There is considerable evidence that those bureaucrats who worked in the chanceries of the various Islamic empires were a highly professional and close-knit caste, concerned only with advancement within the bureaucracy, especially within their branch of it, and with no connection to or interest in the religious hierarchy. This was especially true during the 'Abbāsid period, which spawned a considerable body of secretarial literature describing the qualities of the perfect chancery scribe, such as Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 276/889) Adab al-kātib or Abū Hilāl al-‘Askari’s (d. 396/1005) Kitāb al-ṣinā’-atayn. These descriptions credit the kātib with a wide-ranging knowledge of all the arts and sciences, including prose, poetry, grammar, knowledge of history, proverbs, political theory, Traditions, Qur’ān, fiqh, etc. Such works were obviously propaganda, and in fact the kātib’s greatest skill was as a littérateur with the ability to compose and phrase official documents and correspondence with “recondite allusion, ample quotations from Koran and poetry, (as well as using) rhymed prose ... (to convey) the sovereign’s ideas either by elaborate indirection or by poignant pun ...” Carter, in his study of these kuttāb, sees them as thorough professionals standing apart from the rest of the Islamic establishment. Although Carter recognizes the

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3. Ibid., p. 252.


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influence of a number of scribal families in bringing new kuttāb into the ranks of the chancery, he does not see this as the major reason for their devotion to their work 1. Rather he notes that «while judges, theologians, authors, teachers, etc. were often amateurs, with other means of livelihood, the kāṭib was ... ‘skilled in no other craft than that of clerk’ » 2.

This type of literature continued even in the Mamlūk period, during which time several secretarial encyclopaedias were produced, the most famous being al-Qalqāšandi’s Šubh al-ašā 3. This work consists primarily of samples of letters and documents which the chancery scribe (kāṭib al-inšā’) could consult when in doubt about the proper format of official correspondence. It also goes into considerable detail on the organization of the Mamlūk bureaucracy and lists the qualities and qualifications desired in the perfect chancery scribe 4. Even more to the point is al-Qalqāšandi’s poem on the qualities of the chancery secretary, and the superiority of this occupation for an educated man over all other types of employment 5. The various ʿulūm which al-Qalqāšandi demands of the kāṭib are virtually identical to those listed by ʿAbbāsid writers 6. Also, as with earlier writers on the art of the epistolary or chancery secretary, al-Qalqāšandi gives a much lower status to the financial secretary or accountant (kāṭib al-amwāl or mustawfī) than to the chancery secretary 7. This attitude was undoubtedly reinforced by the presence of important scribal families which contributed several generations of epistolary secretaries to the bureaucracy. Carter has mentioned this as a supporting factor for the professionalism among the ʿAbbāsid kuttāb (see above) and al-Qalqāšandi’s panegyric on the famous Banū (Ibn) Faḍl Allāh, within his maqāma 8, is evidence of the presence of one

1. Ibid., p. 47.
2. Ibid.
4. Some of these qualifications are listed and discussed in ibid., I, 140-481, II, 1-4.
5. Bosworth, Maqāma, pp. 291-98, especially, p. 295. This assertion is also to be found in al-Qalqāšandi, Šubh, I, 54-7.
8. Ibid., p. 297; for more details on this family, see K. S. Salibi, Faḍl Allāh, EI2, II, 732-33.