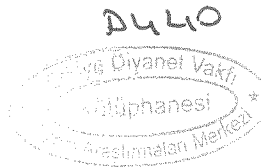


Küttāb

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15 Eylül 2022
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How were young Muslim minds shaped? A critical study of the *küttāb* in Medieval Islam



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Abstract

In medieval Islamic times and afterwards, the *küttāb* was a modest institution for elementary education, with most emphasis being placed on learning the Qurʾān by heart—hence a ‘Qurʾānic school’ in English. Thus far, the topic of the *küttāb* has been addressed by only a few modern works, leaving inadequately researched a number of critical related issues. This article is an attempt to give insights into the intellectual development of Muslim pedagogy in such archetypal primary schools. It looks into the teaching programmes and methods adopted for that intellectual preparation as well as their assumptions, rationales, implications, and consequences. The *küttāb*’s objectives are usually thought of as being universally identical, to help in the formation of a good Muslim. The picture, however, was more multifaceted, and the objectives, as well as means of their realisation, were moulded based on what a ‘good Muslim’ would mean according to those in command. Administrating the *katātib* was a source, and a symptom, of competitive rivalry between the different intellectual tendencies in medieval Islam, who jostled for control over these critically significant institutions. The article thus delves into the intellectual, cultural, and socio-economic contexts in which primary education materialised and was practiced in pre-modern Islam.

Keywords: Medieval Islam; primary education; *küttāb*; intellectual tendencies; *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa*

Be advised that educating children is one of the most gainful and certain ways [to acquire knowledge and please God]. The child is a trust in his parents’ keeping. His pure heart is a precious gem that is yet to be impressed by any carving or [mental] image, and is thus receptive to whatever would be carved on it.¹

Küttāb, whose plural form is *katātib*, is itself originally a plural of *kātib*, ‘scribe’, particularly an apprentice particularly in the context of a scribe who is still learning his craft. It is derived

¹Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Beirut, 2005), p. 955. This saying of al-Ghazālī, and his chapter on elementary education, in general (*Iḥyāʾ*), pp. 955–958, is clearly informed by Ibn Miskawayh’s *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq [wa-taḥfīr al-aʿrāq]*, (ed.) ʿImād al-Hilālī (Beirut, 2011), pp. 288–295 (p. 289).