

5.2 The Organisation of Teaching and Studying

The wider influence of theology schools is not as easily discernible as that of legal *madhāhib*. Jurisprudence was concerned with positions and sinecures; anyone who held the office of judge somewhere, and even someone who only provided legal expert opinions privately, could expect to be included in biographical works. Theology, on the other hand, was concerned with spiritual influence, which was not tied to a specific profession or institution. We learn of influential personalities, and they are in fact introduced as ‘heads of schools’ (*raʿīs/ruʿasāʾ*), but it is difficult to discover who made up the rank and file. Theologians gave lectures, but not always in the mosque;¹ we would imagine the meetings of the ‘corporation’ (σωματεῖα) hosted by Nazzām as having taken place in a distinguished citizen’s, or indeed Nazzām’s own, house.² People regarded themselves as the pupils of one particular master whose ‘circle’ (*ḥalqa*) they were part of; this remained the case even when dedicated places of study, the madrasas, became available for the established subjects.³ In the early days of theology these teaching circles were part of a larger informal organisation: there were ‘brothers’⁴ in all the cities – in the case of the Muʿtazila even in India – to whom one could write letters and who knew whom to consult in complex religious matters.⁵ There were always one or two among the local followers who would assist the head of the school; they were called *ghilmān*, ‘assistants’, who earned a little money, and might also have lived in the master’s house. Their duties are never described clearly; sometimes they had to buy the rolls for a picnic, just like a student assistant might at a university nowadays.⁶ They were probably usually quite young; once someone had been promoted to colleague, he would be called *ṣāhib*, ‘companion’.

1 Cf. e.g. vol. II 410 above.

2 See vol. III 324 above. We should not imbue the mosques with too much ‘holiness’; Leo Africanus reports that at his time, during the first half of the sixteenth century, the alchemists, too, met once weekly in the Qarawiyīn mosque in Fes (*Descrittione dell’Africa*, transl. Schubert-Engelschall 129).

3 Cf. Chamberlain, *Knowledge and social practice in medieval Damascus* 75ff.; regarding the *riyāsa* in those days see *ibid.* 154f.

4 Cf. Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *Faḍl* 276, –6f.; also vol. V 136 (of the German edition).

5 See p. 6, 277, and 285 above; also Catalogue of Works XXIV, no. 9, where the ‘brothers’ from eastern Iran are called *ahl al-Khurāsān*.

6 Thus Jāḥiẓ as Nazzām’s assistant (see vol. III 458 above). A nature philosopher such as Abū l-Ashʿath, who had several assistants (see vol. II 42 above), might have required assistance when conducting alchemical experiments.