Libraries and Librarianship in Iran During the Samanid Dynasty, 819-999 CE / 204-389 AH

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Introduction

Libraries have played a fundamental role in human societies throughout recorded history, serving as vital institutions for education, knowledge dissemination, and religious practice. They have contributed significantly to the growth and development of culture, fostering intellectual and scholarly pursuits. Since the earliest formations of organized

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societies and the advent of writing systems to record and preserve human knowledge and memory, libraries have been an essential component of human civilization.[2]

The significance of libraries goes beyond their mere existence as repositories of books and information. They have served as centers of learning, providing access to a wide range of knowledge and resources. Libraries have facilitated the accumulation and preservation of cultural heritage, facilitating the transmission of ideas, theories, and discoveries across generations. They have played a crucial role in shaping and advancing human civilizations.

According to Nikkar,[3] the importance of libraries cannot be overstated. While libraries may not be solely responsible for the creation of civilization, they are an indispensable cornerstone of its existence. Libraries have been instrumental in fostering intellectual curiosity, nurturing critical thinking, and promoting lifelong learning. They have served as meeting places for scholars, intellectuals, and individuals seeking knowledge, sparking intellectual discourse and the exchange of ideas.

Moreover, libraries have often been associated with religious institutions, serving as repositories for sacred texts and religious manuscripts. They have played a central role in preserving religious knowledge, facilitating religious education, and supporting spiritual practices within communities. Thus, libraries have been integral to human societies since the earliest stages of civilization. Their role as educational, intellectual, and cultural institutions cannot be overstated. Libraries have been guardians of knowledge, catalysts for intellectual growth, and symbols of human progress. They continue to serve as invaluable resources for individuals and communities alike, fostering intellectual curiosity, promoting literacy, and preserving the collective wisdom of humanity.

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[2] Ali Mazinani, *Ketabkhaneh va Ketabdari* [Library and Librarianship] (Tehran: SAMT Publications, 2000).

[3] Maliheh Nikkar, *Ashna'i ba Ketabkhaneh va Manabe' An* [Introduction to Libraries and their Resources] (Shiraz: Rahgosha Publications, 1995).

In the fourth century AH / tenth century CE, Iran was divided into eastern and western spheres of influence. The eastern part was ruled by the Samanid dynasty (819-999 CE / 261-389 AH), while the west was divided among the Ziyarids (1022–1136 CE / 413-531 AH), Buyids (932–1055 CE / 320-447 AH), and various local princely states. The Samanids actively revived and synthesized Persian culture and civilization with the new Islamic beliefs and practices, forging a distinctive cultural identity. [4] Compared to previous regional rulers, the Samanid court actively fostered the Persian language and customs, incorporating them within an Islamic framework. Their efforts to assert a distinct cultural identity and autonomy can be seen as significant since the decline of the Sassanian Empire after the Arab invasion.

In their brief century of rule, the Samanid dynasty fostered as many acclaimed poets, writers, philosophers, physicians, and polymath scientists as the entirety of Europe during the Middle Ages. [5] Luminaries such as mathematician Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi (c. 780–c. 850 CE / 185–233 AH), physician Abu Bakr al-Razi (864–925 CE / 251–313 AH), botanist Abu Hanifa al-Dinawari (815–896 CE / 213–283 AH), astronomer Ahmad ibn Abdallah Khassib Marwazi (d. 1013 CE / 403 AH), philosopher Abu Nasr al-Farabi (872–950 CE / 259–339 AH), poet Rudaki (858–941 CE /237–319 AH), martyr Shahid Balkhi (c. 858–c. 936 CE / 244–325 AH), poet Daqiqi (c. 900–c. 976 CE / 288–366 AH), vizier and scholar Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk Tusi (1018-1092 CE / 409–485 AH), epic poet Ferdowsi (c. 940–c. 1020 CE / 329–416 AH), philosopher and poet Nasir Khusraw (1004–1088 CE / 394–453 AH), polymath Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (973–1048 CE / 362–442 AH), and physician Ibn Sina (980–1037 CE / 370–428 AH) all emerged under Samanid patronage. Across fields from mathematics to astronomy, from mechanics to

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[4] Baqer Sadrinia, "The Secret of the Flourishing of Knowledge and Thought in the Samanid Era: Letter from the Samanid [Court]," in Ali Asghar Shoar Doust & Qahraman Soleimani (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Scientific Society on Samanid Civilization, History and Culture* (Tehran: Scientific Society on Samanid Civilization, 1999).

[5] Zabihollah Safa, *Tarikh-e Olum va Adabiyat-e Irani* [History of Persian Sciences and Literature] (Tehran: Ibn Sina, 1968).

medicine, Iranians made significant contributions to science and human knowledge, leaving an invaluable written legacy.[6]

Intellectually, the era saw the flowering of Islamic theology (kalam) and movements such as Ismailism and Mu'tazilism, as well as the metaphysical brotherhood of Ikhwan al-Safa. No subsequent period in Iran's Islamic history quite compared to the vibrant community of scholars nurtured under the Samanids. The era of Samanid rule in Khorasan during the tenth century CE (fourth century AH) witnessed the emergence of a multitude of intellectual figures in medieval Iran, representing diverse religious and philosophical backgrounds. This phenomenon led historians to label this period as the "Cultural Renaissance" of Iran.[7]

This research aims to describe the state of library buildings, equipment, collection development methods, organization, and types of libraries during the Samanid dynasty by examining the libraries extant from that period. As libraries represent pillars of knowledge exchange, cultural growth and spread, and institutions fundamental to shaping culture across societies, analyzing the libraries of the Samanid era can provide insight into the development and exchange of ideas, as well as cultural influences in that influential time and place. Examining the physical, operational, and intellectual facets of Samanid libraries sheds light on the cultural landscape in which these institutions developed and operated.

No independent research has been conducted specifically on the libraries of the Samanid era. Information on this topic exists partially within books and articles on the history of Iranian libraries more broadly. Key examples include Saha al-Jawahir,[8] which introduced libraries in Iran from their beginnings up to the author's time. Iraj Afshar's

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[6] Safa, *Tarikh-e Olum va Adabiyat*, 1968.

[7] Zabiholla Safa, *Tarikh-e Olum-e 'Aqli dar Tamaddon-e Eslam ta Ovasate Qarn-e Panjom* [History of Rational Sciences in Islamic Civilization until the Middle of the 5th Century AH] (Tehran: University of Tehran, 1953); Iraj Bashiri, *Samanid Achievements* (Dushanbe: Erfan, 1999).

[8] Abdulaziz Saheb al-Jawahir, *Ketabkhaneh-haye Iran: Az Moqabal az Eslam ta Asre Hazar dar Dakhel va Kharejeh* [Libraries of Iran: From Pre-Islamic Times to the Present] (Tehran: Ferdowsi Press, 1932).

History of Books in Iran explained librarianship methods, book shelving, cataloging, bibliography compilation, and librarians in ancient Iranian libraries. [9] In his article "Librarianship in Ancient Iranian Libraries," Afshar delved into the history of books and the emergence of libraries in Iran. Rajabi[10] explained the origins of libraries and their categorization. From 1966 to 1968, Homayoun Farrokh compiled two books [11] and several articles introducing Iranian libraries from pre-Islamic times to the present.[12] Mohammad Nikparvar,[13] Husseini,[14] and Rasouli[15] described the libraries of Khorasan and Transoxiana. Rasouli[16] conducted a study on books and libraries of Shiite seminaries from the ninth to eleventh centuries CE / third to fifth centuries AH[17] conducted research on the system of Islamic librarianship from the ninth to fourteenth centuries CE / third to eighth centuries AH.

While these works all touched on aspects of Samanid era libraries, no study has yet offered a focused examination of the buildings, equipment, collection development,

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[9] Iraj Afshar, *Seir-e Ketab dar Iran* [History of Books in Iran] (Tehran: Amirkabir, 1965).

[10] Mohammad Hassan Rajabi, *Ketabkhaneh dar Iran* [Libraries in Iran] (Tehran: Bureau of Cultural Studies, 2002).

[11] Rokn al-Din Homayoun Farrokh, *Tarikhche-ye Ketab va Ketabkhaneh dar Iran* [History of Books and Public Libraries in Iran] (Tehran: Tehran Municipality Public Libraries Organization, 1966); Homayoun Farrokh, *Ketab va Ketabkhaneh-haye Shahanshahi-ye Iran* [Imperial Books and Libraries of Iran] (Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Arts, 1968).

[12] Rokn al-Din Homayoun Farrokh, "History of Books and Libraries in Iran," *Art and People* 15 (4-7, 1966): 81-121; 25 (4-7, 1966): 10-51; 35 & 45 (4-7, 1966-1967): 51-62; 65 & 75 (4-7, 1967): 63-94.

[13] Mohammad Nikparvar, *Ketabkhaneh-haye Khorasan az Aghaz-e Eslam ta Asre Hazar: Shamol-e Ketabkhaneh-haye Amoomi, Khosoosi, Amoozeshi, Shakhsi* [Libraries in Khorasan Province from the Beginning of Islam to the Present: Including public, private, educational and personal libraries] (Mashhad: Khorasan Department of Culture and Arts, 1972).

[14] Mohsen Husseini, "Libraries of Khorasan and Transoxiana before the Mongol Invasion," in Mohammad Farahzad (Ed.), *Proceedings of the International Congress on Books and Libraries in Islamic Civilization* (Mashhad: Islamic Research Foundation, 2000).

[15] Hojjat Rasouli, "Transoxiana and Khorasan Forerunners of the Book and Library Movement in Iran and Central Asia," *Humanities Journal of Shahid Beheshti University* (85, 2008): 35-46.

[16] Rasouli, "Transoxiana and Khorasan Forerunners of the Book", 2008.

[17] Mahmoud Mar'ashi Najafi, *Nezam-e Ketabdari-ye Eslami dar Sad-e Sevvom ta Hashtom-e Hejri-ye Qamari* [The Islamic Librarianship System from the 3rd to the 8th Century AH] (Mashhad: Islamic Research Foundation, 1995).

organization, and types of libraries during this influential period. Given the central role libraries play in knowledge exchange and cultural development, dedicated research on the Samanid libraries can provide crucial insights into intellectual currents and cultural trends in this time and place.

Library Buildings and Equipment

In the tenth century CE / fourth century AH, the libraries of Khorasan, Rey, and Transoxiana contained the greatest scholarly treasures of the medieval Islamic world. As Sami notes,[18] there were hundreds of public and private libraries across the vast territory of Iran during this era, serving hundreds of learned scholars and academics. In contrast to many Western libraries of the time, there is no evidence that books were chained in Iranian libraries. In fact, libraries even lent books out to patrons. The buildings often contained multiple chambers, with books organized by subject in cabinets or boxes within each chamber. Catalogs listing the contents were posted at the entrance to each chamber.[19] Initially most libraries were not independent institutions, but formed parts of mosques, schools, and scientific centers. As the number of libraries grew, their buildings evolved in form as founders paid increasing attention to library design and architecture.[20] As libraries became independent institutions, their buildings physically manifested their central role as repositories of written knowledge. Examining the architecture and organization of Samanid libraries can reveal how they balanced accessibility with conservation of their expansive collections.

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[18] Ali Sami, "History of Science and Culture in Iran in Different Eras after Islam: The Great Mosques as the First Centers of Learning in the Early Islamic Centuries," *Art and People* 11 (621) (1973): 53-94.

Ziauddin Sardar, "The Role of Books in the Spread of Islamic Civilization," trans. Mahyar Alavi Moqaddam, Mashkuh 92 (1990): 711-31..

[19] Parviz Azem, *Sakhteman va Tajhizat-e Ketabkhaneh* [Library Buildings and Equipment] (Tehran: Iranian Public Libraries Foundation Board of Trustees, 1997).

[20] Ziauddin Sardar, "The Role of Books in the Spread of Islamic Civilization," trans. Mahyar Alavi Moqaddam, *Mashkuh* 92 (1990): 711-31.

Library Collections

Endowments (*waqf*) were one method of collecting books and expanding libraries during the Samanid era. An endowment is a contract that retains ownership of property while allotting its benefits to the endower.[21] In Samanid Iran, books were among the endowments given to schools, monasteries, and study circles in mosques.[22] The oldest endowed library from the Samanid dynasty belonged to the Great Mosque of Nishbur, described by Yaqut al-Hamawi (1936–1938).[23]

Book trading also contributed to expanding library collections. Many Islamic scholars and notables worked as book traders, transferring books from one region to another and thereby growing library holdings as the books entered collections. Ibn al-Nadim, author of *al-Fihrist*, was among these traders.[24]

Copying books, which acted as a form of reproduction, was very common during the Samanid era and increased library resources. Many scholars and scientists hired scribes to copy books from their personal libraries. According to Qiftī (1964-1974), in the home of Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Masoud Oyooni (died 844 CE / 230 AH), groups were occupied with copying, proofreading, and reciting or commenting on texts.

The expansion of book collections was further facilitated by the translation movement. Notable among the sources documenting this expansion is Ibn al-Nadim's *al-Fihrist* [The Index], which provides valuable insight into the names of numerous translators, authors, and their works.

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[21] Ja'far Muhaqqiq Hilli, *Shara'i' al-Islam fi Masail al-Halal wa al-Haram* [The Laws of Islam Regarding the Permitted and Prohibited], trans. Abd al-Hussein Muhammad Ali Baqir (Qom: Ismaili Institute, 1988).

[22] Yahya Mahmoud, *Sa'ati, Vaghf va Sakhtar-e Ketabkhaneh-haye Eslami: Kavoshi dar Miras-e Farhangi-ye Eslam* [Endowment and the Structure of Islamic Libraries: An Investigation of the Islamic Cultural Heritage], trans. Ahmad Amiri Shadmehri (Mashhad: Islamic Research Foundation, 1995).

[23] Yaqut al-Hamawi and Yaqut ibn Abdallah, *Mu'jam al-Udaba* [Dictionary of Literary Figures] (Beirut: Dar al-Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, 1938), vol. 6, 422-522.

[24] Muhammad ibn Ishaq Ibn al-Nadim, *Al-Fihrist* [The Index] (Tehran: Ibn Sina Library, 1967), ed. Reza Tajaddod.

Donations of books by scholars, scientists, and clerics to rulers, ministers, and other scholarly library owners also grew library collections.[25]

While no reports are known of book seizures during the Samanid era itself, the seizure of books when rulers and emirs conquered a city was another reason for expanding a conqueror's library, as the books entered their collections. However, upon the decline of the Samanids, part of their written heritage was transferred to Ghazni, capital of the Ghaznavids.[26]

Library Organization

Explaining the state of organization in Samanid era libraries means looking at how they managed cataloging, classification, lending, and administration.

Cataloging

Samanid librarians took great care in cataloging their libraries. Avicenna's description of Prince Nuh ibn Mansur's library (976-997 CE / 366-387 AH) demonstrates this practice: "Then I looked at the catalog of books from early on and asked for whatever I needed from them, and found books whose names were unknown to most people and which I had not seen before or since".[27]

The comprehensive cataloging of collections was essential for scholars to be able to find and access relevant texts within the extensive libraries. Avicenna highlights encountering unfamiliar titles not known to most people, indicating the value of the catalog in exposing him to obscure or rare works he otherwise would have missed.

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[25] Youssef Eche, *Les bibliothèques arabes publiques et semi-publiques en Mésopotamie, en Syrie et en Egypte au Moyen Age* (Mashhad: Islamic Research Foundation, 1372/1993), trans. Asadollah Alavi.

[26] Yaqut al-Hemawi, 1936, vol. 6, 28-38.

[27] Saeed Nafisi, *Zendegi va Kar va Andishe va Roozegar-e Pour-e Sina* [Life, Work, Thoughts and Times of Avicenna] (Tehran: Danesh Library, 2004), 65.

The scientist Biruni also observed a sixty-page catalog of endowed books in the Great Mosque of Merv.[28] The large size of this catalog points to the vast number of volumes held in the mosque's library, necessitating a lengthy register to record each text.

The evidence of careful cataloging in major Samanid libraries demonstrates the efforts by librarians to organize these invaluable repositories of written knowledge. Detailed registers and lists were pivotal to providing access and preserving order as collections grew. For scholars and patrons, the catalog served as a guide to the library's holdings and allowed them to efficiently retrieve information.

Classification

Librarians organized and classified books based on a categorization of the sciences and arts by Muslim scholars. Each scientific or artistic category was arranged on separate shelves and rows. Books were arranged horizontally on shelves, with large formats on the bottom and smaller formats above. The title, author name, serial number, and other details were inscribed on the spine, top or bottom so they could be easily located by patrons.[29]

Avicenna provides an account of this classification system in Prince Nuh ibn Mansur's library:

> Then he gave me directions and I entered an inner hall which had many rooms and chambers, and in each room were large and small chests piled high with books. In one room were books of poetry, in another jurisprudence, and so on, books of knowledge in each room.[30]

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[28] Yaqut al-Hemawi, 1938.

[29] Afshar, "Ketabdari dar Ketabkhaneh-haye Qadim-e Iran" [Librarianship in Ancient Iranian Libraries], *Barresi-haye Tarikhi* [Journal of Historical Investigations] 51, 151-170 (1974).

[30] Nafisi, *Life, Work, Thoughts*, 2004, 65.

Books on each subject were kept in one chamber, hall, shelf, or chest. This method was common, with slight variations, in major libraries including Isfahan, Nishbur, Baghdad, and Egypt.[31]

This principle of subject classification allowed scholars to efficiently locate works on a given discipline. The consistency across major urban centers also points to shared practices in Islamic librarianship. Analyzing the classification systems can provide insight into how knowledge was categorized and structured in the medieval Islamic world.

Lending

In Islamic civilization, book lending was a commendable and common practice. The high cost of books compelled people to borrow them for copying. Surviving endowment deeds refer entirely or partially to book lending conditions.[32] In many cases, lending regulations were included by the endower on the first, second, or final pages of an endowed book, binding the librarian (trustee) to the endower's stipulations. If the endower did not impose restrictions on users, endowing the book for general use, the librarian could lend the book based on internal library regulations or their own judgment.[33]

The prevalence of book lending reveals the open and accessible nature of many libraries in the medieval Islamic world. Rather than tightly controlling access, librarians facilitated scholarly pursuits by allowing patrons to borrow rare or expensive texts. The examples of lending regulations specified in endowments show efforts to balance broad access with preserving the integrity of collections. Analyzing lending practices can illuminate how libraries reconciled their dual roles as lenders and conservators of written knowledge. Comparing lending stipulations also provides insight into donors' divergent

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[31] Ibn al-Nadim, *Al-Fihrist*, 1967.

[32] Eche, *Les bibliothèques arabes*, 1993.

[33] Alinaghi Behroozi, *Tarikhche-ye Ketabkhaneh-ha va Matbu'at va Chapkhaneh-haye Fars* [History of Libraries, Press and Printing Houses in Fars Province] (Shiraz: Shiraz Public Libraries Association, 1967).

priorities for their endowed books. Overall, lending policies demonstrate the integrally cooperative role libraries played in facilitating intellectual life under the Samanids.

Library Administration

Studying the relevant texts indicates that Avicenna's account of Prince Nuh ibn Mansur's library is the sole reference to a restriction on lending practices in Samanid libraries. Avicenna states that removing books from Nuh ibn Mansur's library was prohibited. Though Avicenna was close to the Samanid ruler, he was not permitted to take books out of the library to copy. Instead, he had to bring scribes into the library to make copies.[34]

The no-lending policy in this particular royal library reflects exceptional efforts to safeguard the collection, even among broader lending practices in other Islamic libraries of the era. As the only recorded administrative regulation on Samanid libraries, this highlights the special care given to this princely book repository, while most appeared to allow more open access. Comparing this case to general borrowing privileges can illuminate wider trends in balancing access and preservation of rare knowledge across different types of Samanid institutions.

Primary sources such as endowment deeds offer invaluable insights into the administrative systems governing medieval Islamic libraries, including those within the Samanid realm. As Marashi Najafi[35] points out, libraries across the Islamic world tended to be endowed institutions established through charitable donations. The founders and benefactors who financed these libraries often stipulated regulations on their administration that library overseers were obliged to follow.[36] For researchers working on the Samanid era, mining the administrative details embedded in such historical

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[34] Muhammad Shebli Naʿmani, *Sho'ar al-'Ajam ya Tarikh-e Sho'ara va Adabiyyat-e Iran* [Poetry in Persian, or History of Persian Poets and Literature], trans. Seyyed Mohammad Taqi Fakhr Da'i Gilani (Tehran: Donyaye Ketab, 1984).

[35] Marashi Najafi, *The Islamic Librarianship System*, 1995.

[36] Nurallah Kasaei, "Ibn Habban Busti: Education, Travel, Scholarly Works and Educational Services," *Islamic Research* 1-2 no.10 (1995): 96-128.

endowment documents provides a unique window into the governance and operations of libraries serving as vital centers of knowledge. Analysis of library administration through these deeds can illuminate issues from collection management policies to personnel roles, revealing how libraries balanced access and preservation of texts. Comparing regulations across different Islamic institutions may also unveil regional variations in administrative structures. Overall, parsing endowment records offers intriguing and little-utilized opportunities to reconstruct the institutional frameworks behind medieval Islamic libraries.

Examining such documents reveals a tripartite oversight model, with key roles including:

Director

In texts and endowments, the library director is referred to as owner, overseer, trustee, keeper, preserver, and endower. Directors were selected from important scholarly, literary, and social figures.[37] A library director's duties included high responsibilities, technical tasks, and cultural activities. Shebli Naʿmani[38] describes these as safeguarding endowments and non-technical library interests; hiring and firing staff and overseeing their work; budgeting; paying staff salaries; maintaining and repairing the building; expanding the library physically and in terms of content when needed; and reporting to the endowment overseer or supervisor.[39] According to Faqihi,[40] their duties included preserving and maintaining existing books and manuscripts; preventing damage from moisture, dust, bookworms, etc.; repairing and rebinding manuscripts; and cataloging, classifying and organizing books. To fulfill their cultural responsibilities, the librarian was obliged to assist readers; inform them of book contents; advise the overseer and

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[37] Kasaei, "Ibn Habban Busti," 1995.

[38] Shebli Na'mani, *Poetry in Persian*, 1984.

[39] Na'mani, Poetry in Persian, 1984, 345.

[40] Ali Asghar Faqihi, *Al-e-Buyah: Nakhastin Salsele-ye Qodratmand-e Shia ba Namune-i az Zendegi-ye Jame'e-ye Eslami dar Qarnhaye Chaharom va Panjom* [The Buyids: The First Powerful Shiite Dynasty with Examples of the Life of the Islamic Community in the 4th and 5th Centuries AH] (Tehran: Saba, 1995).

endower on purchases; hire prominent translators for translation; recruit copyists for manuscript reproduction; and utilize the best bookbinders, illuminators, and calligraphers. They also invited scholars and scientists to teach and work in the library to promote learning and knowledge.[41]

Treasurer

The second member of the library administration triumvirate was the treasurer, who was the library director's deputy. The ideal treasurer was a highly educated jurist, hadith literate, man of letters, and administrator, familiar with librarianship and the library's contents.[42] Their duties included overseeing cataloging and classification and protecting the books from damage.[43] Some sources state that the treasurer was tasked with proofreading and correcting manuscripts.[44]

Librarian

The librarian played an essential role in the administration of medieval Islamic libraries, including those under the Samanids. As the custodians of invaluable manuscript collections, librarians served a highly specialized function in Islamic society. Their duties situated them as intermediaries facilitating access to knowledge, a role with profound implications in an empire centered on scholarly pursuits. Titles like 'overseer' and 'keeper of books' underscore the librarian's mandate to preserve integrity amidst demands for open access. Their meticulous cataloging enabled patrons to navigate expansive collections. Guiding readers and reproducing rare texts for study, librarians ensured manuscripts remained in circulation. At the same time, monitoring reading

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[41] Khayal Muhammad Mahdi Jawahiri, *Min Tarikh al-Maktabat fi al-Bilad al-Arabiyah* [On the History of Libraries in Arab Countries] ([n.p.], 1992).

[42] Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman Sakhawi, *Al-Daw' al-Lami'* [The Brilliant Light] (Cairo, 1953).

[43] Abd al-Wahhab ibn Ali Subki, *Mu'id al-Ni'am wa Mubid al-Niqam* (Cairo: Al Azhar Al Kutub Al Azharia, 1978).

[44] Mohammad ibn Ahmad Moqadasi, *Ahsan al-Taqasim fi Ma'rifat al-Aqalim* [Best Division for the Knowledge of Regions], trans. Ali Naqi Monzavi (Tehran: Iranian Authors and Translators Company, 1982).

rooms and reshelving books maintained order.[45] The complex balancing act performed by librarians exemplified the dual priorities of access and preservation that characterized Islamic libraries. Their position controlling the interplay between patrons and texts gave librarians significant social influence. In serving rulers like the Samanids, librarians' knowledge directly impacted power and scholarship.

The Role and Function of Libraries

The libraries of Khorasan and Transoxiana, especially Samarkand and Nishbur during the Samanid era, had a broader role and function than modern libraries. For example, the presence of scholars and scientists and debate and discussion sessions for students indicates the educational role of these libraries. By providing research tools and facilitating public study, these institutions contributed to the Islamic community's cultural and scientific growth. Libraries were also tools for propagating and teaching religious beliefs; each library's books generally belonged to a specific sect and promoted its beliefs.[46] In addition to books, libraries acted as museums, collecting and displaying precious items like fine paper, calligraphy tools, maps, and calligraphy samples.[47]

Types of Libraries

Scholars have identified five principal categories of libraries operating during the medieval Islamic era. Each type served distinct needs and communities, contributing to the diverse landscape of knowledge institutions:

Mosque Libraries

The history of mosque libraries illuminates their profound social role beyond houses of worship. As Jawahiri notes, early mosques functioned as centers of community

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[45] Ibrahim Salman al-Karawi, *Al-Marja' fi al-Hadharah al-Arabiyah al-Islamiyah* [The Sourcebook on Arab Islamic Civilization] (Kuwait: Dhat al-Salasil, 1987), trans. Abdul Tawwab Sharaf al-Din.

[46] Eche, 1993.

[47] Faqihi, The Buyids, 1995.

administration, law, and education.[48] Their libraries facilitated this mission by providing texts to support governance, dispute resolution, and scholarly circles.

The collections themselves reveal what knowledge mosques deemed valuable to their communities. Quran and Quranic sciences texts formed the earliest holdings, underscoring the centrality of religious learning. As Islamic scholarship expanded, libraries incorporated works by eminent authors, creating a comprehensive intellectual repository. The availability of such rare manuscripts and books to the public aligns with Islamic emphasis on access to knowledge as a social good.

Notable individual mosque libraries included eminent sites like the grand mosques of major Transoxianan cities and famous institutions in Nishbur. Yaqut al-Hamawi and Yaqut ibn Abdallah describe endowed hadith collections at Nishbur's mosque, supervised by the muadhin (prayer caller) Ahmed ibn Abd al-Malik (d. 1077 CE / 470 AH), who provided ink and paper for hadith scholars (1938).[49]

The study of mosque library history sheds light on their multifaceted purposes as worship sites, governance hubs, and reservoirs of books fueling scholarship. Comparing collections across mosques could reveal regional variances in texts housed for local needs. Overall, these institutions represent a rich subject for exploring intersections of knowledge, religion, and community in medieval Islamic society.

Religious School Libraries

With the emergence of madrasas (schools) and universities in Islamic regions from the ninth century CE [third century AH], madrasa and university libraries were established. According to Shebli, "One can hardly find a single madrasa without a library collection".[50] In the medieval Islamic world, madrasas were institutions of higher learning that housed libraries and functioned similar to modern universities. They taught Islamic sciences like

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[48] Jawahiri, *Min Tarikh al-Maktabat fi al-Bilad al-Arabiyah*, 1991.

[49] Yaqut al-Hamawi, *al-Mu'jam al-Udaba*, 1938.

[50] Ahmad Shebli, *Tarikh-e Amoozesh dar Eslam* [History of Education in Islam], trans. Mohammad Hossein Saket (Tehran: Islamic Culture Publication Office, 1991), 358.

Quranic exegesis, hadith, jurisprudence, theology, grammar, literature, and sometimes rational sciences like philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy. Numerous school libraries were established in Bukhara, Samarkand, Nishbur, Buzjan, Marv, and Ghazni, in present-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan. These schools represented a range of religious sects and interpretations of the Islamic canonical texts and tradition. It is worth noting that, despite their differences, no conflict is reported between these schools. For example, in Nishbur, there was both a Shafi'i madrasa library for followers of the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islamic law and a Mu'tazila library for followers of the Mu'tazila school of theology. They coexisted peacefully, inviting each other to events and seminars, fostering an atmosphere of mutual exchange.[51]

Maʿruf provides insights into the libraries within schools in the Muslim East, stating:

> Since libraries were integral to teaching and discussion in madrasas, founders endowed them with many books. These libraries covered various sciences and arts, and special buildings with multiple rooms were constructed for them, with treasurers and overseers appointed to them.[52]

Notable known madrasa libraries in the Samanid domain included the Esmail Samani Madrasa,[53] the Nishburi Qatan Madrasa,[54] the Bayhaqi Madrasa,[55] the Abu Hafs Faqih

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[51] Moqadasi, *Best Division for the Knowledge of Regions*, 1982.

[52] Naji Maʿruf, "Scholarly Schools before the Nizamiyah," *Memorial Volume for Nishburi Scholar: The Professor's Life and Collected Articles on Scholarly and Literary Topics*, trans. Jalal al-Din Shirazian (Tehran: Society for Cultural Works and Figures, 2008), 420.

[53] Hosseyni, 2000.

[54] Muhammad ibn Abdallah Hakim al-Neyshaburi, *Tarikh-e Neyshabur* [History of Nishabur], trans. Muhammad ibn Hussein Khalifeh al-Neyshaburi, ed. Mohammad Reza Shafiei Kadkani (Tehran: Agah, 1978).

[55] Ali ibn Zayd Bayhaqi, *Tarikh-e Bayhaq* [Bayhaq History], ed. Ahmad Bahmanyar and introduced by Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab Qazvini (Tehran: Foroughi Bookstore, 1969).

and Dar al-Sonnat Madrasas, [56] the Nishburi Sabuni Madrasa, [57] the Ibn Habban Madrasa,[58] the Nishburi Shafi'i Madrasa (Ibn Qadi Shohba),[59] the Tus Tabran Madrasa,[60] the Khwaja Amirk Madrasa, [61] the Hasan Qarshi Madrasa, [62] and the Muhammad al-Homshadi Madrasa (Ma'ruf).[63] These madrasa libraries formed an early system of public education in the Muslim world, pre-dating the emergence of modern libraries, and many of them housed collections that rivaled royal libraries. Together with mosques, they played a vital role in the transmission of knowledge in medieval Islamic civilization.

Personal Libraries

The earliest libraries in Iran were personal libraries. Books were produced as handwritten manuscripts, making them expensive, so only the wealthy, the learned, and the virtuous could acquire them. [64] Royal, ministerial, scholarly, literary, and scientific personal libraries can be considered types of personal libraries:

Royal Library

Rulers established libraries at their residences or adjacent to them. Users were their family, ministers, courtiers, at times scholars and clerics. Librarians were chosen from

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[56] Narges Neshat and Abbas Horri, *Ketabkhaneh Amoozeshgahi dar Madreseh Ketabkhaneh Madar* [School Libraries in Library-Centered Schools] (Tehran: Library Network, 2004), quoted in Rajabi, *Libraries in Iran*, 2002.

[57] Homayoun Farrokh, *Art and People*, 1967.

[58] Kasaei, 1995.

[59] Abubakr ibn Ahmad Ibn Qadi Shohba, *Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyah* [Classes of the Shafi'ites] (Hyderabad: Da'irat al-Ma'arif al-Othmaniyah, 1978), ed. Hafez Abdelalim Khan.

[60] Hassan Mohtasham, "The Role of the Samanids in Reviving the Persian Language," in Ali Asghar Shoar Doust & Qahraman Solaymani (Eds.), *Letter from the Samanid [Court]: Proceedings of the Scientific Society on Samanid Civilization, History and Culture* (Tehran: Scientific Society on Samanid Civilization, 1999).

[61] Rajabi, 2002.

[62] Hakim al-Neyshaburi, *Tarikh-e Neyshabur*, 1978.

[63] Ma'ruf, "Scholarly Schools before the Nizamiyah," 2008.

[64] Gholamhossein Masahib, "Library," in *Mosahib's Persian Encyclopedia* (Tehran: Franklin, 1966).

scholars, writers, and philosophers.[65] The only royal library mentioned in sources is that of Prince Nuḥ ibn Mansur in Bukhara, whose librarian was the eminent scholar Avicenna.[66]

Minister and Statesmen Libraries

Learned, skilled, and prudent Persian ministers, alongside state duties, strove to promote knowledge, literature, and art during their term of ministry, assembling magnificent libraries for themselves. These included the Bal'ami family library and the library of Abul-Wafa Buzjani.

Scholarly, Literary, and Scientific Libraries

The exact date of the first personal library of an Iranian scholar or scientist is unknown, but from the beginning of the ninth century CE / third century AH some possessed prestigious personal collections and libraries. Examples include the libraries of Abu Nasr Farabi, [67] Ibn Khazima, [68] Oyooni Samarqandi, [69] and Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn Ahmad Suffar.[70]

Specialist Libraries

Specialist libraries were established alongside special centers like observatories, hospitals, Sufi lodges, shrines, and tombs during the Samanid era. These libraries collected materials related to the specific focus of their associated institution.

Examples of such specialized libraries include:

– The library of the Ibn Habban Lodge, associated with the Sufi lodge of the same name founded in Nishbur in thetenth century CE / fourth century AH by the mystic

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[65] Svend Dahl, *History of the Book: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (Mashhad: Astan Quds Razavi, Islamic Research Foundation, 1993), trans. Mohammad Ali Khaksari.

[66] Homayoun Farrokh, *Imperial Books and Libraries*, 1968.

[67] Homayoun Farrokh, 1966.

[68] Naji, 1980.

[69] Ali Davani, *Mafaakhir-e Eslam* [Distinguished Figures of Islam] (Tehran: Amirkabir, 1987).

[70] Hakim al-Neyshaburi, 1978.

Abu Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Habban. This library held texts related to Sufi thought and practice.[71]

– The library of the Mehnah belonging to Abu Sa'id Abi al-Khayr, associated with the ribat (hostel) established in Nishbur by the renowned eleventh century Sufi. This library contained works pertinent to Sufism and asceticism.[72]

The creation of these subject-specific libraries attached to centers of learning reveals the value placed on textual resources within various fields in Samanid society. The libraries likely supported the scholarly, educational, and spiritual activities at these sites by collecting and preserving relevant works. Examining the development and collections of such specialized Samanid libraries can provide deeper insight into the growth of knowledge in particular disciplines during this period.

Public Libraries

In the medieval Islamic world, mosques functioned not just as houses of worship but also as community centers and hubs of learning. Mosque libraries originated as small collections of Qur'anic manuscripts and religious texts for study circles. As the Islamic sciences developed and scholars produced more works, these collections grew into full-fledged libraries open to the public. Before governments and private donors began founding public libraries as independent institutions, mosque libraries served the people's need for free access to books and knowledge.

Since mosque libraries served as an early form of public library, it can be inferred from existing endowment deeds in the Qom Holy Shrine Library that this public library existed from the early tenth century CE / fourth century AH.[73] Dar al-'ulums, which were centered around libraries but, like the Bayt al-Hikma, also engaged in scholarly and

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[71] Kasaei, 1995.

[72] Homayoun Farrokh, 1967.

[73] Mohammad Taqi Daneshpajooh, *Fehrest-e Nuskhe-ye Khati-ye Ketabkhaneh-ye Astaneh-ye Moqaddaseh-e Qom* [Catalog of Manuscripts in the Qom Holy Shrine Library] (Qom: Holy Shrine [Library], 1976).

scientific activities,[74] can also be considered public libraries. Dar al-'ulums were institutions unique to the medieval Islamic world that combined education, research, and library functions. Their core was a major library collection, but they also hosted lectures by scholars, scientific experiments, and discussions between students - similar to the famous Bayt al-Hikma of ninth-century CE / third century AH Baghdad. While primarily functioning as libraries, Dar al-'ulums were early prototypes of universities in the Muslim world.

The fact that the Mashhad Holy Shrine already had a public section in its library in thetenth century CE / fourth century AH indicates mosque and shrine libraries were providing free library access at an early date in Iran, as they were across the Islamic world. This shows the cultural priority placed on public education and spreading knowledge in medieval Muslim societies.[75]

Conclusion

The flourishing of libraries under the Persian Samanids was enabled by forward-thinking practices that foreshadowed modern principles of access and learning. As scholars have noted, these libraries contrasted starkly with European monastic collections that tightly restricted book access by chaining codices to desks. Samanid libraries actively encouraged the dissemination and reproduction of knowledge by supporting manuscript copying and book endowments sponsored by the scholars themselves. Primary accounts point to few restrictions on utilizing these invaluable repositories, reflecting the Islamic emphasis on education as a universal right.

The organized governance of Samanid libraries also presaged modern systems. Administrative documents reveal a formalized structure with directors overseeing operations, treasurers managing collections, and specialized librarians facilitating reader services. This division of labor made it possible to curate vast holdings while

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[74] Eche, 1993.

[75] Daneshpajooh, 1976.

accommodating patrons. The integration of libraries within public academic institutions furthered open access to texts, as exemplified by the prolific growth of collections in mosques and madrasas. The Samanid approach to libraries as centers for community learning and scholarly discourse resulted in a thriving literary culture, powering the era's intellectual renaissance.

Thriving libraries under the Persian Samanids ultimately fueled an intellectual renaissance that profoundly shaped scientific and philosophical advancements across the medieval world. Luminaries such as mathematician al-Khwarizmi, physician al-Razi, philosopher al-Farabi, and polymath al-Biruni emerged under Samanid rule. Libraries provided these thinkers with access to ancient texts and a vibrant community of peers. Al-Khwarizmi expanded geometry and pioneered algebra by synthesizing Hellenistic, Indian and Islamic knowledge. Al-Razi compiled medical encyclopedias and pioneered smallpox treatments. Al-Farabi bridged Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy with Islamic theology in his neo-platonic works. Al-Biruni corresponded with Ibn Sina while calculating the earth's circumference with remarkable precision.

The transmission of these rare manuscripts and ideas along Silk Road trade networks connected east and west. Islamic libraries preserved and multiplied many classical works that might have otherwise been lost, as occurred with some Greek philosophy in Europe. The resulting advances built on foundations from prior civilizations. Ideas refined under the Samanids regarding medicine, optics, and mathematics were taken up by the Abbasids, Umayyads and from there moved into the European sphere. Muslim engagement with classical thought presaged the twelfth-century renaissance of the Chartres school and early universities. The progress of human knowledge emphasizes intercivilizational continuity rather than discrete achievements by singular geniuses.

Examining Samanid libraries provides deeper insight into the incubators of medieval science and philosophy. Their collections linked Persian, Greek, Indian and Central Asian works, weaving an intricate tapestry of global knowledge. Tracing this interconnected legacy unveils how monolithic cultural narratives fail to capture intricate

transmissions of ideas that defy civilizational boundaries. Understanding Islamic libraries' role nuances Eurocentric assumptions about medieval intellectual stagnation and disruptions in classical learning. Their story expands our conception of collaborative human progress across space and time.