



Document of the Month 10/25: A Qajar Endowment Deed

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From Endowment to Everyday: Life in a Qajar Madrasa

by Maryam Heydarkhani

Legal documents are valuable primary sources for understanding the socio-economic structures and lived experiences of premodern societies. This holds true for medieval marriage contracts, land sale deeds, and partnership agreements studied by the Invisible East team, and equally applies to much later, early-modern records. This essay explores what a 19th-century endowment deed can reveal about life in a madrasa in Qajar Iran. It looks at the Marvi madrasa (Figure 1), founded in the early 19th century, which was among the most prominent educational and religious institutions of Qajar Iran and the most important one in the capital Tehran.



Fig. 1: Marvi madrasa courtyard, view towards the east. Photo: Maryam Heydarkhani

The endowment deed as a historical source

The endowment deed (*waqf-nāme*, or *waqf* deed) of the Marvi madrasa is an extensive, seventy-six folio manuscript, and is a compilation of several documents. The earliest and principal section was drawn up by Moḥammad Ḥosein khān-e Marvī as the madrasa's founder, during the early years of the reign of Fatḥ 'Alī Shāh Qājār (r. 1212-1250/1797-1834). Later sections, issued under successive trustees (known in Persian as *mutawallī*), record various modifications and additions to the building, its facilities, and its endowments. While many *waqf* deeds survive from the Qajar period, and some are even more detailed, its several additions to the original document make the Marvi deed distinctive and together offer valuable insights into the entirety of the Qajar period and its transformations.

The document follows the general structure of Qajar-period legal deeds: it opens with praise of God, followed by the formal introduction of the founder, a statement of pious intent, and a detailed listing of endowed properties, their revenues, and the purposes for which these revenues are to be used. It concludes with the appointment of a *mutawallī*, the terms of their responsibilities, and stipulations for oversight.

The Marvi deed is notable for preserving, in its opening section, a royal commendation by Fatḥ 'Alī Shāh praising the founder and the institution and granting it exemption from taxation (Figure 2). It also includes a *qaṣīda* (ode) by the court poet Fatḥ 'Alī Khān Ṣabā, dated 1231/1816. Later sections, such as those drawn up by Mīrzā Moḥammad Andarmānī (1271/1854–55 and 1278/1861–62) and Mullā 'Alī Kanī (1299/1881–82), are written in a simpler style (Figure 3, left) but remain valuable for understanding the madrasa's continued development. The final section returns to the ornate style of the opening, ending with another long *qaṣīda* that celebrates the madrasa and is dated 1229/1814–15) (Figure 4).

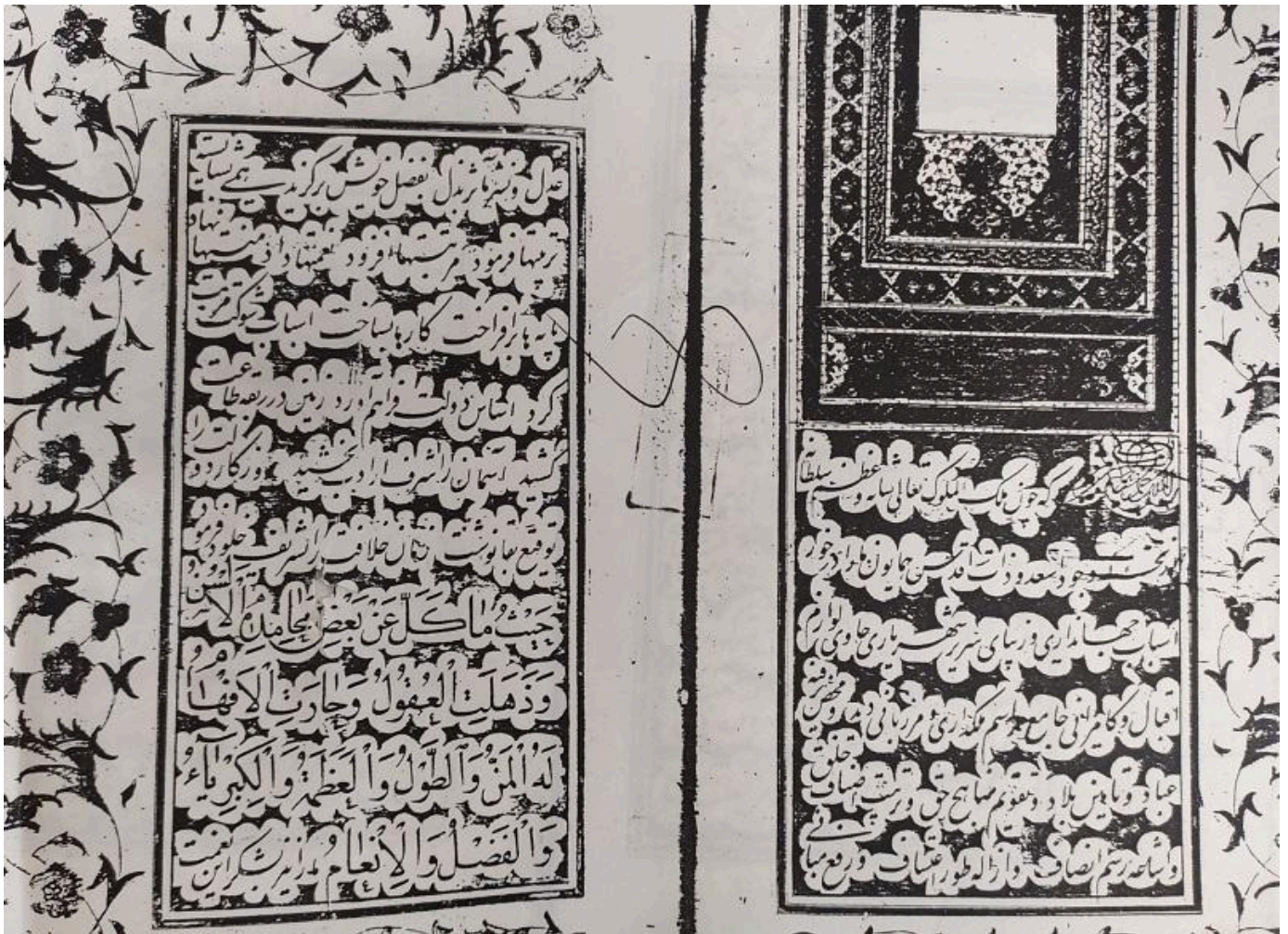


Fig. 2: Opening spread of the Marvi madrasa's *waqf-nāme*, fols 1v-2r. Public domain.

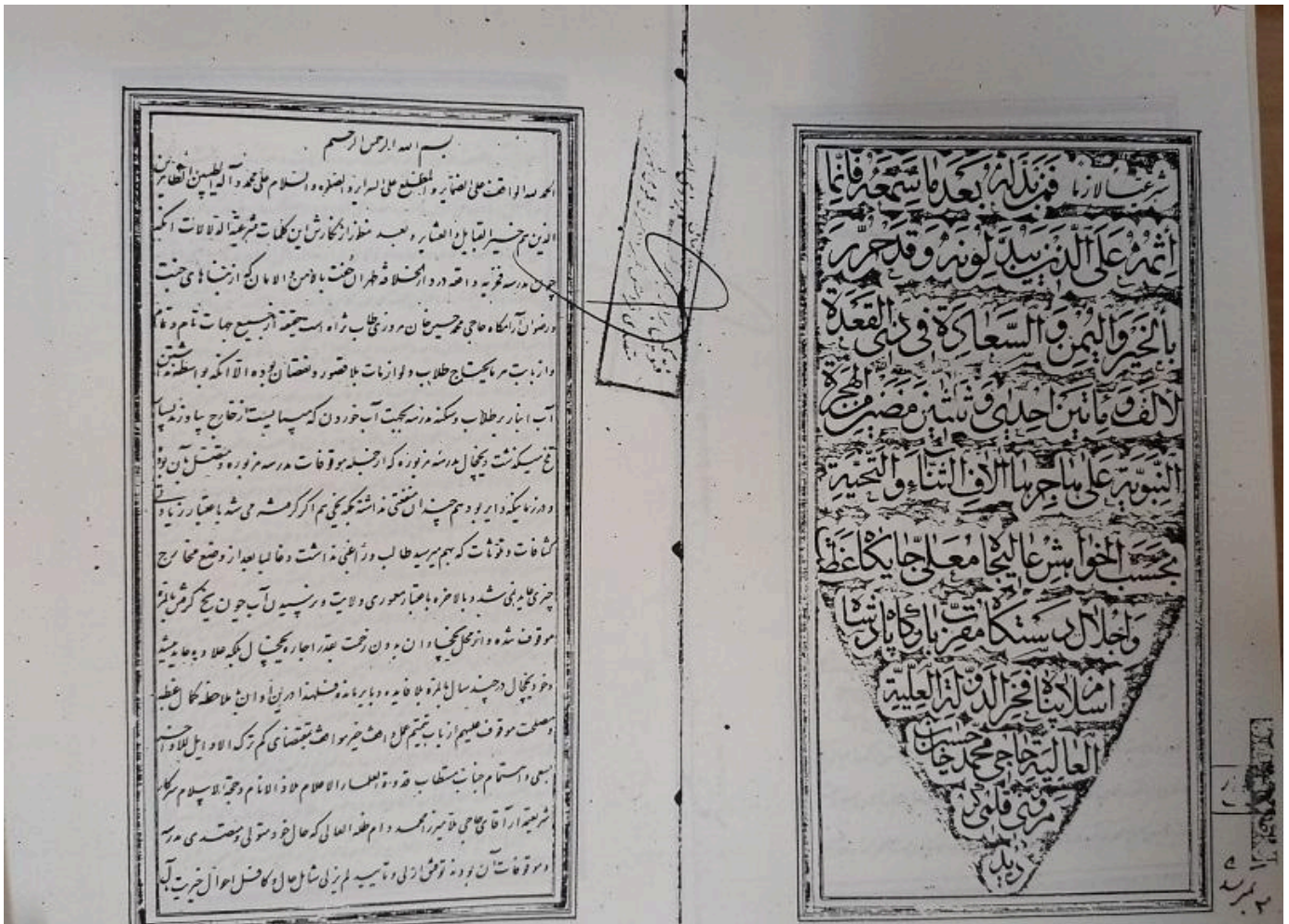


Fig. 3: End of the first section (right) and beginning of a new section (left) of the waqf-nāme, the latter issued under the supervision of Mīrzā Moḥammad Andarmānī, fols 45v-46r. Public domain.

As a historical source, the Marvi *waqf* deed offers far more than a legal record of endowment. Economically, it provides a detailed inventory of properties—shops, caravanserais, public baths, gardens, agricultural land and so on—whose revenues sustained the madrasa. This diversity of holdings reflects a network of urban and rural economic connections through which private capital was channelled toward public and religious purposes.

The multiple documentary layers preserved within the manuscript capture the madrasa’s evolution over time. Amendments and additions—such as the expansion of its facilities and the incorporation of new endowed properties—illustrate the changing priorities of its administrators and the growth of its resources. Precise rules for revenue collection and expenditure indicate a disciplined system of financial management and a concern for accountability, situating the document within the broader bureaucratic practices of Qajar Iran.

From a social perspective, the deed reveals that the madrasa was not solely a place of instruction. It was deeply embedded in the urban fabric, offering livelihoods to a wide range of individuals and serving as a centre for both education and communal religious life. Provisions for teachers, students, staff, ceremonies, healthcare, and maintenance highlight its role as a multifunctional institution within 19th-century Tehran.

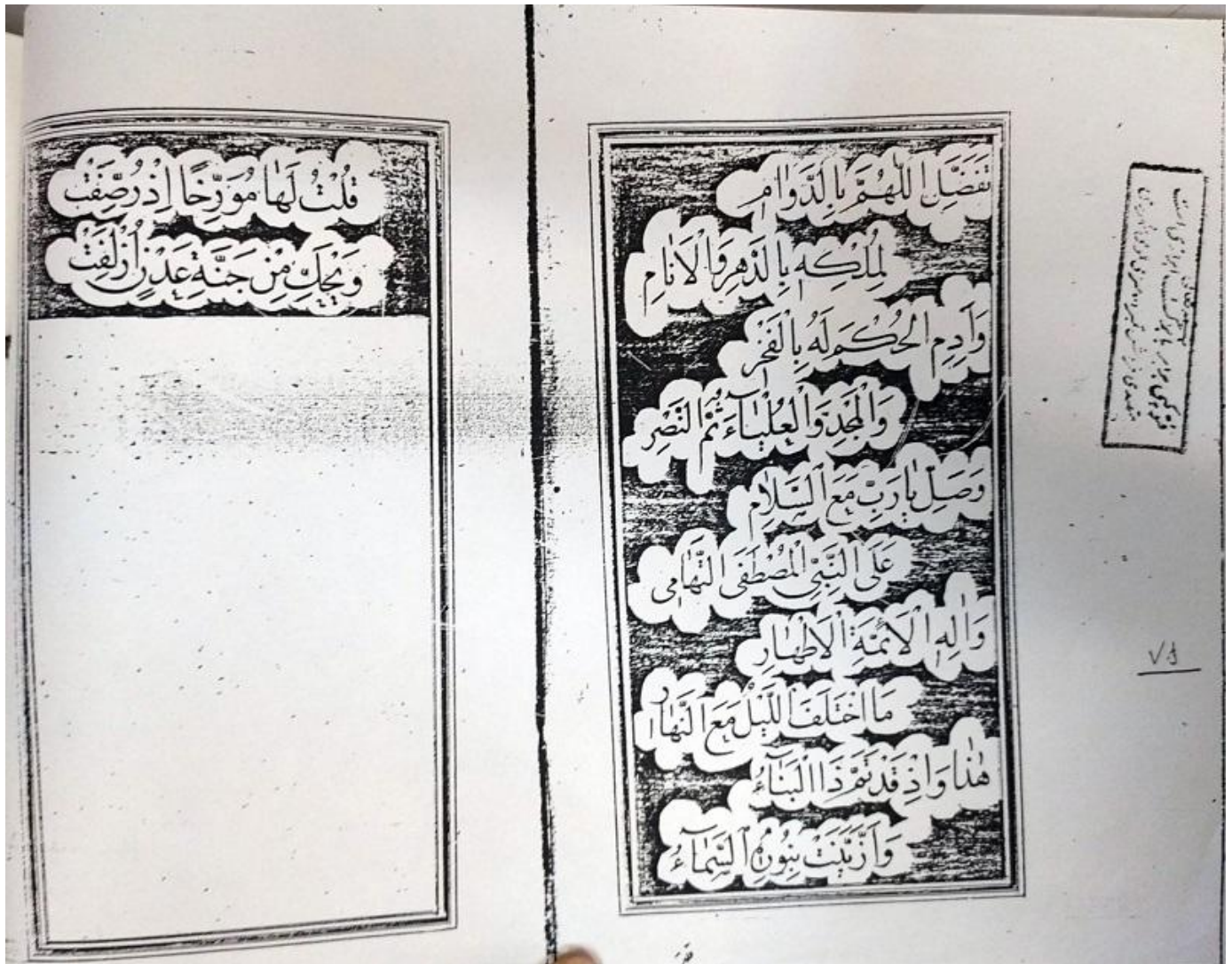


Fig. 4: Final folio of the waqf deed, showing the conclusion of the celebratory qasida and the date 1229/1814–15, fols 75v–76r. Public domain.

Architectural form and spatial arrangement

The Marvi *waqf* deed contains valuable information about the madrasa's architectural layout and facilities, revealing the relationship between its spatial organisation and its intended functions. The madrasa was conceived not merely as a complex of chambers and classrooms but as a self-sufficient institution containing a variety of facilities that supported the educational, religious, and daily needs of its residents.

It included multiple mosques designed for seasonal use—one for winter and another for summer, a bathhouse, a well, an icehouse, and a kitchen. There was also a private space (*khalwat*) serving as a library, latrines (*mabriz*), and residential units for the head teacher, the prayer leader (*imām-i jamā'at*), and the deputy teacher (*tālī*) (Figure 5). Beyond its primary educational function, the madrasa contained spaces for communal religious events, including mourning rituals, and provisions for storing utensils and ceremonial equipment.

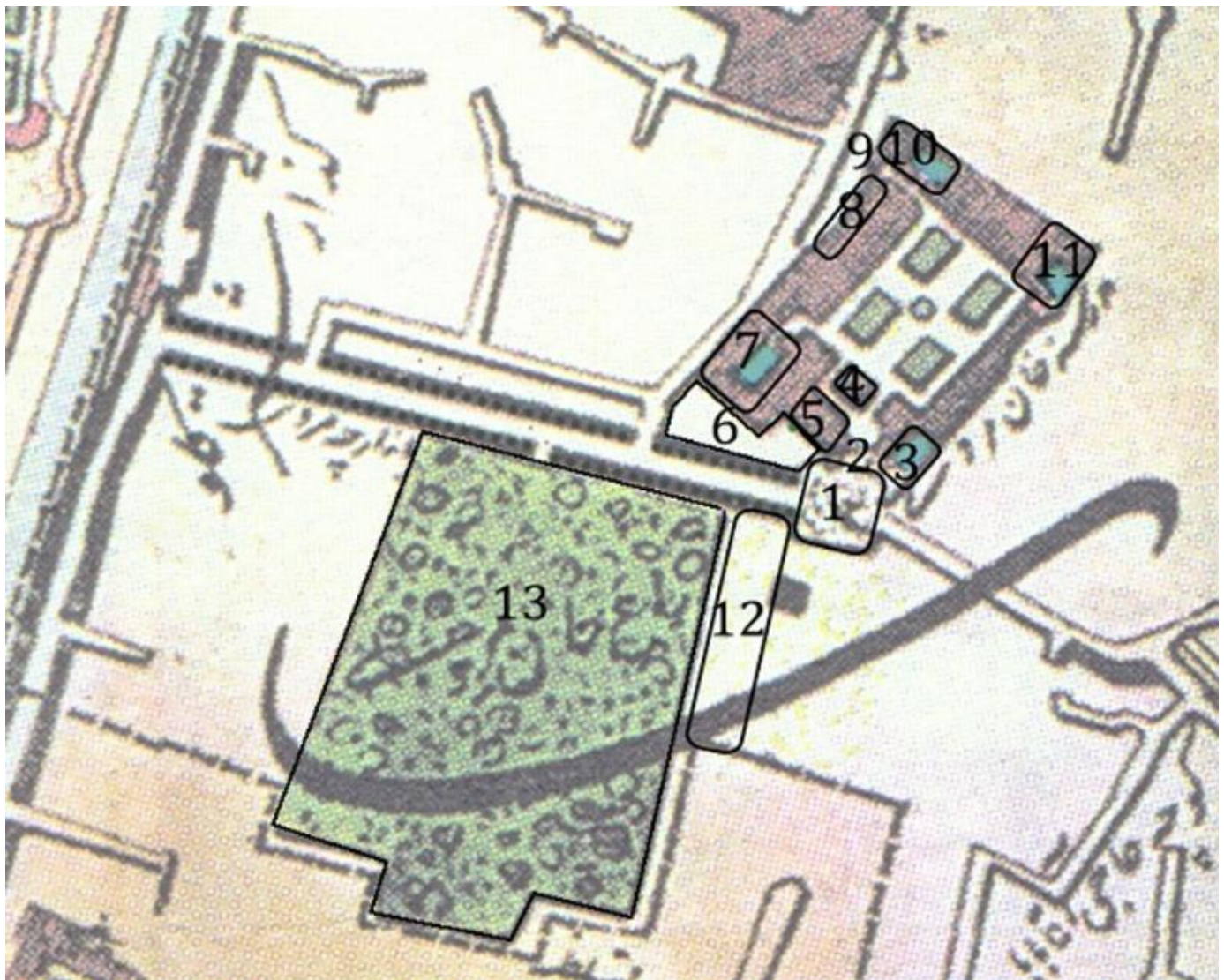


Fig 5: The first approximate map of the madrasa and its spaces at the time of construction, based on the waqf deed (courtyard corners marked in blue). The Marvi Madrasa on Krzisz's map of the city of Tehran, 1275/1858–59. Map from *Muḥsin Mu'tamadī, Juḡhرافیā-yi Tārīkhī-yi Tehrān*, with additions by the author.

1. Entrance hall; 2. Vestibule / corridor; 3. Latrines; 4. Summer mosque; 5. Winter mosque; 6. Icehouse, located above the west side of the teacher's house and the east side of the prayer leader's house; 7. Small madrasa; 8. Bathhouse; 9. Western side entrance; 10. Private chamber / library; 11. Kitchen; 12. Location of the elementary school, deputy teacher's house, stables, kitchen, and bathhouse in the Marvi garden complex; 13. Marvi garden

Descriptions in the deed suggest an architectural plan that balanced public, semi-public, and private spaces, integrating them into a coherent whole. This design not only reflected the functional requirements of a religious school but also demonstrated a vision of the madrasa as a lived environment—one that accommodated the rhythms of daily life alongside the demands of study and worship.

Roles and responsibilities within the madrasa

A notable feature of the Marvi *waqf* deed is its detailed reference to the individuals and roles that formed the madrasa's administrative and educational structure. After the founder, the most significant figure in the hierarchy was the *mutawallī* (trustee), responsible for managing the endowment's affairs. In the Marvi deed, the trustee's duties extended beyond internal administration to include maintaining the madrasa's connections with the outside world.

Alongside the trustee, the document names the *nāẓir* (overseer), who monitored the proper execution of the endowment's terms and the overall management of the madrasa. The deed also mentions teachers, students, muezzins, caretakers, and others, each fulfilling a specific role in the institution's daily operation.

Teachers and students occupy the most prominent position after the trustee, underscoring the central importance of scholarly activity to the *waqf*'s founder. Provision was also made for a librarian and a deputy to the head teacher, with designated spaces for them within the madrasa complex.

Allocations for food preparation and student mourning ceremonies during periods of religious commemoration reflect the integration of ritual life into the madrasa's activities. The inclusion of multiple servants, a water steward (*ābdastān-dār*), janitors, and a gardener for cleaning and maintenance services illustrates the founder's conception of the madrasa as a comprehensive institution where students resided full-time and whose life extended beyond purely academic pursuits.

Time, space, and the rhythm of daily life

The *waqf* deed emphasizes the temporal and spatial order of the madrasa's services and activities. Teaching and lessons were generally held twice daily, in the morning and afternoon, while the overall timetable—daily, weekly, and annually—was structured around the Shī'ī religious calendar.

The muezzin was required to call the *adhān* (call for prayer) at specified times, and the prayer leader conducted the daily congregational prayers for students. The caretaker was responsible for lighting the lamps at night, and the water steward oversaw the cleanliness of the latrines and water basins. These details depict the madrasa as a carefully regulated, active, and inhabited space rather than merely a building for instruction.

Certain functions were tied to specific locations within the complex. For instance, the *khalwat* in the north-western section (Figure 5, no. 10) served both as a private study space for the founder's son and as the repository for the madrasa's collection of books, with its own dedicated janitor and servant. The madrasa's mosque hosted group religious rituals, including mourning ceremonies and congregational prayers, and contained designated storage for the necessary vessels and ceremonial objects, for Ramadan and Muharram.

In its entirety, the Marvi *waqf* deed does more than define the legal and financial structure of the madrasa—it offers a vivid portrayal of daily life within a Qajar educational institution, where study, livelihood, worship, and service coexisted in a single integrated environment.

Conclusion

The Marvi madrasa's *waqf* deed is thus not only a legal and financial document but also an invaluable socio-architectural record. By combining structural details, administrative roles, and descriptions of daily routines, it reveals how the madrasa functioned as a self-contained microcosm of Qajar urban society—economically connected, socially embedded, and architecturally attuned to the rhythms of education, devotion, and communal life.

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About the author

Maryam Heydarkhani is an architectural historian specializing in the social and cultural history of Qajar Iran. Her research explores the architecture and everyday life of madrasas, with a particular focus on *waqf* documents as sources for understanding the relationship between space, community, and piety. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Khalili Research Centre, University of Oxford.

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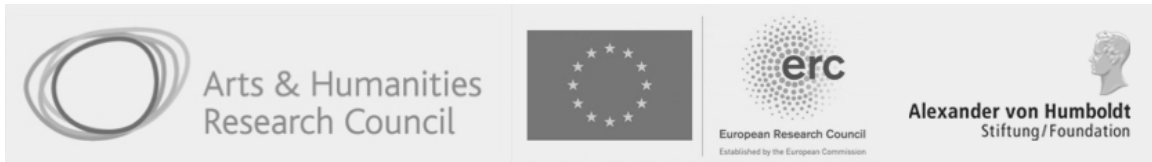
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