

Abstract From

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Due Results in the Theory of Source-criticism in Medieval  
Arabic Literature

## Corrections:

Since the editor of *Al-Abhath* decided to make some unauthorized changes throughout this article, I would like to draw attention at least to the corrections needed in the first page:

The correct title of the article is:

“New Results in the Theory of Source-Criticism in Medieval Arabic Literature”

The first sentence reads:

Due to the peculiarities of the system of teaching and transmitting knowledge in Islam in the Middle Ages, classical Arabic texts have gained a characteristic shape.

The last sentence of the footnote marked with an asterisk reads:

Based on an earlier publication (fn. 9), this article presents in a condensed, but in the case of certain ideas, an enriched and further developed form, the results reached in my recent research in the field of medieval Arabic literature and scholarly writing.

## DUE RESULTS IN THE THEORY OF SOURCE- CRITICISM IN MEDIEVAL ARABIC LITERATURE<sup>☆</sup>

Sebastian Günther<sup>☆☆</sup>

Medieval Arabic literature came under the influence of the Islamic system of teaching and transmission, with all its specific characteristics. Thus we have the familiar phenomenon of compilations, which use chains of transmitters to vindicate the credibility of their sources. This means that in medieval times every tradition or piece of information, which was of theological, historical or of any other scientific interest to the Muslims, contains both the literary text as such (Arab.: *matn*) and a chain of names of those individuals who had transmitted the text in question in the past. In other words, all the earlier persons are mentioned on whose authority a given account is quoted. Such a chain of text-transmitters is called *isnād*.

According to Muslim understanding, a sound *isnād* starts with the Prophet Muḥammad or one of his companions (*aṣḥāb*) or his followers (*tābi‘ūn*). It should, without interruption, go down to the first reporter of the text or an eyewitness of the event concerned. For example, a typical pattern of an *isnād* may be drawn as follows: «I (i.e. the compiler of the collection) say: My teacher told me, he said: my guarantor 1 and guarantor 2 informed me on the authority of so-and-so that the latter heard the Prophet saying... After such a chain of transmitters, the tradition (*ḥadīth*) or the historical report (*ḵabar*) is cited.

☆ Paper given at the 34th International Congress of Asian and North African Studies, 22–28 August 1993 in Hong Kong. Referring to a former article (cf. n. 1 p. 9), it presents in a very condensed but, in the case of certain thoughts, an enriched and further developed form of the recent results of my research in this special field of early Arabic literature.

☆☆ Martin-Luther-University, Halle.

## I

The question of the genuineness of *isnāds* has not been clarified completely. To date, especially among Western scholars, there has been a tendency to treat the *isnād* with suspicion and skepticism, to deny its credibility and, thus, sometimes to reject the authenticity of the traditions themselves. According to this opinion, the *isnād* seems to be a development of later centuries designed to label the traditions dating mainly from the ʿAbbāsīd period (starting in the second half of the 8th century A.D.) – as «genuine» and «unadulterated»; its function was to ensure the acceptability of the traditions. Certainly, a sound critical attitude is – as always advisable, and may be particularly appropriate regarding the value of those chains of transmitters, which allegedly cover the first Islamic century (= 7th century A.D.). But to deny the genuineness of all *isnāds*, and thus that of the early materials in general, would not seem justified. On the contrary, some recently discovered materials concerning early Islam (e.g. Nabia Abbott's books about early Islamic historiography and *Ḥadīth*-literature)<sup>1</sup> and newly undertaken investigations of that period (e.g. Harald Motzki's very interesting book on the development of early Islamic jurisprudence)<sup>2</sup> are currently leading to a wider acceptance of the *isnāds*. In this respect, it would not befit modern science to ignore the diverse information provided by those very chains of transmitters concerning the emergence and development of Islam and its sciences, virtually its entire history. It provides an acceptable platform for scrutinizing the information which is «encoded» in the chains of transmitters, and for their effective use in evaluating literary testimonies.

When applied to such a compilation using *isnāds*, «source-examination» or «source-criticism» is first of all «*isnād*-analysis». It aims to determine the literary sources, which as basic elements (tesseractae, as they were), make up the

1. Nabia Abbott: *Studies in Arabic literary papyri*. I: *Historical Texts*. II: *Qur'ānic Commentary and Tradition*. Chicago 1957 and 1967.
2. Harald Motzki: *Die Anfänge der islamischen Jurisprudenz: Ihre Entwicklung bis zur Mitte des 2. Jahrhunderts*. Stuttgart 1991.

mosaic of the finished compilation; to clarify their origin and the time when they came into being; to draw precise conclusions as to their nature, the ways and forms of their transmission and their value as sources of the literary work in question; and finally, to verify and evaluate the most important of these older literary materials as well as the individuals involved in their transmission.

However, engaging in source-criticism of a compilation from the 8th to the 10th century A.D., we are confronted with a number of difficulties. Apart from the already mentioned queries about the *isnāds*' credibility and their value as historical evidence, these problems are mainly caused by the peculiarities of a system of instruction by lecture and, accordingly, the question of the proportion of oral and written transmission of texts during the first three hundred years of Islam. They arise, not least, from the fact that with the theoretical and practical realization of investigating the «sources» of a given medieval work, one enters a field in the history of Arabic literature, which has, until now, been incomplete, not only methodologically but also terminologically speaking.

## II

Concerning the topic of early Islamic instruction and of oral vs. written transmission, considerable progress has been made during the last few decades, and a certain consensus has emerged. Even if different views and controversial opinions continue to exist, one may draw the following conclusions:

A) In keeping with the example of the prophet Muḥammad, as early as the first decades of Islam, sessions (*majālis*, *mujālasāt*) and circles (*ḥalaqāt*) were held for the purpose of teaching. They took place either in mosques or private homes. This kind of «oral teaching» is considered the oldest means of imparting knowledge. It developed during the first two centuries of Islam and became the most important institution of the Islamic educational system. Beginning with the Science of Tradition (*ʿilm al-ḥadīth*), the passing on of information in lectures and seminars (*mudhākarāt*) was applied largely to other disciplines.

B) Scientifically interested individuals travelled far and wide, often on lifelong journeys in the Islamic empire, in order to seek knowledge (*ṭalab al-ʿilm*), to gather materials in certain fields, to attend in person the lectures of a famous teacher (*shaykh*) and to learn from the different ways in which teachers explained certain problems. Communication between teacher and students (it was not uncommon for them to be with him for many years), learning in a community of kindred spirits, and the strength of the teacher's example, all played a significant role.

C) The high esteem of personal contact between teacher and student, emphasis on the oral – or at least, a close interaction between spoken and written discourse – are characteristic of the medieval Islamic educational system. An obvious predominance of «oral» transmission in early Islam, which was above all religiously motivated, and the practical necessity and usefulness of close contact between teacher and student are to be explained mainly by the peculiarities of the Arabic script and by the difficulties in reading and understanding unvocalized texts. Therefore, Muslim scholars considered the «heard transmission» (*al-riwāya al-masmūʿa*, or *as-samāʿ*) as the best and most trustworthy kind of transmission. To be more precise, today's orientalists use this term, «heard transmission», or «aural transmission» instead of the less accurate and overgeneralizing «oral transmission».

D) Although we have to bear in mind the existence of various opinions among Muslims concerning the usage of writing and the written word, we can rely on the fact that even the oldest authorities already practised writing and that written materials were used for a variety of purposes. To a larger extent than the Science of *Ḥadīth*, other branches of Islamic scholarship used writing – besides «memorizing» – to retain information. Obviously that was the case as early as the first century of Islam. And we have good reason to regard the historiography as that discipline which produced and used written materials from the earliest times.

## III

The fact that until only some years ago no acceptable technique for the analysis of *isnāds* existed appears to have been an additional reason for the occasional inclination among orientalists to disregard chains of transmitters altogether. It was Fuat Sezgin's work about al-Bukhārī's «*aṣ-Ṣaḥīḥ*»<sup>1</sup> and Manfred Fleischhammer's about Abū I-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī's «*al-Aghānī*»,<sup>2</sup> which caused a breakthrough. Quite independently of each other, both developed and practised the method of completely recording the *isnāds* of the «works» concerned, and examining the *isnāds* in ascending order from the proximate to the more remote links. Another method of analysing all *isnāds* which cover a «certain tradition (*ḥadīth*)», from their oldest or original transmitter(s) up to the more recent ones, was developed by Joseph Schacht in his book *The Origin of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*.<sup>3</sup> It was applied and further refined, above all, by G.H.A. Juynboll in his investigation into «Muslim Tradition».<sup>4</sup>

Although the *isnād*-analysis has proven to be the most efficient procedure in source-examination, the problems inherent in its methodology and terminology have not been sufficiently addressed. In particular, it is essential to determine precisely what is to be understood by the term «source» in the case of an early Islamic compilation, given the nature of the medieval Islamic educational system with its sometimes obscure and incomprehensible mechanisms of transmission.

In the broadest sense, all materials which an author used for his literary work might be regarded as «sources», regardless of their age and nature. However, to achieve a meaningful evaluation of these materials and the individuals involved in

1. Fuat Sezgin: *Bukhārī'nin kaynakları hakkında araştırmalar*. Istanbul 1956; and *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*. Vol. I. Leiden 1967, 29-84.
2. Manfred Fleischhammer: *Quellenuntersuchungen zum Kitāb al-Aḡānī*. (Habilitationsschrift, not publ.) Halle/Saale 1965.
3. Joseph Schacht: *The origin of Muhammadan jurisprudence*. Oxford 1950.
4. G.H.A. Juynboll: *Muslim tradition: Studies in chronology, provenance and authorship of early hadīth*. Cambridge, London etc. 1983.

their transmission, a more precise definition of the term «source» will be necessary. At first glance it seems to be possible to rely on a vocabulary that already exists in the relevant literature. But the lack of a commonly accepted terminology negatively affects both the endeavours to conceptualize the problem of sources and the practical analysis of the *isnāds* and the sources respectively. Moreover, it causes difficulties in generalizing and comparing the results even of properly conducted case studies.

I was first confronted with these problems whilst investigating the sources of a famous Shī'ite historic-biographical book from the 11th century: Abū l-Faraj al-Isfahānī's book «*Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn*» (The violent deaths of the descendents of the Prophet Muḥammad in the line of his uncle Abū Ṭālib).<sup>1</sup> As my survey progressed, it became increasingly urgent to clarify certain terms, which had previously been introduced into Oriental studies – e.g., transmitter, guarantor, collector, author, source. They all had to be defined and categorized. In addition, a series of new terms had to be devised for specific reference to the source-materials themselves. Thus, I have distinguished between two main groups of terms.

The first group denotes «persons» who are involved in the transmission process. Such terms specifically refer to their technical function in the transmission as such; their significance as points of reference for the given compiler's work; and to their importance and contribution to the consolidation and eventual «fixation» of the transmitted material. For example, there have been defined terms like *authority*; *older directly-quoted authority*; *author*; *reviewer*; *collector*.

The second group of terms denotes source-«materials». Such terms specifically refer to their formal position in the process of transmission; their

1. Sebastian Günther: *Quellenuntersuchungen zu den «Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn» des Abū 'l-Farağ al-Isfahānī (gest. 356/967). Ein Beitrag zur mündlichen und schriftlichen Überlieferung in der mittelalterlichen arabischen Literatur*. Hildesheim, Zürich, New York 1991.

importance as a source for the compilation under discussion; and to their nature or consistency (oral and written, respectively). Here we find defined terms like: *direct source*; *older directly-used source*; *main source*; *actual source*; *original source*; *written source with subordinated terms*; *written source quoted by name*; *incontrovertibly-written source*; *assuredly-written source*; *possibly-written source*.

A catalogue of pertinent terms, progressing from the general to the particular has been worked out. These terms denote various aspects of the most important «positions» occupied by the individuals and the materials respectively, attributed to them in the «matrix» of transmission. Such conceptual tools, which have proven worthwhile in our source-analysis of Abū l-Faraj's historiographical compilation, permit us to differentiate between the all too often seemingly indistinct mass of transmitters and their handed-down texts, and to classify and evaluate them in terms of «source-criticism».<sup>1</sup>

To make these thoughts a little bit more concrete, I would like to refer to a few results of the *isnād*-analysis of the «*Maqātil*». In accordance with the information to be found in the bio-bibliographical literature, it led us to the conclusion that the author, Abū l-Faraj, received the material used for his book from probably 53 direct *informers*, most of whom were from Kufa and Baghdad; 10 % of them were members of the family of the Prophet. The examination of his «sources» revealed a large number of writings used by Abū l-Faraj directly, i.e. books belonging to his teachers and other older manuscripts, which he came across at the Baghdad book-market. However, he leans more often on information that he received through the mediation of one or more *transmitters*, through his teachers' lectures or as copies and *reviews* of older writings, respectively.

Among the most important *direct sources* which Abū l-Faraj used, we find,

1. Id.: *Source criticism and isnād-analysis in medieval Arabic literature*. In: *Late Antiquity and Early Islam series IV*, Princeton (in print).

for example, the long lost «*K. man shahida ma ʿa Amīr al-muʿminīn ʿAlī*», written by his teacher Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Hamdānī (d. in 944; cited 120 times). In his own words, Abū l-Faraj received another somewhat older work, i.e. the «*K. man qutila min al-Ṭālibiyyīn*» by Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥārith al-Kharrāz (d. in 872; cited 29 times) as a manuscript. This is to be categorized as an *older, directly-used written source, quoted by name*.

Most of the important *older authorities* (or «*authors*», as it were), to whom Abū l-Faraj refers indirectly, lived as early as the end of the 8th and until the middle of the 9th century. Their writings, which were included by him in his «*Maqātil*», have to be classified as Abū l-Faraj's *older* but, in many cases, as his *real sources*. This judgment is underlined by the fact that the corresponding works of his direct *informers* and teachers also lean on them.

Yet another question becomes obvious in this context: With regard to the literary history, it is of special interest to discover, and identify by name, those source-materials which were writings. As in many cases of medieval Arabic literature, only a few of the oldest works survived as authentic or independent manuscripts. Most of them have probably been lost forever. A direct comparison or synoptic analysis of the texts found in our compilation with the «*original*» *written sources* seems only rarely to be possible. Nevertheless, medieval bio-bibliographical dictionaries have preserved abundant «titles» of writings of «books» (*kutub*) and valuable details about their collectors and writers, their sources, ways of transmission, etc. This fact remains important, even if we bear in mind that the majority of these *kutub* quoted by «title» do *not* describe books in the sense of literary works which were finally revised by their authors and published. Since *kitāb*, until the beginning of the third century, primarily means «something written», these «work»-titles mainly represent (a) written collections, compiled and used as «memory-aids» by scholars for their lectures, or (b) lecture-notebooks, or copies of those writings made by students. Often these texts – more precisely, thematically ordered «units» – of various lengths and content, were given a fixed written form, and

eventually published, only by a scholar's student or his student's student. In general, these texts did not develop into a more constant form (memorized or written down or both) until the end of the 8th and during the 9th century A.D. Only from that time on were they transmitted in this or in a slightly altered way. To describe these various kinds of writings or the different (written) character of texts in medieval Arabic literature more precisely, the terms «*syngramma*» and «*hypomnēma*» from Classical Greek have been introduced into Islamic studies by the German Orientalist Gregor Schoeler.<sup>1</sup> Whereas *syngramma* means «a book finally revised and published» – publication being a significant criterion of a real book – the expression *hypomnēma* characterizes, as it did in Classical Greek, the type of «writing for private purposes», «lecture-notes». The introduction of these two expressions, used as terms, marks an important step in our understanding of the medieval Arabic literature.

In my view, however, a third type of writing must be distinguished, which was clearly of importance in medieval Islam. Corresponding to the «lively» character of the written works transmitted in colleges, there is a kind of literary work which cannot be characterized unequivocally as *hypomnēma* (private note) or *syngramma* (real book). On the one hand, these writings give us the impression of being quite plainly more than simple «lecture-notes», as they are known and mentioned in medieval sources with a title, and since they deal with a special literary subject and seem to have been brought by the «authors» themselves into a literary form that is characterized by a relatively well thought out concept in the presentation of the material. On the other hand, there are clear signs that the works of this type have not yet developed into «real books», but were first brought into a *final* written form by a student of the author in question.

Nevertheless, such works were compiled, or rather composed, and already written down by the scholars themselves, and – as usual – transmitted (by

1. I would like only to refer here to a series of four articles, in which G. Schoeler deals with this subject in detail. Cf. *Der Islam* 62 (1985), 201-30; 66 (1989), 38-67 and 213-51; 69 (1992), 1-43.

themselves and their students) through lectures. I propose to call this type of writing: «*literary composition*».

In this context, one may want to draw attention to the fact that in the case of the works which may be classified as «*literary compositions*», there is also at least one corresponding phenomenon in Greek literature, i.e. Aristotle's «*Methaphysics*».<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, this compendium seems to have been considered as a plain collection of «*lectures*». On the other hand, it is a corpus of writings well developed in style and content, written down by its author, and even published to a certain extent, i.e. within the sessions of his colleges and through his lectures. The fact that a considerable number of the medieval Arabic works (*kutub*) – despite the peculiarities of early Islamic transmission – were known already in their times as a *certain* scholar's literary product and were explicitly ascribed to him, speaks convincingly in favour of these opinions.

A good example in this regard is «*The history of Medina*» by ʿUmar ibn Shabba (died 262 H/ 876 A.D.), which has been available in its edited form only recently.<sup>2</sup> After a first reading, one may think that here we really have a work of an early traditionist-historiographer in its original form. The *isnāds* start mostly with *ḥaddathanā* (told us), followed by names of ʿUmar ibn Shabba's teachers. With that, the conditions seem to be fulfilled to evaluate the text as a copy of a «*real book*» by the author ʿUmar himself. But on page 133, we find the information «*ʿUmar ibn Shabba told us and said: This is not from the book (!); Saʿīd ibn ʿĀmir told us...*». So, after all, it is again «*only*» a work (*kitāb*), which was compiled by one of ʿUmar's students! However, due to the fact that almost

1. Werner Wilhelm Jaeger: *Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Metaphysik des Aristoteles*. Berlin 1912; esp. 31, 39 p., 44 p., 96, 112 p., 124, 126, 128-130, and his: *Aristoteles: Grundlagen einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung*. Berlin 1923, esp. 172 pp., 201.
2. *Ḥaddathanā Abū Zayd* (sic.: ʿUmar ibn Shabba) *wa-qāla: laysa ḥadhā mimnā fī l-kitāb; ḥaddathanā Saʿīd ibn ʿĀmir...* Cf. ʿUmar ibn Shabba: *Taʾrīkh al-Madīna al-munawwara li-Abī Zayd, ʿUmar ibn Shabba an-Nunayrī al-Baṣrī (173-262 H)*. Ed. by Fuhaym Muhammad Shaltūt. Part I-IV. Mekka 1399 H/ 1979. I would like to thank G. Schoeler (Basel) for his valuable advise concerning this work.

the complete text is exclusively based on ʿUmar ibn Shabba, according to our terminology, it is certainly more than just a collection of ʿUmar's lecture-notes. It represents, to my mind, the kind of writing, which can be described quite adequately with the term «*literary composition*».

The situation regarding the classification of some older «*sources*», which Abū l-Faraj used for his «*Maqātil*», is quite similar: These writings have to be considered partly as works in the sense of *hypomnēmata*, partly even as *literary compositions*. But first Abū l-Faraj's compendium itself is a «*real book*» (*syngamma*), apparently the earliest of all in the medieval Arabic *maqātil*-genre: it is characterized by a fixed and systematic order in the presentation of the material, has a preface and a closing remark, and, finally, the whole text was evidently written down by the author himself.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. The interaction of the oral and written language is to be acknowledged as a characteristic of the medieval Arabic-Islamic system of transmission. The occasional dominance of one over the other during the first three centuries of Islam (i.e. 7th until 10th century A.D.) does not mean the exclusion of one by the other.
  2. Thus, during this period, «*the concept of a book*» (J. Fück)<sup>1</sup> as an integral whole in terms of the formal peculiarities of language, style and shape of compilation, inseparably connected with the individuality of a writer, could not yet develop. An author was only able to express his independent opinions and personal convictions through the thematic selection of literary materials, the arrangement of the used texts, and the size of his own compilation.
1. Johann Fück: *Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq: Literarhistorische Untersuchungen*. Frankfurt a.M. 1925, 5 pp.

3. When applied to an *isnād*-using compilation, «source-criticism» means first of all «*isnād*-analysis». This «external way» is, in most cases, the only practicable method of tracing the «sources» of medieval Arabic compilation, because the supposedly relevant older manuscripts have not come down to us.
4. Sharply defined theoretical classification of the various pieces of information or text-fragments, which were borrowed by the medieval compiler from previous collections, paves the way for the attempt to reconstruct the text-situation concerning the older writings used by an author and to determine his «sources». In this analysis, a general distinction, as has previously been shown, between terms that denote the «persons», who are involved in the transmission process, and terms that specifically refer to the source-«materials» is advisable.
5. To understand and describe the different character of medieval Arabic writings, given the nature by the early Islamic system of transmission, it is worthwhile to refer to a seemingly quite similar situation in Classical Greek. The terms, *hypomnēma* (lecture-note) and, to a lesser extent, *syngramma* (a real book) are also appropriate as characterizations of many of the medieval Arabic works. However, as these terms do not cover those writings which seem to be somewhere in between, a third expression should be introduced, namely «*literary composition*». This term describes a kind of compilation which was created by its author to a considerably larger degree than was usual in the case of a *hypomnēma* but which had not yet become a *syngramma*.
6. Only at the end of the 9th and during the 10th centuries did this kind of «authorized lecture-book» or «literary composition» sink down again to the level of little more than lecture-notes or written memory-aids, as the development towards literary books (*syngrammata*) became generally more acceptable, and it became usual to «edit» real books. From that time on, the lectures given by

scholars during their sessions or circles no longer seemed to have been used to such an extent for «publication» as they were previously. On the contrary, they started to become teaching courses, i.e. colleges in our modern sense of the word. In my opinion, this view is appropriate with regard to a considerable number of medieval works, predominantly the historical and biographical ones. It solves some problems with their literary-historical evaluation, especially in the case of those *kutub* where characteristics of both *hypomnēma* and *syngramma* can be detected.