Understanding a text through its transmission: Documented *sama', copies, reception

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The dissemination of texts, in many fields of pre-modern Islamic scholarship, was effected through regulated modes of transmission, which also determined the production and use of manuscript copies. Notes on manuscripts, which primarily document the transmission of the text, may also provide information about the production and use of manuscript copies. Transmission, of course, is a social practice: it requires personal communication, both formal and informal, between transmitter, or master, and student, or receiver. This does not necessarily demand any narrow and long term relationship, but it entails some kind of networking which may be connected to specific social milieus, where a certain text or a certain group of texts circulate. Learning about the transmission and, along with it, the production of manuscript copies offers insight into the origin and reception of texts, and thus may contribute to our understanding of the texts’ contents.

This paper will examine the interrelation of transmission and manuscripts in an attempt to demonstrate its bearing upon the interpretation of content. The scholarly discipline of *ḥudūl al-rā‘iyā<table> explains in detail various methods of transmission, as they were applied in the realm of Prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) with particular vigour, but also in other branches of scholarly literature. Many of the adherent practices were well established by the 3rd/9th century and probably had been developed before. The validity of transmission, especially when it includes oral performance, is based upon the transmitter’s general trustworthiness, on his particular authority and competence, and on the meticulous documentation of the transmission.¹ These aspects appear to parallel the practices of juridical testimony. An additional characteristic of oral transmission of written texts is the esteem for the transmitter’s long life span, which may span several decades, stretching between the authority to whom he is referring and the people to whom he is transmitting.

As a general rule, manuscripts are comparable to printed books in that they make texts available; like books, they were produced for the purpose of reading and studying. A manuscript of the *Ma‘āni al-Qur‘ān* by Yahyā b. Ziyād al-Farā‘i (d. ca. 207/821), for example, which is preserved in the Dar al-Kutub al-Miṣrīya, was reproduced from a copy of the 18th century. The manuscript was donated by its own owner, (Muhammad) Māhi‘īd al-Ṣināqī, who made it thus accessible to

readers. But al-Farra’s work may also demonstrate that our notion of what manuscripts are and what they were used for, must be larger, going beyond the idea inspired by modern book printing. The work dates from an early period of Arabic book writing, when books were not written down by their authors. The oldest extant manuscript documents the transmission of the text: The copy from the 9th/10th-century reproduces the text transcribed from the author’s public lecture, and carries sami notes testifying to the text’s transmission, its verification and correction by an authority. As in this case, manuscripts often serve as repositories of notes testifying to the transmission of the text. As we shall see, this particular use of manuscripts may have an impact on the dissemination and disappearance of manuscripts.

The case of the Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān also exemplifies a particular feature of manuscript-production, which is especially characteristic of the early period. The original text cannot be considered a plain and simple text-reproduction. It is a “book” produced – not reproduced – by a scribe: Muhammad b. al-Jahm al-Simari, who regularly attended the author’s lectures, apparently at the young age of 14 to 16 years of age. As he says in the beginning:

“This book which contains the Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān was dictated to us by Abū Zakariyya Yahyā b. Ziyād al-Farra from memory without the help of any of the assemblies he held early on Wednesday mornings and on Fridays during Ramadān and the following months of the year 2 (920/921) as well as in the months of the year 2 (920) and 209.”

The version produced in this manner was not the only one. Subsequent to al-Farra’s dictation, one of his disciples would take the notes from one of the scribes present and would read them to the author, producing amendments, additions and omissions. In this way, different versions came into being. As an example may illustrate in a preliminary manner, manuscripts are not only handwritten books dating from the time before printing was introduced. Specific modes of production may differ from the mere fabrication of copies; their function may go beyond the preservation of the text, and their utility may not consist solely in their being used for reading. Transmission, thus, is a constituent of manuscript production, and copying manuscripts is related to the practices of transmission, which often entail oral performance. This format goes well beyond what a book is supposed to offer, since the text appears imbedded in documents testifying to its transmission, which determine to a large extent the value of the text.

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3 Ibid., 3.
5 Al-Farra, Ma‘ānī al-Qur’ān, I, 14.
6 Ibid., ibid. Cf. Ta‘rīkh Baghḍādī, XIV, 152f.
mental, authorities and warn against dealings with any agent of worldly power. This doctrine is part of a long-lasting orientation of Islamic piety. As it is particularly sharp and accentuated in its criticism of political authority, it may be read as an expression of fundamental scepticism, even fierce political opposition, legitimated by the sunna laid down by the Prophet himself and by the teaching and practice of upright and exemplary pious scholars. The text expounds the good example of religious scholars who implicitly advocate the autonomy of religious institutions. Most examples refer to the Unayzah period, but the collection is inscribed within the context of the Abbasid claim to religious authority. If the evidence of transmission is taken into account, the text appears also as an expression of factionalism and group identity based upon a particular exercise of piety. Any linkage to modern Islamist thought must remain superficial. The documentation of the text’s transmission, which we find on the manuscript mainly in the form of sana’ notes, helps provide insight into the origin and use of the manuscript. They also indicate the text’s reception, helping us to reconstruct the scholarly milieu in which it flourished. The information provided by these documents serves various utilities.

1. Presenting the text

The title page of the manuscript gives the title of the work: Teachings of the Masters and their Moral Conduct (Abhār al-shaykhīk waz-ahlbāqhum). Underneath the transmitter-author is named, the above-mentioned: Abū Bakr al-Marrūdī. His name appears in the first line of a five-line note, starting with the term riwayat Abī Bakr, indicating the transmission of the work bearing this title. The following chain of transmitters is given in a hooked form, as we shall explain in an instant. The note is a summary of the information which appears at the beginning of the text on the following page.

10 Inspired by Syyyid Qūṭb, the editor (as n. 8) reads the text as testifying pious self-respect (Iṣṣa) as a defence against worldly pleasures and benefits.
11 MS Zilıhiya 3856 fol.13r; cf. Yāsīn M. al-Sawā, Fīhīr Rūṣūlī al-Maṣūs al-Ummīya, Kuwait 1408/1987, 639. The only manuscript of this text known so far contains the parts one and three, part two is lost. See also table 1.
13 Al-Kurābī, al-Baghdādī, Tawāḥ, XI, 335.
14 Granting general authorisation to small children for transmitting a text was a widespread practice (Leder, “Spoken word”, 15). But the term Iṣṣa was also used in replacement of other modes of transmission (see n. 23).
16 Henri Laoust, La profession de foi d’Ibn Baṭṭa, Damascus 1958, XLIII.
17 Al-Kurābī, al-Baghdādī, Tawāḥ, V, 83.
This chain locates the transmission at Baghdad and even the reading at Mecca is a transmission among scholars from that city. Some of the scholars are known for adhering to the Ḥanbalī school. Al-Marrūdī is a disciple and close companion of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, and in his text, Aḥmad b. Anas (Ibn Ḥanbal) is the most often quoted authority. Ibn Baṭṭa is one of the most prominent representatives of the madhhab. However, transmission was not confined to Ḥanbalīs. Al-Ājurī was šafi‘ī, and so was al-Busrī, a highly appreciated scholar and, both for his high age and his competence, a much sought-after transmitter (muhaddid ‘anba al-riwāya). Ibn Kardī al-Fallās finally has no record among the followers of Ibn Ḥanbal. The transmission of the unique manuscript containing this text shows that it gained prominence mainly through al-Ājurī and was before him in the hands of a rather little known layman. The text was marginal and subsequently entered official or large tradition. Due to this shift of the social position of the text, it gained prominence in scholarly circles.

3. The riwāya at the title page: book style

The assets of this transmission, in particular the conspicuous link between Ibn Baṭṭa and al-Ājurī, are conveyed by the summary on the title page. Beginning with al-Ājurī after al-Marrūdī, it gives only secondary importance to Ibn Kardī’s role. This riwāya note is an extension of the title, and its main function is to identify the text. As Classical Arabic literature produced variant transmissions (riwāya) of a text, the indication here may have two objectives: a practical specification of the riwāya in distinction to others, and a more general indication of the text’s value by reference to prominent scholars transmitting it. Its form seems to sustain our interpretation. It appears as a descending chain, starting with the transmitter-author and then continuing the chain in a hooked form, moving two steps forward and one step back. It thus runs: "transmission (riwāya) of ... Al-Ājurī from ... Al-Fallās from him (that is al-Marrūdī), transmission of ... Al-Busrī from ... Ibn Baṭṭa, with authorization (al-jāzya)."

4. Beyond the riwāya: ongoing transmission

The transmission of the text neither starts with al-Marrūdī nor ends with al-Busrī. Al-Marrūdī represents the transition from a transmission of text units to the composition of the collection, which he authored. He is the authorial "I" giving the information about the authorities to whom he refers, and his references and composition of the text are indicative of its meaning. On the other end, the same notes on the title page give evidence of an ongoing transmission of the text after al-Busrī. Also the initial formula at the beginning of the opening inād, anba‘anā, gives proof of an ongoing transmission. But we have not yet established the authorial "We" saying "anba‘anā Abū l-Qāsim ‘Abī b. Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Busrī". Who is transmitting from al-Busrī and how is this transmission related to the book and to the manuscript copy we have? In the case of a regular transmission, we should expect that behind anba‘anā is a scholar who gained authorisation for his transmission through a reading of the text to al-Busrī.

5. A copied reading note: unclear traces

Above the beginning of the first part (fol. 13r) and again above the beginning of the third part (fol. 34r), we find a reading note. It says that, "I read the text (aloud) to Abū l-Qāsim" – without doubt this refers to al-Busrī – "in Ramadan of the year 468/1076 in the Mosque at the Marāthī Gate." We may assume from the place of the note that the authorial "I" here is related to the

23 Here ḥuṣn is used to indicate the transmission qira‘atan ‘alaqhi which Ibn Baṭṭa had received.
24 It is not entirely clear to which book the note refers. I read: حفظت على أبي القاسم من كتاب أبي على إنشاب (؟) إله. وله تلاذ وذالك في شهر رمضان سنة 468 وفウォ كلمة اتفتا ورث واها... The second reading note, fol. 34r, refers to a date four months later: والللا في يوم المولد الأسود عشر من الأخر سنة ثمان وستين وأربع ماهاتا
transmission from al-Busri. The note is written in the same hand as the text, and, if the text was not handwritten by the hidden transmitter himself, it must have been copied together with the text. In other words, the copyist must either be the same person who read the text to al-Busri, or else the note was copied together with the text. As we deduce from our conjectures concerning the copyist established below, the note refers to a reading held before production of the extant copy. None of the transmitters playing a role in the production or authentication of the copy could have read the text to al-Busri at that date. The exact function of the note at this point remains unclear, as it does not endorse the value of the manuscript in terms of a regular transmission. However, this note can be related to the – as yet unknown – transmitter from al-Busri.

6. Informal sama` notes

Sama` notes reveal the interrelation between the transmission of the text and the production of the manuscript copy that contains the notes. Under the ma`ṣāṣa at the title page, and in the same hand, we find two copies and abbreviated sama` notes, the first for ` Ubaydallah b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Farrāʾ (d. 469/1076-77),25 son of the famous master of the Ḥanbalī school of Baghdad, the Qāḍī Abī Yaʿlā,26 and brother of Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, author of the Taḥqīq al-Ḥanābalī. It is said that he heard the text in a reading presided over by Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, but no details are given. The second mentions hearing (sama`) and ownership (milh) of the manuscript by a grand nephew of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Farrāʾ: ` Ubaydallah b. `Alī b. Muḥammad (b. al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad) Ibn al-Farrāʾ (d. 578/1182).27 The note also gives the name of his informant – or the reader of the text – as the Qāḍī Abī ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad b. `Ubaydallah b. Sallām al-Karkhi (d. 551/1156),28 who is known for his transmission from al-Busri. It also points out that al-Karkhi transmitted the text by the authority of al-Busri, who had received an jāzā from Ibn Bāṭṭa.

The second note particularly underlines the value of the manuscript, as it is shown to be an authorised copy related to a regular transmission based on sama`, i.e. a formal and documented reading of the text in which Ibn al-Farrāʾ took part. We may further deduce from the note that Ibn al-Farrāʾ copied the text, or obtained a copy, possibly from a copy that al-Karkhi owned. Ibn Sallām al-Karkhi could thus be the self-appointed virtual voice saying “anbiya` sama` (al-Busri informed us at the beginning of the text). In accordance with established practice, al-Karkhi, born in the year 468/1075-6, was still a young boy when al-Busri died in 474/1082.

7. Certificate of audition: copied or original?

These conjectures are endorsed by the complete certificate of audition that appears at the end of the text.29 It refers to a reading held by Ibn Sallām al-Karkhi transmitting (bi-rīḥāyat) from al-Busri; the reading was performed by Muntakhab al-Dir Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb b. al-Ḥusayn b. Dādā al-Jāthibī (d. 549/1153),30 in the presence of `Ubaydallāh b. `Ali Ibn al-Farrāʾ, who is named as the owner of the manuscript (ṣāḥib milh) and Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb al-Kaḥfīb b. Ahmad b. `Abd al-Qādir b. Muḥammad. The writer of the note is not mentioned, but the date is given: Dhu l-Qa`da 547/1153. February 1153. The characteristic handwriting of the document differs from that of the text; letters are less densely connected than in the text. But there are still striking similarities, which might mean that it was written by the same hand. If the certificate of audition and the text were written by the same person, one may conclude either that a reading was held before the copy was produced, or else that the copy dates from before Dhu l-Qa`da 547, and the certificate of audition was added by the same person who produced the copy.


dīn, Ḥanbalī, sīyāh, XX, 277.

28 Al-Dhahabi, Sīyāh, XX, 277.
29 Fol. 49b; See figure 3.
30 Al-Dhahabi, Sīyāh, XX, 251.
8. Original certificate of audition:
   Authentication of the manuscript and terminus ante quem of the copy

A further certificate of audition corroborates this second interpretation.\(^{31}\) It appears on one of two sheets that were cut and then pasted to the manuscript. In both cases, the left side of the sheet was damaged. The reading is preserved by Ibn Sallama al-Karkhi, and the name of the reader (qanità) and writer of the certificate (kataªuna) is the same Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Khaliq b. Ahmad b. 'Abd al-Qadir b. Muhammad b. Yusuf (d. Jumâda II 568/Jan-Feb. 1175)\(^{32}\) whom we already came across in the certificate at the end of the text. Among the listeners, the owner (sahîhabu) of the book (juz'\(^{\text{a}}\)) is named as Ibn al-Farrâ', and introduced as the one who had produced the copy. Furthermore, the aforementioned reader, Ibn Dâdâ al-Jâbîdî, a scholar famous for his trustworthiness and competence as a transmitter, is mentioned. The date is Wednesday, 9 Dhu l-Qa'da 547/25 February 1153. Alongside it, Ibn Dâdâ confirms what Ibn 'Abd al-Khaliq wrote. This was probably done because Ibn 'Abd al-Khaliq had a reputation for being dishonest and unserious.\(^{33}\) This certificate was written after Ibn al-Farrâ's copy was produced.

Both certificates regard the transmission of the written text, from two angles. They testify that the manuscript is part of an authorized transmission, insofar as its owner, Ibn al-Farrâ', "received" the text through a reading held by an authorized person. This determines the validity of the manuscript for a further, ongoing transmission. The original certificate, affected by a "weak" transmitter and endorsed by a "strong" authority, provides strong evidence to confirm the information given in the copied certificate written by the copyist and owner. The data provided by both certificates also concern the production of the copy, as they allow us to establish its date as being (shortly) before February 547/1153. Provided that the original certificate was part of the manuscript, and not added to it later, the copy must have been produced before that date. Even in the other case, when it was added by pasting, the reference to Ibn al-Farrâ' would most probably mean that he had produced a copy beforehand.

9. Alternative transmission, a basis for further copy production

Manuscripts, especially when their transmission is verified to have been authorized, are used as repositories of same²a notes. The notes may document the continuation of transmission that is the basis for the authorization of a new copy. Ibn al-Farrâ', the owner of the manuscript, did not play any active role in further transmissions, in contrast to Ibn Sallama al-Karkhi before him. However, the manuscript did. It was used in readings presided by Abu l-Qasım Sa'id b. Ahmad Ibn al-Bannâ (d. 550/1156).\(^{34}\) The importance of Ibn al-Bannâ for the transmission of the text is shown in two certificates of audition produced two years earlier. One appears on another of the two sheets already mentioned, which were cut and pasted to the page.\(^{35}\) Ibn al-Bannâ's authorization (jízà) from al-Busri is emphasized, as is the latter's authorization from Ibn Bat'a. As in the case of al-Karkhi, al-Bannâ was a young boy of seven or eight years when al-Busri died. All certificates where he appears as the presiding master emphasize that he held a formal authorization from al-Busri. As before, \(\text{jízà}\) here figures as a parallel concept replacing transmission through reading. From this perspective, the certificates are of considerable value having more weight than the unspecified transmission of al-Karkhi.

Among the several listeners present at the reading, which was held Sunday, 14 Muharram 550/20 March 1157, is al-Mubârak al-Ša'rafi, as well as the famous Qur'an reader Abu l-Hasan 'Ali b. 'Asâkir al-Šaṭi' (d. 572/1176-77).\(^{36}\) The reader, Ahmad b. Sâlih b. Shâfi'i b. Sâlih b. Hâtim (Abu 'AbdALLâh al-Jili (d. 565/22 April 1170)),\(^{37}\) appears in the same function at another reading, which he himself recorded (wa-haddâkh khaṭṭûn) only three days earlier, on Thursday, 11 Muharram of the same year (17 March, 1155) for the same sheikh.\(^{38}\) Here al-Šaṭi' is also mentioned among the listeners, but he came late and participated only at the last part of the reading.

10. A posthumous certificate?

A certificate of audition on the title page\(^{39}\) documents the reading of Abu Tâlib al-Šu'ayr b. 'Ali b. Šu'ayr al-Ša'rafi (d. 564/1169)\(^{40}\) to al-Bannâ and, for a second part, to Abu Bakr al-Mu'mammad b. Ubaydallâh Ibn al-Zâghûnî (d. 23 Rabi' I 552/5 May 1157, at the age of 80 or 81 years).\(^{41}\) The reading is dated Muharram of the year 552/ca. February 1157. Both sheikhs, it is said, held an authorization (jízà)

\(^{31}\) Fol. 33v. See figure 4.
\(^{35}\) Fol. 50v.
\(^{36}\) Al-Dhâhabî, Shu'ar, XX, 548-550.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., XX, 572.
\(^{38}\) Second certificate on fol. 33, see figure 3.
\(^{39}\) See figure 1.
\(^{40}\) Ibn al-Jawzâ, al-Mustâqãm, 1992, XVIII, 185.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., XVIII, 122.
from al-Busri. Among the listeners is the well-known scholar and ascetic 'Ali b. Ahmad b. Muhammad b. 'Umar al-Faţimi al-Hasayni al-Zaydi (d. 575/1180).42

According to the date given in the certificate, the reading was held two years after al-Bannā’s death. The writer of the document is not named, and its handwriting is very similar to that on the title page. However, it appears to be an independent and true document.43 We therefore conclude that the year of al-Bannā’s death was 552, not 550 and that probably Ibn al-Jawzi gave a wrong date in his *Muntazam*. In any case, al-Bannā, born in 467/1075 was an aged sheikh when he presided over the reading, thus providing an *innaid* ā’īd (short chain of transmitters). The consecutive appearance of two masters for one text is rare, and this circumstance may point to the weakened health of al-Bannā and, as a consequence, to the authenticity of the document.

11. Dead end: the manuscript ceased to be used for transmission

The transmission granted by al-Bannā and certified on the manuscript did not lead to any further transmission activity by the participants at the readings. The prominent position of the certificate on the title page could have served the purpose to authorize ongoing transmission. But the manuscripts owned by ‘Ubaydallah b. ‘Ali Ibn al-Farri‘a were sold in the 1170s44 and thus the manuscript found its way to Damascus. As none of the Damascene scholars had acquired any authorisation for further transmission, the text was not circulated in regular transmission.

12. Marginal and great tradition

As was mentioned above, the work was transmitted by al-Ājurri and subsequently by Ibn Batta; they brought it into circulation among well-known and established scholars. Ahmad Ibn Hanbal’s outstanding steadfastness against prosecution instigated and conducted by the state and religious establishment made a deep imprint on the Ḥanbali legal school, but this collection of fierce state-critical traditions did not gain the status of an integral part of Ḥanbali teaching. As we have learned from the notes analysed above, the text did not circulate among Ḥanbali scholars only and was obviously not regarded as part of a particular Ḥanbali teaching.45 But many of the scholars named in the certificate, were particularly well known for their ostensive piety and humility. Ibn Sallāma was notorious for his secluded lifestyle. Al-Jarbadhāqānī was an ascetic dedicated exclusively to his quest for the transmission of texts. A Ṣayraferi was a merchant acknowledged for his selfless honesty. More than anything else, the text was probably regarded as a lecture on piety and attracted the attention of the pious. Al-Marrūdhi also authored a collection of traditions on *muṣātra*, scrupulous avoidance of any act that could turn out, by way of unforeseen consequences, for example, to be illicit.46

Only to a second degree was it perceived as pertaining to Ḥanbali teaching. Some of the material gathered by al-Marrūdhi also appears in exhortative literature, such as *Kitāb al-zuhd* of Ibn Mubarak or Hannād b. al-Sari, Abu Bakr al-Kha’llaf’s or Ibn Abi l-Dunyaa’s *al-Amr bi-l-ma‘ruf wa-l-nabiyy an al-munkar, al-ṣafhāni’s *Hikmat al-awliyya*, al-Ghazzali’s *Ihya‘ ‘alam al-din*, or Ibn al-Jawzi’s *Ṣifat al-qifara*, and also in biographical literature dealing with the exemplary conduct of pious scholars.47 Nevertheless, there is no other collection known so far being as detailed and severe in disqualifying the moral conduct and legitimacy of rulers and, as a consequence, of political rule. This fundamental interpretation of the precepts of religiously correct conduct results in demanding strict abstention from any function related to political rule. By implication, it even recommends avoiding juridical authority, if that is exercised under the authority of rulers. Such an ultra-orthodox attitude stresses the independence of scholars from political authority and defends them against the power of rulers by recommending strict seclusion. This stance implies a challenge – in as far as the authority of political power is denied, or at least questioned – and this may lead to conflict. In contrast to modern ideologies generating appeals for religious and moral politics, which are particularly attractive for marginalized and morally “outraged” majorities,48 this ultra-orthodox position is quietist in as far as it does not aim at deposing the holders of political power or imposing religious law. At the same time it is activist but, in spite of many examples of a heroic resistance against corruption and repression, it is not directed against political rule, but rather against scholars who do not adhere to this teaching. The factionalist character of the teaching represented by the traditions which al-Marrūdhi collected is surely more important than any stance of political opposition.

This is illustrated, for example, by the first text unit of al-Marrūdhi’s *Teaching of the Masters and Their Moral Conduct*.

42 Al-Diwaḥabī, *Sījir*, XXI, 104.
43 Compare, for instance, “Ahmad” as written in each hand.
45 Ibn Sallāma, Al-Jarbadhāqānī, Al-Ṣayarāfī, Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Khāliq, and al-Zaydi were not Ḥanbalis, but al-Zighāni and Ibn al-Banā belonged to the Ḥanbali madhhab.
47 The editor mostly refers to *ḥaddith* literature only.
I heard, while we were at al-'Askar (in Samarra), how Ishāq b. Hanbal9 deplored Abū 'Abdallāh (Ibn Hanbal) asking him to go in to the caliph in order to command and forbid. He said: "This would be acceptable even in your case, since Ishāq b. Rāhawayh10 goes in to (Abdallāh) Ibn Tūbīr in order to command and forbid." Abū 'Abdallāh replied: "You refer to Ishāq (Ibn Rāhawayh) although I do not agree with what he does! In my opinion there is no good in him, and in his opinion there is no good in me." Al-Marrādī said: "I have heard Abū 'Abdallāh saying: 'When I see him [the caliph], it is my duty to command and forbid him.'"

It is thus reproachable, in the view of Ibn Hanbal, to visit rulers, under any pretext. But if encounters happen, commanding and forbidding is an obligatory duty, even though it may entail unfavourable consequences for the scholar. A particularity of the collection authored by al-Marrādī, however, is that he introduces his quotations, with very few exceptions, by the use of one of two terms: samā’il, which is most often used, and būdā’īthā. The first term clearly refers to oral testimony; it could not yet be established whether the second may imply written materials, but there is some evidence indicating that the formula is referring to an indirect oral reception.31 As comparison reveals, al-Marrādī regularly offers variant versions of longer reports. This also indicates a reproduction from oral and testimony not yet necessarily subject to the methods of formal transmission. His text therefore represents not only the transition from the transmission of text units to an authored collection, but also from informal oral transmission to the "great tradition" of Islamic scripture.

Reading certificates (samā’il)
as a prosopographical source:
Cultural and social practices of an elite family in Zangid and Ayyubid Damascus

Konrad Hischler

The prosopographical study of premodern Middle Eastern societies relies to a large degree on biographical dictionaries, the narrative source genre that is, arguably, one of the most characteristic features of the literary production within these societies. These dictionaries also play a more or a less significant role in the study of fields as diverse as social history, urban history and political history. In many cases they constitute the very backbone of the source material, as in Bulliet's analysis of conversion rates in Persia and the Arabic speaking lands as well as in Petry's study of the civilian elite in Mamluk Cairo. However, the reliance on biographical dictionaries has contributed to a phenomenon which has been summed up by Motahedi with his well-known phrase: "Ulomology is a noble science, at least we have to think so because it is about all the Islamic social history we will ever have." In addition, one may add that this noble science is often élite ulomology as biographical dictionaries were mostly concerned with those individuals, whom the authors perceived to be the "notables" among the religious scholars.

The present contribution seeks to modify the somewhat pessimistic view that the history of the élite religious scholars is all "we will ever have" when it comes to investigating social and cultural patterns of relationships and structures within premodern Middle Eastern societies. Manuscript notes, more specifically reading certificates (sg. samā’), can serve as an important additional source genre to draw a wider picture of the society in which they were issued. It is here that many of those individuals who were not deemed worthy of an entry in the biographical dictionaries, those who were not perceived to belong to the "notables", appeared. In this sense, they allow us to step outside the vision that the dictionaries' authors proposed, to some degree, and to see beyond the social preconceptions that underlie their works. The authors of dictionaries had at their disposal considerable room to manoeuvre in structuring their narratives. However, the formulaic char-

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49 Uncle of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, see Ibn Abi Ya’lla, Tabaqāt, I, 111.
51 Authorities introduced by this term do not show any distinctive traits in terms of time, place or background. The term qanṣa’ alā al-Marrādī refers to the transmission of written materials through reading.

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Figure 1: Title page of the first part (juz) of the ʿAbhār al-ṣuyūṭī wa-ahbāb al-ḥayāt authored by Abū Bakr Ahmad b. Muhammad b. al-Hujjaj al-Marrādī (d. 275/888).
Figure 3: Certificate of audition from fol. 33v.