Literature and the caliphal court

For Muslim scholars, the transmission and dissemination of their knowledge was initially accomplished orally, or, to be more precise, 'aurally'. It depended, in fact, on audition ('amā'ī) and on personal instruction, which took place in scholarly sessions and circles; in some ways this was not unlike classes in present-day universities. In fact, there was opposition to any 'writing down of knowledge' (rāʾīd al-ʿinā', notably in Medina and in Iraq, especially Basra and Kufa, and the opposition was particularly strong when it came to legal opinions (īrdā') or any hadiths attributed to the Prophet. In practice, however, this opposition was not particularly successful: the auditors took notes, either during the teacher's class or afterwards, by copying the notes of another auditor, or indeed those of the teacher himself. In either case, writing was always secondary in the transmission of knowledge. To put it in terms borrowed from Antiquity, only hypomnēmata, private written records intended as a mnemonic aid for a lecture (or a discussion) were used, as opposed to syngraphmata, actual books, composed and redacted according to the canon of stylistic rules, and intended for literary publication (ekdotē). Those wishing to acquire knowledge ('ibn, Hadith in this context) were thus, in principle, obliged personally to attend the teachers' classes and accordingly often had to undertake long journeys in order to do so (rāḥilat ʿīlāb al-ʿinā', a practice that became common in the second half of the eighth century.

The demands of the courtly environment

It is not difficult to see why the Umayyad caliphs preferred to have knowledge accessible in their palace libraries. There, they could easily consult not only the collections containing the traditions of Muhammad and the accounts relating to his life, but also information about the Arab past. To accomplish this they initially (in the mid-seventh century) had scholars brought to the court, where scribes would then write down what these scholars reported. A little later (during the time of 'Urwah ibn al-Zubayr), we find the caliph asking a scholar questions by writing him a letter and receiving a reply also in writing. It is in the following
questions on the subject, to which 'Urwa responded in writing.

As we noted in Chapter 3, 'Urwa composed what might be termed specialised treatises on Islamic history, indeed the first scholarly writings in the Islamic world. 'Urwa's student al-Zuhri is himself reported to have been charged by the Umayyad governor, Khalid al-Qasiri (d. 126/743-4), with compiling a book of genealogies; Khalid is then said to have ordered him to stop all work on the book of genealogies and to write a book on the Sahih. The report does not specify whether this book was ever completed. Al-Zuhri is also reported to have edited annals on the history of the caliphate (Asnām al-khulāṣa), the very first book of its kind, a small fragment of which is quoted by al-Ṭabarī. Once he had started working for the Umayyads, al-Zuhri was called upon several times to put his knowledge at their disposal by producing written collections of hadiths. Various reports describe him as either compiling these collections or dictating them. According to one report, it was for the Umayyad ruler, 'Umar II (ruled 99/717-101/726), that al-Zuhri devoted himself to hadith collection on a large scale, and for the education of the princes at the court of another Umayyad ruler, Hishām ibn 'Abd al-Malik (ruled 105/724-125/743), that he dictated many hadiths. According to one source, he dictated hadiths for the princes to a scribe for a whole year (sc. entirely from memory). According to another source, he twice dictated four hundred traditions a month apart (sc. without the help of notes), and the two dictations were identical in every way. With the exception of 'Urwa's letters, all the above-mentioned books and compilations – inasmuch as their authors ever completed them – disappeared with the fall of the Umayyads. These were evidently works of which only a small number of copies were produced which were then deposited in the caliph's library and which were intended for the exclusive use of the caliph and court.

The state secretaries

In the meantime, a new social class, or scholarly cadre, had appeared on the scene and taken its place next to the scholars learned in the fields of religious and linguistic scholarship: these kuttāb (sing. kātib), literally 'scribes' or 'writers', but here meaning 'state secretaries', henceforth became an integral part of Arabic written culture. Ever since the end of the Umayyad period, they had worked in the administrative offices of the state, specifically in the chanceries (sing. dāwān al-rūḍān) of the caliphs and governors, where their job was to draft the official correspondence of the state. Of non-Arab descent – in Iraq recruited mainly from families of Persian origin – these new Muslims had ideas and ideals completely different from those of the Muslim scholars engaged in religious and linguistic scholarship: H. A. R. Gibb has described their relationship to the State as follows:
were therefore intended for readers. It is true that, initially, this readership consisted exclusively of the caliph and his court, but subsequently a larger readership had access to such works; readers could actually lay their hands on them by getting hold of manuscript copies. These were, therefore, actual books.

It is worth recalling the specific nature of the ‘books’ produced by the traditional scholars and the way in which they were published. Those books can best be characterised as collections of traditions, acquired through audition in the presence of the teacher. They were written as notes or notebooks, and their publication by the scholar who had drafted those notes took place during a subsequent audition, without there being any formal redaction. These writings properly belong, therefore, to the category of aide-mémoire. The traditional scholars can consequently best be characterised as transmitters, whereas the state secretaries and authors of Persian origin are men of letters or writers. The historian al-Ma’sūdī (d. 345/956) tried to get to the heart of the difference between transmitters on the one hand and men of letters on the other — though there were admittedly examples of mixed and transitional ways of working.19

Al-Ma’sūdī contrasts al-Jahiz (d. 255/868–9), illustrative of the secretarial class and an author of epistles and actual books, with his contemporary al-Ma’dīnī (d. 235/850), typical of the traditional scholars and a transmitter of historical reports (khabār), noting:20

None of the transmitters (muṣār) nor any of the scholars (al-‘ilm) is known to have written more books than he [i.e. al-Jahiz]. It is true that Abu al-Hasan al-Ma’dīnī was a prolific writer (qād kāna kāthrib al-kandib), but it was his practice to transmit what he had heard [to auditors, students] (kāna yu’add al-ma‘nī li al-nu‘ūm), whereas the books of al-Jahiz (on the other hand) remove rust from the mind and bring clear proofs to light, because he has composed books according to the best arrangement (nāẓimāt ‘alā al-nu‘ūm).

A comparison of the beginning of any book or epistle of al-Jahiz, the Kitāb fakhr al-stādīn ala al-bīdān (Epistle on Vaunting of Blacks over Whites), for instance, with the beginning of the Kitāb al-Muradīn min Quraysh (Book on the Women of the Quraysh who were Married more than Once), one of al-Ma’dīnī’s two extant works, supports al-Ma’sūdī’s characterisation:

May God protect and preserve you; may He bring you the joy of obeying Him and accept you among those who win His mercy.

You mentioned . . . that you have read my essay on . . . and that I make no mention of the vaunts of the blacks. Know, may God protect you, that in fact I delayed doing so on purpose. You also mentioned that you wanted me to write for you about the vaunts of the blacks. Therefore, I have written down for you what comes to mind of their boastsings.

(al-Jahiz)21

---

18 The genesis of literature in Islam

19 Literature and the caliphal court
they held. Their method of publication only changed under the impetus of the court, and even then only a few isolated works were affected.

According to an account preserved in Ta'rikh Baghdad (History of Baghdad) the substance of which is confirmed by a parallel and slightly more elaborated account in Ibn Sa’d, the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr asked Ibn Ḥishām (d. 750/767), an eminent authority on the life of Muhammad, to compose for crown prince al-Mahdī a large book consisting of a summation of history, beginning with the creation of Adam and continuing to the present day.35 Al-Manṣūr is said to have played a similar role in the genesis of the celebrated anthology of poetry that later came to be known as al-Mufaḍḍalīyyaṭ, commissioning the learned transmitter al-Mufaḍḍal al-Dabbī to put together the anthology for al-Mahdī.36 (Al-Manṣūr was also the addressee of some of Ibn al-Muqaffa’s epistles.)

The ‘great book’ (al-kitāb al-kabīr) that Ibn Ḥishām compiled for the crown prince is said to have comprised three parts: a Kitāb al-Muḥādāḍa (Book of the Beginning) on creation and the biblical prophets, a Kitāb al-Madāḥ (Book of the Mission of Muhammad) on the Meccan period of Muhammad’s life, and a Kitāb al-Maḥḍāṣ (Book of Campaigns) on the Prophet Muhammad’s campaigns in the Medinan period of his life;37 and it may be that the Kitāb al-Khalq (Book of Caliphs) is a continuation of the Kitāb al-Maḥḍāṣ, even though Ibn al-Nadīm identifies it as a separate work.38 No definitive edition established by Ibn Ḥishām himself has come down to us. In any case, the ‘great book’, of which there were no doubt very few copies, is not preserved in its original form: what does survive of Ibn Ḥishām’s works is what his students transmitted from him. The Kitāb Ṣurat lnatalā (Biography of the Messenger of God) by Ibn Ḥishām (d. 218/834) – a student of a student of Ibn Ḥishām – constitutes the most important recension of the information contained in Ibn Ḥishām’s work. Ibn Ḥishām’s book does not take into account the whole of the Kitāb al-Kabīr, but relies, for the main part, on the information appearing in the two parts concerning the life of Muhammad. Ibn Ḥishām’s historical accounts appear in other transmissions too: suffice to mention here the numerous passages included in al-Ṭabarī’s Ta’rikh (History).

Receptions of the Kitāb al-Maḥḍāṣ and quotations from it – the only forms in which the book survives – do nonetheless suffice to reveal the literary and artistic character of the work. Its well thought out, it is divided into chapters, and events are arranged in chronological order, without precluding classification based on genealogical or practical considerations when the need arises.39 Ibn Ḥishām frequently prefaced the different reports relating to a particular event with preliminary remarks summarising and dating the information he provides. He also frequently inserts transitional phrases between the various accounts. The principal outcome of this is a coherent narrative, but – and this is the crux – Ibn Ḥishām has above all put together his material in the service of a guiding principle,
namely 'Placing the history of the Prophet and of the new faith into the history of divine revelation since the beginning of the world'.

To see more clearly the uniqueness of Ibn Ishaq as a muqaddaf author, we need only compare his Kitab al-Maghazi with another work of the same name by his contemporary, Ma'mar ibn Rashid (d. 154/770). What we have of Ma'amar's work comes to us as transmitted by one of his students, 'Abd al-Razzak ibn Hammar (d. 211/827), in the latter's own Kitab al-Maghazi. At first glance, it appears that in Ma'amar's work the events described proceed more or less chronologically. Accounts devoted to earlier events (e.g., the digging of the well of Zamzam, or the history of the Prophet's grandfather, 'Abd al-Mu'talib) are followed by events from Muhammad's life in Mecca, then by events from his life in Medina; after describing Muhammad's death, the author has also added some accounts about the first four ('rightly guided') caliphs. The sequence of Muhammad's campaigns is to a certain extent respected: the Battle of Badr (6/234), the Battle of Uhud (6/252), the Battle of the Trench (9/642), the execution of the Banu Qurayah (5/627), the conquest of Khaybar (7/638) and the conquest of Mecca (8/630). But on closer inspection, it becomes clear that the chronological sequence is not at all consistent: the pact of al-Hudaybiya (6/628), for example, is reported separately, and before Badr (6/234); conversely, the Bi'r Ma'umain incident (4/625) appears after the conquest of Mecca (8/630). Besides being only loosely chronological, the text is also arranged 'pragmatically', for want of a better term; thus, after presenting events in the life of the Prophet that pertain to the public sphere (and enumerated above), Ma'amar goes back in time and resumes his narative about events before the Hijrah, namely the emigration of the early believers to Abyssinia. Then the author turns to slightly more private matters (such as the Hijrah, and the slandering of Al-'Ashah), but without any specific arrangement. Preliminary remarks and transitional phrases between different accounts are absent in what is effectively a collection consisting of scattered traditions belonging more or less together, in juxtaposition. Ma'amar's work lacks the coherent narrative characteristic of Ibn Ishaq's work. It goes without saying that Ma'amar's Kitab al-Maghazi does not have a guiding principle governing it, and can therefore not be described as a well-organised book, as is the case with Ibn Ishaq's.

Traditional scholars certainly recognised the uniqueness of Ibn Ishaq. The celebrated Hadith critic, Ibn Hibban (d. 354/965), said of him: 'He was one of those people who arranged the narratives in the best possible manner.' Horovitz's assessment is similar, though more comprehensive and couched in the language of modern scholarship: 'The material in traditions transmitted to him by his teachers, which he enlarged with numerous statements collected by himself, Ibn Ishaq compiled into a well-arranged presentation of the life of the Prophet.' In short, we can consider the Kitab al-Maghazi of Ibn Ishaq a

syngamma, an actual book, composed and written according to the canon of stylistic rules, and intended for literary publication, rather than a hypomnema, a private written record intended as a mnemonic aid for a lecture or a discussion. We do have to bear in mind, however, that the public this work addressed was an extremely restricted one – it was intended for the exclusive use of the caliph and his court.

Scholarly treatises taking the form of epistles

The impact of the caliphal court on the methods of the traditional scholars is clear. Whereas these scholars originally 'published' through the medium of oral instruction – which did not in any way preclude the use of written notes – now they composed their works by giving them a definitive shape, and with the reader in mind. Besides the court's wish to have at its disposal – i.e. in its libraries – works which the scholars ordinarily only disseminated through audition, we must take into account two additional motivations. In the first place, the state administration, both in the capital and in the provinces, felt a need to have the policies it was carrying out spelled out in writing. This need was the catalyst for the Kitab al-Kharaj (Book of Land-Tax) of Abu Yusuf Ya'qub (d. 182/798), one of the very first actual books in the field of law to have survived. It is true that the Mawsu'at al-Malik, the founder of the Malikite legal school, may predate it, but the Mawsu'at is not an actual book; rather, it is a collection of legally relevant hadiths and legal opinions (iti'as) of the Followers (tahri'is), of which we have several recensions compiled by Malik's students: its author did not give it a definitive shape. Like most of the syngamma of the eighth century, Abu Yusuf's work takes the form of an epistle, as Ibn al-Nadim's characterisation of it in the Fihrist attests: Kitab riqada bi al-kharaj 'abi al-Rashid (The Book of his Epistle on Land-Tax [addressed] to al-Rashid). This epistle, commissioned by Harun ibn al-Rashid, opens as follows:

This is what Abu Yusuf [...] wrote to the Commander of the Faithful Harun al-Rashid. May God prolong the life of the Commander of the Faithful and perpetuate his might in perfect happiness and in prestige endless (fi tarnâm min al-nasr wa-dawla al-mi'min). The Commander of the Faithful [...] asked me to compose for him an all-inclusive book (riqadh jami'ah) on the calculation of the land-tax [...] to be consulted and to be followed when doing so.

The author's use of a style akin to rhetoric, rhyming prose in his prefatory remarks, particularly in the two parts of the eulogy, is tangible influence of the secretaries' literary riqah. What is more, the book's immediate predecessor, a work also called Kitab al-Kharaj (Book of Land-Tax), was also composed by a secretary, Ibn Yasir (d. 750/786), the first person to compose a work of this kind, in fact.
The second factor that motivated traditional scholars to give their works a definitive shape was the conflict with sects and heterodox movements. Indeed, this is the impetus that occasioned the very earliest theological writings, works such as the Risālah fi al-qadar (Epistle on Destiny), attributed to al-Hasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and addressed to the caliph 'Umar II, the 'Anti-Qadari Epistle' attributed to 'Umar II (d. 101/719/0)79 and the Khātāb al-Hijā' (Book on the Postponement of Judgement),80 said to have been written by al-Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah (d. 99/717).81 Although the authenticity of the extant works is doubtful, the fact remains that they are datable to relatively early - the first half of the eighth century, or the second half at the latest.82 All of these 'books', including the Khātāb al-Hijā', are epistles and are thus tied to the tradition of writing official letters, private letters and documents (which, as we have seen, was a practice already in existence in the beginning of Islam). The above-mentioned epistles were documents with a specific function, what we might term scholarly epistles.

The epistle, as a literary genre, originates with the state secretaries and is exemplified by the works of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd or Ibn al-Muqaffa'. The scholarly epistle, on the other hand, appears to be quite a bit older and may well have developed out of the earliest functional epistle. The transition between the two is almost seamless: to take again the example of 'Urwh ibn al-Zubair's replies to the questions posed by the caliph 'Abd al-Malik, his letters are practically scholarly treatises. The developed character of the scholarly epistle, as is the case with Abī Yusuf's Khātāb al-Khayājī and numerous later epistles, is nevertheless still heavily influenced by the literary risālah. As we saw earlier, the Khātāb al-Khayājī even has recourse in its preface to a literary feature, namely rhythmic, rhyming prose. It is therefore not surprising that the fully developed scholarly risālah of the scholars was modelled on the literary risālah of the secretaries.

The first works of Arabic literature conceived of as written works from the start, whether they were scholarly (such as the letters of 'Urwh and other Arab scholars) or literary (such as the epistles of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd and Ibn al-Muqaffa'), were the result of an impetus that came from the court. These works all took the form of letters, i.e. private communications intended for specific individuals, and not the form of books intended for a wider readership. It would seem that, until the end of the eighth century, a text composed as a personal communication was more easily accepted than one composed as a book from the very start and intended for a wider audience.
The genesis of literature in Islam

27 Gutas, Greek Thought, esp. pp. 34 ff.
33 See EP, s.v. al-Ma’sūdī.
36 Fāhrī, p. 68 = Fāhrī, p. 75; al-Qadi, Ktilab Ḥarīm al-‘Allam al-nasī‘ud (Cairo, 1344 AH [= 1926]), pp. 130–2.
37 Ibn ‘Adī, al-Kūmil fi daw‘a al-raja’il, 8 vols, ed. S. Zakkār (Beirut, 1988), vol. 6, p. 113; Ibn Ḥajar, Taḥṣīlb, vol. 9, p. 350; cf. GAS, vol. 1, p. 89. Although it is the title of only the third part of the work, from early on the whole work came to be known as Khālid al-Maghāzi.
The turn toward systematisation: the taṣnīf movement

Traditional Muslim scholars themselves noticed that in the middle of the eighth century a new method of presenting and arranging knowledge had appeared, namely taṣnīf. Taṣnīf was a method which consisted in classifying material into works systematically subdivided into chapters organised according to subject matter. Works that came to be known as muṣannaf (sing. muṣannaf) at the beginning of his voluminous commentary on the Ṣāḥīḥ of al-Bukhārī, Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449) notes the following observation about the move toward committing hadiths to writing:4

Then, at the end of the generation of the Followers (ṣaḥīḥ), (the method of) collecting traditions into a single corpus (taṣdīw al-ṣaḥīḥ) and of classifying reports into separate chapters (ṣaḥīḥ al-ṣaḥīḥ) emerged. (This was at the time) when scholars had spread out to the large cities and when heretical Khārijī, Rāfī‘ī and Qadhar innovations had become more numerous. The first individuals to produce compilations according to this model were al-Rahbī ibn Ḥabīb (d. 228/842), Sa‘īd ibn Abī ‘Arabī (d. 156/773) and others. They classified (traditions that belonged together) into separate chapters, until there appeared, in the middle of the second (i.e. eighth) century, the Creats of the third generation (i.e. authors of muṣannaf). The latter collected legal judgments (i.e. hadiths and iḥā‘) into a single corpus (dawwār al-ṣaḥīḥ). In Medina, Imām Mālik (d. 179/796) compiled (ṣaḥīḥa) his Masūṣa (in this manner), Abū Muḥammad Abū al-Malik ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aṭīf ibn ‘Umayr (d. 196/817) compiled (his work) (ṣaḥīḥa) in Mecca ..., al-Awāzī (d. 157/774) in Syria, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Sufyān ibn Sa‘īd al-Thawrī (d. 161/777) in Kufa, and Abī Sa‘īd Hāmid ibn Salamah ibn Dinār (d. 165/783) in Basra .... 5

What Ibn Ḥajar describes as happening in legal Ḥadīth scholarship — the Maṣṣaṣa of Mālik being undoubtedly the most important work in the field of law — was also happening in several related disciplines: in exegesis, history, grammar, lexicography and theology. It might even be appropriate to consider as similar to the muṣannaf the poetry collections of the learned transmitters, the Muḥaddidīn (compiled by al-Muḥaddīd al-Dawūd), or, for instance, the Mu‘allalā (possibly put together by Ḥammād al-Rāwiyah). 6 As for the Prophet’s biography, Ibn Isḥāq was, according to al-Marrakūshī, ‘the first individual to collect the Maṣṣaṣa of the Messenger of God and to compose them (in a systematic way)’. 7

Oral publication

It is important to keep in mind that, as a general rule, the compilers of these muṣannafūn nevertheless still published them in the traditional way through addition, by reciting themselves, by having their students recite them, or by dictating them to their students (iḥā‘) in their scholarly circles and lectures (keeping in mind that works produced under the impetus of the court were an exception). In the Iraqi centres of learning, the traditionists continued to recite hadiths from memory until the ninth century, refusing to rely on notes or notebooks as aides-mémoire. Sa‘īd ibn Abī ‘Arabī, whom Ibn Ḥajar mentions in the list quoted above, was a Basran traditionist who, like those of subsequent generations, emphatically disapproved of the use of writing to record traditions, at least in theory. 8 Thus Sa‘īd, who was the first or one of the first traditionists to undertake the systematic classification of the hadiths he had collected, recited from memory without using a notebook. This how it came to be said of him: 9

‘Sa‘īd ibn Abī ‘Arabī had no book, but kept everything in his memory.’

In his fundamental study of the development of Ḥadīth scholarship, Ignaz Goldziher concluded from the above statement that accounts reporting that muṣannafūn in the domain of Ḥadīth first appeared in the middle of the eighth century must be false and anachronistic. 10 In Goldziher’s view, the taṣnīf movement did not begin until the middle of the ninth century, with the collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, or possibly slightly earlier that same century. One possible meaning of the statement ‘Sa‘īd ibn Abī ‘Arabī had no book, but kept everything in his memory’ is that Sa‘īd used to recite his entire muṣannaf from memory without using any notes or notebook as aide-mémoire; indeed, this was Goldziher’s interpretation of this report. But it does not seem likely that Sa‘īd would have memorised such a collection — the muṣannafūn are, after all, sizeable compilations, as the earliest examples that have come down to us in later versions attest, e.g. the Jāmi‘ of Ma‘mar ibn Ṭahād (d. 154/770), 11 parts of the Maṣṣaṣa of Abū ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), 12 and the Jāmi‘ of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Wāḥib (d. 197/812). 13 What, then, does the statement mean? The
The genesis of literature in Islam

biographical literature tells us that Sa'd had a scribe named 'Abd al-Wahhab ibn 'Aqil who always accompanied him and who wrote his notebooks (wa-kaqafa kunta'ahu). What appears likely, therefore, is that, before teaching, Sa'd would retrieve the material for his lecture from a certain number of 'writings': this material would not be taken from writings belonging to him – there being no such thing – but from those in his scribe's possession.

In Kufa (like Basra, one of Iraq's major intellectual centres), memorisation of hadiths was de rigueur until at least the first half of the tenth century. One traditionalist, Ibn Abi Za'ida (d. 182/998), is said to have been the very first Kufan author of a mawqif (though, as we saw above, other names have also been advanced). He recited his traditions from memory and one of his colleagues who did the same, Waki' ibn al-Jarrah (d. 197/812), is said to have used Ibn Abi Za'ida's Masama' as a model for his own.

The sources explicitly state that Waki' 'wrote' and 'classified', which means he was in possession of 'notebooks' (kunta) the contents of which were systematically classified into chapters. The very same sources also tell us, however, that he recited his material from memory, e.g. the great critic Ibn Hibban al-Busti (d. 354/965), who writes:

Waki' ibn al-Jarrah ... is one of those who travelled (in search of knowledge i.e. hadiths), wrote down, collected, classified, memorised, recapitulated and reviewed (wa-thakara), and disseminated.

In another place, Ibn Hibban adds the following: We never saw a book in Waki's hands, since he would recite his books from memory (kuwas yaqruru' humadahu min al-hafa). As for Ibn Abi Shaybah (d. 235/849), also a Kufan, and the compiler of one of the earliest extant mawqaifs, he states at the beginning of many chapters of his work:

'This is what I know by heart: have memorised it from the Prophet.'

This odd way of expressing oneself shows that, even at a late date, when the notes or notebooks of the traditionists had been transformed into extensive manuscripts, some Kufan authors of systematically classified collections still felt obliged to present their compilations of traditions as writings for private use: Islam could, after all, only have one actual book, the Qur'an.

In Medina, on the other hand, the opposition to the writing down of traditions had disappeared at the time of al-Zuhri (d. 134/752) or soon after, i.e. by the second half of the eighth century, when the first Medinese mawqaif authors emerged. Al-Bukhari explicitly states this when describing the scandal that resulted when Ibn Ishaq visited the wife of Hisham ibn 'Urwa ('Urwa ibn al-Zubayri's son) in search of information.

The turn toward systematisation: the tafsil movement

The people of Medina consider it acceptable to put (traditions) in writing (fa-inna al-Madina yarsuna al-Qur'an f'al-itzam).

Unlike their Iraqi colleagues, therefore, the compilers in Medina (e.g. Ibn Ishaq, Mālik ibn 'Uqaih in maghāzi, or Malik ibn Anas in fiqh), and also those in Mecca and Yemen (e.g. Ibn Jurayj and Ma'mar ibn Rashid in the realm of ḥadith), did not feel the need to hide any written collections they had in their possession; and even used them in public without the least hesitation. For example, Ma'mar, a Basran who settled in Yemen, would 'care for his books and consult them' since, in that part of the Muslim world, memorisation of hadiths was not especially prized; whenever he had occasion to return to his home town of Basra, however, Ma'mar found himself obliged to recite the hadiths from memory.

Ibn Ishaq and the Kitab al-Maghazi

When it came to 'publishing' systematically classified works, oral instruction, or instruction through audition, to be precise, nevertheless remained the norm everywhere. This was accomplished by audition, by student recitation, or by dictation. This is even true of the Kitab al-Maghazi (Book of Campaigns) of Ibn Ishaq, in spite of the fact that this mawqaf work is, as we have seen, something of an exception. Information on Ibn Ishaq's teaching and transmission practices is relatively plentiful. Yūsuf ibn Bukayr (d. 199/813), one of Ibn Ishaq's students, and a transmitter who prepared a recension of his teacher's work, says:

The whole of Ibn Ishaq's narrative is 'supported' (kull shay' min ādab Ibn Ishaq manmani) i.e. is based on Ibn Ishaq himself, since he dictated it to me (amūda) or recited it in my presence (from a notebook?) (zana'ahu 'alayna) or reported it to me (from memory?) (zaddāhā bih). But what was not 'supported' is recitation (zana') i.e. by a student in the presence of Ibn Ishaq.

Elsewhere, Ibn Bukayr says that everything he reports from his teacher about the Prophet's wives 'is word for word what Ibn Ishaq dictated' (kull shay' min dhikr ashwaq al-nabi fa-huşa ʿilmu) 'Ibn Ishaq ḥafṣan ḥafṣan'.

Ibn Ishaq is said to have dictated his work twice to another student, the Kufan al-Bakṭari (d. 183/799). According to another report, al-Bakṭari is said to have sold his house and accompanied Ibn Ishaq on his journeys until he had 'heard' the Kitab al-Maghazi in its entirety. This line of transmission, from Ibn Ishaq to al-Bakṭari, is of critical importance – it is from al-Bakṭari that Ibn Hisām, the most important editor of the Kitab al-Maghazi, received the material originating with Ibn Ishaq. A third author, Salamah ibn al-Fadil, is reported as saying: 'I heard [or: I followed] (as an auditor; sami'ta) the Maghāzi of Ibn Ishaq twice (during academic instruction). The source reporting this adds: 'He [Salamah] used to say also, "He [Ibn Ishaq] reported them to me (zaddāhā bih)"'. This same Salamah prepared a copy of the whole work for Ibn Ishaq,
which Ibn Ishāq then collated against his own autograph copy.27 Moreover, Salamah inherited all the manuscripts in Ibn Ishāq's estate; as a result, he – and he alone – used his teacher's autograph copies in the subsequent transmission of the work.28 This explains why it is that Salamah, on whose authority al-Tabarî quotes Ibn Ishāq, is credited with having put together the 'most complete books of the Mağhātî'.29

Ibn Ishāq compiled his Mağhātî work for the court, but that version, in one copy, or possibly several, and kept in the library of the 'Abbasid caliphs, has not come down to us.30 All that survives goes back to what Ibn Ishāq used from it and transmitted in his own teaching to his students. To that can be added many scattered reports on the Mağhātî disseminated by Ibn Ishāq outside of his great work.31 The different versions of the Mağhātî accounts transmitted on the authority of Ibn Ishāq often diverge considerably; the problem posed by such divergences is discussed further below.

Mālik ibn Anas and the Kitāb al-Muwaṭṭa'

Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/796), a Medine like Ibn Ishāq, was the compiler of the celebrated Muwaṭṭa' (The Well-Trodden [Path]), a corpus of juridical material in a systematically classified collection that brings together the basic material of fiqh: legal hadiths attributed to the Prophet or his Companions and the iṣna (sing. iṣna'; i.e. juridical opinions) of a large number of Successors. It also contains reports of the 'amal (i.e. the practice, the 'living tradition') of the people of Medina. Mālik seldom gives his own juridical opinions.32 The Muwaṭṭa' is also one of the earliest systematic works in Arabic to have been given an actual title, one that goes back to the author himself and that is to be found in all recensions.33 The titles of other compilations contemporary with the Muwaṭṭa' are appellatives and were not necessarily chosen by their authors: typically, one referred to the Muṣannaf of so-and-so' (e.g. Muṣannaf 'Abd al-Razāq) or the Jāmi' of such-and-such' (e.g. Jāmi' Ma'mar ibn Rāshid). The subdivisions of those works, called kaṭubah (books'), do, however, have titles that designate their content, thus kaṭubah al-baṣīr (Book of pilgrimage), for example, kaṭubah al-hadā'in (Book of legal punishments), kaṭubah al-ta'īth (Book of history), and so on. This practice of giving a title based on content is also to be found in historical works of the period, the Kitāb Sīfîn (Book of the battles) of Sīfîn, for instance. As for Ibn Ishāq's Kitāb al-Mağhātî, it is unclear whether he himself gave the work its title, since the information in the sources is inconclusive; the existence of several different names for the work suggests that nothing was very fixed;34 besides the title Kitāb al-Mağhātî (Book of Campaigns), we also find Kitāb al-Sirah (Book of the [Prophet's] Life) and al-Kitāb al-Kāhir (The Great Book), though this last is reserved for the expanded version Ibn Ishāq prepared for the court. Recall also that, although the title Kitāb al-Mağhātî was used for the whole work, it really only designated the third section, the first two sections bearing the titles Kitāb al-Muḥātudâ and Kitāb al-Muḥâthath, respectively.35

To return to the Muwaṭṭa', its very name ('the well-trodden [path]') is metaphorical, confirming that what Mālik had in mind was an actual book.36 Nevertheless, Mālik did not establish a definitive edition of the work: it was his students, or his students' students, who gave the work its final form, or rather, its final forms. In the end, the publication and transmission of the Muwaṭṭa' by its author during teaching was not very different from the way in which the Kitāb al-Mağhātî was published and transmitted. Generally, Mālik preferred to have the Muwaṭṭa' read by one of his students while he, at least in theory, listened and monitored the recitation.37 This is the method of transmission known as qira'ah or 'arāḍ. But from time to time, the teacher read or recited the text himself in the presence of his students, thereby using audition, or sama', as a method of transmission.38 He is also said to have entrusted a copy of the work that he had himself corrected to a student and authorised that student to transmit it: this method of transmission is known as munaqabah.39 Mālik also seems to have made use of the method known as kāfīlah: he is reported to have authorised a student to transmit a copy of the Muwaṭṭa' that the student had drawn up, without having had a look at this copy.40 Given these diverse modes of transmission, it is understandable that the various recensions of the Muwaṭṭa' known to us diverge considerably.41

Qur'ānic exegesis

In the development of Qur'ānic exegesis (tafsîr) in this period, we see evidence of the same phenomenon of systematisation. We have the Tafsîr of Ma'mar ibn Râshîd (d. 154/770), which, like his Jâmi', has survived in its entirety, or in very large part, in a recension reworked by his student, 'Abd al-Razâq. We also have the Tafsîr of Maqâṭîl ibn Sulaymân (d. 150/767) in the recension of al-Hudhayl ibn Ḥâdhîb al-Dândîn (d. after 156/865).42 As for the so-called Tafsîr Mağhātî, it is, as we saw earlier, a compilation put together by the later scholar, 'Abd al-Razâq and al-Hudhayl respectively, added material originating with other exegetes. Thanks to these two works, we can be certain that the Qur'ânic commentators of that generation produced writings which reflected a high degree of organisation, and that they were able to rely on well-ordered texts in their teaching.
The history of the empire

The taṣnīf movement also influenced the writing of history in this period. We find monographs and compilations of historical traditions relating to specific events, in particular, episodes from the time of the Islamic conquests and the civil war, works on the latter having been composed exclusively by Shi‘ites. One of the earliest authors is the Kufan Jābir ibn Ya‘qūb al-Ju‘fi (d. 129/746), to whom is attributed a Kitāb al-Jamāl (Book on the Battle of the Camel), a Kitāb Siṭfīn (Book on the Battle of Siffin) and other monographs of this sort;14 works with these titles are also attested for the famous Kufan Shī‘ite Abu Mūqaffa‘ (d. 157/774).15 Notable is the Kitāb al-Raddah wa-l-futūḥ (Book of Apostasy and Conquests) of Sayf ibn ‘Umar (d. ca. 184/800), one of the most important sources for understanding the early Muslim expansion.16

In no case do we have the originals: all the texts that survive depend on later transmissions. But we do have extensive passages from these works, transmitted by students and compilers, and preserved by later historians such as al-Tabari and Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī.17 The only text to survive independently in its entirety is the Kitāb Waq‘at Siṭfīn (Book of the Battle of Siffin) of Naṣr ibn Muzāhima (d. 212/827), a later compiler, in fact, than the ones identified above.18 In addition, an extensive fragment of Sayf ibn ‘Umar’s Kitāb al-Raddah wa-l-futūḥ and a smaller fragment of his Kitāb al-Jamāl were discovered some years ago. But once again, we do not have the originals, but rather recensions of a transmitter who lived three generations after the author.

One could argue that most monographs of this type correspond more closely to chapter divisions in systematically organised works than to any of those works as a whole; in either case, traditions are organised according to topic, which then also determines the title of the kitab. But in the domain of historiography, the step toward a real maqāmaṭ is taken by works such as the Kitāb al-Raddah wa-l-futūḥ of Sayf ibn ‘Umar. Here, the compiler does not simply cover an isolated event, but rather a whole series of events, namely the widespread apostasy of the Arab tribes, during the caliphate of ‘Abd al-Malik specifically and during the period of the conquests generally. The fragment that has come down to us deals with the caliphate of ‘Uthmān, as its successive chapter headings indicate, even if bāb, the usual term for chapter, does not appear:19

Hadīth al-Sharā‘ (Accounts relating to the Council)
Imārāt ‘Uthmān (The caliphate of ‘Uthmān)
Maqāla ‘Sayf ibn al-‘Aṣ (The arrival of Sa‘īd ibn al-‘Aṣ)
Hadīth al-‘Aṣrah (Accounts relating to ‘Aṣrah)
Hadīth Miṣr (Accounts relating to Egypt)
Hadīth al-Madinah (Accounts relating to Medina)
Tasā‘ī maqta‘ ‘Uthmān (The origins of the assassination of ‘Uthmān)

The turn toward systematisation: the taṣnīf movement

Ābī ‘Aṣīr Mālik, Ṭālib b. Jāfar (The final counsels offered by ‘Uthmān)
Ma‘īr ‘Uthmān (The burial of ‘Uthmān).

The transitional phrases between the different traditions so characteristic of Ibn Ishaq’s Kitāb al-Maqrīzī are not to be found in Sayf’s monograph, however, even if the disparate traditions are ordered to give a chronological sequence of events.

We are less well informed about the methods used to transmit these monograph compilations than about the methods used for similar religious texts, Maqālaṭ works, and the like. It is almost certain that the historians also disseminated their material during sessions and scholarly circles, through audition, student recitation, or dictation.20 But kitabah and waq‘ah, procedures so little esteemed by the traditionists, whereby students copied the text without having received instruction from the teacher, must also have been quite common. Al-Tabari often cites the monographs of Abī Mūqaffa‘ and Sayf ibn ‘Umar through such transmissions; for example, he introduces quotations with: ‘Hishām ibn Muḥammad al-Maqrīzī (d. 206/821) said (qala) ‘...’ or ‘Abī Mūqaffa‘ said ...’,21 though he is exclusive in his use of the formulation al-Sā‘īr wrote for me (kataha I layna) on the authority of (‘aman) ‘Abū ‘Aṣir (who wrote) on the authority of (‘aman) Sayf ...’ when referring to Sayf ibn ‘Umar.22 This transmission terminology shows clearly that neither al-Tabari nor his transmitters had the licence to transmit material from either Abī Mūqaffa‘ or Sayf ibn ‘Umar and that they copied from one another without ever having ‘heard’ them from the mouths of their teachers. By using the expression ‘wrote for me’, the transmitter is frankly admitting that he was content with copying from a manuscript.

Theology

The move toward taṣnīf can also be seen in theological writings: classical bibliographers attribute treatises with fixed titles to theologians (mostly Mu’tazila) in this period. According to the inventory made in the tenth century by Ibn al-Nadim for his Fihrist, Dirār ibn ‘Amr (d. after 180/796) wrote more than thirty such treatises;23 the following is a representative selection:

Kitāb al-Tawhīd (Book of [belief in] the oneness of God)
Kitāb al-Ma’āni (Book of created things)
Kitāb Tanqīd al-hadīth (Book of the refutation of Tradition)
Kitāb al-Qadar (Book of destiny)
Kitāb Radd Ahrāris al-jawāhir wa-l-‘ārāf (Book of the refutation of Aristotle on [his doctrine of] substances and accidents).

To Dirār’s teacher, Wāṣiṣ ibn ‘Aṭī, (d. 131/748), are attributed a Kitāb al-Manzūlah bayna al-musaqalatayn (Book of [the doctrine of] the intermediate position) and a
Kitaab al-Tawhid (Book of [belief in] the unity of God). The titles of these works certainly suggest that they were well ordered, in the manner of the muṣannafāt of the traditionists, but, as none survive, this can only remain speculation.

An eighth-century 'literature of the school, for the school'

Three characteristics suggest that the systematically organised works we have been discussing qualify as notes or notebooks rather than as actual books. First, none of these works has survived in its original form; second, the texts we do have are dependent on later transmissions, dating from the ninth century at the earliest; and third, whenever several recensions of one of these works exist, these recensions often show considerable textual divergence. The structured and meticulously elaborated nature of a number of these works, a characteristic that remains recognisable even after numerous and different later transmissions — this is true of the Kitaab al-Maghāzī of Ibn Ishāq in particular — suggests, however, that at least some of them are actual books. It is reasonable, therefore, to posit that these muṣannafāt are in an intermediate category between synagmata and hypomnemata, one that encompasses a wide spectrum, ranging from works possessed of all the characteristics of actual books, such as Ibn Ishāq's Kitaab al-Maghāzī, to works that are nothing more than well-ordered records, such as appears to have been the case with the collection of Sa'id ibn Abi 'Arubah.

This being the case, we are entitled to ask whether these works are examples of literature, properly speaking. We can answer this question by turning to Greek literature, which is possessed of works akin to these muṣannafāt. W. W. Jaeger has described Aristotle's teaching texts (Lehrschriften) as 'neither lecture notebooks, nor literature', 'meticulously elaborated writings to be sure, but, according to him, 'not ones intended for publication with a larger lay reading public in mind'. Jaeger characterises these works (and other works of this genre too), as 'a systematic literature of the school, for the school ... published ... through lectures'. Thus, Aristotle's book the Topik is neither a 'lecture notebook' nor 'a collection of drafts', but rather a gramma, a work 'intended to be recited to students'. Jaeger's description of these teaching texts may just as easily be applied to our muṣannafāt: they too are grammata, and, in effect, examples of a literature of the school, intended solely for use by the school, and published through recitation — through audition, dictation, or recitation by a student.

Vestiges of the eighth-century 'Taṣrif Movement'

What remains of the muṣannafāt? None of them survive in their original form; at most, we have later recensions, but none dating from earlier than the ninth century, transmitted and reworked by a student or, more commonly, by a student of a student of the compiler. In the best of cases, these transmissions 'on the authority of so-and-so' either form the basis of independent works or appear as often quite lengthy quotations in later compilations. But very often, all that remains of a muṣannaf is isolated traditions, scattered throughout a variety of later works. Let us take a look at two of them.

Ibn Ishāq's Kitaab al-Maghāzī

Large sections of Ibn Ishāq's Kitaab al-Maghāzī are preserved in the following later works:

1. The Kitaab Surat Muhammad rasūl Allāh (Book of the biography of Muhammad, the messenger of God) by 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām (d. 218/834), an Egyptian originally from Basra. For his recension, Ibn Hishām relies on the material transmitted by his teacher Ziyād ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Bakrī (d. 183/999), himself a student and transmitter of Ibn Ishāq. Ibn Hishām explains in the preface to his work how he has reworked Ibn Ishāq's original, the Kitaab Surat Muhammad is an epitome, an abridged version, not of Ibn Ishāq's whole work, but principally of the second and third parts (the 'Kitaab al-Mabāth' [Book of the Mission of Muhammadal] and the 'Kitaab al-Maghāzī' [Book of Campaigns]). Ibn Hishām sometimes includes supplementary information, citing traditions he obtained from other sources, for example; on occasion, he also adds his own commentary. He states explicitly that he has suppressed the following: all reports in which the Prophet Muhammad does not appear; selected verses; indecent passages; passages that might be injurious to certain individuals; and all traditions that his teacher, al-Bakrī, had not confirmed to him. These deletions notwithstanding, Ibn Hishām's work remains the fundamental source for the life of the Prophet.

2. The slightly later book of the Kufan Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Utāridī (d. 272/886), a work without a definitive title and deriving from a transmission through Yūnus ibn Bukār (d. 198/813), another student of Ibn Ishāq. Yūnus's work consists primarily of material he transmits from Ibn Ishāq, but he supplements it with numerous traditions originating with a variety of other authorities. This explains why Ibn Bukār's work is sometimes known by the title Ziyādī Yūnus fi Maghāzī Ibn Ishāq (The additions of Yūnus to the Maghāzī of Ibn Ishāq). The biographical literature says of him: 'He used to take (the text of) Ibn Ishāq, and then combined it with (other) traditions. This is a case — quite common, as it happens — where the transmitter has added so many supplementary traditions he has himself collected, that we can almost think of him as an independent compiler, indeed, even as the author of a new work.'

3. The Tārikh (History) and the Taṣrif (Qur'ān commentary) of al-Tabari (d. 310/923). Al-Tabari's principal source on the life of the Prophet is Ibn Ishāq's
work, cited most often through Salamah ibn al-Fadl, but also through Yūnis ibn Bakyar and others. In the Ta’rīkh, al-Ṭabarī includes long passages not only from the second and third parts of Ibn Iṣḥāq’s work, but also from the first part, which, as was noted above, Ibn Hishām did not rely upon a great deal.

4. A large number of works that preserve extracts, often quite extensive, transmitted through other lines of transmission. One contemporary scholar, S. M. Al-Sanub, has made a synopsis of all the transmissions from Ibn Iṣḥāq and has identified more than fifty individuals transmitting directly from him. Indeed, every subsequent historical work containing a biography of the Prophet inevitably draws on Ibn Iṣḥāq. Al-Sanub has also shown—and this is one of his most interesting findings—that there are often considerable divergences between texts resulting from parallel transmissions, for example between the versions of a given account reported by Ibn Hishām on the one hand, and by al-Ṭabarī on the other.59

Mālik’s Kitāb al-Muwaqqar

As for the Muwaqqar of Mālik, it survives principally in numerous later recensions all originating with students of Mālik, or students of theirs. These recensions—which of which three or four are complete, one incomplete, and several fragmentary—diverge not only in terms of structure, but also in content.60 Since most have been edited,61 they can be compared relatively easily, but we limit ourselves to the two most important recensions.

1. The first of these is the most widely disseminated, that of Yaḥyā ibn Yaḥyā al-Maṣnūdī (d. 234/848), generally regarded as the vulgate of the Muwaqqar. Yaḥyā first received the text from his teacher, Ziyād ibn ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Qurtubī Ṣabrānūn, then went to Medina in 172/795 to hear it from Mālik himself; unfortunately, Mālik died that year.62 Thus, Yaḥyā was not able to hear the entirety of the Muwaqqar from Mālik, and had to transmit the rest of the work on the authority of Ziyād.

2. The second is the recension of, or rather the reworking by, the Ḥanafī Muhammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī (d. 189/804), who was a student of Mālik’s, one that distinguishes itself above all by its critical comments about Mālik and about the teaching of law in Medina. Al-Shaybānī’s comments appear at the end of most of the chapters and are not always in agreement with Mālik’s juridical opinion, or with the hadiths Mālik quotes.63 Notwithstanding the fact that he is a transmitter of Mālik, al-Shaybānī constantly has recourse to the juridical opinions of his Ḥanafī colleagues, which very often contradict those of Mālik, and to the opinion of his teacher, Abū Ḥanīfah (ṣāliḥ Abī Ḥanīfah), with which he always agrees.

The turn toward systematisation: the taṣnīf movement

There are also countless juridical works, especially Mālikī ones, which include quotations from the Muwaqqar.64 Suffice to mention one, the famous Muṣannaf of Saḥḥāt (d. 249/864), a jurist who transmitted the Muwaqqar from the recension of the Tunisian ‘Alī ibn Ziyād and two other transmitters, and who cites these different sources both separately, and together.65

The canonical collections of traditions of the ninth century

Finally, we turn to the canonical collections of traditions compiled in the ninth century, the so-called ‘Six Books’, to which a seventh, the Muṣannaf of ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd ibn Ḥanbal, is often added. The ‘Six Books’—of which the Jami‘ al-Sāhib of al-Bukhārī (d. 356/869) and the Jami‘ al-Bāḥ (of leaving) is, as its title reveals, a musnad (pl. musnads), that is, a work in which traditions are arranged under the names of the Companions who originally transmitted them, and who in turn are frequently arranged according to the date of their conversion to Islam. The first works of the musnad type appear some time after the first ṣanā‘i‘a,66 the earliest ones to come down to us are the Musnad of Abū Dāwūd al-Tayyibī (d. 203/818) and the Musnad of al-Humaydī (d. 219/834).67

Al-Bukhārī. Muslim and the other traditio

Finally, we turn to the canonical collections of traditions compiled in the ninth century, the so-called ‘Six Books’, to which a seventh, the Muṣannaf of ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd ibn Ḥanbal, is often added. The ‘Six Books’—of which the Jami‘ al-Sāhib of al-Bukhārī (d. 356/869) and the Jami‘ al-Bāḥī of leaving—is, as its title reveals, a musnad (pl. musnads), that is, a work in which traditions are arranged under the names of the Companions who originally transmitted them, and who in turn are frequently arranged according to the date of their conversion to Islam. The first works of the musnad type appear some time after the first ṣanā‘i‘a, the earliest ones to come down to us are the Musnad of Abū Dāwūd al-Tayyibī (d. 203/818) and the Musnad of al-Humaydī (d. 219/834).67

Al-Bukhārī. Muslim and the other traditions of the ninth century, but no less so Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal, ‘published’ their works just as their predecessors had, by personal contact through teaching, employing familiar procedures, audition (ṣanā‘a), recitation before the teacher (ṣanā‘a), and so on.68 Most of these traditions did not give their works a definitive shape; thus the Musnad of ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd ibn Ḥanbal, transmitted by his son, ʿAbd Allāh (d. 390/992), then by the latter’s student, Abū Bakr al-Qāṭī (d. 388/997), the transmitters added other traditions.69 Everyone person wishing to study the canonical collections in order then to transmit them himself was therefore, in theory at least, still obliged to attend the lectures of the traditionists themselves or of their authorised transmitters, and to receive the traditions through audition. In practice, however, few indeed were those who were able to hear these very large works from beginning to end.

In some late sources, al-Bukhārī is reported to have dictated his Šajḥ to ninety thousand students.60 This high number is both a pious exaggeration and misleading, giving the erroneous impression that there were many transmitters of the work. It is certainly possible that the auditors who regularly, or occasionally, attended al-Bukhārī’s lectures were very numerous, but Johann Fück’s study of the transmission history of the Šajḥ—for which he relied on the lines of transmission to be found in the great commentaries of the Šajḥ composed in the thirteenth century by Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), al-Qāṭīnī (d. 855/1451) and al-‘Aynī (d. 923/1517)—has shown that only a limited number of
The turn toward systematisation: the ta‘ṣīl movement

century belong, as do their predecessors from the eighth century, to what Jaeger characterised as 'a systematic literature of the school, for the school,' and were 'published' — in theory, at any rate — 'through lectures'. This is why there is considerable variation in the order of the chapters in the different recensions and manuscripts of the canonical books. But we cannot speak yet of actual books, that is, books that can be considered synagry, even if some compilations do display some of their features (the Śaḥīḥ of Muslim, for example, has a preface or introduction by the author himself). As it turns out, the first actual book in Islamic scholarship would not appear in the domain of the religious sciences at all — that honour would go to a book in linguistics.

Notes

1. Ibn Hajar, Fath al-bārī, Mu‘addidinā, p. 5.
2. On Ṭaba‘ (correcting Ibn Hajar’s Šaḥīḥ to Ṭabā‘), see GAS, vol. 1, p. 93; on Ṣahā‘id, see GAS, vol. 1, p. 91 ff.; on Mālik, see GAS, vol. 1, p. 553 ff.; on ʿAbd al-Malik, see GAS, vol. 1, p. 91; on al-Awālī, see GAS, vol. 1, p. 516; on ʿAbd al-Ālim, see GAS, vol. 1, p. 518; on Abū al-Salāmāh, see Ibn Hajar, Tahunāb, vol. 3, p. 11 ff.
9. GAS, vol. 1, p. 294; transmitted by ‘Abd al-Ra‘zāq as a supplement to his Muqaddimah.
11. GAS, vol. 1, p. 466; this work is edited by Munyyi; see the bibliography.
The genesis of literature in Islam

84. and M. Marmayi, Die Rechenschaft des Qur'ānonwers Sahmān b. Sa'id. Entstehungsgeschichte und Werküberlieferung (Stuttgart, 1909); on 'Ali, see GAS, vol. 1, p. 455.
76. GAS, vol. 1, p. 55. The view of Goldziher ('Ueber die Entwickelung', p. 228) that mannaṣṣa predante muṣṣaṣṣa is mistaken.
82. Goldziher, 'Ueber die Entwickelung', pp. 188 ff.
83. GAS, vol. 1, p. 117.
85. For an example (a recension of the Kāth al-Sunan of Abū Dāwūd), see Schoeler, Arabische Handschriften, pp. 37 ff. (no. 30).

6

The birth of linguistics and philology

The teaching of grammar and lexicography: beginnings in Kufa and Basra

The teaching of grammar and lexicography in Islam probably began in the seventh century, and then flourished in the towns of Basra and Kufa in the eighth century. Both fields had very close ties to Qur'ānic exegesis and in all likelihood arose out of it. The earliest work in linguistics is most likely the Masūd al-Nāfi: ibn al-Aṣqal (Questions [asked by] Nāfi: ibn al-Aṣqal, though its precise date of compilation is still not known. In this work, organised as a series of questions and answers, Nāfi: (d. 65/685), the leader of an extremist Khārjī sect known as the Ārāfa: or Asqalī, queries Ibn al-'Abbās, the Prophet's cousin and reputed founder of Qur'ānic exegesis, about the meaning of a number of Qur'ānic lexemes. Ibn al-'Abbās answers first by citing a synonym, then by citing a verse of Arabic poetry as a prooftext (shāhīd, pl. shāhādāt). As for grammar, Arabic tradition maintains that it was founded by the governor of Kufa, Abū al-Aṣwad al-Du'llāt (d. 65/688), who, at the request of the caliph 'Abd ibn Abī Ṭālib, is said to have developed its basic principles in order to assist with the correct recitation of the Qur'ān. In an important study, C. H. M. Versteegh has shown that the linguistic terminology of the earliest Qur'ānic commentaries is similar to the terminology in the grammatical tradition, in Kufa in particular, and for which it may well have laid the groundwork; the terminology in Basra, on the other hand, appears to have developed independently.

The teaching of grammar, which developed principally in Basra, was quite distinct from teaching in other disciplines; of paramount importance was the study of grammatical rules. It is true that grammar, like the other disciplines in Islamic scholarship, was, in the final analysis, dependent on transmission, but grammar differed in that it subjected the transmitted material to rational study (ma'aql ḍi al-ma'aqlāt). In this rational approach, one method in particular played a fundamental role for the Basran scholars, namely qiyās, a term which appears initially to have simply meant 'rule', only later acquiring, as it would in the study of law, the meaning of 'analogical deduction'. The teaching of
grammar, which also encompassed linguistic hypotheses that needed to be verified and a whole system of doctrines and theories that needed to be structured and implemented, developed in particular in the course of the Banban scholars’ discussions.7

In Kufa in the same period, teaching focused less on linguistics and grammar than on philology and lexicography. The scholars of the Kufa school (the transmitters ‘Alam and al-Mufadhdhal al-Dabbi, for instance) consequently directed their energies toward the philological understanding of texts and to the collection and transmission of pre-Islamic poetry – naturally, this did not prevent them from developing a grammatical terminology.8 In Kufa, transmission of knowledge was fundamental, but teaching in the field of lexicography more closely resembled teaching in the fields of religious scholarship than it did the discussions of the Banban scholars. Already, toward the middle of the eighth century, or maybe earlier still, one Banban scholar, ‘Ibīn ‘Ammār al-Thaqafi (d. 149/766), is reported to have compiled books of grammar. To this ‘Ibīn are attributed two titles, a Kitāb al-Jami’ (The Book of Compilation) and a Kitāb al-Mudhāmil (The Book of Completion).9 Whereas Abī al-Tayyib al-Lughawī, relying on the testimony of Abī Bakr al-Ṣāhī, reports that al-Mubarrad (ca. 210-86/825-900) read pages from one of these books, al-Sirīf (d. 368/979) reports that neither he, nor anyone else at all, had ever seen either of these two books.10 Certainly, the title Kitāb al-Jami’ suggests that it may have been a work systematically subdivided into chapters (i.e., a masānāf) similar to the Jami’ of ‘Abīn ibn Rāshīd, but the works do not survive and, as we have seen, their existence is open to question.

Al-Khalīl ibn ‘Aḥmad, author of a book on grammar

The contribution of Al-Khalīl ibn ‘Aḥmad (d. ca. 160/776), a student of ‘Ibīn ‘Ammār al-Thaqafi, to the systematic development of Arabic grammar can hardly be overestimated: his student, Sibawayhi, cites him more than six hundred times.11 Wolfgang Reusch’s analysis of these citations reveals, however, that although Al-Khalīl was fully acquainted with the comprehensive system described by Sibawayhi,12 he wrote no book on grammar. On this, the Arabic tradition and Western scholarship are in complete agreement.13 There is an explicit statement on this issue by the medieval philologist Al-Zuhaylī (d. 376/989), who states in the introduction to his Mukhtar al-Kitāb al-Ayn (Epitome of the Book of the Letter) ‘Ayn:14

It was he [Al-Khalīl] who (first) presented (the system of) grammar, but he did not wish to write a single letter about it, nor even to sketch an outline of it. He, in this regard, content with the knowledge he gave to Sibawayhi... Sibawayhi picked up this knowledge from him, girded himself with it, and wrote the Kitāb about it...
The genus of literature in Islam

The birth of linguistics and philology

very often, Sibawayhi begins a chapter or paragraph by addressing the reader with the phrase ‘know that’ (‘alam anna) or ‘do you not see?’ (a-‘tara). Such formulas, unthinkable in a context of oral delivery, strongly support the argument in favour of the fundamentally written nature of the Kitâb. But the most convincing evidence has been identified by Geneviève Humbert, who has pointed out the presence of internal cross-references in the text. One such reference (she identifies two) occurs in chapter 296 of the Derenbourg edition, where Sibawayhi uses the words, ‘I have already illustrated this in a more detailed fashion at the beginning of the book’, to refer to a passage that indeed occurs at the beginning of the work, in chapter 2, that is 294 chapters earlier. As Humbert pertinently notes, ‘By all appearances, Sibawayhi conceives of his work as a written text and would seem to be addressing himself to someone who can move from one point in the text to another as necessary, namely a reader.’

Sibawayhi’s Kitâb is the first book in Islamic scholarship to have consciously been drafted with a large readership in mind (besides the special case of the Kitâb al-Ayn, on which more below). Sibawayhi speaks in his own name throughout the first seven chapters, a group that has come to be known as the Rūdâl (Epistle). He quotes authorities in subsequent chapters, but when he does so his method is quite distinct from the method of the traditionists and is closer to modern methods of quotation. The authorities he most often quotes are his teachers, al-Khalîl ibn Ahmâd and Yûsûf ibn Hâbîb (d. 182/798),27 but he rarely quotes them quoting their own teachers.28 The formulas introducing the quotations (alîfâq) only rarely correspond to the ones used by contemporary traditionists. The one Sibawayhi most often uses when referring to al-Khalîl is ‘I asked him … and he responded’ (sa‘aluhu … fa-qâla). Other similar formulations in the Kitâb confirm the fundamentally oral nature of al-Khalîl’s teaching: these include ‘he claimed’ (zâ‘ama) and ‘he said’ (qâla), terminologically indeterminate expressions but ones that do suggest discussion or oral instruction. On the other hand, rarely does Sibawayhi use the formula ‘he reported/transmitted to me/us’ (buddhântâ/hâd), which in the study of the Hadith as a rule signals audition during which the teacher recites the traditions, frequently on the basis of written notes. All the quotations in the Kitâb correspond to the discussions, doctrines, theories and points of view expressed by Sibawayhi’s teachers, not to any traditions and accounts transmitted by them. These quotations thus effectively record ‘the discussions of the Basra school’.29

We noted above that the first seven chapters of the Kitâb are known as the Rūdâl.30 It may very well be that this title was chosen because the Kitâb, or its core at any rate, was initially a Rūdâl which Sibawayhi had written at the request of a particular individual, even if we do not know the identity of the addressee. It is, in any event, very likely that the Kitâb is connected to the fundamentally written tradition of the Rūdâl.

The Kitâb and later grammatical studies

Sibawayhi’s Kitâb earned the title ‘Qur’ân of grammar’ and subsequently attracted the lion’s share of attention of all subsequent scholarly activity in the field of grammar; these works were devoted henceforth to commenting on, extending, and supplementing the Kitâb – it was as if the whole tradition rested on this one text, subjecting it to a constant and continuous process of commentary and explication.31

The method used to transmit the Kitâb, i.e. the way it was studied, was to read it aloud in the presence of a teacher (qâlîh). Such transmission did not occur in Sibawayhi’s lifetime, however; indeed, tradition has it that Sibawayhi had no students and that he died young. The following observation by the celebrated commentator of the Kitâb, Abû Sa‘îd al-Shâbî, in his Kitâb Alkhâr al-na‘awiyin al-Ba‘rayîyin (Book of Accounts of the Basran Grammarians), is corroborated by others in the biographical literature:32

One got access to the Kitâb of Sibawayhi through al-Akhfash. No-one had in fact read the Kitâb with Sibawayhi, and Sibawayhi had not read it with anyone either. After he died, it was read with al-Akhfash.

The comments of al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ (d. 219/832), a student and friend of Sibawayhi’s, are preserved, at least in part, as marginal glosses in the Kitâb, and most of those have been included in the printed edition of the Kitâb edited by ‘Abd al-Salâm Muḥammad Hârîn. It was Basran grammarians, Abû Ummân al-Mâzînî (d. 248/862), Abû ‘Umar al-Jârînî (d. 251/863) and others, who subsequently read the Kitâb with al-Akhfash al-Awsaṭ.33 Al-Muhammad, the leader of the Basra school in the ninth century, in turn read it with al-Mâzînî and al-Jârînî. In this way, an uninterrupted tradition of ‘reading’ the Kitâb developed, thanks to which chains of transmitters were formed, chains which are absent in the work itself. These the transmitters of the book, starting with the current owner of the manuscript and going back uninterruptedly to Sibawayhi; they are thus similar to the ināsâd of the traditionists. Good manuscripts of the Kitâb include such introductory chains (sing. niyâzîb, pl. niyâzîîb), appearing before the text proper. Two of the manuscripts used by Hârîn in the preparation of his modern edition of the Kitâb include these, and as we would expect, given what we know of the work’s transmission history, both chains ultimately lead through al-Muhammad, al-Mazini and al-Akhfash to Sibawayhi.34 Thus, a procedure which originally only applied to individual traditions – acquiring a cumulative chain of authorities via the process of transmission – now applied to an entire book. In a later period,
such introductory chains of transmitters would also find their way into works of Hadith, philology, and even medicine and the sciences. From the time of al-Akhfash al-Aswad on, ‘reading’ the Kitab and explaining it undoubtedly dominated the teaching of grammar, but the study and discussion circles that had existed long before al-Khalil and Sibawayhi did not cease to exist; works entitled Majalla (Sessions) and Analit (Dictations) from the ninth and tenth centuries give us important glimpses into the nature of the discussions that took places in these circles.

Another significant aspect of the transmission of books is the fact that once a work had been given a definitive shape, then recitation or reading of the work by a student with a teacher in the presence of other students (qira’ah) became the normative mode of transmission for that text. To be sure, this did not mean that other methods of transmission, such as audition (sama’), were not employed. But qira’ah was used to transmit the Qur’an (lit. ‘recitation’), the recitation par excellence, and also the ‘Quran of grammar’, Sibawayhi’s Kitab.

Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad, author of the Kitab al-‘Ayn?

The oldest work of Arabic lexicography, the Kitab al-‘Ayn attributed to al-Khalil ibn Ahmad, is also the first complete dictionary of the Arabic language in Arabic. By virtue of the specific problems posed by this book, not least of which its authorship, and by virtue of the fact that it is in all ways a special case, we shall first look in detail at the Kitab al-‘Ayn before turning to lexicography more generally.

Already, in the middle of the eighth century, even before Sibawayhi had conceived of his Kitab, the idea of a large dictionary, in fact the idea of a complete Arabic dictionary, had taken shape, with lexicemes organised not alphabetically or by content, but on the basis of phonetic criteria. We cannot speak sensus strictis of a muqaddaf, though it must be said that the Kitab al-‘Ayn’s organisational principles certainly correspond to the ones that inspired the taqrib movement. The difficulty with the Kitab al-‘Ayn is its authorship. The elaborate controversy that surrounds this question was first raised by the philologists of the late eighth century and continues to this day. One side has it that al-Khalil, the great grammarian and discoverer of the system of Arabic metrics, is the author; the other, represented by the majority of medieval Arabic philologists, vehemently denies his authorship. A simple glance at the work reveals the complexity of the matter. In it, that is, in the introduction and the dictionary proper, al-Khalil is cited as an authority, but he appears as only one cited authority among many; and the introduction suggests that one al-Layth ibn al-Muqaffar (d. before 200/815) – by all accounts a friend of al-Khalil’s, but not someone known to be an accomplished philologist – played a significant part in the compilation of the work.

Modern Western research on the question (notably Erich Brixmich, Stefan Wild, Rafael Talmon) tends to regard al-Khalil as the creative genius behind the book, but does not credit him with the work of actual compilation and redaction. According to this view, the master, al-Khalil, conceived of the idea of the dictionary; and the student, al-Layth, was responsible for compiling, supplementing and editing the work and giving it its final form, making al-Layth the real ‘author’ of the Kitab al-‘Ayn. As there is no unanimity on this position, the alternative views that have been advanced are worth taking seriously. One of these originates within the Muslim scholarly tradition. In a work about the Kitab al-‘Ayn, al-Zubayyi, citing his teacher al-Qali, observes that although al-Khalil’s leading students used to transmit the knowledge they acquired from their teacher meticulously, none either knew the Kitab al-‘Ayn or had even heard it recited. It is only long after they had died that the work found its way from Khurasan to Basra, when Abi Hasim al-Suyuti became head of the school, around 250/865. If al-Khalil had been the author, al-Zubayyi says, again relying on al-Qali, his most prominent students would have taken it upon themselves to transmit the work and not leave it to an obscure figure like al-Layth. And if the book really was al-Khalil’s, then al-Awayni, al-Yazidi, Ibn al-‘Atrbi and contemporaries of theirs, as well as scholars of the following generation such as Abi Hasim, Abi ‘Ubayd and others, would without fail have cited it and transmitted it. This last argument is certainly persuasive: as the investigations of Brixmich and others have shown, these philologists do not, in fact, ever cite the Kitab al-‘Ayn in their works.

There is another argument against al-Khalil’s authorship, originally advanced within the Arabic tradition, then taken up by Brixmich, and more recently elaborated upon by Janus Danecki, namely that although Sibawayhi, al-Khalil’s student, cites his teacher more than six hundred times in the Kitab, he never mentions him in the part of the book that deals with phonetics; what is more, al-Khalil’s alleged phonetic system is, according to Danecki, more elaborate and, all in all, superior to Sibawayhi’s. For these reasons, the Kitab al-‘Ayn must, according to Danecki, be later than Sibawayhi’s, which means al-Khalil could not possibly have been its author.

The question can definitively be settled through a more careful examination of the text of the Kitab al-‘Ayn. The introduction to the work opens with the following chain of transmission (riyad).

Abi Mu‘ayd ‘Abi Allah ibn ‘A‘idh says: al-Layth ibn al-Muqaffar ... has transmitted to me, on the authority of al-Khalil ibn Ahmad, everything in this book.

Immediately thereafter, we find ‘Al-Layth said: al-Khalil said: ...’, a formula that is repeated several times in the introduction; sometimes we find simply ‘Al-Khalil said.’ We also encounter expressions such as ‘Al-Layth said: I asked X; he then answered; ‘I asked a-Khalil, he then answered’, or ‘He [al-Khalil]
sometimes said ...", or even 'Al-Khalif used to call ...' However, the formula 'Al-Khalif transmitted to me/us' (hadātkhāna'ī or hadātkhāna'īn), which would indicate transmission through al-Khalif's instruction to his students (sama', audition, or qira'ah, recitation), never appears. And at the end of the introduction, we read: 'Al-Khalif said: We shall now begin our work (mu'allafanā) with (the letter) 'ayn ...'

The above may at first seem confusing, but given what we know of the methods used to transmit knowledge, it is very clear that we are dealing here with three distinct phases of transmission, which can be simply schematised as follows:

> al-Khalif (writing only fragments; but also responding to questions etc.)
> al-Layth (compiling the fragments, supplementing them with other material, editing)
> Abū Mu'ādh (disseminating)

The last phase is represented by the little-known scholar, Abū Mu'ādh 'Abd Allah ibn 'A'idh: the 'introductory inād' (ināyātī) shows that he received the Kūth al-'Ayn from al-Layth as an already complete work. The preceding, intermediate stage is represented by al-Layth; he assembled his teacher's fragments, and perfected the structure of the work, especially by drawing up and elaborating, for the dictionary proper, many lemmata al-Khalif had not started on or left uncompleted. In addition, he included much miscellaneous material in the dictionary, some of which consists of his recollection of the doctrines or theories al-Khalif put forward in scholarly circles or in discussion, often obtained by questioning al-Khalif and other authorities. What is striking is that these recollections pertain only to grammatical and metrical questions, on occasion to musical ones, but never to lexical ones. As for the first and oldest phase, it is represented by al-Khalif himself and his fragments, all of which open with the formula 'al-Khalif said' (qāla al-Khalif). In one of these fragments, the one appearing at the end of the introduction, al-Khalif explicitly states that he will begin his work (mu'allafanā) with the letter 'ayn. The three phonetic treatises are examples of other fragments originating with al-Khalif - and they are fundamental to the work as a whole as it is in them that he develops his theory of phonetics, the one that dictates the order of the words in the dictionary itself. The composition of these treatises suggests strongly that they are not notes taken by a student, but are rather from the pen of the teacher himself. Two of them (I and III) begin with the formula 'Al-Khalif said: Know that ...' (qāla al-Khalif: i'am anna), a form of address we also find in the Kūth of Ibn al-Sibawayhi. The dictionary proper also contains fragments that originate with al-Khalif. We even find one instance of internal cross-reference, irrefutable proof of the written character of these passages.
Lexicography

Lexicography is the study of 'the words and rare expressions of the Arabs', a field completely distinct from grammar; lexicographers' efforts are therefore largely focused on poetry and unusual expressions. No written work in the field of lexicography played any role comparable to that of Sibawayhi's Kitāb in grammar.

And unlike the case of grammar, audition and transmission of knowledge were fundamental in the teaching of lexicography. What is more, in lexicography, Bedouin Arabs, whose speech was pure and correct (fsqab al-'Arab), enjoyed the same authority as scholars; this explains why al-Ṣuyūṭī gave the title, 'Listening to (or 'auditing') the Words of the Teacher or the Bedouin (al-sawā' min luf al-shaykh aw al-'arab) to the first section of the first chapter of his al-Muḥājir fi 'l-ṣūrā al-lughah (The Flowering [Book] on the Linguistic Sciences), which treats the methods of acquisition and transmission of knowledge. In his Kitāb al-Shīr wa-l-su'ūrā (Book of Poetry and Poets), Ibn Qutaybah preserves an account that underscores the importance of the Bedouin Arabs as arbiters of pure speech as follows:61

The following hemistich by Abū Dhu'ayb was one day recited in al-Asma'i's circle:

'In the deep of the valley of Dhūt al-Dahr, her young was set aside.'

'Completely wrong, O reader!' exclaimed a Bedouin who was present. 'It's Dhūt al-Dahr, a mountain pass where we're from.'62 Thereafter, al-Asma'i adopted that reading.

The Kitāb al-Nawādir fi al-lughah (Book of Lexicographical Rarities) is a good example of those works in which compilers catalogue glosses on Bedouin poetry and supplement these with a vast amount of information regarding specific words or verses, but with no attempt to present the material systematically.63 It is also a good example of a work whose shape can only be explained with reference to the specifics of philological teaching practices. The Kitāb al-Nawādir is attributed to Abū Zayd al-Anṣārī, and the core of the work certainly originates with him, but over time the successive generations of scholars transmitting the work extended it by also contributing to it themselves. The following are examples of comments made by the redactor of the book, al-Akhfash al-Aṣghar (d. 325/937) – who contributed much material to the work, both his own opinions, as well as information taken from other scholars – about variants of little-known proper names and obscure words:65

It appears thus in my book: Salūn; but in my memory it is Subnūyān.

... it is thus (= Nūhāy) in my book, but my recollection is Nāhāy.

What was transmitted (to me) by audition (al-masmū'ā) is 'ṣyūhān, but in the poem it appears as 'ṣyūhān.

These suffice to show that in philological teaching practices, transmission through audition functioned side by side with transmission through writing, in much the same way they did in the teaching of Ḥadīth.

Ṭṣaṣīṭ in the field of lexicography

If the various books of linguistic rarities were not systematic at all, other lexicographic works were, notably al-Ṣharīf al-muṣṣāmaf (works about uncommon words), also called kātib al-ṣīḥāt (books on characteristics) and kātib bi maṣrūfat asma' al-ṣīḥāt (books on the knowledge of the names of things). The use of the term muṣṣāmaf in the titles in this genre indicates that the words were systematically classified into groups based on the work's contents.66 The earliest surviving book of this type is al-Ṣharīf al-muṣṣāmaf (The Book of Uncommon Vocabulary, Arranged Systematically) of Abū ʿUbayd (d. 224/838), an actual book, by an author who is famous for several carefully redacted works.67 In the beginning of his notice on Abū ʿUbayd in the Kitāb Muntah al-nabawīyīn (Book on the Classes of Grammarians), Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Lughawī notes:68

Abū ʿUbayd was an author skilled in the composition (of actual) books, but one who possessed (only) little transmission i.e. he had not received many works through audition; he had not studied them with teachers (muṣṣāmaf ṭawārīk al-wuṣūl min annahu gadd al-muṣṣāmaf).

Toward the end of the notice, Abū al-Ṭayyib adds:69

Abū ʿUbayd used to bring his books (muṣṣāmaf) immediately to the rulers,70 who then offered him gifts in return: this is why his books are so numerous.

A large number of manuscripts of al-Ṣharīf al-muṣṣāmaf do survive; there are also numerous supplements (ṣāḥidūtā) to it, commentaries on it (ṣarīf, pl. sharīf), and epitomes of it, all of which suggests that it was widely disseminated.71

Personal contact with teachers and transmitting from them through audition was not of great importance to Abū ʿUbayd.72 Modern research on Islamic scholarship has established that Abū ʿUbayd was one of the very first scholars to have written actual handbooks composed either under the impetus of the court or in close contact with it. Abū al-Ṭayyib and other biographers disappointingly describe him as making a practice of copying the 'books' he would compile and turning them into his own books.73 Abū al-Ṭayyib writes:

The people of Basra have observed that the majority of what he reports on the authority of their learned scholars did not depend on audition, but came from books.

The very same kind of reproach was directed at Abū Ḥanīfah al-Dnawari (d. 282/895), author of the most famous Arabic book on botany, the Kitāb al-Nabat (Book of Plants), similarly prepared without its author having obtained the material for it through audition.74
The genesis of literature in Islam

The chain of authorities of one manuscript of the Kitâb Gharîb al-lddih reveals that the most important individual in the transmission of Abî 'Ubayd's works, namely 'Ali ibn 'Abd al-'Azîz (d. 287/950), had heard the work with his teacher.75

Ahmad ibn Hammâd told me: 'Abî ibn 'Abd al-'Azîz said to us: I heard this book recited by a student (qi'â'at) several times in the presence of Abî 'Ubayd . . . I asked him: 'May we transmit what was read with you?' Yes,' he answered, using (the phrase) 'Abî 'Ubayd al-Qâsim ibn Sallâm al-Khûjî told us.'

The customary method used to transmit Abî 'Ubayd's works (the Kitâb Gharîb al-lddih, and also the Kitâb Gharîb al-lddih and the Kitâb al-Annâh), therefore, was recitation in the presence of a teacher (qi'â'at) — they were, after all, actual books.

In the ninth century, it was no longer only the court that demanded actual books, especially handbooks. The demand came also from the large, educated reading public. And scholars very soon discovered that much could be gained from handbooks, even if their content was not acquired in the traditional way, that is, through audition with a teacher or recitation in his presence. This is not to say that personal and aural instruction was no longer important, and few scholars abandoned their expectation that it be employed. But the genesis of handbook literature in the ninth century reveals very clearly the profound change in the composition of the readership interested in academic writing.

Notes

4 Versteegh, Arabisch Grammar.
6 Ibid., p. 153.
7 Ibid., p. 156 ff.
8 GAS, vol. 9, p. 37.
11 Cf. W. Reuschel, Al-Hilî ibn Ahmad, der Lehrer Sibawayh's, als Grammatiker (Berlin, 1939), pp. 9-14; G. Troupeau, ‘A propos des grammairiens cités par Sibawayh dans...
The appearance of paper in the Near East in the eighth century

The principal materials for writing before the eighth century were papyrus (qirát) and parchment (raaq), but because both were rare and costly the production and dissemination of literature remained relatively restricted. Techniques for the manufacturing of paper had been introduced in the Near East by Chinese prisoners captured at the battle of At·lahk (near Talis) and taken to Samarrā' and Baghdad in 134/751, and in the late eighth century, paper (kāhād) began its triumphant spread throughout the Near East.¹ The availability of a less costly material, paper, was an important factor contributing to large-scale literary output in the Muslim world in the ninth century and after. Paper and books also had profound influences on literacy and on learning and literary culture, not only on the nature and types of literary production, but also on the nature and transmission of knowledge, on the range and scope of vocations and professional occupations available, and on the constitution of scholarly networks and alliances. The presence of books thus had far-reaching consequences for Arab-Islamic writerly culture, broadly speaking.²

From Ibn al-Muqaffa’ to al-Jāḥīz

The book, a conscious literary product (syngamma) intended for a reading public, had come into existence in the eighth century among the kuttāb or state secretaries, the creators of Arabic artistic prose in the preceding century. The oldest such writings were in the form of letters or epistles, and were intended for courtiers, secretaries or rulers. The men of letters (zabib, pl. zabībat) or writers of the ninth century, of whom the Basam al-Jāḥīz (d. 253/868–9) was the most prominent, continued the literary tradition of the writer-secretaries who, at the beginning of the ninth century, were still of Iranian origin. The most famous of them, Sahl ibn Hārūn (d. 213/826), was somewhat of a successor to Ibn al-Muqaffa’; like him, Sahl wrote epistles, and also translated books from Persian to Arabic,³ one of which, the Kātib Wānqa wa-‘Adhār (‘The Book of Writing and the ‘Adhār’), was a Persian romance of Hellenistic origin.⁴ Sahl also composed

³. Sibawayhi, al-Kātib, vol. 1, pp. 51, 57 and 59, respectively.
⁴. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 57, 59.
⁵. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 49 (twice), 50, 51, 52.
⁶. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 50 (twice), 58.
⁷. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 60.
⁹. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 32.
¹⁰. Ibid., vol. 5, p. 6.
¹⁸. GAS, vol. 8, p. 76.
²¹. GAS, vol. 8, p. 81.
²². Abī al-Tayyib, Marāb, p. 93.
²³. Ibid., p. 94.
²⁴. Abī al-Tayyib, Marāb, p. 93.
²⁵. Abī al-Tayyib, Marāb, p. 93.
²⁶. Abī al-Tayyib, Marāb, p. 93.
²⁷. Abī al-Tayyib, Marāb, p. 93.
²⁸. Abī al-Tayyib, Marāb, p. 93.
²⁹. Abī al-Tayyib, Marāb, p. 93.
original texts modelled on Ibn al-Maqaffa’s Kalâlah wa-Dimmah, of which only the Kitâb al-Namir wa-t 辈-lab (Book of the Panther and the Fox) survives.

Al-Jâhiç held Sahl in high esteem; early in his career he is even said to have published his own works under Sahl’s name.

At the beginning of the Kitâb al-Bukhâl (Book of Mises), al-Jâhiç cites the Risâlah fi al-bukhâl (The Epistle on Miseries) attributed to Sahl, a work that can be considered the link between the literary epistles of the eighth century and the ‘Iraqi’ epistles of the ninth.

But al-Jâhiç did not follow Sahl’s example when it came to the Shu’ubiyâh (the movement which called for the equality of Persians and Arabs), and did not give importance to Persian subjects; he preferred to focus on Arab themes. Indeed, al-Jâhiç’s adab distinguishes itself by the fact that the author exploited the indigenous literary and religious heritage.

The writings of al-Jâhiç: large works and epistles

An inventory of al-Jâhiç’s works undertaken by Charles Pellat catalogues more than two hundred titles, thirty of which, authentic or apocryphal, survive in their entirety, and fifty of which survive in fragments; most treat literary or quasi-scientific topics. All are actual books or epistles, with specific titles, often with a preface or introduction, and frequently dedicated to a minister, secretary, judge or other high-ranking person. The three most important works are the Kitâb al-Hayawan (The Book of Living Beings), which is incomplete but comes to seven volumes in the edition published by ‘Abd al-Salâm Hârin, the Kitâb al-Basân, and the Kitâb al-Basân (The Book of Expression and Exposition), four volumes in Hârin’s edition; and the one-volume Kitâb al-Bukhâl (The Book of Mises).

Given this enormous literary output, al-Jâhiç understandably enlisted the service of copyists (wârâqûn, sing. wârâq) to copy his manuscripts. But the dissemination of his works through copying did not prevent parts of his books from being studied and transmitted in the context of academic instruction, where they often underwent significant modifications: there are, for instance, passages in Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih’s al-‘Id al-faríd based on passages in al-Jâhiç’s Kitâb al-Basân, which do not correspond exactly to the relevant parts of that work. Typically, though, the transmission and dissemination of al-Jâhiç’s works was accomplished through the copying of manuscripts.

A large number of al-Jâhiç’s treatises and shorter books are called ‘letters’ or ‘epistles’, although, even in al-Jâhiç’s own time, the term risâlah (pl. rasû’û) had begun to lose its original meaning of ‘letter’ and had often come to mean ‘short work’, ‘essay’ or ‘monograph’. Ibn al-Nadim provides a long list of them. Hârin has edited one collection of short works under the title Rasû’û al-Jâhiç (Epistles of al-Jâhiç). A number of these rasû’û, such as the Risâlah fi al-jidd wa-l-hrz (Epistle on Gravity and Levity), are actual letters, but, as in the larger works, the addressees in these epistles are usually anonymous, and when we do

learn the identity of the addressee of a specific letter, it is typically from the title itself, e.g. Risâlah fi ... al- ... (Epistle on ... to ...). Innumerable epistles and books of the ninth, tenth and later centuries start with the author’s assertion that a client, friend or pupil has asked him to write a book or treatise on one or other subject, e.g.

You mentioned — may God protect you from deception — that you have read my essay (kitâb) on ... and that I made no mention of ... And you also mentioned that you would like me to write for you about ... Therefore, I have written for you ...

It is, however, often very hard to say whether the commission or the request to which authors refer is real or fictitious; indeed, preliminary statements such as the one quoted above are used increasingly as topos.

Dedicates, addresses, patrons

According to Ibn al-Nadim, al-Jâhiç dedicated the Kitâb al-Hayawan to the vizier Ibn al-Zayyât (d. 233/847), and the Kitâb al-Basân to the judge Ibn Abî Dârîd (d. 240/854), though no dedicatee is mentioned in the text of the work itself. Typically, dedications consisted in the prince, or some other notable, being presented with the ‘first fair copy of the work’. It is reasonable to assume that authors dedicated their books to wealthy individuals who would find the contents of the work appealing and from whom they could accordingly expect or exact reward. Al-Jâhiç says this explicitly in the Kitâb al-Hayawan, but without naming the addressee: ‘Thus have I written it, specially for you, and I bring it to you counting on you for my reward.’

For each of the Kitâb al-Hayawan, the Kitâb al-Basân, and the Zar’ wa-l-nâbî (The Plantation and the Date Palm), al-Jâhiç reports having received five thousand dinars. If true, these were very high payments indeed; by comparison, a century later Abû al-Fârîq al-Ishbahânî (d. 356/967) is said to have received one thousand dinars from Sayf al-Dawhâr for his monumental Kitâb al-Aghâni (thirty-three volumes in its printed edition). Certainly, when assessing a work and deciding on the actual amount of the remuneration, the person to whom the work was dedicated would have given thought to the value of the book and to its potential reach; a superior work of widespread fame could, after all, contribute to the dedicatee’s fame.

The dedicatee is not usually mentioned in the text of the work itself. Indeed, at times it is actually the reader al-Jâhiç who is directly addressing, as in ‘I change you, reader anxious for understanding or listener lending an attentive ear ...’ In the first part of the extremely long introduction to the Kitâb al-Hayawan an anonymous person is consistently addressed: after the formulaic opening (the harrâlah, the wishes, and so on), al-Jâhiç presents a long list of his previous works, all of which his addressee apparently criticised. Al-Jâhiç rehearses the objections of the addressee and then presents his defence. It is
highly improbable that the dedicatee, namely, the vizier Ibn al-Zayyāt, is the one being directly or primarily addressed here: that would imply that Ibn al-Zayyāt had been the one to criticise practically all of al-Jāḥiẓ's books. This is unlikely as Ibn al-Zayyāt was a Mu'tazili who played an important role in implementing the general policies of the empire under the Mu'tazili caliphs al-Mu'tasim and al-Wāthiq.20 and the Kītāb al-Ḥajawīn reflects strong Mu'tazili leanings. It would appear, rather, that al-Jāḥiẓ is now turning to the reader(s) of his books as such, and that the criticisms he describes as having been levelled against him are probably nothing more than a literary conceit. What al-Jāḥiẓ is doing here is reminding his readers about his earlier books, informing them about their content, and guarding the present book against further objections.

The difference between the person to whom a work is dedicated and the intended reader of the work is clear in Ibn Qutaybah's (d. 276/889)21 introduction to the Kitāb Adab al-kāfī (The State Secretary's Handbook), dedicated to the vizier Abū al-Ḥasan 'Ubayd Allah ibn Yabyn ibn Khāqān (d. 263/877), according to the commentaries.22 Ibn Qutaybah could be sure that 'Ubayd Allah - himself formerly a secretary - had the same interest as he did in redressing the dire educational deficiencies of the secretaries. The two also shared religious convictions: both were (unlike al-Jāḥiẓ) orthodox Sunnis with an anti-Mu'tazili bent. Lecomte even thinks it probable that the Kitāb Adab al-kāfī was a work commissioned by 'Ubayd Allah and that, in return for having produced it, Ibn Qutaybah was appointed judge (qāfī) in Dinawar.23 But it is clear from Ibn Qutaybah's statement to the effect in the introduction,24 and also from the work overall, that the book is in particular addressed to the uneducated kūṭāb (state secretaries) whose deficit in education will be helped by this (and other) books. The kūṭāb are not, however, ever directly addressed in the introduction; when mention is made of them, it is always in the third person. Cheikh-Moussa is thus, in principle, correct when he observes that:25

All of the medieval texts that have come to us with the patron-dedicatee identified are not solely directed to that individual, nor to the community at large, but to a small group, a class of privileged persons, the Kātibs, who alone were capable of reading and understanding these written texts, texts which were often of a very high caliber.

The writings of al-Jāḥiẓ enjoyed great popularity, especially, as might be expected, during the Mu'tazili heyday (827–49); his works were coveted, and his audience extended all the way from the Islamic East to al-Andalus (Muslim Spain).26 The caliph al-Ma'mūn, who had introduced Mu'tazilism as state dogma, held al-Jāḥiẓ in especially high esteem: having read al-Jāḥiẓ's books on the imamate, al-Ma'mūn is reported (by al-Jāḥiẓ) to have declared: 'This is a book which does not require the presence of the author (to be understood), and needs no advocate.'27 High-ranking state administrators quickly recognised
Ibn Qutaybah was not, it is true, as many-sided as al-Jahiz, and he did not write about quite as many subjects, but this is not to say that he was narrow. In the ten chapters of his encyclopaedic Kitab ‘Uyun al-akhbar, he covers government, war, sovereignty, character, knowledge and eloquence, asceticism, friendship, polite requests, food, and women. But he writes about these from a perspective different from al-Jahiz’s, and with a different orientation: as he says in the introductions to both the Kitab ‘Uyun al-akhbar and the Kitab al-Ma’tarif, he wants to impart to the people knowledge which will be useful for them, and to inform them about correct behaviour. With Ibn Qutaybah the moral aspect comes clearly to the fore. At the beginning of the Kitab ‘Uyun al-akhbar he writes:

This book, though it does not deal with the Qur’an, Sunna, religious laws, and the science of the permissible and the prohibited, does indeed point out lofty things, guides to noble morals, discourages baseness, and guards against ugliness ...

Audience

Al-Jahiz’s ecumenical interest was a function not solely of his limitless curiosity, but also of his awareness of the interests of his readership. During his lifetime, the intellectual horizons of the educated classes had expanded enormously, thanks, among other things, to translations of the classical (Hellenistic) heritage, to the rise of mysticism and, notably, to the circulation of such ideas as Mu’tazilism. In the ninth century there arose a broad and growing readership with diverse interests and commitments. While Ibn al-Muqaffa’ had written exclusively for courtiers and secretaries, and Ibn Qutaybah would write mainly for the khāṣṣah (the elite), al-Jahiz expressly states several times that in addition to the khāṣṣah, his target audience includes the ‘ammāh (lit. ‘the common folk’). This can be seen most clearly in the Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn, where he attributes to the caliph al-Ma’mūn the following statement about his book on the imamate: ‘its appeal is both to common people and kings (i.e. caliphs), to the masses and the elite (ṣūrī ma’dālā ‘ammī khāṣṣa)’. The term ‘ammah here cannot mean the uneducated populace; al-Jahiz himself offers a clarification:

When you hear me refer to the common folk (’amām), I do not mean the peasants, the rabble, the artisans, and the sellers (of goods), nor do I mean the mountain Kurds … The common folk from among our people … are a class whose intellectual faculties and personal qualities are superior to those of other peoples, even if they do not attain the level of our own elite (khāṣṣa).

This stratum has been described by Shawkat M. Toorawa as a ‘sub-elite’, a group that ‘would include, but would not be limited to, merchants, lawyers, aspiring littérati, the wealthy, and foreign and visiting scholars: in short, the literate, or would-be literate, bourgeoisie, and the intellectuals’.

‘Adab of the Jahizian type’

Al-Jahiz wrote, then, for a wide audience extending from the caliph to merchants, from the upper class to the sub-elite. He accommodated their needs and expectations in his politico-religious writings as well as in various genres of adab (literature for refined learning), two of which he himself created. Pellat termed these genres ‘literary adab of the Jahizian type’ and ‘sci. The Jahizian type’ though he admitted that the borders between the two were fluid. The aim of the new genre of literary adab, like earlier adab, was not only to inform, but also to entertain. Unlike earlier adab, however, al-Jahiz drew less from the Iranian heritage – from which his predecessors, Ibn al-Muqaffa’ and Sahl ibn Hārūn almost exclusively derived their subject matter – than from the indigenous Arab heritage.

Originally from Başra, al-Jahiz had heard the itinerant Bedouin who imparted tribal traditions, stories and rare words to the inquisitive scholars at the Mihrad. He had also listened to the majdīyya, those dailiers at the mosques who discussed and had explanations for everything under the sun. And he had attended the lectures of the philologists in his home town, al-Asma’i and Abū Ubaydah, and the lectures of the learned transmitters of Başra and Kufa, and later Baghdād. Al-Jahiz was thus very familiar with the Arab tradition – what it lacked was its own literature; the tradition had hitherto only been cultivated and transmitted in gatherings and in academic circles, in talks, in lectures and in discussions. This is not to suggest that no part of the tradition would otherwise have been committed to writing, but that what was written was only to be found in the lecture notebooks of the philologists and in the notes taken by their students, all only intended for private use.

What interested al-Jahiz, and what he supposed would fascinate his readers, were less the special grammatical and lexical questions discussed in detail by his teachers than those aspects of the tradition that had literary and artistic value. From the material that al-Jahiz collected and voraciously read, he selected the most interesting reports and the most amusing anecdotes in order to fit them into his works. He gave this material new shape, putting it into a suitable framework, commenting on it with his signature wit and irony, and, above all, presenting it in a brilliant style. In short, he prepared it for a reading public. The most important and most representative work of this type of Jahizian adab is the Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn.

Al-Jahiz also accommodated the scientific interests of his audience. As we pointed out above, the intellectual horizons of the educated classes expanded enormously during al-Jahiz’s lifetime, thanks, among other things, to translations of the classical (Hellenistic) heritage, to the rise of mysticism and, especially, to the circulation of such ideas as Mu’tazilism. The Mu’tazilis were not only interested in theological and political problems, but also in the entire cosmos,
the real world and the laws of nature. They formulated a 'substantial system for explaining the world and mankind', a system that included inter alia the conception of bodies as agglomerates of atoms, the distinction between substance and accidence, the nature of fire, and reflection on how to define humanity. Literary and rhetorical questions were taken up as well.

Al-Jahiz treated all these themes, not in a dry or dull academic way, but in his characteristicly entertaining, playful, never tedious style, and often with mordant wit. This he did in the other genre of adab he created, one that has been described by Pellat as 'scholarly' or 'quasi-scientific', the most important and most representative work of which is the Kitab al-Hayawan.

Earlier Mu'tazili 'literature' and the works of al-Jahiz

As was the case with other Muslim scholars, for a long time the Mu'tazilis did not write books for a reading public; their 'books' (kutub) and booklets (sahif) were 'literature of the school, for the school', intended for oral recitation, not for written publication. This is why there is hardly a Mu'tazili work extant in its original form before al-Jahiz. Al-Jahiz's works do, however, contain many quotations from lost works by earlier Mu'tazili authors, such as al-Jahiz's celebrated teacher, al-Naqzin (d. 229/845 or later), who is said to have written thirty-eight 'books'. Only a few fragments of his works remain, most of them from his Kitab al-Nakaz (Book of the Breach), and al-Jahiz is the earliest author to quote from it, in his Kitab al-Farya (Book of Legal Verdicts).

The Mu'tazili Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir (d. 210/825 or later) is said to have written over twenty 'books', of which not one independent work has survived. Only a few fragments have come to us, among which the text of a sahifa (i.e. a booklet or aide-memoire) on rhetoric. It is cited in different works of later authors in versions sometimes greatly divergent from one another; once again, the earliest author to cite it is al-Jahiz. The following quotation from the Kitab al-Bayan shows that al-Jahiz does not simply string together excerpts and quotes from earlier works but, rather, puts them in context, interrupting the quoted account with commentary. Furthermore — and importantly — it provides us with a glimpse of what the 'publication' of books and booklets in the generations before al-Jahiz was like:

Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir passed by the kahib [Friday sermon-giver] Iblisim ibn Jaballah... while he was instructing the young people in rhetoric. Bishr stopped, and Iblisim thought he had done so to learn (from his lecture), or that he was a spy... whereupon Bishr gave them a booklet (sahifa) he had himself composed and put together. The beginning of this treatise was: [A part of the text follows]. Bishr repeated: 'When it (the booklet) was read to Iblisim, he said to me: I need this (what you said) more than these young fellows!' [A commentary by al-Jahiz follows.]

Books and their readership in the ninth century

The 'publishing' of a written work in this generation consisted in its having been presented in the study circle, usually — as was probably the case here too — by a student. Al-Jahiz, and others besides, would have written down the text during the lecture or borrowed either the author's or a student's manuscript in order to copy it. By including this treatise (and many others besides) in his Kitab al-Bayan, al-Jahiz made it accessible to a wide reading public. Indeed, one important reason for the success of al-Jahiz's books may well have been the fact that he made many topics and ideas — aesthetic, theological and quasi-scientific — hitherto exclusively available in academic and study circles as lectures and discussions, now accessible for the first time to a wide reading public, khitah and 'ammah alike.

The ninth century was an era of bibliophiles. That this phenomenon would arise in the ninth century is no coincidence: this was the century when large numbers of actual books came into existence and in which a broad readership arose. Two of the greatest and most famous lovers of books at this time were al-Jahiz and the state secretary al-Fath ibn Khathin (to whom al-Jahiz dedicated his 'Epistle on the noble qualities of the Turks').

It is reported that al-Fath would always have a book on him, in his sleeve or boot, and that he would read even when he was in the company of the caliph, or when he went to the lariim. Al-Jahiz was not all that different; Ibn al-Nadim reports:

Al-Jahiz never let a book pass through his hands without reading it from cover to cover, no matter what it was. He would even rent the shops of the booksellers (wāqīn) and spend his nights there, poring over them.

And at the beginning of the Kitab al-Hayawan, al-Jahiz spends pages and pages singing the praises of books, averring that one of their virtues is that 'You will get more knowledge out of one (book) in a month than you could acquire from men's mouths in an age'. In the ninth century, in the field of adab at least, 'the transition from a predominantly oral and aural culture to an increasingly textual, book-based, writerly one' had definitely taken place.

Notes


4. This subject matter was reworked and verified in the eleventh century by the Persian poet 'Unqari; see J. T. P. de Bruijn, El., s.v. 'Unqari.
The genesis of literature in Islam

7  See Ch. Pellat, 'Gènesis III. Essai d'inventaire de l'oeuvre Gâtintenne', Arabicia 3 (1959), pp. 147–80; Pellat, 'Nouvel essai d'inventaire de l'oeuvre Gâtintenne', Arabicia 31 (1984), pp. 117–64. Al-Jahiz was also a Ma'ṣūṣil theologian and the author of important politico-religious works, for the most part lost. See below; see also Viktor Shaltāb, al-Muṣaṣṣil wa-l-muṣaṣṣilīyāt fi usūl al-Jahiz (Cairo, 1964).
8  Two of al-Jahiz's copysts are known by name. For Abū Yahya Zakariyya' ibn Yahya ibn Sālima, see Pellat, p. 299; for Abū al-Qasim 'Abd al-Wahhāb ibn ʿIsā ibn Abī Hayyāh, see al-Samānī, ʿUmdat al-ʿAṣr, 13 vols, ed. A. Muʿād Khān (Hyderabad, Deccan, 1962–82), vol. 13, pp. 305 ff, and van Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft, vol. 4, p. 225.
9  Werkmeister, Quellenersuchungen, pp. 78 ff.
10  A. Arnaiz and H. Ben-Shamay, EP, s.v. Risāla.
11  Fihrist, p. 211.
14  See P. Freimark, 'Das Vorwort als literarische Form in der arabischen Literatur', doctoral thesis, Münster, 1967, pp. 36 ff, 115; al-Jahiz, Raud̲il, vol. 1, p. 177; Ǧahizi, 'The Boots', p. 3. Similar formulations are also to be found in the Kitāb al-Farāhiha (The Book of Misers).
15  See e.g. Ibn Qutaybah's introduction to his Kitāb Taṣwin muḫadżal al-ḥadith: 'You have written to inform me how you noticed the attacks carried out by the theologians (ahl al-kalâm) against the traditionists (ahl al-ḥadīth) ... You have requested that I undertake this task ..., and I have thus proceeded to do so to the extent of my knowledge and ability'; G. Lecomte, Le Traité des Diversions du Hadith d'Ibn Qutayba. Traduction du Kitāb Taṣwin muḫadžal al-ḥadīth (Damascus, 1962), pp. 1, 12. Cf. Freimark, Das Vorwort, pp. 36 ff.
20  Yaqūt, Ḥarīrī al-ārīb, vol. 4, p. 150. The reliability of this report is, however, open to question; see H. Kilpatrick, Making the Great Book of Songs. Compilation and the author's craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Ḥarābī's Kitāb al-aghāna (London, New York, 2003), pp. 19 ff. Abū al-Faraj says in the introduction that the impetus to write the book was the order of an unnamed, high-ranking personality (rūʾ): see Aghāna, vol. 1, p. 4; cf. Kilpatrick, Making the Great Book of Songs, p. 28.
21  Cheikh-Moussa, 'La négation', p. 84.
22  Cf. ibid., p. 83.
24  D. Sourceel, EP, s.v. Ibn al-Zayyāt.

Books and their readership in the ninth century

26  An Abū al-Hasan is indeed addressed early in the work: see Ibn Qutaybah, Kitāb Adab al-kutab, ed. M. Gräzer (Leiden, 1900), p. 6, note b.
27  Lecomte, Ibn Qutayba, pp. 32 ff.
28  Ibn Qutaybah, Kitāb Adab al-kutab, pp. 2–3.
29  Cheikh-Moussa, 'La négation', p. 84.
30  Yaqūt, Ḥarīrī al-ārīb, vol. 6, pp. 71, 75.
33  See the letter of al-Fahār, quoted in Pellat, Life and Works, pp. 7–8.
34  al-Jahiz, Raud̲il, vol. 1, p. 335.
37  Another prolific writer was Abū al-Dīnār (d. 281/894) sixty of whose works survive: see R. Weigert and St. Weninger, 'Die erhaltenen Werke des Ibn Abī al-Dīnār', ZDMG 146 (1992), pp. 415–55.
38  G. Lecomte, EP, s.v. Ibn Kusayb; Lecomte, Ibn Qutayba.
41  Ibn Qutaybah, 'Usūn al-akhbār', vol. 1, p. x.
45  Cf. Toorawa, Ibn Abī Tāhir Ṭūrīfār, pp. 1–2: 'The new readership expanded to include landlords and landowners, merchants and entrepreneurs, judges and jurists, physicians, poets and litterateurs, teachers, and of course, other scholars.'
46  Pellat, Life and Works, p. 18 ff.
47  For the Mirbād, the celebrated caravan stopover and market outside town, see Pellat, Le milieu burrīn, pp. 244 ff.
48  For the mawṣūliyyān in Baṣra, see ibid.
52  Cf. Pellat, Life and Works, p. 19.
53  'The author is continually at pains to demonstrate that everything in nature has its uses and is evidence of the existence and wisdom of God': see al-Jahiz, Kitāb al-Hayawān, vol. 2, p. 100–101; cf. Pellat, Life and Works, pp. 141–2.
54  Cf. D. Gimaret, EP, s.v. 'Muṣāṣilīa.'
55  I am grateful to Professor Josef van Ess for kindly informing me that one work by Dirār ibn 'Amm (d. ca. 185/795), the Kitāb al-Ṭahrīsh, appears to have survived in a Yemenic collection copied in 540/1145–6, and for having brought H. A. Qumi’s article, 'Kitāb al-kalimāt’ Dirār ibn ‘Amm’, in Kitāb al-māh-i īān 89 (138–9) 47 Shamāsiyyāh, pp. 4–13, to my attention.
The genesis of literature in Islam

57 J. van Ess, EP, s.v. 'al-Naṣrīn', van Ess, Das Kitāb an-Naqām und seine Rezeption im Kitāb al-Fusūl des Ghāzi (Göttingen, 1972).
62 For the following, cf. Toorawa, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭafṣīr, p. 25.
63 Führer, pp. 130, 208.
64 Ibid., pp. 130, 208. Cf. Toorawa, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭafṣīr, p. 25.

8

Listening to books, or reading them?

In the ninth century, it was not only men of letters (adḥīb, pl. udḥāb) who were writing actual books. Increasingly, many scholars also took it upon themselves to continue the pioneering work of Sībawayhī, giving their material a definitive shape, and with a readership in mind, just as the men of letters did; in this way, they too produced actual books. To be sure, many still followed the traditional method, reciting or dictating in the scholarly sessions and teaching circles, sometimes without even using notes, and redacting no works intended for 'public release'. The philologist Ibn al-ʿAḍābī was one such scholar, so too the lexicographer Ibn Durayd (d. 321/933), who continued to 'publish' his Jamharah (The Great Collection) by dictating it to his students;1 of it, Ibn al-Nadīm reports:

The manuscripts of the Kitāb al-Jamharah fi 'ilm al-lughah (The Great Collection in the Science of Language) all differ, and the book has numerous additions and omissions because the (author) dictated it from memory, in Fars, then in Baghdad.

The antiquarian and historian al-Maḍīʿīnī appears to have dictated his books too; in any event, he published them in the context of his teaching.2 This was therefore an example of 'literature of the school, for the school, intended for recitation'. Recall how al-Maṣʿūdī characterised this scholar's methods:3

It is true that Abū al-Ḥasan al-Maḍīʿīnī was a prolific writer, but it was his practice to transmit what he had heard [to auditors, students] but ... al-Jāḥiẓ (on the other hand) composed books according to the best arrangement.

Al-Maḍīʿīnī's principal transmitter, the historian 'Umar ibn Shabbhāb (d. 264/877), used the same method as his teacher.4 We owe the survival of one of 'Umar ibn Shabbhāb's numerous works, the voluminous Taʾlīḥ al-Madīnah al-manawawrah (History of Medina the Luminous), to the zealously of one of his students, who took notes during his teacher's instruction. This student writes:5

Abū Zayd ('Umar ibn Shabbhāb) transmitted to us, saying: This [i.e. what follows] is not from what is in my notebook: 'X transmitted to us ...'
What ‘Umar ibn Shabbah’s disciple was writing down – that is to say, the text of ‘Umar’s book as we have it in its published form today – included not only the written text of the teacher, but also supplementary material that he had added orally.

In the field of Hadith in particular, most books remained ‘literature of the school, for the school’, and were not intended to be published for a wide readership. This was the case for the Muamad of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, which was not given its final shape until two generations after the death of its compiler. It was also the case for the Musnad of Ibn Abi Shaybah, who says at the beginning of several of the book’s chapters, ‘This is what I know by hear (or: have memorised] from the Prophet.’ The compiler is thus characterising his magnum opus as a hujjāmumma.

Historiography

Other scholars, on the other hand, recognised the advantages of actual books. As we have seen, the historian Ibn Hishām reworked and edited the material of Ibn Isḥāq transmitted to him by al-Bakki relating to the life of the Prophet. His biography of Muhammad, the Kitaab Ṣirat rasūl Allāh, is the fruit of these efforts. But the most eminent historian to have given his compilation a definitive shape is without a doubt al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). His Ta’rīkh al-rasūl wa-mulāk (History of Prophets and Rulers) is one of the most important universal histories of Islam. Its detailed introduction is followed by an account of the creation of the world, the history of the patriarchs and prophets of ancient Israel, the rulers of Israel and of the ancient Persians up to the history of the Sassanids. For its sections dealing with the career of Muhammad, al-Ṭabarī most often relies on the reports of Ibn Isḥāq, principally those transmitted by his own teacher, Ibn Ḥumayd, who in turn reports from Sa’īd ibn al-Faḍl. After Muhammad’s migration to Medina in 622 (Hijra), the chronicle is organised in the form of annals, which provides a framework into which al-Ṭabarī is then able to insert corresponding traditions, almost always with their chain of authorities. The work then covers the epoch of the caliphs, with very great detail on the period of conquests, and ends in al-Ṭabarī’s own time. Occasionally, al-Ṭabarī adds personal observations, or else points out divergences in the transmissions he cites for a given event. After identifying the year in question, he typically provides an overview of the events about which he will be reporting.

With Ibn Hishām, al-Ṭabarī and other historians of the ninth and tenth centuries, historiography – which up to this point had been confined to instruction dispensed by teachers, to these teachers’ private notebooks, to the notes taken by their students or, at best, to a ‘literature of the school, for the school’ – became real literature. From now on, the publication of books was no longer exclusively the outcome of recitation in a scholarly context; it spread by means of standard written transmission, making books accessible to a large and receptive readership.

Literary history and poetry

It was also at this time, in the ninth and tenth centuries, that poetic texts on the one hand, and narrative materials and historico-biographical information on the other, were definitively edited. Poems were edited in specialised collections (dhāwān, pl. dawān) or in anthologies such as the Hamāmah (Poetry of Dervaery) of Abū Tammām (d. 231/845).11 And historical and biographical material (including poetic texts) was definitively redacted in major works such as the Kitaab al-Aghāni (Book of Songs) of Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahání (d. 356/966).12

The problem of the Kitaab al-Aghāni’s sources in general, and those sources’ sources in particular, has garnered a lot of scholarly attention. Since Abū al-Faraj frequently declares that he is copying what follows from the book of so-and-so (nasākhū min kital fiwād), without specifying the book’s title, the possibility of a historico-biographical ‘literature’ dating from before Abū al-Faraj – i.e. earlier books containing the biographies of poets – has been raised and has been of great interest to researchers.

This question can best be addressed by turning to the observations of three scholars who have taken it up: Régis Blachère, Leon Zolondék and Manfred Fleischhammer.13 The major written sources of the Kitaab al-Aghāni have been identified by these scholars; they have been called ‘collectors’ sources’ by Zolondék, and date from the end of the eighth century up to about the middle of the ninth century. The authors of these ‘collectors’ sources’ include ‘Umar ibn Shabbah, al-Mālikī, Ibn Mihrawyhi and Ibn al-Marzuqān.

The point that appears to have escaped the attention of scholars researching this question is that the majority of these works form part of ‘literature of the school, for the school’ – they were not composed as synagmmata, but were ‘intended for recitation’ during teaching. For this reason, none survived as an independent work. These ‘books’ were transmitted to Abū al-Faraj by his informants in one of two ways, either through audition, or – and this occurred very often – through written transmission (kitaab, wa‘dāh). This is why Abū al-Faraj often says, ‘I found/read in the book of so-and-so (wajdāhu wa‘dāhu fi kitaab ...), …’, or ‘I copied from the book of so-and-so’ (nasākhū min kitaab wādu ...), and so on, and why Abū al-Faraj rarely gives titles of works.

The merit of Abū al-Faraj is comparable to that of Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabarī, in that he gave definitive form to his material and that he edited it with a public readership in mind. In the introduction to the Kitaab al-Aghāni, he speaks explicitly about his reader and describes, among other things, the method
The genesis of literature in Islam

The impact on Abū al-Faraj of the methods of the men of letters, al-Jalāḥ in particular, is obvious.

As for the definitive recension of ancient and Umayyad poetry into "dāwūn," this was undertaken by 'editor-transmitters', of whom the most important is al-Sukkari (d. 245/860).13 His dāwūn of "Imrā' al-Qays, Hassan ibn Thabit, al-Hujay'yah, al-Akhtal and others survive and are available in printed editions. Al-Sukkari is also the 'editor' of the only tribal dāwūn to have come down to us, that of the Banū Hudhayl. The chain of transmitters of this dawūn appears at the beginning of the manuscript as shown below.16

The transmitters of the generations before al-Sukkari did not generally give definitive shape to the dawūn they worked on. Their copies of selections of poems were intended, rather, to be recited, studied and commented upon in the context of teaching. This was even the case for al-Sukkari's most important teacher, Muhammad ibn Ḥabib (d. 245/860),17 who left to posterity no dawūn that be himself edited. Ibn al-Sikkit (d. 244/858), also of the generation before al-Sukkari, is an exception, however, not only from the point of view of chronology, but also from the point of view of his methodology in redacting poetic material: he effectively occupies 'an intermediate position between on the one hand al-Aṣma'ī, Abū 'Ubaydah and some others who initiated the first work of methodical arrangement, and on the other hand al-Sukkari, who completed the process'.18 Abū 'Umarāmah ibn Abī Ṭirāfah al-Hudhayl survive.

It is interesting to note that the term "jama'a, in the meaning 'to edit, to make an edition', is used by Ibn al-Nadim in the Fihrist, his comprehensive catalogue

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>al-Sukkari</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>al-Riyāḥī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Aṣma'ī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abū 'Umārah ibn Abī Ṭarāfah al-Hudhayl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

(Bāzrān transmission) (Kufān transmission) (Kufān transmission?)

The chain of transmitters of the tribal dawūn of the Banū Hudhayl

Listening to books, or reading them?

of all written works in Arabic, only to characterise the work of al-Sukkari and later editor-transmitters. The technical term used to describe the activities of al-Sukkari's predecessors - sometimes also applied, it is true, to al-Sukkari himself - is 'āmilî, in the meaning 'to arrange'. Thus Ibn al-Nadim writes:19

Abū 'Amr (ibn al-'Alī), al-Aṣma'ī, Khalīl ibn Khalīlah and Muhammad ibn Ḥabib transmitted them (sc. Imrā' al-Qays's poems) (rawāhī). Abī Sulaym al-Sukkari made an excellent edition (jama'a) ... fi-jawādat) based on the ensemble of the transmitted versions (nuwāzish); Abū al-'Abbās al-Abbāsī did not complete his edition (jama'a) us-lam yawmāthahuha. As for Ibn al-Sikkit, he arranged these poems ('āmilāh).

The recension of the dawūn of contemporary poets, the muḍāfān (sing. muḍāfah, 'modern'), also began in the ninth century, and continued in earnest in the tenth century. It is important to note that in this period poets usually did not edit their own dawūn;20 that move did not become normative until the first half of the eleventh century when Abī al-'Alī al-Mas'ūdī (d. 449/1058) and, somewhat later, al-Ḥārīmī (d. 516/1122), to name just two, edited their own works of poetry and prose with a view to publishing them.21 Most of the ninth and tenth century 'modern' poets still continued to entrust their poems to their transmitters or to leave them to posterity in some other way: Hamzah al-Ifshāḥī, one of the redactors of Abī Nuwās's dawūn, notes:22

The Banū Naybakht report that the mother of Abī Nuwās, Jūblān, had in her possession her son's inheritance ... and that among the things he left behind was a repository containing notebooks (daftar), bundles of writings (addīr) and (rolls of) papyrus (qandīq) on which were copies of his poems.

Hamzah al-Ifshāḥī, relying on a chain of authorities, informs us that a certain Ibrāhîm ibn Mâbbûb had in his possession a notebook (daftar) that contained hunting poems (jardiyāt) of Abī Nuwās, dictated and signed by the poet himself.23 It was the editor-transmitters of the ninth century and the men of letters of the tenth century who gave the poetry of Abī Nuwās its definitive form. Ibn al-Sikkit is reported to have arranged the dawūn and al-Sukkari is said to have done the same but not to have finished it:24

Among the scholars (who formalised the dawūn of Abī Nuwās in written form) is Abī Yūnus Ya'qūb ibn al-Sikkit. He commented on the poems (jama'atuha) in about 820 sheets and arranged them according to 10 genres. Abu Sulaym al-Sukkari also arranged them, but did not complete his work.

Today, we actually have recensions of Abī Nuwās's dawūn produced by littérature (ahl al-adab) of the tenth century, notably those of Abī Bakr al-Shīrī (d. 335/946) and Hamzah al-Ifshāḥī (d. 360/970).25
Hadith collections and handbooks

In the domain of Hadith too, compilers could no longer ignore the fact that books, often of considerable length, were increasingly being copied and disseminated through writing. Like al-Jahiz, the traditionist al-Bukhari engaged a scribe by the name of Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Abu Hattim to copy the Sahih, and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, aware of the fact that his Sahih would have a readership, wrote an 'Introduction' to his collection. Little by little, the Hadith scholars themselves ceased to oppose the written dissemination of their Hadith collections—as long as the text had been read and verified in the presence of the author or in the presence of an authorised transmitter.

The first handbooks of Arabic literature appeared in the ninth century. We mentioned in Chapter 6 that Abu Ubayd had written two handbooks in the field of lexicography, the Gharib al-muṣaffā and the Gharib al-hadīth; another work of this type, by the same author, was the Kithāb al-ʿAmlāh (Book of Proverbs). These three books inspired commentaries, supplements, epitomes and more, which clearly shows the fundamentally written character of these works; the 'Book' of Sibawayhi, it will be remembered, had a similar history. The Kithāb al-Nabatū (Book of Plants) of Abu Hamīd al-Dinawari is also a handbook, as is Ibn Qutaybah's celebrated Kithāb Adab al-kutub (The State Secretary's Handbook). The genesis of books of this type is also a reflection of the needs of a public readership.

The proliferation of handbooks—and of books generally—accessible to anyone resulted in people becoming less and less concerned with requiring transmission through audition. If there were enough books, why attend the scholars' lectures? But many authors, including Abu Ubayd, were reproached for having abandoned the 'search of knowledge' through audition. Abu al-Tayyib al-Lughawi describes Abu Ubayd as 'an author skilled in the composition of (actual) books, but one who possessed (only) little transmission'. Later in the same notice on Abu Ubayd, Abu al-Tayyib writes: The people of Bena have noted that the majority of what he [Abu Ubayd] reported from their scholars is not through audition (sama), but comes from 'books' (kutub). He was given copies of his book, al-Gharib al-muṣaffā, and he did not have the slightest idea about (how to apply) the desinential infliction!

The point of the reproach (which may, admittedly, simply be a malicious accusation) is this: because Abu Ubayd hadn't 'heard' the texts compiled in his book from the mouths of teachers but was 'content' simply to copy from circulating notebooks, he was consequently incapable of correctly reading the texts in his own book.

Listening to books, or reading them?

The reaction to the abandoning of transmission through audition

It was inevitable that a negative reaction would develop regarding the abandoning of transmission through audition. Ibn Qutaybah, himself the author of a large number of actual books including at least one manual, gave great importance to audition. In his Kithāb al-Shīr waṭuṭar (Book of Poetry and Poets), he writes:

Every science must be transmitted through audition (mawjūd ilā al-samā) and this need is nowhere greater than in the religious sciences, followed by poetry, because of its unusual expressions, dialectical varieties, unfamiliar language, names of trees, plants, places and waterholes. If you have not heard them pronounced by someone, you will be incapable of distinguishing between the place names shubib and isyab in the poetry of the Hudhayl tribe.

Ibn Qutaybah cites many other examples to show that 'people who misplace the dialectic points and who derive their knowledge from notebooks (al-muṣaffāfūn fī al-ḥikāhāt 'an al-dafār) commit such serious mistakes because they have not benefited from transmission through audition'. This is a perfectly reasonable argument, given the fact that Arabic was habitually written without vowels and often without dialectic points, and was therefore ambiguous. The coexistence of transmissions through audition and transmissions through writing therefore became indispensable.

Al-Azhari (d. 717/1318), author of the voluminous dictionary of the Arabic language, the Tahābīb al-ḥikāh (The Refinement of Language), was also a strong advocate of transmission through audition. In the introduction to his work, he has the following to say about a saḥīfī, i.e. someone who gets his knowledge solely from books:

The saḥīfī, when his (only) wealth is the books (al-saḥīf) he has read, makes many mistakes misplacing the dialectical points. This is because he transmits information on the basis of 'books' he has not heard (ṣāḥiba 'an kunāb lam yismā'il), and on the basis of notebooks (daffār) without knowing whether what is written in them is correct or not. Most of what we have read in books (al-saḥīf) which did not have the correct punctuation and which experts have not corrected is weak and only relied upon by the ignorant.

Transmission through audition in the teaching of medicine

By the ninth century, the books that were essential for the study and practice of medicine, and other sciences, were mostly either translations of works from antiquity (especially Galen and Hippocrates), or Arabic commentaries, paraphrases, abridgements or adaptations of these same works. Indeed, most of the knowledge which the Arabs had of medicine was thanks to the great translation movement that began some time in the middle of the eighth century under the
The genesis of literature in Islam

early 'Abbasids. Most of the translators were Christians, usually Nestorian, of whom the most important was the philologist, physician and humanist Hunayn ibn Ishäq (d. 260/873).35 Original medical works in Arabic began to be written in this period, but did not reach their apogee until the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Even though medicine was one of the so-called 'ancient sciences' (ulamî qadhdhah) which owed their existence in Islam to the translation movement, thus to a written tradition, the ideal of transmitting learning through audition became important in this science. This method had already been in use before Islam in the context of medical instruction in Alexandria. Hunayn ibn Ishäq himself informs us how the tenets of medicine in Alexandria were taught:36

They would gather every day for the reading (qâ'ilah) and interpretation of a fundamental work from among them [i.e., the books of Galen], in the way that our Christian colleagues gather in our own day to read a fundamental work ... in those places of learning known as asklé (Greek school).

We also have very precise information on the way medicine was taught in the eleventh century. A student recited the book being studied with the teacher, one passage at a time; and the teacher provided his commentary on the recited passages by dictating it to the other students. This is how the physician, philosophe and Nestorian priest Abû al-Faraj 'Abd Allâh ibn al-Tayyib (d. 435/1043) studied Galen's book To Glaucon with his students in the 'Adult Hospital in Baghdad.'37 From the teacher's dictated explanations, taken down by a student, a new book, a commentary, could arise. It is said that most of 'Abd Allâh ibn al-Tayyib's books 'used to be transmitted on his authority through dictation based on his own words (kînât tawqâ' 'anhu innâ in al-latîfî).38

The medico-philosophical controversy between Ibn Butlân and Ibn Rûqâwîn
In the eleventh century, the question of transmission through audition in the field of medicine was the subject of some disagreement and became the centrepiece of the famous medico-philosophical controversy between two physicians, Ibn Butlân (d. after 485/1096) and Ibn Rûqâwîn (d. 453/1061). The great Christian physician Ibn Butlân read many books with his teacher, the 'Abd Allâh ibn al-Tayyib mentioned above.39 Ibn al-Tayyib had learned from (ahkâdha 'an) al-Hasan ibn Susûr (Ibn al-Khâmîmâr, d. 411/1020), who had in turn studied with (q醙a' al-lâli) Yahyâ ibn 'Adî (d. 363/974); Yahyâ had studied with (q醙a' al-lâli) Abû Bishr Mattâ ibn Yunûs (d. 328/940) and al-Farâbî (d. 339/950), the former having studied with, among others, the monk Rûfîf (r) and Bûnîyârîn.40 In his Third Epistle, entitled al-Maqâlât al-miriyâsh (The Egyptian Discourse), so called because he composed it in Old Cairo, Ibn Butlân gives 'The Causes why Something Learned from Oral Instruction by Teachers Is Better and More Easily to Understand than Something Learnt from Books, Given that the

Receptive Faculty of Both of Them be the Same'.41 Ibn Butlân supports this proposition by giving seven reasons, which can be summarised as follows:42

1. The transfer from homogeneous to homogeneous, i.e. from teacher to student, is easier than from heterogeneous to heterogeneous, i.e. from book to student.
2. Unlike a book, a teacher can replace a word the student does not understand with a synonym.
3. Teaching and learning have a natural reciprocal relationship; for this reason, learning from a teacher is more appropriate to a student than learning from a book.
4. The spoken word is less removed from knowledge than is the written word.
5. The student receives knowledge in two ways through recitation, by hearing and by seeing.
6. In books, many things complicate understanding: ambiguous words, incorrect punctuation, limited knowledge of desinential inflection, absence or loss of vowels, and so on. To this can be added the difficulties associated with technical terminology, individual authors' styles of presentation, the terrible condition of manuscripts, bad transmission, and in particular untranslating Greek words.
7. Commentators agree that in the case of at least one specific passage by Aristotle, we would never have been able to understand it were it not for the fact that his students Theophratus and Eudemus had heard it from the Master himself, their elucidation having become the accepted interpretation. Ibn Butlân also mentions the pejorative term qaḍîf as a designation for 'someone who derives his knowledge from books'. Lastly, he points out that it is customary to avoid books that do not have certificates of audition.

We know well the reasons for Ibn Butlân's inclusion of these views in his correspondence with Ibn Rûqâwîn: the latter, who was Muslim, was an autodidact who had composed a book in which he maintained that it was more useful to study medicine from books than from teachers. Ibn Butlân, who was Christian, and who had studied with such teachers as 'Abd Allâh ibn al-Tayyib, must have taken special pleasure in presenting his Muslim adversary with the kinds of arguments Muslim scholars had always advanced in favour of the superiority of transmission by audition to transmission based only on writings. One reason audition was favoured was the potential for error and doubt, given the ambiguity of the Arabic script (which has similar forms for different letters and which is habitually written without vowels and often without diacritical points). Indeed, the inadequacy of the Arabic script appears to have presented real difficulties and dangers when it came to the correct reading of medical and pharmacological terms. Here is one (of several) examples given by another Christian physician, Siûd ibn al-Hasan, who wrote in 464/1072:43

- None of the extracted texts is a helpful response to the task at hand, as none of the texts provided are natural language representations. The texts are raw, unprocessed data that do not convey the content in a readable or understandable format.
The genesis of literature in Islam

One physician found "two dirhams of anisit' (anis) in a prescription, but the orthography was unclear—he thought the reading was ayisin (opium). This is why he wrote 'two dirhams of opium' in his own prescription. He gave it to his patient, and caused his death.

The real motivation for underscoring the importance of transmission from person to person and through audition (justified by pointing out the deficiencies and particularities of the Arabic script), though, may well have been the conviction that the knowledge to be preserved and transmitted needed to be in the exclusive care and control of individuals qualified to do so; dissemination through written copies, which would take place without any supervision whatsoever, meant running the risk of that information being altered or losing its substantive meaning.

The arguments of Ibn Qatayb, al-Azhari and Ibn Bahrān in favour of aural transmission, valid as they may have been, cannot alter the fact, however, that transfer and transmission of knowledge in their respective disciplines had shifted from the aural to the read. In the ninth and tenth centuries audition no longer played a primary role in poetry, in adab or in medicine: its function was secondary at best. Just as Plato's criticisms of writing more than a thousand years earlier had been made when literacy had already won the day in Hellenic culture, so too were Ibn Bahrān's criticisms made when literacy had already won the day in Arab-Islamic culture. The shift from the aural to the read was here to stay.

Notes
2 Fāhiṣ, p. 61 = Fāhiṣ, p. 67.
5 GAS, vol. 1, p. 234.
9 For the following cf. GAS, vol. 1, p. 323; C. E. Bosworth, EP, s.v. al-Thabari; Gilliot, Étude.
10 Al-Sanūkī, Die historischen Überlieferungen, pp. 102, 138–9.
12 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 378.