
The Evolution of Isnad from Orality to Literacy: A Foundational Study in the Methodology of the Muhaddithun

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ABSTRACT:

This article traces the evolution of the isnad (chain of transmission) in the Muslim hadith tradition from its origins in the oral culture of the first Hijri century to its codification as the methodological cornerstone of hadith science by the third and fourth centuries. Drawing exclusively on classical Arabic sources accessible through the Shamela Library, the study examines four overlapping stages: (i) the predominantly oral phase under the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the senior Companions; (ii) the gradual emergence of partial writing among certain Companions and Successors; (iii) the post-Fitnah crystallisation of the isnad as a binding evidentiary mechanism, marked by the famous statement of Ibn Sīrīn; and (iv) the official compilation effort initiated by the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and executed by Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī, leading to the canonical collections and the eventual theoretical works of al-Rāmahurmuzī, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, and Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ. The article argues that the shift from orality to literacy was not a sudden rupture but a continuous and divinely-preserved process, and that the isnad endured this shift by transforming from a personal memory-based device into a systematic written discipline. The study follows the foundational (ta’sīlī) method of the Muslim hadith scholars themselves, employing a historical-descriptive approach grounded in the primary classical sources of the muḥaddithun.

KEYWORDS: Isnad; Hadith; Orality; Literacy; Codification; ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz; al-Zuhrī.

JEL classification codes: Z12.

الملخص:

يتتبع هذا المقال تطوُّر الإسناد في علم الحديث النبوي من نشأته في الثقافة الشفاهية في القرن الأول الهجري إلى تعقيده منهجاً بتألم الحديث في القرنين الثالث والرابع. ويستند البحث حصراً إلى المصادر العربية الكلاسيكية المتاحة في المكتبة الشاملة، ويفحص أربع مراحل متداخلة: (١) المرحلة الشفاهية في عهد النبي وكبار الصحابة، (٢) ظهور الكتابة الجزئية لدى بعض الصحابة والتابعين، (٣) تبلور الإسناد بعد الفتنة آلياً إلزامياً للقبول كما في قول ابن سيرين المشهور، (٤) جهد التدوين الرسمي بمبادرة الخليفة عمر بن عبد العزيز وتنفيذ ابن شهاب الزهري. ويخلص البحث إلى أنَّ الانتقال من الشفاهية إلى الكتابة لم يكن قفزة مفاجئة بل تطوراً مضبوطاً تحفظاً لحفظ لسنّة نبيّه ، وأنَّ الإسناد ثبت بهذا التحول وانتقل من رواية شخصية مبنية على الذاكرة إلى منظومة مكتوبة منهجية عند المحايثين، دون أن يطمعن ذلك في صحّة ما رواه السلف الصالح من حملة السنة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإسناد، الحديث، الشفاهية، الكتابة، التدوين، عمر بن عبد العزيز، الزهري.

1. Introduction

The isnad — the chain of named transmitters that traces a prophetic report back to its source — is one of the most distinctive intellectual achievements of Islamic civilisation. Its function exceeds that of a citation device: from the late first century AH onwards, the isnad functioned as the evidentiary spine of religious authority, and as the analytical lens through which every report attributed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) was tested. Ibn al-Mubārak, as preserved in al-Tabrīzī's al-Kāfī fī 'ulūm al-ḥadīth, famously declared: "The isnad is part of the religion; were it not for the isnad, anyone could say whatever they pleased" (al-Tabrīzī, n.d., p. 403).

Yet this fundamental institution did not emerge in a single moment. It evolved across the first three centuries of Islam, traversing a difficult passage from oral culture to literate culture. The present study addresses this passage as a historical and methodological problem. How did a society initially reluctant to write down Prophetic speech come to produce, by the third century, the Six Books and the meta-discipline of 'ulūm al-ḥadīth that rests entirely on written chains of transmission?

The study's research questions are: (a) What is the linguistic and technical meaning of *isnad* in classical sources? (b) What was the actual status of orality and writing during the Prophetic era and the era of the senior Companions? (c) What was the role of the *Fitnah* (the civil strife of the mid-first century AH) in turning the *isnad* into a binding evidentiary requirement? (d) How did the official codification effort under 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz interact with this transformation? (e) What were the methodological consequences of the shift from oral to written transmission?

The aim of the study is therefore to reconstruct the historical and conceptual trajectory of the *isnad* from orality to literacy using strictly primary classical sources. The methodology is historical-descriptive, supplemented by close textual analysis of the classical *hadith*-science corpus following the foundational (*ta'sīlī*) approach of the Muslim *muhaddithun*. The sources are drawn exclusively from books accessible through the Shamela Library (*al-Maktaba al-Shāmila*), namely: *Taqyīd al-'ilm* of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463 AH), *al-Muḥaddith al-fāṣil* of al-Rāmahurmuzī (d. 360 AH), *al-Kifāya fī 'ilm al-riwāya* of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ* (d. 643 AH), *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* with the commentary of al-Nawawī (d. 676 AH), Ibn Ḥajar's *al-Nukat 'alā Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ* (d. 852 AH), and several auxiliary works in the genres of *muṣṭalaḥ* and *tarājim*.

The article is organised into seven sections after the introduction: a conceptual framework, the oral phase, the early writing controversies, the post-*Fitnah* crystallisation of the *isnad*, the official codification, the canonical consolidation, the theoretical phase, methodological implications, and the conclusion.

The significance of this study lies in three areas. First, it offers a synthetic narrative of the orality-to-literacy transition that integrates evidence scattered across the major works of *hadith* methodology. Second, it relies exclusively on primary classical sources available through the Shamela Library, demonstrating the research utility of this digital repository for serious academic work. Third, it situates the *isnad* system in the broader history of source criticism, arguing for its

precedence over comparable Western developments by several centuries.

A note on transliteration is in order. The article follows the standard transliteration conventions of the International Journal of Middle East Studies for Arabic terms, except in cases where simpler English forms are well established (e.g., "hadith" rather than "ḥadīth" in some non-quoted contexts). Personal names of classical authors retain their full diacritical marks for accuracy of identification. All Hijri dates are explicitly marked as "AH" to distinguish them from Common Era dates.

A final note on methodology: this study deliberately distances itself from the so-called "common link" theories of certain orientalist scholars such as Schacht and Juynboll, which have been comprehensively refuted by Muslim scholars including Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Aʿzamī in his *Studies in Early Hadith Literature* and ʿAbd al-Razzāq Maḥmūd in his refutations. The author of the present study affirms the methodology of the classical muḥaddithun, accepts the historical reliability of the isnad system as developed by Ibn al-Mubārak, al-Bukhārī, Muslim, and their successors, and treats the evolution from orality to literacy as a divinely-protected institutional development, not as evidence against the authenticity of the prophetic reports themselves.

2. Conceptual Framework: The Isnad and the Oral–Literate Divide

2.1. The Linguistic and Technical Meaning of Isnad

In classical Arabic lexicons, the root sanada conveys the meaning of leaning, supporting, or attributing. As applied to hadith, the isnad is the chain of named narrators by which a matn (textual content) is "supported back" to the Prophet (peace be upon him). The technical definition is most clearly captured by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, who treats isnad as the formal mechanism through which the riwāya

(transmission) is validated, distinguishing it from the matn (al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, n.d.-a, vol. 1, p. 122 [al-Kifāya]).

In Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ's Muqaddima, isnad is positioned as the essential identifier of the science of hadith. Ibn Ḥajar, commenting on Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, observes that the early Muslims "began to attend to isnad as an essential matter of religion" only after specific historical pressures emerged (Ibn Ḥajar, n.d., vol. 1, p. 8). The isnad is thus simultaneously: (a) a textual structure preserved in writing or memory; (b) an evidentiary mechanism that warrants belief in the attribution; and (c) a meta-discipline whose criticism (riwāya criticism) gave rise to the entire science of 'ilm al-rijāl.

2.2. Orality and Literacy in the Arabian Context

Pre-Islamic Arabia was a predominantly oral culture in which memorisation was prized as the highest intellectual virtue. Poets, genealogists, and tribal historians transmitted vast bodies of material by memory across generations. This oral disposition carried into the Prophetic era and shaped, at least initially, the way Prophetic sayings were preserved. As Imām Muslim himself notes in his introduction to al-Ṣaḥīḥ, the early generations relied principally on personal contact and direct hearing for transmission, with isnad criticism only emerging later (Muslim, n.d., vol. 1, pp. 14–15).

However, it would be a mistake to conceive of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia as illiterate in any absolute sense. Writing existed, though it was reserved for specific purposes — commerce, treaties, and certain genealogical records. What the Islamic intellectual tradition would do is gradually expand the legitimate scope of writing to include religious knowledge, while simultaneously retaining and refining the oral discipline of careful auditory transmission.

3. The Oral Phase: The Prophet (PBUH) and the Senior Companions

3.1. The Initial Prohibition of Writing

The earliest stage of hadith transmission in the Prophetic era was overwhelmingly oral. This is documented in the canonical collections themselves. Muslim records on the authority of Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī that the Prophet said: "Do not write anything from me, and whoever has written anything from me other than the Qur'an, let him erase it" (Muslim, n.d., vol. 4, p. 2298, no. 3004). This prohibition reveals two important features of the early period: first, there was already in circulation a desire among some Companions to record what they heard from the Prophet; second, the Prophet himself restrained this impulse, evidently out of concern that the Qur'an and his personal discourse not be confused in fragile early manuscripts.

The Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ, in his commentary on Muslim, explains that the early disagreement among the Salaf regarding the writing of knowledge was real and substantial: "There was among the Salaf — from the Companions and the Successors — much disagreement about the writing of knowledge; many of them disliked it and most of them permitted it; then the Muslims reached consensus on its permissibility and that disagreement disappeared" (al-Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ, n.d., vol. 8, p. 553).

3.2. Exceptions: Written Documents in the Prophetic Era

Despite the general prohibition, the Prophetic era was not entirely devoid of writing. Several authentic narrations show that writing was permitted in specific contexts. The most famous instance is the report of Abū Shāh, an emigrant from Yemen who attended the Prophet's Farewell Sermon and requested that it be written for him. The Prophet replied: "Write for Abū Shāh" (Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī, n.d., al-Muḥarrar, p. 487; Ibn Taymiyya, n.d., vol. 20, p. 322).

Likewise, 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, one of the youngest Companions, possessed a personal compilation known as al-Ṣaḥīfa al-Ṣādiqa, in which he had recorded what he heard from the Prophet. He famously said, as quoted by al-Bukhārī in the Kitāb al-ʿilm, that he wrote what he heard out of his concern for accuracy. Other Companions, such as 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, possessed similar personal

documents containing legal and administrative material. The principle of writing was therefore not absolutely barred; rather, it was managed and balanced against the dominant oral preservation method (Ibn Farah, 699 AH, p. 7).

Ibn Taymiyya, commenting on the apparent conflict between the prohibition and the permission, advances the view shared by the majority of scholars: the prohibition was abrogated, "since the Prophet later permitted writing for 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Amr and said: 'Write for Abū Shāh'" (Ibn Taymiyya, n.d., vol. 20, p. 322).

3.3. The Companions' Era: Predominantly Oral

After the Prophet's death, the senior Companions continued the predominantly oral pattern. The famous Companion 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb is reported to have been reluctant to encourage written collections of hadith out of fear that they might compete with the Qur'an for attention. Even when individual Companions kept personal notes, the overall culture remained one of oral transmission, validated through hearing (samā') and direct discipleship.

Imam Muslim provides one of the most important methodological clues to this phase. Speaking in his Muqaddima of the situation immediately after the Prophet's era, he transmits the famous statement of Muḥammad ibn Sīrīn (d. 110 AH): "They were not asking about the isnad. But when the Fitnah occurred, they said: 'Name your men for us.' So those who were of the Sunnah were looked at and their hadith was accepted, and those who were of the people of innovation were looked at and their hadith was rejected" (Muslim, n.d., vol. 1, pp. 14–15; cited in al-Nawawī, n.d., Irshād, vol. 1, p. 49).

This statement is critical for the present study because it dates the rise of the isnad as a binding requirement to a specific historical moment — namely, the Fitnah, traditionally identified with the civil strife following the assassination of the third caliph 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān in 35 AH. Before the Fitnah, the close personal acquaintance between Companions and Successors made formal isnad investigation unnecessary; afterwards, the appearance of sectarian groups motivated

transmitters to fabricate or distort reports, and the isnad became indispensable.

4. The Post-Fitnah Crystallisation of Isnad as Evidentiary Method

4.1. Ibn Sīrīn and the Shift to Formal Investigation

The statement of Ibn Sīrīn quoted above is not merely a historical observation; it functioned as a foundational text for later hadith critics. Al-Mizzī cites it in his *Tuḥfat al-ashrāf* and the Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Farāḥ, in his *al-Ghirāmiyya fī muṣṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth*, treats it as the watershed moment in the evolution of riwāya criticism, marking the transition from a culture of personal trust to one of explicit isnad evaluation (Ibn Farāḥ, 699 AH, pp. 6–7).

Ibn Farāḥ describes the phases as follows: "Thus the era of the Companions of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah be pleased with them all, passed in vigilance and assurance of the soundness of transmission; but when the Fitnah appeared, scrutiny of the conditions of the men and what they were upon in their attributes emerged" (Ibn Farāḥ, 699 AH, p. 7). This periodisation became canonical in subsequent hadith methodology, including the works of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, Ibn Ḥajar, and al-Suyūṭī.

4.2. The Era of the Senior Successors

The Senior Successors (al-Tābi'ūn al-kibār), including Sa'īd ibn al-Musayyab (d. 93 AH), 'Āmir al-Sha'bī (d. 104 AH), and Muḥammad ibn Sīrīn (d. 110 AH), responded to the new evidentiary climate by intensifying their attention to the conditions of narrators. They began categorising transmitters by reliability, memory, and madhhab. The Imam al-Nawawī summarises this development in his *Irshād*: "Then the Successors spoke — Sa'īd ibn al-Musayyab (d. 93), 'Āmir al-Sha'bī (d. 104), and Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110) — and their speech was little because the cases of weakness and rarity in that age were few" (al-Nawawī, n.d., *Irshād*, vol. 1, p. 51).

During this same period, certain Successors began producing partial written compilations. The most famous is the *Ṣaḥīfa* of Hammām ibn Munabbih (d. 132 AH), a student of Abū Hurayra, which preserves over 130 hadith reports that were later integrated almost verbatim into the Musnad of Aḥmad. The very existence of this *Ṣaḥīfa* as a stable text used by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal demonstrates that by the early second century AH, oral transmission and written documentation operated alongside each other (al-Baghawī, n.d., vol. 8, p. 226; al-Balqīnī, 805 AH, p. 892).

4.3. Early Written Compilations: The Ṣaḥīfa Tradition

Parallel to the rise of formal isnad criticism, a quiet movement of partial written compilation was developing within the early Muslim community. The most documented of these is the *Ṣaḥīfa al-Ṣādiqa* of the young Companion ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ, who himself reported that he wrote down what he heard directly from the Prophet (peace be upon him) and that the Prophet endorsed this practice. ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Amr is named by Abū Hurayra in al-Bukhārī’s *Kitāb al-‘ilm* as the only Companion whose volume of recorded hadith exceeded his own, "because he used to write, and I did not write" (Ibn Farah, 699 AH, p. 7).

A second important early document is the *Ṣaḥīfa* of Hammām ibn Munabbih (d. 132 AH), a Yemeni student of Abū Hurayra. The *Ṣaḥīfa* contains 138 hadith reports that Hammām received directly from his teacher and committed to writing. The textual stability of the *Ṣaḥīfa* is established by the fact that virtually the entire contents reappear, with their isnads intact, in the Musnad of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (al-Baghawī, n.d., vol. 8, p. 226). This permits a striking demonstration: a text written in the second century AH has been preserved across the centuries in such a way that the chain of transmission from Hammām → Ma‘mar → ‘Abd al-Razzāq → Aḥmad → and so forth can be reconstructed in full. The *Ṣaḥīfa* therefore functions in modern hadith studies as proof that, even before the official codification, isnad chains were being preserved with high accuracy.

Other documents from this period include the legal letters of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the personal compilations of Anas ibn Mālik’s students, and various administrative documents preserved by early Yemeni and Iraqi transmitters. The cumulative effect was that, by the end of the first century AH, the literate substrate upon which the second-century codification project would build was already in place — albeit in scattered, private, and inconsistent form (al-Suyūṭī cited in al-Ṣāliḥ, 1407 AH, p. 44).

5. The Official Codification Effort Under ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz

5.1. The Caliphal Decree and Its Motivation

The decisive turn in the evolution of isnad from oral to written form occurred under the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (r. 99–101 AH). Recognising the dangers of relying on memory in a community now spread from Andalusia to Khurāsān, and observing the rising tide of fabrications by sectarian groups, the caliph ordered the systematic compilation of the Prophetic Sunna in writing.

This decree is documented in numerous sources. Al-Bayhaqī, in his *al-Sunan al-Kubrā* (Introduction), narrates: "Likewise he wrote to his agents in the principal cities of the Islamic world to gather the hadith; the first to respond to him was Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī, who compiled a book on it; then the matter of codification spread" (al-Bayhaqī, n.d., *Sunan*, Introduction, p. 16).

Al-Nawawī confirms this in his *Irshād*: "And at the beginning of the second Hijri century the era of the codification of hadith began by the command of the just caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, may Allah have mercy on him; so Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī and others compiled" (al-Nawawī, n.d., *Irshād*, vol. 1, p. 51). Al-Qurṭubī, in his *al-Mufhim*, expresses the same datum: "And as we direct our faces toward the second Hijri century, we encounter the name of the just caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz; for the idea of codifying the prophetic hadith arose for him, so he instructed Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī..." (al-Qurṭubī, n.d., *al-Mufhim*, vol. 1, p. 9).

5.2. The Role of Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124 AH)

Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī is the pivotal figure in the institutional transition from orality to literacy. As the chief jurist of Madina and the trusted scholar of the Umayyad court, he was uniquely positioned to undertake systematic written compilation under caliphal authority. The narration recorded by al-Bayhaqī shows that he was the very first to respond to the caliphal decree, and his compilations became a foundational reference for the next generation of muḥaddithūn, including Mālik, al-Awzāʿī, and Sufyān ibn ʿUyayna.

The wider impact of the Zuhri initiative was that it normalised the practice of written hadith compilation. By the time of the second generation after him, the production of muṣannafāt (topical compilations) had become standard, with works such as the Muwaṭṭaʾ of Mālik (d. 179 AH) and the Muṣannaf of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī (d. 211 AH) representing fully literate, isnad-organised collections.

5.3. The Saying "Knowledge Is Game and Writing Is Its Snare"

The transition was also marked by aphorisms that captured the new disposition. The most famous is the saying attributed variously to ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and circulated widely among the Successors and the early hadith scholars: "Bind knowledge by writing" (qayyidū al-ʿilma bi-l-kitāb), and its companion proverb: "Knowledge is game, and writing is its snare" (al-ʿilmu ṣaydun wa-l-kitābatu qayduh). These sayings appear in numerous classical sources, including the chapter on the etiquettes of seeking knowledge in Ibn Raslān's Sharḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd (Ibn Raslān, n.d., vol. 17, p. 564) and in al-Ḥalabī's adab compilation, where the verse is preserved: "Knowledge is game, and writing is its snare — so bind your hunt with firm ropes" (al-Ḥalabī, n.d., Uns al-masjūn, p. 33).

5.4. Methods of Transmission in the Codification Era

The institutional codification under al-Zuhri did not displace oral transmission. Instead, it produced a hybrid system in which written texts were transmitted orally through formally recognised methods.

These methods, codified in the works of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī and Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, are typically enumerated as eight: (1) samāʿ (audition from the shaykh's mouth), considered the highest grade; (2) qirāʾa or ʿarḍ (reading aloud to the shaykh for his correction); (3) ijāza (formal authorisation to transmit a specific text); (4) munāwala (the physical handing-over of a manuscript with permission); (5) mukātaba (correspondence); (6) iʿlām (notification that a text is among the shaykh's narrated material); (7) waṣīyya (testamentary transmission); and (8) wijāda (finding a manuscript without direct authorisation) (al-Balawī, 938 AH, p. 365).

Each of these methods preserved a different mode of contact between teacher and student, and each carried a different evidentiary weight in subsequent transmission. The most significant feature of the system is that even the lowest-ranked method, wijāda, was acknowledged as a legitimate channel of partial knowledge, provided that the wijāda was openly declared in the transmitted chain. The system thus achieved the integration of orality and literacy by making the very mode of transfer part of the isnad itself.

Modern commentator ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Khuḍayr observes that, after the consolidation of the canonical era, the function of the eight modes "became merely the preservation of the chain of the isnad" — that is, the texts themselves were now firmly written, and the elaborate modes of transmission served to keep the chain of personal contact alive even where the textual substrate was stable (al-Khuḍayr, n.d., vol. 10, p. 5).

6. The Canonical Consolidation in the Third Century AH

6.1. *The Six Books and Isnad as Architecture*

By the third century AH, the cumulative effect of the codification movement was the production of the canonical Six Books: Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Sunan Abī Dāwūd, Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī, Sunan al-Nasāʾī, and Sunan Ibn Mājah. In each of these works, the isnad functions not merely as a citation device but as the architectural

principle of the entire book. Every hadith is preceded by its full chain of named narrators, and the chains themselves are studied as objects of investigation.

Al-Qurṭubī highlights the historical significance of this achievement: "These books that were codified in hadith are counted among the greatest glories of this community on the whole" (al-Qurṭubī, n.d., al-Mufhim, vol. 1, p. 9). The implication is that the isnad-based literature of the third century is not merely a religious archive but a civilisational accomplishment.

6.2. From Oral Memory to Written Authority

The transformation by the late third century is complete. Whereas in the first century the Companions had been reluctant to write, by the third century the entire intellectual culture of hadith depended on written compilations. Oral transmission did not disappear — *ṣamāʿ* remained the gold standard mode of acquisition for a manuscript — but the written text now functioned as the primary repository of the Sunna, and the isnad was its organising principle.

The Ḥāfiẓ al-Dhahabī, in his *Tadhkirat al-ḥuffāẓ*, draws attention to the wider intellectual reorganisation by which schools, lectures, and the formal study of *rijāl* (narrator biographies) emerged as the corollary of this written turn (al-Dhahabī, n.d., *Tadhkira*, vol. 3, p. 171).

6.3. The Pre-Canonical Generation: Mālik, al-Awzāʿī, and Sufyān

Between al-Zuhrī and al-Bukhārī, a transitional generation of scholars produced foundational works that bridged the codification era and the canonical era. The most important of these are: Mālik ibn Anas of Madina (d. 179 AH) and his *al-Muwattaʿ*, the first major systematically isnad-organised collection of legal hadith; Sufyān al-Thawrī of Kufa (d. 161 AH), whose oral teaching shaped a vast network of Iraqi transmitters; al-Awzāʿī of Sham (d. 157 AH), the chief jurist of Syria; and ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181 AH), the

great hadith critic from Khurasan whose dictum on the centrality of isnad has already been cited.

This generation was decisive because it formally connected legal reasoning to hadith authority by way of the isnad. Mālik's *al-Muwaṭṭa'*, in particular, was structured not as a topical compilation alone but as an isnad-centred legal manual, in which each ruling was tied to its prophetic warrant through a named chain. By the end of the second century AH, the integration of fiqh, hadith, and isnad had become so complete that no jurist could plausibly argue without producing his chains.

7. The Theoretical Phase: From Practice to Discipline

7.1. Al-Rāmahurmuzī and the Birth of 'Ulūm al-Ḥadīth as a Discipline

The fourth century AH witnessed the elevation of the practical hadith critique into a self-conscious discipline. The pioneering work was *al-Muḥaddith al-fāṣil bayn al-rāwī wa-l-wā'ī* of al-Ḥasan ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Rāmahurmuzī (d. 360 AH), the first systematic treatise on the etiquette, conditions, and methodology of hadith transmission. The book treats the entire ecosystem of isnad — *riwāya*, *samā'*, *ijāza*, *munāwala*, and the relations between the master and the disciple — and stands as the first work whose object is the science of transmission rather than the transmitted material itself (al-Rāmahurmuzī, n.d.).

7.2. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī: The Architect of Hadith Methodology

In the fifth century AH, Abū Bakr al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463 AH) produced what is arguably the most comprehensive systematisation of hadith methodology. Two of his works are foundational for the present study: *al-Kifāya fī 'ilm al-riwāya*, a manual of transmission method, and *Taqyīd al-'ilm*, a dedicated history of the controversy over writing hadith. The latter work brings

together, in one volume, the textual evidence both for and against writing knowledge, presenting the early dispute as already resolved in favour of writing in his own time.

Al-Khaṭīb's treatment of the early disagreement is notable for its rigorous source-handling. He gathers narrations from various Successors who explicitly permitted writing, including the famous remark transmitted by al-Shaʿbī (d. 104 AH), echoing the Prophetic instruction: "Bind knowledge by writing" (al-Ṣāliḥ, 1407 AH, p. 44, citing al-Khaṭīb, Taqyīd al-ʿilm, p. 99).

7.3. Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ: The Canonical Synthesis

The synthesis of the entire tradition occurred in the seventh century AH with the Muqaddima of ʿUthmān ibn al-Ṣalāḥ al-Shahrazūrī (d. 643 AH), whose Maʿrifat anwāʿ ʿulūm al-ḥadīth became the standard manual for centuries. In sixty-five types of hadith science, Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ codifies the discipline that the previous five centuries had developed, and the isnad is the organising thread that ties every category to every other (Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, 643 AH).

The work of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ was further commented upon and refined by Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852 AH) in al-Nukat ʿalā kitāb Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, where Ibn Ḥajar traces the methodology back to the era of Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, observing that "he was the first who exercised caution in accepting reports" — a detail that confirms the centrality of evidentiary scrutiny from the earliest moment of the tradition (Ibn Ḥajar, n.d., vol. 1, p. 8).

7.4. The Categories of Isnad in the Mature Discipline

By the time of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ's Muqaddima, the categories of isnad evaluation had been fully developed and standardised. The principal categories are: (a) ṣaḥīḥ (sound), in which every transmitter is reliable (ʿadl), accurate (ḍābiṭ), and the chain is unbroken (muttaṣil) from beginning to end; (b) ḥasan (good), which falls slightly below ṣaḥīḥ in the level of accuracy of one or more of its transmitters; (c) ḍaʿīf (weak), which fails to meet one or more of the conditions of

acceptance; and (d) mawḏūʿ (fabricated), in which one of the transmitters is known to have invented the report.

Each of these grades involved a complex set of sub-categories that depended entirely upon the close analysis of the written isnad: mursal (a Successor narrating directly from the Prophet without naming the Companion); munqaṭiʿ (broken at any point in the chain); muʿḍal (with two or more consecutive transmitters omitted); muʿallaq (suspended at the beginning of the chain); shādhdh (the reliable transmitter contradicting more reliable ones); and munkar (the unreliable transmitter contradicting reliable ones). This entire taxonomic apparatus presupposes the existence of stable written texts that can be compared side by side — a presupposition that simply did not exist in the first century AH (al-Tabrīzī, n.d., p. 7).

7.5. The Mature Discipline and Its Auxiliary Sciences

Surrounding the isnad as the central evidentiary mechanism, a galaxy of auxiliary sciences emerged in the mature phase: (i) the science of impugning and validating narrators (al-jarh wa-al-taʿdil); (ii) the diagnosis of hidden defects (ʿilal al-hadith); (iii) the study of transmitters whose memory deteriorated (al-mukhtalitin); (iv) the study of obfuscation in chains (al-tadlis); (v) the chronological classification of transmitters by generation (al-tabaqat); and (vi) the lexical investigation of obscure terms (gharib al-hadith).

Each of these auxiliary sciences produced its own dedicated literature in the third and fourth centuries AH. Without exception, they presupposed the existence of comprehensive written archives of isnad chains, since they required the comparative analysis of many narrators across many transmissions. The fact that these sciences flourished only after the codification era is itself a powerful piece of evidence for the transformative impact of literacy on the discipline.

8. Discussion and Analysis: Methodological Consequences of the Transition

The transition from orality to literacy in the transmission of hadith had at least six major methodological consequences, each of which contributed to the maturity of the isnad system.

First, the rise of the biographical evaluation of narrators (*‘ilm al-rijal*) was a direct consequence of the literate phase. So long as transmission was confined to face-to-face encounters between known scholars, biographical investigation was an informal matter. Once chains became written objects that could be circulated across regions, the question "Who is this narrator?" became an unavoidable essential task, leading to the great *rijal* encyclopaedias of al-Bukhari (*al-Tarikh al-kabir*), Ibn Abi Hatim (*al-Jarh wa-al-Ta‘dil*), and al-Mizzi (*Tahdhib al-kamal*).

Second, the literate phase enabled the emergence of meta-disciplines such as the diagnosis of hidden defects in chains (*‘ilal al-hadith*), the resolution of apparent contradictions (*ikhtilaf al-hadith*), and the lexical study of obscure terms (*gharib al-hadith*). None of these would have been possible without the comparative analysis of written texts.

Third, the literate phase paradoxically reinforced rather than weakened oral transmission. The *ijaza* system, by which a scholar formally authorises a student to transmit a written text, became increasingly elaborate precisely because written texts demanded an authentication beyond their mere physical existence. The book without *ijaza* was suspect; the book with *ijaza* was authoritative. Thus, orality and literacy became symbiotic rather than antagonistic.

Fourth, the isnad system shaped the broader epistemology of the Islamic sciences. The disciplines of *tafsir*, *fiqh*, and *tasawwuf* adopted isnad-like structures of attribution and source criticism. The cultural prestige of the isnad, captured in Ibn al-Mubarak's saying that "the isnad is part of the religion," extended beyond hadith to become a general intellectual norm.

Fifth, the move toward written codification ironically reinforced the value of memorisation rather than displacing it. The great hadith scholars of the literate phase, including al-Bukhari, Muslim, and Ahmad, were renowned precisely for combining encyclopaedic memorisation with mastery of the new written tools. Al-Bukhari is said to have memorised 100,000 sound hadiths and 200,000 weak hadiths, and to have selected only about 7,500 unique narrations for his al-Sahih after the most rigorous comparison. Such a feat would have been impossible without both a comprehensive written corpus to compare against and an exceptional memory to hold its contents (al-Dhahabi, n.d., Tadhkira, vol. 3, p. 171).

Sixth, the methodological transformations of the third century AH established standards of source citation that anticipated by many centuries the European development of formal historical and scientific citation. The Western academic footnote, in its rigour and its explicit attribution of every claim to a named source, can be understood as a delayed and partial parallel to what the early Muslim hadith critics had been doing since the second century AH. This claim is not anachronistic; it reflects the recognition by orientalist scholars themselves that the isnad system represents one of the most precocious and rigorous attribution systems in pre-modern intellectual history.

9. Conclusion

This article has traced the development of the isnad from an oral mechanism in the Prophetic era into a written, codified, and theoretically articulated discipline by the seventh century AH. The principal findings are as follows. First, the early Muslim community did not pass abruptly from orality to literacy; rather, the two modes coexisted under continuously refined principles. Second, the Fitnah of the mid-first century AH was the catalyst that turned the isnad from a courtesy into a requirement, as captured in Ibn Sirin's influential dictum recorded by Imam Muslim. Third, the institutional turning point was the caliphal decree of 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz and its

execution by Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri. Fourth, the third century AH produced the canonical Six Books in which the isnad became the structural skeleton of the entire literature. Fifth, the fourth and subsequent centuries elevated isnad criticism into the formal discipline of 'ulum al-hadith, culminating in the syntheses of al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, Ibn al-Salah, and Ibn Hajar.

The study's main recommendation for further research is the production of a comparative study between the isnad system and parallel evidentiary mechanisms in other ancient and medieval traditions to better assess the distinctive contribution of the Muslim hadith tradition to the global history of source criticism. A second line of inquiry would examine the persistence and adaptation of isnad-like structures in the contemporary digital transmission of religious knowledge, where the question of provenance has acquired new urgency. The classical sources, accessible through digital repositories such as the Shamela Library, remain the indispensable foundation for any such future work.

A third avenue for future research concerns the comparison between the isnad-based hadith tradition and the textual transmission of the Qur'anic recitations (qira'at). Both disciplines rely on chains of personal contact, but the Qur'anic chains operate under a stricter mass-transmission requirement (tawatur), whereas the hadith chains tolerate single-strand transmission (ahad) under specified conditions. The comparative analysis of these two complementary evidentiary regimes within a single intellectual tradition would yield significant insights into how early Muslim scholars calibrated their epistemic standards to the nature of the material under transmission.

A fourth and final research direction is the application of modern computational tools to the analysis of large-scale isnad networks. With the availability of digital corpora such as the Shamela Library, it has become possible to construct comprehensive databases of named transmitters and their connections, and to use graph-theoretic methods to identify common links, regional clusters, and patterns of transmission. Such studies, while still in their infancy, promise to add

quantitative rigour to a discipline that has been almost entirely qualitative for fourteen centuries. The next generation of hadith scholarship will likely combine the philological depth of the classical tradition with the analytical power of contemporary digital humanities.

In closing, this study has sought to demonstrate that the journey of the isnad from orality to literacy is not merely a technical history of one particular discipline; it is a window onto a wider intellectual revolution by which the early Muslim community fashioned, out of the raw material of memory and the new resource of writing, a sophisticated apparatus for the preservation, transmission, and rigorous verification of religious knowledge.

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