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The historical formation of the Sunna

Methodological reflections on the emergence of Prophetic authority

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THE HISTORICAL FORMATION OF THE SUNNA

PART 1 – EARLY *FIQH* AND THE ISSUE OF *ḤADĪTH* DATING

Classical Islamic law hermeneutics relied on four well-known sources: the Qur’ān, the *sunna*, consensus, and analogy (*qiyās*). The first two represent textual sources that do not share the same degree of historicity. Thanks to the work of the past decades on ancient Qur’ānic manuscripts, a majority of scholars now recognize the Qur’ān as a text that actually dates back to the first/seventh century, and whose *ductus* was broadly stabilized by the beginning of the following century despite the original existence of different recensions and the persistence of variant readings.¹ However, the number of Qur’ānic verses with normative value is limited. The first generations of Muslims had therefore to turn to other sources in order to approach God’s Law, through an effort of “understanding” (*fiqh*). They solicited various authorities supposedly qualified to address legal issues, either because they had known Muḥammad or his Companions, or because of their piety, or finally because their institutional role – as caliph, governor, *qāḍī* – placed them in a position to define and enforce legal rules.²

The *sunna*, however, only became strictly identified with a textual corpus, that is prophetic *ḥadīth*, at a later stage. Islamic sources report that writing down the Prophet’s words was at first controversial, for it might lead to some confusion with the Book of God. The Prophet’s sayings were therefore reportedly first transmitted orally, while systematic written collections did not emerge before the Marwānīd period, especially from the 720s onwards.³ Yet, prophetic *ḥadīths* did not become a major source of law overnight. They awaited the emergence of a movement of “traditionalists” (*ahl al-ḥadīth*) who proposed, from the end of the second/eighth century onwards, to systematically elaborate Islamic law on the basis of *ḥadīth*. Only in the third/ninth century did this trend manage to prevail and permeate the emerging legal schools (*madhabs*) with its methods.⁴ Because of this turbulent history, *ḥadīth* has always proved to be a

¹ See François Déroche, *Qur’ān of the Umayyads. A First Overview* (Leiden: Brill), 71, 137-39.

² On this issue, see Mathieu Tillier, “Califes, émirs et cadis : le droit califal et l’articulation de l’autorité judiciaire à l’époque umayyade,” *Bulletin d’Études Orientales* 63 (2014): 147-90.

³ For a synthesis of different views, see Gregor Schoeler, “Recording,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Concise Companion to the Hadith*, ed. D. W. Brown (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 93-107. For more detailed studies engaging with the relationship between oral and written in early Islam, see for example N. Abbott, *Studies in Literary Papyri*, I (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 5-31; M. Z. Siddiqi *Ḥadīth Literature: Its Origin, Development, Special Features and Criticism* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993); G. Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006); J. A. C. Brown, *Hadith. Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 18-31.

⁴ See Christopher Melchert, “Traditionist-Jurists and the Framing of Islamic Law,” *Islamic Law and Society* 8 (2001): 383-406.

problematic textual material in the eyes of Muslims.⁵ The quest for authority in order to defend particular rules resulted in the forgery of prophetic sayings and the falsification of chains of transmission (*isnāds*).⁶ Consequently, Muslim scholars were required to develop critical methods to distinguish authentic from forged traditions, and isolate a corpus of sound traditions (*ṣaḥīḥ*) on which jurists could rely.

Modern historians, however, are moved by different concerns. Rather than focusing on the authenticity of the *ḥadīth*, which is only important to the person of faith who needs to know what the Prophet “really” said or did, historians question the *historicity* of this textual material. One may identify two main historiographical tendencies, which differ both in their methods and in their conclusions. On the one hand, a sanguine approach, which faithfully follows Islamic classical narratives, considers that *ḥadīth* potentially conveys words dating back to the historical Prophet, even though some formulations were altered over time. On the other hand, critical historians in the line of Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921) and Joseph Schacht (d. 1969) approach *ḥadīth* as a literary genre disconnected from early Islam, and cast doubt on the possibility of detecting historical traces of Muḥammad’s sayings. These historians primarily intend to historicize the introduction and circulation of traditions, either through an internal critique of their content (*matn*) – through, for example, the search for anachronisms – or through *isnād* analysis – such as highlighting “common links” that mark the first diffusion of a *ḥadīth* –, or through a combination of both methods (the so-called *isnād-cum-matn* analysis first developed by Harald Motzki). These two major tendencies (sanguine and critical) are, as Herbert Berg pointed out, irreconcilable.⁷

Yet, regardless of the approach, studying the history of *ḥadīth* faces serious methodological constraints. First, as noted above, medieval Islamic sources themselves acknowledge that systematic written collection of *ḥadīths* did not start before the reign of the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar II (r. 99-101/717-720). Although one of the earliest compendia dating back to the second half of the second/eighth century, Mālik’s (d. 179/795) *Muwattaʿa*’ actually came down to us through recensions from the beginning of the third/ninth century, and its earliest extant manuscripts were copied later. The earliest *ḥadīth* writings on papyri survived in a very fragmentary state. Such fragments are generally undated, although some were presumably copied in the third/ninth century.⁸ Finally, literary *ḥadīth* is very difficult to cross-reference with documentary sources, since no quotations of *ḥadīth* in documentary papyri (such as letters) are known for the early centuries of Islam, nor are prophetic sayings quoted on coins – in contrast to Qur’ānic verses. Scholars are therefore left to study *ḥadīth* through *ḥadīth*, which may result in circular reasoning, or to study it through a literary tradition that postdates 750 CE.

In order to overcome these methodological pitfalls, it is first necessary to take into consideration that prophetic *ḥadīth* represents only a specific form of authoritative saying. While the Islamic tradition used to distinguish prophetic *ḥadīth* from non-prophetic *āthārs* such

⁵ See for example Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 45-52.

⁶ Joseph Schacht, *The Origins*, 152-57; J. A. C. Brown, *Hadith*, 75-77.

⁷ See Herbert Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam. The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 6-48. For a recent survey of these methods, see P. Pavlovitch, “Dating,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Concise Companion to the Hadith*, 114-33.

⁸ Nabibia Abbott, *Studies in Literary Papyri*, II (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 114-28. For a picture of this document, see <https://www.islamic-awareness.org/hadith/perf731>.

as Companions' and Successors' sayings, these two types of reports (*khavar*) differ neither in form nor, originally, in their uses. The traditionalists' quest for authority simply led to the marginalization of non-prophetic sayings in favor of prophetic dicta alone. To approach the history of *ḥadīth*, it is therefore essential to understand this concept in its broader sense of "authoritative sayings." Furthermore, the only way to escape circular reasoning would be to study *ḥadīth* in light of a separate body of texts, and if possible to rely on documentary sources, i.e., material sources frozen in the state of their production, and whose date can be ascertained with precision.

Such a corpus actually exists, namely, a body of epigraphic inscriptions on rocks, composed of official writings (by authorities, often on monuments), graffiti (such as those traced by travelers along routes), and funerary stelae (epitaphs). These inscriptions go back as early as the first/seventh century, and their number increased exponentially from the end of the second/eighth century onwards. They sometimes include a date.⁹ One important genre that appears in these inscriptions is that of *du'ā'*, that is, supplications or invocations to God (*da'wa*, pl. *da'awāt*), a type of prayer that is more informal than ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) and usually begins with the expressions *Allāhumma* ("O God") or *as'alu Llāh* ("I ask God").¹⁰ One of the earliest dated examples is the foundation inscription of a dam built by Caliph Mu'āwiya near Tā'if in 58/667-678:

This dam belongs to the Servant of God Mu'āwiya, Commander of the Believers. 'Abd Allāh b. Sakhr built it with the permission of God **in the year 58. O God, forgive** the Servant of God Mu'āwiya, Commander of the Believers, strengthen him and ensure his victory. **Benefit** the believers through him! 'Amr b. Ḥabbāb wrote this.¹¹

Unlike ritual prayer, invocations appear only marginally in *fiqh* literature,¹² inasmuch as Muslim jurists never came to consider that God required His creatures to address Him supplications in order to grant them salvation. In the third/ninth century, therefore, *du'ā'* rather came to incorporate renunciation literature (*zuhd*) and works devoted to supererogatory manifestations of piety, such as specialized *ḥadīth* collections on invocations.¹³ However, one should avoid an overly teleological reading of this phenomenon. In the first two centuries of Islam, early Muslims did not address God in just any way, nor did they ask Him for just anything. Surviving inscriptions suggest that invocatory practices conformed to standards that evolved over time, including the use of ready-made formulae. The fact that *du'ā'* did not make

⁹ On early Arabic graffiti, see Frédéric Imbert, "[L'Islam des pierres. L'expression de la foi dans les graffiti arabes des premiers siècles](#)," *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 129 (2011): 57-78.

¹⁰ See Louis Gardet, "Du'ā'," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, Brill Online.

¹¹ George C. Miles, "Early Islamic Inscriptions Near Tā'if in the Hijāz," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 7 (1948): 236-41. The English translation has been modified according to R. Hoyland's emendations in his article "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 69 (2006): 406 (emphasis added). For an online picture of this inscription, see <https://www.islamic-awareness.org/history/islam/inscriptions/muwinsc1.html>.

¹² See for instance al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Umm*, ed. Rif'at Fawzī 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib (al-Manṣūra: Dār al-wafā', 2001), II, 546.

¹³ See for instance Ibn Fuḍayl, *Kitāb al-du'ā'*, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Sulaymān b. Ibrāhīm al-Bu'aymī (Riad: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1999); al-Ṭabarānī, *Kitāb al-du'ā'*, ed. Muḥammad Sa'īd b. Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Bukhārī (Beirut: Dār al-bashā'ir al-islāmiyya, 1987); Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Kitāb al-zuhd*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Qāsim (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1983).

its formal entry into *fiqh* was thus less due to the non-normative nature of this practice than to a choice made by the authors of the surviving legal sources. Invocatory standards thus represented, in the first/seventh and second/eighth centuries, would-be legal rules that, in the end, were rather relegated to a secondary normative system. Therefore, one may consider the early field of *du‘ā* as representative of a wider normative domain in formation.

I recently experimented with a new method of *ḥadīth* analysis, the results of which will be presented in detail in a forthcoming article in the journal *Der Islam*. I tracked invocatory inscriptions, using mainly the *Thesaurus d'Épigraphie islamique*.¹⁴ I surveyed 1061 inscriptions in total, dated between the years 1 and 299 AH. Among these inscriptions, I considered mainly those that could be dated in an absolute way (inscriptions with a date), which allowed me to draft a chronological repertory in which I recorded the first appearance of supplication formulae. Subsequently, I searched for the formulae I identified in rock inscriptions within a corpus of 26 collections of *ḥadīth* composed up to the sixth/twelfth century, using the *al-Maktaba al-Shāmila* database, and focusing on formulae introduced by *Allāhumma* (the vast majority of epigraphic supplications) alone. By “formula,” I mean a group of words or a phrase employed to express a specific supplication. For instance, in Mu‘āwiya’s dam inscription examined above, the main invocatory formula is *Allāhumma ighfir li-* (“O God, forgive”). Lastly, as a third step, I cross-referenced the two corpora: I first excluded the *isnāds* to focus on the lexical convergences of short formulae common to both epigraphic inscriptions and *ḥadīths*, and I only reintroduced *isnād* analysis at a second stage.

This comparison led me to question the meaning of such convergences (or, on the contrary, of divergences) between epigraphic inscriptions and *ḥadīth*. Were rock inscriptions inspired by authoritative sayings already disseminated at the time they were engraved? Conversely, were *ḥadīths* based on invocatory practices as reflected in epigraphic inscriptions? Were the epigraphic formulae attributed to any particular group of religious authorities? In terms of dating, to what extent can inscriptions be used to date corresponding invocatory *ḥadīths*? My next posts will present the results of these investigations.

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PART 2 – IMPLORING GOD AND THE “LIVING TRADITION”: A RELATIVE CHRONOLOGY OF EPIGRAPHIC AND TRADITIONAL INVOCATIONS

Stating that the *sunna* of the Prophet represents a major source of classical Islamic law may appear as self-evident. Many legal rulings are supposedly rooted in the words and deeds of Muḥammad, which Muslims considered not only exemplary, but also invested with a normative value.¹⁵ The emergence of the Prophet’s authority, however, has a history, which includes the formation of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* movement in the second half of the second/eighth century, followed by the success of their methods in the third/ninth century. This movement eventually resulted in stressing the exclusive importance of authoritative sayings attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad. The affirmation of a universal type of prophetic authority, superior in value to the opinions of local post-prophetic figures, had a major impact on legal hermeneutics. This

¹⁴ <http://www.epigraphie-islamique.uliege.be/thesaurus/>

¹⁵ See for example al-Shāfi‘ī, *al-Risāla*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo: Maktabat dār al-turāth, 1979), 85-103 (#282-307).

phenomenon, which researchers call “traditionalization” of *fiqh*, led in the third/ninth century to the development Islamic legal schools that formally relied to a large extent on prophetic authority.¹⁶ In order to understand the early stages of the formation of Islamic law, tracing the historical emergence of authoritative sayings (*ḥadīth*), and understanding the mechanisms by which specific types of dicta emerged in early Islam, appear therefore as crucial issues.

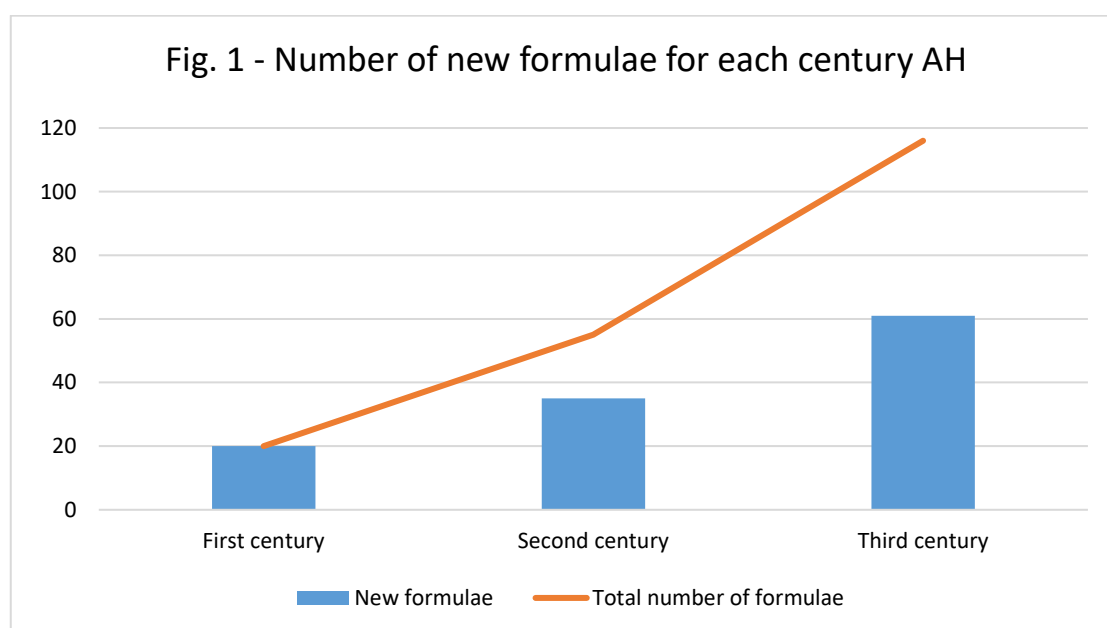
Yet, *ḥadīth* dating methodologies, on which depends the reconstitution of this historical process, have so far led to circular reasoning. This realization led me, in my last post, to propose an experimental method based on a comparison between early inscriptions on rocks and normative sayings collected in *ḥadīth* books, focusing on invocatory inscriptions (*du‘ā*). At first sight, the issue of *du‘ā* might appear distant from legal matters, insofar as it never became a major subject of *fiqh* – although it did make its way into legal chapters. Addressing God, even in a more informal way than in ritual prayer, responded nonetheless to specific rules. Muslims who engraved invocations on rocks used ready-made formulae, following social and/or religious norms. Addressing supplications to God was thus regulated by what Joseph Schacht called “living tradition,” that is, generally accepted customs or practices.¹⁷ For that reason, however minimal the interest of classical jurists in this subject, the relationship between early practices of *du‘ā* and its theory as recorded in *ḥadīth* books may reveal more general dynamics concerning the production of norms and legal rulings in Islam. How did the living tradition of epigraphic invocations relate to authoritative sayings collected and recorded in *ḥadīth* works? In order to answer that question, I systematically compared invocatory formulae found on rocks with a corpus of 26 collections of *ḥadīth* composed up to the sixth/twelfth century.¹⁸ In what follows, I shall refer exclusively to the Hegira calendar, which provides homogenous one-century periods that correspond well with the history of *ḥadīth*. For the record, the first, second, and third centuries AH respectively match the following timespans: 622-718 CE, 718-815 CE, and 815-912 CE.

¹⁶ See Christopher Melchert, “Traditionist-Jurisprudents and the Framing of Islamic Law,” *Islamic Law and Society* 8 (2001): 383-406.

¹⁷ On living tradition, see Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 58.

¹⁸ The most important of these 26 works are: ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Muṣannaf ‘Abd al-Razzāq*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Rahmān al-A‘zamī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1983); Abū Dā‘ūd, *Sunan Abī Dā‘ūd*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūt et Muḥammad Kāmil Qurra Balālī (Damascus: Dār al-risāla al-‘ālamīyya, 2009); Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūt and ‘Ādil Murshid (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-risāla, 1997); al-Bayhaqī, *al-Da‘awāt al-kabīr*, ed. Badr b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Badr (Kuwayt: Ghirās, 2009); al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Muṣṭafā Dīb al-Bughā (Damascus-Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr al-Yamāma, 1987); Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Awwāma (Beirut: Dār al-qibla-Mu‘assasat ‘ulūm al-qur‘ān, 2006); Ibn Fuḍayl, *Kitāb al-du‘ā*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Sulaymān b. Ibrāhīm al-Bu‘aymī (Riyad: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1999); Ibn Ḥibbān, *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān bi-tartīb Ibn Balbān*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūt (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-risāla, n.d.); Ibn Māja, *al-Sunan*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūt et Muḥammad Kāmil Qurra Balālī (Damascus: Dār al-risāla al-‘ālamīyya, 2009); Ibn Wahb, *al-Jāmi‘ fī l-ḥadīth*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥasan Ḥusayn Muḥammad Abū l-Khayr (Riad: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1995); al-Maḥmilī, *Kitāb al-du‘ā*, ed. Sa‘īd b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Mūsā al-Qazaqī (Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-Islāmī, 1992); Mālik b. Anas, *Muwatta‘ al-imām Mālik (riwāyat Yahyā b. Yahyā al-Laythī)*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf (Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-Islāmī, 1997); al-Maqdisī, *al-Tarḥīb fī l-du‘ā wa-l-ḥathth ‘alay-hi*, ed. Abū Yūsuf Muḥammad b. Ḥasan (Cairo, 1991); Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. Muḥammad Fu‘ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo: Dār al-ḥadīth, 1991); al-Nasā‘ī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-kubrā*, ed. Ḥasan ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Shalabī et al. (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-risāla, 2001); ‘Amal al-yawm wa-l-layla, ed. Fārūq Ḥamāda (Beirut, Mu‘assasat al-risāla, 1985); al-Ṭabarānī, *Kitāb al-du‘ā*, ed. Muḥammad Sa‘īd b. Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Bukhārī (Beirut: Dār al-bashā‘ir al-Islāmīyya, 1987); al-Tayālīsī, *Musnad Abī Dā‘ūd al-Tayālīsī*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo: Dār Hajar, 1999); al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-kabīr*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf (Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-Islāmī, 1996).

Let us first look at the epigraphic corpus of dated invocations. The number of inscriptions containing an invocation to God increased dramatically after the first century AH. Simultaneously, the themes of supplications diversified considerably. During the first century, supplications consisted mainly of individual requests for God's forgiveness or blessing for the speaker,¹⁹ and, more rarely, for Jesus or for Muḥammad – but only from the end of the first century onwards, especially in the inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock.²⁰ During the second and third centuries, supplications became more diverse, with the introduction of explicit prayers for eternal salvation or spiritual guidance, requests to die as a martyr or to be exempted from the tortures of the grave.²¹ Invocations concerning Muḥammad also flourished at that time.²² In addition, it is worth noting the cumulative nature of these themes. New topics and formulae did not erase earlier ones, but were rather added to them. Thus, alongside new themes, individual requests for forgiveness continued to be expressed on rocks in the second and third centuries AH. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the formulae (i.e. words and phrases) for expressing supplications to God multiplied in an exponential manner. Between the end of the first and the end of the third century AH, the number of formulae increased sixfold. These results reveal a major development in the invocatory genre through the second and third centuries AH.



¹⁹ See for example H. M. El-Hawary, "The Most Ancient Islamic Monument Known Dated A.H. 31 (A.D. 652, from the Time of the Third Calif 'Uthman," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1930): 322.

²⁰ Max Van Berchem, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum. Deuxième partie : Syrie du Sud, Jérusalem « Haram », II* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1927), 231 (#215). For an online picture of the facsimile edition, see <https://www.islamic-awareness.org/history/islam/inscriptions/dotr>.

²¹ See for instance M. Abū l-Faraj al-'Ushsh, "Inscriptions arabes inédites à Djabal Usays," *Les Annales Archéologiques de Syrie*, 13 (1963): 233 (#36); M. Sharon, *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum Palaestinae*, III (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2004), 180; H. Hawary and H. Rached, *Catalogue général du Musée arabe du Caire : Stèles funéraires*, I (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1932), 3 (#3).

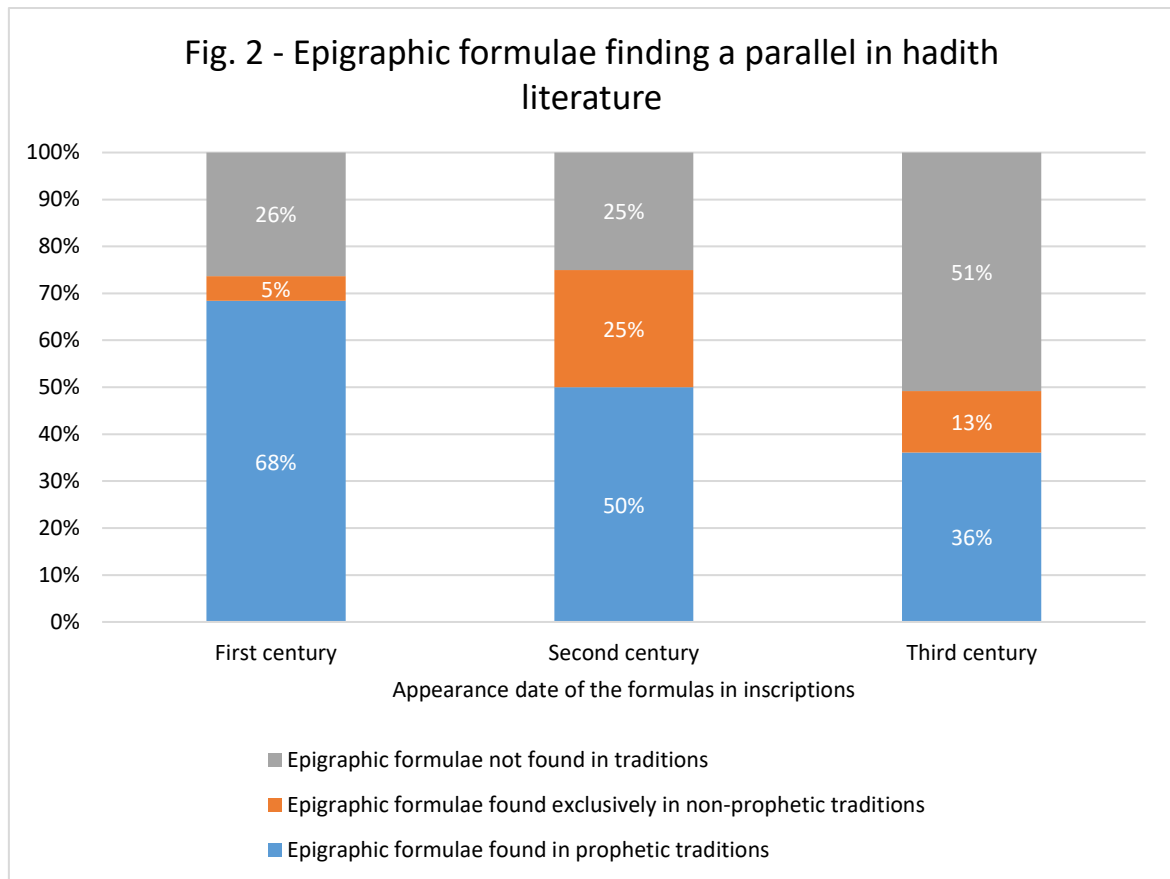
²² See for instance R. W. Hamilton, "An Eighth-Century Water Gauge at al-Muwaqqar," *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine*, 12 (1946): 70.

If we now place epigraphic invocatory formulae side by side with formulae found in collections of prophetic and non-prophetic sayings (*ḥadīth*), what do these two corpora have in common? We notice that between 49% and 75% of epigraphic formulae find a parallel in *ḥadīth*, which suggests a strong correlation between inscriptions and *ḥadīth* (see fig. 2).²³ This result could at first sight agree with the results of the sanguine approach of *ḥadīth* history.²⁴ One could indeed conclude that words historically uttered by religious authorities served as a model, through *ḥadīth* reports, for the inscriptions that survived on rocks. This would indicate that the repertoire of authoritative sayings found in *ḥadīth* collections is very ancient indeed, as claimed by traditional scholars.

However, this interpretation immediately raises a serious problem. If ancient sayings uttered by religious authorities served as prototypes, why did the themes of invocations multiply over time, as well as formulae that were used to convey them? Even if we consider that many formulae remained only oral (and were never recorded on stone) in the first century AH, we should expect, if these formulae actually went back to the first-century authorities mentioned in *ḥadīth* literature, to find *all* these formulae popping up on rocks at the same time, that is during the lifetime of these authorities or immediately after. However, innovation in the creation of new formulae was not only continuous, but it also increased over time and even accelerated in the third century AH, at a time when religious authority was increasingly restricted to the Prophet and excluded contemporary figures. One could adduce historical arguments to explain this phenomenon, such as the fact that words heard or uttered by Companions may have reached the provinces of the Islamic empire only gradually, due to the geographical distance between Medina and the rest of the empire. However, this would mean that only a very small number of Companions used these formulae (i.e. not all those who participated in the conquests), and it would also imply the existence of an intellectual and linguistic gap between the elite of the Companions and other Muslims. We must therefore reject the hypothesis that epigraphic formulae that appeared in the second and third centuries AH were inspired by sayings from the first century AH, and thus reject the positivist conclusion that *ḥadīth* constituted an authoritative corpus early on. The alternative conclusion is that, if an invocatory formula does not appear on rocks at a certain time T, it means that this formula was unusual or unknown at that time T, and that no corresponding model existed in *ḥadīth* at that same time T. This conclusion suggests, with some nuances to which I shall return, that epigraphic invocations and invocatory *ḥadīths* that included both the same formulae must have appeared at about the same time, and therefore that the dates of the inscriptions match, more or less, the time when the corresponding models found in *ḥadīth* literature came into circulation.

²³ For a detailed comparison between inscriptions and *ḥadīth*, see my forthcoming article in *Der Islam*.

²⁴ See Mathieu Tillier, “Early Fiqh and the Issue of Ḥadīth Dating,” *Islamic Law Blog*, January 6, 2022, <https://islamiclaw.blog/2022/01/06/early-fiqh-and-the-issue-of-%e1%b8%a5adith-dating/>.



Moreover, one can observe that the proportion of epigraphic formulae that find a parallel in *ḥadīth* gradually diminished (fig. 2). One must conclude that invocatory formulae on rocks were not necessarily influenced by *ḥadīth*. On the contrary, it seems more likely that the creation of new invocatory formulae, of which traces can be found on rocks, preceded their consecration in the form of *ḥadīth*. Finally, many formulae attested on rocks do not appear in *ḥadīth* literature, which indicates that *ḥadīth* literature only canonized (or abstained from canonizing) formulae that had spread at an earlier stage.

Yet, these conclusions should be qualified according to time periods:

(1) In the first century AH, when invocatory formulae on rocks agree with the same formulae as canonized in *ḥadīth* literature, a historical link between the two may be considered. Since these formulae are attested on rocks as early as the first century AH, they are likely to have been uttered by the authorities of the same period. For example, the frequent occurrence of the phrase *Allāhumma ighfir* (“O God forgive”) in first century inscriptions suggests that Muḥammad could historically have uttered these very same words. These early formulae attested on rocks may therefore represent the earliest “core” of invocatory *ḥadīths*. This historical “core,” which have been desperately sought after by modern scholars, would therefore be *lexical* in nature. Nevertheless, this convergence does not allow us to ascertain that corresponding *ḥadīths* spread as early as the first century. Because of the cumulative character of formulae that I mentioned earlier, ancient formulae were still engraved on rocks during the following centuries. A *ḥadīth* that quotes the formula *Allāhumma ighfir* could therefore have been put into circulation in the second or third century, simply because Muslims continued to use this expression.

(2) In the second century AH, as *ḥadīth* began to develop in scholarly circles, one cannot exclude that some authoritative sayings influenced epigraphic fashions. Nevertheless, the continuous invention of new formulae in epigraphic invocations calls for caution, and suggests that an invocatory genre continued to develop independently from *ḥadīth*.

(3) In the third century AH, however, the relationship between inscriptions and *ḥadīth* became increasingly sophisticated. Some formulae appeared on rocks after they had been first attested in large *ḥadīth* collections. This suggests that from that time onwards, *ḥadīth* may have provided invocatory models and thus preceded the epigraphic diffusion of some formulae. Nevertheless, many formulae that did not match any *ḥadīth* model continued to appear, which shows that the innovation process continued in an autonomous manner, without being hindered by the emergence of *ḥadīth* or by its canonization.

At this point, our comparison between epigraphic and *ḥadīth* corpora relating to invocations shows that some formulae mentioned in *ḥadīth* literature (prophetic and non-prophetic) actually date back to first/seventh-century historical practices, and could *plausibly* have been uttered by Muḥammad. However, the number of such formulae is very small. The vast majority of invocatory formulae appeared at a later stage, and multiplied in an exponential manner in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, which suggests that their appearance in *ḥadīth* collections is anachronistic. Rather, one should conclude that traditions employing these formulae were put into circulation around the time of their first dated appearance on stone.

What can these results tell us about the history of Islamic law? First, they reveal that, when a comparison between documentary (epigraphic) and literary (*ḥadīth*) sources is possible, a lexical convergence between first-century practices and *ḥadīth* may occasionally appear. However, this convergence is extremely limited, as most of the formulae endorsed by *ḥadīth* reports were only engraved on rocks from the second/eighth century onwards. If one extends that observation to other normative fields represented more in *fiqh* literature, it suggests that a tiny fraction of *ḥadīths* employed by Muslim jurists to infer rules or defend norms they adhered to may have resorted to archaic expressions historically in use in the first/seventh century. This concordance, in addition to being limited, does not allow us to infer at this stage that the Prophet historically pronounced the rules associated with such archaic formulae, nor, more importantly, that his words were faithfully transmitted. The preservation of an archaic lexical core within certain formulae could indeed turn out to be an illusion created by the conservatism of the first generations of Muslims. It is therefore necessary to remain cautious and confine ourselves to assuming the historically realistic character of a limited part of the vocabulary used by certain legal traditions.

The antiquity of legal traditions, namely that they date back to the time of the Prophet, could be all the more doubtful since the preceding results suggest that in the second/eighth century, practices still generally preceded their theorization in the form of authoritative sayings. This may therefore confirm Joseph Schacht's hypothesis that the formation of *ḥadīth* primarily consisted in projecting practices that had become accepted as normative onto past authorities.²⁵ In other words, and insofar as my findings regarding the very narrow field of *du'ā'* may be generalizable, the expression of legal rules in the form of *ra'y* and prophetic *ḥadīth*, and the

²⁵ See for instance Joseph Schacht, *The Origins*, 66, 82, 156, 204-18.

subsequent formation of Islamic law, merely reacted to practices emerging from the living tradition – to either endorse or, on the contrary, condemn them.

THE HISTORICAL FORMATION OF THE SUNNA

PART 3 – FROM ANONYMOUS *DICTA* TO THE PROPHET’S *SUNNA*

The history of Islamic law and that of *ḥadīth* are closely connected. As I recalled in my previous posts, prophetic authority as expressed in Muḥammad’s *sunna* became one of the pillars of legal hermeneutics from the third/ninth century onwards. Although a *ḥadīth* is presented as a written record of an uninterrupted oral transmission beginning in the first/seventh century, it remains to this day difficult to date its circulation due to the circular character of *isnād* analysis. Yet, as I have argued in my previous posts, it is possible to compare a sample of *ḥadīth* with dated epigraphic sources. The invocations or supplications to God (*du‘ā*) that Muslims engraved on stone from the earliest days of Islam do indeed use formulae found in *ḥadīths* relating to that form of prayer. Insofar as invocation to God followed normative practices – what Joseph Schacht called “living tradition” – I hypothesized that a comparison between these epigraphic practices and *ḥadīth* could reflect, more generally, the dialectical relationship between practices responding to either social or legal norms, and the expression of those norms as *ḥadīths*.

Comparing the corpus of epigraphic inscriptions that include invocations to God with *ḥadīth* literature has previously led me to conclude that some *ḥadīths* mentioning formulae that overlap with the inscriptions of the first century AH can be considered as historically *plausible*. This means that the Prophet and his Companions might have used them to address God in their prayers. Conversely, other formulae early attested in epigraphic inscriptions are absent from *ḥadīth* literature. For instance, the invocation for Jesus found in the Dome of the Rock has no *ḥadīth* counterpart. In the second/eighth century, Jesus quickly lost the centrality he enjoyed at the time the Dome of the Rock was built in 691-692 CE.²⁶ This absence of invocations for Jesus means that *ḥadīth* literature actually offers only a selection of first-century phrases. Some formulae that the Prophet or his Companions may have uttered never entered the body of Islamic traditions, partly because of dogmatic changes since the early days of Islam. In addition, we have seen that many invocatory traditions found in the *ḥadīth* must be dated to later periods insofar as their formulae do not match those attested in first-century inscriptions.

In his seminal work on the historical formation of Islamic law, based on literary sources and excluding any documentary material, Joseph Schacht argued that legal traditions referring to the Prophet’s authority did not emerge before the first half of the third/ninth century. According to him, the anonymous “living tradition” was first projected backwards onto post-prophetic authority figures – that of Successors, and subsequently of Companions – before it was

²⁶ See Mathieu Tillier, “‘Abd al-Malik, Muḥammad et le Jugement dernier : le dôme du Rocher comme expression d’une orthodoxie islamique,” in *Les vivants et les morts dans les sociétés médiévales. Actes du XLVIII^e Congrès de la SHMESP (Jérusalem, 2017)*, ed. Société des historiens médiévistes de l’Enseignement supérieur public (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2018), 348, 351, 363 (online version: <https://books.openedition.org/psorbonne/53878>)

eventually transformed into prophetic sayings.²⁷ Similarly, Intisar Rabb has recently shown how the “doubt canon” in legal procedure remained rooted in anonymous practice until it was transformed into a prophetic *ḥadīth* in the third/ninth century.²⁸ So far, I have deliberately avoided distinguishing between speaking authorities, that is, those to whom *ḥadīth* literature ascribed the formulae that are attested on stone. I use the term *ḥadīth* in its broader sense of a saying ascribed to any authority, whether or not this authority is the Prophet. It is now time to introduce those authorities into the picture, in order to better understand how formulae were chronologically ascribed to different persons. This comparison, using dated epigraphic documents as a reference point, should thus make it possible to assess the validity of Joseph Schacht’s conclusions.

When one compares the earliest epigraphic invocations with the earliest *ḥadīth* collections or, at least, with those that preserve the widest range of attributions to authorities (among which, the *Muṣannafs* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī [d. 211/827] and of Ibn Abī Shayba [d. 235/849]),²⁹ it appears that these formulae are often ascribed to anonymous or biblical figures (also cited in the Qur’ān) such as Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus, but also to supernatural creatures such as the angel Gabriel or the houris of paradise.³⁰ The authoritative value of sayings attributed to anonymous speakers became extremely weak when the *ḥadīth* reached its maturity in the third/ninth century. Biblical figures did still enjoy some authority, but to a much lesser extent than the major authorities of early Islam, probably because the transmission of their sayings offered no guarantee of reliability. The weaker authority of these anonymous or biblical sayings led subsequently either to their exclusion from the canonical *ḥadīth* corpus or to their re-attribution to more authoritative figures. One can therefore conclude, as Joseph Schacht did, that anonymous traditions represent the earliest layer (or one of the earliest layers) of *ḥadīth* literature. We may add that this early layer also included mythical figures whose authority was later disqualified.

At a second stage, which can also be reconstructed from the same sources, invocatory formulae were attributed to non-prophetic speakers (Companions and Successors), in what scholars called *ḥadīth mawqūf* and *ḥadīth maqtū‘*.³¹ One is struck by the strong chronological convergence, at the end of the first century, between the appearance of a formula on stone and the time when authorities to whom it was attributed were alive. For example, the phrase

²⁷ Joseph Schacht, “A Revaluation of Islamic Traditions,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 2 (1949): 145; Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), part 2.

²⁸ Intisar A. Rabb, *Doubt in Islamic Law: A History of Legal Maxims, Interpretation, and Islamic Criminal Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 48-59.

²⁹ ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Muṣannaf ‘Abd al-Razzāq*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A‘zamī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1983) (<https://archive.org/details/waq15649>); Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Awwāma (Beirut: Dār al-qibla-Mu’assasat ‘ulūm al-qur’ān, 2006) (<https://archive.org/details/WAQ63900>).

³⁰ See for example Ibn Fuḍayl, *Kitāb al-du‘ā’*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Sulaymān b. Ibrāhīm al-Bu‘aymī (Riyad: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1999), 280 (#102); ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, III, 119 (#4989); V, 149 (#9218), 256 (#9538); Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, V, 348 (#8181); X, 261 (#19697); Ibn Ḥanbal, *Kitāb al-zuhd*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Qāsim, (Beyrouth: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1983), 72, 101; al-Nasā’ī, *Amal al-yawm wa-l-layla*, ed. Fārūq Hamāda (Beirut, Mu’assasat al-risāla, 1985), 200 (#137).

³¹ See for example ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaf*, II, 158 (#2889), 159 (#2892), 187 (#3010), 206 (#3082), 449 (#4042), 568 (#4489); III, 110 (#4968), 116 (#4982); Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, III, 50 (#3050); V, 313 (#8049), 314 (#8053), 350 (#8188); VI, 83 (#8930); VII, 199 (#11301), 246 (#11477, #11478), 247 (#11480), 249 (#11484).

Allāhumma ... urzuq (“O God, ... give sustenance”), which is first attested on stone in 78/698,³² is ascribed in early *ḥadīth* to roughly contemporary figures such as Abū Muslim al-Khawlānī (d. 62/682), al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Ṭāwūs b. Kaysān (d. ca. 106/724-725), Makḥūl al-Shāmī (d. ca. 113/731-732) and ‘Aṭā’ b. Abī Rabāḥ (d. ca. 114/732). This convergence suggests that these post-prophetic authorities could plausibly have uttered these formulae, and that their later dissemination in the form of non-prophetic traditions may have originated in the memory of words historically uttered by these figures.

Other traditions state that these Companions and Successors approved invocatory formulae that are also found in anonymous or biblical versions.³³ This phenomenon indicates that these Companions’ and Successors’ *ḥadīths* correspond to a second stage in the formation of Islamic tradition, which was meant to enhance the credit of earlier traditions lacking sufficient authority.

The third stage is, finally, that of the “prophetization” of invocatory traditions, that is, their transformation into prophetic *ḥadīths*, directly linked to the Prophet. This prophetization is already noticeable in the second half of the second/eighth century in the *Muwaṭṭa’* of Mālik (d. 179/795), who ascribed to the Prophet some formulae attested on rocks as early as the first century.³⁴ Conversely, Mālik never ascribed to the Prophet invocations that appeared on rocks after 92/710. In his work, such second/eighth-century formulae are only quoted in the form of *āthār* going back to Companions or Successors.³⁵ These formulae were still new in his time, and had not yet had time to be retroactively attributed to the Prophet – which happened in later *ḥadīth* collections.

A profound paradigm shift indeed occurred in the first half of the third/ninth century, which I would associate primarily with the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). This paradigm shift resulted not only in a restriction of authority to prophetic *ḥadīth* (non-prophetic material is excluded from the *Musnad* and relegated to secondary collections), but also in ascribing to the Prophet invocatory formulae that were previously non-prophetic. This process, which I call “prophetization,” took different forms. The Prophet was sometimes made the speaker of a formula that had previously been ascribed to a Companion, who thereby lost his status as a speaker and became a mere transmitter.³⁶ In other cases, the Prophet was inserted as a listener of an invocation pronounced by someone else, which made it possible to legitimize the invocation with the Prophet’s tacit or explicit approval.³⁷ In a third scenario, the Prophet was introduced in the narrative to justify a secondary theological issue appearing in the invocatory tradition; the invocation remained non-prophetic, but the corresponding *ḥadīth* became adorned with prophetic legitimacy.³⁸

³² Frédéric Imbert, “Califes, princes et compagnons dans les graffiti du début de l’Islam,” *Romano-Arabica*, 15 (2015): 69.

³³ See for example Ibn Fuḍayl, *Kitāb al-du‘ā’*, 212 (#47).

³⁴ Mālik b. Anas, *Muwaṭṭa’ al-imām Mālik (riwāyat Yahyā b. Yahyā al-Laythī)*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf (Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-islāmī, 1997), I, 227 (#441), 233 (#456), 234 (#457).

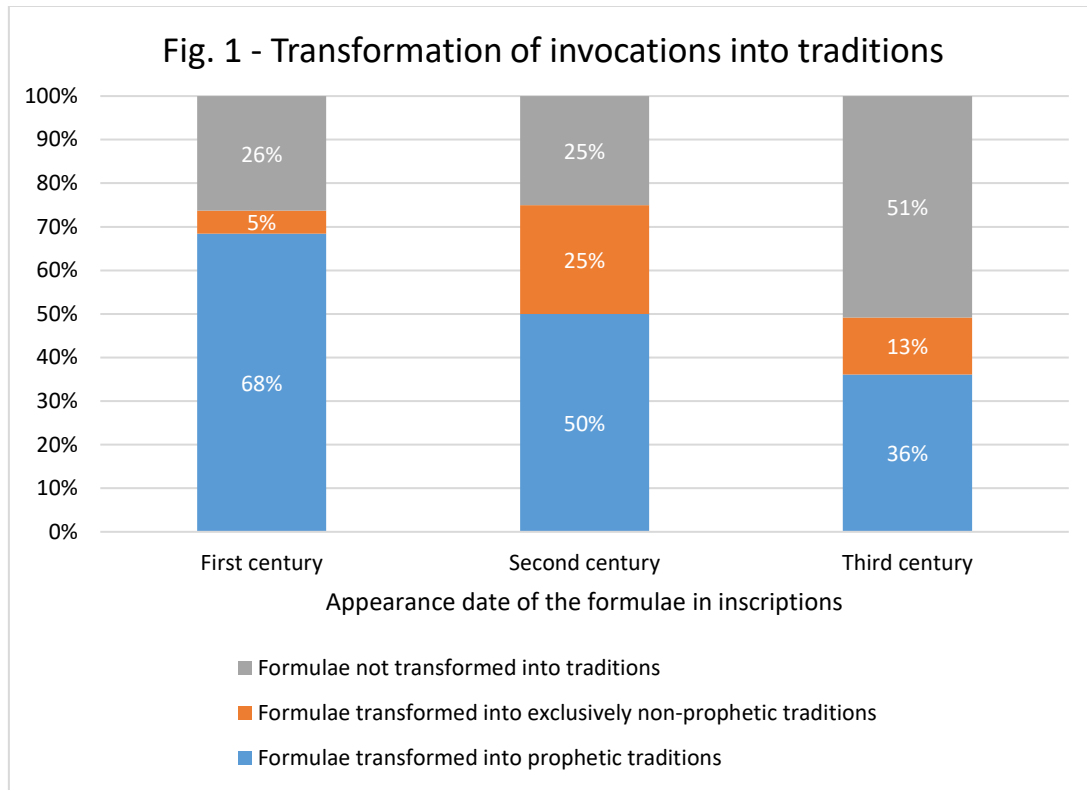
³⁵ Mālik b. Anas, *Muwaṭṭa’*, I, 313 (#609); II, 524 (#2700).

³⁶ See for example Ibn Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, XIX, 346 (#36269) versus al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-kabīr*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf (Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-islāmī, 1996), V, 425 (#3424).

³⁷ See for example Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūt and ‘Ādil Murshid (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-risāla, 1997), VII, 40 (#3925).

³⁸ See for example Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, XXXVI, 27 (#21697).

Ibn Ḥanbal's *Musnad* finally contains prophetic *ḥadīths* that did not previously exist in any form, whether prophetic or non-prophetic. Such is the case, for example, in a *ḥadīth* containing the formula *Allāhumma ... ḥāsib ... ḥisāb* ("O God, ask [him] for accounts..."), attested on stone from 225/840 onwards, that is, during Ibn Ḥanbal's own lifetime. This formula, unprecedented in *ḥadīth* literature, was directly prophetized and included as part of the *sunna*.³⁹



It is nevertheless worth noting that the prophetization of invocatory formulae was limited. As evidenced in fig. 1, the number of epigraphic formulae that were transformed into prophetic traditions decreased over time. This means that prophetization could only occur if and when a formula had become commonly accepted. The more recent a formula was, the less likely it was to be unanimously accepted and thus to become part of the prophetic *sunna*. The prophetization of old and accepted material went therefore hand in hand with a gradual closing of the canonical corpus of prophetic *ḥadīth*, whereby part of the invocatory material (especially some of the most recent one) was excluded.

Studying the authorities to whom *ḥadīth* literature ascribes invocatory formulae attested on rocks thus allows for a reconstruction of the historical dynamics that led to the formation of prophetic *sunna*. Standard formulae that were initially attributed to anonymous people or to Biblical/Qur'ānical or mythical figures were, at a second stage, reattributed to Successors or Companions in order to grant them higher authority. The last stage, which flourished in the third/ninth century, was the projection of these words onto the Prophet. The results I have just presented take as reference point dated inscriptions offering a relatively reliable chronology for the introduction of new invocatory formulae. This dating thus provides a historical starting point

³⁹ Gaston Wiet, *Catalogue général du Musée arabe du Caire : Stèles funéraires*, IX (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1941), 104, #3366. Cf. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, XL, 260 (#24215).

for the integration of a formula into the normative system under construction, of which the *ḥadīth* became a key material. Therefore, these results do not only confirm Joseph Schacht's conclusions regarding the emergence of legal *ḥadīths* and their progressive incorporation in the legal discourse, but also provide a documentary basis for them. How generalizable are these results? One should of course remain cautious not to over-interpret them, since they rely only on a limited sample of *ḥadīths*. The convergence between my results regarding the progressive transformation into *ḥadīths* of social norms regarding invocation, and those of Schacht, which relied on the analysis of *ḥadīth* with legal content, suggests, however, that my own conclusions are potentially extensible to a large part of the *ḥadīth* corpus, whether or not it was eventually used for legal purposes.

Yet, a nuance to Schacht's conclusions is necessary. While he believed that a search for a core of *ḥadīth* dating back to the Prophet was pointless,⁴⁰ I argued in my last post that some *ḥadīths* preserved a lexical core potentially dating back to the middle of the first/seventh century and that the Prophet may have used some expressions occurring in *ḥadīth* literature. Similarly, the temporal convergence between the appearance of invocatory formulae on stone and the life spans of some Successors to whom they are attributed suggests that these formulae were associated with them, if not during their lifetime, then at least shortly after their death, and that they may very likely have uttered them. This confirms that Successors' sayings in the first half of the second/eighth century, if not as early as the end of the first/seventh century, represent one of the earliest roots of Islamic law.

THE HISTORICAL FORMATION OF THE SUNNA

PART 4 – BACK TO THE *ISNĀD*. THE PROPHETIZATION OF THE *SUNNA*

In the first three posts in this series on the historical formation of the *Sunna*, I have argued that it is possible to compare epigraphic and literary data in order to better understand the dynamics of *ḥadīth* formation during the early centuries of Islam, and its integration into an Islamic normative system. Dates found in invocatory inscriptions can be considered, in many instances, as *termini post quem* to the dissemination of models that incorporated the same formulae into *ḥadīths*. These *ḥadīths* attributed those formulae to various authorities, beginning with anonymous sayings and ending with prophetic ones, which confirms to a large extent Joseph Schacht's model. By focusing on invocatory formulae, those first three posts have purposely set aside the issue of *isnād*. It is now time to reintroduce the study of chains of transmitters in order to examine (1) the extent to which they confirm or invalidate the chronological convergence between the appearance of an invocation on stone and its dissemination in the form of *ḥadīth*, and (2) how they may help understand the prophetization process of formulae. To do so, I shall rely on two examples.

The first one relates to the formula *Allāhumma ... ighfir li-... wa-irḍa 'an* ("O God, forgive him and be pleased with him"), which first appears in an inscription dated 121/738-739.⁴¹ This formula first occurred in *ḥadīth* form in the *Muṣannaḥ* of 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan'ānī (d.

⁴⁰ Joseph Schacht, "A Revaluation of Islamic Traditions," 147.

⁴¹ Khaleel I. Al-Muaiikel, *Study of the Archaeology of the Jawf Region* (Riyadh, 1989), 142, #3.

211/827) as an anonymous saying transmitted by Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767).⁴² It was subsequently quoted in a prophetic form in the *Muṣannaf* of Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 235/849) and in the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), as well as in the works of later traditionists.⁴³ The earliest transmitters of this *ḥadīth* are obscure characters, who were positioned in different orders from one *isnād* to another (which suggests that authors did not even know when they lived), and with contradictions. The common link is Mis‘ar b. Kidām, who died around 153/770, that is, thirty years after the formula first appeared on stone.⁴⁴ In other words, the formula seems to have spread during the lifetime of Mis‘ar b. Kidām, who may have been either a mere figurehead for the creation of a prophetic tradition, or himself the main actor in the transformation of the formula into a prophetic *ḥadīth*. This convergence between epigraphy and *isnād* incidentally confirms the validity of the “common link” theory as developed in particular by Joseph Schacht and Gauthier Juynboll, according to which common links played a key role in the dissemination of prophetic traditions.⁴⁵ We can therefore conclude that this invocatory formula spread in the first half of the eighth century CE. It was then repeated in an anonymous saying that reached ‘Abd al-Razzāq in the early third/ninth century. Soon after, a prophetic tradition came into being.

My second example relates to the invocatory formula *Allāhumma irfa‘ daraja* (“O God, raise [him] to degrees...”), whose first stone-dated attestation was engraved in 228/842-843.⁴⁶ This formula did not result in the composition of a unique *ḥadīth* equipped with more or less similar *isnāds*, but rather in several *ḥadīths* with different *isnāds* that can be found in the works of ‘Abd al-Razzāq, Ibn Abī Shayba, Ibn Ḥanbal and Muslim.⁴⁷ Although these are different traditions, their chains of transmitters partially overlap. Without going into detail here, we note first that according to ‘Abd al-Razzāq, this formula was pronounced by figures with weak authority, including Ayyūb al-Sakhtiyānī (d. 131/748-749), and the radical Shī‘ī Jābir al-Ju‘fī (d. 128/745-746). Yet, ‘Abd al-Razzāq also heard it through traditions going back to Companions Ibn ‘Abbās and ‘Alī – which corresponds, according to our previous post, to the second attribution stage of a formula. He finally also knew it according to a prophetic *ḥadīth*. Despite their different *isnāds* and *matns*, these non-prophetic and prophetic sayings are interconnected by means of their concomitant ascription to a transmitter who is not a “common link” (insofar as we are not examining different versions of a same tradition, but rather different traditions), but whom I would rather call a “hub.” In ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s traditions, this hub is

⁴² ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Muṣannaf ‘Abd al-Razzāq*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A‘ẓamī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1983), III, 119 (#4989).

⁴³ Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Awwāma (Beirut: Dār al-qibla-Mu’assasat ‘ulūm al-qur’ān, 2006), XV, 17779-180 (#29963); Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arna’ūt and ‘Ādil Murshid (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-risāla, 1997), I, 351 (#223).

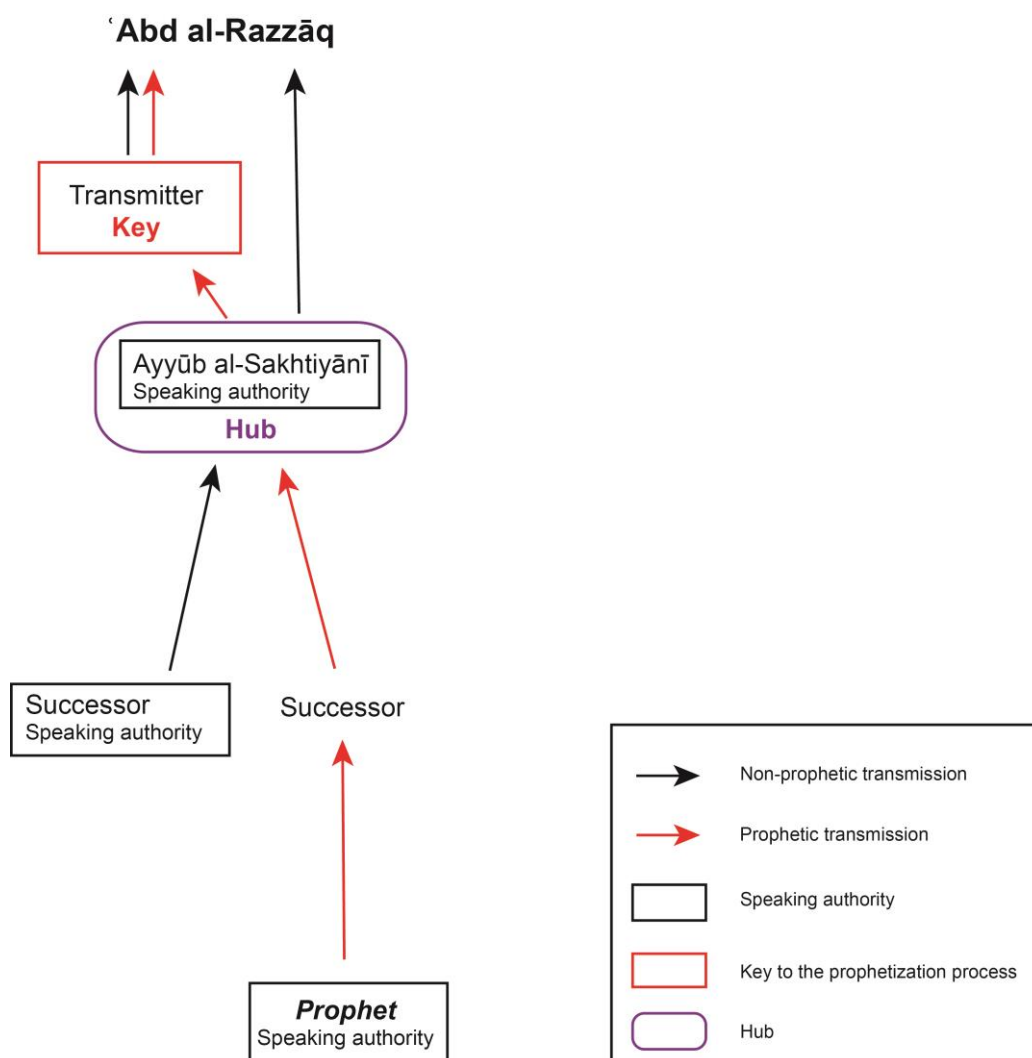
⁴⁴ See al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh al-Islām wa-wafayāt al-mashāhīr wa-l-a’lām*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma’rūf (Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-Islāmī, 2003), IV, 212-216.

⁴⁵ Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 175; G. H. A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Ḥadīth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 206-17.

⁴⁶ Gaston Wiet, *Catalogue général du Musée arabe du Caire : Stèles funéraires*, IX (Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1941), 115, #3386.

⁴⁷ ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Muṣannaf*, I, 496 (#1911); II, 211 (#3104); III, 393 (#6067), 687 (#6422), 491 (#6432); Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, VII, 247 (#11480), 427 (#12100); Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, XLIV, 165 (#26543); Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. Muḥammad Fu‘ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo: Dār al-ḥadīth, 1991), II, 634 (#920).

Ayyūb al-Sakhtiyānī, who went from being the initial speaker of the invocatory formula to becoming a transmitter from an earlier and more authoritative Successor, namely, Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110/729), and finally became the transmitter of a prophetic saying. I call this transmitter a “hub” for he is only a figurehead used as a link between non-prophetic and prophetic reports. He cannot be held responsible for the prophetization of the formula, since ‘Abd al-Razzāq also identifies him as the speaker of this formula. The intermediate transmitter between al-Sakhtiyānī and ‘Abd al-Razzāq, namely, Ma‘mar b. Rāshid (d. 153/770), more likely projected the formula onto the Prophet. For this reason, I propose to call that intermediate transmitter the “key to the prophetization process.” This intermediate transmitter likely used Ayyūb al-Sakhtiyānī’s name to transform the formula into a prophetic saying. If my conclusions are correct, the formula started being engraved on stone in the 830s or 840s, at the same time it became a prophetic dictum, or only a bit later. This matches the typical dynamics of the third century AH (and not of earlier periods), during which the diffusion of *ḥadīths* influenced epigraphic practices.



To conclude this series of posts, the method I have tested and whose results I summarized here consists in a synoptic reading of epigraphic inscriptions and *ḥadīths*, with particular attention to lexical convergences. This method, based on cross-referencing documentary and

literary sources, offers a firmer ground for studying the emergence of a specific tradition than mere internal examination. It also helps understand how formulae attested on rocks were eventually incorporated into the *sunna*. This method attempts to overcome the polarization between sanguine and critical, even ultra-critical methods. It is, of course, more in line with the latter than the former. However, by taking dated documentary sources as a reference point, this method provides more nuanced results than those achieved by revisionist historical schools. While critical historians regard *ḥadīth* as a literary genre detached from the prophetic era, it turns out that *ḥadīth* potentially preserves an ancient “core,” lexical in nature. This does not mean that traditions that convey this lexical core can be historically traced back to the Prophet. The attribution of certain sayings to major authorities of early Islam, including the Prophet, nevertheless appears as *realistic* when corroborated by documentary sources.

Notwithstanding the existence of such a historical lexical core, my research confirms, with respect to the issue of *du‘ā*, that prophetic *ḥadīth* must be understood to a large extent as the result of a slow transformation of sayings previously attributed to other authorities. Given the immensity of the Islamic empire, *ḥadīth* prophetization probably took place at different times depending on the regions. My preliminary study suggests, however, that this process spanned about half a century, between the second half of the eighth and the first half of the ninth century CE. The slowness of this process left traces in pre-canonical *ḥadīth* collections, namely through the competing attributions of sayings to different authorities. These rival ascriptions coexisted for several decades before disappearing from the *ḥadīth* canons that developed in the second half of the ninth century CE.

The extent to which this methodological approach is applicable to the entire corpus of *ḥadīth*, and especially to those traditions that supported legal norms in *fiqh* literature, remains to be ascertained. So far, I have not been able to identify any other category of *ḥadīth* whose formulae could be compared with normative epigraphic practices dating back to the earliest centuries of Islam. However, the notions of “hub” and “key,” by which I referred to transmitters that may be held responsible for the prophetization of certain sayings first ascribed to non-prophetic authorities, may well be applicable to further research focused on more legal *ḥadīths*. It will be necessary, for that purpose, to consider short formulae, or even legal maxims, that have been placed successively in the mouths of several authorities, along with *ḥadīths* that share these formulae but neither the rest of their wording nor their *isnāds*. The field of possible inquiries is huge and will require more advanced investigations than the preliminary research I have presented here.