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***TRAVELLING THROUGH TIME***

**Essays in honour of Kaj Öhrnberg**

EDITED BY

**SYLVIA AKAR, JAAKKO HÄMEEN-ANTTILA  
& INKA NOKSO-KOIVISTO**



**Helsinki 2013**

**Travelling through Time: Essays in honour of Kaj Öhrnberg**  
**Edited by Sylvia Akar, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila & Inka Nokso-Koivisto**  
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# THE TRANSMISSION OF AL-MADĀ'INĪ'S HISTORICAL MATERIAL TO AL-BALĀDHURĪ AND AL-ṬABARĪ: A COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS OF TWO *KHABARS*

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*University of Helsinki*

To Kaj Öhrnberg, my teacher, whose lectures led me to the fascinating world of Arabic historical writing, on his 70th anniversary.

## INTRODUCTION

Early Arabic historiography has brought forth a broad scholarly literature, especially concerning the early Islamic period (1st/7th century).<sup>1</sup> Scholars have been divided into two “camps”, namely sceptical and sanguine, and neither of them has been able to convince the other.

In this paper I will try to approach the problem of the transmission of historical traditions from a different angle, analyzing two *khabars* of al-Madā'inī pertaining to the early 'Abbāsīd period, a period which has not been a subject of much historiographical study. With this analysis, I will show that even the transmission of the traditions pertaining to this, somewhat late, period, is often problematic.

The sanguine stance assumes that the traditions included in the later chronicles derive from earlier collections of historical traditions and ultimately stem from contemporary eyewitnesses. In many instances, in fact, this could be the case. In other instances the historicity of the accounts should be called into question. For instance, the traditions can be the result of historical writing with discernible ideological stances; this is, in fact, rather easy to notice. What is harder is to try

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1 See especially Noth/Conrad 1994, Donner 1998, and Robinson 2003 with their extensive bibliographies. For the 'Abbāsīd period, see Lassner 1986 and El-Hibri 1999.

I would like to thank Professor Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila for his helpful remarks on an earlier draft of this paper.

to trace the birth of an individual tradition and its later transmission when there are no clear indications whose ends it would serve.

### Al-Madā'inī's life and works

Abū l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh al-Madā'inī was a major early collector of historical and literary traditions about whose life rather little is known.<sup>2</sup> According to one report, he was born in 135/752–753;<sup>3</sup> but dates of birth are rather unreliable in this period. What is more reliable is that he was from al-Baṣra. He probably lived some time in al-Madā'in (whence his *nisba*) before moving to Baghdad, where he spent the rest of his life and eventually died.<sup>4</sup> His date of death, however, is variously given as 215/830–831,<sup>5</sup> 224/838–839,<sup>6</sup> 225/839–840,<sup>7</sup> or 228/842–843,<sup>8</sup> or even later. It is said that he was 93 years old when he died.<sup>9</sup> It is impossible to know his dates for certain; the year 215/830–831, in any case, seems to be too early.

He is said to have been a *mawla* of 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Samura b. Ḥabīb b. 'Abd Shams b. 'Abd Manāf.<sup>10</sup> His forefathers, then, were not Arabs.<sup>11</sup> In Baghdad he made friends with the musician Iṣḥāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī (d. c.235/850), whose home he often frequented and who also became his patron.<sup>12</sup> It is unclear what his relations with the powers-that-be were, but he himself is quoted as recounting a literary meeting with the Caliph al-Ma'mūn.<sup>13</sup>

Before coming to Baghdad, he visited the study circles of many teachers from whom he transmitted *akbbār* pertaining to history and *adab*; he also gathered information orally from a very diverse group of informants.<sup>14</sup> Once in

2 Despite his importance, al-Madā'inī has not been the subject of many studies. See, however, Petersen 1964: 92–99; Rotter 1974; Werkmeister 1983: 397–406; Athamina 1984: 248–256; U. Sezgin 1986.

3 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*: 100.

4 U. Sezgin (1986: 946) also speculates that al-Madā'inī could have stayed some time at al-Kūfa, given the large number of his Kūfan informants.

5 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*: 100.

6 al-Khaṭīb, *Ta'riḫ Baghdad* XII: 55; al-Dhahabī, *Ta'riḫ* VI: 104.

7 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*: 100–101; Yāqūt, *Irshād* V: 309.

8 al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ* III: 1330. Rotter (1974: 104) espouses this date.

9 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*: 101.

10 Yāqūt, *Irshād* V: 309.

11 Rotter 1974: 104.

12 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*: 101. On Iṣḥāq al-Mawṣilī, see Yāqūt, *Irshād* II: 197–225; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt* I: 202–205.

13 Yāqūt, *Irshād* V: 311.

14 For a list of his teachers as well as his students/transmitters, see Yāqūt, *Irshād* V: 309; al-Dhahabī, *Ta'riḫ* VI: 104.

Baghdad, he concentrated on teaching – at that point, he was a learned man and no longer a student. His interest in Arabic literary culture was vast, as can be seen from the list of his works in the *Fihrist*, over 200 in total.<sup>15</sup> He was an esteemed authority and a trustworthy transmitter in the field of *akhbār*. He was not, however, very interested in the *ḥadīth* or religious sciences, nor was he deemed a credible transmitter by the *muhaddithūn*. Rather, he collected and transmitted historical and literary traditions, among other things, about the *Jābiliyya*, the life of the Prophet, the Arab conquests and other great events of early Islamic history, Arab poets, and (which interests us here) about the history of the Caliphs. Indeed, al-Madā'inī represents a culmination of the early Arabic authors in compiling and arranging historical material.<sup>16</sup> Among his historical works is *Kitāb Akhbār al-Khulafā' al-Kabīr*, “The Great book of the traditions about the Caliphs”, which is said to have included the history of the caliphate from the first Caliph Abū Bakr to the ‘Abbāsīd al-Mu'taṣim (r. 218/833–227/842 – this information, if true, excludes the earliest date of his death).<sup>17</sup> Al-Madā'inī's many “books” were probably not very long; this could also hold true for his *Kitāb Akhbār al-Khulafā' al-Kabīr*. It is often assumed that historical traditions in the works of al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī, for instance, derive from this work. This is possible, but difficult to ascertain. That is so because none of al-Madā'inī's works have survived as such (see the following subchapter for the reasons for this). All we have are later recensions or incorporations of his works by his students or students' students. What is more, before the birth of “the work with a final form” in the Arab world (3rd/9th century) it was not unusual to transmit only parts, that is, some *akhbār* of the work. The basic unit of historiography was *khbar*, not *kitāb*.

### Scholarly environment and the transmission of science in the late second/eighth and early third/ninth centuries

To begin with, it should be noted that reconstructing the scholarly atmosphere of the second/eighth century is problematic because we do not have contemporary sources. All our sources, with minor exceptions, are from the third/ninth century or from later periods. We should avoid drawing universally

15 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*: 101–104.

16 Rotter 1974: 105.

17 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*: 102. The last *akhbār* in al-Ṭabarī on the authority of al-Madā'inī are from the reign of al-Amīn. I have not been able to find reports attributed to al-Madā'inī pertaining to later periods in other works either. If the information in the *Fihrist* is correct, it probably follows that the reigns of later caliphs were dealt with in very short notes.

applicable conclusions on the basis of this source material.<sup>18</sup> It is also fair to say that I discuss here the scholarly environment from the perspective of historical material.

Early Islamic civilization was a culture of the Book, but not of books: for about one hundred years, the Qurʾān was the only Arabic book. The first Arabic books seem to appear, at the very earliest, in the mid-second/eighth century. Nevertheless, even after that, “aural” transmission was the ideal for a long time.<sup>19</sup> Why this was so is not easy to say, but at least two explanations spring to mind: 1) Arabic script, which at the time did not usually employ diacritical points or vowel marks, was prone to be misunderstood if the aural component was lacking, that is, if the transmission was purely written. 2) Paper, which became with time an inexpensive material for writing, was not widespread before the third/ninth century, parchment, and papyrus being used for writing before that.<sup>20</sup>

The oral/written dichotomy is not very apt for the early Islamic culture: writing was present from the beginning but served, for the most part, as notes or aides-memoires.<sup>21</sup> (The Arabic word *kitāb*, usually translated as ‘book’, properly speaking means any kind of writing.) The works of the authors were published and transmitted mostly through lectures and study circles (*majlis*, *ḥalqa*). Again, it must be emphasized that we do not have contemporary descriptions of these sessions for the early period. Technical terms that are defined in the later literature might have acquired their exact meaning only later. Nevertheless, the following concepts should be described here:

*Samāʾ*, literally ‘hearing’, means audited transmission or a lecture. This was, according to Schoeler, the usual way of publishing a work until the latter part of the third/ninth century. The students often, but not always, wrote down notes dictated by their teacher. The advantages of this kind of dissemination in an age where writing materials were hard to come by are easy to comprehend: in this way, the teacher/author could make sure that his work was heard by many students at a time.

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18 I follow Schoeler (1985; 2009) closely here, although it is somewhat problematic that he does not tackle the challenge which the non-contemporary sources present. See also Khoury 1987; Günther 1991; Motzki 2003. Earlier, Abbott (1957; 1967) and F. Sezgin (1967: 53–83, 237–256) have argued for widespread written transmission even in the first centuries AH. In the light of more recent research, their stance does not hold true.

19 The term “aural” is Schoeler’s, see Schoeler 2009.

20 Schoeler 2009: 99.

21 Schoeler 2009: 8.

*Kitāba* and *wijāda* indicate written transmission. The latter especially means copying verbatim from a written source, the former can also mean 'writing down' (from oral sources). Although aural transmission remained the ideal, written transmission did occur. Notebooks (*ṣuḥuf*) were circulated (*munāwala*) among students, who wrote out copies of them for themselves.

What should be emphasized is that the outcome of all of the above-mentioned ways of transmission was, as a rule, notebooks meant for personal use. The *kutub*, 'books', attributed to the early authorities, were not as yet books in our sense of the term (written works with premeditated forms), but anything written, most probably something we would call "notes".

For al-Madā'inī, the consequences of this are many. First, al-Madā'inī was a student of many teachers from whom he transmitted material from their lectures. He himself had students to whom he lectured: among his students or transmitters are mentioned, for instance, Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ, al-Zubayr b. Bakkār, Aḥmad b. Abī Khaythama,<sup>22</sup> and al-Ḥārith b. Abī Usāma.<sup>23</sup> According to one account, it seems that his lectures were also transmitted by written means, although the passage is ambiguous: Aḥmad b. Abī Khaythama is quoted as saying, "Yaḥyā b. Ma'īn would say to me more than once, 'Write from al-Madā'inī his books (*uktub 'an al-Madā'inī kutubahu*).'"<sup>24</sup> It is hard to say whether the crux of the matter in this particular tradition is that al-Madā'inī's books were transmitted by way of *wijāda* or Yaḥyā b. Ma'īn's words are quoted in order to emphasize al-Madā'inī's authority and trustworthiness. In addition to informants from whom al-Madā'inī wrote down information, he also gathered information from notebooks, for he is criticized as learning from written sources (*min al-ṣuḥuf*).<sup>25</sup> Here as elsewhere in the early Islamic world, it seems clear that the written and the oral existed side by side.

Second, al-Madā'inī most probably did not envision his written works in any final form (this will be dealt with in more detail below, see pp. 50–54). The existence of al-Madā'inī's books is, in my opinion, mostly due to his students/redactors.

Third, later writers like al-Ṭabarī did not transmit information from al-Madā'inī directly, but through an intermediate link, a student/redactor/transmitter of al-Madā'inī, whose name we can in most instances only conjecture (see pp. 50–52 below). He/they might have been a student/students of al-Madā'inī who

22 On him, see p. 51 below.

23 al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh* VI: 104.

24 al-Khaṭīb, *Ta'rikh Baghdād* XII: 55.

25 Yāqūt, *Irsḥād* V: 310. The comment is a common insult in the early period, but we cannot overlook the possibility that it carries a grain of truth about al-Madā'inī.

included the latter's material into his/their own works, or a redactor/redactors of al-Madā'inī's works who published them (orally or literarily) in later recensions.<sup>26</sup>

Al-Madā'inī is said to have dictated by way of *samā'* "all of his books" to Aḥmad b. al-Ḥārith.<sup>27</sup> This could be taken as proof that al-Madā'inī mostly published his works through lectures, that is, his "books" did not circulate as written works with final forms. Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi, too, suggests that al-Madā'inī dictated (*amlā*) his own works.<sup>28</sup> Yet again, it must be underlined that the technical terms appearing in the later works might have not acquired their exact definition in al-Madā'inī's time.

Finally, a few words about the early historical books. An often-stated view about the early Arabic chronicles is that the works of al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892), al-Ya'qūbī (d. 284/897), and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923):

are formally speaking no more than a mosaic of appropriated texts. In these mosaics, the constituent narratives (*akhbār*) retain clear edges that mark them as discrete texts. In [al-Balādhurī's] *Ansāb al-Ashraf* [...] and [al-Ṭabarī's] *Ta'rikh* the edges are very sharp indeed; each *khbar* is outlined in black, so to speak, by the *isnād* [chain of transmission] that prefaces it.<sup>29</sup>

This is true to some extent, but when one analyses different traditions (*akhbār*, singular *khbar*) and their chains of transmission, the "edges" of different *akhbār* become more illusionary than real.<sup>30</sup> I would argue that both al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī reworked their source materials, combining and breaking up *akhbār* as they saw fit.<sup>31</sup> Their sources were written as well as oral.<sup>32</sup>

The *asānīd* (plural of *isnād*) are often allusively given by al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī and, more often than not, only the main *akhbārī* (early historian, collector of historical traditions) or *rāwī* (transmitter) is named. A further

26 Rotter (1974: 110–111, 130) considers the distinction between al-Madā'inī's and his transmitters' material to be in many cases ambiguous. See also Zolondek 1960: 221–222.

27 Yāqūt, *Irshād* I: 408. On Aḥmad b. al-Ḥārith, see p. 52 below. The problem, of course, is that Yāqūt is here employing a technical term which acquired its precise meaning later.

28 *Al-'Iqd al-Farīd*, quoted in Rotter 1974: 108.

29 Humphreys 2004: 76.

30 On the *khbar* form, see Leder 1992.

31 Donner 1998: 263 mentions especially "compression" and "expansion" as two significant factors in the transmission of the texts. See also Leder 1988; Shoshan 2004: 109–156; Robinson 2008: 302; and, for an interesting case study dealing with the redaction activities of the compilers, Landa-Tasseron 1986.

32 Osman (2001: 69), discussing the transmission of Ibn Sa'd's material to al-Ṭabarī, says, "While Ṭabarī may have had access to some parts of Ibn Sa'd's *Ṭabaqāt*, I contend that he used an oral account to transmit at least certain portions of the work."

problem is that, for the early Islamic period, the *isnād* gives us meager means of finding out who really is:<sup>33</sup>

- a) the first informant or the originator of the *khbar*;
- b) (<sup>1, 2, 3, etc.</sup>) the (possible) oral transmitters of this information;
- c) the early “author” or collector of these pieces of information, usually from oral sources, that is, a) and b<sup>x</sup>), for a work of some kind which he transmitted mostly during his lectures;
- d) (<sup>1, 2, 3, etc.</sup>) the (possible) students of c), who transmitted the latter’s works or parts of them from his lectures;
- e) the codifier, who collected information, mostly from c) and d) and wrote it down in an orderly fashion in a book with a fixed form.

It is probable that during the late second/eighth and early third/ninth centuries transmission between a) and b) and c) is oral or semi-literal. The transmission between c) and d) is semi-literal, that is, aural. The transmission between d) and e) could be aural or written. This is, of course, only a rude sketch of a diversified reality which existed at that time.

Although bio-bibliographical literature (e.g. the *Fibriṣṭ*) helps us to identify these different characters, it is evident that the origin and the *Fortleben* of a given *khbar* has to be conceived in collective terms, with many possible authors and redactors.<sup>34</sup> It must also be borne in mind that this bio-bibliographical literature itself comes to fruition quite late and probably does not understand the earlier, semi-literal, environment in detail. Furthermore, the *asānīd* of the early works fail to tell whether written or oral transmission was at play and,<sup>35</sup> sometimes, where the quotation begins or ends. False ascriptions are an additional problem.<sup>36</sup> All this makes it difficult – often futile – to try to reconstruct the original shape of the works of the early *akhbārīs*.<sup>37</sup>

33 The chart is mainly useful for the needs of this paper. A more generally valid, exhaustive list would have to be much longer; cf. Günther’s paper (2005). Although his contribution dealing with the terms of different individuals is laudable, I do not share his optimism that such a precise scheme can be retrieved from the sources.

34 Leder 1988 calls the *akhbār* “unauthored literature”. See also Leder 1990; 1998: 36–38.

35 I believe it erroneous to think that the different terms of the *isnād* (*qāl*, *akhbārānī*, *haddathanā*, ‘*an*, etc.) give us reliable and consistent means for this, cf. Rotter 1974: 106–109, 116; Athamina 2008: 145–155.

36 Landau-Tasserion 2004: 48–54.

37 The pitfalls of this kind of an endeavor have been brilliantly pointed out by Conrad 1993 and Landau-Tasserion 2004, *pace*, for instance, F. Sezgin 1967: 82–84, 237–256.

Below I will proceed to compare two versions of two *khabars* of al-Madā'inī. The different versions of the *khabars* are quoted in the historical works of al-Balādhurī and of al-Ṭabarī, which are chosen here because they are quite early, unrelated sources.<sup>38</sup>

### THE KILLING OF MARWĀN II, THE LAST Umayyad CALIPH

The killing of Marwān II occurred at the end of 132/the beginning of August 750.<sup>39</sup> The fortunes of the last Umayyad Caliph were sealed after a disastrous defeat of his troops by the 'Abbāsid army at the battle of Zāb earlier in the year 132. After the rout, Marwān began a desperate escape through Syria. It soon became evident that he was unable to muster any troops, many Syrians even turning against him. He ended up in Egypt, where he was killed at or near the village of Būṣīr.

There are a handful of different traditions about the killing of Marwān. I will present one of these below, a *khabar* of al-Madā'inī, comparing al-Ṭabarī's version of it with al-Balādhurī's. This I will follow with an analysis of the differences between the two renderings.<sup>40</sup> When something is omitted from the *khabar*, this is indicated by ellipsis (...).

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38 On al-Balādhurī's *Ansāb al-Asbrāf*, see Goiten's introduction to his edition of vol. V of *Ansāb al-Asbrāf*: 7–32 and Athamina 1984. On al-Ṭabarī, see Rosenthal's introduction to his translation of vol. I of *The History of al-Ṭabarī*: 5–154, and, more recently, the articles in Kennedy 2008.

39 For this episode, see Wellhausen 1927: 547–550; Omar 1969: 124–127; Kennedy 1981: 46–48; Hawting 1986: 115–118.

40 For somewhat similar comparisons, see Leder 1990; Bray 1998; Donner 1998: 272–274; and, especially, Rotter 1974: 118–119, for a comparison of two *khabars* by al-Madā'inī in Khalīfa b. Khayyāt and al-Ṭabarī.

The Marwān *kbabar* translated and compared

Al-Ṭabarī, III: 49–50. I follow here Williams's translation, with slight modifications (vol. XXVII: 174–175):

'Alī [al-Madā'inī] – Ismā'īl b. al-Ḥasan<sup>41</sup> – 'Āmir b. Ismā'īl:<sup>42</sup> We found Marwān at Būṣīr. We were a small party, so they pressed us hard.

We gathered together by palm trees. If they had known how few we were, they would have killed us. I said to the men with me, "If we wait until morning and they see how few we are in number, not one of us will get away." Then I recalled the words of Bukayr b. Māhān,<sup>43</sup> "By God, you will slay Marwān; it's as though I hear you cry, 'Give it to them, youths! (*dahīd yā juvānegān*).'" Then I broke the sheath of my sword, and my companions broke theirs. And I cried out, "*Dahīd yā juvānegān!*" It was like fire would have been poured on them, and they fled. Then a man attacked Marwān, struck him with his sword, and killed him.

Al-Balādhurī (ed. Damascus), VII: 655:

'Āmir b. Ismā'īl: We found Marwān at Būṣīr before daybreak. We were a small number; our companions had not reached us or strengthened us,<sup>44</sup> so the men of Marwān pressed us hard. We sought refuge by trees; there were palm trees. If they had known how few we were, we would have died.

Then I recalled that Bukayr b. Māhān had said to me, "By God, you will slay Marwān; it's as though I hear you cry, '*Dahād yā juvānegān, dahā yā ahl Khurāsān!*'"<sup>45</sup> I took heart from that.

We whirled back at them, and they fled. Then a man – he was from the people of al-Baṣra<sup>46</sup> – attacked Marwān, pierced him with his sword, and killed him.

41 Cited twice in al-Ṭabarī for information on the 'Abbāsīd revolution, both times through al-Madā'inī.

42 'Āmir b. Ismā'īl al-Ḥārithī al-Muslī (d. 157/773–4), of the Banū Musliyya b. 'Āmir was an officer of the 'Abbāsīd revolution; he died in Baghdad, and the Caliph Abū Ja'far offered prayers over his corpse, see al-Ṭabarī III: 46, 49, 380; Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rīkh Madīnat Dimashq* XXV: 308–310.

43 He was a propagandist for the 'Abbāsīds. See Sourdel 1960.

44 *Wa-lā tanāmū ilaynā*. The verb is not in the dictionaries and the text seems corrupt. My translation is conjectural.

45 The Persian is obviously corrupt or poorly edited. We will have to wait for the last volumes of the scholarly edition (Beirut, Bibliotheca Islamica) to appear to truly get a grasp of al-Balādhurī's work.

46 Or: troops from al-Baṣra, ahl al-Baṣra.

### The Marwān *khabar* analyzed

The first thing that attracts one's attention is that al-Ṭabarī gives a fuller *isnād*, from al-Madā'inī through a *rāwī* of his to the eyewitness 'Āmir b. Ismā'īl.<sup>47</sup> Al-Balādhurī only gives the first link of the *isnād*. Before and after this particular *khabar* he does, however, cite al-Madā'inī, so it is natural to assume that al-Madā'inī continues to be the authority through which the *akbbār* pertaining to Marwān's death are related.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that al-Balādhurī's (as well as al-Ṭabarī's) use of *isnād* is, more often than not, unsystematic. A case in point is the *khabar* of al-Rāwandīyya, heretics who wreaked havoc in Baghdad during the caliphate of Abu Ja'far al-Manṣūr. Al-Ṭabarī gives as his authority simply 'Alī b. Muḥammad (al-Madā'inī).<sup>48</sup> Al-Balādhurī has a more complex *isnād*:<sup>49</sup> Abū Mas'ūd (al-Kūfī),<sup>50</sup> (Ḥafṣ b. 'Umar b. Ḥammād) al-'Umarī, "and others", although the *khabar* is the same, excluding very slight changes. Now, if we do not know that Ḥafṣ b. 'Umar al-'Umarī was a rarely quoted informant of al-Madā'inī,<sup>51</sup> the provenance of the *khabar* as cited in al-Balādhurī would be unclear to us. And if we only knew al-Ṭabarī's version, we could be led to think that he quotes from a written work of al-Madā'inī a *khabar* for which al-Madā'inī does not furnish a more complete *isnād*. This is just to remind us that the *isnād* is not to be blindly followed.<sup>52</sup> Nor is the *isnād* we are able

47 On eyewitness reports in al-Ṭabarī, see Shoshan 2004: 25–41. I think we ought to be skeptical about the attribution of the story to 'Āmir b. Ismā'īl. The first-person narration could be merely a rhetorical device.

48 *Ta'rikh* III: 129 ff.

49 *Ansāb al-Asbrāf* (ed. Beirut) III: 235 ff.

This is a case of a "collective *isnād*" (although a "collective *khabar*" could be a more fitting name, see Donner 1998: 264, n. 31). This kind of an *isnād* is equivocal as to which part of the text comes from which informant/transmitter, see Günther 2002: 142–145. Note that al-Madā'inī employed these kinds of collective *khabars* very frequently.

50 I have not been able to identify him.

51 See al-Ṭabarī III: 404–405. This identification is not certain. There is another possibility, since it could be the case that we are dealing with two Ḥafṣ b. 'Umars, one called Ḥafṣ b. 'Umar b. Ḥammād (the *nisba* unknown), an informant of al-Madā'inī in al-Ṭabarī III: 404–405, and the other called Ḥafṣ b. 'Umar al-'Umarī, a transmitter of al-Haytham b. 'Adī's material who died c.260/873. On the latter, see Leder 1988: 81–82, n. 50–56. In that case al-'Umarī mentioned in al-Balādhurī could actually be a transmitter of al-Madā'inī and not the other way around. This is, however, improbable, given the collective *isnād*. In any case, this shows that the use of the *isnād* in al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī is ambivalent.

For cases where al-Ṭabarī introduces his tradition with "it is said/mentioned" but where al-Balādhurī states that the authority is al-Madā'inī, see, e.g. al-Ṭabarī III: 58 ff. = al-Balādhurī III: 157 ff. and al-Ṭabarī III: 45 ff. = al-Balādhurī VII: 654 ff. This is probably al-Ṭabarī's way of saying that he considers the tradition in question to be of questionable authenticity.

52 See also Leder 1992: 284–291 on the elusive nature of the *isnād*.

to reconstruct with the help of the two versions complete: we still lack the intermediate link or redactor between al-Madā'inī and al-Balādhurī/al-Ṭabarī, which is only rarely given explicitly.

Although we can be sure that both al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī are recounting here the selfsame *khbar* pertaining to the killing of the last Umayyad Caliph, Marwān II, the wording is somewhat different.<sup>53</sup> Al-Ṭabarī's version glosses over the reason why the troops with 'Āmir b. Ismā'īl were so small in number – their companions had yet to reach them, explains al-Balādhurī – and instead focuses on the first-person narrator 'Āmir b. Ismā'īl and his reminiscence of Bukayr b. Māhān's prediction (a fictitious construct, of course).

The differences between the two versions are not very significant (compare with the next *khbar*, which reveals huge discrepancies). Yet their variation seems to corroborate Schoeler's assertion that al-Madā'inī "was a member of the group of scholars who did not put their writing into fixed form and only transmitted them through lectures".<sup>54</sup> Another possibility is that the discrepancies are due to the fact that al-Madā'inī was quoted rather freely. Yet it appears that al-Madā'inī – and most of his contemporaries – did not yet have any real books with final forms.<sup>55</sup> Al-Madā'inī's "books" were transmitted to al-Ṭabarī through an intermediary (student/redactor/transmitter),<sup>56</sup> perhaps Aḥmad b. Zuhayr (also known as Ibn Abī Khaythama, d. 279/892)<sup>57</sup> or 'Umar b. Shabba (d. 262/875).<sup>58</sup>

53 It should be noted in passing that some of the discrepancies in al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī's versions could, of course, be due to the transmission of the *Ansāb al-Asbrāf* and *Ta'rikh* themselves, the textual histories of which are somewhat problematic. See Daniel 2003.

54 Schoeler 1985: 215.

55 Cf. Günther 1991: 147–148; 2005: 94.

56 On his transmitters, see also Rotter 1974, especially 110–111 and the Table on p. 120. Rotter, however, considers it possible that al-Ṭabarī inherited some material from al-Madā'inī directly, by way of *wijāda*. But, as I argue, al-Madā'inī himself did not seem to have published his works in written form; while probably al-Madā'inī's books were in circulation, they were only later recensions. Even allowing for the possibility of al-Ṭabarī's *wijāda* quotations and that we could be able to identify where it occurred, we do not have "echten Madā'inī" at hand, although Rotter (1974: 122) states that we do.

57 For him, see Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*: 230; Yāqūt, *Irshād* I: 128–129; Pellat 1971; Günther 1991: 122–123; Fleischhammer 2004: 80–81. His *Ta'rikh*, which was much admired, has survived, although only in parts (Pellat 1971). He is said to have allowed the transmission of his work only verbatim (*'alā l-wajh*) (Rosenthal 1968: 62). His *Ta'rikh* has been edited and published in 2004. A quick glance at it shows that it is more useful for the *ḥadīth* and religious sciences than historical information. Al-Madā'inī is quoted in the surviving parts of the work only a handful of times and only with short passages. This could, however, be due to the fact that only a small portion of the annalistic section of Ibn Abī Khaythama's *Ta'rikh* has survived. A detailed study of Ibn Abī Khaythama and his work would be much needed.

58 Schoeler 2009: 111. Rotter (1974: 110) notes that some of the titles of the works of 'Umar b. Shabba mentioned in the *Fihrist*: 102, resemble in part or fully those of al-Madā'inī. Hence, they seem to be only recensions of al-Madā'inī's works.

Al-Balādhurī is mentioned in Yāqūt as transmitting (directly) from al-Madā'inī,<sup>59</sup> but he also seems to have obtained al-Madā'inī's material through intermediaries. Al-Madā'inī's information could have been transmitted to al-Balādhurī, for instance, through Abū Ja'far Aḥmad b. al-Ḥārith b. al-Mubārak al-Kharrāz (d. c.258/872), who was mentioned above as having transmitted “all the works” of al-Madā'inī.<sup>60</sup> Al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī, then, besides being independent sources from each other (i.e. al-Ṭabarī was not familiar with al-Balādhurī's works or chose to ignore them) also seem to be getting their “al-Madā'inī material” by different routes.<sup>61</sup> Al-Madā'inī's students transmitted his material either by redacting later versions of his works or by incorporating it into their own works. The problem is that the *asānīd* in al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī only rarely mention the transmitter of al-Madā'inī; this is probably due to shortening of the *asānīd* or, quite as likely, to the fact that the name of the redactor of a given work was not considered important. Variation in al-Madā'inī's material could have originated in many instances, as in the three following examples:

1) Al-Madā'inī himself could have modified his works, that is, his lecture notes during his career. Even in the cases where early authors like Ibn Ishāq gave fixed form to their works, they continued to teach them through lectures, aurally, which made way for several recensions of their works. We do not, for example, have Ibn Ishāq's original *Sīra*, which he donated to the Caliph al-Manṣūr (the fate of this version of the work is unclear), but later recensions of it by the students of the students of Ibn Ishāq.<sup>62</sup> We cannot, of course, positively exclude the fact that al-Madā'inī would have published some work or another of his in a written, premeditated form. In any case, it must be emphasized that al-Madā'inī's works did circulate in written form in later recensions and were known as “al-Madā'inī's books”.

2) His transmitters, that is, students, could have changed the wording of the original, adding interpolations or omitting something. Because the works of early authors/compilers, for instance al-Madā'inī, did not claim, by and large, to have a final form, it was:

<sup>59</sup> *Irshād* II: 127.

<sup>60</sup> See, e.g. *Ansāb al-Ashraf* III: 195, where he transmits from al-Madā'inī. For Aḥmad b. al-Ḥārith, see Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*: 104–105; Yāqūt, *Irshād* I: 407–409, where he is mentioned as being a transmitter of al-Madā'inī. See also Günther 1991: 118–121; Günther 2002: 149, n. 45; Fleischhammer 2004: 76–77, 81–82. In al-Ṭabarī, he appears twice as a *rāwī*, III: 136 (*an* Khalīfa b. Khayyāt) and 1353 (no authorities other than him are mentioned), and once as a poet, III: 1540.

<sup>61</sup> See also Robinson (2008: 314), who notes that al-Azdī too quotes al-Madā'inī on the authority of Aḥmad b. al-Ḥārith or, perhaps more precisely, Muḥammad b. al-Mubārak *an* Aḥmad b. al-Ḥārith.

<sup>62</sup> Schoeler 1985: 204–212.

permissible for transmitters and editors to omit, add and insert their own opinions and knowledge into the texts that they were transmitting, without giving precise indications of what they were doing.<sup>63</sup>

It is also unclear whether it was customary to take notes during the lectures or whether al-Madā'inī's lectures were only written down afterwards from memory.

3) Codifiers, that is, writers of proper books with fixed forms (in this case al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī), could have altered the content of the *akhbār* depending on their own aesthetic tastes or ideological considerations. Occasionally, they would insert material from other sources without pointing out that the source of the text changes. However, it is usually impossible to say whether the longer version of a particular *khbar* is created from the shorter one by expansion or whether the shorter one is abridged from the original.<sup>64</sup>

It is to be noted that, in addition to written sources, al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī also received their material aurally, so they belong both to category two as well as category three. And in a way al-Madā'inī and his students were also codifiers. The early (3rd/9th–4th/10th century) chronicles are, properly speaking, “compilations drawing on a multitude of sources, most of which are themselves compilations”.<sup>65</sup> The life of a *khbar* has to be understood as a dynamic process where many factors overlap and where the oral and the written exist side-by-side.

The following route of transmission surfaces for this particular *khbar*, if we choose to believe the *isnād* – which I would hesitate to do with a):

- a) 'Āmir b. Ismā'īl, the eyewitness of the account.
- b) Ismā'īl b. al-Ḥasan, the oral transmitter from 'Āmir.
- c) Al-Madā'inī, the early author/collector.
- d) An unnamed student or numerous students of al-Madā'inī, who transmitted the latter's works or parts of them from his lectures, some of them incorporating the transmitted material into their own works. We usually do not get to know, from the *isnād*, his/their names, because second-hand quotations were allowed and only the main authority was mentioned in the *isnād* (this being, e.g. the eyewitness or the *akhbārī* or both: there is no consistency

63 Landau-Tasserion 2004: 49.

64 Donner 1998: 264.

65 Leder 1988: 67.

in this).<sup>66</sup> Al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī could have, of course, been citing directly from al-Madā'inī's works, but in either case they were probably later recensions of the originals. But, as mentioned, these recensions were known as al-Madā'inī's own books.<sup>67</sup>

- e) Al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī. As said, they too reworked the material.

### THE REVOLT OF 'ABDALLĀH B. 'ALĪ, THE UNCLE OF ABŪ L-'ABBĀS AND ABŪ JA'FAR

The revolt of 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī took place at the death of Abū l-'Abbās in Dhū l-Ḥijja 136/June 754.<sup>68</sup> Abū Ja'far, a man with no great history in the service of the 'Abbāsīd propaganda or revolution,<sup>69</sup> came to the throne at the instigation of 'Īsā b. Mūsā. This was sure to irritate 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī, a veteran revolutionist and the governor of Syria from 132/750 till 136/754.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, it is not certain whether Abū l-'Abbās had nominated Abū Ja'far as his successor or not.<sup>71</sup> Hence, on receiving news of the death of Abū l-'Abbās, 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī made his bid for the caliphate.

On the other hand, the revolt can be interpreted in the framework of the Syrians who were unwilling to submit to the rule of the 'Abbāsīds, whose main support was the Khurāsānī army.<sup>72</sup> The Syrians now gained a surprising ally and

66 Landau-Tasserion 2004: 54. Athamina (2008: 153) seems to imply that al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī, more often than not, explicitly stated when they shortened the *isnād* by employing such phrases as *'an shuyūkbih, fī riwāyatih*, etc. As I have argued, this is not the case. The use of *isnād* is, indeed, arbitrary; this can be ascertained from the different versions of the *akhbār* circulating with divergent *asānīd*. See also Leder 1988: 78–80; Robinson 2008: 310–311, 311, n. 59–61, 313–314.

67 Cf. Rotter 1974: 107. See, for comparison, Osman 2001 on Ibn Sa'd's material in al-Ṭabarī and its transmission. Although Rotter (1974: 130), by and large, is of the opinion that al-Madā'inī composed many of his works as books with fixed forms, he is willing to concede, when dealing with al-Madā'inī's *Kitāb al-Dawla*, that it is probable "that Madā'inī himself never wrote a history of the Abbasids in the way Yāqūt meant it [cf. *Irsḥād V*: 315], but rather such a work was compiled by Ḥārith [Ibn Abī Usāma] or as-Sukkarī from the Madā'inī material". I, however, see the case of the *Kitāb al-Dawla* as more a rule than an exception.

68 For the revolt, see Omar 1969: 183–192; Tuḡan 1969; Lassner 1980: 19–38; Kennedy 1981: 58–61; Bonner 1996: 53–55.

69 For later endeavors of the official historiography to try to embellish his early career, see Lassner 1980: 20–31.

70 Lassner deems 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī "the most logical choice as a successor to Abū l-'Abbās" (1980: 33).

71 Nöldeke 1892: 116. Cf. Lassner 1980: 22–23.

72 Kennedy 1981: 58.

leader in a former foe, 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī, who had routed them at the battle of Zāb four years earlier.

After a win at Ḥarrān, 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī's fortunes started to turn. Ruptures between his Syrian and Khurāsānī troops became to appear. It was also disastrous for his cause that 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī was only able to get the support of one of his brothers (the *'umūma*). Abū Muslim was sent to fight him, and after skirmishes and fighting of four months it became clear that 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī could not win the day. His army was decisively defeated at Nišībīn in Jumadā II 137/November 754 and he fled to al-Baṣra, taking refuge with his brother Sulaymān, the governor of the city. The Caliph al-Manṣūr still considered him dangerous, and succeeded in luring him to al-Ḥīra, whereupon al-Manṣūr deceitfully imprisoned him. It is possible, however, that 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī died accidentally (in the year 147/764–765) and was not killed by Caliph's orders, as is claimed in some of the historical traditions.<sup>73</sup>

#### The 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī *khbar* translated

Al-Ṭabarī, III: 92–93. I follow the translation of McAuliffe, with slight changes (XXVIII, 8–11).

'Alī b. Muḥammad – al-Walīd<sup>74</sup> – his father:<sup>75</sup> ... 'Īsā b. Mūsā had sent Abū Ghassān, whose name was Yazīd b. Ziyād and who was the chamberlain of Abū l-'Abbās, to 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī to receive the oath of allegiance to Abū Ja'far. That was done by order of Abū l-'Abbās, who before he died had commanded the people to give an oath of allegiance to Abū Ja'far after him.

Al-Balādhurī (ed. Beirut), III: 105–106.

Al-Madā'inī: Abū l-'Abbās had written to 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī, ordering him to conduct the summer raid.

When the news of [Abū l-'Abbās's] death reached him, ['Abdallāh b. 'Alī] was near the mountain pass of al-Ḥadath, about to enter the land of the Byzantines.

<sup>73</sup> See Lassner 1980: 39–57 for an extensive analysis of this episode.

<sup>74</sup> al-Walīd b. Hishām b. Qaḥḍham al-Qaḥḍhamī, a source for the Umayyad and early 'Abbāsīd periods cited often through 'Umar b. Shabba. He was a Baṣrī collector of historical traditions. See Pellat's index for his edition of al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj al-Dhahab*, VII: 757 for references.

<sup>75</sup> Nothing much seems to be known of the father of al-Walīd. Note Schacht's (1953: 294) scepticism on the reliability of these "family *isnāds*".

Abū Ghassān reached ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī at the entrance of the mountain passes when [the latter] was heading against the Byzantines. At the time when Abū Ghassān came to him with news of Abū l-‘Abbās’s death, he was encamped at a place called Dulūk. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī ordered a herald to announce a general gathering for prayer. The army commanders and troops gathered around him, and [‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī] read to them the death announcement for Abū l-‘Abbās, but called upon the people to himself [i.e. his own claim to the caliphate]. He told them that, at the time when Abū l-‘Abbās wanted to send troops against Marwān b. Muḥammad, he had summoned his paternal brothers and urged them to go against Marwān b. Muḥammad. He had said, “Whoever of you complies and goes against him will be my heir apparent.”<sup>76</sup> [‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī said:] “No one but me complied with him. It was thus that I left [Abū l-‘Abbās] and killed those whom I killed.”

[‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī] summoned ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Ribī al-Ṭā’ī, Khufāf b. Maṣṣūr al-Māzinī, Nuṣayr b. al-Muḥtafiz al-Muznī, and Ḥabbāsh b. Ḥabīb al-Ṭā’ī – who was the *ṣāhib* (owner/chief) of *Jawbat Ḥabbāsh*<sup>77</sup> in Baghdad, in the back of the quarter (*rabaḍ*) of Ḥumayd b. Qaḥṭaba – and said: “Abū l-‘Abbās sent me against Marwān on the understanding that I will succeed in power (*al-amr*) after him.” They stood up and saluted him as Caliph.

[‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī] resolved to claim the caliphate. He preached to the people<sup>78</sup> between Dulūk and Ra‘bān.

Abū Ghassān and al-Haytham b. Ziyād had come to him. He asked them to testify [to the truth of his claim]. Abū Ghassān testified, but al-Haytham said, “I testify that Abū l-‘Abbās appointed Abū Ja‘far [as his successor],” so [‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī] killed him.  
[...]

<sup>76</sup> It is improbable that Abū l-‘Abbās would have said that; see al-Ṭabarī III: 38. Cf. Omar 1969: 184; Lassner 1980: 33.

<sup>77</sup> *Jawba* means an empty place or an intervening space between houses. The place is unidentified, but seems to have gotten the name from this Ḥabbāsh b. Ḥabīb al-Ṭā’ī. These kinds of glosses are a fine example of editorial work by al-Balādhurī or his direct source.

<sup>78</sup> Or addressed the army, *khaṭaba l-nās*.

Abū Ghānim al-Ṭā'ī<sup>79</sup> and Khufāf al-Marwarrūdhī<sup>80</sup> stood up with a number of commanders of the Khurāsānī army and testified to the truth of what he had said. Abū Ghānim, Khufāf, Abū Aṣḡagh, and all of the army commanders who were with him rendered the oath of allegiance to him. Among them were Ḥumayd b. Qaḥṭaba,<sup>81</sup> Khufāf al-Jurjānī, Ḥayyāsh b. Ḥabīb,<sup>82</sup> Mukhāriq b. Ghifār,<sup>83</sup> and Turārkhudā, as well as others from Khurāsān, Syria and al-Jazīra.

ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlī was encamped at Tall Muḥammad.<sup>84</sup> When he had finished receiving oaths of allegiance, he set out and made camp at Ḥarrān, where Muqātil al-ʿAkkī<sup>85</sup> was. Abū Jaʿfar had appointed [Muqātil al-ʿAkkī] as his deputy when he went out to meet Abū l-ʿAbbās. [ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlī] urged Muqātil to offer him an oath of allegiance as caliph. [Muqātil] refused to oblige [ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlī] and fortified himself against him. [The latter] took action against him, besieging Muqātil until he had forced him to surrender his stronghold, and he killed him.

[ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlī] went to Ḥarrān, whose governor was Muqātil b. Ḥakīm al-ʿAkkī in charge of four thousand men. He was the governor of al-Jazīra. [ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlī] besieged him and set up trebuchets;<sup>86</sup> then Muqātil asked for peace which [ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlī] granted him. [ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlī] entered Ḥarrān in Ṣafar in the year 137 [i.e. July–August, 754].

79 Abū Ghānim ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd b. Ribī al-Ṭā'ī. One of the seventy chief proselytes of the ʿAbbāsīd movement, he fought at Zāb and was among those who swore allegiance to Abū l-ʿAbbās when he was proclaimed caliph. See al-Ṭabarī II: 2001, III: 15, 28; Crone 1980: 174–175.

80 Khufāf b. Manṣūr al-Jurjānī al-Māzinī. He is portrayed as proposing an attack against the Caliph Abū Jaʿfar in al-Ṭabarī III: 127.

81 The son of Qaḥṭaba b. Shabīb.

82 Cf. the name in al-Balādhurī's version. See also al-Ṭabarī III: 38.

83 According to the textual apparatus, the reading of the name is uncertain.

84 Unidentified.

85 See Crone 1980: 185–186.

86 *Majāmiq*. For these siege weapons, see Chevedden 2000.

### The ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī *khobar* analysed

The two versions of the *khobar* seem to be so dissimilar that it is fair to ask if we might have here a case of two different *khobars*, originating from two different “books” of al-Madā’inī. If al-Balādhurī included the full *isnād*, we would be on safer ground. Borrowing the concepts used by Leder,<sup>87</sup> it is difficult to say whether this is a case of “real divergent traditions” or “mere variants”.

Assuming these two texts are traceable to the same original – and I deem it probable –, we have here a model example of a case where it is virtually impossible to reconstruct al-Madā’inī’s original form of the text. There are, I believe, sufficient similarities (e.g. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī’s justification of his claim to the caliphate as arising from the fact that he was the only one brave enough to fight Marwān, the recurring of the same names, and the general outline of the plot) to believe that we are not dealing with two different *khobars*.<sup>88</sup>

It is, however, noticeable how different the two versions are from each other. Take the fate of Muqātil al-‘Akkī, for instance. In al-Ṭabari’s account he is killed, seemingly at the time of surrender of Ḥarrān. As for al-Balādhurī, his version states that ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī granted Muqātil peace, but his killing is not recounted. A different *khobar* told by al-Ṭabari on the authority of al-Haytham gives yet another differing account:<sup>89</sup> when the Caliph sends Abū Muslim to fight ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī, the latter is still besieging Muqātil al-‘Akkī at Ḥarrān. Alarmed at this news, ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Alī promises Muqātil al-‘Akkī safe-conduct (*amān*), but after a while intrigues to kill Muqātil (with success).

Al-Ṭabari’s *khobar* is certainly easier to grasp, even if I have omitted some material from al-Balādhurī’s text to make it more straightforward. After the passage quoted, al-Balādhurī’s version harks back to the moment when Abū Muslim had asked the caliph permission to perform the *ḥajj*, which only makes the course of events harder to follow.

The divergences could be due to a number of reasons, but they are here much more palpable than in the Marwān *khobar*. I believe the same to be true with many longer *akhbār*: they are much more reworked than the shorter accounts. It is probable that the short *akhbār* have been transmitted somewhat verbatim. The long *akhbār* include, for example, omissions for brevity’s sake, as well as inter-

87 Leder 1988: 70–71.

88 Cf. Leder 1988: 71, 75–76.

89 al-Ṭabari III: 94. Al-Haytham b. ‘Adī al-Ṭā’ī, besides being a renowned *akhbārī* on his account, was also one of al-Madā’inī’s informants, which could mean that this *khobar* too is from some work of al-Madā’inī. If we wish to speculate, what we could have here, then, is three diverging accounts of the same event by al-Madā’inī, originating from different informants of his. This is, however, improbable.

polations. Also, because it is likely that sometimes the students of an *akbbārī* did not have the possibility of writing down extensive notes during the lectures, the longer *akbbār* underwent significant metamorphoses. The basic plot, so to speak, remained the same, but the course of events became distorted.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have shown that the historical traditions originating with an early *akbbārī*, *al-Madā'inī*, resurface in rather different forms in the later, third/ninth and fourth/tenth century chronicles. Often, the *akbbār* are reworked to such an extent that it is impossible to try to reconstruct *al-Madā'inī's* original form from them. This calls for a critical mind when trying to peel off the later strata in search of the earliest material. Any truly reliable reconstruction of a work of a given early *akbbārī* is only possible if we have at hand many independent versions of the transmitted *akbbār*, and even with such a corpus we would need to proceed meticulously. This being attainable only in rare cases, it is certain that the reconstructions include much spurious material. In a way, they are the creations of the modern scholar.<sup>90</sup> It should also be kept in mind that the early *akbbārīs* did not, in most cases, seem to have envisioned a work with a final form. If we are to reconstruct a “book”, say, by *al-Madā'inī*, the simultaneous existence of many versions of that particular work should be taken into consideration.

The early Arabic historiography (the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries) is, in my opinion, best to be understood as a dynamic, collective process where texts had multiple authors and redactors. Moreover, traditions circulated in oral as well as written forms – indeed, drawing a line between the two is often unfeasible.

All in all, I consider that a skeptic approach to the sources is needed: we should not take for granted that the information included in such works as *al-Ṭabarī* is positively traceable to the early sources. This is because it is doubtful whether the *akbbār* quoted (or, as in some instances seems to be the case, “quoted”) from early *akbbārīs* like *al-Madā'inī* and their informants have been transmitted in a shape even somewhat close to the original.

In the end we only have the written sources: for instance, *al-Balādhurī* and *al-Ṭabarī's* historical works. And between them and the early Islamic history are tens, even hundreds of years.

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<sup>90</sup> Landau-Tasserón 2004: 54.

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