Manuscript Carriers and Their Impact on the Transmission of Narratives from the 1st to the 3rd Century AH

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Abstract

The task of recording texts during the early stages of Arab-Islamic civilization constituted a major challenge. Although written texts at this stage were initially limited to the Holy Qur'an and the Prophetic Hadith, they soon expanded in scope and volume to include the sayings of the Companions and, shortly thereafter, those of the Successors. This expansion necessitated the use of writing materials known as manuscript media, which were primitive in their early forms—such as parchment, bones, and palm ribs—before gradually evolving alongside the territorial expansion of the Islamic world. Influenced by the outcomes of neighboring civilizations, these media ultimately culminated in the adoption of paper, which proved most suitable for the documentation of sciences by the third Hijri century.Parallel to this material development emerged a methodological process of equal importance, known as the methods of transmitting narrations. These methods aimed to enhance the reliability of scholarly transmission and consequently underwent significant diversification and development. This study seeks to reveal the relationship between the evolution of manuscript media and their impact on the development of methods of transmitting narrations within Arab-Islamic civilization during its first three centuries.The study concludes that the challenge of developing methods of narration transmission in Arab-Islamic civilization interacted positively with the advancement of manuscript media. Together with the system of isnād (chain of transmission) and the sciences of al-jarḥ wa al-taʿdil (narrator criticism and validation), this interaction achieved an exceptionally high level of reliability and trustworthiness. Such rigor ensured the preservation of the Qur'anic text and the noble Prophetic Hadith—the two foundational pillars of Islamic civilization—and subsequently safeguarded the transmission of scholarly opinions and narrations across various scientific disciplines.

Keywords: *Documentation, Manuscript Media, Narration, Methods of Transmission, Reliability.*

Introduction

Faced with the challenge posed by the growing number of texts that required documentation beyond the administrative needs of the emerging state—such as official record-keeping and correspondence—scribes and scholars sought flat materials suitable for writing. These materials were initially primitive in nature, including parchment, bones, palm ribs, and other resources provided by their environment. Over time, however, they evolved to encompass more appropriate media capable of accommodating lengthy texts and better suited to educational processes in terms of cost, form, weight, and methods of preservation and circulation.

On the other hand, ensuring scholarly integrity and the reliability of texts and their transmitters constituted an additional challenge, particularly in light of the political, social, and cultural transformations experienced by the Islamic world following the Great Fitna. These developments resulted in divisions within the unity of the Muslim community and the emergence of factionalism and diverse intellectual currents. Consequently, many of the narrations circulated and the texts exchanged among scholars became susceptible to fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism, among other distortions.

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In response, scholars developed rigorous methodologies and mechanisms through which narrations could be examined, verified, and classified. These methodologies later came to be known as the methods of transmitting narrations (ṭuruq taḥammul al-riwāyah). This study addresses a central research problem concerning how the development of manuscript media interacted with the growing need to regulate the transmission of narrations and ensure scholarly trustworthiness, as well as the extent to which this interaction influenced the methodologies of narration transmission within Islamic heritage throughout the first three Hijri centuries.

Accordingly, this research aims to identify the manuscript media employed during the first three centuries of Islam, clarify their types and material characteristics through a survey of historical accounts, and trace the historical evolution they underwent. It also seeks to highlight the civilizational, political, and scholarly factors that contributed to this development, and to examine the impact of these media on the methods of transmitting narrations, as well as the degree to which such methods were linked to the physical nature of the material medium carrying the text.

Methodologically, the study adopts a descriptive and codicological approach to examine manuscript media and define their characteristics from their earliest beginnings in the formative period of Islam, as well as the stages influenced by contact with civilizations neighboring the Arabian Peninsula. This is undertaken in light of the expanding need for documentation during an era marked by intellectual vitality and the diversification of knowledge and sciences. The study further employs analytical and synthetic approaches to establish the relationship between the evolution of manuscript media and the necessity of developing systematic methodologies for the accurate transmission and preservation of narrations.

1. Manuscript Media in the Prophetic and Rashidun Periods

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) encouraged the recording of the Holy Qur'an as well as the learning of reading and writing in general. This is evidenced by his decision to release the captives of Badr in exchange for teaching Muslims literacy (Kafouri, 2002, p. 216). He also appointed scribes for himself. Al-Khuzaʿī stated: "ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān and ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib—may Allah be pleased with them—used to write the revelation, and when they were absent, Ubayy ibn Kaʿb and Zayd ibn Thābit would write it" (al-Khuzaʿī, d. 789 AH, p. 171). Al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn ʿAsākir enumerated the scribes of revelation and counted them as twenty-three individuals (Ibn ʿAsākir, d. 571 AH, vol. 15, p. 234).

Naturally, scribes required materials on which to write. Numerous transmitted reports indicate the materials used by the Companions—may Allah be pleased with them—during the lifetime of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Through these reports and others, it is possible to identify the manuscript media that were in use during the Prophetic and Rashidun eras.

a. Shoulder Blades (al-Katif)

The katif refers to a broad bone located at the base of an animal's shoulder. The Companions used the shoulder blades of camels and sheep due to their abundance in the local environment. Al-Bukhārī narrated on the authority of al-Barāʾ that when the verse:

"Not equal are those believers who sit back—other than those with disability—and those who strive in the cause of Allah with their wealth and their lives"

(Qur'an 4:95),

was revealed, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Call Zayd for me and let him bring the tablet, the inkpot, and the shoulder blade—or the shoulder blade and the inkpot" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, vol. 6, p. 184).

Another narration states: "Bring me a shoulder blade so that I may write for you a document after which two men will not disagree" (Musnad Aḥmad, vol. 4, p. 415).

ʿĀʾishah (may Allah be pleased with her) reported: "When the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) became seriously ill, he said to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr: 'Bring me a shoulder blade or a tablet so that I may write a document for Abū Bakr after which there will be no disagreement'" (Ibn Ḥanbal, Faḍāʾil al-Ṣaḥābah, vol. 1, p. 205).

Bones were readily available materials that could be obtained without cost. They were suitable for writing either in their natural form or after minimal polishing, which explains their use by the scribes of revelation in recording the Qurʾan (Jawād, 1993, vol. 8, p. 260). Ibn al-Nadīm listed "camel shoulder blades" among the bones used for writing by the Arabs (Ibn al-Nadīm, d. 385 AH, p. 31).

Bones continued to be used as manuscript media even after the era of the Companions, despite the availability of better and more suitable materials. They often served as an alternative for those in hardship or poverty who could not afford more appropriate writing supplies. Al-Shāfiʿī, who lived in the second Hijri century, recounts his experience:

"When I completed memorizing the Qurʾan, I entered the mosque and would sit with scholars. I would hear a ḥadīth or a legal issue and memorize it. My mother had nothing with which to buy paper for me, so whenever I saw a bone I would take it and write on it. When it was filled, I would throw it into a jar we had" (Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, d. 463 AH, vol. 1, p. 431).

b. Palm Stalks and Karanīf

Zayd ibn Thābit reported: "The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) passed away while the Qurʾan had not yet been compiled in a single collection; rather, it was written on palm stalks, karānīf, palm branches, and fronds" (Ibn Ḥanbal, Faḍāʾil al-Ṣaḥābah, vol. 1, p. 390).

ʿUsub (sing. ʿasīb) refers to palm fronds from which the leaves have been removed once dried (Ibn Manẓūr, d. 711 AH, vol. 1, p. 599). Karanīf (sing. kirnāfah) are the thick, broad bases of palm fronds which, once dried, resemble shoulder blades in hardness (Ibn Manẓūr, vol. 9, p. 297).

Palm stalks, bases, and fronds were among the most common writing materials due to their abundance and ease of access in the desert environment (al-Ḥallūjī, 1989, p. 21).

c. Likhāf (Stone Tablets)

Al-Bukhārī narrated that when Abū Bakr assigned Zayd ibn Thābit the task of compiling the Qurʾan, he began collecting it from "palm stalks, likhāf, and the memories of men" (al-Bukhārī, vol. 6, p. 183).

Likhāf are thin, broad, white stones suitable for writing (Ibn Manẓūr, vol. 9, p. 297). Ibn al-Nadīm also mentioned them in his Fihrist (pp. 31–32).

Despite the fact that parchment was more durable and long-lasting, it was relatively scarce, more expensive, and more susceptible to erasure, alteration, and textual manipulation of the written content (al-Ḥallūjī, The Arabic Manuscript: Its Origin and Development until the End of the Fourth Hijri Century, 1967, vol. 1, p. 302). This circumstance had a profound impact on scholars of narration, ḥadīth, and historical reports, prompting them to develop unprecedented methodological systems within human civilization. These innovations were embodied in the science of isnād (chain of transmission) and the methods of transmitting narrations, which will be discussed later in this study.

– Adīm (Tanned Leather)

Adīm refers to red or tanned leather (al-Ḥallūjī, The Arabic Manuscript, 1989, p. 22). It was widely used during the lifetime of the Prophet (peace be upon him), as the Qurʾan "was among what was written on adīm." It is narrated on the authority of Umm Salamah, the wife of the Prophet (peace be upon him), that:

"The Messenger of Allah—may God's prayers and peace be upon him—called for a piece of leather while ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib was with him, and the Messenger continued dictating while ʿAlī wrote until the front, back, and edges of the leather were completely filled" (al-Rāmahurmuzī, d. 360 AH, p. 601).

Likewise, the Prophet's letters to the people of Dūmat al-Jandal, to Mālik al-Judhamī, to Zuhayr ibn Uqaysh al-ʿAklī, and the land grants he issued to al-ʿAbbās ibn Salamah were all written on leather—some red and others Khawlānī (al-ʿUmarī, 2009, p. 302).

– *Qaḍīm*

Qaḍīm refers to white leather used for writing, while qaḍīmah denotes a white sheet. It is reported that:

"The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) passed away while the Qur'an was written on palm stalks and qaḍīm" (Ibn Manẓūr, d. 711 AH, vol. 12, p. 488).

Al-Jāḥiẓ drew a detailed comparison between parchment and paper, enumerating the advantages and disadvantages of leather as a manuscript medium in his epistle al-Jidd wa al-Hazl addressed to Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Malik al-Zayyāt. He stated:

"Why did you adorn copies on leather, and why did you urge me to use skins, when you know that leather is bulky in size, heavy in weight? If water touches it, it is ruined; and if the day is humid, it slackens. Were it not for anything else except that it causes its owners to dislike rainfall and detest moisture, that alone would suffice as a deterrent. You know that during such days the copyist does not write a single line nor cut a single skin. If it becomes damp—let alone soaked—it stretches and spreads, and when it dries it never returns to its former state except with severe contraction and unsightly stiffness. It has the foulest odor, is more expensive, and is more susceptible to fraud: Kūfan leather is passed off as Wāsiṭī, and Wāsiṭī as Baṣrī. It is artificially aged to remove its odor and hair. It contains more knots and deformities, yellows more rapidly, and the fading of ink upon it is far more pronounced. Were a scholar to carry enough of it for his journey, the load of a camel would not suffice; whereas the same amount of cotton paper would suffice to be carried along with his provisions." (al-Jāḥiẓ, d. 255 AH, pp. 253–255)

Al-Jāḥiẓ then pointed to a crucial issue that significantly contributed to the development of precautionary methodologies in textual transmission—namely, the ease with which parchment could be altered through scraping. He stated:

"You advised me to rely upon it because it tolerates scraping and alteration, and because it endures frequent handling and circulation. Its worn sheets retain value, and erased parchment may substitute for new. Paper notebooks, however, have no market value even if they contain rare traditions, elegant insights, and precious knowledge. Were their equivalent in number to be offered in leather—despite containing trivial poetry and weak reports—they would be more expensive and more eagerly sought." (al-Jāḥiẓ, d. 255 AH, pp. 253–255)

He further elaborated on additional disadvantages of parchment while highlighting the advantages of paper (kāghid), stating:

"Leather is relied upon for accounting registers, contracts, treaties, legal documents, and property deeds. From it are made inscription templates and map outlines. It is also suitable for covering jars and sealing vessels. You claimed that termites damage paper more quickly, yet denied that mice damage leather more readily—rather asserting that they destroy paper faster and more thoroughly. Thus, you were the cause of harm in preferring leather over paper, and the cause of calamity in replacing light notebooks carried in travel with heavy codices that burden the hands, crush the chest, curve the back, and weaken eyesight. It would have been more appropriate for people to reserve the term muṣḥaf exclusively for the compiled Qur'an, and not apply it to every bound volume that gathers branches of learning between two covers." (al-Jāḥiẓ, d. 255 AH, pp. 253–255)

e. Mahāriq

Mahāriq are white sheets made of cloth; the singular form is mihrāq. The term is Persian in origin and was Arabized. Ibn Manẓūr defines it as "a white silk fabric coated with starch and polished, upon which writing is performed" (Ibn Manẓūr, d. 711 AH, vol. 10, p. 368).

Al-Aṣmaʿī states:

"Its origin was pieces of silk cloth that were polished and written upon by non-Arabs. They were called mihrakad, which the Arabs Arabized into mihrāq."

This type of writing material appears to have been rare and difficult to obtain in the Arabian Peninsula, as it was imported through commercial caravans from other regions. Consequently, it was reserved only for matters of great importance (al-Ḥallūjī, 1989, p. 22). Al-Jāḥiẓ remarks:

"Books are not called mahāriq unless they are records of debts, treaties, covenants, or guarantees" (al-Jāḥiẓ, al-Ḥayawān, vol. 1, p. 50).

f. Writing Boards (al-Sabūrah)

The Arabs also used writing boards known as sabūrah, referring to planks made of teak or other wood upon which writing was inscribed. When the text was no longer needed, it could be erased and reused. The term is Arabized, and some ḥadīth scholars pronounced it sutūrah. In the same sense, the term safūrah was also used, likewise Arabized (Jawād, 1993, vol. 8, p. 269).

g. Papyrus (al-Qirṭās / al-Ṭūmār)

Papyrus refers to a type of writing material manufactured from the pith of the papyrus plant, which was widely cultivated in the Nile Delta of Egypt. It was known in the Arabian Peninsula prior to Islam and was distinguished by its relatively large writing surfaces; however, it was more expensive and less durable than parchment (al-ʿUmarī, 2009, p. 301). The term qirṭās is mentioned in the Qur'an in the verse:

"Even if We had sent down to you a Book on parchment and they touched it with their hands, those who disbelieved would have said: 'This is nothing but manifest magic'"

(Qur'an 6:7).

When Abū Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) undertook the compilation of the Qur'an, portions of it were written on qarāṭīs (al-Suyūṭī, d. 911 AH, vol. 1, p. 207). Several Qur'anic copies written on papyrus have survived and are currently preserved in the Egyptian National Library (al-ʿUmarī, 2009, p. 301). Likewise, Khālid ibn al-Walīd (may Allah be pleased with him) drafted the peace treaty with the people of Damascus on papyrus sheets.

The use of papyrus became widespread in Arab lands following the Muslim conquest of Egypt under ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ (may Allah be pleased with him) in 22 AH. The administrative needs of the expanding Islamic state for papyrus and other writing materials increased significantly, to the extent that a special storage house for papyrus was allocated adjacent to the residence of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān (may Allah be pleased with him) in Madinah (al-Balādhurī, d. 279 AH, vol. 1, p. 22).

Papyrus production effectively ceased in the fifth Hijri century (eleventh century CE). The relatively high cost of papyrus is evidenced by the repeated admonitions of the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, who urged administrative economy and financial restraint (al-Balādhurī, vol. 8, p. 191).

A detailed description of papyrus manufacture has been preserved in a seventh-century Hijri Islamic source, al-Jāmiʿ li-Mufradāt al-Adwiyah wa al-Aghdhiyah by Ibn al-Bayṭār (d. 646 AH), p. 119.

Although a number of papyrus documents have survived through the centuries, papyrus remains a fragile and brittle writing medium. For this reason, special precautions were taken to preserve it, such as placing it in ceramic or glass vessels or enclosing it within parchment covers (Déroche, 2005, p. 75). Arabic sources indicate that caliphs favored papyrus because erasing or altering its text without damaging the surface was nearly impossible. Nevertheless, the washing of papyrus for reuse was known, and reused papyrus palimpsests have reached us (Déroche, 2005, p. 75).

Paper had been known in China for nearly five centuries prior to Islam. The Persian term for paper is kāghadh, rendered in Arabic as kāghid or kāghad, a word derived from the Sogdian language. The Sogdians—who maintained close contact with Chinese Central Asia—played a significant role in disseminating papermaking techniques (Déroche, 2005, pp. 100–101).

The Muslim victory over the Chinese governor of Kūshā in 133 AH on the banks of the Talas River in Central Asia (in present-day southern Kazakhstan) marks the true historical beginning of the large-scale expansion of papermaking and paper usage in the Islamic world. Chinese captives were reportedly employed in establishing papermaking workshops in Samarkand (Déroche, 2005, p. 102).

2. The Impact of Environment on the Diversity of Manuscript Media in Islamic Civilization

During the Prophetic and Rashidun periods, the Islamic state was still in its formative, semi-nomadic phase. Consequently, the need for writing materials was limited, and the manuscript media employed were largely derived from the immediate natural environment. This environment was predominantly harsh and desert-based, offering limited resources. The primary economic and subsistence activities were pastoralism and animal husbandry—particularly camels and sheep—whose skins provided parchment and leather for writing. Their bones, especially broad ones such as ribs and shoulder blades, were also used, in a manner suited to the short texts commonly recorded at the time, such as selected Qur'anic verses or individual Prophetic traditions.

In certain regions of the Arabian Peninsula where agriculture predominated—such as Madinah and al-Ṭāʾif, known for extensive palm cultivation—additional temporary writing materials were derived from palm trees, including fronds, stalks, and bases. These were employed in a limited and provisional manner.

Although Quraysh was renowned for trade and its merchants frequently interacted with the Levant—then under Byzantine rule, where Egyptian papyrus was widely traded—historical sources do not report the importation of papyrus among the goods brought from Syria. This absence can only be explained by the predominance of Bedouin life among the early Arabs of Islam: intellectual production had not yet flourished in its diverse forms, bureaucratic registers had not been fully established, and epistolary practices were still limited. Consequently, there was little need for costly papyrus, particularly given the expense of its manufacture and transport from its place of origin in Egypt.

By contrast, Egypt—having become an Islamic province following its conquest in 22 AH—presented an environment markedly different from that of the Arabian desert. Egypt is traversed longitudinally by the Nile River, and its principal economic activity was agriculture. Along the Nile's banks flourished abundant vegetation, most notably the papyrus plant, which supplied successive Nile civilizations—including the Pharaonic, Ptolemaic Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Coptic—with their primary writing medium: papyrus paper.

At times, early Muslims were compelled to use alternative writing surfaces on a temporary basis when access to established materials was impossible. Necessity drove them to record information on their garments, on their palms, and even on their sandals. It is reported that Saʿīd ibn Jubayr stated:

"Ibn ʿAbbās would dictate to me until I filled the page, and I would then write on my sandals until they were filled" (al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, d. 463 AH, pp. 130–131).

It is also reported that al-Zuhrī "would sometimes write ḥadīth on the back of his sandal for fear that it might escape him" (al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, p. 130).

They would also write on camel litters or any surface at hand, such as saddles, due to the scarcity of writing materials and the harshness of their environment, as well as their urgent need to record what they heard or to convey messages or confidential information to their people (Jawād, 1993, vol. 8, p. 272). Saʿīd ibn Jubayr further stated:

"I used to hear ḥadīth from Ibn ʿUmar and Ibn ʿAbbās at night, and I would write it on the middle beam of my saddle until morning, then copy it properly"

(al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, p. 130). Numerous similar examples are found throughout biographical, prosopographical, and literary sources.

3. Manuscript Writing Materials during the Umayyad and Abbasid Periods

Ibn Khaldūn analyzes the development of scientific activity and the accompanying evolution in documentation and writing, stating:

"In earlier times, great care was devoted to scientific registers and records in terms of copying, binding, and verifying them through narration and precision. The reason for this was the expansion of the state and the consequences of civilization." (Al-Muqaddimah, p. 532)

He further elaborates, tracing in detail the development of the codification movement and its writing materials side by side, saying:

"All of this was among the consequences of urbanization and the expansion of the state and the prosperity of its markets. Scientific writings and registers increased, and people became eager to transmit them across regions and generations. They were copied and bound, and the profession of copyists emerged—those concerned with transcription, correction, binding, and all matters related to books and registers. This craft became concentrated in major urban centers.

Initially, registers were used for copying knowledge, official correspondence, land grants, and legal documents written on parchment prepared from leather, due to the abundance of comfort and the limited number of writings at the beginning of Islam, as well as the scarcity of official letters and contracts. Thus, writing was confined to parchment as an act of honoring written materials and striving for accuracy and perfection.

Then the tide of authorship and codification rose, official correspondence and legal documents multiplied, and parchment proved insufficient. Consequently, al-Faḍl ibn Yaḥyā proposed the manufacture of paper, which was produced and used for official letters and state documents. People thereafter adopted it for their official and scholarly writings, and excellence in its manufacture reached remarkable levels." (Al-Muqaddimah, p. 532)

It can therefore be said that by the time of ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (may God be pleased with him), writing had already become an essential component of state administration. Provinces were conquered, treaties and covenants were concluded between Muslims and non-Muslims who entered under their authority without warfare, correspondence between the caliph and governors increased during both peace and war, administrative registers were compiled, and systems and records were established to document names and stipends allocated to Muslims (al-Ḥalūjī, The Arabic Manuscript, 1989, p. 24).

Naturally, the materials used during the Prophetic and Rightly Guided Caliphate periods collectively proved insufficient to meet the needs of the newly expanded state. For this reason, the Islamic conquest of Egypt in 22 AH marked a turning point in the history of Arabic writing. Arabs were introduced to a new and suitable writing material: papyrus.

This material imposed itself strongly during the Umayyad period and carried Arabic writing into a new stage of development. These papyrus sheets were considered "the best material for writing," as reported by al-Suyūṭī (Ḥusn al-Muḥāḍarah fī Tārīkh Miṣr wa al-Qāhirah, vol. 2, pp. 327–328). More importantly, papyrus was easily obtainable due to the flourishing of its trade within the Umayyad territories after being imported from its original homeland, Egypt.

As a result, Arabic writing rapidly expanded and spread widely, and "most Umayyad correspondence was written on papyrus," as stated by Jurjī Zaydān (Zaydān, n.d., vol. 1, p. 259). Papyrus remained the foremost writing material—and indeed the principal manuscript carrier—throughout the Umayyad period and the early Abbasid era, as it was accessible to the general population (al-Ḥalūjī, 1989, p. 24).

Al-Jahshiyārī reports that during the reign of Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr (136–158 AH), a ṭūmār (papyrus roll) was sold for one dirham (al-Jahshiyārī, p. 138). Its abundance and wide circulation were such that in the Karkh district of Baghdad there existed an alley known as "Darb al-Qarāṭīs" (Papyrus Street), mentioned by al-Ṭabarī in his account of the events of the year 200 AH (al-Ṭabarī, vol. 8, p. 544).

Al-Jahshiyārī also recounts an anecdote indicating that papyrus filled the Abbasid treasuries during the reign of al-Manṣūr. Observing this, the caliph initially decided to sell it, but later reconsidered out of fear that supplies might be disrupted due to unrest in Egypt. He said:

"I reflected on our books, which are written on papyrus, and realized that an incident in Egypt could interrupt its supply, forcing us to write on materials unfamiliar to our officials. Therefore, leave the papyrus as it is, as a precaution." (Al-Wuzarāʾ wa al-Kuttāb, p. 138)

Alongside papyrus, some other writing materials continued to be used, though only in cases of necessity. We read, for example, that Ibn Jurayj (d. 150 AH) said:

"I came to Nāfiʿ, and he threw down his bundle and dictated to me upon my wooden tablets." (al-Rāmahurmuzī, p. 602)

It has been previously noted that al-Shāfiʿī (105–204 AH), in his youth, used bones as writing materials due to poverty. In the Islamic West, al-Maqdisī records in 375 AH that the Maghribīs had "all their Qurʾāns and notebooks written on parchment" (al-Maqdisī, p. 239). Likewise, al-Qalqashandī (Ṣubḥ al-Aʿshā, vol. 2, p. 477) notes that the people of the Islamic Maghrib continued to write noble Qurʾāns on parchment.

This indicates the continuity of parchment usage in the western Islamic world (the Maghrib and al-Andalus) long after it had disappeared in the eastern regions, especially considering that al-Qalqashandī died in 811 AH. Notably, this practice extended beyond Qurʾāns to other texts as well. Surviving parchment manuscripts include:

- Fragments of a Murābiṭūn-era copy of al-Muwaṭṭaʾ (the recension of Yaḥyā al-Laythī), preserved in the Qarawiyyīn Library and elsewhere.

In addition, parchment continued to be used in the Maghrib for Qurʾānic licenses (ijāzāt) and important legal documents until nearly the beginning of the 13th AH century (al-Manūnī, 1994, pp. 20–21).

During the Abbasid period, paper emerged as a new and formidable rival to papyrus. Prior to that, Arabs had known and imported paper and occasionally used it for writing, but it did not spread widely until it was manufactured locally during the reign of Hārūn al-Rashīd (170–193 AH).

The introduction of paper into the Islamic world followed the victory of Muslim armies led by Ziyād ibn Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥārithī, governor of Samarqand, over the Ikhshīd of Farghānah, who was supported by the king of China, in 133 AH. The Muslims returned to Samarqand with twenty thousand captives, among them Chinese artisans skilled in papermaking (al-Ḥalūjī, 1989, p. 27).

On the efforts of these captives, papermaking flourished in Samarqand and soon spread to the Arab world. Al-Faḍl ibn Yaḥyā al-Barmakī established a paper factory in Baghdad (Ibn Khaldūn, p. 532), and his brother Jaʿfar ordered the replacement of parchment with paper in government bureaus.

Al-Qalqashandī reports that Hārūn al-Rashīd:

"Ordered that people write only on paper, because skins and similar materials allow erasure and rewriting and thus facilitate forgery, whereas paper, once erased, becomes damaged, and if scraped, its defect becomes evident." (Ṣubḥ al-Aʿshā, vol. 2, p. 515)

It appears that papermaking remained confined to Iraq and Transoxiana until the early fourth century AH. Ibn al-Nadīm mentions only Khurāsānī paper and its types: Sulaymānī, Ṭalḥī, Nūḥī, Firʿawnī, Jaʿfarī, and Ṭāhirī (Ibn al-Nadīm, p. 31).

When al-Jāḥiẓ discussed luxury goods imported from various regions, he mentioned that paper was brought from China and Samarqand, without noting its importation from any other land (al-Tabṣirah bi al-Tijārah, pp. 26–28).

Al-Qalqashandī describes paper in terms of quality, stating:

"The finest paper is that which is brilliantly white, well-sized, smoothly polished, proportionate in its edges, and enduring over time. The highest grade of paper we have seen is the Baghdādī type: it is thick yet flexible, with delicate margins, well-balanced components, and generously sized sheets. It is generally used only for noble Qurʾānic manuscripts, though chancery scribes may occasionally employ it in correspondence with the Khāqāns.

Below it in rank is Syrian paper, which is of two types: one known as Ḥamawī, whose size is smaller than the Baghdādī; and beneath it in quality is the common Syrian type, whose size is smaller than the Ḥamawī. Below both in rank is Egyptian paper, which likewise exists in two formats: the Manṣūrī size and the customary size. The Manṣūrī is larger, and rarely are both sides polished. As for the customary type, some of it is polished on both sides and is known among papermakers as al-muṣlaḥ.

Inferior to all of these is the paper of the western lands and the Franks; it is extremely poor in quality, quick to deteriorate, and short-lived. For this reason, they usually write Qurʾāns on parchment, following the ancient custom, in pursuit of durability and longevity." (Ṣubḥ al-Aʿshā fī Ṣināʿat al-Inshāʾ, vol. 2, pp. 516–517)

This observation explains the prolonged survival of parchment usage in the Islamic Maghrib.

With the spread of papermaking throughout the Islamic world, the Arabic manuscript entered a new phase of its growth and development—a fertile stage characterized by abundant production, wide availability, and ease of circulation among readers (al-Ḥalūjī, The Arabic Manuscript, 1989, p. 30). The emergence of paper as the primary carrier of the Arabic manuscript may be likened to the appearance of printing in fifteenth-century Europe and the role it played in transferring the Western world from the Middle Ages to the Age of Enlightenment.

4. The Emergence of the Science of Transmission (ʿIlm al-Riwāyah) and the Discipline of Ḥadīth Terminology

The development that occurred in manuscript materials and the stages through which they passed was accompanied by a parallel evolution in the methods of transmitting and regulating both oral and written narration. From this process emerged an independent scholarly discipline known as ʿilm al-riwāyah (the science of transmission). Although its origins were initially confined to the ḥadīths and practices of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, its application soon extended to other fields of knowledge, such as biography—evident in the Maghāzī of Ibn Isḥāq and the Sīrah of Ibn Hishām—history, as in the works of Khalīfah ibn Khayyāṭ and al-Ṭabarī, and literature, such as al-Aghānī by Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī.

A careful researcher observes that the fundamental principles and foundations of the science of transmission and the conveyance of reports are rooted in the Qurʾān and the Prophetic Sunnah. In the Qurʾān, God Almighty says:

"O you who believe, if a wicked person comes to you with news, verify it, lest you harm people out of ignorance and then become regretful for what you have done."

(Qurʾān 49:6)

In the Sunnah, the Prophet ﷺ said:

"May God brighten the face of one who hears something from us and conveys it as he heard it; for perhaps the one to whom it is conveyed comprehends it better than the one who heard it." (al-Dārimī, vol. 1, p. 303)

This noble verse and authentic prophetic tradition establish the principle of verification in receiving reports, as well as the necessity of accuracy, attentiveness, comprehension, and precision in transmitting them to others. In obedience to the command of God and His Messenger, the Companions—may God be pleased with them—were meticulous in accepting and conveying reports, particularly when doubt arose regarding the reliability of a transmitter. From this practice emerged the concept of isnād and its decisive role in accepting or rejecting reports (al-Ṭaḥḥān, 1995, p. 11).

The isnād refers to the chain that leads to the text (matn). A ḥadīth is transmitted through a sequence of narrators beginning with the reporter and ending with the Prophet ﷺ. According to the majority of scholars, there is no distinction between the terms isnād and sanad (al-ʿUmarī, Studies in the History of the Noble Sunnah, p. 44).

In the introduction to Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110 AH) states:

"They did not used to ask about the isnād, but when the tribulation occurred they said: 'Name to us your men.' Thus, the narrations of the people of Sunnah were accepted, and the narrations of the people of innovation were rejected." (Muslim, vol. 1, p. 15)

Following the political and social upheavals that began during the caliphate of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān (may God be pleased with him), which led to deep fragmentation within Islamic society and the rise of competing political inclinations and partisan ideologies, fabrication in ḥadīth emerged. This compelled scholars to verify sources of transmission and to scrutinize the individuals involved in conveying reports (al-ʿUmarī, p. 44).

Since reports were accepted only after establishing the reliability of their chains of transmission, the sciences of al-jarḥ wa al-taʿdīl (impugning and accrediting narrators) developed, along with the study of connected and disconnected chains, hidden defects (ʿilal), and critical evaluation of transmitters. Scholars gradually expanded these investigations until numerous auxiliary sciences of ḥadīth emerged, addressing issues such

as accuracy, modes of reception and delivery, abrogation, rare expressions, and related matters. Initially, these disciplines were transmitted orally, but over time they were codified and recorded in writing (al-Ṭaḥḥān, 1995, pp. 11–12).

Among the most important topics in the science of transmission are the modes of receiving narration (ṭuruq taḥammul al-riwāyah), in which the evolution of manuscript carriers played a clearly observable role. Although developments in writing materials were not the direct cause of the emergence of these modes, they significantly contributed to their diversification.

The scholars of ḥadīth classified the modes of transmission into eight types:

1. Hearing Directly from the Shaykh (al-Samāʿ min Lafẓ al-Shaykh)

This occurs when the teacher recites and the student listens—whether the teacher reads from memory or from a book, and whether the student writes what he hears or merely listens without writing. This method is regarded by most scholars as the highest and most authoritative form of transmission.

There is no disagreement that the listener may use the expressions:

"ḥaddathanā" (he narrated to us),

"akhbarnā" (he informed us),

"anbanā" (he reported to us),"I heard so-and-so say,""so-and-so said to us," or "so-and-so mentioned to us." (ʿIyāḍ, p. 69; al-Ṭaḥḥān, 1995, p. 123)

2. Reading to the Shaykh (al-Qirāʾah ʿalā al-Shaykh)

In this method, the student reads while the teacher listens—whether the reader is the student himself or another person, whether the reading is from memory or from a written text, and whether the shaykh follows from memory or from his own copy or that of a reliable individual.

This form of transmission is unanimously considered valid. The majority of scholars of the Ḥijāz and Kūfah equated it with direct audition, including Mālik and al-Bukhārī. Some scholars even regarded it as superior to audition—a view attributed to Mālik ibn Anas (ʿIyāḍ, p. 70).

The most cautious formula in conveying it is:

"I read to so-and-so," or "It was read to so-and-so while I listened and he approved."

It is also permissible to say: "ḥaddathanā by reading to him," though the most common practice among many ḥadīth scholars is to use the expression "akhbarnā" alone (al-Ṭaḥḥān, 1995, p. 124).

3) Authorization (al-Ijāzah)

Authorization refers to granting permission to transmit narrations, either orally or in writing. Its typical form is that a shaykh says to one of his students:

"I authorize you to narrate Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī on my authority" (al-Ṭaḥḥān, 1995, p. 124).

Authorization has multiple forms, the detailed discussion of which is beyond the scope of this study. In general, transmission through this method is considered weak and should not be treated with undue leniency (ʿIyāḍ, d. 544 AH, p. 88; al-Ṭaḥḥān, 1995, p. 125).

This mode of transmission is conveyed using formulas such as: "So-and-so authorized me," "he narrated to us by authorization," "he informed us by authorization," or

"he reported to us by authorization" (al-Ṭaḥḥān, 1995, p. 125).

4) Handing Over (al-Munāwalah)

This method is of two types:

- Handing over accompanied by authorization: This is the highest form of authorization. It occurs when the shaykh hands his book to the student and says: "This is my narration from so-and-so; transmit it from me." The student may then retain the book either permanently or temporarily for copying.

- Handing over without authorization: In this case, the shaykh merely hands the book to the student and says: "This is my audition."

The ruling concerning these two forms is that the first is permissible for transmission and ranks below audition and reading to the shaykh. The second—unaccompanied by authorization—is not permissible according to the sound opinion.

This method is conveyed by expressions such as: "He handed it to me," or "He handed it to me and authorized me" (ʿIyāḍ, d. 544 AH, p. 79; al-Ṭaḥḥān, 1995, pp. 125–126).

5) Writing (al-Kitābah)

This method consists of the shaykh writing down what he has heard—either personally in his own handwriting or by dictation—for someone present or absent.

It is of two types:

- Writing accompanied by authorization: transmission by it is sound.

- Writing without authorization: the predominant view among ḥadīth scholars permits narration by it, though some stipulated that the recipient must recognize the handwriting of the writer, since handwriting may otherwise be confused.

It is transmitted using expressions such as: "So-and-so wrote to me," or "He narrated to me / informed me in writing" (ʿIyāḍ, pp. 83–84; al-Ṭaḥḥān, 1995, pp. 126–127).

6) Notification (al-Iʿlām)

This occurs when the shaykh merely informs the student that a certain ḥadīth belongs to his narration or that a particular book represents his audition, without granting permission to transmit it.

Many scholars of ḥadīth, jurisprudence, and legal theory permitted acting upon this form, while a number of traditionists rejected it.

Its formula is: "My shaykh informed me of such-and-such"(ʿIyāḍ, pp. 107–108; al-Ṭaḥḥān, 1995, p. 127).

7) Bequest (al-Waṣiyyah)

This refers to a shaykh bequeathing his books to a person at the time of death or prior to travel. Reports from the early generations indicate permission to transmit through this method (ʿIyāḍ, p. 115).

8) Discovery (al-Wijādah)

This occurs when a student finds narrations written in the handwriting of a shaykh whose script he recognizes, without having heard from him or received authorization.

Transmission through wijādah is considered disconnected (munqaṭiʿ). The narrator states: "I found in the handwriting of so-and-so," or "I read in the handwriting of so-and-so such-and-such" (ʿIyāḍ, pp. 116–117; al-Ṭaḥḥān, 1995, p. 128).

If we attempt to relate these modes of transmission to manuscript carriers, we find that the first, second, third, and fourth methods emerged by the end of the first Hijrī century (Sezgin, 1991, vol. 2, pp. 5–6). Josef Horovitz dates the emergence of the isnād system within Islamic intellectual life to the final third of the first Hijrī century (Sezgin, 1991, vol. 2, p. 6).

During this period, the most widespread writing materials throughout the Islamic world under Umayyad rule were papyrus as the primary carrier and parchment as a secondary one. Despite this, scholars exercised extreme caution in protecting the textual integrity of transmitted reports from distortion, corruption, or scribal error. Consequently, they combined memorization with writing.

Sufyān al-Thawrī stated: "Papyrus is a poor repository for knowledge"

(al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, p. 62).

This caution stemmed from the fact that parchment could be erased, scraped, altered, or modified. Writing alone was therefore insufficient as a guarantee of accuracy. Even papyrus, though resistant to erasure, was not immune to interpolation or addition to the text. For this reason, many early scholars destroyed their books at the time of death or instructed that they be destroyed, fearing that they might fall into the hands of unqualified individuals who would misunderstand their contents, add to them, or omit from them— thereby attributing false material to the original author (al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, p. 66).

Imām Mālik stated regarding those who transmitted solely from books without memorization: "Nothing should be taken from him, for I fear that something may be added to his books at night." A number of leading ḥadīth authorities held similar views and adopted strict standards in transmission (ʿIyāḍ, p. 136).

What was said about papyrus also applies to paper, as early mistrust toward it likewise prevailed. However, a significant transformation occurred regarding the practice of destroying books. Once the science of transmission reached its highest level of methodological maturity, such behavior became unjustified. Trust in paper increased, since the principles of isnād criticism and textual analysis developed by late second- and early third-century scholars made it virtually impossible for forgers to introduce additions or omissions without exposure.

In this regard, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal stated: "I see no meaning in burying books" (al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, p. 69).

After establishing the modes of transmission, ḥadīth scholars ranked them according to degrees of reliability and strength of performance. They regarded narration through handing over, bequest, writing, and discovery as weaker forms—primarily due to the possibility of alteration in manuscript carriers. All of this stemmed from their profound concern for preserving the integrity of Islamic law.

Conclusion

In conclusion, manuscript carriers evolved in accordance with the administrative and scholarly requirements of Islamic civilization. They played a decisive role in disseminating knowledge, expanding its circulation, and fostering intellectual prosperity, which reached its zenith by the end of the third Hijrī century.

Manuscript materials stood as tangible witnesses to the early Muslim engagement with documentation. What began as mere transmission gradually advanced into creativity and intellectual production by the close of the third century. The clearest evidence of Muslim originality lies in their invention of the science of transmission and its sophisticated modes of reception.

The diversification of transmission methods was, in essence, a direct response to the development of writing materials: the more resistant a carrier was to alteration, the greater the scholarly leniency toward methods of transmission—always in the interest of safeguarding the authenticity of the Islamic tradition.

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