The OpenITI corpus contains more than 11,000 works and now exceeds 2 billion words in size. Many of the corpus’s works are extraordinarily large, surpassing even the largest modern books. How did authors working in Arabic manage to be so prolific before the arrival of such technologies as printing and computers? The explosion in books was enabled by the adoption of paper as a writing support in the ninth and tenth centuries, but much more needs to be said about the practices that gave rise to it.

Digital methods are well suited to understanding the methods of authors undertaking large-scale projects. Authors who produced such massive texts worked in regular, patterned ways, and these patterns – at any scale – are something that computers can detect.

In a previous set of blog posts, we considered the writing practices of one prolific author, the polymath [Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī](https://kitab-project.org/tabari/Dispatches-from-al-Tabari-1-Al-Tabari-s/) (d. 310/923). We showed that he was an efficient writer who relied on extensive written notes he had compiled in his younger days on information he had obtained from his informants. These notes made their way into his universal history, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*; his Quran commentary, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān* (*Tafsīr*); and the *Tahdhīb al-athar*, an incomplete work on traditions arranged according to the last transmitter of the Hadiths and also according to the Prophet’s Companions. These three works represent 4.72 million words of text in the OpenITI corpus. Al-Ṭabarī acknowledged his reliance on the people who provided him with material by using citation chains (*isnād*s). We found that it was possible to detect patterns within thousands of these chains and, despite first appearances, to discern that his core informants were in fact a relatively small group of people.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now we turn our attention to another, even more challenging case, that of the largest pre-1500 work in the OpenITI corpus: *The History of Damascus* (*Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, hereafter *TMD*), written by [ʿAlī Ibn ʿAsākir](https://zenodo.org/record/8233103).[[2]](#footnote-2) Ibn ʿAsākir was born in 499/1105, six years after the Crusaders captured Jerusalem, and he died in 571/1176, two years after Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (d. 589/1193, a.k.a. Saladin) succeeded Nūr al-Dīn b. Zangī (r. 541–69/1141–74) as leader of Syria and Egypt.[[3]](#footnote-3) Ibn ʿAsākir began the *TMD* in 529/1134–5 but then stopped, and it was only under the patronage of Nūr al-Dīn, in 559/1164, that he finished it. The *TMD* is both a biographical dictionary and a large repository of Hadith. The first volume treats the history of the city, including its ancient roots and seventh-century conquest, and the second volume covers the topography of the city. The remainder of the book comprises biographies of the elites who lived in or passed through Damascus prior to Ibn ʿAsākir’s time, including several biblical figures (e.g. Abraham, David, Solomon, John the Baptist and Jesus).[[4]](#footnote-4) Suleiman Mourad believes it likely that Ibn ʿAsākir first came up with the idea of writing a history of Damascus when he studied the *Tārīkh Baghdād* of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī [al-Khatib][[5]](#footnote-5) (d. 463/1071), a work that bears some resemblance to the *TMD* (both works are called histories but presented in the form of biographical dictionaries) and on which Ibn ʿAsākir relied in writing his own work.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The *TMD* challenges our work on pattern recognition more than al-Ṭabarī’s books did. That is chiefly because of its size (more than 8 million words), the more varied vocabulary that Ibn ʿAsākir uses to cite his sources and the fact that he relied on many more prior writings than al-Ṭabarī did, some of which we can trace. There is simply more data of greater variety and potential for analysis.

On the other hand, Ibn ʿAsākir also says far more than al-Ṭabarī does about his working methods. We thus have here a better case of the author’s own testimony regarding how he went about his business. Medieval works are typically highly intertextual, and they are rarely created without at least some reliance on earlier works. But the *TMD* is exceptional in its citations. For example, 39% of the *TMD*’s word count consists of *isnād*s – that is, it contains more than 3.17 million words’ worth of *isnād*s.[[7]](#footnote-7) To put that quantity in context, the citationson their own, without the reports they support, take up more space than five copies of al-Bukhārī’s [al-Bukhari’s] entire Hadith collection, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, or forty copies of the Quran.[[8]](#footnote-8) And the *isnād*s, though crucial, are not the only way in which he tells us what he is doing.

In our study of Ibn ʿAsākir, we build on the methods we initiated in our work on al-Ṭabarī. We use *isnād*s to explore how Ibn ʿAsākir worked by his own account. We also search for other citation patterns. We have spent approximately eighteen months working on creating the new data set that we present here as a work in progress. The data set is oriented to the following questions, which will be familiar to readers of the al-Ṭabarī series:

1. The *TMD*’s *isnād*s name individuals who, in one way or another, transferred information to Ibn ʿAsākir. When we read the *isnād*s en masse, what can we learn about his reliance on the people he cites as his direct informants? From approximately how many people did Ibn ʿAsākir obtain information directly? How vast was his source base? What can we learn about his reliance on different people?
2. How does Ibn ʿAsākir cite his sources within *isnād*s? What vocabulary does he use and what might it mean? Did he acquire the information on his own, or as part of a group; through oral communication, in writing or via a mix of the two?
3. Previous historians have written about a ‘library’ used by Ibn ʿAsākir and listed books and book titles that it might have contained. When author names appear within *isnād*s, what do the names signify for Ibn ʿAsākir? What can *isnād*s reveal about his reliance on books? How does Ibn ʿAsākir cite books themselves?
4. Outside of *isnād*s, how does Ibn ʿAsākir cite books and other written materials?

In this and the following six posts, we introduce our data and address these questions in turn as we build up to an argument about Ibn ʿAsākir’s writerly practices and the discourse he adopts.

To anticipate, we argue that the *TMD* carries within its pages evidence of how Ibn ʿAsākir composed the work. The central method involved his collation of texts, long and short, acquired from individuals across a lifetime. He worked efficiently and used the technologies available to him in his day. He most likely had many notebooks containing quotations from earlier authorities. He also had books. But scholars oversimplify his source base when they read the *TMD* for evidence of Ibn ʿAsākir’s library, if by library they mean a collection of books sitting on shelves. That is because they overlook the discourse of the *TMD* itself.

This discourse centres on people, connections and memory, and it is the life and soul of the *TMD*. Ibn ʿAsākir strives to show his many connections and the numerous personal relationships, both his own and those of his predecessors, that produced the *TMD*. He creates an image of a community of scholars who carry on the tradition of the Prophet up to his own day. The *TMD* documents this community for posterity through repeated citation of the names of its members, their relationships with one another and their connections to Damascus. Moreover, the community extends beyond Damascus to include individuals in far-flung regions whom Ibn ʿAsākir knew personally and on whom he relied in composing the *TMD*. His documentation, which anticipates the reuse of the *TMD* by later scholars, creates a lasting memory of the community. As the final reporter in the *TMD*, Ibn ʿAsākir himself, in Damascus, sits at the centre of the network he has erected.

Ibn ʿAsākir’s lifetime, which fell in the ‘post-canonical’ period of Hadith transmission, coincided with the high-water mark for *isnād* citation, as shown by Figure 1.1. This time was characterised by what Paula Manstetten has described as ‘an increasing formalisation of *ḥadīth* transmission’. Manstetten argues that the enormous variety of *isnād*s Ibn ʿAsākir collected over his lifetime, including short *isnād*s, showcased his ‘cultural capital’ in a post-canonical context.[[9]](#footnote-9) Indeed, as we will discuss, Ibn ʿAsākir seems to have taken positive delight in regaling his audience with complex *isnād*s. For him, they often constituted content in themselves, reflecting the expert culture, networks and competitive environment in which he lived.

A diagram showing the number of points

Description automatically generatedFigure 1.1: *Isnād*s as a percentage of historical works, 0–1000 AH, based on an ‘*isnād* classifier’ created by Ryan Muther. Each of the dots represents a book within the OpenITI corpus, plotted using the programming language R. The x-axis marks the century in which the author died, and the y-axis shows the percentage of the work that consists of *isnād*s (its ‘*isnād* percentage’), calculated by dividing the number of word tokens in the entire text by the number of word tokens located within *isnād*s. The red line represents the median *isnād* fraction for the middle two quartiles of each century. The blue line represents a filtered subset of the same data (similarly calculated) for works specifically classified as belonging to the genre of history (‘Geschichte’) by Carl Brockelmann.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Ibn ʿAsākir’s obsession with Hadith transmission is demonstrated by the many works he wrote specifically on Hadith and *isnād*s, including scholastic works such as a book listing Hadiths backed by precisely seven *isnād*s.[[11]](#footnote-11) Another book, *Kitāb* *al-Arbaʿīn al-buldāniyya ʿan arbaʿīn min arbaʿīn li-arbaʿīn fī arbaʿīn*, features forty Hadiths, each transmitted by a different Companion of the Prophet, which he took from forty shaykhs from forty different towns on forty different topics.[[12]](#footnote-12) Meanwhile, Ibn ʿAsākir’s (still surviving) *Tartīb asmāʾ al-ṣaḥāba alladhīna akhraja ḥadīthahum Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal fī al-Musnad* arranges alphabetically and according to other principles the names of the Companions of the Prophet appearing in Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s [Ahmad b. Hanbal’s] *Musnad* (one section is devoted to Syrian Companions). For each Companion, Ibn ʿAsākir specifies the relevant location within the *Musnad*. As an index to the *Musnad*, the work would thus have been a useful resource for the composition of the *TMD* and Ibn ʿAsākir’s other books.[[13]](#footnote-13) Yāqūt (d. 626/1229) compiled a list of the titles of works attributed to Ibn ʿAsākir, and these give a sense of his interest in the scholastic side of *isnād* research.

When he worked, Ibn ʿAsākir would have found some of this material useful on its own, but others of his writings likely served as aids for finding information within the written works to which he had access. The *Tartīb asmāʾ al-ṣaḥāba*, for example, would have been useless without access to a copy of Aḥmad’s *Musnad*. You could use it to identify a Companion featured in the *Musnad*, but without the text of the latter all you would have is a name.

Ibn ʿAsākir also wrote two synthetic works expressly about his own teachers (the role that his son and other descendants played in producing these works has been the subject of some investigation). One of the two, pertaining to eighty-some women who taught him through audition, no longer survives. But the other – the *Muʿjam al-shuyūkh* (‘Alphabetically arranged catalogue of teachers’) – does, and we rely on it in what follows. The work belongs to a massive genre in Hadith scholarship.[[14]](#footnote-14) It lists Ibn ʿAsākir’s teachers (1,621 of them) alphabetically, provides information on each and quotes Hadiths transmitted by them. The version that survives and to which we have access is damaged, and it is missing entries from the letter *yāʾ*. It is therefore shorter than a longer version seen by al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), which evidently listed 1,636 transmitters.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Through his citations, Ibn ʿAsākir showcases his command over a geographically wide-ranging source base and the ability of this source base to speak to the history of Damascus. Modern scholars have used pieces of information in Ibn ʿAsākir’s books and medieval sources, including Yāqūt’s *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ* and al-Dhahabī’s *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, to reconstruct Ibn ʿAsākir’s journeys and his meetings with the people from whom he acquired material directly. They have established that he moved to Baghdad in 520/1126 to study at the Niẓāmiyya madrasa and remained there for five years (so approximately from the age of 21 to 26). From Baghdad, in the year 521/1127–8, Ibn ʿAsākir made the Hajj pilgrimage. Yāqūt mentions that Ibn ʿAsākir participated as a listener in lectures (*samiʿa*) in Mecca, Minā and Medina, and perhaps these encounters happened during the Hajj. In 529/1135, he undertook a second educational journey, which lasted four years and took him to the eastern Islamic world.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In the *TMD*, Ibn ʿAsākir mentions these locations, but the *Muʿjam al-shuyūkh* gives a more direct sense of the geography of his formation; it is as if Ibn ʿAsākir is presenting the fruits of his youthful journeys in this book. Of the cities in which Ibn ʿAsākir reports having obtained information, Baghdad is the most commonly mentioned. Besides Baghdad, Isfahan, Merv and Herat, he names many other, less-known places where, he says, he received material from his teachers. Many of these places are not mentioned in biographies of him. Damascus itself appears only rarely as a site of information transfer. Two notable exceptions are the entries for Abu Muhammad al-Akfani and Abu Muhammad al-Sulami, two direct informants whom he cites often in the *TMD* (and who are discussed in subsequent posts).[[17]](#footnote-17)

Garrett A. Davidson’s recent interpretation of the post-canonical period of Hadith scholarship in *Carrying On the Tradition* suggests the possible motivations of authors working in this period, and we believe that these do much to explain the discourse about people and connections that runs through Ibn ʿAsākir’s *TMD*. Davidson focuses on the function of transmission after the canonisation of the major Hadith collections in the ninth and tenth centuries CE. When the simple preservation of the reports attributed to the Prophet was no longer the chief concern, the focus of scholars shifted to preservation of the chains of transmission associated with the reports. Hadith transmission became geared towards cementing individuals’ personal connections to the long history going back to the Prophet. As Davidson puts it:

[T]he fundamental aim of post-canonical hadith transmission was to preserve the chain of transmission and the connection to the Prophet. Scholars conceived of this chain of transmission as a distinct trait of the Muslim community. God had distinguished the Muslim community from previous Abrahamic communities by preserving the connections that linked them to their Prophet. Every community to which God had sent prophets before the Muslim community had lost those links and gone astray as a result. It was only the Muslim community that God had ordained to preserve their connection to their Prophet. This was at the core of the complex of ideas that sustained and gave meaning to post-canonical hadith transmission.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Although Davidson has puzzlingly little to say about Ibn ʿAsākir himself, his arguments are useful for understanding the *TMD* and the way in which Ibn ʿAsākir elucidates his working methods through his numerous citations.

It is important to note that our approach to the *TMD* differs from that adopted by other specialists. We focus on how Ibn ʿAsākir describes his own work rather than on, for example, whether the Hadiths he relays are corroborated by more authoritative collections. Similarly, we are not interested in whether his claims about the early history of Damascus stack up against earlier sources or the material record. Nor are we concerned with the content and significance of the narratives he transmits or the editorial choices he has made in selecting reports. Our goal is more limited but as ambitious as any effort to date: discerning what Ibn ʿAsākir himself says he is doing, thousands of times, over more than 8 million words.

We use a variety of terms to refer to the content of Ibn ʿAsākir’s citations. When speaking about the texts attached to *isnād*s, we occasionally use the Arabic term *matn*, but more often – and because *isnād*s are not our sole focus – we refer to ‘information’ or ‘quotations’ to denote the material that Ibn ʿAsākir has obtained from an earlier source via a specific *isnād*. The term ‘information’ might seem like an odd choice to historians today, who may read it as synonymous with ‘fact’. That is not what we intend. Rather, we use the term as computer scientists do, to mean simply what has been transmitted.

Within today’s research landscape, we believe that our work on the compositional practices revealed by Ibn ʿAsākir’s citations and reuse of earlier texts complements work being undertaken on the material remains of books and other writings in this period. It uses similar, though not identical, forensics to understand writerly practices. A meta-argument that runs through KITAB’s work is that the digital can bring us closer to understanding the material.

Our final argument boils down to a call to take Ibn ʿAsākir’s documentation practices seriously. The story of the *TMD*’s composition reveals this aspect of his project in great detail. We can now see more clearly than we could previously what he was doing and how it mattered to him.

Going beyond search

Much current work on writerly practices that relies on digital methods leans heavily on searches. But searching texts such as the *TMD* can seem like a Boolean fishing expedition, in which a researcher tests hypotheses as true or false. Did authors describe cities using particular terms? Did later writers cite an earlier author often? Did an author cite a particular work? Such research looks for relevant terms or citations of a particular work in a database.

Full-text search can make this method of discovery seem relatively straightforward. But as Ted Underwood has pointed out, the problem of confirmation bias looms large: ‘[I]n a database containing millions of sentences, full-text search can turn up twenty examples of anything.’[[19]](#footnote-19) And even more worryingly, going hunting in this way ‘tends to filter out all the alternative theses you didn’t bring’. This problem is acute for any subject, Underwood notes, ‘but it’s particularly acute in historical research, since other periods don’t always organise their knowledge in ways we find intuitive. Our guesses about search terms may well project contemporary associations and occlude unfamiliar patterns of thought.’[[20]](#footnote-20)

Underwood’s caution is especially important for Arabic history writing. Today’s scholars have generally used search engines uncritically and without acknowledgement (much less explanation) of their search terms for purposes such as identifying Ibn ʿAsākir’s sources. New computational methods can provide an important corrective by raising awareness of patterns of thought that such searches miss – for example, by highlighting the greater preponderance of people rather than books in Ibn ʿAsākir’s citations, the many different ways in which Ibn ʿAsākir acknowledges his sources or the diverse kinds of writings he used – only some of which fit today’s image of a distinct book.

In what follows, we undertake a forensic investigation. We will work at two widely different levels – with satellite images and also with a microscope, as it were.[[21]](#footnote-21) This simultaneously distant and very close reading of data is an attempt to draw out what Ibn ʿAsākir does and says he is doing in ways that limit the influence of our presuppositions about citation, especially the presumption that he had access to a library holding complete works with titles, which he browsed and from which he took down quotations.

Readers will have to wait until Post 5 (‘Ibn ʿAsākir’s Citation of Author Names in *Isnād*s’) to hear about our searches for author names and until Post 6 (‘Searches for References to Written Materials outside of *Isnād*s’) for a search for titles in the *TMD*. First, we will focus on what Ibn ʿAsākir himself cared most about: direct informants who told him things and whom he cited in his *isnād*s. This discussion will involve many names of individuals who are little known today but who mattered as sources to Ibn ʿAsākir.

A bit about Ibn ʿAsākir and the *TMD*

Ibn ʿAsākir belonged to the elite of Damascus amidst what is often termed ‘the Sunni revival’ of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In this period, beginning with ʿImād al-Dīn Zangī (r. 521–41/1127–46), the father of Ibn ʿAsākir’s patron (Nūr al-Dīn b. Zangī), Sunni Muslim states launched attacks on Shi'i dynasties in Syria, Iraq and Egypt as well as a Counter-Crusade against Christian kingdoms in Edessa, Antioch, Tripoli and Jerusalem. Nūr al-Dīn himself subsequently played a major role in both the Sunni revival and the Counter-Crusade, fending off the second Crusade’s attack on Damascus in 543/1148 and, after major battles at Inab and Banyas, uniting Syria under his rule. Nūr al-Dīn – as well as the later Zengids, Ayyubids and Mamlūks – linked the threats posed by Fāṭimid Egypt and the Crusaders within a religious and political ideology centred on *jihād*. In addition to completing his long-term project, the *TMD*, Ibn ʿAsākir penned for Nūr al-Dīn a famous collection of forty Hadith on inciting *jihād*, as well as a work on the merits of Ashkelon, which was then in the hands of the Crusaders.[[22]](#footnote-22) Given this wider context, many scholars have assumed that Ibn ʿAsākir sought to show the holiness of the entire Syrian region through the *TMD* by collecting and presenting within it renowned representatives of Islamic learning focused on Syria.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Yāqūt, in his *Muʿjam al-ʿudabāʾ*, quotes Ibn ʿAsākir’s eldest son, al-Qāsim (d. 600/1203), describing his father as a famed leader in Hadith and as a highly recognised scholar (*aḥad aʾimmat al-ḥadīth al-mashhūrīn wa-l-ʿulamāʾ al-madhkūrīn*). Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (Saladin) himself led Ibn ʿAsākir’s funeral prayer after his death.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Mourad notes that the ‘scholars who studied with Ibn ʿAsakir’s immediate descendants and subsequent generations of the ʿAsakir family became some of the most authoritative and reputable authorities of Hadith and Sunni jurisprudence in Damascus, Syria, Egypt and elsewhere.’ The basis of Ibn ʿAsākir’s ‘enduring impact’ is not only

the books he wrote or the advocacy he engaged in on behalf of the revivification and empowerment of Sunnism, but also his role in launching a family of remarkable scholars, each of whom made their own individual imprint on this Sunni renaissance.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq* itself was the product of a long editorial process, chronicled particularly well by Suleiman Mourad in his 2021 monograph and his *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article. As Mourad describes, already during Ibn ʿAsākir’s lifetime there were two different editions of the work, the first divided into 570 fascicles and the second into 800. Al-Qāsim played a major role in both editions. He transcribed Ibn ʿAsākir’s text into a final clean copy for the first edition and prepared the second edition during his father’s lifetime and under his supervision, although he circulated it only after the latter’s death (indeed, less than a month later). Both versions were passed on, but Mourad concludes that almost all surviving manuscripts are based on the later, expanded edition.[[26]](#footnote-26) Members of Ibn ʿAsākir’s family, as well as his students, taught the *TMD* in the years after his death. It reportedly took three years to learn the work from a teacher and likewise three years to check and correct a manuscript of it, although the *TMD* was likely passed on to some students under less strenuous terms.

The *TMD*’s great size made subsequent reproduction of it particularly challenging. It was often copied only in part, with the result that by the twentieth century not a single complete copy existed anywhere (though Mourad mentions five nearly complete copies).[[27]](#footnote-27) Efforts to produce a modern printed edition were tortuous. A full edition, prepared by ʿUmar al-ʿAmrawī and ʿAlī Shīrī, was published only in 1995-2001 by Dār al-Fikr. It is this edition on which the OpenITI file is based (indeed, all versions of the *TMD* in the OpenITI corpus are currently based on it), and this is also the edition used by most modern scholars when they need to access the entirety of the *TMD*,[[28]](#footnote-28) in spite of its weaknesses; according to Mourad, ‘The quality of this edition is inferior, and it contains countless errors and typos due to the rush to finish it.’[[29]](#footnote-29) There are two other editions, but neither of these is currently available in a machine-readable format (creating such a file will constitute a major project, however it is accomplished). One, a complete edition, was produced by ʿAlī ʿĀshūr in thirty-nine volumes and published in Beirut in 2001 by Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī. The other edition has been underway since the 1940s, originally under the sponsorship of the Arab Scientific Academy of Damascus (al-Majmaʿ al-ʿIlmī al-ʿArabī bi-Dimashq). Its history is complicated, but the project is ongoing, with four volumes published in 2020.

The work itself has spawned a continuous tradition of scholarship on Damascus – the only city in the Muslim world, as Mourad notes, to possess such an uninterrupted history. According to Mourad, this tradition reflects a political trend that supported Sunnism and restored Syria, including Damascus, to the centre of early Islamic history at the expense of Baghdad, thus reinstating a position it had held as the home of the Umayyads, the first dynasty of Islam. Zayde Antrim has argued that the scholars participating in the tradition saw Syria as a perennial bulwark against wrong belief. In Ibn ʿAsākir’s own day, this threat was represented by the Crusaders and the Ismāʿīlī Shiʿis led by the Fāṭimid dynasty in Egypt.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Scholars have also used the *TMD* as a sourcebook for Hadith and mined it for historical anecdotes and biographical information. The work’s alphabetical ordering makes it easy to look someone up. In the twentieth century, Ibn ʿAsākir became a model for Syrian nationalism and its various reform movements, including pan-Arab and pan-Islamic nationalism.[[31]](#footnote-31) Scholars of Islamic history, wherever they are based, have also found the *TMD* useful as a data source for addressing a great number of questions relating to earlier periods up to his own day.

Outline of what lies ahead

In the blog posts that follow, we address the four main questions outlined above concerning Ibn ʿAsākir’s citation practices in the *TMD*. These build up to a new picture of Ibn ʿAsākir’s working methods and specifically of his reliance on people as opposed to books as his sources.

In Post 2, we present our data and talk about it all.

Then we run through the questions in four consecutive posts, followed by a summary.

In Post 3, ‘Ibn ʿAsākir’s Direct Informants’, we consider the size of Ibn ʿAsākir’s source base, his collection of many of his quotations in his youth, and what we know about his top six direct informants. We also ask why he cites people jointly.

In Post 4, ‘Ibn ʿAsākir’s Transmission Terms in *Isnād*s’, we examine Ibn ʿAsākir’s terminology in describing how he obtained his information, including identifying the most prevalent transmission terms and their modification with terms such as *ijāzatan* (with a license to transmit a text).

Post 5, ‘Ibn ʿAsākir’s Citation of Author Names in *Isnād*s’, starts from the fact that his *isnād*s mention at least 238 author names. Sometimes different chains go back to the same author. How should the inclusion of author names within *isnād*s be interpreted? We also search for titles in *isnād*s and consider text reuse evidence before engaging with the argument that *isnād*s that mention author names should be read as citations of these authors’ works.

Post 6, ‘Searches for References to Written Materials outside of *Isnād*s’, focuses on Ibn ʿAsākir’s vocabulary and descriptions, which offer a detailed picture of writerly culture in his day. We seek to understand his terms and their meanings. Outside of *isnād*s, how does he cite books and other written materials? We especially look at three forms of cited writings that the term ‘book’ only partially represents.

Post 7, ‘People, Connections and Memory’, draws together the conclusions of this series of posts.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge our reliance on the important recent work of scholars such as Mourad and Davidson as well as Jens Scheiner, who has sought to reconstruct Ibn ʿAsākir’s library. Although we will argue that such a reconstruction is problematic on many levels, Scheiner’s painstaking work on the transmission chains provided us with important metadata, including author names, death dates, name variants and book titles associated with particular authors. Scheiner relied on two earlier works, which we have also consulted. These are the ‘Maṣādir’ of Aḥmad M. Nūr Sayf and the *Mawārid* of Ṭalāl b. Saʿūd al-Daʿjānī. We also consulted Paula Manstetten’s PhD thesis, which contains many important insights on the growth of Islamic education in the period, Damascus’s status as a centre for learning during Ibn ʿAsākir’s lifetime, the role of the madrasa, Ibn ʿAsākir’s place in historiography and the nature of *isnād*s themselves.

KITAB project team members have aided us in many ways in preparing this data set and these blog posts. Regular biweekly meetings with David Smith, Ryan Muther, Mathew Barber and Peter Verkinderen have allowed us to discuss work in progress (including work addressing the same problems from different angles). We are developing an understanding of computational methods partly by seeing their present possibilities as well as limitations, including those of methods more automated than ours. Our method does not presently rely on machine learning, but other research carried out under the project’s auspices does. Team members have also read our posts and helped us refine our thinking. In addition to those named above, we would like to thank Abdul Rahman Azzam, R. Kevin Jaques, Lorenz Nigst, Aslisho Qurboniev and Gowaart Van Den Bossche. We debated the meanings of transmission terms extensively with members of the team.

We also shared drafts of these posts with scholars in the field, including Suleiman Mourad, Konrad Hirscher, Isabel Toral-Niehoff, Letizia Osti and Devin Stewart. To them, we express our gratitude as well.

Hamid Reza Hakimi has contributed to the annotation of texts including the *TMD* and al-Daʿjānī’s *Mawārid*, improvement of the Name List through much transcription and disambiguation based on scripts, review and correction of footnotes, and assorted other tasks. Among others, he checked the quality of the machine-readable file of volume one of the *Mawārid* from which we extracted author names and book titles. He matched the titles scholars today label as Ibn ʿAsākir’s sources to OpenITI unique resource identifiers (URIs). He also assessed the *TMD* text’s quality by sampling sections and made some corrections to the paragraph markers. This was necessary to extract *isnād*s. He could have spent even longer on this task, but we do not aim for perfection and do not believe addressing our questions requires it. In this case, as often, perfection is the enemy of the good. We would like to stress that it was Hamid’s work that made it possible for us to generate the data set on which these posts are based.

Hanna Siurua copy-edited the posts, which took enormous patience and a sharp eye.

As authors, we had both shared and different goals. Co-authorship acknowledges that these posts required the contributions of each of us as well as our joint work. It was important that we both read and understand Arabic. For Masoumeh Seydi, the KITAB project’s data scientist, a major goal was to improve the method of collecting and analysing data relating to citation practices including and beyond what is contained in *isnād*s. She created a series of steps, repeated them, honed them and documented them to allow them to be extended to other texts and circumstances. She managed the data. Sarah Bowen Savant formulated the questions, co-developed the methods with Masoumeh, brought together data from other modern studies and provided input on the data generated by Masoumeh, though the generation and management of the data lay in Masoumeh’s domain. For Sarah, the primary goal was to test the limits of the presently available methods and see what they can reveal. Advances in natural language processing (NLP) and machine-learning methods lie on the horizon (indeed, ChatGPT has now arrived), but the methods used here already offer great potential for understanding a complex work such as the *TMD*. Future advances will provide no magic answers, as they will also require substantial human contributions and interpretation, and we hope our work will help in that process. These blog posts were written by Sarah and serve as notes and a testing ground for her forthcoming monograph, where Masoumeh’s contribution will be gratefully acknowledged and these posts cited. We also expect to co-author a subsequent book treating Ibn ʿAsākir, his *TMD* and digital methods broadly.

1. By ‘core’ or ‘direct informants’ we mean the people from whom he cited material and who occupied the first position in his *isn**ād*s. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sarah Bowen Savant and Masoumeh Seydi, ‘Ibn ʿAsākir and His History of Damascus (Data Set) (1.0) [Data

   set].’ Zenodo. 10 August 2023, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8233103>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Suleiman Mourad and James Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihad Ideology in the Crusader Period: Ibn ʿAsākir of Damascus (1105–1176) and His Age, with an Edition and Translation of Ibn ʿAsākir’s* The Forty Hadiths for Inciting Jihad (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Suleiman A. Mourad, ‘Ibn ʿAsākir Family’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed., http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\_ei3\_COM\_30705. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For individuals cited as sources in the *TMD*, we use primarily the ‘normalised’ form of the name, given here in square brackets; see Post 2 for an explanation of name normalization. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Suleiman A. Mourad, *Ibn ‘Asakir of Damascus: Champion of Sunni Islam in the Time of the Crusades* (London: Oneworld, 2021), 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This basically confirms an estimate of roughly 40% put forward earlier by Jens Scheiner in ‘Ibn ʿAsākirʼs Virtual Library as Reflected in His *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq*’, in Steven Judd and Jens Scheiner (eds), *New Perspectives on Ibn ʿAsākir in Islamic Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Isnād* word count of *TMD*: 3,167,713 (39% of 8,153,085), based on Ryan Muther’s model using the OpenITI Zenodo corpus release of 2022.2.7: Lorenz Nigst et al., ‘OpenITI: A Machine-Readable Corpus of Islamicate Texts; Primary Version’ (Zenodo, 23 March 2023), https://zenodo.org/record/7764026. The word count of *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*: 593,471 words; of the Quran: 78,248. These figures can be studied in [Sarah Bowen Savant and Masoumeh Seydi, ‘Ibn ʿAsākir and His History of Damascus’ [data set]](https://zenodo.org/record/8233103), table ‘IsnadFractions\_ML’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Paula Caroline Manstetten, ‘Ibn ʿAsākir’s *History of Damascus* and the Institutionalisation of Education in the Medieval Islamic World’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Department of the Languages and Cultures of the Near and Middle East, SOAS, University of London, 2018), 113–14. See especially chapter 3, ‘*Isnād*s as Capital; *Isnād*s as Records – Ibn ʿAsākir’s Work in the Context of Post-Canonical *Ḥadīth* Transmission’. The first modern edition of the *TMD* (consisting of only five volumes and published by ʿAbd al-Qādir Badrān between 1911 and 1914) excluded *isnād*s. See Suleiman A Mourad, ‘Appendix A: Publication History of *TMD*’, in James E. Lindsay (ed.), *Ibn ʿAsākir and Early Islamic History* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2001), 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. As noted above, the data and graph here are based on Muther’s model applied to the 2022.2.7 (primary) version of the OpenITI corpus. An earlier version of this graph appears in Sarah Bowen Savant, ‘People versus Books’, in Bruce Fudge, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, Christian Lange and Sarah Bowen Savant (eds), *Non Sola Scriptura* (London: Routledge, 2022), 286, <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/57649>. The graph relies on bins for each century’s works’ data points, resulting in the impression that the lines end short. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ*, ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās, 7 vols (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1414/1993–4), 4:1698–1701, entry for Ibn ʿAsākir, 0626YaqutHamawi.MucjamUdaba.Shamela0009788, ms. 1199–1201. All data in these posts apart from information from Muther’s model (see above) is based on the 2022.1.6 version of the OpenITI corpus. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On this work, see Garrett Davidson, *Carrying On the Tradition: A Social and Intellectual History of Hadith Transmission across a Thousand Years* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 215–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tartīb asmāʾ al-ṣaḥāba alladhīna akhraja ḥadīthahum Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal fī al-Musnad*, ed. ʿAmīr Ḥasan Ṣabrī (Beirut: Dār al-Bashāʾir al-Islāmiyya, 1409/1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Davidson, *Carrying On the Tradition*, chap. 6, ‘Men of Books and Books of Men: The *Muʿjam*/*Mashyakha* and *Fihrist*/*Thabat* Catalog Genres’ (pp. 241–75). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ṭalāl b. Saʿūd al-Daʿjānī, *Mawārid Ibn ʿAsākir*, 3 vols (Medina: Wizārat al-Taʿlīm al-ʿĀlī, al-Jāmiʿa al-Islāmiyya bi-l-Madīna al-Munawwara, ʿImādat al-Baḥth al-ʿIlmī, 1425/2004), 1:51–2. Yāqūt says Ibn ʿAsākir had 1,300 shaykhs, plus more than eighty female teachers. Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ*, 4:1698, entry 743, ms. 1199. Based on al-Dhahabī’s breakdown, Yāqūt’s number would appear to include only male scholars who directly taught Ibn ʿAsākir Hadith and thus it excludes 46 teachers of poetry and 290 other persons from whom Ibn ʿAsākir received an *ijāza* (without having met them). Mourad and Lindsay, *Intensification and Reorientation*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Mourad, ‘Ibn ʿAsākir Family’. See especially al-Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ*, ed. Shuʿayb Arnāʾūṭ and Ḥusayn Asad, 25 vols (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1985), 20:554–6, 0748Dhahabi.SiyarAclamNubala.Shamela0010906, ms. 6647–8. Al-Dhahabī claims to have read a biography of Ibn ʿAsākir written by Ibn ʿAsākir’s son in the latter’s own handwriting (Yāqūt also cites the biography from Ibn ʿAsākir’s son but without reference to handwriting). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. These conclusions are based on a search for locations in the *Muʿjam al-shuyūkh* that follow transmission terms. The most important is بقراءتي عليه ب, which occurs 934 times across the text in various entries, including those for Baghdad (283 times), Isfahan (150), Nishapur (81), Merv (55) and Herat (54). He mentions Damascus only 33 times in this context. This search gives an indicative picture of the places cited but not a complete one because of the variety of transmission terms and also the state of the text, which includes a Latin-script volume and page numbers that generally pose a challenge to searches (though it is worth noting that other, similar searches also suggest that his focus mostly lay outside of Damascus). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Davidson, *Carrying On the Tradition*, 274–75. See also chap. 1, ‘Reimagining Hadith Transmission in the Shadow of the Canon’ (pp. 5–46). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ted Underwood, ‘Theorizing Research Practices We Forgot to Theorize Twenty Years Ago’, *Representations*, 127/1 (2014), 64–7: 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Underwood, ‘Theorizing Research Practices’, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. We thank Peter Verkinderen for this analogy. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Mourad and Lindsay, *Intensification and Reorientation*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See, for example, the works of Mourad, Lindsay and Manstetten. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ*, 4:1698, entry 743, ms. 1199. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Mourad, *Ibn ‘Asakir of Damascus*, 82–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Mourad, *Ibn ‘Asakir of Damascus*, 63, 71–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Mourad, *Ibn ‘Asakir of Damascus*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. E.g. Davidson, *Carrying On the Tradition*. See also James E. Lindsay, ‘Ibn ʿAsākir, His *Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq* and Its Usefulness for Understanding Early Islamic History’, in Lindsay (ed.), *Ibn ʿAsākir and Early Islamic History*, 1–23; and Scheiner, ‘Ibn ʿAsākirʼs Virtual Library’. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Mourad, *Ibn ‘Asakir of Damascus*, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Antrim compares the introductions to the *TMD* and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s *Tārīkh Baghdād* to argue that Ibn ʿAsākir was not just writing for Syria but also writing against Baghdad and Iraq. See Zayde Antrim, ‘Nostalgia for the Future: A Comparison between the Introductions to Ibn ʿAsākir’s *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq* and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s *Taʾrīkh Baghdād*’, in Judd and Scheiner (eds), *New Perspectives on Ibn ʿAsākir*, esp. 21–2. On Ibn ʿAsākir’s ‘full co-optation by the state’ (that is, his appointment to the newly established Dār al-Ḥadīth by Nūr al-Dīn b. Zangī), see Dana Sajdi, ‘Ibn ʿAsākir’s Children: Monumental Representations of Damascus until the 12th/18th Century’, in Judd and Scheiner (eds), *New Perspectives on Ibn ʿAsākir*, 33–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See especially Mourad, *Ibn ‘Asakir of Damascus*, 103–17. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)