Image yourself as a learned bookseller of the twelfth century. You have just been called in to assess the estate of a wealthy, prominent scholar who has died suddenly. He has left behind two or three heirs who are arguing over ownership of the mass of material the scholar has acquired and created over a lifetime. Your role is to assist the heirs in drawing up a list of the estate’s contents – each and every item – for fair distribution.

You enter a large room, which is exactly as the deceased scholar left it. What do you find? Piles and piles of paper, many with bindings of various sorts. There are labels written on sheets, but mostly one has to look at the contents to know what the pages hold. The papers are organised in many different ways on shelves that line the room. Some related works are piled together. The purpose of all this material was ultimately to facilitate the scholar’s teaching and writing – activities in which he was probably engaged up to his last breath. You can speak with each of the heirs to chart the room’s contents, but you need to rely on your own judgement, too. You have known the scholar for more than four decades and shared many an important festival together in the company of friends. But you did not expect him to die so suddenly, nor have you seen his rooms up close for many years. You feel that his eldest son – who faithfully copied out his father’s magnum opus for him – should receive the greatest share of the writings before you. But other members of the family disagree, and it falls to you to settle things. If only your friend were still alive to help you.

When you divide the contents into different types of material, what will the new piles consist of? Are there many high-value items? Are there works acquired by the scholar from his predecessors? Are there lightly bound notes? Handlists?

When reading Ibn ʿAsākir’s *TMD* and its *isnād*s, these were the kinds of questions that arose in our minds. They are applicable not only to Ibn ʿAsākir but to any historical author whose working method we might want to understand today.

Modern libraries, catalogues and scholarly writings about Arabic literature and Arabic and Islamic book culture might lead us to imagine an orderly room with books – many still well known today – sitting neatly on shelves. It is common to seek out evidence of the circulation of certain books from the ninth century onwards. We hear, for example, that such-and-such a scholar possessed X number of manuscripts of a particular famous work, and that when he died, they filled X amount of space. Similarly, explorations of material evidence, including the rare but important catalogues of the libraries of prominent individuals, promise to offer a glimpse of how authors worked and what they may have had to hand.

Such investigations can indeed tell us something about what authors possibly drew on in their work. They can reveal much about the works that circulated and were recorded. But they cannot give us the whole picture, especially when the sources that authors used were more ephemeral and perhaps carried little value in the market, even if they had great value for a scholar’s own work.

The fixation on the book as an object is natural. It reflects what did in fact survive and also what is familiar to us: the reproduced works of the much later print era. But the book as an object does not account for the entirety, or perhaps even the main part, of the writings that authors relied on.

## Specific findings

This series of blog posts has offered a long tour through the *TMD*, the people Ibn ʿAsākir cites, the *isnād*s he attributes to them and the transmission terms and other citational terminology he employs. We thank you for coming along on that tour, and we recognise that the material and arguments we present are knotty. We have approached these posts in the spirit of exploration to look into Ibn ʿAsākir’s direct informants, the language he uses to cite them, the authors whose names appear in his *isnād*s and those whose names do not. We could surely have advanced our case for a broader reading of the citational vocabulary more efficiently, but we would have done so at the cost of eliding the processes we have used as well as our data and its features (both positive and problematic). In our approach, we have modelled what we ask of scholars today: investigating as much of the whole picture as possible through the data before engaging in a Boolean fishing expedition (as we have tried to do in Post 6). We will offer more summative statements in future publications, but we leave these posts as a trail for our readers to follow. The saying ‘Had I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter’ may apply to our posts, too.

A major goal of these posts is to call attention to the discourse of the *TMD* itself, which centres on people as carriers of the tradition – indeed, traditions – that Ibn ʿAsākir portrays in the *TMD*. He presents a vast quantity of information relating to Damascus and Syria that goes back to the Prophet, his Companions, and the illustrious men and women who lived there. Collectively, this body of material preserves an image and set of memories about the region but also, crucially, about the people who passed them on. It is a story whose sources originated in many cases outside of Damascus.

Let us sum up our findings with respect to the questions posed in the first post in this series.

### Question 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?

Ibn ʿAsākir cites a few people very often as his direct informants; he owes the bulk of his material to these people. But he cites many more people only once or twice (and many of them jointly). Ibn ʿAsākir was young when he received much of his information and much older when he passed it on. But certain crucial direct informants probably gave him information when he was no longer a youth. It is possible that Ibn ʿAsākir displays *isnād*s with elevation and other transmission pyrotechnics most often with persons who are cited infrequently (see Post 4).

### Question 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?

The transmission terms that Ibn ʿAsākir uses most often do not tell us how he preserved the information, though the extent of the *TMD* and the time span between acquiring information and passing it on in the *TMD* beg the question.

Ibn ʿAsākir’s terminology (e.g. *akhbaranā*) suggests that he frequently obtained information in a group setting. Such collective transmission might well have justified his use of other people’s written notes as long as he was present in the session at which the information was conveyed. We might suppose that the transmission term *anbaʿanā*, in particular, points to this sort of situation, especially since Ibn ʿAsākir often uses this term to describe how he got information from people when he was very young. By contrast, when he mentions reading something back to a direct informant or informants, he refers to himself alone.

In only a very small percentage of *isnād*s does Ibn ʿAsākir acknowledge reliance on the device of an *ijāza* to acquire information. His informants and their informants use it more often. He seems to avoid the device, as if to stress his own industry in seeking out information directly. That said, the instances when he reports that he obtained information through correspondence bear further investigation to explain why he cites these people in particular.

### Question 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?

We have searched extensively for the names of authors and books within *isnād*s. We recognise that our search is not conclusive and hope that we and others can improve on our search terms and methods.

We experienced success in finding author names but general failure in finding citations of specific titles or other references to authored works. We believe that a wider reading of the written tradition is merited to observe where book titles are cited and where they are not. This is not a new topic, but it is one that has not been investigated across texts from different locations and periods.[[1]](#footnote-1) In Ibn ʿAsākir’s case, perhaps he cited books only when he could not cite people.

### Question 4

Outside of *isnād*s, how does Ibn ʿAsākir cite books and other written materials?

Answering this question admittedly requires more work, but the very difficulty of doing so attests to the fact that Ibn ʿAsākir is not simply pointing to book sources. We do find Ibn ʿAsākir citing books directly, though considering the size of the *TMD*, it is not very often. In particular, his likely use of other types of written materials deserves consideration.

In the years to come, scholars will be able to enter the situation of our imaginary bookseller in increasingly sophisticated ways thanks to rapid improvements in technology on two main fronts.

First, more and more manuscript works are being digitised and converted into machine-readable files, ready for analysis. The evidentiary base that we now have access to will continue to expand, and there will simply be more works to consider.

Second, we will be able to compare these files to one another much more easily to discern relationships between works, and improvements in natural language processing should enable us to understand the citational patterns much better. Ours represents an early effort, based on scripts that do not rely on NLP. It took much effort and time but also taught us much about citational language and patterns. Building on this work promises great rewards.

The end result, we believe, will be a more complex picture of the works on which authors such as Ibn ʿAsākir relied, the sources from whom he got them, the places where he accessed them and the ways in which he used them. The works that Ibn ʿAsākir calls *tasmiya*, for example, likely represent the tip of an iceberg of varieties of writing that cannot easily be classified as published books.

## A final point on memory

Finally, we would like to offer some thoughts on the broader social significance of our interpretation of Ibn ʿAsākir. These thoughts arose as we worked on his corpus.

Much work on Hadith focuses on memorisation and strategies of retention. Although such memory was central to the practice of Hadith transmission (if sometimes exaggerated), memory also operated on another level, which entailed practices that created memory of another nature.

The citation of individuals thousands of times produced a network of associations that predated and included Ibn ʿAsākir and was intended to outlast him. This network represented an articulation for posterity of the relationships that held a scholarly community together. The repetition of *isnād*s and their planned reproduction in later works was part of what made this network memorable. The network – as much as any information about a place – was crucially important to Ibn ʿAsākir. It was not just the backing for the story; it was the story itself.

The transhistorical community that Ibn ʿAsākir belonged to had Damascus as its chief focus, but a crucial question concerns the role of Baghdad in the *TMD* and the meaning assigned to the city by Ibn ʿAsākir. His frequent citation of information that originated in Baghdad, his heavy reliance on al-Khatib (including his *Tārīkh Baghdād*) as a source and the thousands of incidental references to Baghdad across the *TMD* as a whole all point to the fact that Baghdad loomed extraordinarily large in Ibn ʿAsākir’s vision. Scholars have written about Ibn ʿAsākir’s ideas concerning Baghdad, but we believe this big picture has not been adequately appreciated, as previous research did not have our evidence to take into account.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The entire edifice of *isnād* production is implicated in this memory making. That includes its terminology, with its explanations by scholars of Ibn ʿAsākir’s day and afterwards. The legitimacy of the community required a literature to defend the community. The *isnād* was a model in the sense used by computer scientists today. It generated the community, and the mechanisms of this generation were created, repeatedly, by authorities such as Ibn ʿAsākir.

Davidson, when writing about the state of oral/aural transmission after the completion of the written canon in the fourth/tenth century, quotes the jurist and Hadith scholar al-Bayhaqi (d. 458/1065) as follows:

[T]oday, if one brings a hadith that is not already known to the community of hadith scholars, it is rejected. Likewise, today if one brings a hadith that is known to them, its veracity is not dependent on him [the individual transmitter], for he is not the sole transmitter of that hadith, its veracity is dependent on others. … The hadith, whether they are authentic or otherwise, have been recorded in the collections compiled by the great scholars of hadith. It is impossible that any of the hadith escaped them all, even if some of them might have escaped some of them.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Why should one transmit Hadith in this case? Al-Bayhaqi has an answer: ‘The point of transmitting and hearing hadith [today] is so that the phrases “he informed us” and “he reported” continue, and further to preserve the chain of transmission that is a unique trait of the Muslim community.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

Following this logic, the purpose of continued transmission of the sorts of reports that appear in the *TMD* was not (or at least not mainly) preservation of the reports themselves, whose contents lived elsewhere. Rather, it was preservation of the chain of transmission itself.

When scholars speak about memory in this period and particularly with respect to Hadith transmission and Hadith transmitters, they typically focus on memorisation: how much did transmitters memorise? But to our mind, this is the wrong focus. Memory practices had specific features that are broader and that centre on connections between people. Looking at Ibn ʿAsākir’s other books, we find many further indications of his deep concern with preserving the chain of transmission.

1. Among the many examples of treatment of this topic, our thinking has been stimulated by Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 43ff. and *The Technique and Approach of Muslim Scholarship* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1947), as well as James E. Montgomery, *Al-Jāḥiẓ: In Praise of Books* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A basic search that includes ‘Baghdād’ but excludes ‘Baghdādī’ yields 2,065 results. Cf. e.g. Antrim, ‘Nostalgia for the Future’, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Davidson, *Carrying On the Tradition*, 62; Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ al-Shahrazūrī, *ʿUlūm al-ḥadīth*, ed. Nūr al-Dīn ʿItr (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1425/2004), 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Davidson, *Carrying On the Tradition*, 62; Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, *ʿUlūm al-ḥadīth*, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)