This is the third in a series of blog posts examining al-Tabari’s (d. 310/923) citations in his *Taʾrikh al-rusul wa-l-muluk*, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān* (*Tafsir*), and *Tahdhib al-āthār*. In the first and second posts we presented our questions, method and data set. The data set consists of six tables created iteratively using a series of analytical procedures developed by both of us and implemented by Masoumeh.

In this post we tackle the size of al-Tabari’s likely source base. In particular, we seek to establish how many people he credits with a major role in providing the information on which he relies. Al-Tabari’s books are full of citations, giving the impression that he drew actively on numerous sources of information. How big was his source base? And how many people gave him significant amounts of information directly?

## A Small Number of Very Important Direct Informants

Coming to grips with al-Tabari’s source base means wrestling with a long and complicated list of names whose referents countless generations have already struggled to identify. We cannot access these sources directly, unmediated by the efforts of the intervening generations. But using digital methods, we can discern and analyse frequencies and patterns of citation on a scale that is unprecedented.

It is impossible to determine precisely how many people al-Tabari reported from directly using the *haddathani*/*haddathana* formula, but we were able to form a fairly good estimate of that number, and it is surprisingly small. We looked at all 32,115 *isnad*s that feature this formula in any of al-Tabari’s three works and counted the number of citations for each direct informant (the first person in the *isnad*); these figures are presented in the Direct Informants Overview table, described in our previous post. After listing the informants in the order of the frequency with which they are cited, we calculated the cumulative total number of citations and the percentage of the total that the citations represent at each level – the top informant, the top two informants, the top three and so on down the list. This information is found in the ‘Cumulative count’ and ‘Cumulative percentage’ columns. The table yields the following data:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Number of names** | **% of all citations** |
| 1 | 9% |
| 2 | 17% |
| 3 | 24% |
| 4 | 31% |
| 5 | 36% |
| 6 | 42% |
| 7 | 47% |
| 8 | 51% |
| 9 | 56% |
| 10 | 59% |
| 20 | 79% |
| 30 | 84% |
| 40 | 87% |
| 50 | 89% |
| 75 | 92% |
| 100 | 93% |

Table 1: The percentage of al-Tabari’s citations accounted for by his most frequently cited direct informants, at different sample sizes.

Table 1 shows the high degree to which al-Tabari relied on a small group of core informants – indeed a very small group, in view of the large size of his works. The numbers are dramatic: more than half (51%) of al-Tabari’s citations go back to a mere eight direct informants, and the vast majority – nearly 80% – of his citations are to just twenty people. This is extraordinary, especially considering that he often names an informant on first mention but not in subsequent references, when his readers know whom he means. Since our method catches only explicit mentions of informants’ names, it is likely to understate the true frequency of references to the most common informants. In reality, then, the degree of concentration is probably even higher than it appears from our figures.

On the flip side, 749 names cited by al-Tabari appear as direct informants in only about 7% of his citations across all three works. There are hundreds of names that appear just once, though many of these names may represent variant surface forms of the same name. The total number of people from whom al-Tabari actually harvested information is likely to fall far short of this high figure. More probably it lies in the neighbourhood of 200–300; but within this number, a very small group played an outsized role.

## The Top Ten

What this means is that al-Tabari worked efficiently, drawing maximum benefit from a small set of sources. But who were these people? What follows is an annotated list of the ten most often cited informants in order of the frequency of their citation. These ten persons are cited in all three of al-Tabari’s works, and according to our data set they together account for 59% of all references to a direct informant. The list specifies how many times al-Tabari cites each individual (that is, how often the individual’s name begins a paragraph in our machine-readable files) after *haddathani* (‘he told me’) and *haddathana* (‘he told us’), respectively. The biographical information given below has been collated from publications by Gilliot, Athari and Lucas.[[1]](#footnote-1) We also list the variant surface forms of each name. It is important to note that surface forms can vary for many reasons, including different appellations by which a person was known, the effect of Arabic case endings (which vary depending on the sentence’s syntax), and typological and other errors, both those present in the source texts and those arising from the normalisation of Arabic script in the OpenITI corpus. (As an example, the variation in the dotting of the final yaʾ under Bishr b. Muʿadh below appears already in the source on which the OpenITI file is based.)

1. Muhammad b. Humayd al-Razi (d. 248/862). Cited 2,879 times (21 *haddathani*/2,858 *haddathana*). Al-Tabari met him in Rayy, where he stayed for five years after leaving home at the age of 12. Ibn Humayd transmitted a recension of Ibn Ishaq’s biography of the Prophet to al-Tabari.

Surface forms of his name:

ابن حميد

ابن حميد الرازي

محمد بن حميد

محمد بن حميد الرازي

In terms of Ibn Ishaq’s biography of the Prophet, it is hard to know precisely what Muhammad b. Humayd had to hand. It may have been the case that al-Tabari worked off of a written version. This was the view of Heribert Horst, who concluded that Ibn Ishaq’s book was one of only four or five ‘complete books’ (*vollständige Bücher*) upon which al-Tabari relied.[[2]](#footnote-2) R. Kevin Jaques believes it likely that al-Tabari heard a portion of an Ibn Ishaq version from Muhammad b. Humayd, but received permission (in the form of an an *ijaza*) to transmit the entirety. As Jaques writes, ‘In al-Tabari’s citation of Ibn Humayd, he would have received an ʿ*ijāza* to transmit Ibn Humayd’s ideas as if al-Tabari had heard the entirety of it from Ibn Humayd’s lips. What was accredited for transmission was, in effect, the oeuvre of the author.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

While al-Tabari may have worked in this way, the high prevalence of the ‘he told me’ formula represents his access as based on a relationship that ran over time. Yaqut quotes Ibn Kāmil (d. 350/961), a contemporary and early biographer of al-Tabari, as saying that al-Tabari wrote down over 100,000 Hadiths based on reporting from Muhammad b. Humayd (*kataba ʿan Ibn Humayd*).[[4]](#footnote-4) The account falls within Ibn Kamil’s description of al-Tabari’s journey in search of knowledge, an account that generally emphasises how much al-Tabari wrote down and stored up for later use (including mention of his rearrangement of his materials). The sense from Yaqut (via Ibn Kamil) would be that al-Tabari heard individual reports from Muhammad b. Humayd, not that he sat down to a written out version of the Prophet’s biography.

Of course, Muhammad b. Humayd passed on more material than the Prophet’s biography. This leaves open the possibility that Ibn Kamil’s account – emphasising bit by bit acquisition – applies to this other material, not the biography by Ibn Ishaq. This is not, however, what Yaqut’s text straight-forwardly says.

1. Bishr b. Muʿadh (d. 245/859–60). Cited 2,418 times (23 *haddathani*/2,395 *haddathana*). Al-Tabari met him in Basra. Al-Tabari relies on him and two intermediaries for a major collection of exegetical opinions from an early traditionist, Qatada (d. ca. 118/736–7).

Surface forms of his name:

بشر

بشر بن معاذ العقدى

بشر بن معاذ العقدي

1. Al-Muthanna b. Ibrahim al-Amuli (d. unknown). Cited 2,259 times (2,064 *haddathani*/195 *haddathana*). Al-Tabari met him either in Amul or in Rayy.

Surface forms of his name:

المثنى

المثنى بن إبراهيم

المثنى بن إبراهيم الآملي

المثنى بن إبراهيم الطبري

المثنى بن إبرهيم الآملي

1. Yunus b. ʿAbd al-Aʿla al-Sadafi (d. 264/867). Cited 2,250 times (2,113 *haddathani*/137 *haddathana*). A famous early supporter of al-Shafiʿi and a major scholar in Egypt, where al-Tabari met him. For al-Tabari, he is the source of a Quran commentary by ʿAbd al-Rahman b. Zayd.

Surface forms of his name:

يونس

يونس بن عبد الأعلى

يونس بن عبد الأعلى الصدفى

يونس بن عبد الأعلى الصدفي

1. Al-Qasim b. al-Hasan (d. 272/885). Cited 1,699 times (56 *haddathani*/1643 *haddathana*). Al-Tabari met him in Baghdad. Gilliot says this is probably Abu Muhammad al-Qasim b. al-Hasan b. Yazid al-Hamdani al-Saʾigh. He is cited in numerous reports in the *Tafsir* as reporting from the Meccan Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/768), who composed a *Sunan*.

Surface forms of his name:

القاسم

القاسم بن الحسن

1. Muhammad b. Bashshar, called Bundār (d. 252/866). Cited 1,644 times (16 *haddathani*/1,628 *haddathana*). Al-Tabari met him in Basra. He was a major Hadith scholar.

Surface forms of his name:

ابن بشار

بن بشار

محمد بن بشار

1. Abu Kurayb (d. 248/862). Cited 1,609 times (12 *haddathani*/1,597 *haddathana*). Al-Tabari met him in Kufa. One of the transmitters of Ibn Ishaq from Yunus b. Bukayr (d. 199/815). Gilliot mentions (on the basis of Yaqut’s *Muʿjam al-ʿudabāʾ*) that al-Tabari memorised Abu Kurayb’s reports; the reports also indicate that al-Tabari may have written them down afterwards as notes.

Surface forms of his name:

أبا كريب محمد بن العلاء أبو كريب

أبو كريب محمد بن العلاء

محمد بن العلاء

محمد بن العلاء أبو كريب

محمد بن العلاء الهمداني

1. Sufyan b. Wakiʿ (d. 247/861). Cited 1,443 times (16 *haddathani*/1,427 *haddathana*). Al-Tabari met him in Kufa.

Surface forms of his name:

ابن وكيع

سفيان بن وكيع

سفيان بن وكيع بن الجراح

1. Muhammad b. ʿAmr al-Bahili (d. 249/869). Cited 1,411 times (1,306 *haddathani*/105 *haddathana*). He is a Basran Hadithcollector who settled in Baghdad. Mujahid’s (d. 104/722) exegetical opinions passed into the *Tafsir* partly through him.

Surface forms of his name:

محمد بن عمرو

محمد بن عمرو الباهلي

1. Ibn ʿAbd al-Aʿla (d. 245/859–60). Cited 1,278 times (48 *haddathani*/1,239 *haddathana*). Al-Tabari met him in Basra. Al-Tabari relies on him for Maʿmar’s collection of exegetical opinions from Qatada (a second major source of Qatada’s opinions alongside Bishr b. Muʿadh).

Surface forms of his name:

ابن عبد الأعلى

ابن عبد الأعلى

ابن عبد الأعلى الصنعانى

ابن عبد الأعلى الصنعاني

ابن عبد الأعلى بن واصل

محمد بن عبد الأعلى

محمد بن عبد الأعلى الصنعانى

محمد بن عبد الأعلى الصنعاني

Al-Tabari was born in Amul in 224 or 225/838 or 9. Given the death dates of his top ten sources (whose average year of death was 252/866), he must have been very young – in his teens and twenties – when he gathered reports from most of them. This is consistent with the story biographers tell of al-Tabari’s ‘intellectual formation’ (to use Claude Gilliot’s term). After leaving home at the age of 12 he lived for around five years in Rayy before moving to Baghdad, where he spent about a year. Afterwards, he spent two years or somewhat less in southern Iraq (Wasit, Basra and Kufa) before returning to Baghdad for a further eight years. Then he embarked on what C. E. Bosworth called his ‘major educational and research journey’, which took him to Syria, Palestine and Egypt. He eventually landed back in Baghdad in 256/870, where he flourished as a scholar:

His return to Bag̲h̲dād marked the end of his student *Wanderjahre*, and he now settled down for the remaining fifty years of his life in order to devote himself to teaching and authorship, producing an amount of high-quality scholarship such as to evoke the admiration, in an age of prolific authors anyway, of both contemporaries and subsequent generations.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Al-Tabari’s biography thus supports the impression that he largely collected his information in the early period of his life. It is further corroborated by the information we can gather on his most frequently cited direct informants beyond the top ten: the average year of death for the top 100 is 256/869–70.

In the overall data set of 32,115 *isnad*s, the terms *haddathani* and *haddathana* begin an *isnad* approximately 38% and 62% of the time, respectively. It seems that al-Tabari deliberately distinguished transmission to him, singly, from transmission to him as part of a group, since he made a point of using a specific term – either *haddathani* or *haddathana* – nearly exclusively for each direct informant listed above. Still, more work should be done to discern and interpret the patterns in his use of the terms.

It thus appears that al-Tabari encountered the major sources of the information he relied on in his books when he was young, long before he compiled his works. Such citation of much older persons is, of course, common and reflects the widespread desire to minimise the number of transmitters in an *isnad* (on the rationale that information flow is more reliable over fewer people). The terms he uses indicate that his learning occurred in group settings more often than it did in one-on-one situations.

How do we explain al-Tabari’s reproduction of this knowledge in books that he wrote as much as a half-century after his first exposure to the source material? How does he manage to quote, for example, nearly 3,000 reports (in our data set) from Muhammad b. Humayd, with whom he studied as a teen, in his *Taʾrikh*, *Tafsir* and *Tahdhib*?In the next blog post we argue that al-Tabari maintained a set of notebooks and put them to efficient and good use.

1. See Claude Gilliot, ‘La formation intellectuelle de Tabari (224/5–310/839–923)’, *Journal asiatique* 276 (1988), 203–44; Akram Athari, *Muʿjam shuyukh al-Tabari* (Amman and Cairo: n.p., 2005); and Scott C. Lucas, *Selections from the Comprehensive Exposition of the Interpretations of the Verses of the Qurʾān* (Cambridge: Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought and Islamic Texts Society, 2017), esp. ii, 467–82 (‘Appendix B: Ṭabarī’s Teachers’). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The others were compositions by ʿAli b. Abi Talha, Mujahid, ʿAbd al-Rahman b. Zayd b. Aslam, and possibly Ibn Saʿd. Horst, ‘Zur Überlieferung im Korankommentar aṭ-Ṭabarīs’, *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 103 (1953), 290–307, at 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jaques has spent more than ten years collecting evidence for the transmission of Ibn Ishaq’s *Sira*. It seems unlikely to Jaques that al-Tabari copied the entirety of the text from Ibn Humayd’s audition. ‘It seems to me more likely that al-Tabari made, or had made, and was given a copy, of the text that Ibn Humayd got from Ibn al-Fadl.’ Personal communication, 4 September 2021. See also Franz Rosenthal, general introduction to al-Tabari, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, i: *General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yaqut, *Muʿjam al-ʿudabaʾ*, ed. ʿUmar Faruq al-Tabbaʿ (Beirut: Muʼassasat al-Maʻarif: Dar Ibn Hazm, 1999), i, 520-1. The number should not be taken literally; the same figure is used for reports from Abu Kurayb. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. C. E. Bosworth, ‘Al-Ṭabarī’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2nd ed. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)