In the preceding posts, we showed that al-Tabari (d. 310/923) used the phrases ‘he told me’ and ‘he told us’ (*haddathani*/*haddathana*) in the *Taʾrikh al-rusul wa-l-muluk*, the *Jamiʿ al-bayan ʿan taʾwil ay al-Qurʾan* (*Tafsir*) and the *Tahdhib al-athar* to indicate people from whom he had obtained information directly. He mentions hundreds of people in this manner – but a very small subset of them accounts for the majority of his citations. Al-Tabari’s three works contain a vast amount of material from direct informants, and most of that material came into his possession early in his life, a long time before he composed his books. It is our contention that al-Tabari made use of an extensive written record to preserve and organise his material over the decades.

## Why Notes?

This contention may be met with scepticism. One might argue that al-Tabari memorised the information he obtained from his informants and could recall it without the need for written aids. Memorisation of reports was a culturally valued skill in his time. However, there are five main reasons to think that he in fact drew on well-written and well-organised notes:

1. The long time – as much as half a century – that had elapsed between his contact with the sources and his writing (see the previous post).
2. The extensiveness of the citations. There are thousands of pieces of information from different informants scattered across thousands of pages of his works. Citation chains featuring direct informants alternate with other citation chains, disappear for hundreds of pages and then reappear. The feats of medieval memory defy our imagination today, and we do well not to underestimate its role and importance. But the rote recall and deft manipulation of purely oral information on such a scale does seem highly unlikely. A model of memory operating like an index is more plausible: al-Tabari had an extensive mental map of his data, which allowed him to locate what he needed in his notes as he created his own works, drawing on, but not merely reproducing, earlier writings with their own forms. All three of his works are highly structured, by chronology (*Taʾrikh*), Quranic chapters (*Tafsir*) or early traditionists (*Tahdhib*). Al-Tabari’s memory feat was to map the contents of these earlier works, with their own forms, into his own.
3. The efficiency of al-Tabari’s work. Much of the material he incorporated into his own works may already have been systematically arranged along lines similar to the structure of his own works. But his fast writing pace can also be explained by a well-organised collection of written material – that is, notebooks that he had compiled in specific times and contexts during his youth and that he returned to again and again. The most often used notebooks, based on notes collected from only a few persons, a crucial role for al-Tabari. He relied heavily on them as well as on other written sources, including another written source, whose extensive reuse by al-Tabari can be detected in our data (though he does not cite the work).[[1]](#footnote-1)
4. The regular citation of the same transmission chains pointing back to earlier written works. Al-Tabari relied substantially on information from individuals who lived before him, many of whom are reported to have written books of their own. Although he could not have met these people in person, his most important direct informants provided him with access, possibly only lightly mediated, to these earlier compositions.
5. The three works’ close (though not exact) alignments with other surviving texts, including al-Tabari’s own. When using earlier texts, he appears to have made adjustments to them to fit the thematic interests of his own books.

Franz Rosenthal already noted al-Tabari’s probable use of notebooks as well as the scarcity of his citations of actual books by others. He concluded:

There can be no doubt that the ‘I was told’ and ‘we were told’ at the opening of chains of transmitters have as a rule to be taken literally as indicating direct personal contact or contact within the setting of public lectures and instruction.

Rosenthal nonetheless discerned a pretence of orality in al-Tabari’s citations:

It must also be assumed that he often referred to someone with whom he undoubtedly had some personal contact, but later, he used the source that was transmitted to him by that individual in its written (published) form and quoted from it while pretending all the time to rely upon oral transmission.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In our view, it is more reasonable to read al-Tabari’s citations with *haddathani* and *haddathana* as explicit acknowledgement of material that he received orally and recorded in his notes and notebooks. By using these distinctive phrases (and differentiating them from phrases such as *dhukira ʿan*), he was emphasising that the transmission took place through personal contact, which was considered more prestigious and more authoritative than transmission of written material alone. From al-Tabari’s perspective, he was saying exactly what he was doing; there was no pretence involved.

Gregor Schoeler’s depiction of aurality among Muslim writers of the third/ninth century may partly explain al-Tabari’s learning situation. As noted in our first blog post, in his discussion of forms of writing in this period, Schoeler distinguished between essentially private notes and notebooks (*hypomnēmata*, sing. *hypomnēma*), on the one hand, and ‘actual books, composed and redacted according to the canon of stylistic rules, and intended for publication’ (*syngrammata*, pl. *syngramma*), on the other. The Arabic tradition refers to both types as books (*kutub*, sing. *kitāb*). Before the third/ninth century, the conventions that would later mark a ‘published’ book had not yet crystallised, and accordingly many books written in that period do not survive, while others, such as the *Sira* of Ibn Ishaq and the *Muwaṭṭaʾ* of Malik b. Anas, survive in multiple variant versions.

Book historians have identified the third/ninth century as a turning point at which *syngrammata* began to flourish. Most recently, Beatrice Gruendler has painted a detailed picture of this century, in which books appeared as ‘new media’. Al-Tabari’s numerous and extensive writings represent a milestone that ought to be considered in any periodisation of book history. It is hard to imagine them coming into existence fifty years earlier, when he was still a student and the ‘rise of the Arabic book’ was only beginning.

But did scholars such as al-Tabari view the materials at their disposal in strictly binary terms – as either notes/notebooks or ‘actual books’ or, to put it differently, as either ‘published’ or unpublished works? Al-Tabari gives little indication of such binary thinking in his citations. We might look for a distinction in how he cites people (whose information he recorded as notes) versus how he cites redacted books (which he accessed without direct contact with the authors). But he only rarely acknowledges books as his sources. Even when he cites someone known to have authored a relevant book, he usually fails to mention the work in question.

For example, when citing reports from Sayf b. ʿUmar (d. during the reign of al-Rashid, r. 170–93/786–809), al-Tabari repeatedly uses phrasing that suggests he accessed Sayf’s work in the form of written material acquired by al-Sari, who himself relied on Shuʿayb (*wa-amma al-Sari, fa-innahu qala fi kitabihi ilayya*, *haddathana Shuʿayb ʿan Sayf* …).[[3]](#footnote-3) Modern scholars, mostly basing their discussions on al-Tabari’s *Taʾrikh*, have speculated about the nature of Sayf’s work, which no longer survives, primarily for the purpose of assessing its reliability (or lack thereof) as a source for the events it relates.[[4]](#footnote-4) The title *Kitab al-Futuh al-kabir wa-l-ridda* as the name of Sayf’s lost work does not appear in the *Taʾrikh*; its widespread use and attribution today appear to derive from Ibn al-Nadim’s (d. 385/995) *Fihrist*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

We believe that what is required for a more nuanced understanding of al-Tabari’s work and the literary culture of his time is deeper probing of the variety of written forms that existed and were likely to be used by people such as al-Tabari. What forms might notes have taken? What sorts of ways of binding material together can we imagine? It may have been conventional within *isnad*s to mention individuals and not their works, but what does this convention tell us about how authors such as al-Tabari thought about the works at their disposal and what they could expect in terms of the treatment of their own works afterwards?

This line of enquiry requires an openness to the many ways in which al-Tabari and his peers might have constructed and conceived of their own works. It could have the effect of demoting ‘actual books’ as the main, privileged carriers of information in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries and beyond.[[6]](#footnote-6) Therefore, we would do well to broaden our understanding of authorship to include many forms of writing and writerly culture.

## Aligning al-Tabari’s Books

Evidence of text reuse in al-Tabari’s works indicates that he drew repeatedly on the same written sources in his writings.

Text

Description automatically generated

Image 1. An excerpt from a longer alignment (displayed furthest to the right, with the excerpt circled in red) between passages based on Ibn Ishaq’s *Sira* in al-Tabari’s *Taʾrikh* (on the right; OpenITI, Shamela0009783, milestones 596–604) and in his *Tafsir* (on the left; OpenITI, Shamela0007798, milestones 9635–41). Text found only in the *Taʾrikh* is highlighted in green; text found only in the *Tafsir* is highlighted in blue. The long green block comes from Hisham b. Muhammad al-Kalbi. Alignment generated with Ryan Muther’s adaptation of David Smith’s passim software and fed into the OpenITI Diff viewer application (created by Peter Verkinderen, who also designed the way to visualise the location of the excerpt within the whole).

The alignment shown on the far right side of Image 1 covers ten consecutive pages in the Leiden edition of the *Taʾrikh* and almost the same in the *Tafsir*.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is one of the longest alignments between the two works. Looking at it gives the impression that one is seeing the seams that run between and link the works. The passages overlap very closely, but they have slight wording differences that could reflect al-Tabari’s own different readings of the text that he received from Muhammad b. Humayd in Rayy while in his teens.

The closeness of the two texts is evident in the very first sentences in the alignment:

*Taʾrikh*: He [Ibn Ishaq] said: Abraha then built al-Qalis (or al-Qullays) in Sanʿaʾ. He built a church (*kanisa*) unlike any seen on earth in its time. Afterwards, he wrote to the Negus, the king of the Abyssinians, saying:

O king! I have built for you a church (*kanisa*) the like of which has never been built for any king before.

*Tafsir*: He [Salama b. al-Fadl] said: Ibn Ishaq told us (*haddathana*) that Abraha built a church (*kanisa*) in Sanʿaʾ. He was Christian and called it (*sammaha*) al-Qalis (or al-Qullays). It was unlike any seen on earth in its time. He wrote to the Negus, the king of the Abyssinians, saying:

O king! I have built for you a church (*kanisa*) the like of which has never been built for any king before.

For al-Tabari, the account of the building of the church in Sanʿaʾ may have been a familiar story, one that he taught regularly in his afternoon teaching sessions in Baghdad. When he sat down to compose the *Taʾrikh* and *Tafsir*, the text of this story was well known to him; it was alive in his memory. Writing it down may have been akin to singing for him, insofar as he had internalised the text down to the level of the words and so could improvise when addressing his audience. In the *Tafsir*, he seems to have added the clarification that Abraha was a Christian and that the church he built was called al-Qalis (or al-Qullays). The beginning of the story is thus similar but not identical in the two texts, but when quoting the Negus’s letter al-Tabari appears to have returned to his notes to ensure verbatim accuracy.

Both reports rely on a transmission chain that ran from his direct informant, Muhammad b. Humayd (d. 248/862), through Salama b. al-Fadl (d. after 190/805-6) to Ibn Ishaq (d.c. 151/768), though the chain is cited explicitly in connection with this story only in the *Tafsir* (in the *Taʾrikh*, al-Tabari gives the chain earlier in the text, at the beginning of the overall narrative, without repeating it thereafter). It is likely that the clarification in the *Tafsir* was added by al-Tabari himself, though we cannot know for sure without access to the notes themselves. It is also possible that the clarification was already present in al-Tabari’s notes, or that both texts differ slightly from the text recorded in the notes. Or that a copyist or copyists were involved along the way. We do not, at present, have an earlier, independent text of Ibn Ishaq’s work against which to compare al-Tabari’s version, but a cursory look at text reuse data for this passage in works written after al-Tabari’s lifetime suggests that the version in the *Taʾrikh* aligns more closely with other transmissions of Ibn Ishaq’s text than does the version in the *Tafsir*.

Some of al-Tabari’s notes would have been thoroughly familiar to him, but others he would have known less well, perhaps because he never taught from them, even if he drew on them for his works. Infrequently recalled material – like a melody one has heard only once or twice long ago, to continue the singing metaphor – would not lend itself so easily to improvisation or expansion. It is possible that the many much shorter and often very precise alignments between al-Tabari’s works reflect instances in which he reproduced such less familiar material from his notebooks.

Over the course of his long and illustrious career, al-Tabari was extraordinarily productive in several different fields, including Quran commentary, history and law (in his catalogue of authors, Ibn al-Nadim places him in the chapter on *ʿulamaʾ*). We might reasonably speculate that al-Tabari copied parts of his *Taʾrikh* into his *Tafsir*, or vice versa. That would have been efficient. But the text reuse data indicates that that is not how he generally worked. Instead, it seems that he went back to the same sources again and again in the course of composing each of his works. We examine the alignments between his works more closely in a later post, when we consider his reliance on notebooks for his three major works.

1. Discussed in Sarah Bowen Savant, ‘Al-Ṭabarī’s Unacknowledged Debt to Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr’ (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Franz Rosenthal, general introduction to al-Ṭabarī, *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), 5–6 (citing Yaqut); see also 52-4. Heribert Horst has also argued that al-Ṭabarī’s sources were mostly lecture notes, written down as an aide-mémoire. He examined a large number of *isnad*s and concluded that al-Tabari relied on only four or five ‘complete books’ (*vollständige Bücher*), by ʿAli b. Abi Ṭalha, Mujahid, ʿAbd al-Rahman b. Zayd b. Aslam, Ibn Ishaq 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. See, for example, al-Tabari, *Taʾrikh al-rusul wa-l-muluk*, OpenITI, Shamela0009783BK1-ara1.completed, ms. 1302. R. Stephen Humphreys translates this phrase as ‘It was transmitted to me in writing by al-Sarī.’ See al-Tabari, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, xv: *The Crisis of the Early Caliphate:* *The Reign of ʿUt̲h̲mān*, trans. R. S. Humphreys (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a still-useful summary of the scholarly treatment of Sayf, see Ella Landau-Tasseron, ‘Sayf ibn ʿUmar in Medieval and Modern Scholarship’, *Der Islam* 67 (1990), 1–26. See also F. M. Donner, ‘Sayf b. ʿUmar’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibn al-Nadim, *al-Fihrist*,OpenITI, 0385.Fihrist.Shia003355-ara1.mARkdown, search term: سيف بن عمر. It is also noteworthy that the plural term الفتوح occurs only sixteen times in the *Taʾrikh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a related discussion, see Sarah Bowen Savant, ‘People vs. Books’ (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrikh al-rusul wa-l-muluk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., 15 vols in 3 series (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1879–1901), i, 934–45; al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, v: *The Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, trans. C. E. Bosworth (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 217–35; al-Ṭabarī, *Jamiʿ al-bayan*, ed. ʿAbd Allah b. ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turki ([N.p.]: [Dar Hijr li-l-Tabaʿa wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawaziʿ wa-l-Iʿlan], 2001), xxiv, 636–44. See also al-Tabari, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, v: *The Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, trans. C. E. Bosworth (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 217–35. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)