THE MASHĀHĪR AL-ʿULAMĀʾ AL-AMṢĀR OF IBN ḤIBBĀN AL-BUSTĪ (d. 354AH/965CE)

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Abstract

This brief article argues that early Muslim scholars correlated knowledge with social endurance. Ibn Ḥibbān's al-Mashāhīr is a compendium of biographies of men of learning from various regions of early Islam which contained many entries the subjects of which included came literary individuals who took an active role in encouraging the spread of knowledge. This study attempts to examine the purposes, form, structure, content, total of figures, and basic strategies used in Ibn Ḥibbān's Mashāhīr along with his general contribution to the science of ḥadīth transmission in the late third and fourth Islamic centuries. It has not, however, produced a comprehensive examination of the wide dimension of prosopographical texts available in Ibn Ḥibbān's work. The task also involves analysing both theoretical and practical aspects of Ibn Ḥibbān's method for organizing. In the arrangement of biographical dictionary Ibn Ḥibbān could reveal the genealogy of authority he had constructed over the path of his career on the following generation of scholars as well as enhancing of important centre of ḥadīth studies during three early centuries. Also, examining representations of towns or regions in the Mashāhīr over a period reveals culturally and historically specific meaning and yields insight into peoples' relationships to political and social realities.

Keywords: Ibn Ḥibbān, Mashāhīr, ḥadīth, biographical dictionary, biography

1. INTRODUCTION

In the *Mashāhīr* of Ibn Ḥibbān, people of knowledge may be ḥadīth transmitters, judges, politicians or entrepreneurs, but these activities fall outside the scope of the *tarjama*, which focuses upon essential features that link individuals with the quality of being pious and literary centres of society. Although other activities are significant for discerning the role of the individual, yet they are not part of the reported scholarly persona (Encyclopaedia of Islam 2, 1995). Brockelmann and Sezgin mention that the manuscript of the *Mashāhīr* is preserved in Leipzig (Brockelmann, 1937; Sezgin,1967). In addition, Sezgin also indicates the standard printed edition of the *Mashāhīr* was first printed by Maṭbaʿa Lajna al-Taʾlif wa al-Tarjama wa al-Nashr in one volume, in

Egypt in 1960. This was Manfred Fleischhammer's edition, based on a manuscript in the University Library of Leipzig.

In his introduction, Fleischhammer describes in short, the available manuscript including the name, total of figures, organization, scribes or copyists, transmission of the book, and the date of composition (Ibn Ḥibbān, 1960). A quick glance at the content reveals that there is no alphabetical order in this book. However, Fleischhammer supplies alphabetical indexes of the names and the *kunya* of the men at the end of this book. These two indexes are indispensable because most of the men are mentioned by their names and a few are mentioned with the *kunya* first, usually followed by the name. Discussing first page of the manuscript, he indicates that the book was written as "*Kitāb Mashāhīr ʿUlamāʾ al-Amṣār raḥimahum*

Allāh, min taṣnīf al-Imām Abī Ḥātim Muḥammad ibn Ḥibbān ibn Aḥmad al-Bustī raḍī Allāh ʿanh".

In his review, Ṣāliḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid highlighted a few mistakes which have been made in the first printed edition (al-Munajjid, 1960). He looks to the letterforms, short vowel markings, pointing in single or double dots and etc. which may be due to errors made when copying the text. He also doubted that the manuscript is complete and therefore he seems want to suggest that it was an abridgement. Since then several other re-workings of the Egyptian edition have appeared. These works, which provide a valuable addition to the many biographical dictionaries available, have been very carefully edited. Marzūq ʿAlī Ibrāhīm re-edited the *Mashāhīr* and published it in 1987 (Ibn Ḥibbān, 1987). The editor used manuscripts, Fleischhammer's edition, and Ibn Ḥibbān's *al-Thiqāt* for the reconstruction of the book. He asserts the actual name of this book is *Mashāhīr ʿUlamāʾ al-Amṣār wa Aʾlām Fuqahāʾ al-Aqṭār* based on Ibn Ḥibbān's introduction. In total, the *Mashāhīr* consists of biographies of which there are 1602 separate items; but as 14 of the men are duplicated, there are only 1588 separate people.

The biographies are all concise, occasionally as short as a single printed line, sometimes giving no more than the man's name and the date of his death, but more often giving further details (Robson, 1960). However, Ibn Ḥibbān does not mention his sources on all of these biographies perhaps because he came from the generation after Ibn Saʾd, al-Bukhāri, Ibn Abī Ḥātim and other scholars of the third/ninth century. In his introduction to the *Mashāhīr*, Ibn Ḥibbān explains why he wrote it (Ibn Ḥibbān, 1960). He indicates that he wished to provide a collection of distinguished men as well as to present a convenient book for students. This seems to him to have been more important than giving lengthy details of their lives and works. Even though the *Mashāhīr* gives comparatively little information about the men, it is important because it gives a list about men who were considered distinguished by master critics, like Ibn Ḥibbān in the fourth/tenth century. Paying attention to these strategies of compilation makes it possible to suggest some general tendencies in Ibn Ḥibbān's representation of cities or regions and to interpret these tendencies in light of the historical context (Antrim, 2006). Beyond question it was a source book for later biographical works.

2. FORM AND STRUCTURE

For the most part, the book is devoted to those notable persons of subsequent generations who transmitted ḥadīth reports about the Prophet from the Companions down to the Successors of Successors. It is clear to see Ibn Ḥibbān's general criteria for the divisions of the scholars or other men into classes. He lived in a period when this approach had made considerable advances. Ibn Ḥibbān also precisely states that the *Mashāhīr* is arranged according to ṭabaqāt which lists the scholars in three early generations of Islam. The exceptional feature of this biographical dictionary is that the entries are arranged first according to city, and then in each city according to generational classes (ṭabaqāt).

Several organizational principles can be proposed about how Ibn Ḥibbān composed the *Mashāhīr*; (1) he included the noble persona (excellence in a field of knowledge), (2) occasionally, he posited them in order; relation to the Prophet for the first generation of Muslim i.e. Companions, family of the Prophet and etc., (4) he abandoned the alphabetical order for the generational classes, (4) he organized them in chronology from the lens of subsequent generations, (5) he asserted that the main theme is the centre of attraction among early Muslims.

Long before contemporary scholars began to look at knowledge as the "cultural capital" of society, early Muslim scholars correlated knowledge with social endurance (Chamberlain, 1994). So for example, the complete title of Ibn Ḥibbān's *Mashāhīr* is "Renowned Scholars of Cities and Distinguished Jurists of Regions." In the simplest terms, place may be defined as "space to which meaning has been ascribed;" and one way of ascribing meaning to space is to represent it in writing. Thus, examining representations of spaces (limited here to towns and regions) in the written record of a society over a period of time reveals culturally and historically specific meaning and yields insight into peoples' relationships to political and social realities.

The words by which Ibn Ḥibbān presents them – ʿUlamāʾ (Scholars/Learned), *Fuqahāʾ* (Jurists/Law experts) – affirmed their association of status with knowledge. In order to associate the idea of scholars with place, Ibn Ḥibbān adopted the term *al-amṣār* (cities) and *al-aqṭār* (regions), as he designated some form of territoriality. Consequently, ḥadīth scholars after Ibn Ḥibbān's generation who engaged in the composition of the sciences of ḥadīth transmission

books devoted an exclusive topic to the subject of the residence and region of transmitters. For instance, Ibn Ṣalāḥ dedicated the final chapter of his book to the topic of *Maʿrifat Awṭān al-Ruwāt wa-Buldānihim* (The Residence and Lands of Transmitters) (Ibn Ṣalāḥ, 1986). Prior to discussing the available examples of *isnād* that draw attention to where the transmitter lived, Ibn Ṣalāḥ suggested "it is commendable for the expert to give the ḥadīth with its *isnād*s and then mention the homelands of it transmitters and other facts about them."

According to Franz Rosenthal, although by the tenth century works on biographical dictionaries began to include all kinds of scholars, litterateurs, statesmen, and even a sprinkling of wealthy businessmen, the defining feature of the majority of the biographical entries remained the individual's engagement with religious sciences, particularly ḥadīth studies (Rosenthal, 1952). Apparently Ibn Ḥibbān was interested in collecting these individuals' biographies, for a variety of reasons. Apart from ḥadīth, some of the *ʿulamāʾ* or *fuqahāʾ* were the authors of his sources, which reflected their lives and concerns. For instance, the Rashidun Caliphs were also judges, teachers, merchants, and military leaders.

Ibn Ḥibbān does mentioned the specific condition for classification for each generation. The *luqya* (encounter) between a people with earlier generation is the essential principle for distinguishing them (Encyclopaedia of Islam 2, 1995). In the closing chapter of Successors of Successors in Madinah, Ibn Ḥibbān says that the Companions are those who had encountered the Prophet, and the Successors are those who had encountered the Companions and so on (Ibn Ḥibbān, 1960). Perhaps the notion of this style is applied to designate a "more collective social generation" (Encyclopaedia of Islam 2, 1995) And it is possible that it may have been modelled on the following ḥadīth in the *Ṣaḥīḥ*: "The best of man are those of my *qarn* (generation), afterwards those who (are) close to them, afterwards those who (are) close to them" (Ibn Ḥibbān, 1960). Ibn Ḥibbān offers the following *tarjama* about the ḥadīth: *dhikr al-bayān bi-anna khayr hādhih al-umma al-ṣahāba thumma al-tābiʿūn* (Report on the statement that the best of this community are the Companions followed by the Successors) (Ibn Ḥibbān, 1993). Occasionally, one finds in the last entry of each region the Companions who were the last to die in the region, supported with the date if available. He states that the last Companion who died in Makkah was Abū al-Ṭufayl ʿĀmir b.

Wathīla in 107/725, in Kufa was ʿAbd Allāh b. Abī Awfā in 87/705, and in al-Shām was ʿAbd Allāh b. Busr al-Sulamī in 88/706.

Obviously Ibn Ḥibbān avoids the organisation of these generations into a specific timeline. From another perspective, using the timeline classification will result in abandoning the principle of *luqya*. In *Talqīḥ al-Fuhūm*, Ibn al-Jawzī provides an example of the *ṭabaqāt* concerning the timeline that was used by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) (Ibn al-Jawzī, 1975). Abū Ṭālib distinguished five classes of caliph, jurist, ḥadīth scholar, reader and ascetic for every forty years up to his era. It is possible, though, the inspiration for the came as a "timeline" result of the ḥadīth: "My community will be made up of five classes: firstly forty years with charitable and pious people; they will be followed for the next 150 years by people who will live in compassion and mutual harmony; then for 160 years more there will come people who will turn their backs on each other and will separate themselves; then will come a period of scattering [and of war or of flight] and *al-najā al-najā* (every man for himself)" (Ibn Mājah, 2003; Yazaki, 2013). However, in the *al-Majrūḥīn*, Ibn Ḥibbān evaluates this ḥadīth as spurious (Ibn Ḥibbān, 1396AH).

3. CONTENT

Furthermore, not only did the number of biographies in each generation of the *Mashāhīr* increase but several places were added. From the number of Companions, it can be roughly inferred how the early ḥadīth transmission network proliferated in different regions. Ibn Ḥibbān's *ṭabaqāt* presentation in the *Mashāhīr* is very useful for the study of cultural centres which at the same time were political centres of their eras (Senturk, 2005). According to Recep Senturk, Ibn Ḥibbān has demonstrated "the polycentric structure of Islamic culture by documenting the fluctuations in the number of scholars over time in the important cities of each period."

As mentioned earlier, the *Mashāhīr* includes a brief description of the privileged persons of each of the three early generations who lived in capitals of the Islamic world. Practically the *ṭabaqāt* dealing with the Companions, the Successors, and the Successors of Successors are subdivided into regions where many ḥadīth transmitters were active. The cities or regions covered range from Yemen in the south to the al-Shām frontier in the north, and from Egypt in the west to

Khurasan in the east. Ibn Ḥibbān insisted that most attention had been devoted to Madinah, Makkah, Kufa, Basra, Damascus and Baghdad. A general explanation of the region is usually found in the introduction of a section. As an illustration, Ibn Ḥibbān's usage of the simile style may dazzle a reader when he compares al-Shām like a prostrate man (Ibn Ḥibbān, 1960). He depicts a picture of a man his head is Palestine, his neck is Jordan, his chest is Damascus, his stomach is Homs, his navel is Aleppo, his right leg is the cities above Euphrates to Iraq's border, his left leg is the cities above Tigris to Iraq's border, his right hand is the cities on the deserts side, and his left hand is the cities on the coasts. The name of al-Shām includes all these cities from Arish in Egypt to Sawad, but that the real al-Shām is from Balis to al-Dhamin.

The first section of the book is devoted to the Companions who lived in Madinah. It begins with a short introduction that gives Ibn Ḥibbān's purpose that selecting Madinah as the first city or region of the book. Then Ibn Ḥibbān continues with an abbreviated biography of the Prophet which describes his genealogy, birth, first revelation, duration in Makkah and Madinah, and finally his death. Next Ibn Ḥibbān presents the Companions in rank order, whereas he organizes the classification based on the Rashidun Caliphs, the Companions who were promised paradise and the rest who lived in Madinah.

Although Ibn Ḥibbān does not declare a preference for *Ahl al-Bayt* (people of the house) over others, it is possible to tell from the order of presentation that he has a certain preference for them. After the Companion's generation, the first seven entries of Successors in Madinah and the first five entries of Successors of Successors in Madinah both deal with *Ahl al-Bayt*. And between the first four Caliph and the Companions who were promised paradise, Ibn Ḥibbān positioned Ḥasan (who succeeded ʿAli for six or seven months) and his brother Ḥusayn. He also places the *Ahl al-Bayt* like ʿAqīl b. Abī Ṭālib, ʿAbd Allāh b. Jaʿfar b. Abī Ṭālib, al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAbd al-Muṭallib, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās, al-Faḍl b. al-ʿAbbās, and Qathm b. al-ʿAbbās after the Companions who were promised paradise, preceding other Companions.

Coming immediately after Madinah, Ibn Ḥibbān arranged the Companions into specific regions in the following order; Makkah, Basra, Kufa, Damascus, Egypt, Yemen, and Khurasan. The next section of the *Mashāhīr* that deals with the Successors and Successors of Successors utilizes the same order as

that used for the Companions. Only in the case of the Successors of Successors, does Ibn Ḥibbān add Baghdad and Wasit the new centres that are occupied by scholars. It is not logically necessary that number of people is a measurement for determining the early centre of ḥadīth. Perhaps the best way to analyse ḥadīth scholars and ḥadīth to consider the number of ḥadīth narrated by each authority. In any case, the number of scholars who populated a city or region still can bring us a picture of commonly attracted place. And perhaps the inclination of the later school of law may also have been influenced by the residence of earlier Companions (Senturk, 2005).

In the era of Companions, Madinah remained the centre of scholars although new centres began to emerge. The prominent Medinese Companions in ḥadīth like Abū Hurayra, Ibn ʿUmar, Jābir b. ʿAbd Allāh, Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī and others occupied themselves primarily with teaching the ḥadīth to younger generations i.e. the Successors. Madinah contains 152 Companions, 36 per cent of the total Companions' generation. 61 Companions live and represent the attributes that legitimate the scholarly authority in Makkah, or 14 per cent of the total; in Basra 52 Companions, 12 per cent; in Kufa 55 Companions, 13 per cent; in Damascus 55 Companions, 13 per cent; in Egypt 22 Companions, 5 per cent; in Yemen 16 Companions, 3 per cent; and in Khurasan 5 Companions, somewhat more than 1 per cent. The numerical distribution of the Companion subject to region also can be seen in the following graph

Number of Companions
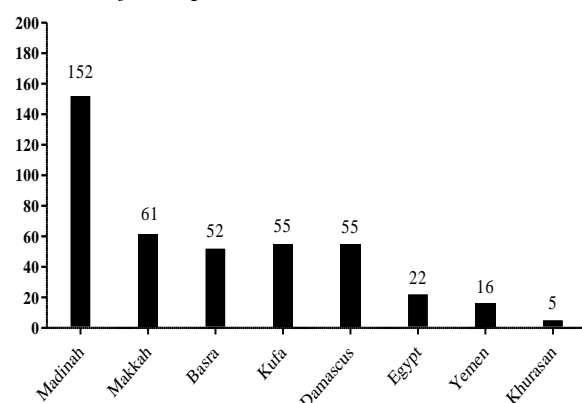
A tremendous change occurred in the time of Successors. Al-Shām with Damascus as the capital of the Umayyad Empire emerged as the highest number of entries with 172 Successors, 30 per cent of the total Successors. From Makkah, Ibn Ḥibbān placed 51 Successors, 9 per cent of the total; Basra 92

Successors, 16 per cent; Kufa 18 Successors, 3 per cent; Egypt 33 Successors, 6 per cent; Yemen 28 Successors, 5 per cent; Khurasan 10 Successors, almost 2 per cent. Meanwhile the number of Successors who lived in Madinah was 70, or 12 per cent, a number that later on dropped even further, during the time of the Successors of Successors which saw Iraq emerge as the new centre.

Number of Successors
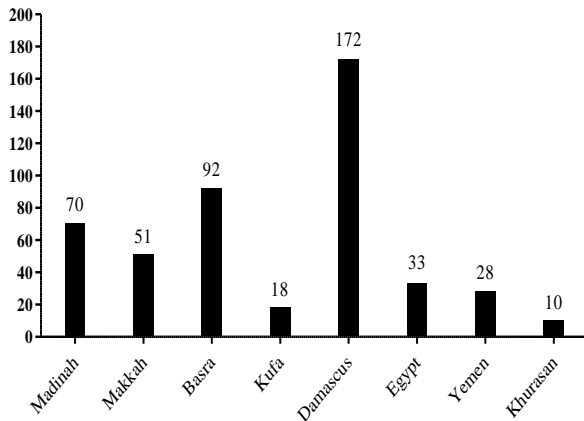
As can be seen in the next graph, in the time of Successors of Successors, Iraq was the most populous region; with its 229 Successors of Successors accounting for about 45 per cent of the generation. Iraq's two most populated cities alone, Basra and Kufa, together constitute about 40 per cent of the Successors of Successors numbers. They are followed by Damascus with 81, or 16 per cent; Makkah with 58, 11 per cent; Egypt with 45, 9 per cent; Khurasan with 41, 8 per cent; Madinah with 31, 6 per cent; Yemen with 25, 5 per cent; Wasit with 20, 4 per cent; Baghdad 4, below than 1 per cent.

Number of Successors of Successors
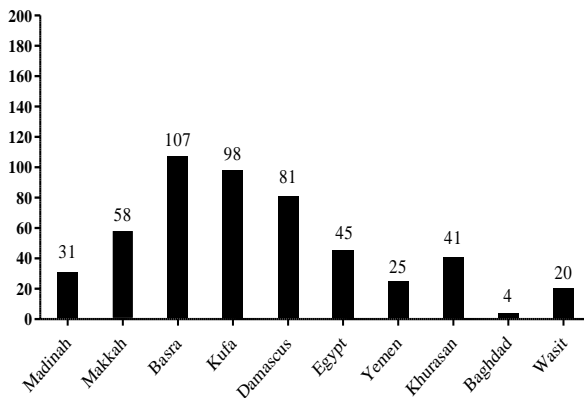
This section also has been scrutinized by Nurit Tsafrir who was interested in the spread of the Ḥanafi School of law for the period between the middle of the second/eight century until the end of the third/ninth century. She indicates that the number of Ḥanafi biographies in the section on the Successors of Successors in Kufa is considerably significant: of about seventy Kufis who died between 130/747 and 218/833, seventeen were "semi-Ḥanafis" and only six, or about 10 per cent of the total, were Ḥanafis (Tsafrir, 2004). However, she argues the difficulty to measure the proportion of Ḥanafis to non-Ḥanafis as this book deal mainly with ḥadīth transmitters. In the *Mashāhīr* sources the legal affiliation of a scholar is not mentioned and can only be inferred from indirect indications, such as the teachers and the students. This ambiguity in the *Mashāhīr* reflects the historical situation in the second/eight and third/ninth century, when there was no clear distinction between the legal affiliation of a scholar. It may be, then, in the early period Ḥanafi scholars were less involved in the transmission of ḥadīth.

With plenty information at his disposal, Ibn Ḥibbān himself must have been aware of the fact that some of the biographies he included in the third generation were of men whose affiliation with the various school of thought or school of law. Nevertheless, Ibn Ḥibbān was able to delegate the plan of transmitting the biography of the early Muslim community, or at least, of those members whom he deemed worthy of commemoration. It is generally accepted that work such the *Mashāhīr* that includes biographies of more than a thousand of people from three early period of Islam provides well-emphasized datum on ḥadīth transmitters network.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a short analysis of the purposes, history, organization, total of figures, and basic strategies used in Ibn Ḥibbān's *Mashāhīr*. It has portrayed the important trends in ḥadīth scholarship and also indicated that the material contained in many biographical entries must be used with caution. It has not, however, produced a comprehensive examination of the wide dimension of prosopographical texts available in Ibn Ḥibbān's works and among his contemporaries. For Ibn Ḥibbān, ḥadīth transmitters or scholars belong together in *ṭabaqāt* – he frequently indicates that he constructs his works in this approach. Though organized by a bibliographic rubric at the macrostructural level, and periodically chronologically too, there are other constructional principles that are made explicit by Ibn Ḥibbān: chronology (date of death), affinity, geographical origin, and fame. The relation of biographical

dictionary to ḥadīth is clearly asserted and demonstrated by Ibn Ḥibbān. Assuredly the ḥadīth transmitters whose biographies are contained in the *Mashāhīr* are thus presented as the successors of the Prophet. This was at the basis of the outlook that sustained and gave meaning to the biographical dictionary in the late age of the ḥadīth compilation and beyond. Through the arrangement of biographical dictionaries Ibn Ḥibbān could reveal the genealogy of authority he had constructed over the path of his career on the following generation of scholars. For the *Mashāhīr* the transmitters designated in a "more collective social generation" using *ṭabaqāt* as the continuity of the community as well as focusing of important centre of ḥadīth in the course of three centuries.

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