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## THE MUSNAD GENRE IN HADITH LITERATURE: ORIGINS, TYPOLOGY, AND METHODOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

**Abstract.** *This article investigates the musnad as a distinct genre within the classical hadith sciences, tracing its lexical origins, its technical definitions as employed in the scholarly tradition, and the historical conditions that gave rise to its emergence as a systematic mode of hadith compilation. The study examines the methodological principles governing musnad works, the criteria by which they are classified into selected (muntaqa), critically annotated (mu'allal), and general ('amm) categories, and the various organizational schemes applied by their compilers. Attention is also given to the genre's contribution to the preservation of transmission chains and its indispensable role in the disciplines of narrator criticism (jarh wa-ta'dil) and hadith authentication.*

**Keywords:** *hadith sciences, musnad, isnad, sanad, narrator criticism, jarh wa-ta'dil, hadith compilation, mutawatir, Companion narrations, Islamic manuscript tradition.*

### INTRODUCTION

The codification of hadith proceeded through multiple phases, and scholars developed several distinct organizational approaches to meet the differing needs of transmitters, jurists, and general readers. Among the most significant of these organizational frameworks is the musnad arrangement, in which narrations are grouped according to the Companion who transmitted them from the Prophet rather than by subject matter or legal category. Understanding this genre requires attention both to the philological background of the term and to its technical applications within the hadith sciences.

The Arabic root of *musnad* derives from the verb *sanada* (سَنَدَ), which conveys the meanings of leaning, supporting, or being attributed to something. In its technical

application, the term designates compilations in which hadith narrations are arranged according to the names of Companions – either alphabetically or in the order of their conversion to Islam. The lexicographer Abu Mansur al-Azhari (d. 370/981) states: «Any foundation upon which something is leaned constitutes a musnad» (Abu Mansur al-Azhari, 1964:365). This spatial metaphor – comparing the hadith’s attribution to the act of resting something against a support – reflects the organic connection between the genre and the concept of reliable transmission.

Ibn Faris (d. 395/1005) elaborates on the semantic field: «The meaning of *sanad* denotes the joining of one thing to another. Ages are likewise called musnad because they follow consecutively one upon the other» (Ibn Faris, 1979:105). The lexicographer Abu Nasr al-Jawhari notes that the plural form of the word occurs as both *masanid* and *masanid*, while Abu ‘Abdallah al-Zarkashi (d. 794/1392) prefers the form without the *ya*’ (Abu Nasr al-Jawhari, 1990:489). Taken together, these observations confirm that the word musnad carries the fundamental sense of something firmly grounded or attributed to a recognized source.

## MAIN PART

The term musnad carries three distinct technical meanings within the hadith sciences, each of which is operative in different scholarly contexts:

**First: A hadith with an unbroken chain (*sanad muttaṣil*).** In this usage, musnad designates any narration whose chain of transmission extends continuously back to the Prophet without interruption. Works organized by subject matter are sometimes also termed musnad by their authors when they intend this sense – that is, their criterion of inclusion is the unbroken chain. The canonical collections of Imam al-Bukhari (d. 256/870), Muslim (d. 261/875), and al-Darimi exemplify this usage in their full titles, which incorporate the word musnad to signal their commitment to connected transmissions. A representative example from al-Bukhari’s collection demonstrates the principle: the chain from ‘Abdallah ibn Yusuf to Malik, from Malik to Abu Zinad, from Abu Zinad to al-A‘raj, and from al-A‘raj to Abu Hurayra, reporting from the Prophet – each link in the chain constitutes a direct encounter between transmitter and recipient.

**Second: A compilation organized by Companion.** In this more specialized sense, a musnad is a work in which the narrations of each Companion are gathered separately.

Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi notes that among the early compilers, «some chose to transmit narrations in musnad form» (al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, 2004:51). Badr al-Din al-Zarkashi elaborates: «Certain hadith scholars collect the narrations reported by each Companion separately, arranging them either alphabetically or according to the hierarchical standing of the Companions – beginning with the ten given the glad tidings of Paradise (al-‘ashara al-mubashshara), followed by those who participated in the Battle of Badr» (Badr al-Din al-Zarkashi, 1998:456). This is the predominant technical meaning of the genre term.

**Third: Synonymous with the term sanad.** In a looser usage, musnad sometimes functions as a synonym for the chain of transmission itself – the sequence of narrators linking the compiler back to the Prophet. Mahmud al-Tahhan employs the term in this sense in his standard reference work on hadith terminology (Mahmud al-Tahhan, 1994:45).

### **Historical emergence of the musnad genre**

Prior to the systematic codification of the 8th century CE, hadith circulated in a scattered, unorganized state. As compilation activity accelerated from the late Umayyad period onward, scholars began consolidating narrations into structured collections that often included not only Prophetic reports but also the statements of Companions and the legal opinions (fatwas) of the Successors (tabi‘un). The musnad as a distinct genre – focused exclusively on Prophetic narrations and organized by Companion – emerged primarily from the late 8th century onward.

Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani (d. 852/1448) provides the earliest historical testimony: «Certain hadith masters wished to isolate narrations transmitted directly from the Prophet. This was in the early years of the second century of the Hijra. The first to compose a musnad work was ‘Ubaydallah ibn Musa al-‘Absi al-Kufi, followed by Musaddad ibn Musarhad al-Basri» (Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, 1984:45). On the question of priority, however, three distinct scholarly positions exist:

**First position:** Al-Hakim, Ibn al-Jawzi, Ibn al-Athir, and Badr al-Din al-Zarkashi hold that ‘Ubaydallah ibn Musa al-‘Absi al-Kufi (d. 213/828) was the first, followed by Abu Dawud al-Tayalisi (d. 203/818). Ibn Hajar substitutes Musaddad ibn Musarhad (d. 228/843) for Abu Dawud, while Ibn al-Salah places Abu Dawud before ‘Ubaydallah ibn Musa.

**Second position:** According to Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the pioneer was Nu‘aym ibn Hammad al-Khuza‘i al-Misri (d. 228/843), followed by Asad ibn Musa al-Umawi al-Misri, known as Asad al-Sunna («The Lion of the Sunnah»).

**Third position:** Abu Ahmad ‘Abdallah ibn ‘Adi proposes a regionally differentiated view, arguing that each leading center produced its own pioneer: in Kufa, Yahya ibn ‘Abd al-Humayd al-Himmani; in Basra, Musaddad; and in Egypt, Asad ibn Musa.

### **The methodological hierarchy of musnad works**

Musnad compilations occupy a specific position in the hierarchy of hadith literature. Al-Hakim states: «Musnad works arranged according to the order of Companion narrations include reports from both trustworthy and criticized narrators» (Abu Ya‘la Ahmad ibn ‘Ali al-Mawsili, 1984:112). This is because the defining criterion of the genre is comprehensiveness with respect to a given Companion’s narrations, not the authentication of each individual report.

Ibn al-Salah explains: «The established practice of musnad compilers was to transmit each Companion’s narrations without distinguishing their evidentiary quality. For this reason, musnad works – however eminent their authors – rank below the five canonical collections and the thematically organized compilations.» Ibn Hajar endorses this assessment: «Whoever compiled in the musnad arrangement intended to gather every narration attributed to a given Companion, regardless of whether it was admissible as evidence or not» (Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, 1984:5). Nevertheless, certain musnad compilers departed from this norm by applying selection criteria. As Ibn Hajar notes: «Some musnad authors selected from each Companion’s narrations only those they considered sound.»

Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi offers an important counterpoint regarding works that include critically annotated narrations: «Compiling a musnad with ‘ilal (hidden defects) is preferable, because knowledge of hidden defects ranks among the highest branches of hadith scholarship» (al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, 2004, Vol. 9:76). Ibn al-Salah reinforces this: «The highest level of compilation in this domain is to present every transmission path for each hadith together with a full account of variant readings and the points of difference among narrators – an approach exemplified by Ya‘qub ibn Abi Shayba.»

Imam Muslim articulated the rationale for selective compilation: «Preserving a smaller number of authentic narrations and perfecting them is easier than studying a large corpus, especially for lay readers who cannot distinguish sound from unsound reports.

A small number of authentic narrations is preferable to a large number of unreliable ones; their multiplicity and repetition, however, benefit the specialist who understands their causes and defects.»

### **The three principal categories of musnad works**

Shams al-Din al-Sakhawi's discussion of musnad typology, drawing on Zayn al-Din al-'Iraqi (Zayn al-Din al-'Iraqi, 2004:341), provides the basis for the following classification:

**I. Selected (Muntaqa) Musnads** – works in which the compiler applied authentication criteria and included only narrations meeting a defined standard of reliability. The most authoritative examples include:

**1. *The Musnad of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal.*** Ibn Hajar writes: «Any fair-minded person will not doubt that this musnad is more carefully selected and its narrators more reliable than other works» (Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, 1984:447). The collection draws from 904 Companions, is organized by Companion in the order of their precedence and tribal affiliation, and encompasses approximately 30,000 narrations – extended to 40,000 through additions by Ahmad's son 'Abdallah and later by Abu Bakr al-Qattani. Ibn Hajar devoted a chapter in his notes specifically to defending the collection against criticism, addressing its weak and fabricated narrations.

**2. *The Musnad of Ishaq ibn Ibrahim al-Hanzali al-Marwazi (d. 238/852), known as Ibn Rahawayh.*** Preserved in six volumes, much of which has not survived, this work included only those narrations from each Companion that its author considered sound. Ibn Rahawayh states: «I included the most authoritative of each Companion's narrations» (Badr al-Din al-Zarkashi, 1998:366). The extant portion was edited by Dr. 'Abd al-Ghafur Ballushi.

**3. *The Musnad of Imam Baqi ibn Makhlad al-Andalusi al-Qurtubi.*** Ibn Hazm declared: «I know of no one whose reliability, precision in accepting narrations, and quality of teachers match his. He transmitted from 2,084 authorities, of whom only ten were considered weak, the rest being well-known figures» (Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi, 1996:286).

**4. *The Musnad of Abu Bakr Ahmad ibn 'Amr al-Bazzar, titled Bahr al-Zakhkhar.*** Al-Bazzar was meticulous in noting contested narrations and their defects. Regarding a report attributed to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib concerning al-Mahdi, he writes: «We know of no

other transmission of this narration from the Prophet through this chain. We have cited it and also stated its defect» (al-Bazzar, 1998:15).

**5. *The Musnad of Diya' al-Din Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahid al-Maqdisi, titled Al-Ahadith al-mukhtara mimma laysa fi al-Ṣahihayn*** (Selected Hadiths not Found in the Two Ṣahih Collections). Organized by Companion, this work explicitly applies a criterion of soundness. In his introduction, the author states: «These are narrations not found in al-Bukhari and Muslim. I have included some that al-Bukhari cites in suspended form (ta'liq) and have noted in certain cases where a well-documented chain carries a defect» (Diya' al-Din al-Maqdisi, 2001:65).

**II. Critically Annotated (Mu'allal) Musnads** – works in which the compiler's primary concern was to document the hidden defects ('ilal) of the narrations included. Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi and Ibn al-Salah regarded this approach as the most sophisticated level of compilation. Ibn al-Salah states: «The highest level is to present every transmission path for each hadith with a complete account of variant readings and the disagreements among narrators.»

It was widely observed among early scholars that no critically annotated musnad had ever been brought to completion. Abu al-Qasim 'Ubaydallah (d. 1044) reports: «I have heard the masters say: 'No annotated musnad work has ever been completed'» (al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, 2001:281). Notable examples include:

**1. The Musnad al-kabir al-mu'allal of Ya'qub ibn Shayba ibn Ṣallat al-Sadusi.** Al-Dhahabi writes: «He is the author of an unparalleled, complete, major annotated musnad in thirty volumes – had it been finished, it would have run to a hundred volumes» (Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi, 2010:642). A single part has been published, consisting of the musnad of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab.

**2. The 'Ilal al-kabir of Imam al-Tirmidhi (d. 279/892).** Organized originally by Companion, it was later rearranged by subject by Mahmud ibn 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and circulated in that form. The work illustrates the deep influence of al-Tirmidhi's teacher, Imam al-Bukhari, on his approach to identifying the hidden defects of narrations.

**3. The Bahr al-Zakhkhar of Hafiz Abu Bakr al-Bazzar.** Ibn Kathir notes: «Al-Bazzar's musnad contains defects not found in other musnad works» (Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi, 1996, Vol. 1:179), a remark intended to praise the author's attention to singling out solitary narrations.

#### 4. The Musnad of Abu ‘Ali al-Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn Masarjis al-Masarjisi.

Al-Sakhawi states: «He has an annotated musnad in 1,300 parts» (Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi, 2010, Vol. 4:1431).

**III. General (‘Amm) Musnads** – works in which the compiler made no systematic attempt either to authenticate narrations or to annotate their defects, focusing simply on comprehensiveness. The most widely known examples include:

1. The Musnad Abi Bakr
2. The Muntakhab min musnad ‘Abd ibn Humayd

#### **Organizational schemes in musnad literature**

Musnad compilers employed several distinct methods for ordering the Companion narrations within their works:

**Chronological-hierarchical ordering.** The most prevalent arrangement begins with the ten Companions promised Paradise (al-‘ashara al-mubashshara) – the four caliphs, al-Zubayr ibn al-‘Awwam, Talha ibn ‘Ubaydallah, ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Awf, Sa‘d ibn Abi Waqqas, Sa‘id ibn Zayd, and Abu ‘Ubayda ibn al-Jarrah – and proceeds through participants in the Battle of Badr, signatories of the Truce of Hudaibiyya, those who converted between Hudaibiyya and the Conquest of Mecca, and finally those who converted at the Conquest. Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi endorses this arrangement as the optimal method (al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, 2004:105), as does Ibn al-Salah. In practice, the narrations of female Companions – typically headed by ‘A’isha, followed by Umm Salama, Umm Habiba, Zaynab bint Jahsh, and others – are generally placed at the end of works using this scheme, though Abu Dawud al-Tayalisi’s musnad places Fatima first among the women.

**Tribal ordering.** Some compilers organized by tribal affiliation, beginning with the Banu Hashim and proceeding outward through the Quraysh to other Arabian tribes. This reflects the genealogical prestige hierarchy operative in early Islamic society.

**Alphabetical ordering.** Al-Tabarani’s al-Mu‘jam al-kabir and Diya’ al-Din al-Maqdisi’s musnad exemplify this arrangement, which facilitates rapid location of narrations from specific Companions.

**Unclassified ordering.** A small number of compilations follow no discernible arrangement. Al-Dhahabi describes the musnad of al-Harith ibn Muhammad ibn Abi Usama al-Tamimi al-Baghdadi (d. 282/895) as «written neither in the order of jurisprudential chapters nor in the musnad arrangement» (al-Dhahabi, 2002:642). ‘Ali

ibn Abi Bakr al-Haythami (d. 807/1405) subsequently reorganized this work by legal chapters under the title *Bughyat al-bahith 'an zawa'id musnad al-Harith*.

Tarajim (sub-chapter) format. Some musnad works introduce sub-chapters within each Companion's section, dedicated to the narrations of individual Successors from that Companion. Al-Hakim describes the procedure: the compiler first heads a section with «The narration of Abu Bakr from the Messenger of God,» then introduces a subsection titled «The narration of Qays ibn Abi Hazim from Abu Bakr.» Works following this pattern include the musnads of al-Tayalisi, al-Bazzar's *Bahr al-Zakhkhar*, and the musnad of al-Haytham al-Shashi.

### **Major musnad compilations: a selective survey**

Sayyid 'Abd al-Majid al-Ghawri, in his encyclopaedic survey *Mawsu'at 'ulum al-hadith wa-fununih*, identifies the following as the most significant musnad works:

**1. *The Musnad of Abu Dawud al-Tayalisi (d. 204/819)*.** Several Khurasani masters undertook to supplement the collection with additional narrations from Abu Dawud's student Yunus ibn Habib al-Isfahani. The hadith of this musnad were later rearranged by legal subject by Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Banna and published in two volumes under the title *Minhat al-ma'bud bi-tartib musnad Abi Dawud*.

**2. *The Musnads (Small and Large) of Hafiz Abu Ya'la al-Mawsili (d. 307/919)*.** The large musnad has not survived intact, though Ibn Hajar and al-Busayri (d. 840/1436) drew upon it in their respective works. The published edition of Abu Ya'la's musnad contains no reference to the existence of two separate collections (Abu Ya'la al-Mawsili, 2005:10).

**3. *The Musnad of Muhammad ibn Harun Abu Bakr al-Ruyani (d. 307/919)*.** Survives incompletely.

**4. *The Musnad of Abu Sa'id al-Haytham ibn Kulayb al-Shashi (d. 335/947)*.** A hafiz-level scholar from Transoxiana. The work has not survived in full; it was edited for publication by Dr. Mahfuz al-Rahman Zaynallah. The musnad selects its Companions and then lists the narrators who transmitted from each Companion in alphabetical order. Until recently, the sole manuscript was preserved as item number 277 at the Zahiriyya Library in Damascus – later transferred to the Maktabat al-Asad – consisting of 192 folios copied in naskh script in 563 AH by Hafiz Diya' al-Din al-Maqdisi. This manuscript represents the seventh through fifteenth parts of the original fifteen-volume work. Mahfuz al-Rahman Zaynallah established the attribution of the text to al-Shashi on the grounds that every isnad in the collection begins with al-Shashi's own teachers: al-'Abbas ibn

Muhammad al-Duri, Abu 'Isa al-Tirmidhi, Abu Hatim al-Razi, 'Isa ibn Ahmad al-Balkhi, 'Abdallah ibn Muhammad ibn Shakir, and others (Abu Sa'id al-Haytham al-Shashi, 1990:29).

The largest musnad work in Islamic history is traditionally ascribed to Husayn ibn Muhammad ibn Masarjis al-Masarjisi (d. 365/976), a scholar born into a Christian family who converted to Islam through the influence of 'Abdallah ibn al-Mubarak. Al-Kattani reports: «The musnad, when corrected, comprises 1,300 parts. It is said that no larger book has been written in Islam» (Muhammad ibn Ja'far al-Kattani, 1992:73). A competing claim designates the musnad of Abu Yusuf al-Sadusi, a student of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, as the largest – though that work was never completed.

Muhammad Matar al-Zahrani lists the following among the most significant musnad compilers (Muhammad Matar al-Zahrani, 2010:94): Abu Dawud al-Tayalisi (d. 204/819), Abu Bakr ibn Abi Shayba (d. 235/850), Ishaq ibn Ibrahim al-Hanzali (d. 238/853), Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Dawruqi (d. 246/860), 'Abd ibn Humayd al-Kishshi (d. 249/863), Ya'qub ibn Shayba Abu Yusuf al-Sadusi al-Basri (d. 262/876), Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Tarsusi al-Khuza'i (d. 273/886), al-Harith ibn Muhammad ibn Abi Usama al-Tamimi al-Baghdadi (d. 282/895), Ahmad ibn 'Amr al-Bazzar (d. 292/905), Abu Ya'la al-Tamimi al-Mawṣili (d. 307/919), al-Haytham ibn Kulayb Abu Sa'id al-Shashi (d. 335/947), and Da'laḥ ibn Ahmad al-Sijistani (d. 351/962).

Several musnad works became associated primarily with the shaykh from whose narrations they were drawn rather than with their actual compiler – as in the case of Abu Dawud al-Tayalisi's musnad, Imam al-Shafi'i's musnad (compiled by Ibn Matar al-Naysaburi from al-Shafi'i's narrations), and Abu al-Hasan al-Daraqutni's 'Ilal (compiled in musnad form by his student al-Barqani, d. 425/1034). A further group of musnad compilations have not survived: these include the musnads of Musaddad ibn Musarhad (d. 228/843), Muhammad ibn Yahya ibn Abi 'Umar al-'Adani (d. 243/857), and Ahmad ibn Mani' Abu Ja'far al-Baghawi (d. 244/858).

### **Derivative literature based on musnad works**

The musnad corpus did not function merely as a terminal product of compilation activity. It served as the primary raw material for several subsequent genres of hadith literature. Later scholars drew on musnad works to produce *zawa'id* compilations (identifying narrations not found in canonical collections), *majma'* works (gathering

narrations from multiple musnads), *dhayl* supplements (extending and completing earlier works), and *aṭraf* indices (listing the opening phrases of narrations across multiple collections). The interconnection between these derivative genres and the musnad literature underscores the genre's foundational role in the broader architecture of hadith scholarship.

The critical value of the musnad for establishing the authenticity of narrations is particularly evident in the context of hidden defect analysis (*ilm al-ʿilal*). As al-Khatib al-Baghdadi explains: «The way to identify the defect of a hadith is to gather all its transmission paths, examine the disagreements among narrators, and weigh their respective capacities for retention and accurate transmission» (Ibn ʿAsakir, 1998, Vol. 64:71). Yahya ibn Maʿin, as reported by al-Hakim, observed: «Had we not written a single hadith through thirty paths, we would not have understood it.» The availability of multiple transmission paths in musnad works made them indispensable tools for this analytical process.

## CONCLUSION

The musnad genre occupies a structurally foundational position in the architecture of classical hadith literature. By preserving narrations in a format organized around the Companions who transmitted them, musnad works simultaneously fulfilled three scholarly functions: they documented the continuity of transmission chains, they provided the raw material for comparative analysis of variant transmissions, and they supplied the evidential basis for both narrator criticism (*jarh wa-taʿdil*) and the detection of hidden defects (*ʿilal*).

The internal differentiation of the genre – into selected, critically annotated, and general musnads – reflects the varying priorities of their compilers: authentication of individual narrations, documentation of transmission pathology, and comprehensive coverage of a Companion's hadith corpus. The organizational diversity of musnad works, whether arranged by Companion hierarchy, tribal affiliation, or alphabetical order, demonstrates the genre's adaptability to different scholarly audiences and purposes.

The role of the musnad as a primary source for subsequent derivative genres – *zawa'id*, *majma'*, *dhayl*, and *aṭraf* works – confirms that its significance extended well beyond its immediate function as a reference tool. Three of the four founders of the

major Sunni legal schools produced musnad works, most notably Ahmad ibn Hanbal, whose collection remains the most widely studied and cited musnad in the tradition. The continued inaccessibility of many musnad manuscripts and the incompleteness of several major compilations represent productive areas for ongoing critical scholarship.

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