Introduction

Al-Hatib al-Bagdadi (392-463/1002-1071) was concerned all his life with hadith. In his El 2 article on him, Sellheim rightly calls him «the great critical systematizer of hadith methodology». That means that he was particularly expert at appraising isnads. As we all know, at a certain time in the first/seventh century an authentication device called the isnad, or «chain of authorities», was introduced to stem the proliferation of sayings falsely ascribed to the Prophet Muhammed. Producing an isnad meant mentioning one’s authority for a bit of transmitted material and, if necessary, that authority’s authority and so on. For a precise chronology of the birth of the isnad, see further down.

One of the major problems about which al-Hatib wrote extensively is that of the marasil or mursal, traditions provided with isnads in which (mostly1) the name of the Companion2 is lacking. 

1 In early hadith terminology a mursal strand is one in which one name is missing, no matter at what level. Since that invariably meant in early days the name of the Companion between the Prophet and the Successor, mursal came to mean an isnad without a Companion. In later developments the term mursal was no longer usable in its original sense and thus mursal became defined as a strand in which only the name of the Companion was lacking, whereas an interrupted isnad with one name missing at no matter what level became known as munqati’3; in other words: every mursal is munqati’, but not every munqati’ is mursal. In the following the term mursal is used only for a strand from which the Companion is missing.

2 In the following the terms Companion and Successor are exclusively used in their technical sense, a Companion being a member of the generation of the Prophet from those who intimately used to know him to those who were mere children at the time of his death, but who are alleged to have set eyes on him at least once, be it from a distance. Successors are all those who personally knew one or more Companions. From these two definitions it becomes clear that Companions are people ranging in age between those who were the Prophet’s seniors to those who died some fifty to sixty years after his death, and that Successors are between those who were the Prophet’s contemporaries to those who died a century or more after his death.

Arabica, tome XXXIX, 1992
Long before al-Ḥaṭīb’s time, especially as a result of the insistence of Ṣafī’ī (d. 204/820) that traditions—in order to be acceptable—should be supported by isnād-s going back all the way to the Prophet⁵, mursal isnād-s had acquired the reputation of being far less «sound»—the technical term for acceptable—than isnād-s which duly list all the transmitters including the Companion, thus forming an uninterrupted chain (with a technical term: muttaṣil). Al-Ḥaṭīb set out to reevaluate some of the material supported by marāṣil isnād-s by devoting a thorough study to the phenomenon in his Al-kifāya fi ʿilm al-riwāya. From his expose I translate here the following passage (Hyderabad 1357, p. 384):

«Scholars are agreed that irṣāl in traditions, which are [otherwise] not [the product of] tradition deceit (in Arabic: taddīs), constitutes the transmission of a traditionist on the authority of someone who is not his contemporary or whom he has never met. Examples of this sort of transmission are Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab, Abū Salama b. ʿAbd al-Rahmān, ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr, Muḥammad b. al-Munkadir, al-Ḥasan al-ʾBaṣrī, Muḥammad b. Sīrīn, Qatāda and other suchlike Successors who transmit traditions directly on the authority of the Messenger of God.» (After giving other examples of irṣāl in isnād-s not involving Companions, strictly speaking munqāṭīc strands, he goes on:) «But scholars do differ in their opinions whether or not to put traditions [supported by mursal isnād-s] into practice. Some say that they are acceptable and should therefore be considered as pointing to an obligatory practice, if the traditionist responsible for such traditions is a reliable authority; this is the opinion of Mālik b. Anas and his Medinan followers, and Abū Ḥanīfa and his Iraqi followers, as well as others. But al-Ṣafī’ī and various other scholars do not uphold this obligation, and their stance is adopted by the majority of experts and critics of ḥadīth.»

Al-Ḥaṭīb gives a long list of scholars who accept marāṣil of certain Successors while rejecting those of others. These scholarly opinions make fascinating reading for all those familiar with the names of

---