I. Introduction

§ 1 In the sixth century of the Muslim era the Ḥanbalite scholar Abū Ḭ-Farağ ibn al-Ḡawzī (d. 597) wrote a book to encourage his lazy contemporaries to greater efforts in the memorisation of Tradition.1 God, he argued, had singled out the Muslims to memorise Koran and Tradition, whereas those who had been before them had been dependent on written sources and were incapable of memorisation. The Jews, for example, had conferred on Ezra2 the title “son of God” merely because he knew the Torah by heart; among Muslims, by contrast, a seven-year-old child could recite the Koran from memory. The same contrast obtained in the field of Tradition. “Nobody among the nations transmits the words and deeds of their Prophet in a reliable fashion apart from us; for among us Tradition is transmitted from one generation to another, and the reliability of [each] transmitter is examined until the tradition has been traced back to the Prophet. Other nations have their traditions from written sources of which the writers and transmitters are unknown.”3

§ 2 Ibn al-Ḡawzī’s exhortation suggests two basic points about the “oral Tradition” of Islam. The first concerns the significance of its oral character. For Ibn al-Ḡawzī, as for the Muslim traditionists in general, this oral character was more than an occasion for the display of

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1 Ibn al-Ḡawzī, al-Ḥatt ‘ala ḥifz al-‘ilm wa-dikr kibār al-hiffiz, Beirut, 1985; see also the description of the work in M. Weisweiler, Istanbuler Handschriftenstudien zur arabischen Traditionsliteratur, Istanbul, 1937, pp. 199f, no. 149. I tend to use “Tradition” to refer to hadīṭ at large, and “tradition” for an individual hadīṭ.

2 For ‘azīz read ‘Uzayr, and for the faqada of the Beirut printing read fa-qara’a with Weisweiler.

3 Ibn al-Ḡawzī, Ḥatt, p. 11.10; Weisweiler, Istanbuler Handschriftenstudien, pp. 199f.
mnemonic virtuosity—though it certainly was that.⁴ For it was on the oral continuity of transmission that the very authenticity of Tradition was seen to rest; mere literary transmission, and a fortiori literary finds, could carry no such authority.⁵ This point of view needs emphasis because it is exactly the reverse of our own: the Dead Sea Scrolls represent at once the philologist’s dream and the traditionist’s nightmare. It is hard to imagine that Ibn al-Ǧawzī would have set much store by modern vindications of the authenticity of Muslim Tradition based on the exhumation of Arabic literary papyri,⁶ or on the claim that the oral terminology of isnāds always conceals written transmission.⁷

§ 3 Our own view was, however, widely represented in the broader culture of Islam, and even among the traditionists themselves. Ǧāhiz (d. 255) avers that, but for books, the greater part of learning would be lost and forgetfulness would prevail,⁸ and quotes the poet Ǧūl-Rumma (d. 117) on the greater reliability of written records of poetry (al-kitāb lā yansā wa-lā yubaddītu kalāman bi-kalām).⁹ In the polemic of Abū Saʿīd al-Dārīmī (d. 282) against an adherent of the views of Bīr al-Mārīsī (d. 218), the antagonist appears to be arguing the unsoundness of certain traditions on the ground that Tradition was not written down before the killing of ʿUṭmān.¹⁰ Dārīmī responds by adducing attestations of the early writing of Tradition.¹¹ Among the traditionists, the Medinese Muḥammad ibn ʿAmr [al-Layṭī] (d. 144) refused to transmit to his students unless they wrote, for fear that they would falsely ascribe things to him.¹² In an Imāmī anecdote a traditionist of the early second century wishes to write down a tradition so that no one can reject it.¹³ The Kūfī Abū Nuʿaym al-Faḍl ibn Dukayn (d. 219) states that

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⁴ The element of virtuosity can be seen, for example, in the conjunction of the notions of never writing down a tradition and never asking for one to be repeated (see, for example, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, Ǧāmī hayān al-ʿilm, Cairo, n.d., I, pp. 67.18, 67.21 (this work is hereafter cited as Ǧāmī’), all references being to the first volume unless otherwise stated); Ibn Saʿīd, al-Tabaqāt al-kaḥīr, ed. E. Sachau et al., Leyden, 1904-21, VI, p. 174.4 (this work is hereafter cited as Tabaqāt); Dārīmī, Sunan, ed. ‘A.H. Yamānī, Medina, 1966, no. 459 (this work is hereafter cited as Sunan). Whether traditions have to be repeated for the slow-witted is in no sense a doctrinal issue.


⁸ Ǧāhiz, Hayawān, ed. ‘A.M. Hārūn, Cairo, 1938-45, I, p. 47.8.

⁹ Ibid., p. 41.6. I owe both of these references to Albert Arazi; for parallels to the second, see below, § 115, note 522.


¹¹ Ibid., pp. 129-32.


¹³ See below, § 11, note 50.