Muslim Tradition: Theory vs. Usage. The Definition (ḥadd) and the Usage (istiʿmāl) in Sunnī Hadith Science in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries CE

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1 Introduction

During the tenth and eleventh centuries, the first theoretical Sunnī hadith texts depict the history of hadith as a process that went through two important steps: the constitution of major hadith collections and the development of the terminology of hadith science.¹ This paper focuses on the second step and in particular on the methods according to which the hadith scholars define the technical terms of hadith science. Some of the methods of defining a given term highlight the gap between its theoretical definition (ḥadd) and the definition deriving from its usage (istiʿmāl). The sources for this work are selected from a number of theoretical writings of hadith science, the science that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Rāmahurmuzī (d. 360/971) refers to as the science of “knowledgeable transmission” (ʿilm al-dirāya).² According to al-Rāmahurmuzī, the “knowledgeable transmission” complements the science of the simple transmission (ʿilm al-riwāya)³ and includes (a) knowing the various chains of transmission of a single hadith,⁴ (b) knowing the authority from which the hadith is transmitted,⁵ and finally, (b) knowing the terminology used in hadith literature and being able to distinguish between the meanings of specific terms such as ‘kull’ (every one [of the transmitters]) and ‘akthar’ (the majority [of the transmitters]).⁶

¹ Scott C. Lucas, Constructive Critics, ḥadīth Literature, and the Articulation of Sunnī Islam: The Legacy of the Generation of Ibn Ṣaʿīd, Ibn Māʾīn, and Ibn Ḥanbal (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 68–72.
² ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Rāmahurmuzī, al-Muḥaddith al-fāṣil bayna al-rāwī wa-l wāʾī, ed. Muḥammad ʿAjjāj al-Khatīb (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1984), 230; Asma Hilali, “ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Rāmahurmuzī (m. 360/971) à l’origine de la réflexion sur l’authenticité du ḥadīṯ,” Annales Islamologiques 39 (2005): 131–147.
³ See examples of narratives showing the differences between “ʿIlm al-dirāya’ and “ʿIlm al-riwāya’ in al-Rāmahurmuzī, al-Muḥaddith, 248–253.
⁴ al-Rāmahurmuzī, al-Muḥaddith, 250.
⁵ al-Rāmahurmuzī, 251.
⁶ al-Rāmahurmuzī, 240.
In this paper, I focus on the third component of ʿilm al-dirāya. By this, I mean the construction of the meaning of a given term in hadith science on the basis of various methods of defining. I study the methods that the hadith scholars follow to define specific terms, in particular those referring to the ranks of hadiths. Then, I show how they take into consideration the gap between the theoretical definition (ḥadd) and its correlate, the usage (istiʿmāl). The notion of istiʿmāl refers in this context to the tacit consensus among the hadith scholars regarding the meaning of specific terms; the same consensus emerges from their use of specific terms when they describe hadith case studies. The first section is dedicated to the methods of defining terms of hadith science in tenth and eleventh century CE sources. The second analyzes the notion of istiʿmāl and highlights its importance in the methods of definition. In the final section, I put into perspective Juynboll’s contribution to the study of the definition in the science of hadith and I question the place he gives to the notion of istiʿmāl. The sources mentioned in this paper are situated in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE. That is the period in which the systematic books on hadith as a science emerged as well as the first theoretical writings such as al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī’s (d. 405/1014), Maʿrifat ʿulūm al-ḥadīth. In the same period appears a sophisticated conception of the very act of defining terms of hadith science. This time witnessed the dynamic interaction between, on the one hand, the attempts of the scholars to elaborate a theory of hadith and, on the other, the activity of hadith transmission and criticism. The dynamic link between the two activities theory of hadith and transmission of hadith is reflected in the debate of the hadith scholars about definition (ḥadd) vs. usage (istiʿmāl).

2 Definition and Usage in Hadith Science

The gap between the theoretical meanings of hadith terms and the meanings emerging from their usage by the hadith scholars constitutes a major concern of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1085) in his book Kitāb al-kifāya fī ʿilm al-rīwāya. In the chapter entitled “Knowing the expressions used by hadith

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7 Regarding the meaning of istiʿmāl in a linguistic context, see: A. Hadj-Salah, “Lugha,” in Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., accessed 27 July 2018, http://dx.doi.org.janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4685.
8 Asma Hilali, “Étude sur la tradition prophétique: La théorie de l’authenticité du I–VI/VI–XII siècle” (PhD diss., Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes, 2004).
9 al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, Kitāb al-kifāya fī ʿilm al-rīwāya (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1988).
scholars” the author states that [hadith scholars] describe a hadith as musnad¹⁰ by referring to its chain of transmission (sanad) and its non-interruption while they use the term [musnad] for the [a hadith] attributed to the Prophet.¹¹

Al-Baghdādī defines the term musnad by highlighting the gap between the theoretical definition and the contexts in which the same term is used. By using the term in a specific context, the scholars of hadith progressively modify its meaning and contribute to the elaboration of a parallel meaning related to the usage. However, the notion of istiʿmāl does not abrogate the theoretical definition; it rather takes fully part of it and constitutes one of the components of the dirāya. Al-Baghdādī’s method announces the beginning of the theoretical writings in the field of hadith in which the very act of defining the categories of hadiths as well as the types of chains includes a variety of methods such as naming, describing, defining a contrario and finally defining by means of setting conditions. By defining the categories of hadith, the authors of the theoretical books evolve from the riwāya towards the dirāya and inaugurate the theoretical turning point in hadith history in which the methods of definitions occupy a prominent place. What follows is a survey of these methods.

2.1 Defining and Naming

The term ḥadd (boundary, limit) and the act of naming are two distinctive methods of definition. Goichon states: “the name expresses the meaning by using only one word.”¹² The restriction of the definition to one word distinguishes naming from other procedures of definitions such as describing the components of a meaning or setting the conditions of its accomplishment. The method of giving names to the categories of hadith that could be described as a minimalist method of defining is frequent in our sources. Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr al-Qurṭubi (d. 462/1070) considers defining as quasi-equivalent to naming.¹³ According to him, when the scholar gives a name to a specific category of hadith, he reveals its true nature (ḥaqīqa). On this basis, he dedicates a chapter

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¹⁰ Juynboll defines the term musnad as an adjective “applied to an isnād that goes back all the way to the Prophet without a link missing.” See Alfred F.L. Beeston (ed.) and Gautier H.A. Juynboll, “Musnad,” in Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., accessed 27 July 2018, http://dx.doi.org.janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_0814.

¹¹ al-Baghdādī, Kifāya, 21. See the entire quotation on p. [12] below.

¹² Bernard Carra-de-Vaux, Joseph Schacht and Amélie-Marie Goichon, “Ḥadd,” in Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., accessed 27 July 2018, http://dx.doi.org.janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1573-3912.islam_SIM_2586.

¹³ Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr al-Qurṭubi, Jāmiʿ Bayān al-ʿilm wa fadlīhi wa mā yanbaqhi fi riwāyatihī wa jamʿīhi, ed. Abū al-Ashbāl al-Zahiri (al-Dammām: Dār Ibn al-Jawzi, 1994), 1751 ff.
to “the object of what is named ʿilm and fiqh in general.” For the author, naming has often the same function as defining or, rather, pre-defining since the theoretical definition needs to be completed by the notion of istiʿmāl.

2.2 **Defining a contrario**

Defining terms of hadith science *a contrario* occurs in the first theoretical writings on hadith. Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr reports: “Knowledge (ʿilm) is considered as such when it was transmitted on the authority of Muḥammad’s Companions (aṣḥāb). Any [knowledge] that was not transmitted on the authority of one of them should not be [considered] as such.”

In the first section of the citation, the scholar describes a category of hadith, namely that which has the status of “knowledge” (ʿilm), by setting the theoretical conditions of its accomplishment. In the second part, he describes the consequence of missing the same condition, i.e. the non-accomplishment of the specific category of hadith, the one that equals knowledge, i.e. authentic hadith. The method of defining the term ʿilm *a contrario* allows the author to underline that any hadith narrated on the authority of transmitters other than the Prophet’s Companions is excluded from the realm of ʿilm, thus, from the realm of authenticity. The method of defining *a contrario* enhances the importance of the condition and restricts the number of chains of transmission having the potential to be considered as authentic.

2.3 **Defining by the Opposite**

As was mentioned above in the Introduction, al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī wrote a theoretical work dedicated to the definitions, “gradations and sub-divisions within the technical terms.” He occasionally critically comments on the methods of defining terms by their opposite. The high and law chain of transmission is one of the most important terms in hadith science. The high chain designates the chain containing the smallest number of authorities within the most reliable method of transmission; the law chain contains the larger number of

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14 Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *Jāmiʿ*, 1:751.
15 Ibn ʿIbn al-Barr, *Jāmiʿ*, 1:761.
16 James Robson, “Hadith,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., accessed 27 July 2018, http://dx.doi.org.janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0248. See in this volume, Christopher Melchert, “The Theory and Practice of Hadith Criticism in the Mid-Ninth Century.”
authorities within the less reliable method of transmission. The determinant aspect in the chain is firstly the method of transmission and secondly the number of authorities; al-Naysābūrī criticizes the method of defining the high and law chain of transmission by saying: “Stating that the low character of a chain of transmission (sanad nāzil) or (nuzūl al-ısnād) as the opposite of its high character constitutes the definition of the opposite [of the high character of the sanad], but that is not correct.”

The author builds on previous definitions of the chain of transmission and its lowly valued and highly valued characters and calls for the awareness of the vague character of some methods if definition by the opposite. Al-Naysābūrī emphasizes that the number of authorities in a given chain of transmission does not determine the high character of the chain or, in the case of its opposite, its low character. When the chain contains a significant number of authorities, it might be described as a low chain. However, taken exclusively, the low character of a given chain does not allow the definition of that same chain as the opposite of a high one. For al-Naysābūrī, defining the low chain of transmitters by describing its opposite, the high chain, does not express its low character. Low chains within a small number of authorities might exist, as might high chains with a large number of authorities. Thus, the author concludes that the method of defining a given term in hadith science by its opposite does not reflect the complexity of the meaning. In this specific case, not only is the theoretical definition not similar to the usage, but it sometimes contradicts it. However, the complexity of the two expressions (high chain of transmission vs. low chain of transmission) becomes clearer when the author proceeds by defining the high chain of transmission through the method of setting the conditions of its accomplishment.

2.4 Defining and Setting Conditions

Defining by setting conditions consists of enumerating the historical circumstances related to the transmission of a given hadith that, once attested, would allow the scholars to dedicate specific terms for specific and complex meanings. Defining by setting conditions is most of the time related to the ranks of hadith and their value vis-à-vis the issue of authenticity. For example, the

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17 al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, Maʿrifatʿulūmal-ḥadīth, ed. Al-Sayyid Muʿaẓẓam Hussein (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1977), 12.
encounter with the prophet Muḥammad constitutes, theoretically, the condition for the attribution of the quality of Companionship (ṣuḥba) to a given transmitter. The second example is the definition of the high chain of transmission to which al-Naysābūrī dedicates a sophisticated demonstration. He enumerates the necessary conditions for its accomplishment and adds some subtle precisions. Where there are few transmitters, the chain is defined as “high” (sanad ʿālī or ʿuluww al-isnād). However, as a condition for the high chain and thus for one of the conditions of the authenticity of the hadith, it is not sufficient that the number of transmitters should be small. Al-Naysābūrī adds an extra-condition: in addition to the high chain, the trustworthiness of the transmitters is necessary. This definition thus includes two theoretical sub-conditions. Moreover, the author takes into consideration the element of the usage and insists on the fact that, in their usage of the expression “high chain of transmission,” the hadith scholars often abandon the additional extra condition (the trustworthiness of the transmitters) for the sake of the first condition (the small number of transmitters). Al-Naysabūrī underlines that, theoretically, this is an erroneous method for setting the conditions of a high chain. And he insists on the fact that the conditions of a high chain should include, in addition to their small number, the trustworthiness of all transmitters. Thus, the definition issued from the usage (a small number of transmitters as a unique condition of the high chain) overlaps with the more complex theoretical definition (small numbers of transmitters and their truth worthiness). The dynamic theoretical definition vs. definition by usage might modify the theoretical meaning of the “high chain of transmission.”

2.5 Defining and Describing

A descriptive definition is frequent in the early texts of hadith science. In order to define a specific term, the authors proceed by enumerating the particularities of the hadith case-study related to it. This method leads often to a vague description of the hadith and of the rank to which it belongs. The following example concerns the definition Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr al-Qurṭubī builds on the notion of knowledge (ʿilm), i.e. authentic hadith: “At the beginning of knowledge, [there is] hearing (al-inṣāt), then listening (al-istimāʿ), then learning (al-ḥifẓ), application (al-ʿamal), and finally dissemination (al-nashr).”

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18 al-Naysābūrī, Maʿrifat, 11.
19 al-Naysābūrī, 11.
20 al-Naysābūrī, 11.
21 Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, Jāmiʿ, 1:143. See several versions of this narrative in Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, Jāmiʿ.
The author defines knowledge by describing its successive stages, each of which corresponds to a step along the way of learning authentic hadith in order to disseminate them.

2.6 Imbricated Definitions

Imbricated or overlapping definitions are firmly dependent on another. For example, hadith theoreticians define the chain of an uninterrupted hadith (muttaṣil) as containing names of transmitters who had taught each other hadiths without any interruption, i.e. without any intermediaries who did not have such a relation.22 The absence of any interruption can also be found in hadiths transmitted according to the preposition ‘an, named hadith called ‘mu’an’an’.23 This category of chain consists of the use of the preposition ‘an (on the authority of) alone.24 The definitions of ḥadīth muttaṣil and ḥadīth mu’an’an overlap and the definitions of their chains of transmission sometimes also overlap.

Another example of overlapped definition is an “interrupted” hadith (mursal).25 In this specific rank of hadith, the direct/oral transmission is interrupted between the Follower (tābiʿī) and the Prophet. Following al-Naysābūrī, the definition of mursal overlaps with that of the munqatī’, defined by three possible types of interruptions of the oral transmission:

(a) interruption between the Follower of the Follower (tābiʿ al-tābiʿ) and the Follower (al-tābiʿ) (b) interruption between the Follower (tābiʿ) and the Prophet, and (c) interruption between the Companion and the Prophet.26

Mursal and munqatī’ are imbricated and might also be complementary. Al-Baghdādī indeed alludes to the imbrication of the two categories of hadiths

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22 al-Naysābūrī, Maʿrifat, 34; al-Baghdādī, Kifāya, 21.
23 Gautier H.A. Juynboll, “Muʿanʿan,” in Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., accessed 27 July 2018, http://dx.doi.org.janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5275. Muʿanʿan is a passive form of the verb formed from the repetition of the preposition ‘an and means on the authority of.
24 Juynboll, “Muʿanʿan,” al-Baghdādī, Kifāya, 21.
25 al-Naysābūrī, Maʿrifat, 25. Al-Baghdādī, Kifāya, 21. Cf. Gautier H.A. Juynboll, “Mursal,” in Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., accessed 27 July 2018, http://dx.doi.org.janus.biu.sorbonne .fr/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5547 and also G. Troupeau and Gautier H.A. Juynboll, “Raf,” in Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., accessed 27 July 2018, http://dx.doi.org.janus.biu .sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0900.
26 al-Naysābūrī, Maʿrifat, 27–29; al-Baghdādī, Kifāya, 21.
and insists on their quasi-theoretical conformity. However, their conformity is only theoretical since the hadith scholars use the same terms for two different meanings: “The hadith munqatī’ is similar to the mursal but the term mursal is often used in order to designate a chain of transmission in which the Companion is mentioned but not the Follower.”

The distinction between the definitions of the two terms munqatī’ and mursal in the usage of the scholars complement their theoretical definitions and, at the same time, put them into perspective.

3 The definition (ḥadd) and Usage (isti‘māl)

As shown in the preceding development, the discrepancy between theoretical definition and usage is an important concern in the work of al-Baghdādī. The precise meaning of the notion of usage will be revealed progressively through the analysis of different citations below. In a chapter called “Knowledge of expressions used by hadith scholars,” al-Baghdādī writes: “The attribution of the qualifier ‘linked’ (musnad) to a given hadith signifies that its chain of transmission is unbroken between its transmitter and those from whom he heard it. They [hadith experts] often use the term [musnad] to designate [a hadith] attributed specifically to the Prophet.”

Al-Baghdādī looks at the way the hadith scholars use the term musnad in their study of specific examples of hadith texts; he then deduces a new layer of meaning that he adds to the theoretical meaning of the same term. The author distinguishes between the theoretical definition of the term and its definition issued from its usage by the hadith scholars. However, he provides additional

27 al-Baghdādī, 21.
28 Asma Hilali and Jacqueline Sublet, “The Masters’ Repertoire (mašyaḥa) and the Quest for Knowledge,” in Knowledge and Education in Classical Islam: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Impact, ed. Sebastian Günther (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).
29 al-Baghdādī, Kifāya, 21.
30 al-Baghdādī, 21.
elements that clarify our understanding of the notion of usage: “Regarding an ‘interrupted’ (mursal) [hadith], its chain of transmission is broken in precisely the following way: one of the transmitters did not hear the hadith directly from the transmitter who preceded him. However, most hadiths named mursal are those transmitted by a Follower on the authority of the Prophet.”

The usage of the term mursal by the scholars of hadith restricts the theoretical definition; the term designates not just any interruption in the chain of transmission but rather a specific interruption, the one that occurs between the Prophet and the Follower. According to al-Baghdādī, the usage of a technical term constitutes in itself a definition that is as important as the theoretical definition of the same term elaborated by the theoreticians of hadith. The dynamic relationship between the theoretical definition and the definition emerging from the usage introduces a certain flexibility into the theoretical definition. This leads to the transformation of the meaning by the scholars who, in the case of the mursal, focused on the interruption of the chain of transmission between a Follower and the Prophet. Al-Baghdādī affirms that the usage generates a tacit agreement between hadith scholars regarding one specific meaning of the term rather than another. While the theoretical definition establishes a broad meaning for the terms, the convention surrounding their usage establishes the restricted meaning. In hadith science, the usage, along with the theory, produces the meaning and constitutes a second layer of theorisation. Al-Baghdādī thus confers upon the usage the same authority as the theory in determining the meaning of terms in hadith science. The usage neither adds nuance to the theoretical definition nor contradicts it; rather, it fully engages with it. Al-Baghdādī compares his own theoretical definitions with what he calls “the usage of a hadith expert.” Superimposing several definitions of the same term enables him to measure the distance and the connection between theoretical meanings and the conventional ones emerging from practice. Al-Baghdādī perceives in the usage an autonomous meaning of the term that attests a pre-theoretical approach by the authors of first writings of hadith science in the tenth century CE.

31 al-Baghdādī, 21.
32 Juynboll, “Mursal.”
4 Theory vs. Usage in Juynboll’s Definitions

Defining the technical terms of hadith science constitutes one of the important contributions of Gautier Juynboll to hadith scholarship. Similarly to the mediæval hadith scholars, in almost all his entries in The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Juynboll shows an awareness of the gap between the theoretical meaning of a given term and the meaning that emerges from the conventional usage of the same term by mediæval hadith scholars. For example, in the same manner as Muslim Ibn Hajjâj al-Qushayrî (d. 875) in his introduction to his Ṣaḥīḥ, Juynboll emphasizes that the definition of the term ṣaḥīḥ has gone through a process to which both the theory of hadith science and hadith scholars’ conventions produced by usage contributed. Juynboll writes of the term ṣaḥīḥ:

It did not come into use immediately with the onset of isnād criticism, for al-Rāmahurmuzî (d. 360/970), who wrote the first systematic work on hadith, does not seem to have applied it yet. It is used by mediæval as well as modern Muslim tradition experts (sometimes followed in this by some western scholars) to describe or qualify one particular prophetic tradition or a whole collection of such traditions.33

In the same manner, when defining the term musnad,Juynboll underlines the distinction between the theoretical definition and the meaning of the same term issued from the usage by stating: “Most Muslim hadith scholars hold that a marfūʿ isnād need not necessarily be uninterrupted (muttaṣil), whereas in their definition a musnad isnād must be at the same time muttaṣil.”34 In a more explicit way, he describes the process of elaborating the conventional meaning when he defines hadith marfūʿ by saying: “Reports, furthermore, in which Companions are alleged to have said: ‘We used to do (or say) such and such a thing in the time of the Prophet,’ were considered mawqūf as to the actual wording but marfūʿ as to the underlying meaning, since they implied Muhammad’s tacit approval.”35

Juynboll attributes, however, the gap between theoretical meaning and the meaning issued from the usage to the growing importance of the legal function of hadith literature. According to him, the discrepancy between theory and

33 Gautier H.A. Juynboll, “Muslim’s Introduction to his Šaḥīḥ: Translated and Annotated with an Excursus on the Chronology of fitna and bidʿa,” Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 5 (1984): 310.
34 Juynboll, “Musnad.”
35 Juynboll, “Raf.”
usage is also due to the chronological gap between the early period of hadith history and its later period. For example, the meaning of the term *munkar* evolved precisely because at the early stages of hadith transmission in the second century AH (eighth century CE), the same term referred to the text of the hadith (*matn*) while later on, hadith scholars who were more involved with matters to do with the chain of transmitters (*sanad*), had to read just the meaning of *munkar* to criteria related to the *sanad*. Juynboll comments: “The identification of traditions as *munkar* hails from a very early stage in Muslim hadith evaluation. [...] In later usage, as from the second half of the second/eighth century, *munkar* becomes virtually synonymous with *mawdūʿ* ‘fabricated,’ pertaining to *isnād* as well as *matn*.”

Nevertheless, Juynboll did not pay further attention to the notion of usage and to the dynamic between theory and usage and considers the notion of usage only as a part of the authority of hadith in the first/seventh century. He believes that hadith authority results mainly from legal discussion. In other words, he considers hadith's entering the legal sphere crucial for the evolution of terms and definitions. However, more than a method for defining, the dynamic of theory vs. usage shows the growth of the hadith corpus as well as the theoretical debates that accompanies it while hinting at a certain harmony between the theory of hadith and history of transmission.

Acknowledgements

This paper was presented at the first Juynboll congress organised by LUCIS in 2011. I thank the organisers, Petra Sijpesteijn, Léon Buskens and Camilla Adang for inviting me to the conference. My thanks also to Russel Harris and Stephen Burge for their feedback on the first draft of this paper.

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36 Gautier H.A. Juynboll, “Munkar,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., accessed 27 July 2018, http://dx.doi.org.janus.biu.sorbonne.fr/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_5521.
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