

An Analysis of Hadith Collection Methods in Musnad Ahmad: A Historical and Methodological Study and Its Contribution to the Development of Hadith Studies

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Abstract

Musnad Ahmad is one of the largest Hadith collections in Islamic scholarship, compiled by Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241 AH). Unlike Hadith works organised by jurisprudential chapters, Musnad Ahmad arranges traditions according to the Companions who narrated them. This distinctive arrangement makes it a significant source for the history of Hadith compilation and an essential reference for classical and contemporary Hadith studies. This study analyses the methods Ahmad ibn Hanbal employed in collecting hadiths, including the historical background of the compilation, sources of transmission, selection criteria, systematic arrangement, and its contribution to Hadith scholarship. Using a qualitative library-research approach, the study relies on Musnad Ahmad as its primary source, complemented by classical and modern works on the Hadith sciences. The findings indicate that Ahmad's method prioritised the collection of prophetic traditions while safeguarding narrator credibility through the principles of integrity ('adalah) and precision (dhabit). Consequently, Musnad Ahmad has become one of the most influential Hadith compilations in preserving the prophetic tradition and advancing Islamic scholarship.

Keywords: *Musnad Ahmad; Ahmad ibn Hanbal; Hadith Compilation; Hadith Methodology; Islamic Scholarship.*

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1. Introduction

Hadith is the second source of Islamic law after the Qur'an, serving to clarify (bayān) Qur'anic verses. From the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) through the generation of the Tabi'in, Hadith was transmitted orally before gradually evolving into a tradition of writing and systematic codification. This codification effort reached its peak during the second and third centuries AH, when Hadith scholars began compiling collections based on specific methodologies.

One of the monumental works in the history of Hadith codification is Musnad Ahmad by Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, which collects approximately thirty thousand hadiths narrated from more than seven hundred Companions of the Prophet. This figure makes Musnad Ahmad one of the largest Hadith collections to appear before the emergence of the later thematic compilations.

The distinctive feature of Musnad Ahmad lies in its organisational structure, which is based on the names of the Companions rather than on legal themes, unlike Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī or Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim. This arrangement facilitates the work of Hadith scholars in tracing chains of transmission (sanad) and comparing the various narrations attributed to a given Companion.

Nevertheless, the existence of Musnad Ahmad often raises questions about the method Imam Ahmad employed in compiling it. Some regard the work as an unsystematic collection of hadiths, while others argue that Imam Ahmad applied rigorous selection criteria consistent with the principles of Hadith scholarship.

This issue warrants in-depth study, given that Musnad Ahmad serves as a primary source for later Hadith scholars. An examination of its compilation methods sheds light not only on Imam Ahmad's methodology but also on the evolution of Hadith scholarship during the third century AH.

This study therefore aims to elucidate the methods of Hadith compilation in Musnad Ahmad through historical and methodological analysis, thereby clarifying the characteristics of the work's composition and its contribution to the development of Hadith scholarship.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design based on library research (studi pustaka). Musnad Ahmad of Ahmad ibn Hanbal constitutes the primary data source, while classical and contemporary works on the Hadith sciences — including 'ulum al-hadith literature, biographical dictionaries (tabaqat), and relevant secondary scholarship — serve as supporting data. Data were collected through documentary review of these sources and analysed descriptively and analytically: passages relevant to the historical background, sources of transmission, selection criteria, and organisational structure of Musnad Ahmad were identified, compared, and interpreted in light of the established principles of Hadith criticism (jarh wa ta'dil). The trustworthiness of the analysis rests on triangulating the primary text against multiple classical and modern secondary sources

3. Results and Discussion

The Biography of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal

Imam Ahmad's full name is Abu Abdullah Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal ibn Hilal ibn Asad al-Syaibani. He was born in Baghdad in 164 AH (780 CE). His father died while he was still young, so his early education was overseen by his mother, who was known for her piety.

From an early age, Imam Ahmad displayed an extraordinary devotion to learning, particularly Hadith. At the age of fifteen he began a scholarly journey (rihlah fi thalab al-hadith) to various Islamic regions, including Kufa, Basrah, the Hijaz, Yemen, Syria, and Khurasan, in order to meet with Hadith scholars.

During these travels, Imam Ahmad studied under many eminent scholars, including Sufyan ibn 'Uyainah, Waki' ibn al-Jarrah, Yahya ibn Sa'id al-Qattan, 'Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani, Isma'il ibn 'Ulayyah, Yahya ibn Ma'in, and Imam al-Shafi'i. His relationship with Imam al-Shafi'i,

in particular, significantly shaped the methodologies of fiqh and Hadith that each subsequently developed.

Beyond his renown as a Hadith scholar, Imam Ahmad was also a faqih (jurist), a scholar of tafsir (Qur'anic exegesis), and the founding figure of the Hanbali school of thought. His steadfastness in upholding the Ahl al-Sunnah creed during the Mihnah the inquisition over the createdness of the Qur'an earned him the title Imam Ahl al-Sunnah (Leader of the People of the Sunnah).

Imam Ahmad passed away in Baghdad in 241 AH (855 CE). Historical accounts report that more than eight hundred thousand men and sixty thousand women attended his funeral, a testament to the immense esteem in which the Muslim community held him.

The Historical Background of the Compilation of Musnad Ahmad

The compilation of Musnad Ahmad cannot be separated from the broader development of the Hadith sciences during the third century AH. By that period, Hadith had spread across many regions, creating a pressing need to gather the Prophet's narrations into a single, comprehensive work.

Imam Ahmad recognised that, as narrators passed away, the risk of losing part of the Prophet's Hadith increased accordingly. He therefore undertook scholarly journeys spanning several decades to collect Hadith directly from trusted teachers.

According to his son 'Abdullah ibn Ahmad, Imam Ahmad had memorised approximately one million hadiths together with their chains of transmission, from which he ultimately selected around thirty thousand for inclusion in the Musnad.

The compilation spanned a very long period. Imam Ahmad did not complete it in a single effort; rather, he continued to revise it and add narrations until the end of his life. After his death, his son 'Abdullah ibn Ahmad finalised certain sections on the basis of notes his father had left behind.

The principal aim of compiling Musnad Ahmad was not merely to produce a book of authenticated Hadith, but to provide an extensive reference collection for scholars. This is reflected in Imam Ahmad's own statement that, should Muslims disagree over a Hadith, they should refer back to his Musnad. Musnad Ahmad thus functions as a Hadith encyclopaedia encompassing narrations of varying quality, although the majority of its hadiths derive from chains of transmission considered acceptable by the standards of Hadith scholarship.

The Concept of Musnad in the Tradition of Hadith Codification

The term musnad derives from the verb *asnada*–*yusnidu*–*isnādan*, meaning “to lean” or “to connect.” In Hadith science the term carries two meanings: first, a Hadith with an unbroken chain of transmission (*sanad*) extending back to the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him); and second, a Hadith compilation organised according to the names of the Companions who served as the initial narrators, rather than by subject matter or fiqh chapter.

This Companion-based organisational model represents an early form of Hadith codification that emerged during the second and third centuries AH. Its primary purpose was to preserve the continuity of the *sanad* and to facilitate the work of *muhaddithun* (Hadith scholars) in tracing the transmission paths associated with each Companion. Under this system, all narrations attributed to a given Companion were grouped together, enabling direct comparison of variations in both *sanad* and *matn* (textual content).

Unlike *Sahih* collections, which focus on selecting only the most authentic hadiths, *musnad* collections prioritise gathering as many narrations as possible without disregarding the validity of the *sanad*. Consequently, *musnad* collections typically contain *sahih* (authentic) and *hasan* (sound) hadiths alongside some narrations deemed weak by Hadith scholars.

Several notable Musnad works exist in the history of Hadith scholarship, including Musnad Abu Ya'la, Musnad al-Bazzar, and Musnad al-Humaydi. Musnad Ahmad, however, holds the most distinguished position among them, owing to the breadth of its material, the meticulousness of its chains of transmission, and the scholarly authority of its compiler.

The Method of Hadith Collection in Musnad Ahmad.

Scholarly Travel as a Method of Data Collection

One of the defining features of Imam Ahmad's method was his practice of *rihlah fi thalab al-hadith* scholarly journeys to various centres of Islamic learning undertaken to obtain Hadith directly from trusted narrators.

At the time, no centralised system existed for documenting Hadith. A scholar therefore had to visit Hadith teachers in person to receive Hadith through the processes of *sama'* (direct hearing), *qira'ah* (reading in the presence of the teacher), or *ijazah* (authorisation to transmit).

Imam Ahmad travelled to Baghdad, Kufa, Basrah, Mecca, Medina, Yemen, Syria, and Khurasan. This journey, which spanned more than thirty years, resulted in the accumulation of thousands of distinct chains of transmission. On several occasions Imam Ahmad even undertook paid work to cover the costs of his travels, illustrating the considerable material and physical sacrifice that Hadith collection demanded during the classical era.

Collecting Hadith from Credible Teachers

Imam Ahmad did not accept Hadith indiscriminately. He was highly selective in choosing teachers of demonstrated moral integrity (*'adalah*) and precise memorisation (*dhabt*). Among his principal teachers were Sufyan ibn 'Uyainah, Yahya ibn Sa'id al-Qattan, Waki' ibn al-Jarrah, 'Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani, Hushaym ibn Bashir, and Isma'il ibn 'Ulayyah several of whom also taught Imam al-Bukhari and Imam Muslim. Imam Ahmad's sources of narration therefore derived from exceptionally strong chains of transmission.

Beyond hearing hadiths directly, Imam Ahmad cross-checked the narrations he received by comparing chains of transmission obtained from different teachers (*muqaranah al-asanid*). Through this comparison he could identify differences in wording (*ikhtilaf al-lafz*), additional narrative elements (*ziyadah*), and weaknesses in particular chains, making *muqaranah al-asanid* an early form of Hadith criticism that preceded formal codification.

Selection Criteria for Inclusion in the Musnad

It is a common misconception that Musnad Ahmad contains every Hadith known to Imam Ahmad. Various reports indicate that he memorised approximately one million hadiths together with their chains of transmission, yet included only around thirty thousand in the Musnad — meaning that more than ninety per cent of the hadiths he had mastered were deliberately excluded. This disparity points to a rigorous, sustained process of selection rather than indiscriminate compilation. Imam Ahmad weighed at least four considerations before including a Hadith:

a. The Credibility of the Narrator. The narrator had to be known for sound character, freedom from falsehood, strong memorisation, and a clear understanding of the hadiths transmitted. These criteria correspond to the concepts of *'adalah* (integrity) and *dhabt* (precision) within the discipline of *jarh wa ta'dil* (Hadith criticism).

b. Continuity of the Chain of Transmission (*Ittisal al-Sanad*). A broken chain was accepted only under specific conditions, namely when supported by corroborating paths (*shawahid* or *muta'abi'at*). Consequently, the majority of hadiths in Musnad Ahmad possess a continuous chain of transmission extending back to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.

c. Absence of Contradiction by a Stronger Narration. When two seemingly contradictory hadiths were encountered, Imam Ahmad preferred the narration supported by the stronger chain of transmission or the greater number of narrators — a principle that later evolved into the theory of *tarijih* (weighing and preferring one piece of evidence over another) within the Hadith sciences.

d. Practical Value for the Community. Imam Ahmad also gave weight to the practical benefit of a Hadith for Muslims; accordingly, the Musnad contains substantial material relating to creed, worship, transactions (*mu'amalah*), ethics, the Prophet's biography, jihad, and Qur'anic interpretation.

The Organisational Structure of Musnad Ahmad

The principal distinction of Musnad Ahmad lies in its method of arrangement. Unlike Imam al-Bukhari, who organised his collection according to books of taharah (ritual purity), prayer, zakah, and commercial transactions, Imam Ahmad arranged the Musnad according to the names of the Companions, beginning with those of highest precedence in Islam. The principal divisions include:

1. Musnad of Abu Bakr
2. Musnad of 'Umar
3. Musnad of 'Uthman
4. Musnad of 'Ali
5. Musnad of the Ten Companions Promised Paradise
6. Musnad of Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet's Household)
7. Musnad of the Ansar (the Helpers of Medina)
8. Musnad of the Remaining Companions\
9. Musnad of the Female Companions

This arrangement demonstrates that Imam Ahmad's emphasis lay on the sanad (chain of transmission) rather than on fiqh (jurisprudential) classification.

The Scholarly Wisdom of Arrangement by Companion

This arrangement offers several scholarly benefits:

- 1. Facilitating the tracing of sanad.** A researcher can readily identify every Hadith narrated by a specific Companion.
- 2. Comparing variations in matn.** Where a single Hadith is narrated through multiple chains from the same Companion, all versions of the wording can be compared, which greatly assists critical analysis of the matn.
- 3. Quantifying each Companion's narrations.** Abu Hurairah, for example, narrated thousands of hadiths, whereas Companions such as Talhah ibn 'Ubaydillah narrated only a few dozen information of considerable value for research into the history of Hadith transmission.

Characteristic Features of Imam Ahmad's Method

Analysis of Musnad Ahmad reveals four principal characteristics of Imam Ahmad's methodology.

- 1. Comprehensive.** Imam Ahmad sought to compile as many hadiths as possible. His aim was not solely to produce a collection of authenticated (sahih) hadiths, but to preserve the Hadith heritage from being lost.
- 2. Sanad-based.** His primary focus was maintaining the continuity of the sanad, and consequently the greatest scrutiny was directed at narrator credibility.
- 3. Not excessively restrictive.** Unlike Imam al-Bukhari, who required the highest level of authenticity, Imam Ahmad accepted certain hasan and even mildly da'if (weak) hadiths, provided these did not concern matters of creed or the rulings on the lawful and the prohibited. This position rests on the principle, recognised by some scholars and subject to certain conditions, that weak Hadith may be employed in relation to fada'il al-a'mal (the merits of good deeds).
- 4. Oriented toward preserving the Sunnah.** Imam Ahmad's methodology reflects a profound commitment to preserving the entirety of the Prophet's traditions; he preferred to retain hadiths that might prove useful in the future rather than discard them on overly restrictive methodological grounds. This orientation established Musnad Ahmad as one of the most extensive Hadith encyclopaedias in Islamic history.

The Contribution and Limitations of Imam Ahmad's Method

Taken together, these features indicate that Imam Ahmad's methodology combined a sustained drive to preserve the Sunnah with the disciplined application of Hadith-critical principles: he verified chains of transmission, evaluated narrator quality, and cross-compared narrations before inclusion. This combination of comprehensiveness and rigour is what has established Musnad Ahmad as one of the most influential works in the history of Hadith

scholarship, and it remains a primary reference for both classical and contemporary Hadith research owing to the richness of its transmission chains and the diversity of its narrations.

The method nonetheless carries certain limitations. Organising the material by Companion greatly facilitates sanad-based research but is less practical for jurists seeking hadiths on a particular legal theme: a researcher wishing to locate hadiths on zakah, for instance, must first identify which Companion narrated them unlike Sahih al-Bukhari or Sunan Abu Dawud, both of which are arranged by fiqh chapter. This limitation, however, does not diminish the scholarly value of Musnad Ahmad, since its compilation was guided by an objective the comprehensive preservation of the Sunnah through its chains of transmission that differs from that of the thematic Hadith collections.

Sanad and Matan Analysis in Musnad Ahmad

Analysis of sanad (chain of transmission) and matn (text or content) constitutes the two central pillars of Hadith research. The sanad refers to the chain of narrators transmitting a Hadith from the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) to the compiler of the collection, while the matn refers to its actual wording, which serves as a source of Islamic teaching. Although Imam Ahmad did not articulate a formal theory of sanad and matn criticism, his method of gathering Hadith shows that both elements underpinned his judgement of a narration's acceptability.

Within the tradition of Hadith scholarship, the sanad is regarded as the feature that distinguishes Hadith from other forms of knowledge transmission. 'Abdullah ibn al-Mubarak observed that the sanad is part of the religion itself; without it, anyone could attribute anything to the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him). This statement underscores that the validity of a Hadith depends heavily on the continuity of its sanad and the credibility of its narrators.

In assessing sanad quality, Imam Ahmad applied the principles of jarh wa ta'dil, evaluating each narrator's character and intellectual capacity against the twin criteria of 'adalah (moral integrity) and dhabt (precision in memorisation). Narrators known for frequent forgetfulness, transmission errors, or a poor reputation were deemed weak, and their narrations were consequently not treated as a primary basis for a ruling. He likewise scrutinised the continuity of the chain itself (ittisal al-sanad): a broken chain (munqati', mursal, or mu'dhal) was not accorded the same standing as a continuous one. The well-known Hadith on intention, narrated by 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, illustrates this principle: its chain of trustworthy narrators is unbroken, which is the primary reason for the Hadith's acceptance among scholars.

Alongside the sanad, Imam Ahmad paid close attention to the matn. One method of matn analysis involved comparing the wording of hadiths transmitted through different chains and determining whether any discrepancy was a matter of phrasing alone or one that altered meaning. Most wording variations found in Musnad Ahmad do not, in fact, alter the substance of the Prophet's teaching; rather, they reflect narration by meaning (riwayah bi al-ma'na), a practice permitted by the majority of Hadith scholars provided the core meaning is preserved.

Imam Ahmad likewise attended to the possibility of shadh (anomalous transmission) and 'illah (hidden defect) in the matn the detection of 'illah being one of the defining skills of the great muhaddithun, Imam Ahmad among them. He never claimed that every Hadith in his Musnad was sahih; his overriding objective was to preserve the Prophet's Hadith from being lost to the Islamic tradition. The presence of mildly da'if hadiths in the collection therefore does not indicate a flaw in his methodology, but reflects a compilatory objective distinct from that of Sahih al-Bukhari or Sahih Muslim.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

This analysis of the Hadith-collection methodology in Musnad Ahmad shows that Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal employed a systematic and comprehensive approach to compiling the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), driven above all by a desire to safeguard the Sunnah for future generations. To this end, he undertook decades of scholarly journeys (rihlah fi thalab al-hadith) to major centres of Islamic learning in order to acquire Hadith directly from highly credible teachers.

His method attended not only to the sheer volume of narrations gathered but, more importantly, to the quality of the chains of transmission and the narrators themselves. By applying the foundational principles of Hadith scholarship — continuity of the chain (ittisal al-sanad), narrator integrity ('adalah), precision of memorisation (dhabt), and comparison across multiple lines of transmission (muqaranah al-asanid) — Imam Ahmad ensured that the compilation process involved rigorous verification, resulting in a work of substantial scholarly value.

In its organisational structure, Musnad Ahmad differs from other Hadith collections in being arranged by the names of the Companions who served as the initial narrators. This arrangement facilitates the tracing of sanad and the identification of all narrations attributed to a given Companion, though it is admittedly less convenient for locating hadiths by fiqh theme. This limitation does not diminish the work's scholarly standing; rather, it points toward a productive direction for future research — namely, the development of thematic indices (faharis) and cross-referencing tools that would complement the Companion-based structure of Musnad Ahmad and further enhance its accessibility for both classical and contemporary Hadith scholarship.

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