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AUTHORS, SUBJECTS AND FAME
IN THE *KITĀB AL-FIHРIST* OF IBN AL-NADĪM:
THE CASE OF AL-ṬABARĪ AND AL-ŠULĪ*

The aim of this paper is to suggest a possible approach to
one of the fundamental works of medieval Arabic literature,
the *Kitāb al-fihrist* by Muhammad b. Ishāq al-Nadim (d. 385/
995 or 388/998)\(^1\). The case studies for analysis will be two
of the most prominent residents of Baghdad in the late third/
ninth and early fourth/tenth centuries: Abū Bakr al-Šūli (d.
335/947) and Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), who
are among the most frequently mentioned scholars in the
*Fihrist*. These examples will show how a work more loosely
structured than *tabaqāt* can be analysed from an internal point
of view and yield interesting results.

The uniqueness of the *Fihrist*, both in its aims and struc-
ture and in its completeness, has always been recognised\(^2\),
and the information contained in it has been extensively used.
However, the usual way in which the book has been ap-
proached by secondary literature is that of an encyclopaedia

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\(^1\) For biographical details on Ibn al-Nadim, cf. the entry on him by
- Ma荆州neuve, 1960—. Cf. also F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen

\(^2\) Cf. for example F. Sezgin who calls the *Fihrist* «die älteste und viel-
leicht die einzige arabische Literaturgeschichte» (GAS I, 386). More re-
und die mittelalterliche arabische Literatur: Beiträge zum 1. Johann Wilhelm
Fück-Kolloquium (Halle 1987), ed. M. Fleischhammer und Stefan Leder,
38-43, Wiesbaden Harrassowitz, 1996, where he names a number of schol-
ars who similarly attempted to put the mass of existing information in
order, for which work patronage was always ready. He also highlights the
different orientations of such works, and that none of them is as complete
(from the point of view of branches of knowledge treated) as the *Fihrist*.
to consult, as if Ibn al-Nadim’s scholarship were exactly the same as Brockelmann and Sezgin’s. The Tajaddud edition and B. Dodge’s translation in the early seventies prompted a new series of studies on single chapters or sections of the book, and also a few evaluations of it in more general terms. The present work aims at being part of both groups, to attempt to bring two methods together: that of «seeing what the Fibrist says on» a certain personage or discipline or particular issue, and that of examining the priorities given by Ibn al-Nadim and the different ways in which he conceived and approached different subjects and authors.


6 An interesting point of view is the one expressed in H.H. Wellisch, «The first Arab bibliography, Fibrist al-’ulûm». Champaign, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois, 1986, (occasional papers, 175). 42 pp. This paper is mainly a presentation to non-Arabists, based on Dodge’s translation. However, not being an Arabist in any of the current senses, Wellisch does not suffer from the but-it’s-completely-different syndrome, and is therefore able to recognize some modern cataloguing criteria which were already present in the Fibrist. He goes so far as to say that Ibn al-Nadim’s division of the book in ten chapters has a parallel in Melvil Dewey’s ten main classes.
In the study of only one source, the perspective will have to remain internal, rather than aiming at universal conclusions. The criterion which will allow us to conduct such a kind of analysis is fame, and it is twofold: it involves reputation on the one hand and written production on the other. Anyone who was, or had been, even slightly influential in the cultural life of Ibn al-Nadîm’s times will have had something to say, that is, to teach. The number of people who listened to such teaching, the number of people who decided to repeat it to others and the number of people who decided to use it as authoritative, determined the extent of that influence. The only way left to us to measure all those factors is necessarily through written elements: the more people talk about someone, the more widespread his (good or bad) reputation will be; the more a person’s books are transmitted and quoted, the more this person will be influential. This is why the Kitâb al-fihrist is so significant: it provides a record of the fame achieved by certain individuals on the cultural scene, giving them a place in a vast hierarchy of doctrines and subjects, and devoting to them proportionately more or less space. This seems especially true for the learned men active in Baghdad a generation before Ibn al-Nadîm wrote: the students of those men were still alive in Ibn al-Nadîm’s time, and present in the same town wherein Ibn al-Nadîm lived. Therefore, the Fihrist constitutes a first attestation of fame in these cases, rather than a confirmation of already established reputations. For this reason, the two scholars on whom the present study focuses both lived in Baghdad in the late ninth/third and early tenth/fourth centuries. Before looking at them, however, it seems necessary to point out some problems concerning the Fihrist itself, and the way in which to approach it.

The criterion chosen, that of fame, helps us to address the question of Ibn al-Nadîm’s personal point of view, and of the Fihrist’s reliability in general. The issue, which is nothing new for medieval Arabic literature in general, but had somehow managed to avoid touching the Fihrist for a long time, has been raised by Stefan Leder 7. He argues that, for the sake of completeness, Ibn al-Nadîm often names books and people of whom he has only vaguely heard, thus neglecting precision and certainty. This point appears perfectly legitimate, espe-

7 Cf. note 5 above.
cially in certain parts of the *Fihrist*, which deal with remote lands and peoples. Nevertheless, this loses importance if, instead of looking for an exact bibliography, we look at looser concepts like fame and reputation. Fame concerns views and opinions more often than plain facts. For example, the fact that a certain author was believed to have written a hundred books but he had in fact written twenty, might still mean something, if only that he was reputed to be a prolific author even in life, or that he must have had many pupils who transmitted his works with slightly different titles. What can still be extracted from the *Fihrist* is, then, Ibn al-Nadīm’s view of Baghdad in this period, a view which he must have shared with at least some contemporaries and with the earlier authorities on whom he relied.

The second point, which has been raised on the *Fihrist* in general, concerns the order and priorities with which subjects and authors are listed within the book. H. Preissler states that the general principle of the *Fihrist* is a chronological one, that priority is given to disciplines where there is more written material, and that alphabetical order is not systematically followed because, despite being already known at Ibn al-Nadīm’s time, it was used only in some subject areas, whereas it became a fashion in the following centuries. To this I would add that a very interesting field to explore is the internal order in each chapter, and the way in which it changes according to the different sources used by Ibn al-Nadīm, the different characteristics of the subject itself, and of course the existence of written material on that subject and its accessibility to Ibn al-Nadīm. What follows is a series of observations on different ways in which writers and their works are listed in the *Fihrist*, in the chapters in which our two case studies appear.

The general pattern of *maqālas* seems to be broadly linear: a historical introduction of the subject followed by a list

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8 E.g. *maqāla* eight and nine.
9 Cf. note 5 above. The relative novelty of chronological order is further highlighted by Wellisch (cf. note 6 above), footnote 40, where he notes that this method of ordering data had been completely forgotten in the West after antiquity. In the *Fihrist*, it appears to be used mainly for collections of poetry, for example by Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī.
10 In this paper I have translated, and used interchangeably, *maqāla* with «chapter» and *fann* with «section».
of people who wrote on it. Those people, and the subjects themselves, are generally divided into subcategories, which take into account different criteria. Within the subcategories, people seem to be listed in a roughly chronological order. To keep the reader oriented, a table of contents for each chapter is here provided:

Maqāla 1  Languages, including religious sciences for Christianity, Judaism and Islam
2  Grammar
3  History, secretarial skills, adab, entertainment including music
4  Poetry (ancient and modern)
5  Theology (kalām)
6  Law (fiqāh)
7  Philosophy, geometry, arithmetic, music, mathematics, astronomy/astrology, physics, medicine
8  Stories and fables, exorcists, jugglers, magicians, etc.
9  Dualistic sects, Indian religions
10  Alchemy

As may be inferred from its title, the third chapter is both particularly interesting and particularly problematic; several studies have been devoted to it and to its many aspects, especially by D. Sturm.\textsuperscript{11} It is «on the akhbār of the historians, genealogists, writers of anecdotes and adab». Here, more than anywhere else in the book, the thousand years which separate us from Ibn al-Nadîm are important. History as a discipline

\textsuperscript{11} D. Sturm has devoted several studies to this chapter, one on geographers («Die arabisch geographische Literatur in Historikerkapitel des Kitab al-Fihrist von Ibn an-Nadîm», Hallesche Beiträge zur Orientalwissenschaft 10 [1986], 23-36), another on plagiarism and forgery («Ibn al-Nadîm’s Hinweise auf das Verhältnis zum geistigen Eigentum im Historikerkapitel des Kitab al-Fihrist»), Hallesche Beiträge zur Orientalwissenschaft, 13-14 [1990], 65-70), a third on the information given by this chapter concerning society (cf. note 5 above). Sturm’s approach is usually very specific. The present analysis can only take into account his considerations on Ibn al-Nadîm’s objectivity, especially in the third of the articles mentioned, where he concludes that Ibn al-Nadîm, despite being a shī‘i, was generally objective in his description of sunnî scholars, and that it is not likely that he altered or left out data due to his personal beliefs.
seems to have been, in the fourth/tenth century, something which one would practice as a side activity, rather than a profession like that of grammarian or jurisconsult. It is significant that the enormous amount of biographical literature, which the Abbasid period has left us, does not include one single work devoted to historians. In fact, the third chapter is the least homogeneous of the book, as is evident from the number of topics with which it deals, and this can be taken as a testimony of how little history was felt as a unitary discipline. The first fann, «on the akhbār of the historians, genealogists, writers of biographies and anecdotes» is on what one would be tempted to call history proper: it starts with an account of how and when history began to be written, and the rest of the chapter consists of information on writers of akhbār (akhbāriyyūn), of genealogies (nassābiyyūn), of biographies (aṣḥāb-siyyar) and of anecdotes (aṣḥāb al-aḥdāth). Contrary to other subsections, here there is no subdivision according to the different specialisations of the writers, but only a chronological one. It seems that to unify all these topics and authors in the eyes of a medieval Arabic reader it is sufficient that they deal with the past, in one way or another. This results, for example, in Ibn al-Kalbī and Abū-l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī’s entries being very close to each other. Also to be noted, and interesting for the present case studies, is the fact that, while Abū-l-Faraj’s Kitāb al-aghānī is classified as history, al-Ṭabarī’s Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk is not mentioned in this maqāla.

If the first fann of the third maqāla deals with various skills and specialities all grouped in one category, the remaining two fanms have many subdivisions of different kinds. In the second fann, «on the akhbār of the kings, the secretaries, the preachers, the writers of epistles, the ones in charge of the revenues and the administrators», chronological order is secondary to rank. The first names listed are therefore those of caliphs who had literary skills, then members of the royal family, then the secretaries, divided into several groups according to their specialisation (kharāj, administration, etc.). The third fann is «on the akhbār of the boon companions, the julasā’, the udabā’, the singers, the slap-takers, the jesters and the buffoons». It is structured more or less in the same way as the preceding section, but it deals this time with categories of people who, though being close to the court, were
not involved with the government, but with entertainment. Here, Ibn al-Nadîm explains his method of dealing with families within a chronological order. He says: «When I mention one of the writers, I have him followed by the mention of those who are close to him and similar to him, even if their period comes after the period of those whom I mention after them. This is my way in the whole book» 12. The principle of kinship is therefore added to those of rank and chronology.

Maqāla four, «on poetry and poets», presents a completely different structure: here, Ibn al-Nadîm explains, it is not necessary to write tabaqāt of the poets, because many people have already done this. The aim, as he says in the second section, is «to mention the names of the poets, the amount of the production of verses of every one of them, especially the moderns, and the variations which take place in their verses, so that anyone who wants might know all those books and verses, and have insight into them». It is, as Dodge notes, a real bookdealer's catalogue, conveying just the information necessary to someone who buys or sells 13. The main information provided is the amount of poetry produced by a poet. For the most important ones, the name of the editor of their diwān is also given. Besides families, there also is a subsection devoted to women, and another on Syrian poets. The chapter ends, as do others, with a list of authors ordered according to the theme of their writings. Dodge occasionally suggests that this is not consistent with the rest of the work, and that therefore it has been added by someone else. But it could also just be a way of listing people and works which were not important or famous, a miscellanea part present in each chapter. Here, more than elsewhere, Ibn al-Nadîm seems merely to juxtapose his sources without editing them in any way.

The sixth maqāla, on jurists (fugābā'), is very neatly arranged, in a very similar fashion to the second maqāla on

12 Fihrist, 163.
13 Fihrist, 181. After some entries on very famous poets like Abū Nuwās, Ibn al-Nadîm relies totally on two sources: the first one is the Kitāb al-waraqa by Muḥammad b. Dāwūd b. al-Jarrāh, the second is Ibn al-Ḥājib. Muḥammad b. Dāwūd died in 296/908, and Ibn al-Ḥājib is used for the period which is not covered by Muḥammad b. Dāwūd. Next is a section on «names of a group of modern poets who were not secretaries, after the year 300 (913) up to our time».
grammarians. Here, every leading faqih (Mālik b. Anas, Abū Ḥanīfa, al-Shāfi‘ī, Dāwūd al-İṣfahānī, shī‘ jurisprudents, jurists depending on the hadīth, al-Ṭabarī, jurists of the shūrāt) is listed, together with his followers, in chronological order, with usually very detailed entries, especially in the section on jurists who were authoritative on the hadīth. This is hardly surprising, as Ibn al-Nadim could already rely on a large amount of rijāl collections which provided vast biographical information, to which he added his first hand knowledge.

The observation of patterns and priorities in these parts of the Fihrist can give us a few useful clues, some of which are obvious, and some of which may be less so. Above all, each subject is described according to the same broad pattern: origins, people who have written on it in chronological order, together with what they have written, translators, translations and commentaries where applicable. Secondly, uniformity of general methods corresponds to wide variety in the details. Not only the number of faṇns contained in a chapter varies, but also the number of subgroups in which every faṇn is subdivided does, and criteria for these subgroups and their internal order change. There are several reasons for those shifts in order, subdivisions and focus. The more obvious ones, as has already been said, are connected to the existence of written production on a certain topic, and to the different pictures given by different sources. In addition, other elements play an important part. First and foremost of these is Ibn al-Nadim and his readers’ familiarity with a subject: there is obviously no need to explain in detail what the Koran is (maqāla one), while not many people knew Manichaean festivities (maqāla nine). In such cases, the Fihrist adds to its primary function that of giving basic information on the merit of certain topics. Another reason is the existence of encyclopaedic works on a given subject: extensive information on poets’ lives is already given elsewhere, therefore the fourth maqāla only concentrates on names and amount of poetry. Finally, the kinds of source on which Ibn al-Nadim relies

14 Cf. above on chapter four. This point cannot be made everywhere in the Fihrist. The existence of tabaqāt for hadīth scholars did not prevent Ibn al-Nadim from giving information, though not extensive, on them. To explain this one must look at another element: the kind of source on which Ibn al-Nadim relies, which will be presently considered.
also affect the organisation of the Fihrist. Different sources, in fact, do not only mean different names of people who lived in different times and had different opinions, mental
structures, qualities and levels of reliability. They also mean
different ways of transmission: in some cases, as in maqāla
four, on poetry, Ibn al-Nadīm gives us a list of poets taken
mainly from three books; on other occasions he mentions
pieces of information which he remembers, or has in his lec-
ture notes, from his own masters (such as al-Sirāfī); at other
times, he recalls the lives and works of people whom he has
actually met.

The question of focuses in the Fihrist is a crucial one for
the next step of the present analysis. Ibn al-Nadīm, in fact,
can adapt his work to shift, for the reasons mentioned above,
from a bibliography into an encyclopaedia, and from an en-
cyclopaedia into an ante litteram Who’s Who. What happens
if our focus remains on the latter aspect, that is, on scholars
and their fame and reputation? One significant example of
this is that which I illustrate below.

Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī (d. 335/947) is frequently mentioned in
the Fihrist thanks to his many different skills. Besides one
appearance in chapter two, and another in chapter five, his
territory is to be found in maqālas three and four. There,
we learn that he deserved not only a mention among the
courtiers and boon companions, but also one among the chess
players, and a respectable place among editors of poetry. The

15 Cf. note 13 above.
16 Abū Sa‘īd al-Ḥasan b. ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Marzūbān al-Sirāfī (d. 368/
979), a grammarian, is especially present in the second maqāla.
17 Cf. the section on «people whose origin and akhbār are not known
on the basis of investigation», in 2.3, p. 92.
18 Ibn al-Nadīm actually gives a different date in his entry on al-Ṣūlī
pp. 167-8 (330/941-42), but this is present only in Flügel’s edition and is
lacking in the Chester Beatty and Tonk manuscripts. Moreover, all later
sources agree on 335/947. Cf. S. Leder in EI2 (1997), «al-Ṣūlī»; GAS I,
330-1.
19 Fihrist 2.1, p. 65. Here al-Ṣūlī is reported to have said that he heard
al-Mubarrad saying that he was born in the year 307. Although there is no
other mention of al-Ṣūlī in this chapter, other sources (for which cf. Leder
in EI2) confirm that he had heard the lectures of both Tha‘lab and al-
Mubarrad, as nearly every contemporary of his with some sort of scholarly
aspiration had.
20 Fihrist 5.1, p. 208. His name appears as the last link of an isnād
reporting comments on the death of al-Jāḥiz.
entry devoted to him in *maqāla* three\(^{21}\) is particularly detailed, despite the caveat that «his story is too renowned, famous and near to our time for us to examine it deeply». The reader is informed of both the work and the hobbies of al-Ṣūlī, and the list of his writings following his biography specifically describes even the different parts of his *Kitāb al-
awrāq*\(^{22}\). Al-Ṣūlī is described as a *zarif* (a refined man) and an *adib* (a learned man), two not unusual characteristics of a court companion of his time, and as a collector of books\(^{23}\). After mentioning his services to the royal family\(^{24}\), mainly as a boon companion and tutor, Ibn al-Nadim describes him even as a man of virtue (*ḥasan al-muruwwa*), which is not a very common definition for people belonging to his category. The fact that this quality is mentioned for al-Ṣūlī as an individual, and not as part of a category, seems to be in contradiction with the accusation of plagiarism a few lines below: after describing the various parts which form the *Kitāb al-
awrāq*, Ibn al-Nadim adds: «For the composition of this book he [al-
Ṣūlī] relied on the book of al-Marthari, *al-Shi‘r wa-l-
shu‘arā‘*, or rather he copied it word by word and plagiarised it. I have seen the manuscript (*dustūr*) in the handwriting of the man himself [al-Marthadi], a manuscript which came from the library of al-Ṣūlī and through which the plagiarism became evident to me». This piece of information is also present, with almost the same wording, in the entry on al-
Marthadi (d. 286/899, who was the secretary of al-Mu‘taḍid’s brother al-Muwaffaq, d. 279/892)\(^{25}\), and the fact that Ibn al-
Nadim actually claims to have seen the original gives a particular strength to his accusation. However, the contradiction between plagiarism and *muruwwa* is not as sharp as it might

\(^{21}\) *Fihrist* 3.3, pp. 167-8.

\(^{22}\) Only parts of this work are extant, and only three of these have been edited (al-Ṣūlī, Abū Bakr (d. 335/947). *Kitāb al-
awrāq: akhbār al-
shu‘arā‘ al-muhdathin, akhbār al-
Rādi bi-llāh wa-l-
Muttaqi li-llāh, asbār awlād al-
khulafa‘*, ed. J. Heyworth Dunne, Beirut, Dār al-
Masira, 1934-36.

\(^{23}\) «min... al-jammā‘in li-l-
kutub».

\(^{24}\) Al-Ṣūlī was a boon companion of al-Muktafiti (caliph from 289/902 to 295/908), of al-Muqtadir (caliph from 296/908 to 320/932), and tutor and then boon companion of al-
Rādi (caliph from 322/934 to 329/940).

\(^{25}\) *Fihrist*, 3.2, p. 143: «His books were: ... *Kitāb asbār Quraysh*, on which al-Ṣūlī relied in his *Awrāq*, plagiarizing it, and I saw the manuscript in al-Marthadi’s hand». It is amusing that the only divergent elements in these two passages should be the book’s title!
seem, as the attitude towards plagiarism (sariqa) was not unequivocally negative in medieval Arabic literature. The entry also mentions al-Ṣūlī’s death more or less in exile and his ability in the game of chess, which makes him worthy of another entry later in the same section, in the part devoted to chess players.

The only other time when al-Ṣūlī appears in chapter three is as a source for information on Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Mawsili, the great musician and singer of the eighth century, and his son Ḥammād. It is in the fourth maqāla that his importance as a collector and editor of poetry comes to the fore, especially for the work of «modern» poets. The diwāns collected by him are usually said to be `alā-ḥurūf, in alphabetical order, which is not always a feature of the other editions listed by Ibn al-Nadim. Of the many places where al-Ṣūlī’s work is mentioned, two are controversial. The first one...
concerns the poet Ibn Harma (d. 176/792), whose poetry is described as follows: «wa-shi’ruba mujarrad naḥw mi’atay waraq, wa-fī ṣan’at Abī Sa’īd al-Sukkarī huwa khamsuni’at waraq, wa-qad ṣana‘ahu al-Ṣūlī wa-lam ya’ti bi-shay‘». Dodge’s translation says that his poetry «by itself fills about two hundred leaves. In the edition of Abū Sa’īd al-Sukkarī, however, there are about five hundred leaves. Although al-Ṣūlī also worked over it, nothing came of it» 33. By contrast, Leder, describing this passage, says that «Ibn al-Nadim... suspected him of having produced the poetry ascribed to Ibn Harma himself», adding that this is the only existent accusation. Dodge’s translation seems more consistent with what is in al-Ṣūlī’s entry, which includes Akhbār Ibn Harma wa-mukhtār shi’rīhu: a choice of his poetry, which could also be an aborted attempt at the collection and edition of the entire diwān. The second case is also related to plagiarism and forgery, concerning false attribution: the poet Khubz Aruzzi (d. ca. 327/938) had himself arranged his poems in alphabetical order, but this work was attributed to al-Ṣūlī 34. Here, however, the misidentification is not voluntary, therefore al-Ṣūlī cannot be blamed.

As the above examples show, Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī was not an unambiguous individual, with his eclecticism, his suspected tendency to plagiarise books that he had in his library, and his death in disgrace. Nevertheless, there are many places in the Fibrīst where his genuine scholarly work is mentioned, and where he is praised and relied upon. As controversial as he could be, Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī could not be avoided. Let us compare the way in which he appears in the Fibrīst with the way in which another, and to modern eyes much more important scholar, does.

It is interesting to see that Muhammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), who is today considered the most important historian of this period, is mentioned only once, and in a marginal way, in the chapter on historians 35. However, we have seen that an entire fann, the seventh, is devoted to him

33 Dodge, p. 352.
34 Fibrīst, 195: «wa-qad ‘amila shi’rahu ‘alā-l-ḥurūf, wa-nubila ilā-l-Ṣūlī».
and his legal school in the sixth maqāla, and there also his Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa-mulūk is dealt with, including mention of those scholars who abridged it and those who wrote continuations to it. Al-Ṭabarī’s Tafsīr also appears here, ‘better than which has not been made’, together with the scholars who wrote abridgements of it. The rest of the fann consists of disciples of the legal school of al-Ṭabarī, but it is outside it that one can fully perceive the authority and huge production of this scholar. On the one hand, in fact, al-Ṭabarī copied an enormous amount of books; on the other, he played a role as a point of reference in various fields of knowledge (more the religious than the historical ones, according to what can be gathered from the Fihrist). Not only people of different milieux wrote referring to him or arguing against him, which was usual practice, but also time and length were measured according to his standards: in the entry of Ibn Abī Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d. 316/929) it is said he wrote a Tafsīr at the time when al-Ṭabarī wrote his, while in order to explain how much Yaḥyā b. ‘Adī (d. 363/974) worked, it is said that he made two copies of the entire Tafsīr of al-Ṭabarī.

The difference between the kind of fame enjoyed by Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī, with its bright and dark patches barely distinguishable from each other, and that of the virtuous but monochromatic al-Ṭabarī, is evident. At this point, two questions emerge from our data. Why are al-Ṣūlī’s works scattered in different sections, while al-Ṭabarī’s writings are all dealt with in one block, regardless of different topics (different, at least,

36 Fihrist, 291-3.
37 The tafsīr had already been mentioned in 1.3, p. 37, within a list of books composed on the Koran.
38 The only other people to whom this treatment is reserved, i.e. who have the abridgers of their works listed in their own entry, are the ancient Greeks, like Aristotle, in the seventh maqāla.
41 Fihrist, 6.6, p. 288.
42 Fihrist, 7.1, p. 322.
in our eyes)? And why, despite having at hand several works composed or copied by al-Ṭabarî, does Ibn al-Nadîm never openly rely on them for information, as he does with other works which he owns 43?

The questions can be formulated in a more general way: why is the information on different scholars, particularly on their writings, organised in different ways? And why does Ibn al-Nadîm use certain sources rather than others? Whatever role chance may play in these issues, it cannot be the only actor on stage, and the time has long gone when everything could be blamed on the supposed lack of structure and the chaotic mentality of medieval Arabic prose writing. The only scientific way in which we can approach these questions is as conscious decisions of the author. As such, there must be a reason for them.

All the information possessed by the reader of the Fibrist on al-Ṭabarî has been illustrated above. The writings listed in his entry include, besides the Taʾrikh and the Tafsîr, only books on legal matters. Therefore, it can be assumed that none of them contained data which Ibn al-Nadîm could use for the Fibrist. On the other hand, al-Ṭabarî had the fame of an indefatigable copyist, and the books which he copied belonged to the most disparate subjects. Ibn al-Nadîm claims to have seen many of them, as mentioned above 44. While it seems unlikely that none of those books were on subjects of interest to Ibn al-Nadîm, there are several other possible explanations. Ibn al-Nadîm might have seen those books without being able to consult them properly because he did not own them; this would mean that copies of books in the handwriting of al-Ṭabarî were both in demand and expensive. Also the contrary is possible: despite being able to use such books, Ibn al-Nadîm might have preferred to rely on others, or he might even have used them, but without mentioning it. This would imply that, despite al-Ṭabarî’s established reputation, his handwriting was not particularly appreciated, and was considered inferior to that of other copyists; for instance, Ibn

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43 Throughout the Fibrist, Ibn al-Nadîm occasionally mentions not only the source of a piece of information, but also the handwriting in which it was written. The formula «I read in A’s handwriting that B said...» (for example, «qaraʾtu bi-khatt Ibn Muqla anna Thaʿlab qaʾa», extensively used in the second maqala) is very frequently found, but never with al-Ṭabarî.

44 Cf. note 39 above.
Muqala (early tenth/fourth century) and Ibn al-Kūfī (d. 348/960), who are among the most quoted copyists in the Fihrist. It could also be the case that, more than sixty years after al-Ṭabarī’s death (Ibn al-Nadīm writes in 377/987), only very few of the books which he copied were still extant. There is no evidence, in the Fihrist, of which hypothesis might be closer to the truth 45. Whichever the case, though, it remains a matter of fame and reputation.

As for the arrangement of information, obviously the type and availability of Ibn al-Nadīm’s sources will be accountable for part of it, but two other elements should be considered. Firstly, the focus: if a scholar’s works are briefly mentioned in several places, as in the case of al-Ṣūlī, the reader’s attention will go to what they have written, rather than to who they were. If, on the contrary, the information is concentrated in one block, and the entry includes many biographical details, as in the case of al-Ṭabarī, the personality and life of the scholar will come out clearer. (In addition, there are cases, like those of Tha’lab, al-Mubarrad and al-Balkhī, in which both these aspects are present, and which will deserve separate treatment elsewhere).

The other element to be considered has to do with the modern reader’s perceptions, and with the particular structure of the third maqāla. As we have seen above, the modern concepts of history and historian cannot be blindly applied to the disciplines described in the third maqāla. Moreover, the word ta’rikh itself appears in titles of single works, but it is never used in the titles of sections and subsections of the third maqāla, or of any other maqāla 46. It should not be too surprising, therefore, that, while al-Ṭabarī is not present in maqāla three, other works are, which one would think twice before defining as historical. With this idea in mind the arrangement of information appears perhaps less illogical.

The cases of al-Ṣūlī and al-Ṭabarī are only two examples

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45 To be sure, as said above, in one occasion Ibn al-Nadīm remembers seeing a book by Hishām al-Ḍarīr in the handwriting of al-Ṭabarī. This would seem to corroborate our first hypothesis, but, being an isolated case, it cannot be used for more than a footnote.

46 Cf. also Claude Cahen’s article, «History and Historians», in M.J.L. Young et al., Religion, Learning and Science..., especially pp. 188-9 and 197, on the different terms used for historical works, and on the appearance and use of the word ta’rikh; p. 191 on al-Ṭabarī’s eclecticism.
of a way in which the Kitāb al-fībrist can be approached. The observation of internal patterns of presence, criteria of listing, roles and principles of selection, all from a rigorously internal point of view, is bound to yield several questions concerning fame in the eyes of Ibn al-Nadîm. Moreover, the recognition of changing motives and structures in the composition of the book shows us a work which is maybe less finished than a work of tabaqāt, and exactly for this reason it can more easily tell us something about the cultural mentality of Ibn al-Nadîm and his contemporaries.

ABSTRACT
This paper suggests an approach to the study of the Kitāb al-fībrist by Ibn al-Nadîm (d. 386/995), which takes into account his criteria of priority and order within the book’s structure, when analysing the information the author provides about a scholar or group of scholars. The case studies for the present paper are Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlî (d. 335/947) and Muḥammad b. Jarîr al-Ṭabarî (d. 310/923), two prominent scholars who lived one generation before Ibn al-Nadîm, and whose biographical information he treats in contrasting ways.

KEY WORDS
Mediaeval literature. Mediaeval history. Fībrist.