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*Al-Jāhiliyya*: Uncertain Times of Uncertain Meanings

**Abstract:** “Al-Jāhiliyya” evokes vivid images of idol worship, tribalist antagonisms, and violence commonly assumed to be emblematic of the Muslim representation of pre-Islamic Arabia as a “barbaric” anarchical society. Such associations, however, overlook manifold complexities of the era’s portrayal in classical Arabic literature, and this paper calls for a more nuanced reading of classical narratives of *al-Jāhiliyya*. Exploration of the word’s semantic shifts evidenced in Arabic lexicography and Qur’ānic exegesis between the third/ninth and seventh/thirteenth centuries reveals that only after the fourth/tenth century did the now common *Jāhiliyya* stereotypes become virtually synonymous with pre-Islam. Via a survey of third/ninth century Arabic writings, this paper also explores how and why certain discourses articulated rather positive memories of pre-Islamic times.

**Keywords:** pre-Islam, Arab history, Jahiliyya, Arabic lexicography, Qur’ān exegesis.

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The Prophet Muḥammad’s emigration from Mecca and his establishment of a Muslim community in Medina is the nodal point for traditional periodizations of Islamic history. The event inaugurates Year 1 of the Muslim calendar and signifies the end of the pre-Islamic era. Pre-Islamic time is commonly called *al-Jāhiliyya*, a term derived from the word *jahl*, which connotes ignorance and passion, and so the period’s label axiomatically imposes normative parameters on the whole era of history. This has led English writers to call pre-Islamic time the “Age of Ignorance,”¹ “impetuous passions,”² the “Age of Barbarism,”³ or even the “Age

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of Obstinate Impetuosity,”⁴ and current Muslim accounts of pre-Islamic history emphasize the period’s perceived pervasive jahl, identifying four archetypal topoi (idol worship; tyranny/injustice; ritual killing of baby girls; and violence of vainglorious tribal antagonisms) as emblematic of pre-Islamic Arabian society. For example, we read that “autocracy and despotism prevailed at an extreme”⁵ and that “[e]very day a pit was dug in the corner of the desert for an innocent girl to be buried.”⁶ Much academic writing follows suit: swayed by al-Jāhiliyya’s negative stereotypes, scholars describe the pre-Islamic Arabians as “wild” or even “savage[!]” people possessing “no learning to speak of”⁷ and living in a “barbarous society.”⁸ Some researchers, however, now question the putative jahl of pre-Islamic Arabia, arguing that later Muslim writers were responsible for forging impressions of the era’s barbarism and paganism.¹⁰ While debate continues over whether al-Jāhiliyya was actually a time of immorality, paganism, and anarchical violence or whether Muslims only retrospectively reconstructed it in that image, al-Jāhiliyya nonetheless remains indelibly tarred by the stigma of intrinsic negative associations.

⁹ Michael Cook, “The Emergence of Islamic Civilization,” in S. Eisenstadt (ed), The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilisation (Albany: SUNY, 1986), 476–483, 478. See also 480–81 where Arabia is contrasted with the “civilizations” of the Late Antique Fertile Crescent.
The perception that *al-Jāhiliyya* connotes an “Age of Passion/Ignorance” generates a persuasive master narrative that converts the very idea of “pre-Islam” into a colligatory concept – a high-order concept that simplifies a series of events into one intelligible whole. The *Jāhiliyya* idea takes the centuries of Arabian history prior to Muḥammad’s prophethood and enforces a unity between them, melding all the discrete and disparate events of its history into one homogenized conceptual construct. *Al-Jāhiliyya* is thus less a chronological account of the passage of time as it is a normative description of a way of life. The colligatory concept converts time into a static phenomenon whereby all of *al-Jāhiliyya* devolves into disorderly, violent “pagandom,” devoid of meaningful development which simply ended with the establishment of Islam. This *Jāhiliyya* resonates with the “Dark Ages”¹¹ or “Middle Ages,” Europe’s negative colligatory concepts that encapsulate what was traditionally seen as disordered time between the Romans and the Renaissance. Modern medievalists challenged the reduction of a millennium of European history into those monolithic periods and thereby opened broad new avenues of research; the same ought to be due for *al-Jāhiliyya*.¹²

To advance *Jāhiliyya* studies in Islamic historiography, we need first a more nuanced approach to read the classical Arabic narratives about pre-Islamic history that eschews the prejudices of negative and essentialist *Jāhiliyya* periodization. This paper commences from the principle that words can adopt an array of meanings in different contexts: while a word’s form remains constant over time, what it signifies can change. In the case of *al-Jāhiliyya*, the word is repeated across Arabic literature from the Qurʾān to modern times, but its ubiquity does not mean that it has always connoted the same meanings. The current interpretation of *al-Jāhiliyya* as a byword for disorder in pre-Islamic Arabia is merely an idea. Ideas are intellectual constructs that emerge over time; they have a history themselves, and in this paper, I explore the history of *al-Jāhiliyya* as an idea in classical Arabic writing to trace its development in Muslim imaginations.

¹² Shifting away from “barbarism” stereotyping, some scholars have resorted to archaeology to reveal substantial material cultures in pre-Islamic Arabia (Hoyland *Arabia incorporates contemporary archaeology*, see also the essays in *Roads of Arabia: Archaeology and History of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, Ali Ibrahim Al-Ghabban et al, eds., Paris: Louvre, 2010). Scholars whose work focuses on Arabic texts, however, are faced with *Jāhiliyya*’s negative connotations. As opposed to surveying Arabian archaeology to show that pre-Islamic Arabia was “not barbaric,” I am concerned with the very idea of *al-Jāhiliyya* – my approach to tackling the *Jāhiliyya* colligatory concept is to explore how interpretations of the period’s history have evolved over time.
I begin with the meaning of the word jāhiliyya. Its first citations in Arabic do not correspond with today’s notion of the “pre-Islamic era,” so a semantic shift to connote the historical period of violent, pagan Arabia must have developed during Islamic times. I explore aspects of this shift by comparing the definitions of al-Jāhiliyya in Arabic lexicography and Qur’anic exegesis between the third/ninth and seventh/thirteenth centuries, which enables us to observe the only gradual emergence of the stereotyped Jāhiliyya colligatory idea. I conclude with a survey of third/ninth century writings to reveal that Muslim writers did not always treat the era as the reprobate antithesis of Islam.

**Al-Jāhiliyya: development of the paradigm**

The concept of al-Jāhiliyya can be traced to the Qurʾān’s four citations of the word (3:154, 5:50, 33:33, 48:26).¹³ Contrary to al-Jāhiliyya’s now paradigmatic connotations of the “Age of Ignorance/Barbarism,”¹⁴ modern scholars demonstrated that its Qurʾānic citation is suggestive of a state of being rather than a precise period of time. This Jāhiliyya conveys the disquiet and ignorance of non-believers generally and contrasts it with the repose of those believers who are aware

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¹³ Pace Horovitz, who suggested Jāhiliyya derives from the Greek agnoia found in Christian writings connoting “times of ignorance,” e.g., Acts 17:30 (discussed in Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 34, and Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 99). This is brilliant detective work, but the seeming congruence is perhaps a coincidence.

¹⁴ Scholars debate how Muḥammad’s audience understood the word al-Jāhiliyya. Goldziher argues jahl meant “barbarism,” opposite of ḥilm (forbearance, equanimity) (*Muslim Studies*, 1:202); Rosenthal preferred “ignorance” in contrast to ‘ilm (knowledge) (*Knowledge Triumphant*, 32). The best approach may be to accept both: consider two pre-Islamic poets at different corners of the canon, Imru’ al-Qays and al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī, who cite the root j-h-l with similar frequency: Imru’ al-Qays eight, al-Nābigha six (Imru’ al-Qays, *Diwān*, Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibřāhīm, ed., Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1990; al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī, *Diwān*, Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibřāhīm, ed., Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1990). Some instances connote youthful restlessness, the opposite of ḥilm, but they are less than half (al-Qays, *Diwān*, 256, 330, 352, al-Nābigha, *Diwān*, 89, 109, 115). In others, lack of knowledge is intended: cf. al-Nābigha: “the ignorant (jāhil) is not like the knowledgeable (dhū ‘ilm)” (63). Imru’ al-Qays describes landmarkless deserts as majhūl (240) or majhal (332), evidently connoting an absence of knowledge more than absence of equanimity! Also the word for landmark, ‘alam, is from the same root as ‘ilm, suggesting a genuinely old contrast of jahl with ‘ilm in topographical terminology. Jahl is also cited as foolish speech (al-Nābigha, *Diwān*, 172); al-Nābigha also notes those ignorant of his tribe’s lineage have jahl and safāha (idiocy), implying both lack of knowledge and foolhardiness (*Diwān*, 199).
of God. The modern Arabic dictionary, Qāmūs al-Maʿānī, on the other hand, defines al-Jāhiliyya as “the ignorance [jahāla] and misguidedness [ḍalāla] of the Arabs before Islam.” This definition has three salient differences from the Qur’ānic connotations: (i) al-Jāhiliyya is a period of history, the “pre-Islamic era”; (ii) it concerns the Arabs; and (iii) it is synonymous with an Arabian anarchical community with certain ignorant and misguided characteristics.

Whereas the Qur’ān’s Jāhiliyya is a moral state of being without specific temporal aspect, the dictionary definition is the colligatory concept that periodizes history. This Jāhiliyya idea must therefore have been acquired during the Islamic period. My investigation of the word’s history begins with dating the point when al-Jāhiliyya was marshaled to denote a period of time.

Jāhiliyya, in an indefinite form, is attested in prophetic hadith. We read, for instance, that Abū Dharr, a companion of Muḥammad, reportedly insulted the mother of another Muslim during an argument and was upbraided by Muḥammad who noted: “you are a man in whom there is jāhiliyya.” Muḥammad also is reported to have described the Quraysh tribe as having “only recently adopted jāhiliyya.” This hadith invokes jāhiliyya as a fluid state of being which could be adopted and presumably discarded. The conception that the Quraysh adopted jāhiliyya “recently” also implies that in an earlier era, they were free from jahl, a stark contrast to the modern perception that Arabians were endemically tarred with jāhiliyya for all time before Islam.

Hadith collections do also contain references to jāhiliyya connoting “time before Islam.” For instance, the third Caliph ʿUthmān is reported to have said that he did not commit adultery, either in “Jāhiliyya [indefinite] or in Islam,” and Muḥammad himself is recorded observing a shooting star with his companions and asking them “what sign would you draw from this in al-Jāhiliyya?” Given the well-rehearsed arguments over the authenticity of the hadith, it is difficult

19 Al-Tirmidhī, Jāmiʿ, al-Fitan: 1.
20 Al-Tirmidhī, Jāmiʿ, Tafsīr: 34.3.
21 Joseph Schacht’s The Origins of Muḥammadan Jurisprudence (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950) famously argued for the widespread fabrication of hadith in the second/eighth century; M. Azami’
to prove that Muḥammad himself used al-Jāhiliyya in this way, but it seems that a
temporal aspect entered into common use relatively early.

We can understand how early Muslims could employ al-Jāhiliyya as a label for time. The Qurʾān offers a precedent where it mentions “al-Jāhiliyya al-ūlā” in an admonition directed at women’s modesty: “Stay in your homes and do not make a display of yourselves in the manner of the first/ancient Jāhiliyya.”²² This Jāhiliyya is not quite akin to currently common Jāhiliyya idea, since the adjective “al-ūlā” – ostensibly translatable as “the first”, though perhaps better understood as “ancient” (given the other citations of ālā in the Qurʾān)²³ – gives it an archaic aspect of a past era more distant than the time immediately preceding Muḥammad’s emigration from Mecca.²⁴ Qurʾān 33:33, unlike current al-Jāhiliyya stereotypes, does not conceptualize all pre-Muḥammadic time as Jāhiliyya, but it does demonstrate the word’s ability to conjure a “time of jahl,” i. e., when a state of ignorance and/or passion prevailed.

It is plausible, therefore, that early Muslim converts used Jāhiliyya with its Qurʾānic connotations to describe the ways of non-Muslims in general and, by extension, their own behavior before they converted. Accordingly, they could equate the time before their conversions as their period of jahl, i. e., their own Jāhiliyya. By the second and third generations of the Muslim community, when individual recollections of pre-converted life grew dim, al-Jāhiliyya would no longer practically connote individualized pre-Islamic pasts but instead could become a communal byword for the pre-Islamic past: time before Muslim society existed.


²² Q33:33, my translation.
²³ Translating “al-ūlā” as “first” caused classical commentators difficulties regarding Qurʾān 53:50’s phrase “ʿĀd al-ūlā.” Rendering it the “first ʿĀd” raised the assumption that there must have been a “second” ʿĀd for whom classical scholars hunted in the genealogies with unconvincing results (see al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad ibn Jaʿfar, Tafsir Jāmiʿ al-Bayān, Šidqī Jamīl al-ʿAttār, ed., Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1999, 17:102. Ālā should be rendered “ancient,” like Q20:51 and 42:28 describe “ancient peoples” (al-qurūn al-ūlā) and Q20:132 and 87:18 “ancient texts of revelation” (al-ṣuḥuf al-ūlā).
²⁴ ROSENTHAL, Knowledge Triumphant, 34, reached the same interpretation via different reasoning.
Early classical writing also uses al-Jāhiliyya to describe more general “non-Islamic time,” which bears present and future connotations. One hadith narrated by al-Tirmidhī reports Muḥammad expressing Jāhiliyya as contemporary with Islam in the statement “there is no prophethood [nubuwwa] without jāhiliyya in its midst [bayna yadayḥā].”²⁵ And Nu’aym ibn Ḥammād al-Khuzā’i’s (d. 229/844) Kitāb al-Fitan, an eschatological text containing thousands of anecdotes predicting the decline of order and the end of the world, refers to a future Jāhiliyya (a period preceding Judgement Day),²⁶ which he describes with traits of both ignorance and furious passion.²⁷

The temporal aspects which al-Jāhiliyya acquired in the first Islamic centuries thus have a common idea of godlessness contrasting Islam, but “Jāhilī time” could point in various directions, from a pre-Islamic past to an apocalyptic future. Al-Jāhiliyya as a period accordingly elicits at least four sets of questions concerning its attributes in early Arabic writing.

i) Did audiences interpret every Jāhiliyya to be the same, or did they ascribe different characteristics to future and past “Jāhiliyyas”?

ii) In the case of the pre-Islamic Jāhiliyya, did it represent all time before Muḥammad’s emigration or just some of the time, and on what basis was it delineated?²⁸

iii) Did the pre-Islamic Jāhiliyya apply to the whole world before Muḥammad or just Arabia?

iv) When encountering the word “al-Jāhiliyya” as a reference to the past, did classical audiences conjure conceptions of a certain way of life? And if so, did these mirror the “Arab barbarism” of modern Jāhiliyya stereotypes?

This paper addresses these questions by starting with the succession of definitions of al-Jāhiliyya in classical dictionaries written between the late second/
eighth and the seventh/thirteenth centuries, which helpfully provide datable evidence to trace a gradual shift in the word’s connotations towards the now familiar stereotype.

**Al-Jāhiliyya and Arabic lexicography**

The first Arabic dictionary, al-Khalil ibn Aḥmad’s *Kitāb al-ʿAyn* (late second/eighth to early third/ninth century), defines *jahl* as the opposite of *ʿilm* but does not explicitly connect *jahl* and the era of *al-Jāhiliyya* as an age of ignorance per se. It cites the era with an intensive adjective – *al-Jāhiliyya al-Jahlāʾ* – but defines the word not in qualitative but in quantifiable, chronological terms: it is “the time of *al-Fatra,*” which, in turn, is defined as any period of time between two prophets. Al-ʿAyn neither equates *al-Jāhiliyya* with passion/barbarism, nor pre-Islamic Arab life, nor does it detail any corrupt traits for *al-Jāhiliyya* or *al-Fatra:* they are empirically identified as precise periods during which no prophets lived. Al-ʿAyn’s definition embodies a religious connotation similar to some citations of *jahl* in the Qurʾān that describe unbelief (*kufr*), the opposite to faith (*īmān*): “they would not believe unless Allah so willed. Howbeit, most of them are ignorant [*jāhilūn*].”

Al-ʿAyn’s equation of *al-Jāhiliyya* with *al-Fatra* provides for the possibility of many *jāhiliyyas* between each prophet since Adam. But Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) perhaps narrows the chronology in his compendium of historical facts, *al-Maʿārif,* where he defines *al-Fatra* as the period between Jesus and Muḥammad. In at least some third/ninth century discourses, therefore, *al-Jāhiliyya* connoted the six centuries before Muḥammad, although its geographical scope is open and does not only connote Arabia.

Al-Azharī’s (d. 370/980) dictionary *Tahdhīb al-Lugha* provides more detailed commentary on *jahl* than Al-ʿAyn and stresses what it asserts to be *jahl*’s primary

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31 Al-Khalil al-ʿAyn 8:115.


33 Q6:111 (Pickthall’s translation). See also Q6:35

contrast with ‘ilm, entailing both a lack of knowledge and khibra (experience/skill).³⁵ As for al-Jāhiliyya itself, al-Azharī only slightly expands the definition as “the time of al-Fatra and no Islam [wa- lā Islāmun].”³⁶ The absence of divine guidance on earth is emphasized.

The early dictionaries portray al-Jāhiliyya as a quantifiable era exterior to Islam; in stressing the opposition of jahl to ‘ilm, they also suggest that al-Jāhiliyya was interpreted as a period lacking knowledge/religious guidance, and they give no indication that al-Jāhiliyya connoted passionate disorder or that it was specific to Arabia as now defined in modern dictionaries. Outside of the two early dictionaries, citation of al-Jāhiliyya was undoubtedly broader – we have seen al-Khuzā’i used it to connote future time, and al-Ṭabarī’s fourth/tenth century Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk refers to both the prophetic history of Israel before Jesus and pre-Muḥammadic Arab history as parts of al-Jāhiliyya.³⁷ The term was therefore variously applied, but al-ʿAyn and al-Tahdhib are consistent with each other, and their equation of al-Jāhiliyya with al-Fatra must represent what early lexicographers perceived to be the primary signification of al-Jāhiliyya.

Dictionaries from the sixth/twelfth century present a new style of definition. Zamakhsharī’s (d. 537/1143) Asās al-Balāgha calls al-Jāhiliyya simply “al-qadīma” – the “old times,” and he makes no reference to al-Fatra.³⁸ Later in the same century, Nashwān al-Ḥimyarī’s (d. 573/1178) Shams al-ʿUlūm defines al-Jāhiliyya without any temporal reference, citing instead Qurʾān 48:26’s reference to the “rancour/zealotry of al-Jāhiliyya” (ḥamiyyat al-Jāhiliyya) and a curious hadith attributed to Muḥammad stating: “He who dies and has not performed the Hajj has died a jāhiliyya death [mīta jāhiliyya].”³⁹

The differences between the sixth/twelfth-century definitions and those of previous centuries are subtle but significant. Contrasting the earlier dictionaries’ association of al-Jāhiliyya with al-Fatra, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Ḥimyarī refrain from quantifiable chronology: the “old days” of al-Zamakhsharī, imply al-Jāhiliyya is simply “the past” and not a specific period. Al-Ḥimyarī is also the first lexicographer to define al-Jāhiliyya in qualitative terms evocative of both passion and antagonism to Islam. The hadith in Shams al-ʿUlūm is particularly

36 Al-Azharī, Tahdhib, 4:313.
notable. I have not found it in hadith compilations, but a very similar statement is recorded in an earlier collection although without reference to “al-Jāhiliyya”: the earlier version reads “he who dies and has not performed the Hajj ... might as well have died a Jew or a Christian.”⁴⁰ Both versions chastise those who do not make the intention of Hajj, casting them in a reprobate state outside of the Muslim community. The hadith evidently has an old pedigree, but al-Ḥimyari reflects a telling semantic change by replacing the “Jew/Christian” reference in the hadith as preserved in the early third/ninth century with the word “Jāhiliyya,” suggesting that by al-Ḥimyari’s time, the term Jāhiliyya had become a more appropriate epithet for “reprobate non-Islam.” This notion is supported by al-Ḥimyari’s inclusion of Qurʿān 43:26’s reference to “zealotry,” which, together with the new wording of the hadith, draws novel attention to al-Jāhiliyya’s connotations of both passion and un-Islamic behavior.

On their own, these two definitions may seem only a slight variation to the earlier dictionaries, but the seventh/thirteenth century Lisān al-ʿArab shows that the sixth/twelfth century dictionaries point to a changing conceptualization of al-Jāhiliyya.

Ibn Manẓūr’s (d. 711/1311) Lisān al-ʿArab repeats al-Ażhari’s earlier definition that “al-Jāhiliyya was the time of al-Fatra and no Islam,” which is to be expected since Ibn Manẓūr copied almost all the Tahdíb al-Lugha and then expanded upon it. Ibn Manẓūr’s own expanded definition is instructive:

[al-Jāhiliyya] is the condition of the Arabs before Islam, consisting of an ignorance of God Almighty and the religious laws, and [a time] of boasting about genealogy, arrogance, despotism and the like.⁴¹

Ibn Manẓūr’s definition departs from equating al-Jāhiliyya with al-Fatra and suggests a more generalized time “before Islam” without a specific beginning, akin to al-Zamakhshari’s “old times.” Ibn Manẓūr adds the additional territorial connection to Arabia, which marks the first time a dictionary expressly links al-Jāhiliyya with pre-Islamic Arabs and specific habits of their community. His definition turns al-Jāhiliyya away from a precise period of years, and by focusing on the activities of the Arabs, he makes the era synonymous with its inhabitants’ undesirable characteristics. Ibn Manẓūr’s al-Jāhiliyya is not about when, but about how the Arabs lived, and, as such, Lisān al-ʿArab is the first classical dictionary that defines al-Jāhiliyya as the colligatory concept expressed in dictionaries today.

Scholars note that the classical dictionaries intended to explain words encountered in the Qurʾān, hadith and old poetry and were less concerned with vernacular usage, perhaps under the belief that Arabic words did not change their meanings.⁴² While the lexicographers may indeed have been trying to describe what they believed was the “original” meaning of *al-Jāhiliyya*, we have seen that the way in which they expressed it changed over time. The shift in the emphasis of *al-Jāhiliyya*’s interpretation from a specific chronological *fatra* period lacking religious guidance to a more generic idea of an Arab past suggests that by the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries, the word “*al-Jāhiliyya*” had become more readily evocative of a negative stereotype about pre-Islamic Arab origins and lifestyle than it had previously been. As we shall see in the next section, the same shift appears in Qurʾān commentaries, suggesting that the changing interpretation of *al-Jāhiliyya* in the dictionaries reflected a wider trend in classical Arabic writing.

**Al-Jāhiliyya in Qurʾān commentaries**

I analyse the exegetical tradition because successive generations of Qurʾān commentators investigated each of the Qurʾān’s four citations of *al-Jāhiliyya*, permitting diachronic analysis comparable to the lexicons. Amidst the many Qurʾān commentaries (*tafsīr*), I study four well-known and extensive texts contemporary with the dictionaries considered above. The first commentary, also the earliest extant *tafsīr*, is attributed to Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767), which like al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad’s dictionary *al-ʿAyn*, likely reflects additions into the mid third/ninth century. For the fourth/tenth century, I investigate al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 310/923) *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, perhaps the most famous *tafsīr* of the entire classical period.⁴³ For the sixth/twelfth century, corresponding to al-Zamakhsharī’s and al-Ḥimyarī’s dictionaries, I review al-Zamakhsharī’s own exegesis *al-Kashshāf*.


And al-Qurtubi’s (d. 671/1273) al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān offers a text nearly contemporary with Ibn Manẓūr’s Lisān.

In his commentary on Qurʾān 5:50 and 33:33, Muqātil identifies al-Jāhiliyya as the time before Muḥammad’s Prophetic mission (al-mabʿath).⁴⁴ Unlike the contemporary dictionary al-ʿAyn, Muqātil makes no reference to al-Fatra in al-Jāhiliyya’s chronological parameters, leaving al-Jāhiliyya’s scope open-ended, possibly connoting the whole sweep of history before Muḥammad. But closer reading of each of Muqātil’s explanations reveals that he confines al-Jāhiliyya’s chronological window to the events around Muḥammad’s lifetime, evocative of the hadith describing Quraysh’s “recent” adoption of al-Jāhiliyya.⁴⁵ Both that hadith and Muqātil’s Tafsīr imply that al-Jāhiliyya is specific to events immediately preceding Muḥammad, and not an encapsulation of all pre-Muḥammadic time. Muqātil explains the “ḥamiyyat al-Jāhiliyya” (al-Jāhiliyya’s zealotry) in Qurʾān 48:26 referred to the attitude of those Meccan unbelievers (kuffār) who refused Muḥammad entry to Mecca during the pilgrimage in Year 6.⁴⁶ He ascribes Qurʾān 3:154’s “ẓann al-Jāhiliyya” (suppositions of al-Jāhiliyya) to the erroneous opinion of a specific group of Meccans: the “ignorant [juhhāl] Meccan polytheists (mushrikīn): Abū Sufyān and his companions” who falsely alleged that Muḥammad had been killed at the Battle of Uḥud in Year 3.⁴⁷ Muqātil interprets the “ḥukm al-Jāhiliyya” (ruling/decree of al-Jāhiliyya) in Qurʾān 5:50 as the iniquity [jawr] of the leaders [ruʾūs] of the Medinan Jews before Muḥammad’s emigration.⁴⁸ Muqātil’s sense of Jāhiliyya in the Qurʾān is thus closely tied to the actual opponents of Muḥammad and describes their state of rejecting Muḥammad’s prophetic mission. Muqātil does not use the Qurʾānic verses as a platform to speak about the pre-Islamic Arabs generally, nor does he indicate that he believed all pre-Islamic Arabs shared a common jahl or that the whole era was a time of fury and immorality. Muqātil’s conception of al-Jāhiliyya represents an ethic of “not-Islam” exhibited by specific historical persons, not an ethnic aspect of pre-Islamic Arabness.

Al-Ṭabarī’s exegesis of Qurʾān 33:33’s “al-Jāhiliyya al-ūlā” provides more detailed analysis of al-Jāhiliyya as a period of time. He notes that “the community of exegetes disagree” on its meaning and cites various opinions that identify it

⁴⁵ See note 18.
⁴⁶ Muqātil, Tafsīr, 4:76.
⁴⁷ Muqātil, Tafsīr, 1:308.
⁴⁸ Muqātil, Tafsīr, 1:482–83.
as either the period between Jesus and Muḥammad, Adam and Noah, Noah and Idrîs, or Adam and Jesus.⁴⁹ Al-Ṭabarî accepts all possibilities; he appears to prefer the time between Jesus and Muḥammad – but in every case, each of his temporal definitions exactly mirrors the early dictionaries’ equation of al-Jāhiliyya with fatra – an era between prophets.⁵⁰

In terms of the qualitative connotations of al-Jāhiliyya, al-Ṭabarî maintains Muqātil’s discourse that it represents antagonism against the Prophet, identifying the Qur’ānic citations of al-Jāhiliyya with instances of tension between Muḥammad and his opponents.⁵¹ But al-Ṭabarî shifts the emphasis slightly. For instance, whereas Muqātil interpreted “ẓann al-Jāhiliyya” as belonging to “Abū Sufyân and his companions,” al-Ṭabarî also expands the ambit to include the whole “community of polytheists [ahl al-shirk].”⁵² And whereas Muqātil interpreted “ḥukm al-Jāhiliyya” to refer to the iniquitous judgments of Muḥammad’s Jewish opponents in Medina, al-Ṭabarî extrapolates beyond the specific context of Muḥammad and the Jews and interprets the words as indicative of the types of judgments derived from “the worship of idols by the community of polytheists.”⁵³ Lastly, whereas Muqātil restricts the ḥamiyyat al-Jāhiliyya to the Meccan Arabs who opposed Muḥammad’s entry to Mecca, al-Ṭabarî describes it as “the morals of the unbelievers [akhlâq ahl al-kufr].”⁵⁴ This notion that al-Jāhiliyya can connote a generalized group of people – an ahl – distinguishes al-Ṭabarî’s tafsîr from Muqātil’s: al-Ṭabarî’s al-Jāhiliyya evokes not just a conception of time and the actions of specific individuals but also the way of life and moral code of the non-Muslim community. Thus, while al-Ṭabarî’s literal interpretation of al-Jāhiliyya reflects al-Azharî’s dictionary definition of a non-Islamic time defined as a Fatra, his equation of al-Jāhiliyya with non-Muslims in general goes further, interpreting the word as eliciting a generalized idea of non-Muslim idol worship. But unlike the modern Jāhiliyya stereotype, al-Ṭabarî does not interpret Jāhiliyya as something particular to Arabs or as synonymous with an Arabian pre-Islamic anarchical community. A shift in that direction, however, is manifest in later exegesis.

Akin to the change of al-Jāhiliyya’s definitions in the dictionaries since the sixth/twelfth century, the later Qur’ān commentaries also depart from the earlier exegesis of al-Jāhiliyya and shift to more closely resemble modern Jāhiliyya ideas.

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⁵¹ For Q2:154 and the battle of Uḥud, see al-Ṭabarî, Tafsîr, 4:188–89, and for Q5:50’s reference to Jews of Medina, 6:371.
⁵² Al-Ṭabarî, Tafsîr, 4:190.
⁵³ Al-Ṭabarî, Tafsîr, 6:371.
⁵⁴ Al-Ṭabarî, Tafsîr, 26:135.
Al-Zamakhshari and al-Qurṭubi’s commentaries, though separated by some 150 years, are similar in their treatment of *al-Jāhiliyya* and I consider them together. A new feature compared with the two earlier exegetical texts is the appearance of the phrase *millat al-Jāhiliyya* (the religious community of *al-Jāhiliyya*)⁵⁵ and *ahl al-Jāhiliyya* (the people of *al-Jāhiliyya*)⁵⁶ in the commentary on Qurʾān 3:154. Both phrases imply that *al-Jāhiliyya* can be conceptualized as a single eponymous *Jāhili* community. Whereas Muqātil equated *Jāhiliyya* with a precise group of Muḥammad’s opponents and al-Ṭabarī considered it a trait of polytheists, al-Zamakhshari and a-Qurṭubi rendered it a trait of a whole and specific period of history, tarring the generations of people before Islam with *al-Jāhiliyya* en masse by virtue of the era in which they lived. The Qurʾānic verse makes no indication that *al-Jāhiliyya* is meant to be equivalent to a period of time and its population, and al-Qurṭubi seems to be aware of this; hence, he goes to extra lengths to “prove” his interpretation by explaining that the word *ahl* (people), which engenders the interpretation of the *Jāhiliyya* colligatory concept is implied in Qurʾān 3:154 but elided (*maḥdhūf*)!⁵⁷

In terms of dating *al-Jāhiliyya*, the sixth/twelfth century al-Zamakhshari offers two explanations. One follows the exegetical tradition of al-Ṭabarī that *al-Jāhiliyya* was a *fatra* period between prophets,⁵⁸ but al-Zamakhshari’s first explanation is that *al-Jāhiliyya* is simply “*al-qadīma*” – the “old days,” identical to his dictionary definition.⁵⁹ Interpreting the same verse one hundred years later, al-Qurṭubi (like his contemporary Ibn Manẓūr’s *Jāhiliyya*) makes no reference to *Fatra* and follows al-Zamakhshari’s generic conception of *al-qadīma*, writing that “*al-Jāhiliyya* is applied to that period which was before Islam.”⁶⁰ Citing the fact that pre-Islamic poets are called *jāhilī* and interpreting citations of *al-Jāhiliyya* in the hadith to mean pre-Islam, al-Qurṭubi reflects the current generalized notion that *al-Jāhiliyya* is simply the whole pre-Islamic past, not *fatra* segments thereof.

Having generalized all pre-Muḥammadic time as *al-Jāhiliyya*, al-Qurṭubi also generalizes about the era’s qualities, using each Qurʾānic citation of *al-Jāhiliyya* to comment on the pre-Islamic way of life and stereotypes about the Arabs.

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⁵⁸ He proposes it is between Adam and Noah, Noah and Idrīs, or, bizarrely, David and Solomon (al-Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshāf*, 3:521).
None of his observations are expressly supported by the Qurʾān’s text, neither are they adduced in early exegesis of which I am aware: al-Qurṭubi’s glosses are imported from his own conception of the Jāhiliyya idea. He mentions the Arabs’ “fanaticism [ʿaṣabiyya]” and the pre-Islamic Arabians’ defense of their idols al-Lāt and al-ʿUzzā as well as their disdain for worshipping God in the context of the Qurʾānic “ḥamiyyat al-Jāhiliyya”⁶¹ and he explains the Qurʾān’s “ḥukm al-Jāhiliyya” connotes the injustice of al-Jāhiliyya, where the strong and rich were constantly favored, forsaking the weak and poor.⁶² He even mentions a reading of the Qurʾān’s “ḥukm” as “ḥakam,” changing the interpretation from “judgment of al-Jāhiliyya” to “judges of al-Jāhiliyya” and thereby proposing that the verse refers to pre-Islamic Arabian priests (kuhhān) and their mysterious judgments.⁶³ Such a reading implies that Jāhiliyya is a trait associated with people, not just ideas, and it presupposes readers have a fixed conception of the general, paradigmatic habits of “pre-Islamic Arab judges,” which like the ahl al-Jāhiliyya mentioned above, presumes a stereotyped cohesiveness to this “judge type.” Interestingly, this reading, though attributed to early Qurʾān readers, is first cited in Ibn Khālawayhi’s Mukhtaṣar at the end of the fourth/tenth century (and is repeated by al-Zamakhsharī),⁶⁴ suggesting again the negative generalizations about pre-Islamic Arabia’s fabric became more frequently cited from the fourth/tenth century and paradigmatically associated with al-Jāhiliyya by the sixth/twelfth.

As an example of a further negative stereotype at work, Qurʾān 33:33’s reference to women prettifying themselves confused al-Qurṭubi who notes “the Arabs were [before Islam] primarily a people living in destitute (ḍank) and miserable (qashf) conditions.”⁶⁵ Al-Qurṭubi was unable to explain how such apparently poor Arabs could muster sufficient wealth to ornament themselves, and he reasoned that the verse must refer to “prior ages” (al-azmān al-sābiqa)!⁶⁶ This comment is revealing: al-Qurṭubi portrays al-Jāhiliyya as a time/condition specific to the Arabs and assumes a priori that their life was wretched. Whereas the original verse makes no express indication of any of this, and while previous commentators made no such assumptions either, al-Qurṭubi’s interpretation reveals an impression of pre-Islamic Arabia that seemingly did not occur to earlier exegetes, but it does correspond the modern colligatory concept of the Jāhiliyya Arab “Dark Age.”

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⁶¹ Al-Qurṭubi, al-Jāmiʿ, 16:190.
⁶² Al-Qurṭubi, al-Jāmiʿ, 6:139.
⁶⁴ For the history of the citations of this reading, see ʿAbd al-Laṭīf al-Khaṭīb, Muʿjam al-Qirāʾāt, Damascus: Dār Saʿd al-Dīn, 2002, 2:288.
⁶⁵ Al-Qurṭubi, al-Jāmiʿ, 14:117.
⁶⁶ Al-Qurṭubi, al-Jāmiʿ, 14:117.
Al-Zamakhshari similarly associates *al-Jāhiliyya* with negative impressions of the Arabs, explaining that the period was one of “whim [hawā] and ignorance [jahāl],”⁶⁷ and he also explains Qurʾān 5:50’s ḥukm al-Jāhiliyya via reference to legendary pre-Islamic judges, such as King Afʿā of Najrān whose judgments he considers inferior to Muḥammad’s, the “seal of the Prophets.”⁶⁸ Such references to characters and attributes of the pre-Islamic Arabs can be found across Arabic literature since the third/ninth century; however, their absence in the earlier *tafsīrs* and their appearance in sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth century exegesis to gloss the word *al-Jāhiliyya* would suggest that they were becoming increasingly synonymous with stereotypes about Arabian life. Much like modern texts associate *al-Jāhiliyya* with idol worship, baby-killing, and the iniquitous judgments of tyrants as emblematic of the era, the later Qurʾān commentators, unlike earlier generations, stressed *al-Jāhiliyya’s* equivalence to endemic anti-Islamic time interpreted via stereotyped vices.

When read in conjunction with the lexicons, the *tafsīrs* reveal a similarly dated shift towards an interpretation of *al-Jāhiliyya* as the “bad old days” of a pagan and anarchical pre-Islamic Arabia. Prior to the fourth/tenth century watershed, lexicographers and exegetes associated *al-Jāhiliyya* with less elaborate, less impassioned impressions that avoid using the term as descriptive of a whole historical community. In the final section of this paper, I turn back to the third/ninth century to explore how scholars in that period conceptualized *al-Jāhiliyya* and pre-Islamic Arabian history. Four “*akhbārī*” texts (three *adab* and one historical) shall shed more light on an early stage of the Jāhiliyya idea.

**Al-Jāhiliyya in third/ninth century discourses on Arabness**

In tandem with the common generalization that Muslim scholars disparage *al-Jāhiliyya* in their writings, it has been assumed that pious Muslims shun even the memory of *al-Jāhiliyya* – as noted by one Western historian of pre-Islamic Arabia: “some early Muslim scholars would perform expiation after studying pre-Islamic poetry, just as medieval Christian monks might do penance after reading

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⁶⁷ Al-Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:628. He specifically contrasts *jahāl* with *ʿilm*, hence my translation of *jahāl* as “ignorance.”

the classics.”⁶⁹ Our analysis so far, however, has suggested that the negative stereotypes of \textit{al-Jāhiliyya} were not endorsed by all early Arabic writers, and the assumptions about axiomatic Muslim disavowals of \textit{al-Jāhiliyya} may not accurately reflect the era’s status before the fourth/tenth century.

Muslim-era collections of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry give little support to the idea that the anthologists believed in the inveterate “wretchedness” of \textit{al-Jāhiliyya}. The extant poetry is not a compendium of violence, baby-killing and despotism; it contains scant references to pagan practice,⁷⁰ and pre-Islamic poets extoll values antithetical to \textit{jāhiliyya} “barbarism”. They sing of honor, perseverance, generosity, martial prowess, and even their good manners (\textit{adab})⁷¹ and \textit{ḥilm} – the opposite of \textit{jahl}. Consider, for example, the pre-Islamic Hudhali poet Iyās ibn Sahm who described his ideal companion as

\begin{quote}
Mighty, generous, neither ignorant [\textit{jahūl}] nor unsociable,
Neither frivolous in his speech nor headstrong;
But of noble equanimity [\textit{ḥilm}], whose generosity stands the test,
And whose liberality flows freely to those who seek it.⁷²
\end{quote}

Even more telling is the verse of the early Abbasid poet, Muḥammad ibn Munādhīr (d. 198/813):

\begin{quote}
Relate to us some Islamic knowledge (\textit{fiqh}) transmitted from our Prophet
To nourish our hearts;
Or relate the stories of our \textit{Jāhiliyya}
For they are wise and glorious.
...
If you are ignorant of any of these
Then you shall be a lesson to onlookers.⁷³
\end{quote}

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⁶⁹ Hoyland, \textit{Arabia}, 9.
⁷⁰ Hawting, \textit{The Idea of Idolatry}, 30 notes that references to Allāh in pre-Islamic poetry actually outnumber citations of pagan idols. Surveying references to the Hajj in pre-Islamic poetry, I found that even mention of this supposedly key pre-Islamic practice is absent in the well-known classical collections (Peter Webb “The Hajj before Muhammad” in \textit{The Hajj: Collected Essays}, Venetia Porter and Liana Saif eds. (London: British Museum, 2013), 6–14 13, Note 3). Pre-Islamic poetry seems curiously “non-sectarian”.
\end{flushright}
Poetry lauding pre-Islamic ethics is repeated throughout Arabic *adab* writing of the third/ninth century and beyond, and Ibn Munādhīr’s verses demonstrate how knowledge of the pre-Islamic Arabs shared equal footing with Islamic-era rulings as a scholarly pastime. When analyzing pre-Islamic poetry in light of the contemporary *Jāhiliyya* paradigm; however, scholars such as Goldziher and Izutsu adopted a dismissive approach to the pre-Islamic poets’ expressed gallantry: both scholars stressed that pre-Islamic *ḥilm* was of a lesser quality than Islamic *ḥilm* and that the praiseworthy traits of pre-Islamic Arabs, such as generosity, were motivated by boastfulness, not “true virtue.”⁷⁴ It seems that by defining Islam as a “great work of moral reformation”⁷⁵ and by determining that the “original” meaning of *al-Jāhiliyya* was passion and/or barbarism,⁷⁶ Goldziher and Izutsu – somewhat like late classical Muslim writers – erected so rigid a conception of pre-Islamic time that they could not accept that pre-Islamic Arabs possessed “true” forbearance and civility, and when faced with ostensibly “civil” pre-Islamic poetry, they explained it away as a second-class form of refinement!

Stetkevych proposes a more sensitive approach to the heroic aspects of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry by positing that there were two, paradoxically divergent *Jāhiliyyas* in classical Arabic writing. She maintains that one was a timeless heroic age depicted in pre-Islamic poetry, while the other was a chronological progression of human history towards the Prophet Muḥammad and the Caliphate in Arabic historiography. She argues that the two narratives were parallel, isolated streams: “the theological pre-Muḥammadan age appears to be simultaneous with the heroic Jāhiliyah age, but within `Abbasid culture the two are never integrated nor do they affect one another.”⁷⁷ By separating the “heroic tradition” transmitted by poets from the “theological tradition” maintained by religious scholars,⁷⁸ she carves *Jāhiliyya* studies in twain to explain how Muslims could appreciate “pagan” pre-Islamic poetry without treading on sensitive theological toes. Whilst Stetkevych’s proposal breaks down the monolithic *Jāhiliyya* colligatory concept, it replaces it with two colligatory concepts, and this binary notion of *al-Jāhiliyya* split between two genres is perhaps still too neat. My analysis above suggests that even in the “non-literary” field of exegesis, early scholars did not universally disparage *al-Jāhiliyya*. Classical scholars embraced a wide range of

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⁷⁶ See note 14.
interests that almost always crossed genres more freely than scholars do today, and further analysis of “historical” and “religious” writings prior to the fourth/tenth century watershed when the ʿJāhiliyya idea shifted decisively toward “barbaric pagandom” reveals that STETKEVYCH’s dichotomy does not apply to all early classical writings about the status of the pre-Islamic period.

Hadith collections in fact contain positive impressions of memories from al-ʿJāhiliyya:

[Jābir ibn Samra] said the Prophet – God’s blessings be upon him – would pray Fajr and then sit in his place of prayer until sunrise and his Companions would converse about stories of al-ʿJāhiliyya and they would recite poetry and they would laugh, and he [the Prophet] would smile.⁷⁹

In another hadith, reported by Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 245/859–860) in al-Muḥabbab, Muḥammad orders his people to “appoint as your leader he who used to lead you during al-ʿJāhiliyya.”⁸⁰ Ibn Ḥabīb relates this hadith without a chain of authorities, and I have not found it in the main collections, but its citation in al-Muḥabbab, a book relating the history of the Arabs and what could be called “trivia” about Arabness,⁸¹ is noteworthy. The hadith teaches that Muḥammad’s actual stance on the transition of ʿJāhiliyya to Islam; rather, I am interested in why this opinion was endorsed by a third/ninth century Muslim scholar in a book about Arabs.

The material Ibn Ḥabīb gathered in al-Muḥabbab consists of hundreds of anecdotes drawn in almost equal measure from pre-Islamic times and the early Islamic era (up to the Umayyad Caliphate). The material explores manifold aspects of Arab culture, and in so doing, Ibn Ḥabīb occasionally splits topics temporally into two halves – ʿJāhili and Islamic: for instance, he relates stories of “Generous

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⁷⁹ Al-Nasāʾī Sunan, al-Sahw:90. See also a very similar hadith in al-Tirmidhī Jāmiʿ, al-Adab:70.
⁸¹ In addition to genealogies, names of famous Arabs and practices of ancient Arabia, al-Muḥabbab also relates unusual, trivial details like the names of “noble men who lost an eye in battle” (261), “the names of men who were so handsome that they would cover themselves in fear of women” (232), and “Arabs named Muḥammad before Islam” (130).
Men [ajwād] of al-Jāhiliyya” and “Generous Men of Islam”82 or “Brigands [futtāk]83 of al-Jāhiliyya” and “Brigands of Islam.”84 Contrary to what modern audiences may expect, the reported traits of these characters do not differ. The generous men of al-Jāhiliyya are praised for feeding their guests, keeping additional camels on hand to slaughter for unexpected guests,85 and thinking only of helping others, even to their own detriment.86 The generous of Islam are similar: Ibn Ḥabīb does not relate stories of lavish spending Caliphs but instead narrates more modest anecdotes of those who generously gave food or selflessly dispersed money to the needy.87 The narrative suggests a continuity of this “innate Arab” trait, not a change with the advent of Islam, and in three cases, Ibn Ḥabīb relates Islamic-era poetry praising the memory of pre-Islamic benefactors.88 The split into pre-Islamic and Islamic seems merely temporal and not reflective of differing qualities of generosity after Islam.

Similarly, the swashbuckling futtāk of al-Jāhiliyya reflect the violence and antagonisms of the modern Jāhiliyya stereotype, but the group Ibn Ḥabīb relates for Islam are similar: both are ascribed a sense of honor, a heedlessness of authority, and a willingness to kill in defense of their pride. In the Islamic period, the political order of the Islamic state is not portrayed as affecting these Arab brigands: their crimes are reported as often unpunished,89 or only nominally so, even when religiously significant figures such as the Caliph ʿUthmān were involved.90

The emphasis on continuity, not change of Arab identity from al-Jāhiliyya to Islam, can also be inferred from Ibn Ḥabīb’s lists of tribal leaders91 and in curious lists such as “men whose ancestors were all traitors”92 or “men whose ancestors were all killed.”93 For example, the latter list names ‘Umāra ibn Ḥamza whose father and grandfathers, spanning five generations, were all

83 The term fātik implies a bellicose spirit, impervious to authority who reacts violently from his own whim, without consideration of consequences (Ibn Manẓūr, Lisān, 10:472).
84 Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār, 192–212, 212–32.
85 Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār, 140,142,144.
86 For instance, see the story of Ka’b ibn Māma who allegedly distributed his water to the thirsty until he himself died of thirst (Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār, 144)!
87 Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār, 150,153,155.
88 Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār, 141,145,146.
89 Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār, 212–33.
90 Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār, 217.
91 Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār, 254.
92 Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār, 244.
93 Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Muḥabbār, 189.
killed in battle or executed for their political affiliations. The list of his ancestors begins with pre-Islamic generations and crosses into the Islamic era, indicating that understanding Arab heritage required an amalgamation of both periods. Express indications of continuity from *al-Jāhiliyya* include Ibn Ḥabīb’s lists of “rulings of *al-Jāhiliyya* that correspond with Islamic Law,” including inheritance.⁹⁴ Ibn Ḥabīb also lists the religious practices of *al-Jāhiliyya* that were continued in Islam.⁹⁵

Beyond the continuity, *al-Muḥabbar* relates positive qualities about *al-Jāhiliyya* in its own right: it lists pre-Islamic Arabs who shunned alcohol,⁹⁶ refused to worship idols,⁹⁷ were famous for their honesty,⁹⁸ praiseworthy traits of pre-Islamic tribes,⁹⁹ and the six “merits of the Arabs” in *al-Jāhiliyya*, of which Ibn Ḥabīb notes three survived into Islam while three (hostels for feeding the poor) were closed.¹⁰⁰ Ibn Ḥabīb even gives a positive twist to idol worship, now deemed quintessential *jāhiliyya* pagandom: he reports that idols were worshipped “along with God – and there is no God but He,”¹⁰¹ a significant contrast to the opinion in al-Qurṭubī’s seventh/thirteenth century exegesis of Qurʾān 46:26 noted above regarding the pre-Islamic Arabians’ zealous refusal to worship God instead of their idols.¹⁰²

From Ibn Ḥabīb’s third/ninth century perspective of Arab history, therefore, *al-Jāhiliyya* was not a time to be repudiated and forgotten, but rather it constituted Arab origins. Praiseworthy characteristics of the Arabs are shown as deriving from *al-Jāhiliyya* and the memories of pre-Islamic Arabia are retained as the “first half” of Arab identity. Ibn Ḥabīb narrates the reports from *al-Jāhiliyya* in the same matter-of-fact chronological fashion we encountered in the first dictionary definition.

If we interpret *al-Jāhiliyya* to mean “the pre-Islamic origin of the Arabs,” and not the “reprehensible pagan days,” we can also explain an important comment of al-ィḥīẓ (d. 255/868), the renowned *adīb* contemporary with Ibn Ḥabīb. Al-ィḥīẓ writes in *al-Bayān wa-l-Tabyīn*, another compendium of Arabian lore woven into a discourse on language and communication, that

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⁹⁴ Ibn Ḥabīb reports the will of ʿĀmir ibn Jusham who decreed his son’s share would be twice each daughter’s, anticipating the Islamic rule (*al-Muḥabbar*, 236).
¹⁰² See note 61.
the Arabs better retain what they hear and better memorise what is narrated; and they have poetry which registers their glories and immortalises their merits. They followed in their Islam the practices from their Jāhiliyya. And on the basis of that [the Umayyads] established great honour and glory (i.e. more than the Abbasids).¹⁰³

Al-Jāḥiẓ’s comment supports his argument that the Umayyads, whom he describes as an “Arabic Bedouin Arabian” state were superior to the “Persian Khorasanian” Abbasid caliphate ruling the Islamic world in al-Jāḥiẓ’s day.¹⁰⁴

Al-Jāḥiẓ was not alone in this assertion: another near contemporary, Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) wrote Faḍl al-ʿArab to defend Arabs against their detractors, and he used anecdotes from pre-Islamic times to the Umayyads to develop his arguments. He states the “Arabs of al-Jāhiliyya were the world’s bravest nation”¹⁰⁵ that maintained “vestiges of pure monotheism [al-Ḥanīfiyya – the Qur’ānic designation for Abraham’s monotheism].”¹⁰⁶ He repeats Ibn Ḥabīb’s theme of continuity, reporting on “judgments of al-Jāhiliyya which were affirmed by Islam”¹⁰⁷ as part of a wider discourse on the extent of the Arabs’ knowledge (ʿilm) during al-Jāhiliyya.¹⁰⁸ Given the third/ninth-century definition of jahl as the opposite of ʿilm, Ibn Qutayba’s emphasis on the Arabs’ ʿilm from al-Jāhiliyya seems an express rehabilitation of the era’s reputation, rejecting assumptions about its “ignorance.”

Moving beyond al-Jāḥiẓ and Ibn Qutayba’s explicit defences of Arabness, even third/ninth century histories reveal similar approaches to al-Jāhiliyya. Consider, for example, al-Yaʿqūbī’s Tārīkh, a world history which devotes a long section to the Arabians before Muḥammad. Al-Yaʿqūbī opens by stating the Arabs share common ancestry from Ishmael, son of Abraham, emphasizing the Arabs’ origins in prophethood, not paganism.¹⁰⁹ Maʿadd and Quraysh, two important tribal divisions of the Arabs, are said to have always followed the Religion of Abraham,¹¹⁰ and the Hajj is noted throughout al-Yaʿqūbī’s account of pre-Islamic Arab history.¹¹¹ As for idols, al-Yaʿqūbī, like Ibn Ḥabīb, makes no derogatory associations with jahl and instead reports the Arabs’ adoption of idols was “only a

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¹⁰⁴ Al-Jāḥiẓ, al-Bayān, 3:366.
¹⁰⁶ Ibn Qutayba, Faḍl, 87–89.
¹⁰⁷ Ibn Qutayba, Faḍl, 89.
¹⁰⁸ Ibn Qutayba, Faḍl, passim, in particular 89, 141, 146.
¹¹⁰ Al-Yaʿqūbī, Tārīkh, 1:254; 248.
¹¹¹ Al-Yaʿqūbī, Tārīkh, 1:239
means [of worship], and they continued to make the Hajj and practice its Talbiyya like their father, Abraham.”¹¹² The pre-Islamic practice of adjusting the calendar (al-nas’a), described as an “excess of disbelief” in Qur’ān 9:37 is noted by al-Ya‘qūbī as one of the “virtues” of the Kināna tribal-group, aside their right to announce the Hajj.¹¹³ Throughout, al-Ya‘qūbī describes Arab tribal ancestors as “noble” (sharīf),¹¹⁴ “generous” (karīm),¹¹⁵ “forbearing” (ḥalīm – the opposite of jāhil),¹¹⁶ and of “innumerable virtues.”¹¹⁷ His analysis of the pre-Islamic Arabs is a generous and complimentary account of their pre-Islamic origins.

We also find a similar narrative in al-Balādhurī’s (d.c.279/892) Ansāb al-ashrāf, a genealogical history of nobility. Though al-Balādhurī was a courtier of the Abbasid Caliphs in Samarra, his text depicts nobility as exclusive property of the Arabs, and he traces notable Arab lineages from pre-Islamic origins until the late second/eight century¹¹⁸ crossing the Jāhiliyya/Islām barrier without pause. His own patrons are curiously absent; al-Balādhurī’s text focuses primarily on the hundred years before and after Muḥammad, revealing again that al-Jāhiliyya was a core component of the ‘noble’ Arab story, quite apart from modern expectations of pagandom and barbarism.

The “meritorious” al-Jāhiliyya?

From the texts considered above, it appears that third/ninth century writers did not all view history according to today’s Jāhiliyya periodization, nor did they all espouse negative impressions of al-Jāhiliyya. Some early texts do contrast al-Jāhiliyya with Islam’s wholesale social and moral revolution, for example, Ibn al-Kalbī’s (d. 204/819–820) genealogical Jamharat al-Nasab records a hadith in which the Prophet exclaims how almost “nothing from al-Jāhiliyya is consistent with Islam,”¹¹⁹ but this was not a unanimous approach, and we have seen it was outright contradicted by a number of third/ninth century writers armed with

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¹¹² Al-Ya‘qūbī, Tārīkh, 1:255.
¹¹³ Al-Ya‘qūbī, Tārīkh, 1:232.
¹¹⁴ Al-Ya‘qūbī, Tārīkh, 1:223; 237; 241.
¹¹⁵ Al-Ya‘qūbī, Tārīkh, 1:226.
¹¹⁶ Al-Ya‘qūbī, Tārīkh, 1:226.
¹¹⁷ Al-Ya‘qūbī, Tārīkh, 1:232; 228.
¹¹⁸ Al-Manṣūr and al-Mahdī are the last two Caliphs for whom al-Balādhurī narrates a biography; there is also brief mention of al-Rashīd and his contemporaries (Ansāb al-ashrāf Muḥammad Firdaws al-ʿAẓam ed. (Damascus: Dār al-Yaqaẓa, 1995–2004) 3:289–321).
hadith of their own. For many, the memories of al-Jāḥiliyya served as a repository of anecdotes about Arab culture in its “original” state before the Arabs left the Arabian Peninsula during the Muslim Conquests. Al-Jāḥiliyya was a primary point of reference for such constructions of Arab identity. Judging from the mixture of pre-Islamic to Umayyad era anecdotes marshaled in the above writings, authors did not rigidly separate al-Jāḥiliyya from Islamic periods, but instead conceived of both as “Arab eras,” before the “Persification” of political rule by the Abbasids (at least after al-Maʾmūn r.198–218/813–833). The pre-Islamic and early Islamic eras represented separate temporal components of Arab identity, but together constituted the material to reconstruct conceptions of Arabness: the emphasis was one of broad continuity rather than complete change.

Authors working within this discourse would associate al-Jāḥiliyya with “original Arabness” before “barbarism” or “pagandom.” Such writings of Ibn Qutayba and al-Jāḥiẓ could be read as pro-Arab partisanship within early Islamic-era urban Iraq’s cultural debate known as al-Shuʿūbiyya where the virtues of Arabs and non-Arabs were contested. Arab partisans had good reason to focus on the positive aspects of al-Jāḥiliyya, as they can be expected to have portrayed both “halves” of Arab history in as positive a light as possible to promote an illustrious “Arab past”. While Rina Drory considers al-Shuʿūbiyya debate and the reconstruction of al-Jāḥiliyya as intimately intertwined,¹²⁰ the breadth of reporting Jāhiliyya lore across the many literary disciplines and ethnic divides of the classical Muslim world suggests that the third/ninth century discursive environment was concerned with more than Shuʿūbiyya ethnic antagonisms. Neither al-Jāḥiẓ nor Ibn Qutayba were themselves ethnic Arabs, and more factors probably underlie the third/ninth century reconstructions of al-Jāḥiliyya explored above.

For example, during the first two centuries of Islam, Arab tribes were cohesive political units often in competition with each other and the memories of pre-Islamic battle days and tribal antagonisms played a central role in tribal memory which spilled into the politics of the early Islamic world. In this environment, tribes would naturally seek to remember their pre-Islamic history in terms of heroism and nobility as each tribe could be expected to want to portray its past in a positive light. For them, disparagement of al-Jāḥiliyya would hamstring their own reputations. By the third/ninth century, these tribal memories would form a large part of the repository of pre-Islamic lore, which scholars utilized to reconstruct al-Jāḥiliyya.¹²¹ Given their interest in the Arab past and their use of material

¹²¹ Al-Balādhurī’s Ansāb al-ashrāf cites from many Arab “tribal” informants, evidenced in its isnāds. Closer analysis of these sources would be enlightening.
generated in a large part by Arabian tribes, it is not surprising that third/ninth century writers had such positive things to say about *al-Jāhiliyya*.

For so long as Arab tribes represented cohesive political actors in Iraq, and for so long as Persians and Arabs sparred in a meaningful debate over cultural superiority, *al-Jāhiliyya* can logically have elicited associations of nobility, learning, and Arab prowess. By the later fourth/tenth century, however, when the Arab tribes, the cohesion of Abbasid rule and the old antagonisms were being replaced by new political and social orders, and when Arabia was gripped by anarchy and slipped entirely off the historical record,¹²² the Arabian *al-Jāhiliyya*’s utility would change. Interestingly, this coincides with the shift we noted in the impressions of *al-Jāhiliyya* in dictionaries and Qur’ānic exegesis where *al-Jāhiliyya*’s negative aspects came into focus and pre-Islamic Arabness was expressed as a “barbaric” society awaiting salvation. The modern stereotype of *al-Jāhiliyya* is clearly indebted to the arguments of this later classical period, so meticulously copied and preserved in the manuscript tradition and then perpetuated in European discourses since the Enlightenment.¹²³

The connotations of *al-Jāhiliyya* thus must be related to the contexts of their citations. Instead of interpreting the period as stereotyped negativity and applying one translation for all reference to *Jāhiliyya* across Arabic writing, it is prudent to accept the era’s changing meanings over time. The negative connotations inherent in its name did not axiomatically lead writers to disparage the era, and it is likely that the term has retained a plurality of connotations since its first use. Like any period of history, *al-Jāhiliyya*’s temporal and spatial parameters live in


123 For example, one should consider Edward Gibbon’s description of the pre-Islamic Arabs and their “time of ignorance” for is myriad similarities to the sentiments of modern scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim (*Decline and Fall*, 5:235–41). Gibbon derived his information from the eighteenth century explorer of Arabia Carsten Niebuhr and from later classical period Arabic writings translated by European Orientalists (see Holt, P. M., “The Study of Arabic Historians in Seventeenth Century England: The Background and the Work of Edward Pococke,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 19.3 (1957), 444–55, 450–51. It must be noted that the Arabic texts available to Enlightenment writers all post-date the *Jāhiliyya* idea’s fourth/tenth century watershed.
a state of flux and its implications are disputed. The debates, tied inextricably to the interpretation of history itself, bequeath *al-Jāhiliyya* a restless immortality: it can never settle in one state, but it will always be on our minds.