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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 Qurʾānic 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, Qurʾan 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

1 Probably the first English translation of "*al-Jāhiliyya*" as a historical period. See Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Everyman, 1994), 5:234. Franz Rosenthal advocates this translation in *Knowledge Triumphant: the Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 32–35.

2 Robert Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs* (London: Routledge, 2001), 9.

3 Ignáz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, S. M. Stern, ed., C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern, trans. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967–1971), 1:202; repeated by F. E. Peters, *The Hajj* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 21, 36, and Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qurʾān* (Montreal: McGill, 2002), 228.

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[7] possessing "no learning to speak of"[8] and living in a "barbarous society."[9] 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.

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4 Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14.

5 Mumtaz Ali Tajddin S. Ali, "Jāhiliyya," *Encyclopaedia of Ismailism* (Karachi: Islamic Book Publisher, 2006) 307.

6 "The Way to Truth," http://www.thewaytotruth.org/prophetmuhammad/jahiliyya.html. Accessed 5 October 2013.

7 Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1–3. Khalidi puns the Latin *Arabia Felix* ("Lucky Arabia," applied by Roman geographers to the region on account of its lucrative incense trade) with *Arabia Ferox* ("Fearsome Arabia")!

8 Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 14. He also describes pre-Islamic Arabians as "barbarians," as does William McCants, *Founding Gods, Inventing Nations: Conquest and Culture Myths from Antiquity to Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 2.

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.

10 Gerald Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2–5; Hoyland, *Arabia*, 9; and James Montgomery "The Empty Ḥijāz" in *Arabic Theology, Arabic Philosophy*, James Montgomery, ed. (Leuven: Uitgevrij Peeters, 2006), 46, 50. Rina Drory proposed that second/eighth century court scholars "invented" *al-Jāhiliyya* ("The Abbasid Construction of the Jāhiliyya: Cultural Authority in the Making," *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996), 33–49, 43). Specialists of pre-Islamic Arabian history interpret archaeological finds from sophisticated ancient Arabian cultures as proof that the "barbarous" *al-Jāhiliyya* was a Muslim topos; they accordingly give little empirical weight to Muslim-era literature about pre-Islamic Arabia (see Hoyland, *Arabia*, 9).

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.

11 Bernard Lewis expressly calls *al-Jāhiliyya* a "Dark Age" in *The Middle East: 2000 Years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day,* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995, 42.
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 Qurʾānic 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

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 *ʿilm* (knowledge) (*Knowledge Triumphant*, 32). The best approach may be to accept both: consider two pre-Islamic poets at different corners of the canon, Imruʾ al-Qays and al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī, who cite the root j-h-l with similar frequency: Imruʾ al-Qays eight, al-Nābigha six (Imruʾ al-Qays, *Dīwān*, Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, ed., Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1990; Al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī, *Dīwān*, Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, ed., Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1990). Some instances connote youthful restlessness, the opposite of *ḥilm*, but they are less than half (al-Qays, *Dīwān*, 256, 330, 352, al-Nābigha, *Dīwān*, 89, 109, 115). In others, lack of knowledge is intended: cf. al-Nābigha: "the ignorant (*jāhil*) is not like the knowledgeable (*dhū ʿilm*)" (63). Imruʾ 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, *ʿalam*, is from the same root as *ʿilm*, suggesting a genuinely old contrast of *jahl* with *ʿilm* in topographical terminology. *Jahl* is also cited as foolish speech (al-Nābigha, *Dīwān*, 172); al-Nābigha also notes those ignorant of his tribe's lineage have *jahl* and *safāha* (idiocy), implying both lack of knowledge and foolhardiness (*Dīwān*, 199).

of God.[15] 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."[16] This definition has three salient differences from the Qurʾānic 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 Qurʾān'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*."[17] Muḥammad also is reported to have described the Quraysh tribe as having "only recently adopted *jāhiliyya*."[18] 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,"[19] 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*?"[20] Given the well-rehearsed arguments over the authenticity of the hadith,[21] it is difficult

15 Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, 29; Edward Shepard, "The Age of Ignorance" in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, Jane McAuliffe et al., eds., Leiden: Brill, 2001, 1:37–40, 37.

16 www.almaany.com "*Jāhiliyya*." Accessed 5 October, 2013. See also *al-Munjid* 108, which defines *Jāhiliyya* as either the "state of *jahl*" or, similar to *Qāmūs al-Maʿānī*, "the idolatry in the land of the Arabs before Islam," Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1992, 108.

17 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* , al-Riyadh: Dār al-Salām, 1999, *Īmān:22*.

18 Al-Nasāʾī *Sunan al-Nasāʾī*, al-Riyadh: Dār al-Salām, 1999, *al-Sahw*:99. See also al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī*, al-Riyadh: Dār al-Salām, 1999, *Manāqib*:65.

19 Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *al-Fitan*:1.

20 Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *Tafsīr*:34.3.

21 Joseph Schacht's *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950) famously argued for the widespread fabrication of hadith in the second/eighth century; M. Azamiʾ

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 *ūlā* 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.

On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence rejected Schacht (al-Riyadh: King Saud University, 1985), while Harald Motzki struck a middle path, arguing that some hadith are securely datable to at least the later first/seventh century ("The Muṣannaf of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī as a Source of Authentic Aḥādīth of the First Century A.H.," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 50 (1991), 1–21). Wael Hallaq questions the entire modern debate, suggesting that classical-era scholars themselves only rarely accepted hadith as *certain* relics of Muḥammad's speech ("The Authenticity of Prophetic Ḥadîth: A Pseudo-Problem," *Studia Islamica*, 89 (1999), 75–90, 90).

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 Jarīr, *Tafsīr Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, Ṣidqī Jamīl al-ʿAttār, ed., Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1999, 17:102. *Ūlā* 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 yadayhā*]."[25] And Nuʿaym ibn Ḥammād al-Khuzāʿī'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/

25 Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *Tafsīr*:22:1.

26 Nuʿaym ibn Ḥammād al-Khuzāʿī, *al-Fitan*, Suhayl Zakkār, ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1993), 67.

27 Al-Khuzāʿī describes it as a time of ignorance when "ignoramuses [*juhhāl*] will be many and the knowledgeable people/scholars [*ʿulamāʾ*] will be few" (*al-Fitan* 21), and a time of fury when "*jahl and haraj* will descend upon you" (*haraj* is explained in the same passage as "killing") (*al-Fitan* 20).

28 Writers commonly leave *al-Jāhiliyya*'s temporal imprecision unproblematized. For example, Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, London: Macmillan, 1946, 87, notes it could be all time "from 'the creation of Adam'" or the century preceding Muḥammad. Al-Jāḥiẓ considered pre-Islamic Arab poetry (a quintessential marker of pre-Islamic Arab times, which he did not specifically call *al-Jāhiliyya*) to the 150 to 200 years before Muḥammad (ʿAmr ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, Muḥammad Bāsil ʿUyūn al-Sūd, ed., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1998, 1:53).

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-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad's *Kitāb al-ʿAyn* (late second/eighth to early third/ninth century),[29] 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*,"[30] which, in turn, is defined as any period of time between two prophets.[31] *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*),[32] the opposite to faith (*īmān*): "they would not believe unless Allah so willed. Howbeit, most of them are ignorant [*jāhilūn*]."[33]

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.[34] 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

29 Al-Khalīl died in 175/791, but the text's current form may reflect alterations made by al-Khalīl's companion al-Layth ibn al-Muẓaffar (d. 200/815–816) and scholars of subsequent generations. See Gregor Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written in Early Islam*, Uwe Vagelpohl trans., James Montgomery, ed., London: Routledge, 2006, 142–63.

30 Al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad, *al-ʿAyn*, Mahdī al-Makhzūmī and Ibrāhīm al-Sāmarāʾī, eds., Baghdad: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa-al-Iʿlām, 1980, 3:390.

31 Al-Khalīl *al-ʿAyn* 8:115.

32 Q11:27–29.

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

34 ʿAbd Allāh ibn Qutayba, *al-Maʿārif*, Tharwa ʿAkāsha, ed., Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1981, 54.

contrast with *ʿilm*, 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 *ʿilm*, 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-Khuzāʿī 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-Tahdhīb* 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

35 Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Azharī, *Tahdhīb al-Lugha*, Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Mukhaymir, ed., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2004, 4:312–13.

36 Al-Azharī, *Tahdhīb*, 4:313.

37 Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, ed., Beirut: Rawāʾiʿ al-Turāth al-ʿArabi, nd, 1:232, 590.

38 Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar, al-Zamakhsharī, *Asās al-Balāgha*, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1992, 107.

39 Nashwān al-Ḥimyarī, *Shams al-ʿUlūm*, Ḥusayn ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-ʿAmrī et al., eds., Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1999, 2:1199.

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-Ḥimyarī 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-Ḥimyarī's time, the term *Jāhiliyya* had become a more appropriate epithet for "reprobate non-Islam." This notion is supported by al-Ḥimyarī's inclusion of Qurʾān 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-Azharī'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 *Tahdhīb 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-Zamakhsharī'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.

40 Abū Bakr Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaf*, Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-Aʿẓamī, ed., Jeddah: Dār al-Qibla, 2010, 8:458–59.

41 Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* Beirut: Dar Sādir, 1990, 11:130.

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*.

42 Carter describes the dictionaries as "deliberate instruments of conservatism" ("Arabic Lexicography," in *Religion Learning and Science in the Abbasid Period*, M. Young et al., eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 106–17, 116). Weiss comments on the classical scholarly debates and tendency (but not unanimous consensus) to view Arabic as an ancient, unchanging language ("Language and tradition in medieval Islam," *Der Islam*, 61 (1984), 91–99, 99). See also Weiss (*The Search for God's Law*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1992, 129) for medieval philological theories on the unchanging meanings of Arabic words.

43 Andrew Rippen, "Tafsīr," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd ed.), 10:86.

And al-Qurṭubī'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

44 Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm*, ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd a-Shaḥāta, ed.,Cairo: al-Hayʾat al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kutub, 1979–1989, 1:483, 2:488.

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 Idrīs, or Adam and Jesus.[49] Al-Ṭabarī 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-Ṭabarī maintains Muqātil's discourse that it represents antagonism against the Prophet, identifying the Qurʾānic citations of *al-Jāhiliyya* with instances of tension between Muḥammad and his opponents.[51] But al-Ṭabarī shifts the emphasis slightly. For instance, whereas Muqātil interpreted "*ẓann al-Jāhiliyya*" as belonging to "Abū Sufyān and his companions," al-Ṭabarī 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-Ṭabarī 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-Ṭabarī describes it as "the morals of the unbelievers [*akhlāq ahl al-kufr*]."[54] This notion that *al-Jāhiliyya* can connote a generalized group of people – an *ahl* – distinguishes al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* from Muqātil's: al-Ṭabarī'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-Ṭabarī's literal interpretation of *al-Jāhiliyya* reflects al-Azharī'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 worshiper. But unlike the modern *Jāhiliyya* stereotype, al-Ṭabarī 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 Qurʾān commentaries also depart from the earlier exegesis of *al-Jāhiliyya* and shift to more closely resemble modern *Jāhiliyya* ideas.

49 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 22:6–7.

50 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 22:7.

51 For Q2:154 and the battle of Uḥud, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 4:188–89, and for Q5:50's reference to Jews of Medina, 6:371.

52 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 4:190.

53 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 6:371.

54 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 26:135.

Al-Zamakhsharī and al-Qurṭubī'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 *Jāhilī* community. Whereas Muqātil equated *Jāhiliyya* with a precise group of Muḥammad's opponents and al-Ṭabarī considered it a trait of polytheists, al-Zamakhsharī and a-Qurṭubī 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-Qurṭubī 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-Zamakhsharī offers two explanations. One follows the exegetical tradition of al-Ṭabarī that *al-Jāhiliyya* was a *fatra* period between prophets,[58] but al-Zamakhsharī'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-Qurṭubī (like his contemporary Ibn Manẓūr's *Jāhiliyya*) makes no reference to *al-Fatra* and follows al-Zamakhsharī'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-Qurṭubī 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-Qurṭubī 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.

55 Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī, *Tafsīr al-Kashshāf*, Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Salām Shāhīn, ed., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1995, 1:420.

56 Al-Zamakhsharī *al-Kashshāf* 1:420, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, a*l-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, Sālim Muṣṭafā al-Badrī, ed., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2000, 4:156.

57 Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, 4:156.

58 He proposes it is between Adam and Noah, Noah and Idrīs, or, bizarrely, David and Solomon (al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 3:521).

59 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 3:521. C.f. *al-Asās*, 107.

60 Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, 14:117.

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-Qurṭubī'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-Qurṭubī who notes "the Arabs were [before Islam] primarily a people living in destitute (*ḍank*) and miserable (*qashf*) conditions."[65] Al-Qurṭubī 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-Qurṭubī 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-Qurṭubī'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."

61 Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, 16:190.
62 Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, 6:139.
63 Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, 6:139–40.
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-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, 14:117.
66 Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, 14:117.

Al-Zamakhsharī similarly associates *al-Jāhiliyya* with negative impressions of the Arabs, explaining that the period was one of "whim [*hawā*] and ignorance [*jahl*],"[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

67 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:628. He specifically contrasts *jahl* with *ʿilm*, hence my translation of *jahl* as "ignorance."

68 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:628–29.

the classics."[69] Our analysis so far, however, has suggested that the negative stereotypes of *al-Jāhiliyya* were not endorsed by all early Arabic writers, and the assumptions about axiomatic Muslim disavowals of *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 *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 *Jāhiliyya* "barbarism". They sing of honor, perseverance, generosity, martial prowess, and even their good manners (*adab*)[71] and *ḥilm* – the opposite of *jahl*. Consider, for example, the pre-Islamic Hudhalī poet Iyās ibn Sahm who described his ideal companion as

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

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

> Relate to us some Islamic knowledge (*fiqh*) transmitted from our Prophet
> To nourish our hearts;
> Or relate the stories of our *Jāhiliyya*
> For they are wise and glorious.
> ...
> If you are ignorant of any of these
> Then you shall be a lesson to onlookers.[73]

69 Hoyland, *Arabia*, 9.

70 Hawting, *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 *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".

71 See Abū Tammām's *al-Ḥamāsa*'s section on *adab* in pre-Islamic and Islamic-era poetry (Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Marzūqī, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-Ḥamāsa*, Aḥmad Amīn, and ʿAbd al-Salām Hārūn, eds., Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Lajnat al-Taʾlīf wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1968, 3:1115–211).

72 Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥasan al-Sukkarī, *Sharḥ Ashʿār al-Hudhayliyyīn*, ʿAbd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāj and Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir, eds., Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-ʿUrūba, n.d., 2:543.

73 Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab*, Ḥasan Nūr al-Dīn, ed.,Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2004, 3:268.

Poetry lauding pre-Islamic ethics is repeated throughout Arabic *adab* writing of the third/ninth century and beyond, and Ibn Munādhir'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 Jāhilīyah age, but within ʿAbbasid 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

74 Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 1:207; Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, 67.

75 Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, 29.

76 See note 14.

77 Susan Stetkevych, "The ʿAbbasid Poet Interprets History: Three Qaṣīdahs by Abū Tammām," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 10 (1979), 49–64, 51.

78 Stetkevych, "The ʿAbbasid Poet," 51.

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 *Jāhiliyya* 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-Jāhiliyya:*

> [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-Jāhiliyya* 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-Muḥabbar*, Muḥammad orders his people to "appoint as your leader he who used to lead you during *al-Jāhiliyya*."[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-Muḥabbar*, a book relating the history of the Arabs and what could be called "trivia" about Arabness,[81] is noteworthy. The hadith teaches that Muḥammad sanctioned continuity between pre-Islamic and Islamic times and that the rise of Islam did not represent a complete break with *al-Jāhiliyya*. I shall not investigate whether this was Muḥammad's actual stance on the transition of *Jāhiliyya* 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-Muḥabbar* 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 – *Jāhilī* and Islamic: for instance, he relates stories of "Generous

79 Al-Nasāʾī *Sunan*, *al-Sahw*:90. See also a very similar hadith in al-Tirmidhī *Jāmiʿ, al-Adab*:70.
80 Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb *al-Muḥabbar*, Isle Lichtenstädter, ed., Hyderabad: Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmānīyah, 1942, 500. *Al-Muḥabbar* has survived in the recension of al-Sukkarī, student of Ibn Ḥabīb who died in 275/888 or 290/903. The extant text may reflect some edits of al-Sukkarī, evidenced by two references to Caliphs who ruled after Ibn Ḥabīb's death (*al-Muḥabbar* 44, 62).
81 In addition to genealogies, names of famous Arabs and practices of ancient Arabia, *al-Muḥabbar* 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 leaders[91] 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 ʿUmāra ibn Ḥamza whose father and grandfathers, spanning five generations, were all

82 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 137–46, 146–55.
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-Muḥabbar*, 192–212, 212–32.
85 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 140,142,144.
86 For instance, see the story of Kaʿb ibn Māma who allegedly distributed his water to the thirsty until he himself died of thirst (Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 144)!
87 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 150,153,155.
88 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 141,145,146.
89 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 212–33.
90 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 217.
91 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 254.
92 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 244.
93 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 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-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868), the renowned *adīb* contemporary with Ibn Ḥabīb. Al-Jāḥiẓ writes in *al-Bayān wa-l-Tabyīn*, another compendium of Arabian lore woven into a discourse on language and communication, that

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).
95 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 309–11.
96 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 237–40.
97 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 171–75.
98 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 312–20.
99 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 146.
100 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 241–43.
101 Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 315.
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 Qurʾānic 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

103 ʿAmr ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa-l-Tabyīn*, ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, ed., Cairo: al-Khānjī, 2003, 3:366.
104 Al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān*, 3:366.
105 ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Qutayba, *Faḍl al-ʿArab wa-l-Tanbīh ʿalā ʿUlūmihā*, Maḥmūd Khāliṣ, ed., Abu Dhabi: al-Majmaʿ al-Thaqāfī, 1998, 84.
106 Ibn Qutayba, *Faḍl*, 87–89.
107 Ibn Qutayba, *Faḍl*, 89.
108 Ibn Qutayba, *Faḍl*, *passim*, in particular 89, 141, 146.
109 Aḥmad ibn Abī Yaʿqūb al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh al-Yaʿqūbī*, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d., 1:221.
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-nasʾa*), described as an "excess of disbelief" in Qurʾān 9:37 is noted by al-Yaʿqūbī as one of the "virtues" of the Kināna tribal-group, aside their right to announce the Hajj.[113] Throughout, al-Yaʿqūbī 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 century,[118] 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

112 Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh*, 1:255.
113 Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh*, 1:232.
114 Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh*, 1:223; 237; 241.
115 Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh*, 1:226.
116 Al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh*, 1:226.
117 Al-Yaʿqūbī, *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).
119 Ibn al-Kalbī, *Jamharat al-Nasab*, Nājī Ḥasan, ed., Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 2004, 476.

hadith of their own. For many, the memories of *al-Jāhiliyya* 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-Jāhiliyya* 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-Jāhiliyya* 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-Jāhiliyya* 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-Jāhiliyya*, 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-Jāhiliyya* 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-Jāhiliyya* 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-Jāhiliyya* 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-Jāhiliyya*.[121] Given their interest in the Arab past and their use of material

120 Drory, "The Abbasid Construction," 34, 40–43.

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 Qurʾānic 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

122 The decline in Arabian-Iraqi contact is discussed in Saʿd al-Rāshid, *Darb Zubaydah: ṭarīq al-ḥajj min al-Kūfa ilá Makka al-mukarrima: dirāsa tārīkhīyya wa-ḥaḍārīya wa-atharīyah*, al-Riyadh: Dār al-Waṭan, 1993, 83–100, see also Saad al-Rashid and Peter Webb, *Medieval Roads to Mecca,* London: Gilgamesh, 2014 (in press). Ella Landau-Tasseron notes Arabia's "disappearance" from the textual record in the third/ninth century ("Arabia," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam Volume 1*, Chase Robinson, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 395–477, 406–12).

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.