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THE EVOLUTION OF THE TERM QARN IN EARLY ISLAMIC SOURCES

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The Evolution of the Term *qarn* in Early Islamic Sources*

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Introduction

In modern standard Arabic, recurrences of the term *qarn* (pl. *qurūn*), of the root *q-r-n*,1 revolve around two meanings: a "horn" or "one hundred years."2 The association of *qarn* with "horn" is borrowed from the animal domain due to the eye-catching sight of the animal's horns. Hence, the etymology of *qarn* is based on the notion that two things are situated parallel to each other.3 This study, however, will not examine the first meaning of *qarn*, but instead focus on the second. The attestations of *qarn* in early Islamic sources point to a composite term that retained a wide range of meanings and interpretations. More importantly, the number of years that *qarn* denoted was controversial among early Muslim scholars, and it underwent several transformations before it finally came to be associated with "one hundred years." Modern scholarship lacks a serious discussion of the evolution of the term *qarn* in Islamic sources;4 in particular its meaning as a unit of time has almost entirely been neglected.5 Even the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* lacks an entry on *qarn*.

This study will examine the evolution of the term *qarn* in early Islamic literary works and trace the implications of the different meanings it attained in these sources. A significant part of this investigation will be dedicated, therefore, to the discussion of the various numbers of years that *qarn* represented and the

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1 For the root *q-r-n* in other Semitic languages, see M. Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of the Qur'anic Arabic* (Leiden, 2002), 338.

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* I would like to thank Everett Rowson, Fred Donner, and Marion Katz for commenting on early versions of this article.

reasons that "one hundred years" eventually came to be the term's standard meaning. An analysis of the implications of the term's different meanings also enhances our understanding of early efforts to place important events and junctures in early Islamic history in chronological order. In so doing, this study also provides an insight into the early stages of Islamic historical thought. In these discussions, a central place has been given to the prophetic tradition which plays, as we shall see, a crucial role in the evolution of the term qarn.

Qarn as Nation and Umma

Early appearances of the term qarn in Arabic literature can be traced to the pre-Islamic period. Specifically, the word qarn seems to have been used first by the poet and orator Qiss b. Sa'ida al-Iyadi (d. ca. 600 C.E.). In a famous oration, Qiss applied the term qarn to urge his people to be mindful of the vicissitudes of fortune and the inevitable fate of death that befell previous peoples who failed to learn from their misdeeds. In this context, Qiss actually equated the term qarn with a group of people (qawm).7

The term qarn, mostly in its plural form (qurān), also appears in the Qu'ran some twenty times.8 The use of qarn in the Qu'ran retains the general meaning of a "nation," "people," or "generation."9 The application of qarn in the Qu'ran epitomizes the experiences of pre-Islamic peoples who were arrogant and rebellious, though God provided them with abundant resources. Their arrogance and misdeeds provoked God's wrath and led eventually to their destruction. The fate of these rebellious peoples is best illustrated by the stories of pre-Islamic Arab tribes 'Ad and Thamūd.10 Such examples provided moral lessons for later generations, warning them not to go astray and calling upon them to follow the path of God.11

The words 'ahl al-kurān and qurān appeared in tandem to underscore how God had completely destroyed these disobedient nations. In the Qu'ran there is no discussion, however, of the number of years that qarn meant to represent.

The Qu'ranic employment of qarn is reflected in the Prophetic tradition, where the term also began to gradually acquire a new meaning, umma.12 In this regard, one finds two hadith transmitted on the authority of the Companion Abū Hurayra (d. 58/678). The first hadith reads: "I have been sent from the best of the generations of Adam; generation after generation (qarn ba'd qarn) until the generation (qarn) in which I was born came about."13 This report, where qarn meant essentially a generation, affirmed that the Prophet was chosen from the best of Adam's nations. His prophethood concluded the line of the divine message that started with Adam.14 Hence, this hadith emphasizes Muhammad's unique place as the "seal of the prophets in" the line of divine prophethood.

In doing so, this report underlined the superiority of Islam, both as a religion and a nation, against previous generations.

In the second hadith, Abū Hurayra reported that the Prophet said:

"The Hour [of Resurrection] will not take place until my community (ummat) emulates exactly the traditions of the nations (qurān) that preceded it."—It has been asked: "O messenger of God, such as Persians and Romans?"—He replied: "Who else among the nations other than those?"15

The term qarn in this hadith denotes basically a "nation" or "people." However, the word community (umma) was used here to refer to the Islamic community compared to other nations, such as the Romans and the Persians. This hadith was also transmitted on

6 The words qawm and umma appear very often in the Qu'ran. While the first term has a general meaning that basically denotes "people," the latter is a composite term that retains the general notion of an ideal religio-political and social Islamic community. A. J. Wensinck, "Kawm," EI iv (Leiden, 1978), 780–81; F. M. Denney, "Community and Society," Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān (Leiden, 2001), i, 867–86.
7 Al-Jahiz, al-Bayān wa al-tabyīn, ed. 'Abd al-Salām M. Hārān (Beirut: Dār al-Ji, 1990), l, 309.
15 Sunāḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-tasāwīm, 1396, 7319.
The distinction shows the emphasis that Muslims, as an are reference was made to Jews and Christians. This slight difference. Instead of Persians and Romans, a reference was made to Jews and Christians. This distinction shows the emphasis that Muslims, as an umma, placed on their religious identity vis-à-vis other religions. The application of qarn in these two hadiths resonated with Qur'anic meanings of “nation” and “generation,” but when Muslims were compared with these nations, the term umma was applied.

The tafsīr literature is replete with references to the term qarn and the meanings it denoted. The tafsīr of Muqātīl b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) seems to be the first work to have referred to the term qarn.18 Muqātīl frequently used the words umma and qarn to define the term.17 When referring to its plural form, qawm, however, Muqātīl defined it as “nations (umam) that went astray.”18 By applying this definition, he followed the Qur'anic narratives of qarn portraying God's destruction of the rebellious peoples. Hence, the word qarn was employed there primarily to refer, in comparison to the Islamic community, to the experiences of previous nations. In Muqātīl’s tafsīr, there was, however, no discussion of the number of years that qarn designated.

The same definition of qarn is found in the tafsīr works of Abū Ubayda Ma’amar b. al-Muthanna (d. 213/829) and Ibn Wāḥib al-Dinawarī (d. 308/920).19 Similarly, al-Ṭabarī defined qarn, but he also added the phrase “a group of people” (majmū‘a min al-nās) as another meaning of it.20 So far, we have seen that the early occurrences of the term qarn in Islamic literature point to

its association with qawm, or umma, where the Islamic community is compared to other nations. A further examination of the term qarn reveals additional insights into other concerns of the early Islamic community.

Qarn as a tabagāt

The tabagāt genre, which revolves around the biographies of religious scholars and literary notables, played an important role in early Islamic literature.21 This genre emerged as an attempt to preserve the biographies of the Prophet’s Companions.22 As the Prophet’s contemporaries, the Companions occupied a paramount place in the discussion regarding the authenticity of the Prophetic reports.23 Islamic sources assigned an indispensable role to the Companions in passing on the Prophet’s sayings and deeds to succeeding generations. Hadith scholars, therefore, made scrupulous efforts in preserving biographical information about the Companions, particularly data pertinent to the process of hadith transmission. In this section, we shall examine the way in which the term qarn reflects the pivotal place occupied by the Companions in hadith transmission and the association of its meaning with “class of scholars” (tabagāt).


The significant position held by the Companions and their Successors is reflected in a hadith transmitted on the authority of 'Imran b. al-Husayn (d. 53/673). In this hadith, which is also traced back to 'Abdallāh b. Mas'ūd (d. 32/652), we are told that the Prophet said:

“The best of my community is my generation (garni), then those who follow it and the ones who follow them”—'Imran continues to relate saying: “I do not know whether he mentioned two or three generations after his generation.”—

The Prophet added that “after you, there will be people who testify while their testimony is untrustworthy, [they] betray and cannot be trusted, [they] vow and never fulfill their promises, and sluggishness appears among them.”

The application of the term garn in this hadith shows the need of Muslims to place early Islamic generations in chronological order, in relation to the time of the Prophet. The hadith emphasizes that the closer Muslims were in time to the Prophet, the more religiously reliable they are. This ranking of early Islamic generations gave rise to the categorization of early hadith transmitters into Companions and Successors. Two main issues, therefore, stand out in this hadith: the seniority and the authenticity of Prophetic reports. Applying these two parameters, the Companions enjoyed the highest position in this ranking. This was the background against which the tabaqāt literature emerged. The application of the term garn in this hadith, therefore, denoted a tabaqāt.

The association of garn with tabaqāt as reflected in the hadith occurred in early tafrīr works. Among the earliest exegetes to apply this meaning of garn was Ibrāhīm b. Muhammad al-Zajjāj (d. 311/923). In his Ma'ānī al-qur'ān, he offered the following definition of garn:

It has been said that garn amounts to 80 or 70 years, but I believe—and God knows better—that garn means people of a certain age, regardless of the number of years, in which a prophet or a class (tabaqāt) of [knowledgeable] scholars live. This is evident from the saying of the Prophet, peace be upon him, “the best of you are my garn,” i.e., my Companions, peace be upon them “then those who follow them,” i.e., the Successors, “then those who follow them,” then the followers of the Successors. It is also possible that garn is the whole nation and those [scholars] are a garn in it. Qarn derives from the word association (iqrān).

Al-Zajjāj started his discussion of the meanings of garn with a reference to the controversy concerning the number of years that garn represented. Although he mentioned seventy or eighty years as possible meanings of garn, he dismissed this interpretation as insignificant and controversial. Nevertheless, the figures of seventy and eighty years reflect, I argue, early efforts to chronologically define the lifespan of a tabaqāt. This point will be examined further at the end of this section.

At the heart of al-Zajjāj’s definition of garn stood the concept of an ideal period of time associated with prophets or persons prominent by virtue of their religiosity and reliable knowledge. The existence of prophets or religious scholars was the basis upon which a righteoustumma rested, where piety and social stability prevailed. To exemplify this ideal period that garn represented, al-Zajjāj referred to the time of the Prophet and early Islamic generations (i.e., the Companions and the Successors). His interpretation of garn followed to a great extent the hadith mentioned above that was transmitted on the authority of 'Imran b. al-Husayn. This definition of garn reflected, therefore, the need of the early Islamic community to rank early generations of hadith transmitters based on their closeness to the time of the Prophet. What was at stake for Muslim scholars was the question of the reliability of Prophetic reports. The Companions, therefore, were placed at the top of this hierarchy by virtue of being the Prophet’s contemporaries, followed by the Successors. In sum, al-Zajjāj’s definition of garn revolved around the concept of a class of scholars (tabaqāt). As to the determination of the time span of a tabaqāt, al-Zajjāj mentioned, as we have seen, seventy and eighty years, but dismissed these figures as


25 Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, fadā'il al-sahabā, 697, 3650; Saḥīḥ Muslim, fadā'il al-sahabā, 1067–68, 2534.

insignificant. This conclusion poses a further question whether the seventy- and eighty-year versions point to other possible implications of *qarn*, in addition to the time span of a *tabaqā*

References to seventy²⁷ and eighty²⁸ years appear frequently in Islamic sources, particularly in *ḥadīth* and *tafsīr* literature. Reading these reports, one finds that these versions can be traced back to certain Companions. Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), for example, stated on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687) that a *qarn* equaled eighty years,²⁹ whereas al-Rāzī, on the authority of 'Ali b. Abī Ṭalīb (d. 40/661), said that a *qarn* spanned seventy years.³⁰ The association of these reports with Ibn 'Abbās and 'Alī, who played an important role in the transmission of *ḥadīth*, seems to point to al-Zajjāj's definition of *qarn* as a *tabaqā*.

Other scholars who figured prominently in the discussion of the seventy- and eighty-year versions were (in addition to al-Zajjāj) Muhammad al-Kalbī (d. 146/763) and al-Farra'.³¹ Muslims scholars ascribed the eighty-year version to al-Kalbī,³² and it is difficult to explain the reason behind the affiliation of *qarn* with the figures of seventy and eighty years. It seems likely, however, that al-Kalbī and al-Farra' merely followed a rational explanation. This orientation is evident in al-Rāzī's account. Applying rational thinking to his *tafsīr*, al-Rāzī claimed that the chronological meaning of *qarn* was associated with these figures simply because the life span of most people ranged between sixty and eighty years.³³

References to the numbers seventy and eighty in later *tafsīr* works were based on al-Zajjāj's definition of *qarn*. Among these works were those of al-Samargandi (d. 372/983),³⁴ al-Mawardi (d. 450/1058),³⁵ al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1068),³⁶ al-Ṭabrīṣī (d. 548/1153),³⁷ and al-Bayḍāwī (d. 791/1389).³⁸ Some later exegetes even elaborated on the meanings of *qarn* by combining derivation, lexical meaning, and chronological setting. For example, al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1068) related that “*qarn* means people who live together at the same period of time because they are chronologically parallel to each other” (wa al-*qarn* abī al-‘asr li-muğāranat ba’dīhim al-ba’d).³⁹ Ṭabrīṣī concurred, writing that “*qarn* means people [who live] in each epoch, and it derives from [the fact that] they are parallel in term of time [to each other]” (al-*qarn* abī kull ‘asr, ma’kūn hadīm min ṭarānāhim faīl al-‘asr).⁴⁰

**Qarn as a Chronological Pointer for the Prophet's Life**

Since the early days of Islam, the Prophetic tradition served Muslims, after the Qur'ān, as the main authoritative source for socio-religious and political issues.


³⁰ al-Rāzī, *Ṭabarî*, xxiii, 83. It is worth mentioning that al-Ṭabarī on the authority of ‘Ubaydallāh b. Abī Rāfī‘, who was the scribe (kātīb) of ‘Ālī b. Abī Ṭalīb, that *qarn* amounts to seventy years. See al-Ṭabarī, *Ṭabarî*, ix, 391.


³³ al-Rāzī, *Ṭabarî*, xii, 158. See also Ibn Manṣūr, *Lisān al-arab*, xii, 337.


³⁸ Al-Ṭabrīṣī, *Majma‘*, iv, 10; ix, 155.
Therefore, Muslim scholars made serious efforts to preserve the Prophet's sayings and deeds, which were viewed as a model for emulation. Religious debates and political tensions were among the most important factors that spurred the early Islamic community to search for better ways to safeguard the authenticity of prophetic reports. As the period of time that separated the Prophet from the following generations grew wider, Muslims were increasingly interested in the chronological portrayal of important events in early Islamic history, and, specifically, the different stages in the Prophet's life that directly related to the birth of Islam. The debate over the number of years that qarn designated reflects, to my mind, Muslims' concern to portray significant events in their early history in chronological order. The examination of these Islamic attempts, therefore, sheds some light on the early forms of Islamic historical thought.

Islamic exegetical works composed between the second/eighth and the eighth/fourteenth centuries offered ten versions regarding the number of years that qarn represents: ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, one hundred, and one-hundred-twenty years. Two important aspects are characteristic of the way these versions were treated in these tafsīr works. Most exegetes emphasized that the number of years that qarn represented was controversial and could not be fully defined. Second, these scholars also differed as to the authorities to whom these versions were to be traced. As we shall see, certain Companions played a significant role in the discussion of these versions.

This section examines the meanings of six spans of time that qarn was said to represent (ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, and sixty years) and their historical implications. An analysis of these numbers reflects the interest of Muslims in the chronological arrangements of important events in early Islamic history, particularly the significant stages in Muhammad's life after he was designated as a Prophet. Attempts to chronologically define significant junctures in the Prophet's life can be found in a hadith traced back to the Companion Anas b. Mālik (d. 92/711). In this report, we are told that “the messenger of God became a Prophet at the age of forty; he spent ten years in Mecca and ten years in Medina; and died at the age of sixty.” This report portrayed the formative stages of Islam that began with Muhammad’s designation as a Prophet at the age of forty, considered a turning point in his life.

This seems to have been the reason that the fortieth year in human life attained a significant meaning in Islamic thought. The implication of the forty years was clearly reflected in al-Māwardi’s tafsīr. Defining the term “life span” (qarn), al-Māwardi related, on the authority of Qatāda (d. 117/735), that ‘umr meant forty years because Muhammad was entrusted with prophethood around that age. The importance of the fortieth year was also reflected in other reports transmitted on the authority of Mujāhid (d. 104/722), Qatāda and Sibawayah (d. 177/796), claiming that a human being reached a stage of mental fruition when approaching the age of forty.

Judging from the appearances of qarn in early tafsīr works, it is difficult to establish an unequivocal connection between the report on the authority of Anas and the number of years that qarn represents. A reference to a possible link between this report and the meanings of qarn is found in al-Suyūṭī’s (d. 911/1505) tafsīr. Citing the historian Ahmad b. Māsā b. Mardawiyyah (d. 410/1019–20) and based on the authority of Anas b. Mālik, al-Suyūṭī stated that qarn equals forty years. In what follows, we shall examine the extent to which the report on the authority of Anas affected the discussions of the meanings of qarn. We shall also analyze the connection between the chronological implications of qarn and the main junctures in the Prophet’s life.

In many tafsīr works, the forty- and sixty-year definitions are associated with three important Muslim scholars: Ibrāhīm al-Nakha’ī (d. 96/717), Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), and Muḥammad b. Sirīn (d. 110/728). In these works, the name of al-Baṣrī is usually affiliated with sixty-year version, but...
sometimes the twenty-year version was also ascribed to him. Al-Qadi 'Iyad (d. 544/1149) even traced both the figures of ten and forty years back to al-Baṣrī. The association of qarn with forty years was attributed to both al-Nakha'i and Ibn Sirin. These scholars played an important role in the early Islamic religious discourses and transmitted many hadiths on the authority of the Companions, including Anas b. Malik. Al-Baṣrī and Ibn Sirīn even developed a student-teacher relationship with Anas.

A further examination of these versions is in order; first, we may examine the “forty-years” representations. As mentioned, the significance of the number of forty years in Islamic religious and historical thought stems from the assumption that Muhammad was entrusted with the Prophetic message at the age of forty. The earliest reference to the association of forty years with al-Nakha'i and Ibn Sirīn is found in al-Ṭabarî's tafsîr. Al-Nakha'i's report enjoyed a wide circulation in later tafsîr works, such as those of al-Mawardi, al-Ṭūsī, and al-Rāzî. As in the case of reports on the authority of Anas and Qatāda, the figure of forty years reflects the age at which Muhammad became a Prophet. This is evident also in the fact that Ibn Sa'd offered a report on al-Nakha'i's authority, claiming that the fortyth year functioned as a defining moment in everyone's life. When a person reached the age of forty with a certain attitude, Ibn Sa'd added, this position would remain constant until his death.

This shows again that, due to the assumption that Muhammad was entrusted with prophethood at the age of forty, the fortieth year as a turning point in one's life played an important role in Islamic religious thought.

In comparison with al-Nakha'i, it easier to establish a connection between Ibn Sirîn and the forty-years definition of qarn ascribed to Anas b. Malik. This is evident from the close relationship that these two scholars developed. For example, Ibn Quṭayba informs us that Ibn Sirîn transmitted many hadiths on Anas b. Malik's authority and served as his kātib in Fars. Ibn Sa'd also reported that when Anas was dying, he requested to be prepared for burial by Ibn Sirîn. It seems likely, therefore, that the forty-years version of qarn ascribed to Ibn Sirîn was influenced by the report on the authority of Anas, in which we learn that Muhammad became a Prophet at the age of forty.

The sixty-year version of qarn seems to denote the need of Muslims to determine the age at which the Prophet died. Again this discussion leads us back to the report on the authority of Anas, which says that the Prophet died at the age of sixty. In fact, Ibn Sa'd offered four reports, three of which rested on the authority of Anas b. Malik, asserting that the Prophet died at sixty. From these pieces of information, it is difficult to establish a direct connection between Anas and al-Ṭabarî, with whom most exegetes associated the sixty-years tradition. Al-Qâḍî 'Iyâd even offered a report on the authority of 'Ali b. Abī Taḥlib (d. 40/661), who said that qarn equaled sixty years. The affiliation of the sixty-years version with 'Ali, who like the Prophet died around the age of sixty, points to attempts by certain Islamic traditions to connect qarn to the number of sixty years.

The association of qarn with sixty years, therefore, shows the desire to chronologically define important events in early Islamic history, and specifically the age at which the Prophet died. This orientation sheds light on the other numbers of years associated with qarn, such as the twenty-years figure ascribed to al-Ṭabarî. This figure seems to point to the period from the time

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86. Taftīr was written by al-Bābī al-Halabī, i, p. 350. See also al-Ṭabarī, Taftīr, ix, 12; al-Ṭūsī, Tīyān, vii, 85; al-Mawardi, Nukṭāk, vi, 76.
87. Al-Qaḍī 'Iyād, Ikna', vii, 571.
88. al-Ṭabarī, Taftīr, ix, 391.
89. Ibid., vii, 54; al-Tha'labī, Kāshīf, iv, 41; Ibn al-Jawzī, Zād, iii, 5; al-Suyūṭī, Durr, vi, 71.
91. Ibn Qutayba, Māṣāra', 443.
92. Ibn Ḥishām, al-Sīra al-nabawiyya, ed. Muḥammad al-Saqā et al. (Cairo: Maṣāra Mustafā al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1955), 233; Ibn Sa'd, Taḥaqāt, i, 149.
93. Al-Ṭabarī, Taftīr, ix, 391.
94. Ibid., vii, 54; al-Tha'labī, Kāshīf, iv, 41; Ibn al-Jawzī, Zād, iii, 5; al-Suyūṭī, Durr, vi, 71.
95. Al-Mawardi, Nukṭāk, vi, 76; al-Ṭūsī, Tīyān, ix, 373; vi, 462 (no authority is cited); al-Rāzī, Taftīr, xxiii, 85.
97. Ibn Qutayba, Māṣāra', 443.
100. Al-Rāzī, Taftīr, iii, 158; al-Qurtubi, Ja'mī', v, 391; al-Baghwī, Māṣāra', ii, 85, al-Khāzīn, Lutfī, ii, 4.
101. Al-Qaḍī 'Iyād, Ikna', vii, 571.
the Prophet was entrusted with prophethood to his death. Another example of this trend comes from a report on the authority of Abū Maysara al-Handānî (d. 63/682), according to which *garn* equaled ten years. Interestingly, Ibn Abi Shayba traced the *ḥadīth* *khayr al-qurūr garni*, which was transmitted on the authority of ‘Imrān b. al-Ḥusayn, back to Abū Maysara. The figure of ten years seems to resonate with Anas’ report regarding the period of time that the Prophet spent in Medina.

The number of years that *garn* designated also reflected the need to demarcate chronologically idealized phases in early Islamic history, specifically the period of time that separated the Prophet’s time from the caliphate stage, or between the Rāshidūn age and the following caliphate. This orientation is best illustrated in the thirty- and fifty-years versions. Al-Ṭūsī mentions thirty years in his *tafsīr* without an authority and without explaining its historical implications. A discussion of the meaning of this version is found in the *sunna* of Abū Bakr al-Khallāl (d. 311/923). He offered a *ḥadīth* on the authority of Ṣafīnā (d. 70/689), who was a mawlā of the Prophet, in which we are told that “the caliphate of my community is to continue for thirty years,” or according to another version, “the caliphate after me will last thirty years.”

Citing Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), al-Khallāl related that thirty years was the number of years that the first four caliphs (the Rāshidūn) ruled jointly. The same report was mentioned by al-Ḥakīm al-Nisābūrī (d. 405/1014), but he traced it back to Ṣafīnā (d. 70/689). The association of thirty years with the caliphate of the ‘Armīn seems to resonate with Abū ‘Ubayda’s definition of *garn*, in which he stated that “at least a period of thirty years separates two *garns*” (*aqall mā bayna al-qarnayn thalāthun sana*).

As for the fifty-years version, al-Suyūṭi reported on the authority of the Companion Ibn Dahr al-Aslāmī that *garn* equaled fifty years. When framed chronologically, fifty years seems to reflect roughly the period of time comprising Muhammad’s prophethood and the Rāshidūn caliphate. In sum, the thirty- and fifty-year definitions of *garn* therefore show Muslims’ efforts to chronologically highlight certain stages in Islamic history representing the genuine spirit of Islam. The caliphate of the Rāshidūn ended the ideal period of Islamic rulership that began with Muhammad’s prophethood.

**Qarn and the Debate Concerning the End of the Companions’ Generation**

The abovementioned *ḥadīth* (*khayr al-qurūr garni*), transmitted on the authority of ‘Imrān b. al-Ḥusayn, demonstrates, as we have seen, the paramount position occupied by the Companions in the process of *ḥadīth* transmission and, specifically, the authenticity of Prophetic reports. In this *ḥadīth*, however, there is no discussion of the number of years that *garn* denoted. This section investigates the extent to which the term *garn* reflected the perception of the Companions’ age as an ideal stage in Islamic history. Specifically, I will address how this term functioned as a chronological demarcation between the age of the Companions and the following generations, as well as the historical implication of this transition. At the same time, this section also examines the way the meaning of *garn*, as a unit of time, evolved and the reasons why one hundred years ultimately came to be its prevailing definition.

A reference to the association of *garn* with one hundred years is found in a *ḥadīth* transmitted (in a number of versions) on the authority of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Umar (d. 74/693). The same *ḥadīth* was also traced back, with slightly different wording, to Jabir b. ‘Abdallāh (d. 78/697) and to Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī. This report reads: “No breathing soul will remain on this earth at the end of one hundred years.”

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65 His name is ‘Amr b. Shurahbīl Abū Maysara; he was considered to be a reliable *ḥadīth* scholar. Ibn Sa‘īd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vi, 163–65; Ibn Hajar, *Ṭahdhib*, viii, 40–41.
71 Ibid., 824.
74 Very little is known about al-Aslāmī; see Ibn Hajar, *Ṭahdhib*, xii, 269.
76 *Ṣābīḥ Muslim*, Fadā il al-Ṣahāba, 1068, 2537.
hadith defines a human lifespan as limited to one hundred years, but makes no connection between this chronological frame and qarn. In fact, the only unambiguous association of qarn with one hundred years occurs in a version of this hadith in which 'Abdallah b. 'Umar explained that “by this [hadith] he [the Prophet] meant a qarn comes to an end.”

The fact that the connection between qarn and one hundred years is made in only one version of this report lends support to the possibility of a later incorporation of information associating this timeframe with one hundred years, but makes no connection between this timeframe to demonstrate this significant historical juncture, claiming that the Companions' age ended; and the definition of qarn as equivalent to one hundred years. The report also referred to the places where these Companions died. More importantly, the Companions, who died outside Medina, figured prominently in the discussion concerning the meaning of qarn as a unit of time. This report also demonstrated the contribution of the Companions in the establishment of new Islamic centers of learning outside Mecca and Medina. Of great importance was the role played by Anas b. Malik (as we have already seen), 'Abdallah b. Abi Awfâ (d. 87/706), and 'Abdallah b. Hurayra in the process by which 'Abdallah b. Hurayra associated with the debate over the number of years that qarn represented. These two Companions also appeared in the discussion about the year in which the Companions' generation ended.

Muslim exegetes assigned particular importance to 'Abdallah b. Busr al-Mazini in the process by which one hundred years ultimately became the prevailing meaning of qarn. But first we shall discuss how


82 Ibn Sa'd informs us that Anas b. Malik was the last Companion to die, in al-Tabaqat, vi, 19; Ibn Hajaj, Tabādhib, i, 243–44.

83 Ibn Qutayba, Ma`ārif, 341.

84 Al-Shirāzī, Taḥaṣṣīl al-fiqḥa', 46–47.

85 Ibn Qutayba, Ma`ārif, 178; al-Bayhaqi, Dalā’il al-nubuwāya wa ma`āfīs al-nabīlūd dārūr, i, 82–84; al-Dhahabi, Siyar a`rām al-nubalā', ed. Shu`ayb al-`Arna`ūt (Beirut: Mu`assat al-Risāla, 1982), iii, 470.
the name 'Abdallāh b. Abī Awaṭ was connected with the discussion over the number of years that qarn designated.

The report on the authority of 'Abdallāh b. Abī Awaṭ, according to which qarn equaled 120 years, appeared in al-Ṭabarī’s taṣfīr.66 Explaining the meaning of the 120-year timespan, al-Ṭabarī related that the Prophet was entrusted with prophethood during the first (awwal) qarn that ended with the caliphate of Yazīd b. Muṣawiyah (r. 61/680–64/684).67 It is difficult to account here for al-Ṭabarī’s use of the phrase awwal qarn and how the 120 years’ timeframe was applied. However, it seems likely that al-Ṭabarī considered the birth of Muḥammad (c. 570 C.E.) as the beginning of that qarn. Thus, calculating the number of years from Muḥammad’s birth to the caliphate of Yazīd b. Muṣawiyah, one comes close, according to the lunar system, to the total of 120 years. The 120-years version associated with ‘Abdallāh b. Abī Awaṭ enjoyed a wide circulation in later taṣfīr works,68 but it is sometimes traced back to Zurra b. Awaṭ (d. 93/711),69 or to Iyās b. Muṣawiyah (d. 122/739).70

Most Muslim exegetes associated one hundred years, which eventually came to be the prevailing temporal meaning of qarn, with ‘Abdallāh b. Busr al-Māzīnī. The report on the authority of al-Māzīnī seems to appear first in Ibn Ḥanbal’s (d. 241/855) Musnad. In the report, Ibn Ḥanbal related that al-Māzīnī had a mole on the side of his face (‘la qarnīhī). The Prophet, adds Ibn Ḥanbal, placed his finger on the mole and told him: “You will live a qarn.”71 This report ends with the confirmation that indeed al-Māzīnī enjoyed a long life, though leaving the reader pondering at what age he died.

A reference to the report on the authority of al-Māzīnī also appears in al-Ṭabarī’s taṣfīr, where the association of qarn and one hundred years is made clearly. Al-Ṭabarī related on the authority of al-Māzīnī that qarn totaled one hundred years. Like Ibn Ḥanbal, al-Ṭabarī added that the Prophet placed his hand on al-Māzīnī’s head and said “This boy will live one qarn.”72 Al-Ṭabarī concluded his account by confirming that al-Māzīnī died at the age of one hundred. Unlike Ibn Ḥanbal’s presentation of this report, al-Ṭabarī established an unambiguous connection between qarn and one hundred years. A comparison between the presentations of al-Māzīnī’s version in the works of Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Ṭabarī, therefore, points to two stages in which this report evolved, until it came to be associated with one hundred years. In the first stage, the term qarn was an undefined unit of time, but by the time of al-Ṭabarī the association with one hundred years was clearly made. Referring to Ibn Ḥanbal’s portrayal of al-Māzīnī’s story, later Muslim scholars combined these stages by emphasizing the association of qarn with one hundred.73 Al-Ṭabarī’s portrayal of al-Māzīnī’s version became, therefore, the basis upon which later exegetes relied.74

One ought to pose the question here as to why one hundred years, which was associated with ‘Abdallāh b. Busr al-Māzīnī, finally emerged as the prevailing temporal meaning of qarn. So far, we have seen that the one hundred year timeframe functioned as a chronological demarcation of transitional stages in Islamic history. Thus, the end of the Companions’ generation was placed around the year 100 A.H. Reading later taṣfīr works allows three important observations. First, the report on the authority of al-Māzīnī recurred frequently in exegetical literature, and many Muslim scholars even singled it out as the correct version. Second, most Muslim exegetes who deemed al-Māzīnī’s version as the correct chronological meaning of qarn were considered staunch defenders of abi al-Hadīth. This gives more reliability to the conjecture that the report ascribed to al-Māzīnī was, more than other versions, well-rooted in the prophetic tradition. Finally, the association of qarn with one hundred years was linked to the time in which the Companions’ age ended. A few examples are needed here to further substantiate these observations.

66 Al-Ṭabarī, Taṣfīr, viii, 54.
67 Fa-‘uṣūtu rasūl allāh allāhu ‘alayhi wa salam fi awwal qarn kān wa akhirahum Yazīd b. Muṣawiyah. Ibid.
68 Al-Ṭūsī, Tūsīyn, vi, 462, and (with no authority cited) ix, 373; al-Māwdārī, Nukat, v, 77; al-Tha‘labī, Kasāf, iv, 40; al-Rāzī, Taṣfīr, xxxii, 83; al-Qurtubī, Jāmi‘, xv, 147; al-Suyūṭī, Durr, v, 71.
70 Ibn al-Jawzī, Zād, iii, 5.
71 Musnad Ahmad b. Ḥanbal (Beirut: al-Maktub al-‘Islāmī al-‘Arabī, 1969), iv, 189
72 Al-Ṭabarī, Taṣfīr, viii, 54.
73 Al-Hākim al-Nīṣabūrī, Mustadrak, iv, 500; al-Bayhaqī, Dalā’il, vi, 503; al-Dhahabī, Siyar, iii, 431–32.
Citing the grammarian Ahmad b. Yahyā Taṣlab (d. 291/904), al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1790) presented, for example, a number of references regarding the number of years that gārn signified, but he underlined al-Māzīnī’s report as the most acceptable. This statement was based on the aforementioned hadīth foretelling that al-Māzīnī would live a gārn and that he indeed died at the age of one hundred. Similarly, al-Samʿānī (d. 489/1096) asserted that reliable hadīth scholars (buṣfāz) believed that gārn equalled one hundred. To substantiate this view, he cited the hadīth informing us that al-Māzīnī died at the age of one hundred. The preeminence of the report on the authority of al-Māzīnī as the meaning of gārn was shared by al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122), who was also a staunch defender of the sunna. This is evident in the fact that he was granted the title “reviver of the prophetic tradition” (muḫyāʾ al-sunna).

Moving to later exegetical works, one finds that the link between gārn and one hundred years, associated with al-Māzīnī, becomes even clearer. Good examples of this orientation are the accounts of al-Qurtūbī (d. 671/1273) and al-Khāzīn (d. 741/1341), whose works also reflected traditionalist Sunni views. Referring to the meanings of gārn, al-Qurtūbī related that most hadīth scholars subscribed to the view (wa ʾalayhi akhsar abī al-hadīth) that gārn equalled one hundred years. He substantiated this argument by resorting to prophetic tradition confirming that al-Māzīnī died at the age of one hundred. Al-Khāzīn singled out the version of al-Māzīnī as the most correct one (al-qaṣāḥh). To confirm this view, al-Khāzīn referred first to the story of al-Māzīnī and then cited the hadīth transmitted on the authority of Imrān: “The best of my community is my generation (garnī), then those who follow it, and the ones who follow them.”

Al-Khāzīn made a clear connection here between the hadīth on the authority of Imrān and the report ascribed to al-Māzīnī. A similar presentation is found in the taṣfīr of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Taḥālīfī (d. 875/1470). Two significant findings emerge from these accounts. First, they clearly show the relationship between the debate over the date of the end of the Companions’ generation and the number of years that gārn designated. Second, these scholars demonstrated that the report on the authority of al-Māzīnī was the prevailing temporal meaning of gārn, as it was well-rooted in the prophetic tradition.

**Gārn as a Chronological Framework of Prophetic History**

Notwithstanding the wide circulation of the report on the authority al-Māzīnī, some Islamic sources associated the one hundred years’ span with Abū Salama b. ṬAbbār al-Raḥmān b. Ṭawfīq (d. 94/713). This report appeared in the works of al-Suyūṭī and Ibn al-Jawzī, in which we are informed that gārn equaled one hundred years. Unlike Ibn al-Jawzī, however, al-Suyūṭī offered the background against which this report appeared. Specifically, he offered a hadīth on the authority of Abū Hurayra, who was Abū Salama’s teacher, relating that ten qūrūn separated Adam and Noah, and also Noah and Abraham. This report ended without disclosing the number of years that gārn represented. It was Abū Salama, according to al-Suyūṭī, who provided the interpretation that gārn was equivalent to one hundred years.

The report on the authority of Abū Hurayra and Abū Salama reflected early Islamic interest in arranging prophetic eras chronologically by calculating the number of years that separated Muhammad and Adam. Elsewhere, I have offered a detailed examination of this subject. The discussion here will be limited to how the term gārn served as a chronological marker for the prophetic eras. This examination also gives insights into the reasons that made the one hundred years’ span the prevailing meaning of gārn.

Examining the prophetic intervals, Ibn Saʿd, Ibn Qutayba, and al-Ṭabarī offered reports on the authority of Ikrima (d. 105/723), or sometimes his teacher, Ibn ʿAbbās, also relating that ten qūrūn separated Adam and Noah. What is most relevant to our discussion is that Ibn Saʿd and al-Ṭabarī concluded...
their presentations with reports on the authority of the historian al-Waqidi in which qarn was applied as a chronological concept. Ibn Sa'd and al-Tabari related, on the authority of al-Waqidi, that the prophetic eras of Noah, Abraham, and Moses were separated by ten generations. As for the number of years that qarn represented, Ibn Sa'd and al-Tabari maintained that, according to al-Waqidi, qarn equaled one hundred years. Ibn Sa'd and al-Tabari also added that many Muslim historians (ghayr wâhid min abî al-'ilm) shared this view with al-Waqidi. This phrase seems to show that the association of qarn with one hundred years was, by the time of al-Waqidi, the chronological meaning of this term recognized by many Muslim historians.

Reading the accounts of Ibn Sa'd and al-Tabari further, we find that al-Waqidi applied the chronological format of ten qarin, mentioned in the hadith on the authority of Abu Hurayra, to calculate the prophetic intervals between Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Again, al-Waqidi defined the temporal meaning of qarn as one hundred years. By offering this particular definition of qarn without mentioning the controversy around it, al-Waqidi seemed to introduce qarn as a fixed chronological concept. A comparison between the way qarn was applied in al-Tabari's ta'rif and his ta'rifh substantiates this conjecture. In his ta'rif, al-Tabari referred to the controversy around the time period designated by qarn, whereas in his ta'rifh he mentioned only that it equalled one hundred years.

The report on the authority of al-Waqidi gives insight into the process by which one hundred years became the standardized temporal meaning of the term qarn. The term qarn appeared as a chronological indicator for the prophetic intervals first in a hadith transmitted on the authority of Abu Hurayra. Attempts to define the temporal meaning of qarn as equivalent to one hundred years came at a later time. By the time of al-Waqidi, the one hundred years' timeframe came to be a recognized unit of time associated with qarn. Again, the name of al-Waqidi figured prominently in the discussion of the meaning of qarn. No wonder, then, that al-Bayhaqi (d. 458/1066) even offered a report in which he ascribed to al-Waqidi the association of al-Mazini with the one hundred years' version of qarn.

Conclusions

The occurrences of the term qarn in early Islamic sources reflect the efforts of early Islamic generations to historically preserve what they considered the ideal period of Islam. An analysis of the manner in which the term qarn evolved gives insights into the historical needs of Muslims to chronologically define important stages in early Islamic history. At the heart of the discussion on the evolution of the term qarn stands the process of hadith transmission and the authenticity of prophetic reports. Seniority and reliability functioned here as important parameters for the chronologization of important stages in Islamic history.

As a model of piety, the Prophet Muhammad became the axis around which important religio-political and social aspects of the early Islamic community revolved. Following the Prophet, the Companions played a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of the prophetic tradition that was passed on to succeeding generations. The ranking of early Muslim scholars based on their closeness in time to the Prophet was, thus, a matter of great importance to the early Islamic community. This can be seen in the fact that the term qarn figured in many hadiths to denote a generation, tabaqat, umma, or a period of time in which the Companions enjoyed a superior status. Certain versions regarding the number of years that qarn represented pointed to the need to chronologically define the different stages of the Prophet's life: the age at which he was entrusted with prophethood, the number of years he stayed in Mecca and Medina, and his age when he died. The term qarn serves, therefore, as a good indicator of the ideal chronological stages in early Islamic historiography.

Well-rooted in the prophetic tradition, it was the version of one hundred years, transmitted on the authority of 'Abdallah b. Busr al-Mazini, that prevailed. This version shows the interest of early Muslim scholars in chronologically defining the end of the age of the Companions, which is generally put around the year 100 A.H. More than other reports, the one hundred years' definition of qarn represents the triumph of the abî al-hadith, as many Muslim exegetes subsequently presented al-Mazini's version as the correct one. It also reflects the cyclical religious notion that every one hundred years a mujaddid would appear to restore the true meaning of Islam.

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107 Ibn Sa'd, Tabaqat, i, 53; al-Tabari, Ta'rikh, ii, 235 (De Goeje, i, 1069); al-Maqdisi, Bud', ii, 154.
108 Al-Tabari, Ta'rikh, ii, 235 (De Goeje, i, 1069).
109 Al-Bayhaqi, Dala'il, vi, 503-4.