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. qurûn), 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

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

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


3 For a good summary of the etymology of qarn, see al-Râghib al-Isfâhânî, al-Mufradât fi gharîb al-qur‘ân (Mecca: Maktabat Nizar al-Bûz, 1997), ii, 518–19.


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 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 (qur‘an), also appears in the Qur‘an some twenty times.8 The use of qarn in the Qur‘an retains the general meaning of a “nation,” “people,” or “generation.”9 The application of qarn in the Qur‘an 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 Thamud.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 abhlaknū and qur‘an appeared in tandem to underscore how God had completely destroyed these disobedient nations. In the Qur‘an there is no discussion, however, of the number of years that qarn meant to represent.

The Qur‘anic 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 Abu 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 so doing, 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 (umma) emulates exactly the traditions of the nations (qur‘an) 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

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7 The words qawm and umma appear very often in the Qur‘an. 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 religious-political and social Islamic community. A. J. Wensinck, “Kawm,” Etv (Leiden, 1978), 780–81; F. M. Denny, “Community and Society,” Encyclopedia of the Qur‘an (Leiden, 2001), i, 867–86.

8 Al-Jahiz, al-Bay‘an wa al-tabyin, ed. ‘Abd al-Salam M. Hārān (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1990), i, 309.


15 Saḥīh al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-i‘tiṣām, 1396, 7319.
the authority of Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī (d. 64/684) with a 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 hadīths resonated with Qur’ānic 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 Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) seems to be the first work to have referred to the term qarn. Muqātil frequently used the words umma and qarn to define the term. When referring to its plural form, qawm, however, Muqātil defined it as “nations (umam) that went astray.” By applying this definition, he followed the Qur’ānic 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 Muqātil’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‘ām b. al-Muthannā (d. 213/829) and Ibn Wahb al-Dinawari (d. 308/920). 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. 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 taḥāqa

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


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

“The best of my community is my generation (garn), 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 tabaqî literature emerged. The application of the term garn in this hadith, therefore, denoted a tabaqâ.

The association of garn with tabaqâ as reflected in the hadith occurred in early taṣâfir works. Among the earliest exegetes to apply this meaning of garn was Ibrâhîm b. Muhammad al-Zajjâj (d. 311/923). In his Maʿâni al-qurʾân, 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 (tabaqâ) 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 (iqran).

Al-Zajjâj 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 tabaqâ. This point will be examined further at the end of this section.

At the heart of al-Zajjâj’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 righteous umma rested, where piety and social stability prevailed. To exemplify this ideal period that garn represented, al-Zajjâj 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-Hasan. 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-Zajjâj’s definition of garn revolved around the concept of a class of scholars (tabaqâ). As to the determination of the time span of a tabaqâ, al-Zajjâj mentioned, as we have seen, seventy and eighty years, but dismissed these figures as


25 Sahîh al-Bukhârî, fiṣâ’il al-sâhâbâ, 697, 3650; Sahîh Muslim, fiṣâ’il al-sâhâbâ, 1067–68, 2534.

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

References to seventy and eighty years appear frequently in Islamic sources, particularly in *hadith* 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 *garn* equalled eighty years, whereas al-Rāzī, on the authority of 'Ali b. Abī Ṭalīb (d. 40/661), said that a *garn* spanned seventy years. The association of these reports with Ibn 'Abbās and 'Ali, who played an important role in the transmission of *hadith*, seems to point to al-Zayjāj's definition of *garn* as a *tabaqa*.

Other scholars who figured prominently in the discussion of the seventy- and eighty-year versions were (in addition to al-Zayjāj) Muhammad al-Kalbī (d. 146/763) and al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822). Muslim scholars ascribed the eighty-year version to al-Kalbī, whereas al-Farrāʾ associated *garn* with both figures. It is difficult to explain the reason behind the affiliation of *garn* with the figures of seventy and eighty years. It seems likely, however, that al-Kalbī and al-Farrāʾ 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 *garn* was associated with these figures simply because the life span of most people ranged between sixty and eighty years.

References to the numbers seventy and eighty in later *tafsīr* works were based on al-Zayjāj's definition of *garn*. Among these works were those of al-Samargandi (d. 372/983), al-Mawardi (d. 450/1058), al-Tūsī (d. 460/1068), al-Ṭabarī (d. 548/1153), and al-Bayḍāwī (d. 791/1389). Some later exegetes even elaborated on the meanings of *garn* by combining derivation, lexical meaning, and chronological setting. For example, al-Tūsī (d. 460/1068) related that "*garn* means people who live together at the same period of time because they are chronologically parallel to each other" (wa al-*garn* ahl al-*asr* li-muqāramat ba'dīhim al-*ba'd*). Al-Ṭabarī concurred, writing that "*garn* 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-*garn* ahl kull *asr*, ma'khud min ẓārāthin fī al-*asr*).

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

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

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33 Al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān*, vii, 85.


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 tafsir works. Most exegeses 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. Malik (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-Mawardi's tafsir. Defining the term “life span” (umr), al-Mawardi related, on the authority of Qatada (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 Mujahid (d. 104/722), Qatada 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 tafsir 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-Suyuti's (d. 911/1505) tafsir. Citing the historian Ahmad b. Masah b. Mardawiyyah (d. 410/1019–20) and based on the authority of Anas b. Malik, al-Suyuti 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 tafsir works, the forty- and sixty-year definitions are associated with three important Muslim scholars: Ibrāhīm al-Nakha'ī (d. 96/717), Hasan al-Hasrī (d. 110/728), and Muḥammad b. Sirin (d. 110/728). In these works, the name of al-Hasrī is usually affiliated with sixty-year version, but

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43 Al-Ṭabarī, Tafsīr, viii, 54; al-Rāzī, Tafsīr, xii, 158; al-Qādī ʿIyāḍ, Iḥāmāl, vii, 571; al-Bayḍawī, Anwār, i, 133.
45 Al-Mawardi, Nakat, ii, 417.
48 Al-Suyūṭī offers another report on the authority of Ḥamīd b. Ibrāhīm (d. 323/934–5) in which we are told that qarn equals forty years. See Durr, v, 71.
49 Hasan al-Hasrī, Taṣfīr al-baṣrī, ii, 168. See also al-Qūrṭubī, Jāmīʿ, v, 391; al-Suyūṭī, Durr, v, 71; al-Baghdādī, Maṣāʾīl, ii,
sometimes the twenty-year version was also ascribed to him. 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-Ṭabarî and Ibn Sirin 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 Sirin 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-Ṭusi, and al-Râzî. As in the case of reports on the authority of Anas and Qatâda, 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’î’s authority, claiming that the fortieth 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’î, it is easier to establish a connection between Ibn Sirin 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 Qutayba informs us that Ibn Sirin transmitted many *hadiths* on Anas b. Malik’s authority and served as his *kâtib* in Fars. Ibn Sa’d also reported that when Anas was dying, he requested to be prepared for burial by Ibn Sirin. It seems likely, therefore, that the forty-years version of *qarn* ascribed to Ibn Sirin 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-Qâdî ʿIyâd even offered a report on the authority of ʿAli b. Abi Talib (d. 40/661), who said that *qarn* equaled sixty years. The affiliation of the sixty-years version with ʿAli, 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

93 Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, ix, 391.
95 Al-Mawardi, *Nukat*, v, 76; al-Ṭust, *Ṭibyân*, ix, 373; vi, 462 (no authority is cited); al-Râzî, *Tafsîr*, xxiii, 83.
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-Handānī (d. 63/682), according to which *garn* equaled ten years.66 Interestingly, Ibn Abi Shayba traced the *hadith* *khayr al-qurūn garni*, which was transmitted on the authority of ‘Imrān b. al-Ḥusayn, back to Abū Maysara.67 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-Ṭāṣi mentions thirty years in his *tafsīr* without an authority and without explaining its historical implications.68 A discussion of the meaning of this version is found in the *sunna* of Abū Bakr al-Khallāl (d. 311/923). He offered a *hadith* on the authority of Safīn (d. 70/689), who was a mawla of the Prophet, in which we are told that “the caliphate of my community is to continue for thirty years,”69 or according to another version, “the caliphate after me will last thirty years.”70 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.71 The same report was mentioned by al-Ḥākim al-Nisābūrī (d. 405/1014), but he traced it back to Sa‘īd b. Jamhūr (d. 136/754).72 The association of thirty years with the caliphate of the Rāshidūn seems to resonate with Abū ‘Ubayda’s definition of *garn*, in which it is stated that “at least a period of thirty years separates two *garns*” (*aqall mā bayna al-qarnayn thalāthun sana*).73

As for the fifty-years version, al-Suyūṭī reported on the authority of the Companion Ibn Dahr al-Aslāmī that *garn* equaled fifty years.74 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 *hadith* (*khayr al-qurūn 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 *hadith* transmission and, specifically, the authenticity of Prophetic reports. In this *hadith*, 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 *hadith* transmitted (in a number of versions) on the authority of ‘Abdallāh b. Umar (d. 74/693). The same *hadith* was also traced back, with slightly different wording, to Jabīr 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.”75

65 His name is ‘Amr b. Shurahbīl Abū Maysara; he was considered to be a reliable *hadith* scholar. Ibn Sa‘d, *Tabaqāt*, vi, 163–65; Ibn Hajar, *Tahdhib*, viii, 40–41.
66 Al-Ṭāṣi, *Tibyān*, iv, 85; vi, 462.
71 Ibid., 824.
74 Very little is known about al-Aslāmī; see Ibn Hajar, *Tahdhib*, xii, 269.
76 Sahāb Muslim, *Fadā il al-Ṣabābā*, 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 qarn with one hundred years. The hadith seems to reflect later Islamic efforts to chronologically define important shifts in early Islamic history. The span of one hundred years served here as the time frame of these junctures. One of these transitional stages was, as we shall see, the year the Companions’ generation ended.

The time frame of one hundred years as reflective of transitional periods also resonated with the Islamic concept of religious restoration (tajdid), which appeared in a hadith transmitted on the authority of Abu Hurayra. This hadith read: “Indeed, every one hundred years God sends someone to this community to renew (mujaddid) its religion.” Following this chronological frame, some Islamic sources perceived the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-Aziz (d. 101/720) as the first mujaddid. This timeframe of tajdid reflects, as in the case of the end of the Companions’ generation, an interest in a chronological portrayal of critical transitional stages in Islamic history. 80

Reflections on the debate as to when the Companions’ age ended echo in a report ascribed to the historian al-Waqidi (d. 207/823). According to this report, which is mentioned in Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 276/890) al-Muhadithun (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-‘Arabi, n.d.), iv, 128, 633, it states that the hadith was associated with the places where these Companions died. But first we shall discuss how the Companions also appeared in the discussion about 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. Usry ’Amir b. Wathila the last Companion to die, around the year 100 A.H. A careful examination of al-Waqidi’s report points to two significant findings: a link between qarn and the year in which the Companions’ generation 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 Awf (d. 87/706), and ‘Abdallah b. Usry ’Amir b. Wathila (d. 88/707).

The names of ‘Abdallah b. Usry ‘Amir and ‘Abdallah b. Usry ’Amir were 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. Usry ’Amir in the process by which one hundred years ultimately became the prevailing meaning of qarn. But first we shall discuss how
the name 'Abdallāh b. Abī Awfā was connected with the discussion over the number of years that qarn designated.

The report on the authority of 'Abdallāh b. Abī Awfā, according to which qarn equalled 120 years, appeared in al-Tabari's tafsīr.86 Explaining the meaning of the 120-year timespan, al-Tabari related that the Prophet was entrusted with prophethood during the first (awwal) qarn that ended with the caliphate of Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya (r. 61/680–64/684).87 It is difficult to account here for al-Tabari's use of the phrase awwal qarn and how the 120 years' timeframe was applied. However, it seems likely that al-Tabari considered the birth of Muhammad (c. 570 C.E.) as the beginning of that qarn. Thus, calculating the number of years from Muhammad's birth to the caliphate of Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya, one comes close, according to the lunar system, to the total of 120 years. The 120-years version associated with 'Abdallāh b. Abī Awfā enjoyed a wide circulation in later tafsīr works,88 but it is sometimes traced back to Zurārā b. Awfā (d. 93/711),89 or to Iyās b. Mu'āwiya (d. 122/739).90 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 Hanbal's (d. 241/855) Musnad. In the report, Ibn Hanbal related that al-Māzīnī had a mole on the side of his face (‘īn qarnihī). The Prophet, adds Ibn Hanbal, placed his finger on the mole and told him: “You will live a qarn.”91 This report ends with the confirmation that indeed al-Māzīnī enjoyed a long life, though leaving the reader wondering at what age he died.

A reference to the report on the authority of al-Māzīnī also appears in al-Tabari's tafsīr, where the association of qarn and one hundred years is made clearly. Al-Tabari related on the authority of al-Māzīnī that qarn totaled one hundred years. Like Ibn Ḥanbal, al-Tabari added that the Prophet placed his hand on al-Māzīnī's head and said “This boy will live one qarn.”92 Al-Tabari concluded his account by confirming that al-Māzīnī died at the age of one hundred. Unlike Ibn Ḥanbal's presentation of this report, al-Tabari 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-Tabari, 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-Tabari 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.93 Al-Tabari's portrayal of al-Māzīnī's version became, therefore, the basis upon which later exegetes relied.94

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 tafsīr works allows three important observations. First, the report on the authority of al-Māzīnī occurred 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.

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86 Al-Tabari, Tafsīr, viii, 54.
87 Fa-bu'siti la rasūl allāh al-lālā al-lāham 'alayhi wa sallam fi awwal qarn kān wa akhiruhum Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya. Ibid.
88 Al-Tūsī, Tūsīn, vi, 462, and (with no authority cited) ix, 373; al-Māwarid, Nukat, v, 77; al-Thā'labi, Kashf, iv, 40; al-Rāzī, Tafsīr, xxii, 83; al-Qurtubi, Jāmi', xv, 147; al-Suyūṭī, Durr, v, 71.
89 Al-Jawzi, Zad, iii, 5; al-Andalusi, al-Bābor al-mubīt fi al-tafsīr, ed. 'Arāfāt Ḥassāna (Beirut: Dār al-Fihr, 1992), iv, 426; al-Suyūṭī, Durr, v, 71.
90 Ibn al-Jawzi, Zad, iii, 5.
91 Musnad Ahmad b. Ḥanbal (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmi al-'Arabī, 1969), iv, 189
92 Al-Tabari, Tafsīr, viii, 54.
93 Al-Hākim al-Nisābūrī, Mustadrak, iv, 500; al-Bayhaqī, Dala'il, vi, 503; al-Dhahabi, Siyār, iii, 431–32.
Citing the grammarian Ahmad b. Yahyā Ṭaḥlab (d. 291/904),95 al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1790) presented, for example, a number of references regarding the number of years that garm 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 garm and that he indeed died at the age of one hundred.96 Similarly, al-Samʿānī (d. 489/1096) asserted that reliable hadīth scholars (ḥuffāz) believed that garm equalled one hundred. To substantiate this view, he cited the hadīth informing us that al-Māzīnī died at the age of one hundred.97 The preeminence of the report on the authority of al-Māzīnī as the meaning of garm 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” (muḥib al-sunna).98

Moving to later exegetical works, one finds that the link between garm 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)99 and al-Khāzīn (d. 741/1341),100 whose works also reflected traditionalist Sunni views.101 Referring to the meanings of garm, al-Qurtūbī related that most hadīth scholars subscribed to the view (wa ʿalayhi akhīr ahī al-hadīth) that garm 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-ṣaḥḥah). To confirm this view, al-Khāzīn referred first to the story of al-Māzīnī and then cited the hadīth transmitted on the authority of ʿĪmān:

“The best of my community is my generation (garnī), then those who follow it, and the ones who follow them.”102 Al-Khāzīn made a clear connection here between the hadīth on the authority of ʿĪmān and the report ascribed to al-Māzīnī. A similar presentation is found in the tafsīr of ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-Ṭaḥlīlīt (d. 875/1470).103 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 garm designated. Second, these scholars demonstrated that the report on the authority of al-Māzīnī was the prevailing temporal meaning of garm, as it was well-rooted in the prophetic tradition.

Qarn 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. ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. ʿAwf (d. 94/713). This report appeared in the works of al-Suyūṭī and Ibn al-Jawzī, in which we are informed that garm equalled one hundred years.104 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 qurūn separated Adam and Noah, and also Noah and Abraham. This report ended without disclosing the number of years that garm represented. It was Abū Salama, according to al-Suyūṭī, who provided the interpretation that garm 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.105 The discussion here will be limited to how the term qarn 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 garm.

Examining the prophetic intervals, Ibn Saʿd, Ibn Qutayba, and al-Ṭabarī offered reports on the authority of ʿIkrima (d. 105/723), or sometimes his teacher, Ibn ʿAbbās, also relating that ten qurūn separated Adam and Noah.106 What is most relevant to our discussion is that Ibn Saʿd and al-Ṭabarī concluded

95 Ibn Khallikān, Waṭafiyyāt, i, 102–104.
96 Al-Zabīdī, Tāj, xviii, 444.
97 Al-Samʿānī, Tafsīr, ii, 88.
99 Al-Qurtūbī, Jāmiʿ, v, 391.
100 Al-Khāzīn, Lusbih, ii, 4.
101 Ibn Khallikān, Waṭafiyyāt, i, 177.
102 Al-Khāzīn, Lusbih, ii, 4.
103 Al-Ṭaḥlīlīt, Jawāhir, i, 604.
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 re-
lated, 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 hun-
dred years.107 Ibn Sa'd and al-Tabari also added that
many Muslim historians (ghayr wāhīd min ahl 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 fur-
ther, we find that al-Waqidi applied the chronological
format of ten qurūn, mentioned in the ḥadīth 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 defi-
nition 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 tafsīr and his
ta'rīkh substantiates this conjecture. In his tafsīr, al-
Tabari referred to the controversy around the time
period designated by qarn, whereas in his ta'rīkh he
mentioned only that it equalled one hundred years.108

The report on the authority of al-Waqidi gives in-
sight into the process by which one hundred years be-
came the standardized temporal meaning of the term
qarn. The term qarn appeared as a chronological indi-
cator for the prophetic intervals first in a ḥadīth trans-
mitted 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' timespan 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 associa-
tion of al-Mazini with the one hundred years' version
of qarn.109

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 dis-
cussion on the evolution of the term qarn stands the
process of ḥadīth 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 be-
came the axis around which important religio-politi-
cal and social aspects of the early Islamic community
revolved. Following the Prophet, the Companions
played a crucial role in the preservation and transmis-
sion of the prophetic tradition that was passed on to
succeeding generations. The ranking of early Mus-
lim 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 ḥadīths to denote
a generation, ṭabaqa, umma, or a period of time in
which the Companions enjoyed a superior status. Cer-
tain 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 au-
thority of 'Abdallāh b. Busr al-Mazīnī, that prevailed.
This version shows the interest of early Muslim schol-
ars 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 hun-
dred years' definition of qarn represents the triumph
of the ahl al-ḥadīth, as many Muslim exegetes subse-
quently presented al-Mazīnī'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.

107 Ibn Sa'd, Taḥāqāt, i, 53; al-Ṭabarī, Ta'rīkh, ii, 235 (De Goeje, i, 1069); al-Maqdisi, Bud', ii, 154.
108 Al-Ṭabarī, Ta'rīkh, ii, 235 (De Goeje, i, 1069).
109 Al-Bayhaqī, Dalā'il, vi, 503-4.