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Abed el-Rahman Tayyara
Cleveland State University, abedtayyara@gmail.com

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE TERM QARN IN EARLY ISLAMIC SOURCES

Abed El-Rahman Tayyara, Cleveland State University

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The Evolution of the Term qarn in Early Islamic Sources*

ABED EL-RAHMAN TAYYARA, Cleveland State University

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.” 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.
3 For a good summary of the etymology of qarn, see al-Rāghib al-‘Isfahānī, al-Muṣfradāt fi ḡarīb al-qurūn (Mecca: Maktabat Nizar al-Bāz, 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 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. Saffida 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). The term qarn, mostly in its plural form (qarun), also appears in the Qurʾan some twenty times. The use of qarn in the Qurʾan retains the general meaning of a “nation,” “people,” or “generation.” The application of qarn in the Qurʾan 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 disobedient nations.

The term qarn seems to have been used first by the poet and orator Qiss b. Saffida 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).

The word qarn and umma appear very often in the Qurʾan. While the first term has a general meaning that basically denotes “people,” the latter is a compound term that retains the general notion of an ideal religio-political and social Islamic community. A. J. Wensinck, “Kawn,” EJ 4 (Leiden, 1978), 780–81; F. M. Denney, “Community and Society,” Encyclopedia of the Qurʾan (Leiden, 2001), 1, 837–86.

The Hour [of Resurrection] will not take place until my community (ummat) emulates exactly the traditions of the nations (qurun) 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?”

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
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 Muqātīl b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) seems to be the first work to have referred to the term qarn.16 Muqātīl frequently used the words umma and qarn to define the term.17 When referring to its plural form, qurīn, however, Muqātīl defined it as “nations (umam) that went astray.”18 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 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’āmar b. al-Muthannā (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 taḅāqa

The taḅāqa 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. 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” (taḅāqa).

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),24 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.”25

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, stood 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 tafsīr works. Among the earliest exegetes to apply this meaning of garn was Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Zajjāj (d. 311/923). In his Maʿānī al-qarnān, 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 (tabaqā) 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).26

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 righteous umma 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 (tabaqā). 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-qarnān, 697, 3650; Saḥīḥ Muslim, fadā’il al-qarnān, 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\textsuperscript{27} and eighty\textsuperscript{28} years appear frequently in Islamic sources, particularly in *hadith* and *tafsir* 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 ʿAbbas (d. 68/687) that a *garn* equaled eighty years,\textsuperscript{29} whereas al-Rāzī, on the authority of ʿAll b. Abī Ṭalib (d. 40/661), said that a *garn* spanned seventy years.\textsuperscript{30} The association of these reports with Ibn ʿAbbas and ʿAli, who played an important role in the transmission of *hadith*, seems to point to al-Zajjāj’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-Zajjāj) Muhammad al-Kalbi (d. 146/763) and al-Farrā\textsuperscript{31} (d. 207/822). Muslim scholars ascribed the eighty-year version to al-Kalbi,\textsuperscript{31}


\textsuperscript{30} Al-Rāzī, *Ṭabīb*, xxii, 83. It is worth mentioning that al-Ṭabarī on the authority of ʿUbayyid b. Abī Ṭāfī, who was the scribe (kātib) of ʿAll b. Abī Ṭalib, that *garn* amounts to seventy years. See al-Ṭabarī, *Ṭabīb*, iii, 391.


whereas al-Farrāʾ associated *garn* with both figures.\textsuperscript{32} 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-Kalbi 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.\textsuperscript{33}

References to the numbers seventy and eighty in later *tafsīr* works were based on al-Zajjāj’s definition of *garn*. Among these works were those of al-Samarqandi (d. 372/983),\textsuperscript{34} al-Mawardi (d. 450/1058),\textsuperscript{35} al-Tūsī (d. 460/1068),\textsuperscript{36} al-Ṭabarī (d. 548/1153),\textsuperscript{37} and al-Bayḍāwī (d. 791/1389).\textsuperscript{38} 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 abī al-ʾasr li-muqārarnat baʾdiḥim al-ʾaḍām*).\textsuperscript{39} 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 abī kullʾ ʾasr, maʾkinḥūd min iqraʾānim fī al-ʾasr*).\textsuperscript{40}

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

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


\textsuperscript{33} Al-Rāzī, *Ṭabīb*, xii, 158. See also Ibn Manṣūr, *Lisiʾūn al-ʿarab*, xiii, 337.


\textsuperscript{35} Al-Mawardi, *Nukat*, iii, 406.

\textsuperscript{36} Al-Tūsī, *Ṭabīb*, vii, 85.


\textsuperscript{38} Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, 133.


\textsuperscript{40} Al-Ṭabarī, *Maṣāʾ in*, 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 tafsir 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 versions 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 junctions 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 fortieth 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. Mas‘ā Mardawiyah (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 junctions in the Prophet’s life.

In many tafsir works, the forty- and sixty-year definitions are associated with three important Muslim scholars: Ibrāhim al-Nakahā (d. 96/717), ʿAbdallāh b. Wahb, al-‘Azm, ta’fhir al-qur’ān, and Muḥammad b. Sirīn (d. 110/728). In these works, the name of al-‘Asrī is usually affiliated with sixty-year version, but

42 Anas b. Malik, “The history of Muhammad (Peacemakers) is a significant passage in the early work of many Muslim historians. In the works of al-Mawardi, al-Baghdadi, and others, it is mentioned that Muhammad is associated with the fortieth year of his life, which is considered a significant event in his life. In these works, the fortieth year is associated with the fortieth year of Muhammad’s life after he was designated as a Prophet. Attempts to chronologically define significant junctions 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.

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45 Al-Mawardi, Nukat, ii, 417.


47 Al-‘Asrī, Ta’fhir al-nasa‘i (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Muḥammad ʿAlī Şāhī, 1968), iv, 138.

48 Hasan al-‘Asrī, Ta’fhir al-nasa‘i, ii, 168. See also al-Qurtubī, Jāmī‘, v, 391; al-Suyūṭī, Durr, vi, 71; al-Baghdādi, Muṣ‘lim, ii,
sometimes the twenty-year version was also ascribed to him.\textsuperscript{59} Al-Qâdi 'Iyâd (d. 544/1149) even traced both the figures of ten and forty years back to al-Bâṣrî.\textsuperscript{50} The association of qarn with forty years was attributed to both al-Nakha'\textsuperscript{51} and Ibn Sirin.\textsuperscript{52} 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. Mâlik.\textsuperscript{53} Al-Bâṣrî and Ibn Sirin even developed a student-teacher relationship with Anas.\textsuperscript{54}

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.\textsuperscript{55} The earliest reference to the association of forty years with al-Nakha’\textsuperscript{56} and Ibn Sirin\textsuperscript{57} is found in al-Tabârî’s tafsîr. Al-Nakha’\textsuperscript{58}’s report enjoyed a wide circulation in later tafsîr works, such as those of al-Mawardi, al-Tûsî, and al-Râzî.\textsuperscript{59} 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’\textsuperscript{d} offered a report on al-Nakha’\textsuperscript{5}’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’\textsuperscript{d} added, this position would remain constant until his death.\textsuperscript{60}

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’\textsuperscript{5}, it is easier to establish a connection between Ibn Sirin and the forty-years definition of qarn ascribed to Anas b. Mâlik. 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. Mâlik’s authority and served as his katîb in Fars.\textsuperscript{61} Ibn Sa’\textsuperscript{d} also reported that when Anas was dying, he requested to be prepared for burial by Ibn Sirin.\textsuperscript{62} 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’\textsuperscript{d} offered four reports, three of which rested on the authority of Anas b. Mâlik, asserting that the Prophet died at sixty.\textsuperscript{63} From these pieces of information, it is difficult to establish a direct connection between Anas and al-Bâṣrî, with whom most exegetes associate the sixty-years tradition.\textsuperscript{64} Al-Qâdî ‘Iyâd even offered a report on the authority of ‘Ali b. Abî Talib (d. 40/661), who said that qarn equalled sixty years.\textsuperscript{65}

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-Bâṣrî. This figure seems to point to the period from the time

\textsuperscript{59} Ibn Qutayba, \emph{Ma‘ārif}, 443.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibn Sa’\textsuperscript{d}, \emph{Tabaqât}, vii, 18, i, 139; al-Baghdâdî, \emph{Tarîkh Baghdâdî}, ed. Mu‘tâfî ‘Abî al-Qâdir ‘Atâ (Beirut: Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Imâmiya, 2004), vii, 108.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibn Sa’\textsuperscript{d}, \emph{Tabaqât}, i, 139; ii, 235, 237; al-Baghdâdî, \emph{Tarîkh}, vii, 108.
\textsuperscript{62} Al-Râzî, \emph{Tafsîr}, xiii, 158; al-Qurtubi, \emph{Jami‘}, v, 391; al-Baghwî, \emph{Ma‘âlid}, ii, 85, al-Khâzin, \emph{Lubâb}, ii, 4.
\textsuperscript{63} Al-Qâdî ‘Iyâd, \emph{Ibnal}, 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-Handāni (d. 63/682), according to which qarn was transmitted on the authority of ‘Imrān b. al-Ḥusayn, back to Abū Maysara. The figure of ten years seems to resonate with Anas’s report regarding the period of time that the Prophet spent in Medina.

The number of years that qarn 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 Rashīdun age and the following caliphate. This orientation is best illustrated in the thirty- and fifty-years versions. Al-Tūsī 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 hadīth on the authority of Ṣafnā (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,” 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 Rashīdun) ruled jointly. The same report was mentioned by al-Ḥakīm al-Nīṣābūrī (d. 405/1014), but he traced it back to Abū Mayṣara al-Ḥamdāni, which was transmitted on the authority of the Companion Ibn Dahr al-Aslami (d. 405/1014), but he traced it back to Abū Mayṣara al-Ḥamdāni, which was transmitted on the authority of the Companion Ibn Dahr al-Aslami.

As for the fifty-years version, al-Suyūṭī reported on the authority of the Companion Ibn Dahr al-Aslami that qarn equaled fifty years. When framed chronologically, fifty years seems to reflect roughly the period of time comprising Muhammad’s prophethood and the Rashīdun caliphate. In sum, the thirty- and fifty-year definitions of qarn therefore show Muslims’ efforts to chronologically highlight certain stages in Islamic history representing the genuine spirit of Islam. The caliphate of the Rashīdun 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 hadīth (khayr al-qurūn qarni), 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 hadīth transmission and, specifically, the authenticity of Prophetic reports. In this hadīth, however, there is no discussion of the number of years that qarn denoted. This section investigates the extent to which the term qarn 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 qarn, 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 qarn with one hundred years is found in a hadīth transmitted (in a number of versions) on the authority of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Umar (d. 74/693). The same hadīth 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 hadīth scholar. Ibn Sa‘īd, Tahāqāt, vi, 163–65; Ibn Hajar, Tahdīhib, viii, 40–41.
66 Al-Tūsī, Tihāyāt, iv, 45; vi, 462.
68 Al-Tūsī, Tihāyāt, iv, 85.
69 Abū Bakr al-Khallāl, Sunna, ed. ‘Aṭiyya al-Zahrānī (Riyadh: Dār al-Rayā, 1989), ii, 424, 427. Al-Ḥakīm al-Nīṣābūrī referred to this report, but he used the phrase “the caliphate of the prophethood” (khilāfat al-maṣūm) instead.
70 The same report was mentioned by al-Ḥakīm al-Nīṣābūrī, Mustadrak, iii, 135.
71 Ibid., 824.
72 Al-Ḥakīm al-Nīṣābūrī, Mustadrak, iii, 135.
73 Abū ‘Ubayda, Majāz al-qurūn, i, 185; see also Ibn Qutayba, Taṣfīr, gharīb al-qurūn, 150.
74 Very little is known about al-Aslami; see Ibn Hajar, Tahdīhib, xii, 269.
75 Al-Suyūṭī, Durr, v, 71–72.
76 Sahih Muslim, Fadā’il al-Ṣabāḥa, 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 [badith] 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 Abū Hurayra. This hadith read: “Indeed, every one hundred years God sends someone to this community to renew (mu'addid) 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.

Reflections on the debate as to when the Companions’ age ended echo in a report ascribed to the historian al-Waqqādī (d. 207/823). According to this report, which is mentioned in Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 276/892) Kitāb al-ma‘ārif, the date is put close to the year 100 A.H.: “Indeed, every one hundred years God sends someone to this community to renew its religion.”

Unlike Ibn Qutayba, al-Shirazī concluded the report by claiming that the Companions’ age ended between the years 90 and 100 A.H.44

Al-Waqqādī’s report reflects the debate over the year in which the generation of the Companions came to an end. The date is put close to the year 100 A.H.: no wonder many hadith scholars considered Abū al-Ṭufayl ‘Amīr b. Wathila the last Companion to die, around the year 100 A.H.45 A careful examination of al-Waqqādī’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. Mālik (as we have already seen), ‘Abdallāh b. Abī Awfā (d. 87/706), and ‘Abdallāh b. Buṣr al-Māzīnī (d. 88/707).

The names of ‘Abdallāh b. Abī Awfā and ‘Abdallāh b. Buṣr al-Māzīnī 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 ‘Abdallāh b. Buṣr al-Māzīnī in the process by which one hundred years ultimately became the prevailing meaning of qarn. But first we shall discuss how...
the name ʿAbdallāh b. Abī Awwāf was connected with the discussion over the number of years that *qarn* designated.

The report on the authority of ʿAbdallāh b. Abī Awwāf, according to which *qarn* equaled 120 years, appeared in al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*. 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. Muḥāwiyya (r. 61/680–64/684). 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 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. Muḥāwiyya, one comes close, according to the lunar system, to the total of 120 years. The 120-years version associated with ʿAbdallāh b. Abī Awwāf enjoyed a wide circulation in later *tafsīr* works, but it is sometimes traced back to Zurara b. Awwāf (d. 93/711), or to Iyās b. Muḥāwiyya (d. 122/739).

Most Muslim exegetes associated one hundred years, which eventually came to be the prevailing temporal meaning of *qarn*, with ʿAbdallāh 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 (*lá qarnibi*). The Prophet, adds Ibn Ḥanbal, placed his finger on the mole and told him: “You will live a *qarn*.” 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-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*, 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*.,” 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. Al-Ṭabarī’s portrayal of al-Māzīnī’s version became, therefore, the basis upon which later exegetes relied.

One ought to pose the question here as to why one hundred years, which was associated with ʿAbdallāh 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 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.

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87 Fa-suṣūṭa rəsūl allah allāh allāhu ʾalayhi wa sallam ʿa awwal *qarn* kān wāʾ akhirul-an-nam Yazīd b. Muḥāwiyya. Ibid.
91 *Musnad Ahmad b. Ḥanbal* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-ʿIslāmī al-Aʿlā, 1969), iv, 189
Citing the grammarian Ahmad b. Yahyā Tha‘lab (d. 291/904), al-Zabidi (d. 1205/1790) presented, for example, a number of references regarding the number of years that qarn signified, but he underlined al-Māzinī’s report as the most acceptable. This statement was based on the aforementioned hadīth foretelling that al-Māzinī would live a qarn and that he indeed died at the age of one hundred. Similarly, al-Sam‘āni (d. 489/1096) asserted that reliable hadīth scholars (buʃʕāż) believed that qarn equaled one hundred. To substantiate this view, he cited the hadīth informing us that al-Māzinī died at the age of one hundred. The preeminence of the report on the authority of al-Māzinī as the meaning of qarn was shared by al-Baghawi (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” (muḥyī al-sunna).

Moving to later exegetical works, one finds that the link between qarn and one hundred years, associated with al-Māzinī, becomes even clearer. Good examples of this orientation are the accounts of al-Qurtubi (d. 671/1273) and al-Khāzīn (d. 741/1341), whose works also reflected traditionalist Sunni views. Referring to the meanings of qarn, al-Qurtubi related that most hadīth scholars subscribed to the view (wa ʾalayhi akhīr ahli al-hadīth) that qarn equaled one hundred years. He substantiated this argument by resorting to prophetic tradition confirming that al-Māzinī died at the age of one hundred. Al-Khāzīn singled out the version of al-Māzinī as the most correct one (al-ṣaḥābah). To confirm this view, al-Khāzīn referred first to the story of al-Māzinī and then cited the hadīth transmitted on the authority of ʾĪmān: “The best of my community is my generation (qarnī), 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 ʾĪmān and the report ascribed to al-Māzinī. A similar presentation is found in the tafsīr of ʾAbd al-Rahmān al-Tha‘alībī (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 qarn designated. Second, these scholars demonstrated that the report on the authority of al-Māzinī was the prevailing temporal meaning of qarn, 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-Māzinī, some Islamic sources associated the one hundred years’ span with Abū Salama b. ʾAbd al-Rahmān b. ʾAwf (d. 94/713). This report appeared in the works of al-Suyūṭī and Ibn al-Jawzī, in which we are informed that qarn 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 qarn separated Adam and Noah, and also Noah and Abraham. This report ended without disclosing the number of years that qarn represented. It was Abū Salama, according to al-Suyūṭī, who provided the interpretation that qarn 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 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 qarn.

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

95 Ibn Khalikān, Wafayāt, i, 102–104.
96 Al-Zabidi, Taʃī, xviii, 444.
97 Al-Sam‘āni, Taʃīr, ii, 88.
99 Al-Qurtubi, Jami‘, v, 391.
100 Al-Khāzīn, Luḥab, ii, 4.
101 Ibn Khalikān, Wafayāt, i, 177.
102 Al-Khāzīn, Luḥab, ii, 4.
103 Al-Tha‘alībī, 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 referred, on the authority of al-Waqidi, that the prophetic eras of Noah, Abraham, and Moses were separated.

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 wāhid min abī 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'fīr and his ta'rikh substantiates this conjecture. In his ta'fīr, al-Tabari referred to the controversy around the time period designated by qarn, whereas in his ta'rikh he mentioned only that it equaled 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' 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 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 religious 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, taḥāqa, 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 abī 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, Taḥāqa, i, 53; al-Tabari, Ta'rikh, ii, 235 (De Goeje, i, 1069); al-Maqdisi, Bad', ii, 154.
108 Al-Tabari, Ta'rikh, ii, 235 (De Goeje, i, 1069).
109 Al-Bayhaqi, Dalā'il, vi, 503-4.