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Abed el-Rahman Tayyara
Cleveland State University, a.tayyara@csuohio.edu

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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.”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. Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of the Qur’ānic Arabic* (Leiden, 2002), 338.

² *Arabic-English Dictionary, The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. M. Cowan, 4th ed. (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 889–90; al-Fayrūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, ed. ‘Abd al-Khāliq al-Sayyid ‘Abd al-Khāliq (Mansura: Maktabat al-‘Imān, 2009), 1045. For further discussions of the meanings of *qarn*, see Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), xiii, 331–42; al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-‘Arūs min jawābir al-qāmūs* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1994), xviii, 442–454.

³ For a good summary of the etymology of *qarn*, see al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-qur’ān* (Mecca: Maktabat Nizār al-Bāz, 1997), ii, 518–19.

⁴ P. Crone and M. Hind, *God’s Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge, 1986), 25–27; U. Rubin, “Prophets and Caliphs,” in *Methods and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. H. Berg (Leiden, 2003), 73–99.

⁵ F. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden, 1968), 85 n. 4; T. Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, 1994), 9. For studies on the symbolic meanings of numbers, see F. Rosenthal, “Nineteen,” *Analecta Biblica* 12 (1959): 304–18, repr.: *Muslim Intellectual and Social History* (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK, 1990); L. Conrad, “Seven and *Tasbī‘*: On the Implication of the Numerical Symbolism for the Study of Medieval Islamic History,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History in the Orient* 31 (1988): 42–73.

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*⁶

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. Sā‘ida al-Iyādī (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 (*qurūn*), also appears in the Qur’ān some twenty times.⁸ The use of *qarn* in the Qur’ān retains the general meaning of a “nation,” “people,” or “generation.”⁹ The application of *qarn* in the Qur’ān 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 the pre-Islamic Arab tribes ‘Ād and Thamūd.¹⁰ Such examples provided moral lessons

for later generations, warning them not to go astray and calling upon them to follow the path of God.¹¹ The words *ahlaknā* and *qurūn* appeared in tandem to underscore how God had completely destroyed these disobedient nations. In the Qur’ān there is no discussion, however, of the number of years that *qarn* meant to represent.

The Qur’ānic 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 *ḥadīth* transmitted on the authority of the Companion Abū Hurayra (d. 58/678). The first *ḥadīth* 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 *ḥadīth* emphasizes Muḥammad’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 *ḥadīth*, Abū Hurayra reported that the Prophet said:

“The Hour [of Resurrection] will not take place until my community (*ummatī*) emulates exactly the traditions of the nations (*qurūn*) 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 *ḥadīth* 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 *ḥadīth* was also transmitted on

⁶ The words *qawm* and *umma* appear very often in the Qur’ān. While the first term has a general meaning that basically denotes “people,” the latter is a composite term that retains the general notion of an ideal religio-political and social Islamic community. A. J. Wensinck, “Kawm,” *EI* iv (Leiden, 1978), 780–81; F. M. Denny, “Community and Society,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān* (Leiden, 2001), i, 367–86.

⁷ Al-Jāhiz, *al-Bayān wa al-tabyīn*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām M. Hārūn (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1990), I, 309.

⁸ Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī, “q-r-n,” *al-Mu‘jam al-mu-fabras li-alfāz al-qur’ān al-karīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1987), 529–30.

⁹ G. D. Newby, “Generations,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ii, 292–93.

¹⁰ *Sūrat al-Furqān* (25): 38; *Sūrat Fuṣilat* (41): 13.

¹¹ *Sūrat al-An‘ām*: (6): 6; *Sūrat Yūnus* (10): 13; *Sūrat Hūd* (11): 113; *Sūrat Maryam* (19): 74, 98; *Sūrat al-Mu‘minīn* (23): 31, 42; *Sūrat al-Qasas* (28): 43, 45, 78.

¹² F. M. Denny, “Umma,” *EI* x, 859–863.

¹³ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Abū Ṣuhayb al-Karmī (Riyad: Bayt al-Afkār al-Duwwaliyya, 1998), *kitāb al-manāqib*, 681, 3557.

¹⁴ U. Rubin, “Prophets and Progenitors in Early Shi’a Traditions,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (1979): 41–65.

¹⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Kitāb al-i’tisām*, 1396, 7319.

the authority of Abū Saʿīd 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 *ḥadīths* resonated with Qurʾānic 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*.¹⁶ Muqātil frequently used the words *umma* and *qawm* to define the term.¹⁷ When referring to its plural form, *qurūn*, however, Muqātil defined it as “nations (*umam*) that went astray.”¹⁸ By applying this definition, he followed the Qurʾānic 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 ʿUbayda Maʿmar b. al-Muthannā (d. 213/829) and Ibn Wahb al-Dīnawarī (d. 308/920).¹⁹ Similarly, al-Ṭabarī defined *qarn*, but he also added the phrase “a group of people” (*majmūʿa 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 ṭabaqa

The *ṭabaqāt* 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. *Ḥadīth* scholars, therefore, made scrupulous efforts in preserving biographical information about the Companions, particularly data pertinent to the process of *ḥadīth* transmission. In this section, we shall examine the way in which the term *qarn* reflects the pivotal place occupied by the Companions in *ḥadīth* transmission and the association of its meaning with “class of scholars” (*ṭabaqa*).

²¹ C. F. Robinson, “al-Muʿāfā b. ʿImrān and the Beginning of the *Ṭabaqāt* Literature,” *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 116 (1996): 114–20.

²² The Companions played a significant role in the transmission of the Prophetic tradition and also assumed important administrative and religious positions, particularly in the new cities that came under Islamic rule. Muḥammad b. Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990), iv, 215–19; vii, 6–8; Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb al-maʿārif*, ed. Tharwat ʿUkāsha (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1969), 309; Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Tahdhīb al-tahdhīb*, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1994), viii, 125f, xii, 237–40; Ibn Abī Ḥatim al-Rāzī, *Tatimmat al-Maʿrifā li-kitāb al-jarḥ wal-taʿdīl* (Hayderabad: al-Maṭbaʿa al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1952), 7–8.

²³ The question of the authenticity of Prophetic reports and early Islamic written accounts is a highly controversial issue in Western scholarship. A good discussion of the controversy is to be found in H. Motzki, “The Question of the Authenticity of Muslim Traditions Reconsidered: A Review Article,” in *Methods and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. H. Berg (Leiden, 2003), 211–57; *ibid.*, *The Origin of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical School*, trans. M. Katz (Leiden, 2002), 18–49; H. Berg, *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (Richmond, 2003), 6–64; F. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, 1998), 1–31; A. Noth and L. Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Traditions: A Source-Critical Study*, trans. M. Bonner (Princeton, 1994), 2–25.

¹⁶ A good discussion on the evolution of early Islamic Qurʾānic exegesis is found in C. H. M. Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qurʾānic Exegesis in Early Islam* (Leiden, 1993), 63–90; A. Rippin, “Studying Early *tafsīr* Texts,” *Der Islam* 72 (1995): 310–23, repr.: *The Qurʾān and its Interpretative Tradition* (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK, 2001); F. Leemhuis, “Origins and Early Development of the *tafsīr* Tradition,” in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān*, ed. A. Rippin (Oxford, 1988), 13–30.

¹⁷ Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr muqātil b. sulaymān*, ed. ʿAbdallāh Maḥmūd Shaḥāta (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma lil-Kitāb, 1979), i, 550; ii, 230, 526, 636, 641; iii, 29, 45, 156f, 235, 453, 578, 635; iv, 21, 115.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, ii, 301.

¹⁹ Abū ʿUbayda Maʿmar b. al-Muthannā, *Majāz al-qurʾān*, ed. Fuat Sezgin (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Khānjī, 1954), ii, 20; Muḥammad b. Wahb al-Dīnawarī, *Tafsīr ibn wahb*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2003), i, 219.

²⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-ṭabarī al-musammā jāmīʿ al-bayān fi taʾwīl āy al-qurʾān*, ed. Muḥammad Bayḍūn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999), v, 149–50; vi, 538; vii, 135f; viii, 53, 371–72, 387, 423, 474; x, 107f, 547; xi, 287, 431–32, 387.

The significant position held by the Companions and their Successors is reflected in a *ḥadīth* transmitted on the authority of ‘Imrān b. al-Ḥuṣayn (d. 53/673). In this *ḥadīth*, 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 (*qarnī*), then those who follow it and the ones who follow them”—‘Imrān 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 *qarn* in this *ḥadīth* shows the need of Muslims to place early Islamic generations in chronological order, in relation to the time of the Prophet. The *ḥadīth* 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 *ḥadīth* transmitters into Companions and Successors. Two main issues, therefore, stand out in this *ḥadīth*: 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 *ṭabaqāt* literature emerged. The application of the term *qarn* in this *ḥadīth*, therefore, denoted a *ṭabaqa*.

The association of *qarn* with *ṭabaqa* as reflected in the *ḥadīth* occurred in early *tafsīr* works. Among the earliest exegetes to apply this meaning of *qarn* was Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Zajjāj (d. 311/923). In his *Ma‘ānī al-qur’ān*, he offered the following definition of *qarn*:

It has been said that *qarn* amounts to 80 or 70 years, but I believe—and God knows better—

²⁴ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba*, 697, 3651; Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Nisābūrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo: Mu’assasat al-Mukhtār lil-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīf, 2005), *faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba*, 1067, 2533; al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī wa huwa al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1983), v, *Abwāb al-manāqib*, 357, 3950; al-Qazwīnī, *Sunan b. Māja*, ed. Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1998), ii, *Kitāb al-ahkām*, 340, 2362.

²⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba*, 697, 3650; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, faḍā’il al-ṣaḥāba*, 1067–68, 2534.

that *qarn* means people of a certain age, regardless of the number of years, in which a prophet or a class (*ṭabaqa*) of [knowledgeable] scholars live. This is evident from the saying of the Prophet, peace be upon him, “the best of you are my *qarn*,” 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 *qarn* is the whole nation and those [scholars] are a *qarn* in it. *Qarn* derives from the word association (*iqrān*).²⁶

Al-Zajjāj started his discussion of the meanings of *qarn* with a reference to the controversy concerning the number of years that *qarn* represented. Although he mentioned seventy or eighty years as possible meanings of *qarn*, 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 *ṭabaqa*. This point will be examined further at the end of this section.

At the heart of al-Zajjāj’s definition of *qarn* 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 *qarn* represented, al-Zajjāj referred to the time of the Prophet and early Islamic generations (i.e., the Companions and the Successors). His interpretation of *qarn* followed to a great extent the *ḥadīth* mentioned above that was transmitted on the authority of ‘Imrān b. al-Ḥuṣayn. This definition of *qarn* reflected, therefore, the need of the early Islamic community to rank early generations of *ḥadīth* 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 *qarn* revolved around the concept of a class of scholars (*ṭabaqa*). As to the determination of the time span of a *ṭabaqa*, al-Zajjāj mentioned, as we have seen, seventy and eighty years, but dismissed these figures as

²⁶ Al-Zajjāj, *Ma‘ānī al-qur’ān wa-i‘rābuhu*, i, ed. ‘Abd al-Jalīl Abdū Shalabī (Beirut: A‘lām al-Kutub, 1988), 228–29.

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

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

Other scholars who figured prominently in the discussion of the seventy- and eighty-year versions were (in addition to al-Zajjāj) Muḥammad al-Kalbī (d. 146/763) and al-Farrā’ (d. 207/822). Muslim scholars ascribed the eighty-year version to al-Kalbī,³¹

whereas al-Farrā’ associated *qarn* with both figures.³² It is difficult to explain the reason behind the affiliation of *qarn* with the figures of seventy and eighty years. It seems likely, however, that al-Kalbī and al-Farrā’ merely followed a rational explanation. This orientation is evident in al-Rāzī’s account. Applying rational thinking to his *tafsīr*, al-Rāzī claimed that the chronological meaning of *qarn* was associated with these figures simply because the life span of most people ranged between sixty and eighty years.³³

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

Qarn as a Chronological Pointer for the Prophet’s Life

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

³² Al-Farrā’, *Ma‘ānī al-qur’ān*, eds. Aḥmad Yusūf Najātī and Muḥammad ‘Alī Najjār (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 2001), i, 328; see also al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān*, iv, 85.

³³ Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, xii, 158. See also Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, xiii, 337.

³⁴ Al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr al-samarqandī al-musammā baḥr al-‘ulūm*, eds. ‘Alī Muḥammad Mu‘awwaḍ *et al.* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1993), I, 474.

³⁵ Al-Māwardī, *Nukat*, iii, 406.

³⁶ Al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān*, vii, 85.

³⁷ Al-Ṭabrisī, *Majma‘ al-bayān li-‘ulūm al-qur’ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Taqrīb lil-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyya, 1968), iv, 10.

³⁸ Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, 133.

³⁹ Al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān*, vii, 364; ix, 373. Similar treatments of *qarn* are found in later *tafsīr* works. See al-Ṭabrisī, *Majma‘*, iv, 10; ix, 155–56; al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, xii, 158; al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmi‘*, v, 391; viii, 317–18; al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, ii, 19; al-Khāzin, *Lubāb*, ii, 4.

⁴⁰ Al-Ṭabrisī, *Majma‘*, iv, 10; ix, 155.

²⁷ Al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa al-‘uyūn tafsīr Māwardī*, ed. al-Sayyid b. ‘Abd al-Maḥṣūd b. ‘Abd al-Raḥīm (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya and Mu‘assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya, 1992), v, 76; al-Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ al-Yahṣabi, *Sharḥ ṣaḥīḥ muslim lil-qāḍī ‘iyāḍ al-musammā ikmāl al-mu‘allim bi-fawā’id mustim*, ed. Yahyā Ismā‘īl (Mansura: Dār al-Wafā’, 1998), vii, 571; Ibn Abī Zamanayn, *Tafsīr al-qur’ān al-‘azīz*, eds. Ḥusayn b. ‘Ukāsha and Muḥammad b. Muṣṭafā al-Kanz (Cairo: al-Fārūq lil-Ṭibā‘a wal-Nashr, 2002), iii, 261.

²⁸ Ibn Qutayba, *Tafsīr gharīb al-qur’ān*, ed. Aḥmad Ṣaqr (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyya, 1958), 150; al-Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-qur’ān*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥabīb al-‘Āmilī (Najaf: Maktabat al-Amīn, 1957–1963), ix, 373; al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1980), xii, 158; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li aḥkām al-qur’ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-‘Arabī, 1967), v, 391; al-Baghawī, *Tafsīr al-baghawī al-musammā ma‘ālim al-tanzīl*, eds. Khālīd ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-‘Ak and Marwān Ṣawwār (Birūn Buharkit: Idārah-i Ta’lifāt, 1988), ii, 85; Ibn Zamanayn, *Tafsīr*, ii, 59; al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tazīl wa asrār al-ta’wīl*, (Cairo: Matba‘at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1955), i, 133; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-qur’ān al-‘azīz*, ed. M. Al-Wādīfī (Kuwait: Dār al-Arqam, 1985), iii, 421; al-Nisābūrī, *Gharā’ib al-qur’ān*, ed. Ibrāhīm ‘Awaḍ (Cairo: Matba‘at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1962), vii, 70; al-Khāzin, *Lubāb al-ta’wīl fī ma‘ānī al-tanzīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifā, n.d.), ii, 4.

²⁹ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fī ‘ilm al-tafsīr* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1984), iii, 5.

³⁰ Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, xxiii, 83. It is worth mentioning that al-Ṭabarī related on the authority of ‘Ubyadallāh b. Abī Rāfi‘, who was the scribe (*kātib*) of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, that *qarn* amounts to seventy years. See al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, ix, 391.

³¹ Al-Tha‘labī, *al-Kashf wa al-bayān fī tafsīr al-qur’ān al-ma‘rūf bi-tafsīr al-tha‘labī*, ed. Sayyid Kisrawī Ḥasan (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2004), iv, 41; al-Māwardī, *Nukat*, ii, 417.

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.⁴¹ Two important aspects are characteristic of the way these versions were treated in these *tafsīr* works. Most exegetes emphasized that the number of years that *qarn* represented was controversial and could not be fully defined.⁴² 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 Muḥammad'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 *ḥadīth* traced back to the Companion Anas b. Mālik (d. 92/711). In this report, we are told that "the messenger of God became a Prophet at the age of forty; he spent ten years in Mecca and ten

years in Medina; and died at the age of sixty."⁴³ This report portrayed the formative stages of Islam that began with Muḥammad'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-Māwardī's *tafsīr*. Defining the term "life span" (*ʿumr*), al-Māwardī related, on the authority of Qatāda (d. 117/735), that *ʿumr* meant forty years because Muḥammad was entrusted with prophethood around that age.⁴⁴ The importance of the fortieth year was also reflected in other reports transmitted on the authority of Mujāhid (d. 104/722),⁴⁵ Qatāda and Sibawayh (d. 177/796), claiming that a human being reached a stage of mental fruition when approaching the age of forty.⁴⁶

Judging from the appearances of *qarn* in early *tafsīr* works, it is difficult to establish an unequivocal connection between the report on the authority of Anas and the number of years that *qarn* represents. A reference to a possible link between this report and the meanings of *qarn* is found in al-Suyūṭī's (d. 911/1505) *tafsīr*. Citing the historian Ahmad b. Mūsā b. Mardawīyah (d. 410/1019–20) and based on the authority of Anas b. Mālik, al-Suyūṭī stated that *qarn* equals forty years.⁴⁷ In what follows, we shall examine the extent to which the report on the authority of Anas affected the discussions of the meanings of *qarn*. We shall also analyze the connection between the chronological implications of *qarn* and the main junctures in the Prophet's life.

In many *tafsīr* works, the forty- and sixty-year definitions are associated with three important Muslim scholars: Ibrāhīm al-Nakhaʿī (d. 96/717), Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), and Muḥammad b. Sīrīn (d. 110/728). In these works, the name of al-Baṣrī is usually affiliated with sixty-year version,⁴⁸ but

⁴¹ Al-Māwardī, *Nukat*, v, 77; al-Tūsī, *Tibyān*, vi, 462; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-manthūr fī-l tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr* (Beirut: Muḥammad Amīn Damaj, 1972), v, 71–72; al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿArūs*, xviii, 444.

⁴² Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, viii, 54; al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, xii, 158; al-Qāḍī ʿIyād, *Ikmāl*, vii, 571; al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār*, i, 133.

⁴³ Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990), i, 139; ii, 235, 237; al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh*, vii, 108.

⁴⁴ Al-Māwardī, *Nukat*, ii, 417.

⁴⁵ ʿAbdallāh b. Wahb, *al-Jāmiʿ, tafsīr al-qurʾān*, ed. Miklos Muranyi (Wiesbaden, 1995), i, 158.

⁴⁶ Al-Nasafī, *Tafsīr al-nasafī* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Muḥammad ʿAlī Ṣabīh, 1968), iv, 138.

⁴⁷ Al-Suyūṭī offer another report on the authority of Ḥammād b. Ibrāhīm (d. 323/934–5) in which we are told that *qarn* equals forty years. See *Durr*, v, 71.

⁴⁸ Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, *Tafsīr al-baṣrī*, ii, 168. See also al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmiʿ*, v, 391; al-Suyūṭī, *Durr*, v, 71; al-Baghawī, *Maʿālim*, ii,

sometimes the twenty-year version was also ascribed to him.⁴⁹ Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ (d. 544/1149) even traced both the figures of ten and forty years back to al-Baṣrī.⁵⁰ The association of *qarn* with forty years was attributed to both al-Nakha‘ī⁵¹ and Ibn Sīrīn.⁵² These scholars played an important role in the early Islamic religious discourses and transmitted many *ḥadīths* on the authority of the Companions, including Anas b. Mālik.⁵³ Al-Baṣrī and Ibn Sīrīn even developed a student-teacher relationship with Anas.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 Muḥammad was entrusted with the Prophetic message at the age of forty.⁵⁵ The earliest reference to the association of forty years with al-Nakha‘ī⁵⁶ and Ibn Sīrīn⁵⁷ is found in al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*. Al-Nakha‘ī’s report enjoyed a wide circulation in later *tafsīr* works, such as those of al-Māwardī, al-Ṭūsī, and al-Rāzī.⁵⁸ As in the case of reports on the authority of Anas and Qatāda, the figure of forty years reflects the age at which Muḥammad became a Prophet. This is evident also in the fact that Ibn Sa‘d offered a report on al-Nakha‘ī’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.⁵⁹ This shows again that, due to the assumption that

Muḥammad 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‘ī, it is easier to establish a connection between Ibn Sīrīn and the forty-years definition of *qarn* ascribed to Anas b. Mālik. This is evident from the close relationship that these two scholars developed. For example, Ibn Qutayba informs us that Ibn Sīrīn transmitted many *ḥadīths* on Anas b. Mālik’s authority and served as his *kātib* in Fars.⁶⁰ Ibn Sa‘d also reported that when Anas was dying, he requested to be prepared for burial by Ibn Sīrīn.⁶¹ It seems likely, therefore, that the forty-years version of *qarn* ascribed to Ibn Sīrīn was influenced by the report on the authority of Anas, in which we learn that Muḥammad 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. Mālik, asserting that the Prophet died at sixty.⁶² From these pieces of information, it is difficult to establish a direct connection between Anas and al-Baṣrī, with whom most exegetes associated the sixty-years tradition.⁶³ Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ even offered a report on the authority of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), who said that *qarn* equalled sixty years.⁶⁴ The affiliation of the sixty-years version with ‘Alī, 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-Baṣrī. This figure seems to point to the period from the time

85; al-Nisābūrī, *Gharā’ib al-qur’ān*, ed. Ibrāhīm ‘Awaḍ (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1962), vii, 70.

⁴⁹ *Tafsīr ḥasan al-baṣrī*, i, p. 350. See also al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, xix, 12; al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān*, vii, 85; al-Māwardī, *Nukat*, v, 76.

⁵⁰ Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ, *Ikmāl*, vii, 571.

⁵¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, ix, 391.

⁵² *Ibid.*, viii, 54; al-Tha‘labī, *Kashf*, iv, 41; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād*, iii, 5; al-Suyūṭī, *Durr*, v, 71.

⁵³ Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, vii, 12–19, 143; Ibn Qutayba, *Ma‘ārif*, 441–43; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tabḥīb*, i, 160–61; x, 141; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a‘yān wa anba’ abnā’ al-zamān*, ed. Ihsan ‘Abbas (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2005) i, 25–26; vii, 20.

⁵⁴ Ibn Qutayba, *Ma‘ārif*, 443.

⁵⁵ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sira al-nabawiya*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqā et al., (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1955), 233; Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 149.

⁵⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, ix, 391.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, viii, 54; al-Tha‘labī, *Kashf*, iv, 41; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād*, iii, 5; al-Suyūṭī, *Durr*, v, 71.

⁵⁸ Al-Māwardī, *Nukat*, v, 76; al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān*, ix, 373; vi, 462 (no authority is cited); al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, xxiii, 83.

⁵⁹ Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, vi, 285.

⁶⁰ Ibn Qutayba, *Ma‘ārif*, 443.

⁶¹ Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, vii, 18, i, 139; al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Atā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2004), vii, 108.

⁶² Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 139; ii, 235, 237; al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh*, vii, 108.

⁶³ Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, xiii, 158; al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmi‘*, v, 391; al-Baghawī, *Ma‘ālim*, ii, 85; al-Khāzin, *Lubab*, ii, 4.

⁶⁴ Al-Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ, *Ikmāl*, 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-Hamdānī (d. 63/682),⁶⁵ according to which *qarn* equalled ten years.⁶⁶ Interestingly, Ibn Abī Shayba traced the *ḥadīth khayr al-qurūn qarnī*, which was transmitted on the authority of ‘Imrān b. al-Ḥuṣayn, 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 *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 Rāshidūn age and the following caliphate. This orientation is best illustrated in the thirty- and fifty-years versions. Al-Ṭūsī mentions thirty years in his *tafsīr* without an authority and without explaining its historical implications.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 *ḥadīth* on the authority of Safīna (d. 70/689), who was a *mawlā* of the Prophet, in which we are told that “the caliphate of my community is to continue for thirty years,”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-Nīsābūrī (d. 405/1014), but he traced it back to Sa‘īd b. Jamhān (d. 136/754).⁷² The association of thirty years with the caliphate of the Rāshidūn seems to resonate with Abū ‘Ubayda’s definition of *qarn*, in which he stated that “at least a period of thirty years

separates two *qarns*” (*aqall mā bayna al-qarnayn thalāthūn sana*).⁷³

As for the fifty-years version, al-Suyūṭī reported on the authority of the Companion Ibn Dahr al-Aslamī⁷⁴ that *qarn* equalled fifty years.⁷⁵ When framed chronologically, fifty years seems to reflect roughly the period of time comprising Muḥammad’s prophethood and the Rāshidūn 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 Rāshidūn ended the ideal period of Islamic rulership that began with Muḥammad’s prophethood.

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

The abovementioned *ḥadīth* (*khayr al-qurūn qarnī*), transmitted on the authority of ‘Imrān b. al-Ḥuṣayn, demonstrates, as we have seen, the paramount position occupied by the Companions in the process of *ḥadīth* transmission and, specifically, the authenticity of Prophetic reports. In this *ḥadīth*, however, there is no discussion of the number of years that *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 *ḥadīth* transmitted (in a number of versions) on the authority of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Umar (d. 74/693). The same *ḥadīth* was also traced back, with slightly different wording, to Jābir 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.”⁷⁶ This

⁶⁵ His name is ‘Amr b. Shuraḥbil Abū Maysara; he was considered to be a reliable *ḥadīth* scholar. Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, vi, 163–65; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb*, viii, 40–41.

⁶⁶ Al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān*, iv, 85; vi, 462.

⁶⁷ Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣṣanaḥ ibn Abī Shayba, kitāb al-fādā’il* (Bombay: al-Dār al-Salafiyya, 1982), xii, 178.

⁶⁸ Al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān*, iv, 85.

⁶⁹ Abū Bakr al-Khallāl, *Sunna*, ed. ‘Aṭīyya al-Zahrānī (Riyad: Dār al-Rāya, 1989), ii, 424, 427. Al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī referred to this report, but he used the phrase “the caliphate of the prophethood” (*khilāfat al-nubuwwa*) instead. *Al-Mustadrak ‘alā al-ṣaḥīḥayn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifā, n.d.), iii, 135.

⁷⁰ Al-Khallāl, *Sunna*, ii, 427.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 824.

⁷² Al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, *Mustadrak*, iii, 135.

⁷³ Abū ‘Ubayda, *Majāz al-qur’ān*, i, 185; see also Ibn Qutayba, *Tafsīr gharīb al-qur’ān*, 150.

⁷⁴ Very little is known about al-Aslamī; see Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb*, xii, 269.

⁷⁵ Al-Suyūṭī, *Durr*, v, 71–72.

⁷⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Faḍā’il al-Ṣaḥāba*, 1068, 2537.

ḥadīth 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 *ḥadīth* in which ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Umar explained that “by this [*ḥadīth*] he [the Prophet] meant a *qarn* comes to an end.”⁷⁷

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 *ḥadīth* 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 (*tajdīd*), which appeared in a *ḥadīth* transmitted on the authority of Abū Hurayra. This *ḥadīth* read: “Indeed, every one hundred years God sends someone to this community to renew (*yujaddid*) its religion.”⁷⁸ Following this chronological frame, some Islamic sources perceived the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 101/720) as the first *mujaddid*.⁷⁹ This timeframe of *tajdīd* 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-Wāqidī (d. 207/823).⁸¹ According to this report, which is mentioned in Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 276/

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ *Sunan Abī Dāwūd, ma’ ḥāshiyat ‘awn al-‘abd*, ed. Ḥasan Irānī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, n.d.), iv, 128, *kitāb al-malāḥim*, 4282.

⁷⁹ Muḥammad Shams al-Haqq Ābādī, *‘Awn al-ma’būd sharḥ sunan abī dāwūd* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya) 1990), xi, 259–66.

⁸⁰ It is worth mentioning that, referring to the end of the Umayyad caliphate, al-Dīnawarī applied the span of 100 years as a time frame to demonstrate this significant historical juncture, claiming that at the end of every 100 years of a nation, God interferes to restore right and expose evil. See *Al-Akbbār al-ṭiwāl*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mun‘im ‘Āmir and Jamāl al-Shayyāl (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyya, 1960), 332.

⁸¹ As a historian, al-Wāqidī was viewed as an authority on historical reports (*akbbār*) that revolved around the life of the Prophet and his *Maghāzī*. He was also interested in chronology and dates and was known especially for his attempt to find the exact dates for

889) *al-Ma‘ārīf*, al-Wāqidī related that the Companions ‘Abdallāh b. Awfā died in Kufa in the year 86 A.H., Sahl b. Sa‘d al-Sā‘idī in Medina in the year 91 A.H. at the age of one hundred years, Anas b. Mālik in Basra in the year 91 (or 93) A.H.,⁸² and ‘Abdallāh b. Busr al-Māzinī in Ḥimṣ in the year 88 A.H.⁸³ The same report appeared in al-Shirāzī’s (d. 476/1083) *Ṭabaqāt al-fuqāha*. Unlike Ibn Qutayba, al-Shirāzī concluded the report by claiming that the Companions’ age ended between the years 90 and 100 A.H.⁸⁴

Al-Wāqidī’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 *ḥadīth* scholars considered Abū al-Ṭufayl ‘Āmir b. Wāḥila the last Companion to die, around the year 100 A.H.⁸⁵ A careful examination of al-Wāqidī’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. Busr al-Māzinī (d. 88/707).

The names of ‘Abdallāh b. Abī Awfā and ‘Abdallāh b. Busr al-Māzinī 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. Busr al-Māzinī in the process by which one hundred years ultimately became the prevailing meaning of *qarn*. But first we shall discuss how

events. See F. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 245; A. Duri, *The Rise of History Among Arabs* (Princeton, 1983), 37–39.

⁸² Ibn Sa‘d informs us that Anas b. Mālik was the last Companion to die, in al-Basra in the year 93 A.H. at the age of 107. *Ṭabaqāt*, vii, 19; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb*, i, 243–44.

⁸³ Ibn Qutayba, *Ma‘ārīf*, 341.

⁸⁴ Al-Shirāzī, *Ṭabaqāt al-fuqāha*, 46–47.

⁸⁵ Ibn Qutayba, *Ma‘ārīf*, 178; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā’il al-nubuwwa wa ma‘rifat aḥwāl ṣāhib al-sharī‘a*, ed. ‘Abd al-Muṭī’ Qal‘ajī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1985), vi, 499; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb*, v, 82–84; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a’lām al-nubalā’*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arnā’ūt (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risāla, 1982), iii, 470.

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-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*.⁸⁶ 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. Mu‘āwiya (r. 61/680–64/684).⁸⁷ It is difficult to account here for al-Ṭabarī’s use of the phrase *awwal qarn* and how the 120 years’ timeframe was applied. However, it seems likely that al-Ṭabarī considered the birth of Muḥammad (c. 570 C.E.) as the beginning of that *qarn*. Thus, calculating the number of years from Muḥammad’s birth to the caliphate of Yazīd b. 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 Zurāra 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-Māzinī. The report on the authority of al-Māzinī seems to appear first in Ibn Ḥanbal’s (d. 241/855) *Musnad*. In the report, Ibn Ḥanbal related that al-Māzinī had a mole on the side of his face (‘*lā qarnihi*). The Prophet, adds Ibn Ḥanbal, placed his finger on the mole and told him: “You will live a *qarn*.”⁹¹ This report ends with the confirmation that indeed al-Māzinī enjoyed a long life, though leaving the reader wondering at what age he died.

A reference to the report on the authority of al-Māzinī 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-Māzinī that *qarn* totaled one hundred years. Like Ibn Ḥanbal,

al-Ṭabarī added that the Prophet placed his hand on al-Māzinī’s head and said “This boy will live one *qarn*.”⁹² Al-Ṭabarī concluded his account by confirming that al-Māzinī 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-Māzinī’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-Māzinī’s story, later Muslim scholars combined these stages by emphasizing the association of *qarn* with one hundred.⁹³ Al-Ṭabarī’s portrayal of al-Māzinī’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-Māzinī, 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-Māzinī recurred frequently in exegetical literature, and many Muslim scholars even singled it out as the correct version. Second, most Muslim exegetes who deemed al-Māzinī’s version as the correct chronological meaning of *qarn* were considered staunch defenders of *ahl al-ḥadīth*. This gives more reliability to the conjecture that the report ascribed to al-Māzinī 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.

⁸⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, viii, 54.

⁸⁷ *Fa-bu‘itha rasūl allāh sallā allāhu ‘alayhi wa salam fī awwal qarn kān wa ākhiruhum Yazīd b. Mu‘āwiya*. Ibid.

⁸⁸ Al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān*, vi, 462, and (with no authority cited) ix, 373; al-Māwardī, *Nukat*, v, 77; al-Tha‘labī, *Kashf*, iv, 40; al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, xxiii, 83; al-Qurtubī, *Jāmi‘*, xv, 147; al-Suyūṭī, *Durr*, v, 71.

⁸⁹ Al-Jawzī, *Zād*, iii, 5; al-Andalusī, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ fī al-tafsīr*, ed. ‘Arāfāt Ḥassūna (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1992), iv, 426; al-Suyūṭī, *Durr*, v, 71.

⁹⁰ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād*, iii, 5.

⁹¹ *Musnad Ahmad b. Ḥanbal* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī al-A‘lā, 1969), iv, 189

⁹² Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, viii, 54.

⁹³ Al-Ḥākim al-Nisābūrī, *Mustadrak*, iv, 500; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā’il*, vi, 503; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, iii, 431–32.

⁹⁴ Al-Tha‘labī, *Kashf*, iv, 41; al-Māwardī, *Nukat*, v, 77; al-Sam‘ānī, *Tafsīr al-qur’ān*, ed. Yāsir b. Ibrāhīm (Riyad: Dār al-Waṭan lil-Nashr, 1997), ii, 88; al-Ṭūsī, *Tibyān*, vi, 462; al-Qurtubī, *Jāmi‘*, v, 391; al-Tha‘alibī, *al-Jawābir al-bisān fī tafsīr al-qur’ān*, ed. ‘Imād al-Ṭālibī (Beirut: al-Mu‘assasa al-Waṭaniyya lil-Kitāb, 1985), ii, 465.

Citing the grammarian Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā Tha‘lab (d. 291/904),⁹⁵ al-Zabīdī (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 *ḥadīth* foretelling that al-Māzinī would live a *qarn* and that he indeed died at the age of one hundred.⁹⁶ Similarly, al-Sam‘ānī (d. 489/1096) asserted that reliable *ḥadīth* scholars (*ḥuffāz*) believed that *qarn* equalled one hundred. To substantiate this view, he cited the *ḥadīth* informing us that al-Māzinī died at the age of one hundred.⁹⁷ The preeminence of the report on the authority of al-Māzinī as the meaning of *qarn* 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” (*muḥyī al-sunna*).⁹⁸

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-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273)⁹⁹ and al-Khāzin (d. 741/1341),¹⁰⁰ whose works also reflected traditionalist Sunni views.¹⁰¹ Referring to the meanings of *qarn*, al-Qurṭubī related that most *ḥadīth* scholars subscribed to the view (*wa ‘alayhi akthar ahl al-ḥadīth*) that *qarn* equalled one hundred years. He substantiated this argument by resorting to prophetic tradition confirming that al-Māzinī died at the age of one hundred. Al-Khāzin singled out the version of al-Māzinī as the most correct one (*al-aṣaḥḥ*). To confirm this view, al-Khāzin referred first to the story of al-Māzinī and then cited the *ḥadīth* transmitted on the authority of ‘Imrān: “The best of my community is my generation (*qarnī*), then those who follow it, and the ones who follow them.”¹⁰² Al-Khāzin made a clear connection here between the *ḥadīth* on the authority of ‘Imrān and the report ascribed to al-Māzinī. A similar presentation is found in the *tafsīr* of ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Tha‘alibī (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 *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. ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. ‘Awf (d. 94/713). This report appeared in the works of al-Suyūṭī and Ibn al-Jawzī, in which we are informed that *qarn* equalled one hundred years.¹⁰⁴ Unlike Ibn al-Jawzī, however, al-Suyūṭī offered the background against which this report appeared. Specifically, he offered a *ḥadīth* 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 *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 Muḥammad 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 *qarn*.

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

⁹⁵ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, i, 102–104.

⁹⁶ Al-Zabīdī, *Tāj*, xviii, 444.

⁹⁷ Al-Sam‘ānī, *Tafsīr*, ii, 88.

⁹⁸ Al-Baghawī, *Tafsīr*, ii, 85; J. Robson, “al-Baghawī,” *EI* i (Leiden, 1960), 893.

⁹⁹ Al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmi‘*, v, 391.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Khāzin, *Lubab*, ii, 4.

¹⁰¹ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, i, 177

¹⁰² Al-Khāzin, *Lubab*, ii, 4.

¹⁰³ Al-Tha‘alibī, *Jawāhir*, i, 604.

¹⁰⁴ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād*, iii, 5; al-Suyūṭī, *Durr*, v, 71.

¹⁰⁵ A. Tayyara, “Prophethood and Kingship in Early Islamic Historical Thought,” *Der Islam* 84 (2007): 73–102.

¹⁰⁶ Ibn Sa‘d, *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 53; Ibn Qutayba, *Ma‘ārif*, 57; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa’l-mulūk*, ed. Ibrāhīm Abū al-Faḍl (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1960), ii, 235 (de Goeje, i, 1069). Al-Maqdisī (d. after 355/966) offered an identical version of al-Ṭabarī’s report. See *Kitāb al-bad’ wa’l-ta’rīkh* (Beirut: Maktabat Khayyāt, n.d.), ii, 154.

their presentations with reports on the authority of the historian al-Wāqidi in which *qarn* was applied as a chronological concept. Ibn Sa'd and al-Ṭabarī related, on the authority of al-Wāqidi, 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-Ṭabarī maintained that, according to al-Wāqidi, *qarn* equalled one hundred years.¹⁰⁷ Ibn Sa'd and al-Ṭabarī also added that many Muslim historians (*ghayr wāḥid min ahl al-ʿilm*) shared this view with al-Wāqidi. This phrase seems to show that the association of *qarn* with one hundred years was, by the time of al-Wāqidi, the chronological meaning of this term recognized by many Muslim historians.

Reading the accounts of Ibn Sa'd and al-Ṭabarī further, we find that al-Wāqidi applied the chronological format of ten *qurūn*, mentioned in the *ḥadīth* on the authority of Abū Hurayra, to calculate the prophetic intervals between Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Again, al-Wāqidi defined the temporal meaning of *qarn* as one hundred years. By offering this particular definition of *qarn* without mentioning the controversy around it, al-Wāqidi seemed to introduce *qarn* as a fixed chronological concept. A comparison between the way *qarn* was applied in al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* and his *ta'riḫ* substantiates this conjecture. In his *tafsīr*, al-Ṭabarī referred to the controversy around the time period designated by *qarn*, whereas in his *ta'riḫ* he mentioned only that it equalled one hundred years.¹⁰⁸

The report on the authority of al-Wāqidi 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 *ḥadīth* transmitted on the authority of Abū 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-Wāqidi, the one hundred years' timespan came to be a recognized unit of time associated with *qarn*. Again, the name of al-Wāqidi figured prominently in the discussion of the meaning of *qarn*. No wonder, then, that al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066) even offered a report in which he ascribed to al-Wāqidi the association of al-Māzini with the one hundred years' version of *qarn*.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, i, 53; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*, ii, 235 (De Goeje, i, 1069); al-Maqdisī, *Bad'*, ii, 154.

¹⁰⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*, ii, 235 (De Goeje, i, 1069).

¹⁰⁹ Al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il*, vi, 503–4.

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 *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 Muḥammad became the axis around which important religio-political and social aspects of the early Islamic community revolved. Following the Prophet, the Companions played a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of the prophetic tradition that was passed on to succeeding generations. The ranking of early Muslim scholars based on their closeness in time to the Prophet was, thus, a matter of great importance to the early Islamic community. This can be seen in the fact that the term *qarn* figured in many *ḥadīths* to denote a generation, *ṭabaqa*, *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 'Abdallāh b. Busr al-Māzini, 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 *ahl al-ḥadīth*, as many Muslim exegetes subsequently presented al-Māzini'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.