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2026-03-03
Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History
http://hdl.handle.net/10138/629087
Lindstedt, I 2026, 'The portrayal of the pre-Islamic Arabs as murderers of their own infants', Approaching Religion, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 42–55 . https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.148924

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The Portrayal of the Pre-Islamic Arabs as Murderers of Their Own Infants

doi.org/10.30664/ar.148924

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This article critically reassesses the accounts of the supposed custom of infanticide, particularly female infanticide (in Arabic, *wa'd al-banāt*), among pre-Islamic Arabs, arguing that this notion emerged during the Umayyad era as an imagined aspect of the so-called pre-Islamic *jāhiliyya* ("age of ignorance"). Both noble aspects, such as valour and esteemed poetry, and debased ones, such as polytheism and immorality, were ascribed to pre-Islamic Arabs, thus encapsulating a troublesome heritage. Additionally, this article explores some aspects of the Islamic-era political dynamics, particularly the polemics between various Arabian tribes. The case of the tribe of Tamīm—who are said to have been the main perpetrators of infanticide—is examined, highlighting how inter-tribal polemics influenced the birth and popularization of tales depicting the Tamīm as engaged in the brutal practice of daughter-killing. In my interpretation, the Tamīm became the butt of these polemical attacks because they fought on the losing side during the second Muslim *fitna*, "civil war" (680–92 CE). I argue that the sustained recollection and retelling of the *jāhiliyya* narratives served not only to forge a new Muslim identity and self-assertion of moral reformation but also to facilitate intra-Arab distinctions in Islamic times. Social Identity Theory (SIT) serves as the interpretive framework of the article.[1]

1 I am very grateful to Adham Abdel-Bary, Jutta Jokiranta, Tariq Osman, Tsampika-Mika Paraskeva, Nina Nikki, Mulki al-Sharmani and the late Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila for important comments on earlier versions of this article.

Introduction

Muslim religious scholars, starting in the late seventh century CE (as suggested by Donner 2010; Lindstedt 2024), began to formulate and maintain a distinct Islamic identity, which was articulated in contrast to other religious communities—in particular, Jews, Christians, Manicheans and Zoroastrians—but also in contrast to pre-Islamic Arabs who lived during the so-called *jāhiliyya,* or "the age of ignorance" (an era before the mission of the Prophet Muhammad, which lasted ca. 610–32 CE). For example, in his famous work *Nahj al-Balāgha*, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 1015) states that the pre-Islamic Arabs were

> camel-herders tending to their beasts' sores and harvesting their wool. They lived as the most wretched of nations, with the least fertile fields, with no mission under whose wing they could seek shelter, no column of unity on whose strength they could depend. Their situation was volatile, their hands discordant, their numbers scattered. They were trapped in a hard trial and crushed under rocks of ignorance: they buried baby girls alive,

> worshipped idols, cut ties of kinship, and raided one another. Observe the abundance of God's blessings [with the coming of Islam] on them [the Arabs]. He sent them a messenger [the Prophet Muhammad], secured their obedience through his religion [Islam], and gathered their company within his mission. See how bounty spread the wings of her generosity over them and the wellsprings of her delights flowed. See how the new religion gathered them within the gifts of its grace. They were immersed in its bounty, joyful in the fresh greenness of its way of life. (al-Sharīf al-Raḍī 2024, 453–55)

This is an illustrative example of the ways in which Muslim authors saw the coming of Islam ("the new religion gathered them within the gifts of its grace") and what existed before it (Arabs had been "crushed under rocks of ignorance: they buried baby girls alive, worshipped idols, cut ties of kinship, and raided one another"). Such characterizations are habitually echoed in modern scholarship (e.g. Aksoy 2024). However, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī's and similar writings were not really describing what had taken place in pre-Islamic times; rather, they were ideological and tendentious accounts that were used to argue for and emphasize the illuminating nature of the new religion, Islam.

Indeed, much recent scholarship (e.g. Drory 1996; El Cheikh 2015; Crone 2016; Webb 2016) has called into question many of the narratives about, and traits ascribed to, the pre-Islamic inhabitants of Arabia contained in Islamic-era literature. As Nadia Maria El Cheikh (2015, 18) has aptly noted:

> *Jahiliyya* indicated the negative image of a society seen as the opposite pole of Islam. It was portrayed as a state of corruption and immorality from which God delivered the Arabs by sending them the Prophet Muhammad. […] The sharp distinction between the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods meant that the people of *jahiliyya* lingered in the imperial Muslim imagination. They functioned as a signifier of a new Muslim identity emanating from the heritage of *jahiliyya*, a Muslim identity that could not exist without the constant remembering and retelling of the story of *jahiliyya*.

On the basis of this view, which I agree with, these classical Arabic narratives of the "age of ignorance" were more a foundation myth than factual history. For example, though the *jāhiliyya* is portrayed by later Muslim authors as an era and state of idolatrous barbarism, many pre-Islamic Arabians were, in fact, monotheists (Jews, Christians or so-called pagan monotheists); and, moreover, they engaged in ethical thought and practices that to some degree corresponded to later Islamic-era ones (Crone 2016, 53–183; Jamil 2017; Al-Jallad and Sidky 2024; Lindstedt 2024, 42–144).

Importantly too, contrary to what has been thought conventionally in scholarship and popular discourse, it has been suggested by Peter Webb (2016) that Arab identity itself (as a broader category) is an Islamic-era creation. In the process of crafting an Arab ethnic identity, a sense of a shared past was invoked, and the creation and telling of stories about that imagined past was crucial in this. Because this article deals with, in particular, the past construed

and imagined, I will use the words "pre-Islamic Arabs" without problematizing them. Though many of the writers of these stories about *jāhiliyya* identified as Arab, they had a conflicted relationship with this (imagined) Arab past: on the one hand, the Arabs before Islam were, for example, noble warriors, great poets and esteemed astronomers; on the other, they were pagan polytheists, whose life was immoral (see e.g. Ibn Qutaybah 2017). It was, in a word, a troubling heritage, with various conflicting aspects.

The alleged practice of female infanticide

Pre-modern exegetes of the Qurʾan, other medieval Muslim scholars and modern researchers for the most part agree that the Qurʾan not only mentions and condemns infanticide in general (verses 6:137, 140, 151; 17:31; and 60:12), but also female infanticide in particular (16:57–59 and 81:8–9). The putative practice of female infanticide is called in classical Arabic *waʾd al-banāt*, which denotes (or came to mean) "burying baby daughters alive". The following *ḥadīth* (prophetic narrative) exemplifies the understanding of the pre-modern Muslim scholars of what would routinely take place during the "age of ignorance". In it, a tribal leader, Qays ibn ʿĀṣim al-Tamīmī (that is, from the tribe Tamīm), is portrayed as conversing with Muhammad as follows:

> Qays ibn ʿĀṣim came to the Prophet, may God bless him and give him peace. Qays said: "Messenger of God! During the *jāhiliyya*, I buried alive (*waʾadtu*) eight daughters of mine. [What should I do to be redeemed of my sins?]" The Prophet answered: "Manumit a slave [as a recompense] for each one." Qays said: "Messenger of God, I have [only] camels." The Prophet said: "Donate a camel [i.e., slaughter it and donate the meat to the poor] for each one, if you can." (Al-Qurṭubī 1935–1940, vol. xix, 231; see also Wensinck 1936–69, vol. vii, 120–21)

The extensive number of daughters so killed is an example of the image of pre-Islam that many Muslim scholars had in mind: it was a brutal place, and Islam brought about moral and legal reformation. (It should be noted that the text is not to be understood as decreeing the recompense or punishment for infanticide in Islamic times; it merely concerns a compensation of this crime committed in pre-Islamic times, when, according to the narratives, it was not a prohibited practice.) The following report also speaks to this theme and presupposes a widespread cultural convention:

> When a pregnant woman was about to give birth during the *jāhiliyya*, she would dig a grave and give birth next to it. If it [the baby] was a daughter, she would cast her in the grave, and if it was a son, she would keep him. (al-Thaʿlabī 2002, vol. x, 139)

The belief that the pre-Islamic Arabs would have routinely killed their baby daughters is not restricted to the pre-modern era. As even a cursory look at the basic reference works of Islamic studies, such as the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second and third editions), shows, the alleged practice of *waʾd al-banāt* has been accepted—with some exceptions—at face value by most modern scholars. For instance, in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Fred

Leemhuis (2012) takes it as a fact, writing under the entry *waʾd al-banāt*: "'the disposal by burying alive of newborn daughters', refers to the practice in pre-Islamic times of burying newborn girls immediately after birth […] it may be concluded that, more generally, the practice was probably a primitive sort of population control, though 'gendered.'" In the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia*, Avner Giladi (2009) writes: "According to Q[urʾan] 6:151 and 17:31, Arab pagans practised infanticide as relief for both child and parents in times of deprivation; according to Q 16:57–59, pagans killed female infants because they preferred male offspring."

These views are also routinely present in modern research articles. For example, Soner Aksoy (2024, 4) claims that "we know that the *Jāhiliyya* Arabs had a custom of killing their daughters by burying them alive". As for Aqsa Tasgheer and Muhammad Ishfaq (2021, 1), they opine that "This repugnant custom of killing infants was deeply rooted [among] Arabs".

Based on the scholarly reference works and studies just mentioned, it can be said that, until recently, the scholarly consensus has been that a) the Qurʾan mentions and prohibits infanticide, in particular female infanticide, and b) that practice was current among the pre-Islamic Arabs. One could also mention that the idea of widespread killing of baby daughters in pre-Islamic times is a common view in the popular discourse among modern Muslims.

However, a few scholars have of late cast doubt on the pervasive and widespread nature of the practice. It has, for example, been noted that there were differences in how medieval Muslim scholars understood the custom of *waʾd*, some understanding it as not containing clear gendered undertones (*female* infanticide) but as a word that was also used for infant sons who were killed (for various critical approaches to the question, see Ibn Tunbāk 2007; Paraskeva 2021 and 2024).

More pointedly, in an earlier publication (Lindstedt 2023), I have taken issue with the conventional understanding of the two key Qurʾanic passages (16:57–59 and 81:8–9). To quote them (and to adduce the whole beginning of Qurʾan 81 for context):

> 16:57–59: [57]And they [the disbelievers] attribute daughters to God—immaculate is He—while they will have what they desire! [58]When one of them is brought the news of a female [newborn], his face becomes darkened and he chokes with suppressed agony. [59]He hides from the people out of distress at the news he has been brought (*mā bushshira bihi*). Shall he retain it in humiliation, or hide it in/on the ground (*yadussuhu fī al-turāb*)? Look! Evil is the judgement that they make. (Transl. ʿAlī Qulī Qarāʾī, modified)

> Qurʾan 81:1–9: [1]When the sun is wound up, [2]when the stars scatter, [3]when the mountains are set moving, [4]when the pregnant camels are neglected, [5]when the wild beasts are mustered, [6]when the seas are set afire, [7]when the souls are assorted, [8]when the *mawʾūda* will be asked (*suʾilat*) [9]for what sin she was killed, [10]when the records [of deeds] are unfolded, [11]when the sky is stripped off, [12]when hell is set ablaze, [13]when paradise is brought near, [14]then a soul shall know

what it has readied [for itself]. (Transl. ʿAlī Qulī Qarāʾī, modified)

We can start by noting that no pre-Islamic source (in Arabic or any other language) evidences the supposed custom of female infanticide. Because of this silence, it is warranted to also look at the two purported Qurʾanic prooftexts (16:57–59 and 81:8–9) usually understood to reference the murdering of baby girls.

I accept that the Qurʾan (6:137, 140, 151; 17:31; and 60:12) emphatically prohibits infanticide generally speaking, but there does not appear to be any clear gendered aspects mentioned in these Qurʾanic passages, according to my interpretation. As for the passages 16:57–59 and 81:8–9, I suggest that the Arabic *yadussuhu fī al-turāb* in verse 16:59 rather refers to (female) infant abandonment than to infanticide (naturally, abandonment often, but not always, resulted in the death of the child). Moreover, the anonymous disbeliever of the passage is portrayed as *contemplating* abandoning his daughter; the passage cannot be used of evidence of a supposed cultural practice among pre-Islamic Arabs. As regards the other passage, it should be noted that the context is eschatological and the language somewhat cryptic.

I argue, on the basis of pre- and early Islamic Arabic poetry, that the word *al-mawʾūda* in verse 81:8 should be understood as "the one (f.) who has been trodden/trampled over" (Lindstedt 2023, 16–23), rather than as "the female infant buried alive", which is the conventional understanding of pre-modern exegetes and most modern scholars. In the comparative poetical material, all instances of the verb *waʾada* appear to signify treading, in particular loud treading or tramping (see now also the important study Paraskeva 2024 on classical Arabic lexica).

It is true that Qurʾan 81:9 says that the *mawʾūda* has been killed, *qutilat*. But there is, in my opinion, little to suggest that the word *mawʾūda* refers to a child (girl); it could refer to an adult woman as well. I also suggest that the meaning "buried" for *mawʾūda* (root *w-ʾ-d*) was inferred by the exegetes on the basis of another similar root, namely *w-d-ʾ*, which has meanings such as "to bury someone (by levelling the ground over them)" (for a longer discussion, see Lindstedt 2023).

What I definitely do *not* want to say in this or the previous article is that a) pre-Islamic Arabs would never commit infanticide; b) that, if they did, they would not have, because of to some extent shared patriarchal values and misogyny, preferred boys over girls, leading to more daughters being killed; or c) some parents killing their children would not have buried them alive. It is indeed likely that, as in all societies, specifically pre-modern ones, some parents killed their children because of food crises, poverty, mental disorder or other reasons. What I do argue for is that, though Q 6:137, 140, 151; 17:31; and 60:12 refer to and repugn infanticide, generally speaking, there is scant Qurʾanic evidence for female infanticide, in particular, or, even more particularly, for the alleged common cultural practice of burying daughters alive. The general prohibition against infanticide, it should be noted, is shared by various religious traditions in addition to the Qurʾan: see, for example, Deuteronomy 12:29–31 or the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Zellentin 2013, 72–73).

If my interpretation is accepted, it remains to be explored and explained in

detail *why* the Islamic-era Arabs construed and projected the practice of female infanticide onto their forebears. Why would one narrate and re-narrate stories of the history of one's own *ethnos* as having been keen murderers of their own baby daughters? The answer to that lies, I suggest, in inter-tribal polemics, comparison and temporality.

Social identity and social comparison

To probe and analyse the issue of inter-tribal polemics further, I contend that a look at modern theorization of *social identity* and *social comparison* is helpful. The modern academic research of social comparison can be said to have begun with Leon Festinger's article (1954), which put forward a theory of social comparison processes. In Festinger's view, social comparison was related to, in particular, implicit and explicit *self-evaluation* through information gathering from and about other people. He also suggested that people have a "unidirectional drive upward" (Taylor and Lobel 2007, 96), meaning that individuals endeavor to be and become more capable than both their own current level and also the individuals that they compare themselves to. Festinger's views, though influential, were later supplemented with other observations and theorizations.

One strand of research has focused on downward (rather than upward) social comparisons, while another has brought the concept of *self-enhancement* (in addition to self-evaluation) to the fore. It has been noted, for example, that "under conditions of threat, individuals typically make downward social comparisons" (Taylor and Lobel 2007, 97–98): that is, when one's self-esteem and/or status is low, one typically displays more negative views of the outgroups and engages in downward social-comparison which, in this context at least, enhances one's view of oneself.

Social comparison can refer to a number of interrelated, but ultimately distinct, phenomena. Festinger approached the question from the point of view of intragroup and interindividual processes. However, my own interest in this article is intergroup comparison, that is, how people "compare their own group with other groups" (Hogg 2000, 401). It is in particular among the social psychologists that have toiled with *social identity theory* (SIT) that the question of social comparison processes' links with self-esteem, on the one hand, and intergroup dynamics, on the other, has been probed. SIT began with the studies of Henri Tajfel, with important contributions over the years by, among others, John Turner, Michael Hogg and S. Alexander Haslam.

The importance and usages of social comparison have been part of SIT literature from the very beginning. In an influential article, Tajfel (1972) noted that the meanings attached to a group and derived from social identification obtain through social comparison and relations to other groups (see also Hogg 2000, 404). Tajfel felt that Festinger concentrated too much on within-group comparisons; he, on the other hand, concentrated on the importance of the intergroup. In SIT, a basic premise is that people aim for a positive self-image, self-esteem and social identity; social comparison is viewed as part and parcel of the processes related to this quest. Turner, Brown and Tajfel (1979, 190) put this well:

> It is assumed that individuals are motivated to achieve a positive self-image and that self-esteem can be enhanced by a positive evaluation of one's own group. Own group is evaluated by comparison with others: positively discrepant comparisons between ingroup and some relevant outgroup (perceived evaluative differences favouring the ingroup) provide a positive group identity which enhances self-esteem. An individual's social identity is those aspects of his self-concept contributed by the social groups to which he perceives himself to belong. Very generally, then, individuals are motivated to establish positively valued differences (positively discrepant comparisons) between the ingroup and a relevant outgroup to achieve a positive social identity.

Moreover, theorizing in the context of SIT and related fields has also focused on the temporal aspect of social categorization and values attached to groups (see e.g. Condor 1996). As Haslam, Reicher and Platow (2020, 155) note, "social identity is as much about future as about past social realities". This means that, as regards social comparison, one can not only compare one's own group with other groups, but also one's own group to its *past* (in these studies, the notion of collective memory and imagination is often invoked). Such comparison emphasizes the optimal nature of the *present* group identity. In fact, the narratives about the past are not primarily about the history but about the present and the future of the group (see the various contributions in Saint-Laurent, Odradović and Carriere 2018).

These insights from the research on social comparison are useful in discussing, first, the early Islamic-era inter-tribal polemics and, second, the broader discourse on and creation of the depiction of the *jāhiliyya*, or the pre-Islamic "era of ignorance." I understand inter-tribal prejudice and polemics (discussed in what follows) as being one reflection of downward comparison (Hogg 2000, 403), which some early Muslims employed to create a positive group identity for themselves and, more generally, fashioned a narrative about the past that underlined the civilizing nature of Islam.

Processes of inter-tribal polemics and the alleged wa'd al-banāt

This section endeavours to reconstruct the historical trajectory through which the idea of widespread female infanticide among pre-Islamic Arabs was construed. I argue that the notion first began its life as part of inter-tribal, specifically anti-Tamīmī, polemics. After the idea had surfaced, the putative tradition of burying baby daughters alive was generalized to all pre-Islamic Arabs and became one of the means, and themes, that Muslim religious and other scholars employed to create a sense of immoral pre-Islam, which was understood to be in marked opposition to the moral Muslim way of life. This imagined notion, I suggest, was read into the Qurʾan itself through the exegesis of verses 16:57–59 and 81:8–9 (I have explored this process of exegesis in some detail in Lindstedt 2023, 13–8).

As I have stated, the memory of *jāhiliyya* was a conflicted one, but one which the Muslim authors could not escape, as El Cheikh has noted (see the quotation at the beginning of this article). Chivalry, valor

and poetic excellence were projected onto the Arabs of *jāhiliyya*; but so were drunkenness, promiscuity, paganism and the unsettling idea that they engaged in a vicious tradition of female infanticide. Moreover, the imagined manner of accomplishing the infanticide was most cruel: burying the infant daughters alive.

First, we should try to reconstruct how the notion of *waʾd al-banāt* appeared and spread in Islamic-era Arabic literature. I suggest in the following that it first emerged after the second civil war or *fitna* (680–92 CE) as inter-tribal polemics and only afterwards was projected onto the whole Arab *ethnos* (as it was remembered—or construed—to have existed before Islam). Eventually, for instance, the famous ninth–tenth-century exegete al-Ṭabarī adduced the view according to which the Arabs had been, of all humankind, the most eager to commit the offence of female infanticide (*kānat al-ʿarab afʿal al-nās li-dhālika*; al-Ṭabarī 2001, vol. xxiv, 148).

Important hints for analysing the appearance and development of this discourse can be found in identifying the people and tribes that are connected to the (supposed) pre-Islamic cultural custom by Muslim authors, who were writing centuries after the events. For allegedly having been a very widespread practice, mentions of *named individuals* who actually committed the crime are, surprisingly, few and far between. We do find some names of the perpetrators in the sources: i) a rather obscure figure called Nuʿaym ibn Qaʿnab; ii) strikingly, in a few narrations the later Caliph ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb; iii) and, lastly and most commonly, Qays ibn ʿĀṣim al-Tamīmī, who was mentioned at the beginning of this article as having killed eight of his daughters before embracing Islam and who is the most infamous child-killer in the Muslim historiographical and other literature (see Wensinck 1936–69, vol. vii, 120–21; Paraskeva 2021).

However, something does not feel quite right about these narratives of the alleged daughter-murderers: the narratives appear tendentious and unrealistic, as fittingly analysed by Tsampika-Mika Paraskeva (2021, 271–80). Indeed, I would suggest that they were invented out of whole cloth.

Let us take the narratives on Qays ibn ʿĀṣim al-Tamīmī, the most notorious daughter-murderer in classical Arabic accounts (for a long collection of biographical reports on him, see al-Iṣfahānī 2009, vol. xiv, 46–59). The emerging biography of Qays ibn ʿĀṣim is very conflicted: on the one hand, his crimes of murdering his own daughters by burying them alive are recounted at some length (al-Iṣfahānī 2009, vol. xiv, 46–47, 58). Also, we have other negative portrayals of him: he is said to have imbibed alcohol frequently and forsaken Islam after the death of the Prophet (al-Iṣfahānī 2009, vol. xiv, 49, 54, 57; Lecker 2005, 48 remarks that "Qays ibn ʿĀṣim abstained from drinking wine," but he fails to give the context, which is that, according to some narratives, Qays gave up wine after multiple mishaps and transgressions while drunk). On the other hand, very positive accounts co-exist side by side with the negative ones: for example, the Prophet Muhammad is depicted as calling Qays ibn ʿĀṣim "the lord of all the nomads" (al-Iṣfahānī 2009, vol. xiv, 49). Moreover, on the death of Qays, the famous poet ʿAbda ibn al-Ṭabīb al-Tamīmī is said to have composed an attractive poem in Qays's memory, in which ʿAbda asks God to

bless Qays. ʿAbda ends the poem by declaring: "The death of Qays is not simply the death of an individual; he was the edifice of a whole nation/tribe (qawm), which has now collapsed" (al-Iṣfahānī 2009, vol. xiv, 53, my translation). It is difficult, indeed impossible, to square this beautiful lament by ʿAbda with the narratives of Qays the sot and child-killer.

In addition to Qays ibn ʿĀṣim al-Tamīmī being the most well-known and notorious daughter-murdering individual, his tribe, Tamīm is remembered as the one that most often committed this crime. For instance, al-Mubarrad (d. 898) remarks that the crime of female infanticide did not characterize all pre-Islamic Arabs at the beginning but only the tribe of Tamīm, though the practice then spread among their neighbors to a certain degree (al-Mubarrad 1874, vol. i, 277). Al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273) also mentions that Tamīm was the most eager in perpetrating female infanticide, though Muḍar and Khuzāʿa would commit it as well (al-Qurṭubī 1935–40, vol. x, 117; however, this remark is a bit confusing since Muḍar was a large tribal confederation that included, among other tribes, Tamīm).

A unique stance is witnessed in the lexicographer al-Jawharī's (d. ca. 1002) work (and a few later works citing al-Jawharī), who notes that it was, instead, the tribe Kinda who committed female infanticide (Paraskeva 2024, 35). However, there does not appear to be a single individual from Kinda identified in the sources as engaging in *waʾd al-banāt*.[2] All in all, it is safe to conclude that the supposed cultural convention of female infanticide is, in classical Muslim literature, most often ascribed to the tribe Tamīm (in addition to the references already given, see e.g. al-Maydānī n.d., vol. i, 424; Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd 2019, vol. xiii, 174) and their tribal leader, Qays ibn ʿĀṣim, serves as the literary figure who epitomizes this barbaric and blood-thirsty putative pre-Islamic practice.

I argue that there are a number of different reasons why the tribe Tamīm was subject to vehement attacks in poetry and prose. To begin with, some of the Tamīm joined the early Islamic-era rebellious Khārijī movements and revolts, which used, or at least were portrayed as using, unrestricted violence against other Muslims (Ulrich 2019: 114; Hagemann 2021: 69–73). Indeed, several famous early Khārijīs, such as ʿUrwa ibn Udayya and Hurqūṣ ibn Zuhayr, were from Tamīm (El-Hibri 2010: 183, 236; Hagemann 2021: 69). Moreover, Tamīm and other important Muslim tribes of the Umayyad era (661–750 CE), such as Azd, often vied for political position and status and sometimes met on the actual battlefield to fight against each other (Ulrich 2019: 93).

And crucially, in the midst of the second Muslim civil war, many Tamīmīs supported the counter-Caliph ʿAbdallāh ibn al-Zubayr during his Caliphate in 683–92 CE (Ulrich 2019: 87), which posed a severe threat to the rule of the Umayyad Caliphs (who held power in Syria). In the eyes of the supporters of the Umayyad Caliphate, this soiled the Tamīmīs. Soon after ʿAbdallāh ibn al-Zubayr was brutally killed by the Umayyad troops in 692 CE, the loyal poet of the Umayyad dynasty, al-Akhṭal (d. 708) composed a poem in praise of the Umayyad state. Significantly for the arguments of this

2 I thank Tsampika-Mika Paraskeva for pointing this out to me in a private communication.

article, al-Akhṭal denigrated a number of Tamīmī clans in this celebrated poem:

> As for the Kulayb ibn Yarbūʿ [a clan from Tamīm], when tribes vie
> to reach the water hole,
> They have no way to get to water or return.
>
> Left behind, other men determine
> their affairs,
> Left in the dark, they neither see nor sense
> what's going on.
> […]
> What wretches they are sober!
> What wretched drinkers when they're drunk!
> When strong wine or mellow date-brew courses
> through their veins.
>
> Their tribe [Kulayb ibn Yarbūʿ or the wider Tamīm] is where
> every foul deed ends up.
> […]
> The Ghudāna [another clan from Tamīm] have no station
> whatsoever;
> They must restrain their thirsty flocks of sheep
> till only dregs remain.
> […]
> Then they go home to women
> that are dark and defiled,
> Who after their crotches' itch is satisfied
> do not bathe.
>
> Glory has truly sworn
> that it will have
> No covenant with them
> till the hand's palm grows hair.
> (Arabic text in and translation adapted from Stetkevych 2002, 96–97, 297–298)

This vulgar poem shows many aspects of anti-Tamīmī polemics. Various Tamīmī sub-tribes are disparaged by al-Akhṭal: they do not have any political or social standing according to al-Akhṭal, and their moralities are more than suspect. The Tamīmīs do not know how to carry themselves while sober, nor do they know how to drink in a cultured manner. Their women are "defiled" and do not bathe after sexual intercourse, thus remaining impure *ad infinitum*. It should be acknowledged that al-Akhṭal does not mention infanticide among the supposed vices of the Tamīmīs, but I hypothesize that it was one of the aspects in the anti-Tamīmī discourse that was current after the second Muslim civil war. Above, I have noted that several classical Arabic sources state that infanticide was specifically a Tamīmī vice; here, I conjecture that this arose during or in the aftermath of the second civil war.

Behind my hypothesis is, among other things, the fact that the contemporary Tamīmī poet al-Farazdaq (d. 728) appears to be reacting to such anti-Tamīmī polemics when he boasts that, not only did the Tamīmīs not commit infanticide in the present day, in fact, one of his relatives (identified by commentators as his paternal uncle Ṣaʿṣaʿa ibn Nājiya, on whom see Paraskeva 2021, 281–91) forbade the practice already in the pre-Islamic era. Al-Farazdaq composed the following verse in reference to this:

> My uncle was the one who forbade the killers (fem.) of infants (*al-wāʾidāt*)

> He saved (*aḥyā*) the to-be-murdered infant (*al-waʾīd*), who was not buried alive (*lam yūʾad*). (al-Qurṭubī 1935–40, vol. x, 117; Paraskeva 2021, 289–91)

It is interesting, incidentally, that in al-Farazdaq's verse the killers of infants are mothers and the killed infants are masculine (or non-gendered, if we take the masculine *lam yūʾad* to refer to a child, *walad*, regardless of gender). This shows that the understanding of the putative pre-Islamic practice of burying infants alive was still evolving and not understood to refer to, in particular, daughters (Paraskeva 2024, 19–21).

Taking into consideration the fact that sources often ascribe the custom to a specific tribe (mostly Tamīm) and that al-Farazdaq (a Tamīmī poet), boasts of his tribe as having instead rejected the practice early on, it would seem plausible that the reports about the alleged Arab infant-killers arose as polemics against that particular tribe, and al-Farazdaq was reacting to and rebutting such discourse. Hence, I suggest that since Tamīm is often mentioned in classical Arabic historiographical and other literature as the most bloodthirsty in this regard, it can be argued that the reports of *waʾd* were formulated as an anti-Tamīm attack. Indeed, the tribe Tamīm appears to have been the butt of much denigration. Michael Lecker (2005) notes that Tamīmī and anti-Tamīmī informants provided clashing reports about the history and fame of the said tribe in the early Islamic period (on early Islamic-era tribal lore, not exclusively in the context of Tamīm, see also Shoshan 2016, 29–52).

If we entertain this line of thought, the development of the notion could be reconstructed as follows: At some point during the seventh century CE (in all likelihood toward the end of the century), Qurʾanic verses 16:57–59 and 81:8 were understood to refer to female infanticide (by burying the infants alive). Soon after that, the passages were connected with the pre-Islamic habits of the tribe Tamīm by non- and anti-Tamīmī scholars, though the Qurʾan naturally makes no such particular mention of the tribe. Al-Farazdaq's verse would then be a rebuttal of these anti-Tamīmī polemics. And later, starting in the eighth century, Muslim scholars started to delineate the *jāhiliyya* more starkly from the virtuous life of the Islamic era and began to project the *waʾd al-banāt* onto numerous Arab tribes and claim that it was a more pervasive pre-Islamic custom. Al-Mubarrad's point, mentioned above—that female infanticide did not, at first, describe all Arabs but only the tribe of Tamīm though the practice then spread to other tribes—can then be reformulated: the *violent myth* of *waʾd al-banāt* was first employed to disparage Tamīm but was later understood to be a pervasive pre-Islamic Arab custom.

> However, I should note that not everyone seems to have been happy with this portrayal of Arab forefathers and mothers. This is witnessed by classical Arabic sources mentioning individuals who rejected and forbade the supposed culture of female infanticide. For example, the Prophet Muhammad's grandfather ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib is cited as one such person (al-Yaʿqūbī 1883, vol. ii, 9; 2018, vol. iii, 604).

Conclusions: social comparison and the creation of a troubling past

In this article, I have proposed that classical Arabic depictions of *jāhiliyya* do not

often accurately reflect pre-Islamic events. Instead, these portrayals were ideologically driven, crafted to highlight the enlightening impact of the new religion, Islam.

If so, how is one to understand the creation of a troubling Arab past, in particular when it was put forward by scholars writing in Arabic and (often but not always) self-identifying as Arab? First, it shows the sometimes incompatible and creative ways that different social categorizations intersect and social comparison works.

For example, when a ninth-century Muslim Arab compared herself to a Muslim non-Arab (say, Persian), she could adduce the purported glorious past of the Arabs as noble poets and warriors of the desert and as conquerors of Iran in Islamic times in social comparison. This is illustrated by Ibn Qutaybah, who noted (2017, 17): "The Persians did possess all of these [luxurious things and majesty] […] But then God gave them to the Arabs, who plundered the Persians, stripping them of their riches like bark from a tree. Just as a revelation that overrides an earlier one is better, so too it is with peoples."

Needless to say, this was not always successful. Indeed, non-Arab Muslims sometimes used the established negative stereotypes of the pre-Islamic Arabs to their advantage. For example, the Iranian eighth-century poet Ismāʿīl ibn Yasār is said to have composed the following verses: "How have we [the Iranians] been in the long stretch of history? / Indeed, we raised our daughters, while you buried yours alive in the ground!" (Savran 2007–08, 45).

Furthermore, the imagined past of the in-group can also accommodate disquieting and negative aspects, in particular if those characteristics can be said to have been overcome and left behind in the present. Here, the concept of *jāhiliyya* was utilized to mark the moment of this overcoming. The ethico-legal reform that Islam was seen as bringing about was to a degree construed by creating and recounting a pre-Islamic past that contained much stereotyping and imagined history of "the Arabs". In this manner, the Islamic-era Arabs compared themselves not so much with other groups as the purported past of their own ethnos.

Lastly, the trope of (in particular, female) infanticide served as fodder for inter-tribal polemics—indeed, I have suggested that it originated as such. The non-Tamīmī tribes used it to defame Tamīm, while there appears to have been opposing efforts, possibly by Tamīm, to ascribe this grim cultural practice to other tribes such as Kinda. Nonetheless, these counter-polemical endeavours did not became as developed: no individual from Kinda is singled out as exemplifying the crime of infanticide. Among the Tamīm, we find the conflicting portrayal of Qays ibn ʿĀṣim al-Tamīmī, who, on the one hand, is portrayed as a sot, a mass-murderer of his own daughters, and an apostate; on the other, we see the Prophet praising him and the poet ʿAbda ibn al-Ṭabīb composing a beautiful elegy in his memory, portraying him as a larger-than-life figure who merits God's mercy and blessing. As such, one can say that the literary figure of Qays ibn ʿĀṣim al-Tamīmī epitomizes not only pro- versus anti-Tamīmī narratives, in particular, but also the clashing Muslim depictions of *jāhiliyya*, in general. ■



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