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The Quran and the putative pre-Islamic practice of female infanticide

Introduction

In this article, I take issue with one alleged characteristic of pre-Islam: namely, the notion that the Arabians frequently, and disturbingly, practiced female infanticide by burying their daughters alive.[1] This is what the Islamic-era religious scholars inferred on the basis of two Quranic passages (16:57–59 and 81:8–9). For example, commenting on verse 81:8, al-Thaʿlabī (d. 1035) offers a verbose and graphic description of the putative practice:

> When a man had a daughter and he wanted to spare her life, he would dress her in a garment of wool or hair, and [when she had grown up] she would watch over his camels and sheep in the steppe. If he wanted to kill her, he would let her live until she was six spans in length (*sudāsiyya*) and then say to her mother: "perfume and adorn her, for I will take her to meet her relatives." [Instead,] he had dug a pit for her in the desert where he would take her. He would say to her: "look there." Then he would push her into it from her back and pour earth over her until the ground was even …
>
> And Ibn ʿAbbās has said that 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 was a daughter, she would cast her in the grave, and if it was a son, she would keep him.[2]

Ḥadīth works, too, contain narratives of pre-Islamic figures burying their female babies alive. For example, in the *Musnad* of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855 CE), a report is attributed to an early – but not very well-known – Muslim, Nuʿaym ibn Qaʿnab, who goes to ask advice from Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī (d. 652). Nuʿaym recounts to the latter:

> "I used to bury my daughters alive (*kuntu waʾadtu*) during the *jāhiliyya*. I wanted to meet you (scil. Abū Dharr) so you could tell me that I will receive forgiveness and a way out. [At the same time,] I am afraid of meeting you, should you tell me that I will not receive forgiveness." He (scil. Abū Dharr) asked: "During the *jāhiliyya* [and no

[1] I am very grateful to Sean Anthony, Reyhan Durmaz, Thomas Eich, Andreas Görke, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, David Kiltz, Michael Macdonald, Jerome Parker, Marijn van Putten, Mulki Al-Sharmani, Nicolai Sinai, Ville Vuolanto, and the two anonymous peer-reviews for important comments on earlier versions of this article.

[2] Al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān*, vol. X, 139; the passage was later cited by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1143), *Kashshāf*, 1128. All translations from the Arabic sources are my own unless otherwise stated.

more]?" I answered: "Yes." He said: "God has forgiven what has gone by (*ʿafā Allāh ʿammā salafa*).[3]

However, I will argue that the classical Muslim scholars' interpretation of the pertinent Quranic verses (16:57–59 and 81:8–9) is highly tendentious. By analyzing the specific Quranic passages and comparing the crucial word *al-mawʾūda* (81:8), usually translated as "the daughter buried alive," with early Arabic poetry, I conclude that the conventional understanding of it is unlikely. Though we can assume that pre-Islamic Arabians,[4] like all communities, sometimes resorted to infanticide, in this article I argue that the Quran or other types of contemporary evidence do not offer support for the specifically gendered nature of the putative practice (that daughters, in particular, were killed) or the alleged way of committing this (burying them alive).

The Quran and infanticide

Desperate, sick, or poor parents sometimes resorted to infanticide in the pre-modern world which lacked birth control and financial safety nets and, moreover, had no way of treating mental illnesses (in this case, of the parent or parents). Also, one should note that nature itself was often cruel to young children in pre-modern times: in antiquity, for instance, approximately a third of all children died during their early lives because of sicknesses that are mostly preventable or curable today.[5]

In various cultures and times, there have been divergent legal implications and ethical discussions concerning infanticide. In Greco-Roman antiquity, the *paterfamilias* was often interpreted as having the right to expose (abandon) or even kill his children with no legal consequences.[6] Modern researchers have often assumed that infanticide, in particular of female, disabled, or illegitimate babies, was rather common in the ancient world, but this has been criticized by Eleanor Scott, who notes that the archaeological and other pertinent evidence is often open to various interpretations.[7]

[3] Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol. V, 150.

[4] It should be noted that to talk of "Arabians" (before or after Islam) as if they were one single group or culture is rather misleading and simplistic, since there was a great socio-cultural diversity among them. However, since the evidence regarding the putative practice of female infanticide is scarce, I have opted for using the simplified locution "pre-Islamic Arabians." Most of the evidence (in particular, the Quran and Arabic poetry) stems from Western Arabia.

[5] Grubbs, "The Dynamics of Infant Abandonment," 22.

[6] Grubbs, "Infant Exposure and Infanticide." As Grubbs notes, it is important to differentiate the two phenomena. Infant exposure did not always result in the death of the child, while infanticide was the intentional killing of the child.

[7] Scott, "Unpicking a Myth"; see also Grubbs, "The Dynamics of Infant Abandonment," 22–24.

Jewish and Christian texts (including but not limited to the Bible) took a harsh stance toward the practice.[8] Moreover, they often projected the custom onto their pagan opponents and connected it with idolatry more generally. One assumes that, in many cases, this was probably a rhetorical ploy with no empirical basis, used to foster in-group virtue and paint the out-group in a morbid way. It is, hence, a common monotheist literary *topos*. As Paula Fredriksen notes:

> Jewish scriptures heaped scorn and abuse on Semitic pantheons, the "other gods" of the Canaanites and the Philistines. Biblical writers reviled such deities, worshiped through their images, for encouraging sexual excess and perversion, murder, even infanticide. Some Hellenistic Jewish writers – such as the author of *Wisdom of Solomon* (second century B.C.E.), and also the apostle Paul – will similarly accuse Greek gods, generating vice-lists itemizing the moral failings of idolators. (See, for lush examples, Gal 5.19–21; 1 Cor 6.9–10; and esp. Rom 1.18–32.)[9]

The Quran continues the Jewish and Christian criticism of infanticide and likewise links it with idolatry. Infanticide is explicitly condemned, and often specifically ascribed to the disbelievers, in Quran 6:137, 140, 151; 17:31; and 60:12. Verse 17:31, on the other hand, connects the practice to poverty and presents an optimistic outlook that God's provision will take care of the families: "Do not kill your children for the fear of penury (*imlāq*): We [God] will provide for them and for you. Killing them is indeed a great iniquity" (transl. ʿAlī Qulī Qarāʾī). In criticizing infanticide and attributing it particularly to the disbelieving or pagan opponents of the Prophet, the Quran is echoing earlier scriptural views about the practice.

Indeed, some of the passages in the Quran find interesting parallels in the Hebrew Bible. Compare, for example, Quran 6:135–137 with Deuteronomy 12:29–31:

> Quran 6:135–137: [135]Say, 'O my people, act according to your ability; I too am acting. Soon you will know in whose favour the outcome of that abode will be. Indeed the wrongdoers will not be felicitous.' [136]They dedicate to God out of what He has created of the crops and cattle a portion, and say, 'This is for God,' so do they maintain, 'and this is for our partners.' But what is for their partners does not reach God, and what is for God reaches their partners. Evil is the judgement that they make. [137]That is how to most of the polytheists is presented as decorous the slaying of their children by those whom they ascribe as partners [to God] (*wa-kadhālika*

[8] See, e.g., Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 124–125, who suggests that Christianity was actually successful in eradicating infanticide. Also, Behr, "Social and Historical Setting," argues that Christianity stamped out female infanticide in particular. Such triumphalist views have been criticized in more recent scholarship (see, e.g., Vuolanto, "Infant Abandonment and the Christianization of Medieval Europe"), but there seems to be something of a consensus that the rise of Christianity affected the lot of children for the better, at least to a degree; see Grubbs, "The Dynamics of Infant Abandonment," 28–29.

[9] Fredriksen, *Paul*, 38.

zayyana li-kathīr min al-mushrikīn qatl awlādihim shurakāʾuhum), that they may ruin them and confound their religion for them. Had God wished, they would not have done it. So leave them with what they fabricate. (Transl. ʿAlī Qulī Qarāʾī, modified.)

Deuteronomy 12:29–31: [29] When the Lord your God has cut off before you the nations whom you are about to enter to dispossess them, when you have dispossessed them and live in their land, [30] take care that you are not ensnared into imitating them, after they have been destroyed before you: do not inquire concerning their gods, saying, 'How did these nations worship their gods? I also want to do the same.' [31] You must not do the same for the Lord your God, because every abhorrent thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. (Transl. New Revised Standard Version.)

Both passages present various facets that set the believers apart from the disbelievers and emphasize that the former should not emulate nor socialize with the latter, since they worship idols by sacrificing their children to them and engage in all sorts of evil and impure deeds. Nonetheless, these passages in the Quran and Hebrew Bible have more to do with creating in-group identity and virtue rather than providing factual descriptions of various groups. They warn against perceived false beliefs and unethical practices. However, verses such as Quran 17:31 appear to evidence more credible reasons for infanticide: poverty and destitution.

The putative practice of burying daughters alive (*waʾd al-banāt*)

Pre-modern exegetes of the Quran and modern researchers for the most part agree that the Quran not only mentions and condemns infanticide in general, but also female infanticide in particular. Considering the fact that researchers are nowadays well aware of a) the many and mistaken stereotypes projected on the so-called era of *jāhiliyya* and b) the often very tendentious interpretations that the Quranic exegetes put forward,[10] it is surprising to note that it has rarely been explicitly suggested before that we should reject the supposed pre-Islamic Arabian practice of burying infant daughters alive (known in post-Quranic Arabic as *waʾd al-banāt*). In fact, many scholars have accepted that this was a quotidian occurrence. For example, in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, Donna Lee Bowen writes: "Female infanticide was common enough among the pre-Islamic Arabs to be assigned a specific term, *waʾd*."[11] Also, and perhaps surprisingly, Peter Webb, to whom we are much indebted for deconstructing many aspects of

[10] See, e.g., Schöneman, "'Confine Your Women!'" She demonstrates how the classical exegetes projected many misogynous views on verse 4:1, though the Quranic text itself does not present anything to that effect.

[11] Bowen, "Infanticide."

jāhiliyya lore, declares that the Quran contains "several references to *al-waʾd* (female infanticide)."[12] Webb's claim as regards this point is simply not true: according to the traditional understanding, the Quran contains only two references to female infanticide (16:57–59 and 81:8), and, according to my interpretation, even those should be called into question. In any case, in their formulations, modern scholars are following pre-modern Muslim scholars, who suggested that the Quran not only mentions and condemns infanticide generally, but female infanticide particularly. Many (pre-modern and modern) narratives have been created on the basis of these putative Quranic references to burying daughters alive.

However, there have been some previous interpretations, somewhat similar to mine, that have called into question the existence of the *waʾd al-banāt* or problematized the interpretation of Quran 81:8. In particular, Régis Blachère, Marzūq ibn Tunbāk, Mika Paraskeva, and Doru Doroftei and Thomas Eich should be mentioned in this context.[13]

In his 1966 translation of the Quran, Blachère translates verses 81:8–9 as "quand on demandera à la victime pour quel péché elle fut tuée."[14] Hence, he parts ways with the other translators of the Quran by understanding *al-mawʾūda* not as "the daughter buried alive" but simply as "the victim." In a note, he further elaborates his rendering of this passage:

> C'est en s'appuyant sur ce vt. que l'on déduit que les Arabes, avant l'Islam, enterraient vivantes leurs filles. Mais d'une part, le verbe *waʿada* n'offre pas un sens sûr et pourrait être rapproché de *waʿada* « promettre » et par extension « vouer ». D'autre part, le féminin dans le participe *al-mawʿûdatu* « la sacrifiée » peut être déduit du substantif *nafs* « âme », « personne ». Il n'est donc pas inadmissible de penser qu'il s'agit des criminels qui, au Jour du Jugement, auront à répondre de leurs méfaits.[15]

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[12] Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, 268. In addition to Bowen and Webb, the following scholars, for example, accept at face value the commonness of (female) infanticide: Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes*, 33; Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. I, 182; Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 41–42; Anwar, *Gender and Self in Islam* 16; Crone, *The Qurʾanic Pagans and Related Matters*, 315. The references could easily be multiplied.

[13] See also Watt, *Companion to the Qurʾān*, 296, who writes that "the extent of the practice should not be exaggerated." And Walid Saleh, "Meccan Gods, Jesus' Divinity," 92, "The portrait [of the pre-Islamic Arabs in Islamic-era literature] is one of marauding, murderous, infanticide-practicing brutes awaiting the light of Islam, a *jāhiliyyah* which ended with a new calendar – though some of these images are already present in the Qur'an. This portrayal of a mute, theologically lacking paganism has seeped not only into Islamic historiography but also into our reading of the Qur'an." Also, Teipen, "Jahilite and Muslim Women," 441, who notes that "historical evidence points to … a virtual absence of most of these *Jāhilite* aberrations" (including, female infanticide, absence of inheritance rights, etc.). Of interest is also Ahmed, "Women and the Advent of Islam," who problematizes the notion that women in pre-Islamic Arabia had a very low social status and that the rise of Islam bettered it to a large degree.

[14] Blachère (transl.), *Le Coran*, 639.

[15] Blachère (transl.), *Le Coran*, 639, n. 8.

There is much to agree with here, though my interpretation of the relevant words differs from Blachère. It is true that the meaning of the verb *waʾada* should be problematized, but I disagree with his attempt to connect it with the verb *waʿada*, "to promise"; this seems linguistically problematic. Moreover, the notion that the feminine grammatical form of *al-mawʾūda* would be understandable as being implicitly governed by the word (*al-*)*nafs*, "soul, person," is interesting but somewhat hypothetical.

Blachère's line of interpretation as regards Quran 81:8 has been continued by Marzūq ibn Tunbāk in a 2007 book. Like Blachère, Marzūq ibn Tunbāk argues that we should understand the word (*al-*)*nafs* as producing the feminine *al-mawʾūda*.[16] He suggests that *mawʾūda* might also refer to a miscarried fetus.[17]

Mika Paraskeva's article analyzes in detail the narratives related to female infanticide.[18] Though she examines the literary impulses and motives that are present in these stories, and problematizes the purportedly pervasive practice of *waʾd al-banāt*, she does not call into question the conventional interpretation of the two pertinent Quranic passages, 16:57–59 and 81:8. Instead, she subscribes to the widespread notion that the passages refer to female infanticide.[19]

Finally, in an Appendix to their forthcoming book, Doru Doroftei and Thomas Eich take issue with the practice. They criticize the usual understanding of verse 81:8, noting that Quran 16:57–59 and 81:8 are not strong evidence for a widespread practice of female infanticide. They argue, among other things, that the feminine form of the word *al-mawʾūda* occurs because otherwise the rhyme of Quran 81 would not work. According to their Appendix, the verb *waʾada* would have, around the year 600 CE, meant "to bury," without any specific gendered signification.[20] This differs from my interpretation (see below) of the root *w-ʾ-d*. To anticipate my conclusions, I suggest that meanings related to burying are in fact secondary and Islamic-era developments.

All in all, the notion (rather widely accepted in modern scholarship) that female infanticide existed as a widespread tradition among pre-modern Arabians raises a number of questions if we accept the pre-modern traditions such as the one given by al-Thaʿlabī (and ascribed to Ibn ʿAbbās), quoted in the beginning of the article, of pre-Islamic Arabian fathers and mothers customarily killing their baby daughters at face value. It should be automatically clear that a group that routinely kills its daughters will become extinct in a period of a few generations.

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[16] Marzūq ibn Tunbāk, *al-Waʾd ʿinda al-ʿarab*, in particular 153–163.

[17] Marzūq ibn Tunbāk, *al-Waʾd ʿinda al-ʿarab*, 162–165.

[18] Paraskeva, "La costumbre del *waʿd*."

[19] Paraskeva, "La costumbre del *waʿd*," 269

[20] In Doroftei and Eich, *Adam und Embryo*. I thank Thomas Eich for sending me the Appendix before its publication.

Moreover, insofar as I am aware, no Greek, Latin, or Syriac text clearly refers to female infanticide in Arabia, though the writers on the edges and outside of Arabia were often keen on documenting (and imagining) bizarre and distasteful habits and traditions that the inhabitants of Arabia putatively had. There are a few pertinent non-Arabic texts to be noted here. One comes from the pen of Porphyry, the third-century CE Greek-language philosopher from Tyre, who mentions *male* infanticide. He notes that "the inhabitants of Duma in Arabia used each year to sacrifice a boy whom they buried beneath an altar that they treat as a cult-statue."[21] On the other hand, the Syriac *Chronicle* of Pseudo-Zachariah claims that the Lakhmid king al-Mundhir performed human sacrifices in the 520s CE to the deity ʿUzzai (Arabic al-ʿUzzā). According to the text:

> Mundhir, the king of the Ṭayyayê, went up once or twice to Emesa, Apamea, and the country of Antioch, and he led away many [as prisoners] and brought down with him four hundred virgins who were suddenly carried into captivity from the assembly of the apostle Thomas in Emesa, whom he sacrificed in one day for the worship of ʿUzzai.[22]

The historical value of this passage should be doubted: it is most likely simply communicating Christian bias against "the pagans." In any case, the text does not really mention infanticide, so it cannot be used as proof for the pre-Islamic tradition of *waʾd al-banāt*.

It should be mentioned that no archaeological or other material evidence of this purported practice appears to be documented in research literature. However, an ancient (possibly second-century BCE) Sabaic inscription known as MAFRAY-Quṭra 1, found 40 km from Sana'a, should be considered in this connection. The text is a sort of community ordinance of the city of Maṭirat (modern name: Quṭra). It mentions that the local girls ("the daughters of the city of Maṭirat") should not be given in marriage to anyone outside the city; nor is it allowed to kill any girls (*w-ʾl s³n hrg bnt-hw*, "it is forbidden to kill its [scil. Maṭirat's] daughters").[23] One should remark that, first, the text is

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[21] Porphyry, *De Abstinentia*, 2.56; I quote from Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 185.

[22] Pseudo-Zachariah, *Chronicle*, 297–298.

[23] *CSAI* / *DASI*, siglum Nihm/al-Quṭra 1; Robin, "Before Ḥimyar," 113–114. Moreover, Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 300, refers to a study or presentation by Mohammed Maraqten, "New Evidence of Infanticide in Ancient Yemen," as "*PSAS* forthcoming," but it appears that the article was never published in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* or elsewhere. Hoyland notes that the presentation of Maraqten was based on a South Arabian palm-stalk MSS 74, mentioning "'those who kill their children' for cultic reasons." I am unable to access this text, but on the basis of Hoyland's brief characterization it seems to describe something very different from *waʾd al-banāt* as understood by Muslim authors, who rarely ascribe any cultic meaning to the custom. Moreover, the South Arabian palm stalk text does not appear to mention female infanticide but infanticide more generally.

a very ancient one – some 800 years before the life of the prophet Muhammad – and cannot be used as evidence for or against the existence of the practice of female infanticide on the eve of Islam. Second, if one is to use MAFRAY-Quṭra 1 in any way to describe life before Islam, one should note the fact that it *forbids* the killing of girls. Third, it should be acknowledged that the text does not seem to address infanticide; rather, it would appear to me that it is referring to more mature girls or women, since the inscription first mentions aspects of marriage. That is to say, it prohibits violence against the women of the town in general rather than mentions female infanticide.

It is rather striking that the vast majority of modern scholars have not taken issue with the traditional interpretation of these two passages, 16:57–59 and 81:8, nor have they addressed the signification of the word *al-mawʾūda* (verse 81:8). I will do so in what follows, with special emphasis on early Arabic poetry.[24] My methodological premise, which I believe follows the semi-consensus of the field, is that the *tafsīr* and *ḥadīth* works represent later and secondary developments, while the Quran and some portions of Arabic poetry are contemporary to the Prophet.[25] I argue that the connection of these Quranic passages (16:57–59 and 81:8) to the notion of female infanticide (by burying them alive or any other means) is fantastical. The imagined custom of *waʾd al-banāt* is one of the ways in which the Islamic-era Muslim scholars endeavored to portray life before Islam as deeply immoral and unsettling.

Quran 16:57–59

Verses 16:57–59 of the Quran is one of the two passages that have been – all too easily in my opinion – understood by both traditional Islamic and modern academic scholarship to refer to female infanticide. The context of the passage is the issue of the "daughters of God," the existence of which the Quran denies, though the disbelievers are said to subscribe to such a belief:[26]

> [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

[24] I have identified the relevant Arabic verses on the basis of digital resources (https://shamela.ws/search, https://uqu.edu.sa/App/Poetry, and https://www.dohadictionary.org/) and the quotations that are adduced by the Arabic exegetical works and lexica. To search, I have used the different words and roots discussed in this article but also related ones such as *d-f-n* (the basic meaning of which is "to bury").

[25] For methodological considerations and an application of this premise to study religious groups on the eve of and in early Islam, see recently Sinai, *Rain-Giver*.

[26] Crone, *The Qurʾanic Pagans*, 102–124, suggests that some opponents of the Prophet understood these "daughters" to be angels or other mediating supernatural beings rather than deities that existed on the same hierarchical level as God.

> it in/on the ground (*yadussuhu fi al-turāb*)? Look! Evil is the judgement that they make. (Transl. ʿAlī Qulī Qarāʾī, modified.)

Similar discussions and rejections of the "daughters of God" can be found in Quran 16:57–62 and 53:19–28.[27] Here, however, another aspect of discourse is included: that related to human daughters. The Quran suggests that, while the disbelievers are eager to associate other supernatural beings to God as His daughters, they do not appreciate their own daughters. Such a description is a rather credible portrayal of a patriarchal society, but is female infanticide also mentioned in this passage?

One should note that there is a certain amount of ambiguity in the gender of the infant in the phrase "Shall he retain it in humiliation, or hide it in/on the ground," since the verbs of the clause (e.g., *yadussuhu*) use the masculine suffix. But this is explained by the fact that they refer back to the relative clause *mā bushshira bihi*, "the news he has been brought," which is grammatically masculine. However, there is a possibility that the pronoun "it" in "Shall he retain it in humiliation, or hide it in/on the ground," actually refers to the "news" itself rather than the object of the news (the daughter), though I would not treat this as the preferred reading.

More importantly, I note that the expression *yadussuhu fi al-turāb* in verse 16:59 does not necessarily mean "bury it in the ground," as is conventionally understood[28] (and how Qarāʾī translates the passage, though I have modified the translation on this point). The translation "(secretly) send/hide/leave/place" also seems possible for the verb *dassa*.[29] Nor does *fi al-turāb* automatically signify "in(side) the ground (literally: dust)." Rather, expressions such as *fi al-barr* and *fi al-arḍ* commonly denote "on the ground,"[30] and *fi al-turāb* could be understood in a similar fashion in Quran 16:59. In a poem attributed to the Hudhalī poet Maʿqil ibn Khuwaylid, we read:

> Their [the women's] [old] sitting places [on the sand] have become upside down, having left traces on the dust (*tukhaṭṭitu fi l-turāb*).[31]

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[27] See Mette B. Mortensen, "Sourate 16," 632–633. There is a discussion on these topics by the classical scholar al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. XIV, 254–260.

[28] E.g., al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. XIV, 257: "*yadussuhu fi al-turāb*, that is, buries it alive in the ground." See also Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, vol. II, 474.

[29] The meanings of the verb *dassa* are rather manifold in Classical Arabic (see, e.g., Dozy, *Supplément*, vol. I, 438–439), but all the usages have to do with doing something in secret, clandestinely, or in a covert fashion. Naturally, it is not certain that all the significations obtained in Quranic Arabic, but I suggest that the general sense of doing something in a secretive fashion was present in Quranic Arabic.

[30] Fischer, *A Grammar of Classical Arabic*, 157.

[31] Al-Sukkarī, vol. I, p. 387.

Indeed, in many poetical examples, the preposition used for something buried *in* the ground is *taḥt* rather than *fī*. In a poem ascribed to Ḥassān ibn Thābit, the poet bewails the leaders of a tribe who have been "buried beneath the dust" (*dufinū taḥt al-turāb*).[32]

As regards the verb *dassa*, poetical evidence can be used to buttress both interpretations of 16:59: a) my suggested interpretation that *yadussuhu fī al-turāb* refers to secretly taking or sending the daughter somewhere, and b) the conventional understanding that it means burying her in the ground.

The former understanding, which I prefer, is supported by various occurrences where the verb *dassa* means all sorts of clandestine dealings, in particular sending something or someone secretly. The pre-Islamic ʿAbd al-Shāriq ibn ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā is said to have composed the following line: "They [the enemy] secretly sent a horseman from among them (*wa-dassū fārisan minhum*) [to do reconnaissance] during the evening darkness, but we ourselves did not act perfidiously against their horseman (*fa-lam naghdir bi-fārisihim ladaynā*)."[33]

As regards the latter understanding, one could adduce the following verse ascribed to another pre-Islamic figure, Durayd ibn al-Ṣimma. It reads: "I am not [a coward] like a fox who, when something happens, buries his head in every hole (*yadussu bi-raʾsihi fī kulli juḥr*)."[34]

Taking the evidence into consideration, the anonymous disbeliever of the Quranic passage might, then, be intending *to abandon* (expose) the infant daughter somewhere (perhaps the desert outside of the town, as *fī al-turāb* could be understood) rather than burying her; in this reading, the Quran would in 16:57–59 address, and reject, exposure rather than infanticide. Infant exposure should be delineated from infanticide since the former did not necessarily mean the death of the child.[35] And, I would emphasize, the Quran depicts the disbeliever is *intending* or *contemplating*

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[32] Ḥassān ibn Thābit, *Dīwān*, vol. I, 216. However, as discussed below, many inauthentic poems were attributed to Ḥassān.

[33] Al-Marzūqī, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-Ḥamāsa*, vol. I, 442.

[34] Durayd ibn al-Ṣimma, *Dīwān*, 109.

[35] See, e.g., Grubbs, "The Dynamics of Infant Abandonment," for a discussion on the Roman world. In that context, some of the abandoned infants were picked up by passers-by, often ending up as slaves. Grubbs notes (p. 21): "until the twentieth century, when medical and social developments made reliable contraceptives widely available for the first time in history and introduced safe and legal abortion procedures, the most usual method of limiting one's family or avoiding the shame of illegitimacy was abandonment." In contrast to the Roman legislation, according to most Muslim jurists, foundlings (sing. *ṭalīq/-a*) could not be enslaved: as a rule, they were to be raised as free Muslims. However, some Muslim scholars said that foundlings can be treated as slaves. For important remarks on infant abandonment in the medieval Middle East and Islamic jurisprudence, see Giladi, *Children of Islam*, 71–80; *Infants, Parents and Wet Nurses*, 29, 99; Adang, "Islam as the Inborn Religion of Mankind," 406–409; Schneider, "Freedom and Slavery in Early Islamic Times," 375–377; Yassari, Möller, and Najm (eds.), *Filiation and the Protection of Parentless Children*. The latter book deals mostly with modern times but has some notes on the classical period as well (in the first two chapters in particular).

abandonment, rather than necessarily acting on it. There is no mention in the passage of an infanticide carried out, nor can the verses be adduced in my opinion as evidence for the prevalence of such a putative practice, though infant abandonment is portrayed as being mulled by the disbeliever depicted here.

Concerning the possibility that the passage is not about female infanticide but rather something else, al-Māwardī (d. 1058) notes that *yadussuhu fi al-turāb* can be understood in two ways (*fihi wajhān*): first, it can refer to a baby daughter who is secretly placed in the dust in order to kill her (*tudassu fi al-turāb qatlan lahā*). Alternatively, it can refer to the fact that it (the news about the daughter?) is hidden from the people so that they do not know it, like something placed secretly in the dust, out of sight (*innahu maḥmūl ʿalā ikhfāʾihi ʿan al-nās ḥattā lā yaʿrifūhu ka-l-madsūs fi al-turāb li-khifāʾihi ʿan al-baṣar*).[36] Here, the intended referent appears to be the news of the daughter, not the daughter herself.

This reading of al-Māwardī is reused by al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273), who, however, changes the masculine suffixes of al-Māwardī to feminine ones, modifying the meaning. Al-Qurṭubī notes an interpretation (with *qīla*, "it is said") that *yadussuhu fi al-turāb* might signify "hiding her from people until she is not known" (*ikhfāʾuhā ʿan al-nās ḥattā lā tuʿraf*).[37] Though the phrase *ikhfāʾuhā ʿan al-nās ḥattā lā tuʿraf* is a bit cryptic, it could refer to infant abandonment. In any case, the examples of al-Māwardī and al-Qurṭubī show that some classical exegetes pondered the possibility of *yadussuhu fi al-turāb* denoting something other than infanticide by burying the child.

Quran 81:8–9

This is the other Quranic passage that is thought to include (in verses 8–9) an explicit mention of female infanticide. The context of the sura is eschatological:

> [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.)

In verse 81:8, the occurrence of the passive *suʾilat* is perhaps a bit surprising as regards meaning (though the rhyme requires it), and indeed there exists a minority reading

[36] Al-Māwardī, *al-Nukat wa-l-ʿuyūn*, vol. III, 195.

[37] Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, vol. X, 117. Marzūq ibn Tunbāk, *al-Waʾd ʿinda al-ʿarab*, 170–173 follows this line of interpretation.

according to which the verb is in the active, *saʾalat*, "she will ask/demand."[38] However, even the exegetes following the majority reading *suʾilat* interpret the phrase as meaning, not that she herself will be interrogated, but instead she will be asked who (wrongfully) killed her, or her killer will be interrogated about the murder (though the latter option is grammatically tortuous).[39]

Insofar as I have been able to ascertain, almost all[40] modern translators and researchers have accepted the traditional understanding of the word *al-mawʾūda* as denoting "the daughter buried alive." The classical exegete al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) puts forward the following definition for *al-mawʾūda*: "the one [fem.] buried alive (*al-madfūna ḥayyatan*); and that is what the Arabs used to do to their daughters."[41] He also adduces a tradition that states the Arabs were, of all humankind, the most eager to commit this offence (*kānat al-ʿarab afʿal al-nās li-dhālika*).[42] Some commentators, probably influenced by other Quranic verses such as 17:31, connect the putative practice of female infanticide to the poverty of the parents.[43]

As for modern researchers, they have sometimes endeavored to give various intertextual linkages to Jewish and Christian eschatological tropes where a wrongly killed person receives redemption with the coming of the end time.[44] For instance, a (perhaps inauthentic) homily ascribed to Ephrem appears to yield an interesting earlier intertext:

> The one who fornicates, becomes pregnant and kills / so that [the child] does not see this world, / her child will keep her / from seeing the world. / Since she has taken the life of the child / and the light of this world / the child will take her [the mother's] life / and the life of the next world. / Because the mother of the child has brought death within her womb / so that [the child] will be buried in the darkness of the earth, / so too the child will bring death to the mother / so that she will go in the outer darkness.[45]

Though there are possible parallels here (in both texts the context is eschatological and the child/person has been wrongfully killed), it is important to note that in the text of (pseudo-?)Ephrem, the mother has ended the pregnancy rather than committed

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[38] See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. XXIV, 145–146, for a discussion on the vocalization and meaning.

[39] E.g., Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, vol. IV, 602: "her killer will be asked why he killed [*qatala*, read *dafana*, "buried"?] her alive, though she never committed any offence."

[40] Of the different translations that I have examined, the only exception occurs in Blachère (transl.), *Le Coran*, 639, who translates *al-mawʾūda* as "la victime," as mentioned above.

[41] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. XXIV, 147.

[42] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, vol. XXIV, 148.

[43] E.g., al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, 586.

[44] Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum*, 66; Neuwirth, *Der Koran, Band 1*, 296–297; Reynolds, *The Qurʾan and the Bible*, 888–889.

[45] Ephrem, *Sermones III*, 1:537–548; transl. taken from Reynolds, *The Qurʾan and the Bible*, 888–889.

infanticide. None of the exegetes, as far as I know, understand *al-mawʾūda* as referring to an aborted fetus, nor does the lexical and semantic analysis of the word (see below) suggest this. What is more, the intertextual link only works if *al-mawʾūda* refers to a child. However, as I argue in what follows, this is far from certain.

In any case, the word *al-mawʾūda*, a *hapax legomenon*, could be deemed one of the eschatological riddles of the Quran. Similar eschatological passages in the Quran often use mysterious and difficult-to-interpret language. Hence, verse 81:8 could be compared with, for example, Quran 101:9, which states regarding a person whose good deeds are few: *ummuhu hāwiya*. This is often interpreted to mean something like "his home will be the Abyss" (transl. ʿAlī Qulī Qarāʾī), understanding the word *hāwiya* as referring to a name, or characteristics, of Hell. However, *ummuhu hāwiya* could also mean "his mother will be bereft."[46] Whatever the exact signification of *ummuhu hāwiya* (and I would opt for the latter meaning), it is clear that verse 101:9, and the entire sura, uses a locution that is purposefully difficult to fathom. This appears to characterize the style of the eschatological passages of the Quran more generally. The *locus classicus* is the beginning of sura 79, which uses feminine active participles (ending in *-āt*). The referents of these words are unclear, and they were intensely debated in classical Quranic exegesis for centuries.[47]

The exegetes, as noted above, understand the word *al-mawʾūda* as meaning "the daughter buried alive." It is certainly true that verse 81:9 mentions that the *mawʾūda* has been killed. But does the word refer to a murdered female *child* and does it indicate that she has been killed by burying her alive? To answer this question, it is worthwhile to analyze, lexically and semantically, the occurrences of words from the rare root *w-ʾ-d*, which produces the Quranic *al-mawʾūda*. It should be noted that the root *w-ʾ-d* does not seem to appear in other Semitic languages, so comparative Semitic linguistics are of no help here.[48]

I will begin with the classical Arabic lexica and move on to discuss the poetic occurrences of various words from the root *w-ʾ-d*. The lexica give divergent meanings to the words of the root, most of which are interconnected, but one of them sticks out. For example, Ibn Manẓūr's *Lisān al-ʿArab* remarks that the primary signification of the verbal noun *waʾd* (variant: *waʾīd*) is "[producing] a loud sound, like the sound of a wall that falls down, or the like"; it also means the "braying of the camels." Moreover, the verbal noun means "heavy treading on the ground which can be heard, like an echo, from the distance."[49] So far, so good: the form I verb of the root has to do with emitting a (loud) sound and walking loudly. Another word from the root, namely *tuʾda*, actually refers to

[46] For this meaning of the verb *hawā*, see Biberstein-Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire*, vol. II, 1462: "*On dit*: *hawat ummuhu* Sa mère est sans enfants, *et en maudissant*, puisse sa mère être privée de sens enfants!"
[47] See Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity*, 77–85.
[48] Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study*, 425.
[49] Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, vol. XV, 136.

"moderate" or "quiet walking," instead.[50] In any case, the semantic field of the root *w-ʾ-d*, and form I particularly, appears rather understandable: walking in a certain fashion and emitting loud sounds.

However, one meaning stands out. The *Lisān al-ʿArab* notes that the verb *waʾada* also means "to bury her [scil. a daughter] in a grave while she is alive."[51] This, naturally, is linked to, and arguably derived from, the exegetes' understanding of verse 81:8. But is there any pre- or early Islamic Arabic poetical evidence which would corroborate this meaning of the word? It would seem that the answer is negative.

Significations related to loud noises and, in particular, treading in words derived from the root *w-ʾ-d* occur in various pre-Islamic and early Islamic poems. For example, the pre-Islamic Ḥājiz ibn ʿAwf al-Azdī comments on a certain battle: "its loud sound/treading (*waʾīduhā*) makes the courageous one aspire [to join the battle]."[52] Similarly, al-Muthaqqib al-ʿAbdī describes a troop of horsemen thus: "A dark-hued host, multitudinous … their loud feet galloping in the wide-extended land (*yuqammiṣu fī l-arḍi l-faḍāʾ waʾīduhā*)."[53]

As regards somewhat later poetry, the Umayyad-era poet Jarīr (d. 728 CE) notes, panegyrizing the Marwanites but also engaging in self-aggrandizement:

> Its [scil. the Marwanite family's] care protects a maker of clay jars (*jarrār*, a play on the name of Jarīr), who produces a clamor (*lajab*) /
> on earth because of his treading (*li-waʾdihi*), a bellow (*hamāhīm*).[54]

In Jarīr's verses, *waʾd* does not describe horsemen or a troop of warriors on foot but rather the reverberating echo of his own fame. In any case, it certainly does not have anything to do with infanticide.

Two verses (from two different poems) attributed to the *mukhaḍram* poet Umayya ibn Abī al-Ṣalt, noted and discussed recently by Doru Doroftei and Thomas Eich, present an interesting case. They contain the verb *waʾada* in the passive voice. The editor and translator of these fragments attributed to Umayya ibn Abī al-Ṣalt, Friedrich Schulthess, gives the texts and translations into German as follows:

> *Wa-l-arḍu maʿqilunā wa-kānat ummanā*
> *fīhā maqābirunā wa-fīhā nūʾadu*

[50] See Lane, *Lexicon*, s.v. *w-ʾ-d*.
[51] Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, vol. XV, 136.
[52] ʿUbayd (ed.), *Shuʿarāʾ jāhiliyyūn*, 164.
[53] Al-Mufaḍḍal, *The Mufaḍḍaliyāt,* vol. I, 309; vol. II, 106 (the translation of Lyall has been modified somewhat here).
[54] Jarīr, *Dīwān*, vol. II, 672.

Die Erde ist unser Asyl; sie ist jeher unsere Mutter und in ihr ist wiederum unsere Grabstätte und in ihr werden wir verscharrt.

Law lā withāqu llāhi ḍalla ḍalālunā
wa-la-sarranā annā nutallu fa-nūʾadu

Wäre nicht Gottes Zuverlässigkeit, so wären wir verloren und würde es uns nur freuen, dass wir auf das Angesicht gelegt und wie neugeborene Mädchen verscharrt werden.[55]

A few notes of caution are in order. First, the corpus of Umayya ibn Abī al-Ṣalt does not survive in any *dīwān* (collection of poems) attributed to him but, rather, has been collected by modern scholars from various works of Arabic literature where the poems are quoted; the authenticity of his poems cannot be taken for granted.[56] Second, as regards the first verse in particular, Schulthess notes that the ending also appears as *fīhā maqābirunā wa-fīhā nuwallad* ("we are born") in the sources.[57] Doroftei and Eich follow Schulthess in preferring the reading *nūʾad*. However, they suggest that the verb *waʾada* means generally "to bury," with no gendered undertones, in these verses (as, in fact, Schulthess translates in the first instance, "werden wir verscharrt," in contrast to the second example, translated by him as "wie neugeborene Mädchen verscharrt werden").[58]

However, it seems to me that the meaning "to tread, trample (over, underfoot)" would be a better interpretation for the verb *waʾada* in the context of these verses. They could be translated as follows:

The earth is our refuge and has been our mother;
In it are our graves, and in it we are trodden underfoot (*nūʾad*).

Were it not for the covenant of God, we would be utterly lost,
and our happiness[59] would [merely] be that we are thrown to the ground (*nutallu*)
and trodden underfoot (*nūʾad*).

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[55] Edited by Schulthess, *Umajja ibn Abi ṣ Ṣalt*, 26, v. 11 and 28, v. 30; transl. 85 and 87.

[56] It would seem a considerable amount of forged poetry was attributed to Umayya by later Muslim authors. On Umayya ibn Abī l-Ṣalt and the poems ascribed to him, see Powers, "Umayya ibn Abī-ṣ-Ṣalt" and "The Poems"; Seidensticker, "The Authenticity"; Sinai, "Religious Poetry." Sinai, *Rain-Giver*, 28, is rather optimistic about the authenticity issue: "A lengthy poem about the creation of the world by Allāh, including a detailed description of the heavens and of God's throne, is preserved under the name of Umayya ibn Abī l-Ṣalt and has been accepted as authentic by most scholars who have examined it, on the grounds that it constitutes a highly idiosyncratic and, in many respects, obscure adaptation of a wide range of cosmological and angelological traditions that are conspicuously independent of the Quran."

[57] Schulthess (ed.), *Umajja ibn Abi ṣ Ṣalt*, 26.

[58] The Appendix in Doroftei and Eich, *Adam und Embryo*.

[59] Used ironically here, according to my interpretation.

The meaning "to be trampled down, trodden over/underfoot" for the passive verb *nūʾad* fits the context better, I would argue, than "to be buried," as understood by Doroftei and Eich (and the editor and translator of Umayya ibn Abī al-Ṣalt's poems, Friedrich Schulthess). As regards the first example, the interpretation "in it are our graves and in it we are buried" ("in ihr ist wiederum unsere Grabstätte und in ihr werden wir verscharrt") entails repetition. My suggestion "we are trodden underfoot" for *nūʾad* yields a better meaning, in my opinion, and this is true as regards the second verse as well.

As far as I know, the word *mawʾūda* occurs in only one poem ascribed to any pre-Islamic or *mukhaḍram* poet. This is in a verse that exists in two different versions, one being attributed to Ḥassān ibn Thābit, the other to Mutammim ibn Nuwayra, the brother of Mālik ibn Nuwayra, the chief of the Banū al-Yarbūʿ. The fact that the later Muslim scholars were not sure to whom to ascribe the verse raises, in itself, some doubt, but the attribution to Ḥassān, the poet laureate of the prophet Muhammad, is particularly suspicious.

It is well known that Ḥassān's collection of poems contains many inauthentic poems; Walid Arafat's many studies have been important in demonstrating this.[60] Furthermore, the line does not appear in any manuscripts of Ḥassān's *Dīwān* but is attributed to him in various other literary works (the verse is not connected to a whole poem but floats, as it were, as a single line quoted and requoted). Ḥassān's version reads:[61]

> Many a *mawʾūda* resting in [burial] shrouds,
> marked by the tissue that envelops the fetus – she has not been given a pillow to sleep on.
>
> *wa-mawʾūdatin maqrūratin fī maʿāwizin*
> *bi-āmatihā marsūmatin lam tuwassad*

The other, variant, version of what seems to be ultimately the same verse, attributed to Mutammim ibn Nuwayra, runs as follows:[62]

> And a *mawʾūda* buried in desert,
> confined in the tissue that envelops the fetus – she has not been given a cradle.
>
> *wa-mawʾūdatun maqbūratun fī mafāzatin*
> *bi-āmatihā mawsūdatun lam tumahhad*

[60] E.g., Arafat, "A Controversial Incident"; "Early Critics of the Authenticity"; "The Historical Significance."
[61] Ḥassān ibn Thābit, *Dīwān*, vol. I, 467. The editor, Walīd ʿArafāt, quotes the line from the *Lisān al-ʿArab*.
[62] Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, vol. XIX, 230.

I use the vocalizations as given in the editions referenced. The first version gives the case of the word *mawʾūda* in the genitive, in which case the so-called *wāw rubba* appears to be governing the noun, the other in the nominative. Both are possible and yield a cogent meaning.

The two verses do not appear to be independent of each other but, rather, one of the two versions is based on the other, composed by changing a few words with the same length. The attribution to either Mutammim or Ḥassān is dubious. It is rather likely that the verse is an Islamic-era forgery. The word *mawʾūda* does not seem to occur in any other Arabic poem attributed to a pre-Islamic figure; hence, such a unique example raises questions. Finally, both versions (ascribed to either Mutammim or Ḥassān) are adduced not as part of the whole poem but as solitary verses without context. I would argue that the verse(s) were composed, by a later Muslim scholar, who wanted to adduce "proof" that the word *mawʾūda* was used in pre-Islamic poetry and that the practice of *waʾd al-banāt* really existed. The *wāw rubba* (if it was the intended grammatical construction of the author of the line) would also indicate that the *waʾd al-banāt* was a pervasive occurrence.

On the basis of my semantic analysis of the words derived from the root *w-ʾ-d* in poetry and lexica, it would seem that the most straightforward way of understanding the Quranic *al-mawʾūda* would be "the one (f.) who has been trodden/trampled over." Analogously to the verb *waṭiʾa*, the basic meaning of which is, similarly, "to tread (underfoot)," the semantic field of *waʾada* might be thought to encompass significations such as "to plunder; destroy," which are attested for *waṭiʾa*[63] In fact, the meaning "to destroy" for *waṭiʾa* is, it would seem, present in Quran 48:25, which reads:

> They are the ones who disbelieved and barred you from the Sacred Mosque, and kept the offering from reaching its destination. And were it not for [certain] faithful men and faithful women, whom you did not know — lest you should destroy them (*an taṭaʾūhum*),[64] and thus blame for [killing] them should fall on you unawares; [He held you back] so that Allah may admit into His mercy whomever He wishes. And had they been separate, We would have surely punished the faithless among them with a painful punishment. (Transl. ʿAlī Qulī Qarāʾī, modified).

In the pre-Islamic or early (pre-Umayyad) Islamic poetry there do not seem to be any occurrences of the root *w-ʾ-d* in the sense of "to practice infanticide" or "bury

[63] See Dozy, *Supplément*, s.v. *waṭiʾa*. As is well known, *waṭiʾa* also denotes "to penetrate, have sexual intercourse with."

[64] The syntax of the verse is difficult, and this phrase can be variously understood. See https://quran.com/48/25 for various translations. Instead of "lest you should destroy them," the rendering "you could have destroyed them" is also possible.

someone alive"; all examples have to do with "treading" or "emitting a loud sound." Moreover, on the basis of my analysis, the Quranic word does not appear to refer to a child or infant specifically.

Whence the meaning "to bury"?

Though what follows is somewhat speculative, I note that the Arabic lexicographers remarked that the root *w-ʾ-d* was often conflated, through metathesis (*qalb*), with another rare (and so-called weak) root, namely *w-d-ʾ*. Hence, they note that the phrases *tawaʾʾdat al-arḍ ʿalayhi* and *tawaddaʾat al-arḍ ʿalayhi* are both used to indicate "the earth swallowed him," said when someone got lost and disappeared without a trace.[65] It seems that it is here (in the root *w-d-ʾ*) that we have a possible piece of the puzzle in how the Quranic Arabic word *al-mawʾūda* was later understood by the exegetes.

The semantic field of *w-d-ʾ* is very different from *w-ʾ-d*. Whereas (as surveyed above) the latter had to do with loud sounds, especially when someone or something walks (though it was also used to refer to other types of walking), the former denotes attacking, destroying, and burying.

For example, the verb *wadaʾa* means "to attack someone violently, from all sides" and "harm someone unexpectedly." The form II verb *waddaʾa* signifies "to level the ground" and, used with the preposition *ʿalā*, "to bury someone (by levelling the ground over them)." Form I is also sometimes used in the same meaning. Form V, then, means "to be buried."[66] For instance, to the poet al-Akhṭal is ascribed the following verse where he uses the verb *waddaʾa* to refer to burying: "In that case, I would be like the one who has perished and who the relatives have buried between the burial niche and stones" (*idhan la-kuntu ka-man awdā wa-waddaʾahu ahlu l-qarābati bayna l-laḥdi wa-l-rajam*).[67]

It could be that the meanings of the root *w-d-ʾ* are behind the later interpretation made by Muslim exegetes of verse 81:8. Interestingly and surprisingly, the exegetes do not appear to ever mention this metathesis (*w-d-ʾ*) explicitly in the case of 81:8, though they sometimes refer to another metathesis, namely *ʾ-w-d*, which yields meanings related to "burden; oppress."[68]

In my interpretation, however, the commentators understood the Quran to use the word *al-mawʾūda* in the sense "the buried girl," due to the meanings of the root *w-d-ʾ*. However, as was the case of *w-ʾ-d* too, note that the semantic field of *w-d-ʾ* has nothing to do with specifically killing a female *infant*, nor of burying her alive. This appears to have been derived wholly from the imaginations of the exegetes. Behind this construal appear to be the (real and explicit) Quranic denunciations of infanticide and

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[65] Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, vol. XV, 136.

[66] For these significations, see al-Fīrūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, vol. I, 32; Biberstein-Kazimirski, vol. II, 1507. Incidentally, similar meanings are also given for the root *w-d-y*.

[67] Al-Akhṭal, *Shiʿr* (in the recension of al-Sukkarī), 164.

[68] Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, vol. XIX, 230; al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, vol. XXXI, 70.

the exegetes' understanding of 16:57–59 to refer to female infanticide particularly. Encountering a rare word, *al-mawʾūda*, in an eschatological passage, the exegetes resorted to intra-Quranic interpretation and creative philology to interpret what it might signify.[69] It is not that their understanding is completely impossible, but, taking the poetic and lexical material into consideration, it is, in my opinion, rather improbable.

I end this section by briefly noting the spelling in the early (first two centuries of the Islamic era or so) Quranic manuscripts that I have consulted.[70] They consistently spell the word that appears as *al-mawʾūda* in the reading traditions and the Cairo edition as *al-m-w-d-h*. This reflects the loss of the *hamza* in most positions in Quranic Arabic: the word would have been pronounced *al-mawūdah*. The combination *wū* is often spelled with only one *wāw* in the early manuscripts (e.g., Dāwūd, *d-ā-w-d*), which helps explain the spelling *al-m-w-d-h*, with one *wāw* only.[71] It should also be noted that the passive participle, which is in Classical Arabic *al-maʾūda* (from the root *ʾ-w-d*), would have become *al-mawūdah* in Quranic Arabic. Hence, one should keep open this possibility ("the oppressed one") as well, though I do not deem it preferable. In this connection, I also remark the peculiar Shīʿī variant reading of *al-mawʾūda*, namely *al-mawadda*, "love, affection, friendship,"[72] which can be explained on the basis of the consonantal *al-m-w-d-h*.

To conclude, I would suggest that the word *al-mawʾūda* of verse 81:8 be understood as "the one (f.) who has been trodden/trampled over" (compare also the English expression "downtrodden"). Since many of the poetical examples cited here have to do with armies marching, the connotations of *al-mawʾūda* might have to do with the idea that the female person has fallen the victim of an oncoming troop of horsemen or infantry. As regards the exegetes' interpretation of the word as "the female infant buried alive," this appears to be affected by the meanings of the root *w-d-ʾ*.

Conclusions

To sum up the arguments of this article: I have taken issue with the putative pre-Islamic custom of burying daughters alive. In my reading, the Quran does not refer to such a custom even once, though it does mention and condemn infanticide. I have suggested that verses 16:57–59 refer to infant abandonment, while the exact meaning of 81:8–9 is open to some debate but scarcely refers to female infanticide. I have suggested that the

[69] E.g., al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, vol. XIX, 230–231: who notes on *al-mawʾūda* in verse 81:8: "this topic (*al-maʿnā*) has been encountered (*qad maḍā*) in *sūrat al-naḥl* [*sūra* 16] in His words *am yadussuhu fī al-turāb*."

[70] Accessible digitally here: https://corpuscoranicum.de/de/verse-navigator/sura/81/verse/8/manuscripts.

[71] I thank Marijn van Putten for navigating the Quranic manuscripts with me. For an important study on the language of the Quran, see his *Quranic Arabic*.

[72] See the variant readings at https://erquran.org/.

meaning of the word *al-mawʾūda* in 81:8 is "the one (f.) who has been trodden/trampled over."

No non-Arabic source mentions female infanticide in Arabia: for example, a relevant non-Arabic text, by the third-century CE philosopher Porphyry, mentions an annual sacrifice of a *boy* by the people of Duma. Nor is there any archaeological record of the supposed cultural practice of female infanticide. Early Arabic poetry has also been found wanting in this regard. Hence, there is simply no evidence that the real pre-Islamic Arabians (as opposed to the imagined Arabs of the *jāhiliyya* lore) practiced female infanticide as a specific and common cultural trait.

Yes, it is probably true that, first, pre-Islamic Arabian parents sometimes (one assumes, rarely) resorted to infanticide out of need, desperation, mental illness, food crisis, or other reasons. Second, patriarchal values possibly (but not necessarily) resulted in more daughters than sons having been killed. And third, it is possible that some pre-Islamic parents buried their babies alive. But these three aspects apply to practically all human civilizations, in particular in pre-modern times. What I have argued for in this article is that the Quran or other types of contemporary texts do not offer evidence for the specifically gendered nature of the supposed practice (that particularly daughters were killed) or the alleged way of committing this (burying them alive).

Indeed, despite the Quranic prohibition, infanticide was practiced by medieval Muslims too, as the works of the jurists attest.[73] In a *fatwā* given by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), for example, a thoroughly tragic case is discussed (though it could naturally belong to the realm of hypothetical legal cases): a mother and her son were both ill (the nature of the illness is not specified: *innahā kānat marīḍa wa-huwa marīḍ*). Because of the situation, she became greatly distressed (*ḍajirat*) and ended up burying her son alive (*dafanat ibnahā bi-l-ḥayāt*) inside her house. Ibn Taymiyya notes that the Quran and prophetic traditions explicitly forbid infanticide: the mother has committed a grave sin. As regards her punishment in this life, she must pay the blood money (*al-diya*) to those who are the rightful inheritors of the dead son (*li-warathatihi*).[74]

Infant abandonment continued to take place too, as evidenced by the extensive Islamic legal discussions on foundlings and their status.[75] However, one needs to emphasize the rarity of such deeds in the Islamic era. What is more, when parents resorted to infanticide or abandonment, it appears to have mainly been because of distress, poverty, or illness. These impressions should also be extended to pre-Islamic Arabia as I have argued in this study. Of late, scholars have noted that a variety of evidence indicates that the rise of Islam was not such a dramatic shift in, for instance, Arabian religious beliefs,[76] as was imagined by earlier researchers. It is highly likely, I

[73] Giladi, "Some Observations on Infanticide."
[74] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿat al-fatāwā*, vol. IV, 182; Giladi, "Some Observations on Infanticide," 191.
[75] See note 35, above.
[76] E.g., Sinai, *Rain-Giver*.

would argue, that changes in ethical views, including the practice of infanticide, were also piecemeal.

The analogue with the rise of Christianity is instructive. Recent research emphasizes that the notion that Christianity did away with infanticide and infant abandonment has more to do with imagined than empirical reality.[77] The idea, articulated by late antique Christian authors, that the non-Christian "pagans" were bloodthirsty child-murderers was a rhetorical means to support in-group virtue and stereotype the out-group. *Mutatis mutandis*, the descriptions by Muslim writers of pre-Islamic Arabia and its allegedly pervasive practice of (in particular, female) infanticide can be, I suggest, understood in the same vein.

[77] E.g., the studies of Grubbs referenced in this article and Vuolanto, "Selling a Freeborn Child."

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