

“Qur’ān and Arab Christianity: Religious Themes and Motifs in Pre-Qur’anic Arabic Poetry”

The two-day workshop aims at exploring the Qur’ān’s Arabian milieu, mainly as represented in pre-Qur’anic poetry attributed to Christian and Pagan poets. Scholars have long noted that poetry attributed to pre-Quranic poets contain religious ideas and sentiments comparable to some that appear in the Qur’ān. References to God and to religious beliefs are found within the corpus of poetry ascribed to both Pagan and monotheistic Arab poets. As promising as this material sounds, it was long viewed as an unreliable source in the investigation of the Qur’ān’s milieu due to its codification long after the advent of Islam and the question of authenticity this raises. However, the importance of pre-Qur’anic poetry has been increasingly recognized in recent years, and scholars have adopted some methods to verify its genuineness and to employ it in their efforts to examine the theological scene of pre-Islamic Arabia.

Topics to be addressed by the workshop include:

1. Monotheism in Arabia prior to the rise of Islam

2. Religious themes and motifs in pre-Quranic poetry and how they compare to the Qur’ān
3. Al-Ḥīra as a center of Late Antique Christianity and as a literary hub
4. Possible affinities between late antique Arabic poetry and Judeo-Christian texts
5. Innovative methodological approaches to the study of pre-Quranic poetry, especially those addressing authenticity.

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The Construction of the Palace of Khawarnaq in Ḥīrah by Kamāl ud-Dīn Behzād (1450–1535); Wikimedia Commons

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Münzgasse 30
72070 Tübingen

Evangelisch-Theologie Fakultäten/Seminar für
Religionswissenschaft und Judaistik/Institutum Judaicum



Workshop Timetable

September 24

10:30: Welcome and Introduction

Session One

Chair: Holger Zellentin (University of Tübingen)

10:45 Nicolai Sinai (University of Oxford)

“Pagan Monotheism and Pre-Islamic Arabia”

11:45 Break

12:00 Raashid S. Goyal (University of Tübingen)

“The Internecine War (*ḥarb al-fasād*) of the Ṭayyi’”

13:00 Lunch

Session Two

Chair: Stefanie Rudolf (University of Tübingen)

14:00 Suzanne Stetkevych (Georgetown University)

“Except for Sulaymān”: Ritual and Religion in the Court Poetry of al-Nābighah al-Dhubayānī

15:00 Break

15:15 Nadja Abuhusein (University of Tübingen)

“God, the King, and the Poet: Faith and Forgiveness in ‘Adī Ibn Zayd al-‘Ibādī’s Apology Poems to the Lakhmid Ruler al-Nu‘mān Ibn al-Mundhir”

16:15 Break

16:30 Iyas Nasser (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

“Christian Motifs in the Poetry of ‘Adī Ibn Zayd al-‘Ibādī, an Arab Christian Pre-Islamic Poet”

18:00 Dinner

September 25

Session Three

Chair: Ana Davitashvili (University of Tübingen)

10:00 Nora Schmid (University of Tübingen)

“Methodological Approaches to the Qur’an and Pre-Islamic Christian Poetry”

11:00 Break

Session Four

Chair: Raashid S. Goyal (University of Tübingen)

11:15 Maxim Yosefi (University of Göttingen)

“The Pre-Qur’ānic Notions of Fate as Reflected in Early Arabic Poetry and Their Influence on the Qur’ānic Representation of Allah”

12:15 Break

12:30 Ruben Schenzle (Freie Universität Berlin)

“Riding with the Jinn: Pre-Islamic Spirituality and Its Islamic Transformations”

13:30 Lunch

14:30 Alexander Foreman (University of Chicago)

“No God but *Raḥmānān*: On a South Arabian Monotheistic Theonym in Pre-Islamic Arabian Poetry and Epigraphy”

15:30 Conclusion



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Qur'ān and Arab Christianity
Religious Themes and Motifs in Pre-Qur'anic
Arabic Poetry

Abstracts

24-25 September 2024
Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen

Session One

1.1 “Pagan Monotheism und Pre-Islamic Arabia”

Given prominence by a 1999 volume edited by Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, the term “pagan monotheism” was meant to capture the prominence and spread of monotheistic tendencies in late ancient Graeco-Roman religion. The concept has given rise to vigorous debate not only in its original disciplinary context, the study of late antique paganism and Christianity, but has now also begun to impact the study of pre-Islamic Arabia and the context of the Qur’an. Building on earlier work by Gerald Hawting, a 2010 article by Patricia Crone characterises the Qur’anic “associators” (*mushrikūn*), who form Muhammad’s principal opponents in the Meccan surahs, as “monotheists who worshipped the same God as the Messenger, but who also venerated lesser divine beings.” An opposite viewpoint is that of Aziz Al-Azmeh. His 2014 monograph *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity* argues that “Allāh was not a cultic deity before Muḥammad, and that He was not the ‘High God’ of a pantheonic universe, but rather an opaque and obscure being, invoked on occasion, alongside other, more deeply rooted and locally enracinated deities.” From this perspective, Al-Azmeh has lately taken umbrage at my *Rain-Giver, Bone-Breaker, Score-Settler: Allāh in Pre-Quranic Poetry* (2019), which documents the relative frequency with which the deity Allāh is evoked in early Arabic poetry and proposes to explain this as due to the impact of Biblical monotheism, especially the progressive diffusion of Christianity. According to Al-Azmeh, the main objective of my study is “to salvage the thesis of pagan monotheism.” However, my essay does not in fact say that pre-Islamic poetry attests to a religious viewpoint best described as “pagan monotheism” and overall takes little to no interest in issues of conceptual classification. In this talk, I will retrospectively let myself be drawn into such classificatory debates and submit that a newly coined notion of “hypsistotheism” – which bears resemblance to Angelos Chaniotis’s use of the term “megatheism” – is a more illuminating description of pre-Islamic views of Allāh than “pagan monotheism.” I will also seek to corroborate the hypothesis that the early Qur’an’s progression from hypsistotheism to monotheism proper was crucially reliant on a selective uptake of Jewish traditions.

Nicolai Sinai (PhD Free University Berlin 2007) is a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Oxford, where he has been teaching since 2011, and a Fellow of the British Academy. His most recent book is *Key Terms of the Qur’an: A Critical Dictionary* (2023).

1.2 “The Internecine War (*ḥarb al-fasād*) of the Ṭayyi’”

This study examines a lengthy conflict between brother tribes of the Ṭayyi’ confederation, usually identified as the “War of Corruption” (*ḥarb al-fasād*). The war is said, variously, to have endured for 25 or as many as 130 years, and to have had devastating consequences for the losing side, the Jadīla, many of whom abandoned their lands in northern Najd and eventually lost their tribal identity. It seems also to have affected a general decline of the tribe’s power and standing in Arabia. Remarkably, extant works on the *ayyām* or battle-days of the Arabs do not treat the war, possibly because the internecine conflict was lamented rather than celebrated. Despite this neglect, the *ḥarb al-fasād* is remembered by a wealth of Ṭā’ī poets, many more than those associated with *ayyām* of greater renown. The poetry and other materials are presently collated and evaluated with the objective of discerning the particulars of the war and its broader significance.

Raashid S. Goyal researches the history, languages, and literature of the early Islamic and pre-Islamic Near East, with a particular interest in the development of legal and political ideas in the early centuries of Islam. He received his Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from Cornell University (2023), and is currently a Postdoctoral researcher and member of the QaSLA project at the University of Tübingen, Germany. His recent and forthcoming publications include “Rebel’s Advocate: How Abū ‘Ubayda Ma‘mar b. al-Muthannā Came to be Labelled a Khārijite,” “The Gestation of Arabic Biography: Genre and Method in Early Traditionist Writings,” and “Arabness before Islam: Views from the Poetry and the *Nasab* Literature.”

Session Two

2.1 ““Except for Sulaymān”: Ritual and Religion in the Court Poetry of al-Nābighah al-Dhubyānī”

This paper proposes to explore the religious motifs in the poems of al-Nābighah al-Dhubyānī to the Lakhmid and Ghassānid courts of pre-Islamic Arabia. Taking as its basis my earlier formulations of the ritual structure of the pre-Islamic court qasida as a Speech Act that performs multiple social, political, and economic functions in a verbal negotiation of rank and status and declaration of allegiance, this study examines the manner in which al-Nābighah subordinates religious motifs to the ritual structure and performative goals of his poems. It will on his poems of apology (*i'tidhāriyyāt*) to the Lakhmid king al-Nu'mān ibn al-Mundhir, a series of *qasidas* in which he attempts to seek forgiveness and reinstatement in the court of al-Ḥīrah, which he fled due to the slander of his enemies. Although the salient religious motif is the Sulaymān passage in his final poem of apology—and finally successful, we are told—his Dāliyyah, other subtle and more lyrical elements occur in the others, such as the evocation of the Ḥajj pilgrims and their camels in the poet's oaths of innocence. The study concludes with a comparison of these religious motifs and their function in al-Nābighah's poems to their occurrence and function in the Qur'ān.

Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych is Sultan Qaboos bin Said Professor Emerita of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Georgetown University, Washington, DC. She holds a PhD in Classical Arabic Literature from the University of Chicago. A Specialist in Classical Arabic Poetry, her most recent book is *The Cooing of the Dove and the Cawing of the Crow: Late 'Abbāsīd Poetics in Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī's Saqṭ al-Zand and Luzūm Mā Lā Yalzam* (Brill, 2022). She is the recipient of the Sheikh Zayed Personality of the Year Award (2019) and the King Faisal Prize in Arabic Literature (2021).

2.2 “God, the King, and the Poet: Faith and Forgiveness in ‘Adī Ibn Zayd al-‘Ibādī’s Apology Poems to the Lakhmid Ruler al-Nu‘mān Ibn al-Mundhir”

This paper explores the apology poems of ‘Adī ibn Zayd al-‘Ibādī, focusing on how his Christian faith and his intricate connection to the Lakhmid court, particularly with al-Nu‘mān, shaped his poetic expression. Through a detailed analysis of apology verses, addressed to al-Nu‘mān, I compare ‘Adī’s themes and literary style with those of his contemporaries, examining the cultural and religious nuances that distinguish his work. The paper demonstrates how his Christian identity is subtly woven into his verse, particularly through religious imagery and moral undertones. By juxtaposing his poetry with others from the same period, I highlight the distinctive voice of ‘Adī ibn Zayd and his engagement with themes of loyalty, forgiveness, and divine justice. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of pre-Quranic Arabic poetry, revealing how religion and politics shaped the literary landscape of late antiquity in Arabia.

Nadja Abuhussein is a Ph.D. candidate and a member of the QaSLA project at the University of Tübingen, specializing in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Her dissertation focuses on the works of ‘Adī ibn Zayd al-‘Ibādī, a prominent sixth-century Christian poet from al-Ḥīra, exploring the intersection of religion, politics, and literary expression in his verse.

2.3 “Christian Motifs in the Poetry of ‘Adī Ibn Zayd al-‘Ibādī, an Arab Christian Pre-Islamic Poet”

The Christian pre-Islamic poet ‘Adī Ibn Zayd al-‘Ibādī (d. ca. 600) employs a number of motifs that reflect the impact of Christianity on his poetry. He describes the light of Easter, a monk praying in a cloister and water that makes people thirsty. There are also frequent references to a group of people who, in the midst of life’s enjoyment, suddenly face death. This talk will focus on several poems by ‘Adī Ibn Zayd al-‘Ibādī, examining their Christian motifs, discussing parallel Biblical verses and illuminating the religious diction that characterizes his poems.

المعاني المسيحية في ديوان عدي بن زيد العبادي،
الشاعر العربي المسيحي الذي عاش في القرن السادس

يَطْرُقُ الشَّاعِرُ عَدِيُّ بْنُ زَيْدِ الْعِبَادِيِّ (تُوفِّيَ نَحْوَ سَنَةِ 600) طَائِفَةً مِنَ الْمَعَانِي الَّتِي تَشْهَدُ عَلَى مَكَانَةِ الْمَسِيحِيَّةِ مِنْ نَفْسِهِ وَأَثَرِهَا الْمُدَوِّيِّ فِي شِعْرِهِ؛ فَهُوَ يُحَدِّثُنَا عَنْ قَنْدِيلِ الْفَصْحِ الْمَجِيدِ، وَيَصِفُ الزَّاهِبَ الَّذِي كَانَ يُصَلِّي فِي الْهَيْكَلِ يَلْتَمِسُ الْخَلَاصَ، وَيَذْكَرُ الْمَاءَ الَّذِي لَا يَنْقَعُ غُلَّةَ الصَّادِي وَإِنَّمَا يَزِيدُهُ عَطْشًا، وَيُصَوِّرُ أَوْلِيَاءَ الَّذِينَ يَتَهَالِكُونَ عَلَى هَذِهِ الْحَيَاةِ الْفَانِيَّةِ، يَزُومُونَ الْمَلْدَاتِ وَيَنْصَرِفُونَ إِلَى اللَّهْوِ وَالْفِرَاحِ، وَيَجْمَعُونَ الْأَمْوَالَ ظَنًّا مِنْهُمْ أَنَّهُمْ مُخَلَّدُونَ، فَإِذَا نَفَسُهُمْ تَطَلَّبَ، وَإِذَا آجَالُهُمْ تَقَضَى، فَيَخْتَرِمُهُمُ الْمَوْتُ وَيَرْحَلُ بِهِمْ عَنْ هَذَا الْعَالَمِ. سَأَقِفُ فِي هَذِهِ الْمَحَاضِرَةِ عِنْدَ هَذِهِ الْمَعَانِي مِنْ شِعْرِ عَدِيِّ بْنِ زَيْدٍ، أَتَنَاوَلُهَا بِالْبَحْثِ وَالتَّحْلِيلِ وَأَتَتَبَعُ مَا يَقَابِلُهَا مِنْ آيَاتِ الْكِتَابِ الْمَقْدَسِ، مُطَوِّفًا فِي هَذَا كَلِّهِ حَوْلَ الْأَلْفَاظِ الْمَسِيحِيَّةِ الَّتِي وَرَدَتْ فِي قِصَائِدِهِ.

Dr. Iyas Nasser is a lecturer and researcher in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He completed his PhD at the Hebrew University and was awarded a postdoctoral Fellowship at the Freie Universität Berlin. His studies focus on various aspects of classical Arabic literature: love poetry, narrative techniques, rhetorical criticism and the assertive voices of women poets. His research also draws on Arabic manuscripts, thereby obtaining new insights into classical poetry. In addition to his academic research, Nasser is a poet who has published two Arabic-language poetry collections.

Session Three

3.1 “Historical Authenticity and the Referential Illusion in Studies on Arabic Poetry and the Qur’an”

Authenticity is “a singularly persistent concept that provides a seminal value and normative source for cultural interpretations, decisions and practices” (Assmann 2012). It has played a crucial role in the study of ancient Arabic poetry, especially in historical critical studies focusing on pre-Islamic poetry as a “source” of the Qur’an. In this paper, I shed light on the ways in which discussions about historical authenticity have shaped nineteenth and twentieth-century scholarship on ancient Arabic poetry. I trace the emergence of authenticity as a criterion in historical critical scholarship on religious themes and motifs in pre-Qur’anic Arabic poetry and the Qur’an. I argue that “authentic” pre-Islamic Arabic pagan, Christian, and Jewish poetry was privileged due to a referential illusion – the idea that a textual referent with no historical objectivity is real. It has led to a myopic view of the potential of poetry to shed light on the Qur’an and early Islamic religious culture. Poems were integrated in various ways in early Islamic religious scholarship and literature to shed light on the Qur’an, early Islamic history, and the Arabic language, especially in exegetical, historical, and philological works. I offer some suggestions for a meaningful reintegration of poems which are usually not discussed in studies of the Qur’an because they are likely post-Qur’anic and/or considered “inauthentic”.

Nora K. Schmid is a researcher at the University of Tübingen. She gained her PhD from Freie Universität Berlin in 2018. She previously held research positions at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (2007–2012), Freie Universität Berlin (2012–2018), and in the project “Qur’anic Commentary: An Integrative Paradigm” (University of Oxford, 2019–2024). In 2022/23, she was Acting Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Hamburg and in 2023/24 Departmental Lecturer in Islamic Studies at the University of Oxford. Her research interests include the Qur’an, Islamic religious literature and culture (notably Arabic poetry and sermons), and Islamic law.

Session Four

4.1 “The pre-Qur’ānic notions of Fate as reflected in early Arabic poetry and their influence on the Qur’ānic representation of Allah”

Apart from Allah, the only omnipotent force that receives attention in pre-Qur’ānic poems is Fate. The notions about it are ambivalent. On one hand, Fate is associated with Death. Mostly referred to as *Manāyā* and *Dahr*, and often anthropomorphized, this kind of Fate is always represented as an unpredictable bloodthirsty being that reaches everyone sooner or later. On the other hand, Fate is associated with the all-erasing Time. In this case, Fate can also be referred to as *Manāyā* and *Dahr*, but is represented as a transcendent force. The Qur’ān (Q 45:24) promotes believing in Allah instead of reverence for Time. This indicates the rootedness of this reverence in the Arabian worldview and suggests that the development of the Qur’ānic concept of Allah occurred while looking back at the pre-Qur’ānic beliefs in Fate to counter them. Studying the notions of Fate contributes to our understanding of the development of the Qur’ānic representation of Allah. Already in pre-Qur’ānic poetry the power of Fate is associated with the omnipotence of Allah. Arguing that this association is genuine rather than results from the Islamic editing of the early poetic texts, I submit that in late pre-Islam the notions of Allah and Fate coexisted without contradicting each other. Most likely, the concept of Allah incorporated beliefs in Fate, and their representations were regarded as two hypostases of the same force. Consequently, to counter beliefs in Fate, the Qur’ānic concept of Allah did not reject them but rather insisted on their exclusive orientation towards God.

Maxim Yosefi is a researcher at the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies of the University of Göttingen. He studied history and anthropology at St. Petersburg University, East Asian Studies at the University Duisburg-Essen and Arabic language and literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 2016, he received PhD from the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (Beersheba). Since then, he has been undertaking projects on medieval Islamic discussion of poets and poetry, Arabian notions of inspiration, Yemeni manuscripts, Islamic and Jewish ethical ideas. His major fields of interest include classical Arabic poetry and its discussion by medieval Arabic authors.

4.2 “Riding with the Jinn: Pre-Islamic spirituality and its Islamic transformations”

We are going to read a poem by al-Ḥakam b. ‘Amr al-Bahrāni from al-Jahiz’ *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*. Its motives – e.g. divine creation, animals, spirits and demons – draw a very peculiar picture of the poet’s spiritual world. We will have a look at the spiritual imagination of pre-Islamic Arabia to analyze the verses. In an outlook, I am going to show how the Qur’ān reacted to these beliefs and in which ways Islamicate scholars and writers adapted and patterned this – in al-Jahiz’ words “strange and marvelous – *ġarīb wa- ‘aġīb*” – spiritual imagination. Through the poem I’d like to shed light on the gradual change how the Jinn, demons and spirits from the pre-Islamic spiritual world were incorporated into the cosmology of the Qur’an and of Islam and later fostered the encyclopedic archive of the Arabic-Islamic mirabilia collections (e.g. al-Qazwini), eventually evolving into a vibrant feature of popular narrative, folktale and literature – like in the stories of the Arabian Nights. And as anthropologists show, they continue being living part of a widespread collective imagination.

Ruben Schenzle is a researcher and teacher in Arabic literature at Freie Universität Berlin. His PhD thesis on *Utopica arabica. Über das utopische in der arabischen Literatur von al-Andalus* is forthcoming with ERGON. Fields of interest include post-Umayyad al-Andalus, literary translation of prose and poetry, as well as Late Antique contexts of Early Islam. He is co-editor of ADAB – Focus on Arabic Literature with Beatrice Gruendler and Johannes Stephan. You can check his latest teaching project, a student weblog on „Arab Traces in Germany“: *Arabische Spuren in Deutschland*.

4.3 "No God but *Raḥmānān*: On a South Arabian Monotheistic Theonym in Pre-Islamic Arabian Poetry and Epigraphy"

Gods, demigods, deified mortals and other superbeings commonly have many names. Perhaps because of His claim to universal dominion, the Biblical monotheistic God is particularly susceptible to such onomastic elephantiasis, and Arabia is no exception. This paper focuses on the early history of the name *Al-Raḥmān* and discusses the evidence for the synchronization of this name with *Allāh*, and the context of that synchronization (to wit: the political project of Abraha), drawing on early inscriptions and the extremely sparse attestations of the name in Pre-Islamic poetry, a point distinguishing the *Jāhili* corpus from the Qur'anic preacher who makes frequent use of *Al-Raḥmān*. Emphasis is laid on the importance of archaeology as a resource for understanding and contextualizing the *Jāhili* corpus in what we may tentatively call an early monotheistic but not yet Islamic milieu.

Alex Foreman is a student in the NELC doctoral program studying the pre-Islamic poetic corpus in light of both its late antique context and the linguistic history of Arabic. His scholarly interest centers around all forms of intentionally unusual language, including poetic dialects, scriptural reading traditions, cryptolects and conlangs. Of particular interest to him are the ways such forms of unusual language change over time. His areas of curiosity include Pre-Islamic and Early Umayyad Arabic Poetry, Arabic linguistic history, Medieval Hebrew liturgical reading traditions, early Qur'anic reading traditions, the performance of medieval lyric verse and the languages of the late antique Mediterranean. He is also a literary translator, principally of poetry



Alte Aula in Tübingen im September 2018; Wikimedia Commons

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