Title of research article

Historical Periodization among Arab Muslims: An Expanded Theoretical Examination of Layer-Based (Ṭabaqāt) and Century-Based (Qarn) Approaches in Classical Arabic Biographical and Historiographical Literature. "A Study in Theoretical Concepts and Historiographical Foundations"

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Abstract

Historical periodization constitutes one of the most essential methodological foundations of Arabic-Islamic scholarship, shaping the way Arab Muslim scholars conceptualized intellectual authority, generational continuity, and the transmission of religious and cultural knowledge. Despite its centrality, the theoretical architecture underlying its two dominant models—the layer-based approach (ṭabaqāt) and the century-based approach (qarn)—has received relatively limited systematic academic scrutiny. This study offers an extensive theoretical and analytical investigation into the emergence, development, and epistemological functions of these periodization systems within Arabic biographical and historiographical literature. Drawing upon a wide corpus of classical sources—including Arabic biographical dictionaries, Hadith compilations, rijāl literature, genealogical texts, and early Islamic historical narratives—the research traces the linguistic, doctrinal, and methodological origins of both models. The analysis shows that the layer-based system developed primarily in the disciplines of Hadith authentication and transmitter evaluation, where scholars were grouped according to shared generational, pedagogical, and scholarly affiliations in order to safeguard the reliability of isnād chains. By contrast, the century-based model evolved from a flexible generational notion of "qarn" into a rigid 100-year framework, influenced significantly by the prophetic tradition promising the appearance of a religious "renovator" (mujaddid) at the beginning of every century. This transformation contributed to a semantic and functional shift in the concept of "qarn," redefining it from a communal and socio-intellectual cohort into a standardized chronological unit. The study argues that these two approaches were never mutually exclusive; rather, they functioned as complementary epistemic tools that balanced continuity, hierarchy, and innovation in Islamic intellectual history. Their interwoven use across centuries allowed Muslim scholars to organize collective memory, assess scholarly reliability, systematize historical chronology, and respond to doctrinal or jurisprudential challenges. Ultimately, the research highlights that while the ṭabaqāt model offers greater flexibility and contextual sensitivity, the century-based qarn model introduced a uniform temporal structure that sometimes imposed rigidity on organic intellectual developments. Together, they formed a distinctive historiographical paradigm unique to Islamic civilization.

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1. Introduction

The organization of historical knowledge into specific temporal frameworks has long been a fundamental pillar of the intellectual tradition in the Islamic scholarly paradigm. Early poetic references to the concepts of eras and layers *"tabaqat"* demonstrate that Muslim intellectuals developed systematic models for periodizing literature and biographical works. These models –often embodied in rhymed titles and well-arranged indices- served not only as instruments of preservation but as mechanisms for tracking the evolution of religious, linguistic and artistic traditions across successive generations of scholars and poets.

This study examines two intertwined approaches of periodization in the Arabic classical heritage: the layer-based approach, which groups individuals by shared scholarly lineages (chains of transmission), age categories, or social characteristics; and the century-based approach, which divides historical time into hundred-year periods. By tracing the formation of these frameworks –from their early connotations in ancient Arabic poetry and prophetic texts to their consolidation in classical biographical works and literary compendia–we illustrate how Muslim intellectuals have created a comprehensive historiographical model that balances heritage continuity with renovation.

We begin by exploring the conceptual and lexical origins of the layers as a term and its application by medieval historians, jurists (faqihs), grammarians and poets. We then turn to the century-based periodization, reviewing its roots in early Islamic oral traditions (e.g., prophetic Hadiths promising religious renovation every hundred years) and the rhetorical art of rhymed titles. Throughout, we analyze the interactions between these approaches and the broader epistemological horizons they established.

Ultimately, this study concludes that layer-based and century-based periodization are not merely features of Islamic historiographical imagination but also revealing profound assumptions about authority, credibility, and cultural renovation. By reaffirming their importance as integral to classical Arabic-Islamic civilization's self-consciousness, we highlight their role in organizing and revitalizing the collective memory of Islamic intellectual traditions.

2. Research Problematic

Although layer-based and century-based periodization have played a pivotal roles in shaping Muslim historical and cultural awareness, there is a lack of theoretical consistency in analyzing their roots, evolutionary dynamics, and ties to methodological and doctrinal foundations. This gap gives rise to the main research question:

How were layer-based and century-based periodization shaped in the Arabic-Islamic legacy, and what linguistic, institutional, and religious factors contributed to their formation and consolidation?

To address this, the study poses the following sub-questions:

1- What are the connotative and derivational origins of "layer" and "century" in Arabic dictionaries, and how did their usage evolve from general linguistic contexts to specialized historical methodologies?
2- To what extent did prophetic texts and sayings (e.g., those promising religious renovation every hundred years or preferring one century over another) establish century-based periodization as a historical framework?

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3- How did the interaction between layer-based periodization (relying on the shared narration chains and methods across generations) and century-based periodization (relying on hundred-year units) manifest in biographies?

4- What impact did these approaches have on Arab scholars' and historians' conceptions of literary and cultural evolution, especially under the influence of Orientalist methodologies and modern critical trends?

By answering these questions, the research aims to develop an analytical model that clarifies how these periodization approaches framed the collective memory of Islamic society and embedded concepts of continuity and renovation in historical discourse.

3. The layer-based approach of periodization

Studies of the Arabic-Islamic scholarly legacy often conflate biographical dictionaries with layer-based approaches, treating them as distinct disciplines. However, explicit awareness of their interconnection appears in titles like "books of layers (ṭabaqāt) and biographies", which serve as synonyms in texts on notable figures across Islamic eras. This phrasing is common in indices of biographical dictionaries in libraries, including electronic ones. Serious studies, especially those influenced by modern western methods, view the layer-based approach as a subset of biographies ('Abd al-Ghanī Ḥasan, 1955, p. 53). In my view, this perspective captures the concept's usage than treating "layers" as an independent science akin to transmission chains "Isnad", biographies or genealogies.

Early and later biographers and historians classified content into layers, as evident in titles such as *"layers of jurists and hadith scholars", "the big layers", "layers of the most famous poets", "the great book of layers", "layers of grammarians and linguists"*. Dozens of works explicitly use "layers" in their titles, while others apply it methodologically without name it. What, then, is the meaning and concept of "layers", and when did its use begin in the Islamic legacy?

3.1. Layers "*Tabaqat*" Linguistically

The Arabic term *tabaq* (طَبَق) "layer" carries multiple meanings depending on contexts. In Ibn Sīdah's "*al-Muḥkam wa al-Muḥīṭ al-Aʿẓam*" (d. 458 AH), *al-tabaqu* (الطَّبَقُ) "the layer" refers to a group of people equal in status to another. *Al-tabqah* (الطَّبَقة) signifies assuming a state, and successive sheep generations are described as "*tabaqan and tabqan*" (طَبَقا وطَبْقا) (one layer after another) (Abu al-Hasan Ali Ibn Ismail Ibn Sidah, 2000, p. 293). Al-Zamakhshari (467 AH) interprets the Quranic verse *Latrakabun tabaqan `ala tabaqi* (لَتَرْكَبُنَّ طَبَقًا عَلَى طَبَقٍ) – "you will surely ride one layer after another" (Q. 84:19) as "state after state". The phrase *wamadaa tabiq baed tabaq* (ومضى طبق بعد طبق) – "layer after layer passed" means "a world of people after another". Time has *atbaq* "layers" as states, while people are *tabaqat* (طبقات) "layers" denoting hierarchical ranks. When one thing *tabaqa* (طابق) "matched" another, they are equivalent (Abu al-Qasim al-Zamakhshari, 1998, p. 592). Arabs used also *tabaq* (طبق) "layer" for a century, as Al-Azhari (d. 370 AH) explains in "*tahdhib allughati*", citing Al-Abbas ibn Abdul Muttalib: "when a world passes, a layer *tabaq* appears" meaning one century follows another. It is termed a layer *tabaq* because centuries and peoples succeed one another like strata of the earth: one perishes and another replaces it, each in its appointed time (Abi Mansour Muhammad bin Ahmad Al-Azhari, 1964, vol. 9p. 5).

From these dictionary explanations, the term existed in ancient Arabs speech, evolving toward equivalence and consistency. As in *Lisān al-ʿArab,* two things are *mutābiq* (مطابق) (layered) when congruent, and *al-muṭābaqah* (المطابقة) means conformity (Abu al-Fadl Muhammad ibn Makram Ibn Manzur, 1990, entry on "Tabaq"). It often denotes agreement among a group, whether large or small, such as a nation succeeding another. According to *Tahdhib al-Lughah,* the term *"tabaq"* (الطبق) denotes a group of people equivalent to another; it also refers to one nation succeeding another. Furthermore, *"tabq"* (الطَّبْق) signifies large creatures or a collective of people (Al-Azhari, 1964, vol. 9p. 5).

3.2. Terminological Definition of Layers

Terminologically, *tabaqāt* (layers) is a biographical approach introducing notables figures of a single generation or a shared category (e.g., in a science, age range, virtue, or profession). Popular in biographies of hadith collectors, Quran exegetists, philosophers, Sufis, and poets, it emphasizes the status and circumstances before birth and

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death dates (Muhammad Shafi'i Miftah Bushiya, 2012, p. 55). Functionally, it organizes biographies material into short historical contexts, often spanning one generation.

The term first appeared explicitly in Hadith narrator books (Muhammad Ali al-Thanawi, 1996, p. 1223), denoting contemporaries sharing age, teachers "*sheikhs*" and chains "*isnād*"(Muslim bin Al-Hajjaj Al-Naysaburi, 1991, p. 33). Early layers "*tabaqat*" did not rely on death dates or fixed temporal units, varying from ten to over twenty years (Muslim bin Al-Hajjaj Al-Naysaburi, 1991, p. 36). Sometimes, it depends on precedence in Islam (e.g., the first ten converted, people of Badr, people of al-Hudaybiyah, those who converted and emigrated between al-Hudaybiyah and the Conquest of Mecca *al-Fath*, and those who converted in the day of the Conquest). This is evident in works by Al-Khatib Al-Baghdadi and Ibn Al-Salah (Shams al-Din ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi, 2005, p. 334). Fundamentally, it represents a form of temporal arrangement and categorization that signifies periodization. For example, in the book title by Shams al-Dīn Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Dhahabī's (d. 748 AH/AD 1348), the term "aʿṣār" (أعصار)—the plural of "ʿaṣr" (عصر), meaning "eras"—meaning *ṭabaqāt* (طبقات) "layers": *Maʿrifat al-Qurrāʾ al-Kibār ʿalā al-Ṭabaqāt wa-l-Aʿṣār* (معرفة القراء الكبار على الطبقات والأعصار) "Knowledge of the Great Quran Reciters According to Layers and Eras", organizing content into eighteen layers from the Companions to his time.

Although al-Dhahabi phrased his book's title in a rhymed, melodic pattern, his inclusion of the term *aʿṣār* "eras"—along with his organization of the content into eighteen *ṭabaqāt* (طبقات; layers), spanning from the Prophet's Companions (*al-ṣaḥābah*) to his own era—clearly underscores the connotation of *ṭabaqāt* "layers" as temporal periods in biographical writings within Islamic civilization. This is further evidenced by the opening phrase of his introduction:

"This is a book containing knowledge of famous Quran reciters, who possess the chain transmission (isnād), mastery, and precedence in their lands, across layers tabaqat and times..." (Shams al-Din Abi Abdullah bin Ahmad al-Dhahabi, 1988, p. 23).

However, compilations of *tabaqat* "layers" sometimes extend beyond temporal frameworks, incorporating geographical factors or patterns of chain transmission-*isnād*, particularly for hadith narrators. Nonetheless, most usages of the term "layer" *tabaqah* emphasize temporal and historical periods. For instance, most biographers of *tabaqat* "layers" classify Prophet's Companions "*al-ṣaḥābah*" as one *tabaqah* "layer", the Successors "*al-tābiʿūn*" as another, the followers of Successors as yet another, and so forth.

Some prominent linguists have attempted to quantify a *tabaqah* "layer" temporally. For example, Ibn Sīdah defined it, as "*A tabaqah "layer" is twenty years*" (Ibn Sidah, 2000, entry on "tabq"). This ascertains the defined *tabaqah* "layer" strictly in temporal terms.

By chance, the evident textual that linked *tabaqat* "layers" to periods is the narrated hadith in *Sunan* of Ibn Mājah by Anas Ibn Malik, which is:

"*My nation is* (divided) *into five tabaqat "layers", each tabaqah "layer"* (lasting) *forty years; thus, my tabaqah "layer" and that of my Companions are people of faith and knowledge, while the second tabaqah "layer", from forty to eighty* (years), *are people of kindness and piety*" (*Sunan* of Ibn Mājah).

Regardless of Hadith's authenticity-whether sound, weak, or fabricated-its mere existence in this form explicitly defines *tabaqat* "layers" as temporal periods.

3.3. Origins of Layer-based Approach

Franz Rosenthal traces the roots of the layer-based "*tabaqat*" approach but rejects attributing it to ancient usages of the term *tabaqat* "layers" in describing the four successive Persian states. Instead, he views as an authentic Islamic method, distinct from the year-based arrangement common in Greek biographical traditions. This German orientalist regards it as a natural outgrowth of the concepts of "Companions" and "Successors", which emerged in the early second Hijri century amid the development of hadith criticism, particularly concerning chains of transmission "*asānīd*" and narrations (Franz Rosenthal, 1983, p. 33-34). As Al-Sakhawi highlighted in "Fath Al-Mughith", the purpose of biographers in organizing individuals into known *tabaqat* "layers", is as follows:

"*The tabaqat "layers" of narrators are among the most important matters; they ensure protection from confusion among those with similar names, nicknames, or attributes; enable the detection of fraud al-tadlīs (التدليس), and*

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facilitate understanding the true intent behind a chain of narrators "al-ʿanʿanah" (العنعنة)" (S. al-Din Al-Sakhawi, (2005), Vol. 4, p. 367).

Initially, the study of *tabaqat* "layers" was a branch of Hadith scholarship, aimed at verifying narrators' authencity by documenting their names, biographies, credibility, lifespan, and levels of accuracy and honesty in narration" (Bashar Awad Marouf, (1965), issue 5). This reflects the narrator's value within the transmission chain "*Isnad*" (ʿAbd al-Ghanī Ḥasan, 1955, p. 18), as echoed in Sufyan al-Thawri's statement: "When the narrators lied, we turned to history" (Al-Sakhawi, 2005, vol.4, p. 53).

Although Hadith narrators were the first to employ the layer-based approach "*tabaqat*" for these purposes, the same principle applies to other prominent figures in Islamic religious knowledge, such as jurists, linguists, exegetes, reciters, and poets. As George Makdisi observed, its goal was to identify qualified scholars capable of determining correct religion -Religious Orthodoxy (Makdisi, 1991).

4. Century-based Approach Periodization Among Muslims

During the Middle Ages –particularly after the sixth Hijri century- Muslim authors adopted a periodization method based on centuries, known as the century-based approach. This is evident in numerous book titles devoted to the biographies of scholars across various fields of knowledge, including poets, and occasionally extending to notable figures of warfare, politics, and governance. This phenomenon is especially prominent in writings from the stage often termed the "era of weakness and decline".

A survey of works from this period reveals dozens of books with titles that explicitly indicate periodization, typically covering one or two successive centuries. Other writings organize content implicitly by century, even if not reflected in the titles. These primarily date from the sixth to the thirteenth Hijri centuries, coinciding with the weakening of scientific activity in Islamic cities until the late nineteenth century, when Western knowledge increasingly influenced Arab intellectual life.

What distinguishes these titles is their rhythmic and melodic quality, which defines the temporal span through rhymed, harmonized structures. Often, the first part mirrors the second in form, prioritizing poetic appeal over lateral description. This style aims to "facilitate memorization and retention of speech, as well as incite the reader's emotions to engage them", rather than directly conveying the content (Kamal Al-Zamani, 2018, vol. 7, p. 71). In essence, all such titles pair a melodic phrase with a term denoting the period, as seen in examples like:

- *aldaw' allaamie/ alqarn altaasie* (الضوء اللامع/ القرن التاسع)- Shining Light/9th Century,
- *alnuwr alsaafir/ alqarn aleashir* (النور السافر/ القرن العاشر)- The Traveling Light/10th Century,
- *alkawakib alsaayira/alniat aleashira* (الكواكب السائرة/المئة العاشرة)- The Wandering Planets/The Tenth Hundred,
- *'iinsan aleuyun/sadis alqurun* (إنسان العيون/سادس القرون)- Human Eyes/Sixth Century,
- *alghurat altaalieatu/alniat alsaabiea* (الغرة الطالعة/المئة السابعة)- The Rising Forehead/The Seventh Hundred,
- *alghusun alyanieatu/shueara' alniat alsaabiea* (الغصون اليانعة/شعراء المئة السابعة)- The Lush Branches/Poets of the Seventh Century,

and numerous others.

This periodization is not confined to titles but confirmed by the content, where the subjects of biographies are those who were born, died, or lived primarily in the specified century. Authors sometimes modified the first part of the title to harmonize with the second, which denotes the timeframe, underscoring the deliberate nature of this appproach.

Nevertheless, an epistemological inquiry requires a deeper exploration of its roots. What factors prompted authors during this phase of Islamic authorship activity to adopt century-based periodization, especially following earlier methods like annals (used by storytellers), and the layer-based approach (used by biographers)?

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4.1. The Linguistic Meaning of "Century" in Arabic Dictionaries

For a comprehensive understanding of the century-based approach periodization, it is essential to examine dictionaries and lexicons from the era to elucidate the term *qarn (قرن)* "century" and its connotations among Arabs at the time, thereby uncovering motivations for its use in biographical periodization. In "*tahdhib allughati*" by Al-Azhari (d. 370 AH), *qarn* "century" is defined as:

"*The people of a period lived during the time of a Prophet or a generation of scholars, whether that span is shorter or longer... And those who were contemporaries in that time, while those who followed them belong to another contemporaneity*" (al-Azhari, 1964, vol. 9, p. 5).

In "*al-Muḥkam wa al-Muḥīṭ al-Aʿẓam*", Ibn Sīdah (d. 458 AH) explains *qarn (قرن)* "century" as:

"*One nation succeeds another, often spanning ten, twenty, thirty, sixty, seventy, or eighty years, representing the average lifespan of people in such an era. It is referenced in the Prophet's saying:* **"My nation's lifespan is between sixty and seventy years, with few exceeding that"** (Al-Tirmidhi (3550), Ibn Majah (3236)). *This applies to the people of Noah's era, as well as those of Moses, Jesus, Aad and Thamud on their lifespans... and so-and-so is on the same level as so-and-so, meaning in age and stature*" (Ibn Sidah, 2000, vol. 6, p. 363).

Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711 AH) in "Lisān al-ʿArab" defines the *qarn* "century" as a people of one era, specifying it as a hundred years. He cites a narration about the Prophet, who passed his hand over a child's head and said, "Live for *qarn* "century", so he lived for a hundred years" (Ibn Manzur, 1990, p. 334). Ibn Kathīr aligns with this view, noting that *qarn* "century" is commonly understood as a hundred years among many people" (Ibn Kathir, 1990, vol. 1, p. 101). Islamic tradition often limits the maximum human lifespan to a hundred years, as attributed to the Prophet. For instance, a Hadith narrated by Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, from ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿUmar states that the Prophet, after praying the Isha prayer near the end of his life, stood and said: Do you see this night? At the end of a hundred years, no one on earth will remain alive" (Ibn Kathir, n.d, vol. 1, p. 210). This suggests that a hundred years marks the utmost limit of life.

Furthermore, Al-azhari's earlier explanation highlights a connection between *qarn* "century" and renovation, whether through a prophet or a group of scholars. However, in common usage, *qarn* "century" typically denotes a hundred years, though it could vary slightly. This understanding influenced biographers, particularly from the eighth century onward, who frequently used the term *miʾah* "hundred" in their titles. Examples include:

- ʿAlī ibn Mūsā al-Andalusī (d. 685 AH) in his book "*al-Ghuṣūn al-Yāniʿah fī Maḥāsin Shuʿarāʾ al-Miʾah al-Sābiʿah*" (The lush branches in the beauties of the poets of the seventh century),
- al-Ghubrīnī (d. 714 AH) in "*ʿUnwān al-Dirāyah fī man ʿUrif min al-ʿUlamāʾ fī al-Miʾah al-Sābiʿah bi-Bijāyah*" (The title of knowledge about those scholars known in the seventh century in Bejaia),
- Ibn al-Fūṭī (d. 723) in "*al-Ḥawādith al-Jāmiʿah wa al-Tajārib al-Nāfiʿah fī al-Miʾah al-Sābiʿah*" (Universal incidents and beneficial experiences in the seventh century)
- Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852 AH) in "*al-Durar al-Kāminah fī Aʿyān al-Miʾah al-Thāminah*" (The hidden pearls in the notables of the eighth century) and others.

4.2. From Doctrinal Interpretation to Temporal Construction: Hadith of renovation at the end of a century

The earliest evidence of pre-Islam Arabs' precedence in treating a century as a distinct temporal unit appears in their poetry. For instance, the ancient centenarian pre-Islamic poet al-Mustawghir ibn Rabīʿah ibn Kaʿb ibn Saʿd, who reportedly lived for three hundred and twenty years, described his longevity in these verses (Ibn Qutaybah, 1960, p. 384):

"*I grew weary of life and its length,
and I increased the number of years by a hundred.
A hundred came after it, two hundred for me,
and I increased the number of months by years*" (Ibn Qutaybah, 1960, p. 384).

By referencing "*A hundred*" followed by "*two hundred*", the poet clearly periodizes his lifespan into hundreds-year increments. We might imagine him substituting terms like "*qarn*" (century) and two "*qarnain*" (two

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centuries) if they fit the poem's rhythm. Regardless of whether this exact form of periodization was widespread in pre-Islamic poetry or not, its prominence in early Islam is undeniable.

The century-based periodization in Islamic heritage relies on prophetic traditions that forecast the nation's future. A key Hadith, narrated by al-Bukhārī in his Ṣaḥīḥ, describes three successive centuries in which each generation is superior to the next: "The best among people are those of my century, then those who succeed them, then those who succeed them. After that, a people will come whose testimony precedes their oath, and their oath precedes their testimony" (Al-Bukhari and Muslim).

However, the most influential motivator for this century-based periodization was likely another Hadith, which promises religious renovation at the end of each century. As narrated by Abū Dāwūd: "God sends for this nation, at the head of every hundred years, one who renovates its religion" (Abu Dawud). This is echoed in a statement attributed to the Companion ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ: "Whenever a hundred years have passed since the beginning of this world, an event must occur at its end. When the end of a hundred years arrives, the Antichrist will emerge, and Christ will descend to kill him" (Al-Suyuti, 1982, vol.2, p. 108).

These prophetic Hadiths and companions sayings collectively shaped a long doctrinal history of Islam, forming an epistemological paradigm *(or Epistémé)* built on accumulated texts, concepts, and principles. This paradigm created an unconscious cultural structure (Abed al-Jabri, 2023, p. 38), posting that each century possesses unique characteristics superior to those of the following one; and that the century's end marks a pivotal moment of change -potentially heralding religious renovation or even apocalyptic events, such as the appearance of Antichrist and the descent of Christ.

The influence of these traditions on popular beliefs is evident in historical narratives. For example, al-Dīnawarī recounts a key political event in Islamic history: the emergence of Imam Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās, and the transfer of the Shiite call to the Abbasids in al-Ḥumaymah in the year one hundred and one AH (101 AH). Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī accepted pledges of allegiance from Shiite leaders, confident in success because it coincided with the end of the first century after the Prophet's Hijra. He reportedly stated: "This is the time of our wish and hope, for the end of a century in history; no nation's century has ever concluded without God revealing the truth of righteous and nullifying the falsehood of deceivers" (Ibn Qutaybah, 1960, p. 332). The first Abbasid imams further invoked the Quranic verse: "Or like the one who passed by a town which had fallen into ruin. He said, 'How will Allah bring this to life after its death?' So Allah caused him to die for a hundred years; then he revived him" (Quran, 2/ 259).

4.3. Semantic Transformations in the Understanding of the Prophetic Century: Dominance of the Mechanical Meaning

The Hadith stating, "The best among people are those of my century, then those who succeed them, then those who succeed them…" exerted a profound influence on the development of century-based periodization in Islamic historiography. This concept later dominated the structure of biographical works. Nevertheless, examining the Hadith in its original phrasing and tracing its reception reveals a significant semantic shift in the term *"qarn"* (century), transferring it from his collective meaning tied to peers and contemporaries to a mechanical temporal semantic limited to one hundred years.

On one hand, the Hadith in its common formulation-as in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Nasāʾī: "The best people are my century, then those who follow them…"- was understood as a prophetic divine sentence bestowing goodness on the first three Muslim generations, without precise distinctions among individuals within each. The majority of scholars held that this goodness includes all members of these generations, despite variations in their ranks. Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, however, argued that it applied to the nation as a whole in that era, not to every individual, noting that later generations might include figures superior to some from earlier ones. In his view, this status stemmed from these centuries' proximity to the Prophet and the sources of Revelation *"al-waḥy" (الوحى)*, granting them an exceptional place in Islamic historical consciousness (Ibn Abd al-Barr, 1993, Vol. 1, p. 190).

However, this collective understanding of the century-*"qarn"* did not endure. A temporal interpretation soon emerged, treating the term as a unit equivalent to one hundred years, which was then used to construct historical categories. This trend was reinforced by another prominent Hadith in Abu Daoud: "Allah sends for this nation, at the head of every hundred years, one who renovates its religion". This linkage prompted an interpretive shift,

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turning the century-*"qarn"* into a mechanical standard for dividing Islamic history into uniform temporal units, regardless of social or cognitive coherence within those periods.

Furthermore, later narrations, such as in *hilyat al'awlia',* present the Hadith as: "The best of centuries is this century in which I am with them..." diverging from versions in reliable collections. This reflects a lexical and semantic modulation, reducing the century-*"qarn"* to a mere temporal label and stripping it of its original meaning as a group bound by temporal and cognitive ties.

The original connotation of the *qarn* "century" is evident in the Hadith's grammatical structure: "The best people are those of my century, then those who follow them...". Here, the Prophet uses the plural pronoun "them" *hum(هم)* in "those who follow them", rather than a singular form that might denote a temporal unit. This implies goodness belongs to a group of people, not an abstract period. If the intent were a standalone temporal unit, the phrasing might have been "then the century that follows" rather than "those who follow them". Thus, the pronouns reinforce the century-*qarn* as a living collective entity, undermining interpretations that impose a mechanical, centennial connotation.

This shift contributed to what might be termed "mechanical periodization" in Islamic biographies; where centuries-*qorun* became closed units integrated into biographies without scrutiny of their internal dynamics or generative links. While this approach provided a clear temporal framework for categorization, it lacked the organic dimension found it in layer-based (*ṭabaqāt*) systems, which respected cognitive and social structures through transmission chains (*isnād*).

Revisiting prophetic texts in their original form and analyzing their linguistic and rhetorical structures enables us to reassess the connotation of the century-*qarn*, distinguishing its use as a socio-cognitive concept tied to generations from the countable temporal meaning imposed by later receptions. This distinction is crucial for understanding time-construction mechanisms in Islamic consciousness and deconstructing the periodization patterns that shaped Islamic historiography in subsequent centuries.

Biographers eagerly compiled works on scholars, righteous people, poets, and authors by century, with over seventy writers documenting intellectual movements through single–or two-century biographies. Typically, each century's renovator was identified from among scholars, with near-consensus on figures from the first century to the thirteenth AH (19th century CE), coinciding with the rise of Western epistemological influences.

Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, a ninth century scholars, surveyed religious renovators in his book *Al-Tanbīʾah bi-man Yabʿathuhu Allāh ʿalā Raʾs Kull Miʾah* (Prophecy of Whom God Sends at the Head of Every Century), noting agreements and disputes from the first century to his era. Notably, he addressed creedal views limiting Islamic historical time to the ninth century, allocating a shared century to the Antichrist and Al-Mahdi, whose rule would end before the century's close, transferring authority to Jesus Christ as the tenth century's renovator (Al-Suyuti, 1990, p. 64).

From the seventh to the thirteenth century, biographers periodized their works by centuries, sometimes viewing history itself as accounts of past centuries-as in Ibn Khaldūn critiqued in his Muqaddimah: "History is apparently just a storytelling about days, states, and the precedents of earlier centuries" (Abd al-Rahman (Ibn Khaldūn, 2016/1406, pp. 35–36). He likely aimed to criticize predecessors for reducing history to mere chronicles, a flaw evident in texts like Qāḍī Abū al-Qāsim Ṣāʿid ibn Ṣāʿid al-Andalusī's *Ṭabaqāt al-Umam* (d. 462 AH): "Those concerned with the news of nations searched all generations and examined the classes of centuries"(Ibn Said al-Andalusi, 1912, p. 12).

A primary critique of this periodization is its mechanical projection of time, prioritizing arbitrary counting historical, social, or cultural variables (Hassan Al-Talib, 2008, p. 154). Centuries do not emerge as distinct cultural or political eras with unique features (Abed al-Jabri, 2023, p. 44); they lack grounding in pivotal events or dualistic concepts: progress/decadence, contradiction/continuity, tradition/renovation, and connection/disconnection, ..Etc(Hassan Al-Talib, 2008, p. 148).

Despite this, century-based periodization reflects a cognitive unconsciousness shaped by the religious references emphasizing the goodness of early centuries(predecessor- *alsalaf*) and the sanctity of religious traitions. While it overlooked the historicity of cultural values, and intellectual patterns, it remains a prominent practice that fulfilled historical and documentary purposes. It facilitated the classification of Islamic cultural phenomena into temporal units, preserving the literary and cultural memory during periods of cognitive decline.

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The phenomenon's prominence in titles and texts raises questions about its neglect by historians of civilization and literature, particularly those studying periodization. Notably, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, a leading Arab intellectual critical of Islamic heritage, attributed century-based periodization to Europeans, denying its presence in the Arab world: "But we, in the Arab world, do not periodize our culture-except out of affection" (Abed al-Jabri, 2023, p. 44). Surprisingly, he viewed Arab historians' use of Hijri centuries as mere imitation of European tradition, despite al-Jābirī's awareness of Islamic biographers' practices, which he limited to the "first time" (seventh and eighth centuries) while ignoring its continuity to the thirteenth century (19th century CE). In contrast, we must highlight Arabic precedence in this domain. The German Orientalist Franz Rosenthal affirmed in *A History of Muslim Historiography* that century-based periodization originated with biographers, who divided biographical material by centuries, often arranged by years or alphabetically (Franz Rosenthal, 1983, p. 121). French historian Jacques Le Goff similarly notes the West's delay in adopting century-based periodization until the sixteenth century CE.

5. Conclusion

 Layer-based (*ṭabaqāt*) and century-based (*qarn*) periodization approaches represent complementary dimensions in Islamic historical consciousness. The former categorizes by shared scholarly chains and age groups, ensuring authentic Isnad (chain) within generations and preserving transmission credibility. The latter stems from prophetic traditions emphasizing early centuries' goodness, redefining the century-*qarn* as a hundred-year temporal unit, after its initial connotation of generational fraternity.

Despite apparent differences, these approaches interacted in biographical texts: layer-based writers incorporated broader "century" logic, while century-based ones used layers to detail individuals within periods. This fusion of Isnad (chains) stability and dynamic time created unique pattern balancing continual stability and renovation.

However, century-based periodization's uniform divisions sometimes obscured social and cognitive variances, necessitating critical review. Mechanical division inadequately capture class or cultural differences or factors rendering the century-*qarn* a practical unit.

This study opens avenues for future researches comparing Islamic periodization with that contemporaneous civilizations, leveraging its strengths (e.g., Isnad "chains" precision and temporal structure) while addressing weaknesses (e.g., uncritical veneration of early centuries and rigid divisions). Such efforts could yield flexible tools suited to the complexities of Islamic historical experience.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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