THE CONCEPT OF DAHR AND ITS HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE GĀHILIYYA AND EARLY ISLAM

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Every historical stage through which cultures develop creates its own worldview structure comprising major conceptual elements as well as segments of a lesser totality. When it comes to pre-Islamic culture, there is a common tendency to accept that belief in Allāh represented one of the most significant features of that period. It is frequently depicted in terms leaving little room for doubt that almost all of the Gāhili concepts stemmed out of the conviction that Allāh had been the creator of the universe, the giver of livelihood and the master of man’s life. Nonetheless, it would be worth seeing whether there might have been different categories, which could successfully compete with the notion of Allāh’s dominance over the Gāhili worldview and set the background for an apprehension of fate and history in a way dissimilar to the Islamic one, or at least to what Islam would purport to deem as peculiar to the Gāhiliyya. Any quest for such a dominant category would inevitably lead to the concept of dahr.

In his influential study about the relation between God and man in the Qur’ān Izutsu encountered the major question of dahr, and came up with a balanced theory which tried to reconcile two apparently contradicting notions. When analyzing the already mentioned theory of Allāh’s dominance over the pre-Islamic worldview and the dissimilar conclusions which a thorough review of the dahr notion could evince, Izutsu came to the following conceptual argument. “Man, once created by Allāh, severs his ties, so to speak, with his Creator, and his existence on earth is, from that time on, put into the hands of another, far more powerful, Master” (Izutsu 1964:124). As far as this mighty master is dahr, the question arises how the two powers, each pretending for ontological totality – Allāh and Fate – could co-exist in such a uniform conflation. The division between the responsibility for creation accorded to Allāh on the one side, and the sway over man’s life-span and death conferred on dahr on the other, seems to me to spring out of a rather gratuitous foundation. The only legitimate inference from Izutsu’s postulates could be that dahr was the main ontological power affecting men before the advent of Islam. As to whether the Gāhili individual was concerned with the matter of his creation or frightened by his grim death-dominated future remains yet to be seen.

While asserting the ubiquity of the dahr concept within the Gāhili worldview, Izutsu is inclined to confine his analysis to the individual aspect of the relation between man and Fate. This aspect is of great significance without any doubt; yet any comprehensive review of the dahr concept would reveal a differentiation within its
notional domain. The power of *dabr* does not affect man as much as it involves the whole Universe. It exceeds the field of personal and stretches over to the realm of the whole existence, which is effectively subdued to its unavoidable influence. Hence our analysis should follow the line of cleavage between the individual and supra-individual in the Gáhili concept of *dabr*.

The personal aspect of *dabr*

Texts relating to *dabr* abound in the pre-Islamic narrative discourse in such a ubiquity that one could hardly find a single genre of expression devoid of them. Gáhili poets employ the *dabr* notion in major and minor circumstances as if there were no other ontological power holding sway over their lives. Fate is depicted responsible for all that befalls the individual: primarily disasters and misfortunes. The significance of this concept in relation to man and his life is attested by the Qur’an itself:

“Wa-qāli:n mā hiya illā ḥayātun d-dunyā, namūtu wa-nahyā wa-mā yuhlikunā illa d-dabru”: “And they said: there is no other life but our mundane life, we live and we die, and only *dabr* brings our perdition” (Q. XLV: 24).

*Dabr* represents a caliginous force engulfing the whole existential realm of the Gáhiliyya. Sometimes *dabr* could grant man little respite, but its revenge would inevitably betide him sooner rather than later:

“Kagāka d-dabr u dawlatuhu siḡālun, takūru surūfiḥa bīnin fa-brinā// fa-bayn mā nuṣarru bībi wa-nardā, wa-law lubisat gadaratuṣu sinīn// iḏ inqalabat bībi karratū dabrīn, fa-layta l-ulū gubitū tabūna”: “Thus the power of *dabr* has been ever changing, with its vicissitudes coming and going// and whilst we rejoice and are satisfied with it, and if its goodness should continue for years// when once is smitten by the assault of *dabr*, you shall find those who were happy rendered grind” (Ibn Hisām, Sīra IV, 250).

Nothing can avail against the dark power of *dabr*, nor could anything escape from it, for “*dabr* devours all” (al-Maydāni, Maǧma‘ II, 240). *Dabr* blindly ambushes man with his deadly arrows coming from every direction, as to make their victim standing powerless at the pale of death. ‘Amr ibn Qāmi‘a reproves the “daughters of *dabr*”, who pursue man as merciless hunters:

“Ramatm banāt ad-dabr mīn ḥaytu lā arā // fa-kayfa lī-man yurmm wa-layya bi-rāmī”: “The daughters of *dabr* have shot at me from where I cannot see// what can one do, when he is shot at, while being unable to shoot back” (Izutsu 1964:126).

The phrase “banāt ad-dabr” evokes parallels with the pre-Islamic belief in the daughters of Allah and could well be a sign of resemblance between notions attached to both concepts. It may be that this similarity subsequently facilitated the absorption of *dabr* into Allah.

In addition to their fear from *banāt ad-dabr*, ancient Arabs believed that *dabr* could exhaust man’s stamina (al-Maydāni, Maǧma‘ II, 402) and subject him to an ordeal (*ibṭilā*). In this respect Umayya b. Abi ǦSalt states (Diḏān 36):

“Wa-man yaḥtalibi d-dabrīn minhu bi-lagratin, sayakbū laḥā wa-n-nā ‘ibatu l-qāṭaraddadī”: “And he who should be subjected to ordeal by *dabr*, would yield to it, for misfortunes are numerous”.

Hence any individual, who went through hardship, becomes qari‘u d-dabrī – *dabr* bitten. What worsened the situation of the pre-Islamic individual facing *dabr* was the ultimate inevitability of its fatal influence. As Zuhayr b. Abi Sulmā says, no rites or worship could deter the ominous power of that villain, which would finally bring about death and plunge man into the sea of eternal nothingness:


It is not surprising therefore to find the notions of *dabr* and death co-existing in a largert synomous context. In many instances *dabr* is juxtaposed with such terms, denoting death, as maniyya, ḥaf, manāyā, manun, himām etc. Thus the Gáhili poet al-Gatammaš ad-Dabbī laments his fellow tribesmen saying:

“Abīlā‘ī īlaw ǧayru l-himāmī aṣaḥakum ʿatābū wa-la-kīn mā ʿalā d-dabrī maʿtabī”: “O, my loved ones, if you were smitten by one save himīm, I would have reproved, but *dabr* cannot be reproved” (Abū Tammām, Hamāsā I, 426).

In general, the personal aspects of the *dabr* concept permeated man’s life span from its beginning till its end. It is hard to find any other ontological power which could compete with *dabr* in the sense of worldview significance. The belief in Fate appears to have held its sway over the Gáhili mind in every respect pertaining to the personal existence. Not surprisingly, Allah cannot be found to have occupied any important position within the Gáhili ontology. The theory of Allah’s dominance over man’s creation, emphasized in the Qur’an alone, must still be supported by more external proofs.

**Dabr** and the destiny of mankind and the world

The oppressive kingdom of *dabr* easily extended its sway beyond the life of the individual to engulf the destiny of his folk, nay the destiny of the whole mankind and universe. The unlimited notional scope of this concept suggests its totality within the Gáhili worldview, which – as it appears – was prone to assign both human life and the destiny of the world to the sole influence of *dabr*.

Many poetic passages show that *dabr* could effectively bring about the destruction of whole peoples. Thus we find in the pre-Islamic poetry examples of its limitless power, which would subsequently serve as a good basis for the Qur’anic admonitions and homiletic imagery. Sources reveal that the scriptural tales about people who perished due to heavenly damnation owe some or all of their origins to inveiglate
notional domain. The power of dahr does not affect man as much as it involves the whole Universe. It exceeds the field of personal and stretches over to the realm of the whole existence, which is effectively subdue to its unavoidable influence. Hence our analysis should follow the line of cleavage between the individual and supra-individual in the Gahili concept of dahr.

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"Wa-ma yugni tawâqqu'u l-mawtî say'an, wa-la 'aqdu t-tamâ'imi wa-lâ i-gadâri": "The fear of death shall avail nothing, nor [shall avail] attachment of amulets and blue necklaces" (al-İsfahâni, Ağaî X, 364).

It is not surprising therefore to find the notions of dahr and death co-existing in a larges synonymous context. In many instances dahr is juxtaposed with such terms, denoting death, as mañiyya, hatif, manayâ, manun, himâm etc. Thus the Gahili poet al-Gatammas ad-Dbî laments his fellow tribesmen saying:

"Abîlîa' lılaw ıgyru l-bimami așaβakum 'atabtu wa-la'kin mâ 'alu d-dhbâr ma'atub": "O, my loved ones, if you were smitten by one save himam, I would have reproved, but dahr cannot be reproved" (Abû Tammâm, Hamâsâ I, 426).

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pre-Islamic beliefs related to dahr. From amongst them we quote the following verse from the Hamása:

_“Wa-ahlakan tasman wa-ba’dahu// qadiyya bibim wa-qâd Ėduni// wa-ahla Ėlfin wa-Ma’tribin// wa-hayya Luqmâna wa-t-tuquni”;_ “And [dahr] damned Tasm and afterwards a lot of cattle, and Dû Ėdun, and the people of Ėlî and Ma’îrib, and the folk of Luqmân and the experienced” (Abû Tammâm, Hamása II, 14).

In this particular verse dahr acquires broad eschatological attributes unfolding over a vast range of old Arabian mythology and especially over those mythological strata, which are obviously related to the imagery of calamity and perdition. The eschatological flavour of the dahr concept is further affirmed by its believed responsibility for the end of the whole creation (dunya) as in the verse of Umayya b. Abî s-Salt:

_“Wa-lam taslami d-dunya wa in zanna ahluha// bi-sihhatiha wa-d-dabru qad yata-ğarrada”;_ “This world [ad-dunya] shall not survive, even if its inhabitants would presume its soundness, for dahr might show up” (Umayya, Divsán 36).

This second aspect of the dahr concept, which went to a great extent unnoticed by students of the Gahilîyya, is of greater significance for a proper understanding of the pre-Islamic worldview. The individual aspect of the dahr-related categories, which presents a gloomy picture of the Gahilî interpretation of the past and future, cannot be assumed to represent a self-sufficient notion standing aloof from any conceptual interaction with other corresponding notions. It represents instead the individual side of the more general eschatological category depicting dahr as the ultimate doom of mankind and its world. The individual tragedy of the Gahilî man would therefore be only a consequence lacking totality in comparison to the universal extensions that the belief in dahr appears to have acquired within the conceptual realm of ancient Arabia.

Having in mind the universal significance of dahr during the Gahilîyya, one may now ask to what extent stories about the paramount significance of Allah within the Gahilî pantheon might be lent credibility. Except for some vague îlalq imagery, attributed to Allah by the Qur’ân but not attested by any source extrinsic to it, efforts would be needed to vindicate any of the presumed powers of that deity before Islam. It seems as if in the case of Allah and dahr we face two typologically different categories pertaining to consecutive diachronic strata, while any synchrony is hard to attest.

_Dahr within the conceptual transformation between the Gahilîyya and early Islam_

Insofar as the concept of dahr has enjoyed an obvious totality in the Gahilîyya worldview, not only did it leave no substantial realm for any competing notion, but it also could seriously impede a subsequent introduction of such a one. It is therefore not surprising that when in the first quarter of the 7th century AD Islam appeared with its notion of a high deity, a dangerous conceptual clash occurred.

The gradual formation of the notion of Allah throughout the earliest period of the activities of the Prophet Muhammad ultimately brought about a new worldview category which was aimed at substituting the concept of dahr in its indigenous environment. The high god, introduced by Islam, soon came to be the paramount universal force, which could only in solitude reign over the world and the hereafter and control man’s fate both during his life and after death.

It appears from the extant sources about the Gahilîyya that Muhammad probably embarked on some attempts to eliminate the concept of dahr from the notional background of the Arabic religious milieu, but his endeavor hardly attained any palpable result. Muhammad’s countrymen could not easily forsake their ancient beliefs, and though some of them embraced Islam, the power of dahr continued to evoke their dread. We possess an instructive account to that effect about a Bedouin who came to Muhammad to announce his Islam, and endorsed his decision to accept the new religion by directing his oath towards dahr, the changing one (Uyyazn 1994:II, 28).

With the confusion between the notions of dahr and Allah being capable of endangering the whole future of Muhammad’s religion, the Prophet had to take a resolute action to preempt an eventual melting of the concept of High God back into the old belief in dahr. He managed to do this suitably and quite ingeniously. On the one hand, he finally resigned to dahr’s ubiquitousness and seemed prone to respect it as an independent universal power. On the other hand, though, he defended his own divine concept merely pronouncing that Allah is dahr. In one of his hadîqs the Prophet is quoted to say: _“la tasubbû d-dabra fa-inna l-lâha ta’âlâ huwa d-dabra”; “Do not abuse dahr, for God the Lofty one is dahr”_ (Ibn Ka’ûtir, Tafsir V, 295).

The reincarnation of dahr in Allah has not been as much a part of Muhammad’s political tactics as it was an intrinsic conclusion of the typological transformation between the culture of Gahilîyya and the worldview of early Islam. In the new conditions, dahr has been preserved as a term, but the concept behind it had already undergone a substantial shift.

It appears that with the advent of Islam Allah borrowed the fatalistic aspect of dahr. Yet it was not a mechanical transition, for what had been the blind Doom now became qadî’u llâhi – the wise predestination of the mighty Lord, which according to Hassân b. Tâbit is unavoidable:

_“Wa-ta’âlall anna l-mulka lis-lâhi wabdibhi wa-anne qadî’u l-lâhi là buda wâjî’u”;_ “You should know that power belongs solely to Allah, and that Allah’s predestination inevitably happens” (Hassân b. Tâbit, Divsán 242, v. 114).

This verse evinces the gradual shift of the Gahilî dahr concept towards the early Islamic notion of divine providence. Qadî’u l-lâhi became the conceptual opposite of the blind Doom. Instances of this transformation abound in the Qur’an itself. Thus, if dahr had been bound in the Gahilî mind with the image of a hidden archer, who sends his arrows at random indiscriminately destroying his victims, Allah be-
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came an the epitome of divine wisdom while displaying his power. Now he helps his worshippers and aims his wrath against the infidels as in the battle of Badr:

"Fa-lam tuqtubhum wāqūtun l-lāhi qātalabhum wā-ma ramayta ig ramayta wā-
lākinna l-lāha rama' : "You did not slay them but Allāh slayed them, and you did not send your arrows when you shot, but Allāh sent them" (Q. 8:17).

In Islam Allāh became the sole master of life and death:

"Wā-l-lāhu yuḥyiy wa-yumitu wa-l-lāhu bi-mā 'amāla ta'malin basīr : "Allāh brings life and death and Allāh is aware of what you do".

The concept of Allāh as the wise and mighty Lord, who requires for sins and rewards virtue, has given a new content even to the old tales about the destruction of whole peoples doomed by dahr. Now the tribe of ‘Ad has not perished due to the caprices of the blind Doom, but because of God's perdition:

"Fa-amma ‘Adun fa-stakbaru fi-l-ardi bi-gayri l-haqqi wa-qālu man asaddu minnA quwwatun aw lam yaraw anan l-lāha l-ka'di halagahum huwa asaddu minhum quwwat-
tan wā-kāni bi-ayātina yaqṣubun. Fa-arasalna 'alayhim riḥan sarsaran fi ayyamin nahi-
sātun li-nud iqabhum 'adaba l-hiẓi fi l-hayāt i-dunyā wa-la’adāb l-aḥriātī abzá wa-hum lā yunsarīn" : "And ‘Ad had become presumptuous on Earth without any right and they said ‘Who is more powerful than us?' Did not they see that Allāh who created the wind in ominous days to make them test the torture of humiliation in hayāt ad-dunyā and verily the torture of thereafter is more disgraceful and they shall receive no help?"

The incorporation of dahr into the High God concept of Islam represented the core of transition between the two worldview systems. It played a significant role to alleviate the transformation of Gāhili Arabs to the Islamic faith, which, though rooted to some extent in the ancient Arabian tradition, marked an abrupt departure from a number of values and notional complexes peculiar to the age of heathenism. Finally one can only wonder what could have been the ultimate fate of Islam, should Muhammad have been reluctant to merge Allāh with dahr.

**Islam and the emergence of historical thinking in Arabia**

The ubiquity of the dahr concept during the Gāhiliyya had another important reflection on the worldview patterns of that period. What I mean is the comprehension of history as a systematic vision of the past and the future.

If one looks at the accounts about the Gāhiliyya, one should promptly observe two of their main peculiarities. They are essentially non-historically organized on the one hand, and they represent a welter of what contemporary thinking may label as mere anecdotes on the other. The Islamic authors, who were so firmly devoted to a chronological marshalling of events after the biṣra, appear far from being concerned about defining the time of yawm al-basūs, yawm dāhîs wa-al-gabrā or almost any other event dating in the times of the Gāhiliyya.

The main cause for the Gāhili disinterest in history lies again with the concept of dahr. As we have seen, this concept left people alone with the blind Doom, and one can hardly suppose that such an individual, smitten by a constant fear of the vicissitudes of dahr, would have any organized vision of his past, or would direct his concern towards the future, where the inevitable perdition would be the only discernible perspective. The whole ontological value of existence was concentrated in the present moment of being. The Gāhili worldview was intrinsically pessimistic, while change and innovation were ostensibly negative categories. It is not surprising therefore to find that the concept of dahr has been closely bound to a number of terms representing change and transition. Umayya b. Abī Salīm calls it al-ṣaʿādīt - the new (Umayya, Dīwān 28), while Mutammīm b. Nūwyara says "ad-dahr abdaṭa nakbatan wa-nuz'ān" - "dahr afflicted [a new] disaster and suffering" (ad-Dabbi, al-Muḍādalyāt 540, v. 36). In another place the term dī l-hidāyān - "the renewing one" is employed (Uṣayna 1994:II, 28), while Hassān b. Tābit speaks of nāwā' ibu l-hadāṭān (Hassān b. Tābit, Dīwān 112, No. 18) - a location which strongly resembles the traditional phrase nāwā' ibu d-dahr, used in Arabic to denote vicissitudes of fortune.

It is apparent from the above fragments that the concept of dahr was associated in the Gāhili mind with the change of things in general. Renewal and transition were not positive categories before Islam, for they were bound with the irreversible flow of time, which had one direction - towards death as the final boundary of existence beyond which there was nothing worth striving for. Any change would only force the Gāhili individual out of the closed system of his momentary existence with its elusive pleasures, and make his being rather linear. Yet this kind of transformation was unbearable for a state of mind wherein change was akin to death and harmony was relegated to constancy.

Such a kind of worldview can hardly be supposed to comprise any feeling of history. The past was considered already gone and its events worth only an anecdotal recollection, while future was under the wicked sway of dahr and any direction of man's pondering towards it would evoke only suffering and pain. The later works of the Islamic authors only follow the main stream of the pre-Islamic worldview in its rejection of transition and change, and hence any account about Gāhiliyya necessarily came to be a corpus of scattered anecdotes rather than a chronologically marshalled sequence of events.

With the advent of Islam came the ultimate transition from the Gāhili non-historicity to the Islamic concept of history. Not only did the new religion effect a transformation of the fatalistic notion underlying dahr into the providential aspect of Allāh, but also necessitated a new vision of man's past and future. If the Gāhili

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1 Q. 3:156, also 2:28, 7:158, 10:56, 50:68.
came an the epitome of divine wisdom while displaying his power. Now he helps his worshippers and aims his wrath against the infidels as in the battle of Badr:

"Wa-l-lahu yuhyi wa-yumitu wa-l-lahu bi-ma ta'maluna basir": "Allah brings life and death and Allah is aware of what you do"1.

The concept of Allah as the wise and mighty Lord, who requites for sins and rewards virtue, has given a new content even to the old tales about the destruction of whole peoples doomed by dahr. Now the tribe of ʿAd has not perished due to the caprices of the blind Doom, but because of God's perdition:

"Fa-amma ʿAdun fa-stakbaru fi-l-ardi bi-gayri l-haqqi wa-qdlu man asaddu minnA qa'watan aw lam yarun anna l-lāha l-лаadi halāqahum hurwa asaddu minhum qa'wat-tan wa-kaññ bi-ayatina yaghadun. Fa-arsaln calayhim rihan sarsaran f i ayydmin nahf la yunsarun": And ʿAd had become presumptuous on Earth without any right and they said "Who is more powerful than us?". Did not they see that Allah who created them is more powerful and they rejected our signs. And we sent upon them cold wind in ominous days to make them test the torture of humiliation in hayāt ad-dunyā and verily the torture of thereafter is more disgraceful and they shall receive no help2.

The incorporation of dahr into the High God concept of Islam represented the core of transition between the two worldview systems. It played a significant role to alleviate the transformation of Gāhili Arabs to the Islamic faith, which, though rooted to some extent in the ancient Arabian tradition, marked an abrupt departure from a number of values and notional complexes peculiar to the age of heathenism. Finally one can only wonder what could have been the ultimate fate of Islam, should Muhammad have been reluctant to merge Allāh with dahr.

Islamic and the emergence of historical thinking in Arabia

The ubiquity of the dahr concept during the Gāhiliyya had another important reflection on the worldview patterns of that period. What I mean is the comprehension of history as a systematic vision of the past and the future.

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fatalism made pre-Islamic Arabs chary of seeking cause-and-effect relations between events, the Islamic divine providentialism put them between two main axiological poles: the one of divine creation and the other of judgment after the end of duniya. Due to this new feature introduced by Islam, mankind's history not only acquired its traditional chronological shape, but also emerged as a positive ethical and theological category within the divine creational providence.

Along the newly created historical line, Islam introduced another significant feature that lent history additional integrity, though making it at least partially cyclic. According to Muhammad's religion, Allah not only created the world and would some day bring about its end, but also sent to mankind numerous messengers, who were responsible to warn men about the coming Judgment Day and to rectify any diversions from God's path. History thus became a cycle of prophecies stretching from Adam, who had been the first messenger of God, to Muhammad b. Abdallah, who was the last one (ḥātim al-anbiyā').

The cyclic vision of history during the pre-Islamic period facilitated the revocation of the pagan fatalism, for the dāhr concept was not only dissolved into the concept of divine providence, but, as such, was easily projected back to the age of the ġahiliyya. Thus, the content of the old Arabian fatalism shifted towards the Islamic notion of divine wisdom and was finally subdued to the newly introduced vision of the prophetic history of mankind. With Muhammad's ministry the cyclic history came to its end, and a linear chronology was introduced that began with the linear move of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina during his hiǧra. Subsequent events were sequentially marshalled in a chronological chain that would end only when God initiates the final Judgment.

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The new Islamic understanding of history, introduced by the divine revelation to Muhammad, greatly influenced the way Muslims began comprehending facts of the Islamic history. This being the case the era before Muhammad’s ministry became not a self-standing historical stage in the development of Arabia, but an integral part of the prophetic paradigm ushered in by Islam. For the Islamic consciousness the ġahiliyya became a vivid example of how the ancient monotheism declined after the time when people had been one nation.

The global Qur’anic understanding of the ancient monotheism and the deviation of mankind from it had its particular impact on the emergence of the concept of the Arabs’ own digression from monotheism towards idolatry. The history of the Arabic nation had been permeated with monotheism from its very beginning: long before Muhammad, Arabs had had their prophets Ibrahīm and Ismā‘īl, who taught them the principles of monotheism. After Ibrahīm and Ismā‘īl died, Arabs professed Islam but gradually erred from its path and added to the one God a number of lesser deities: šūrakā’.

Last but not least, the “digression story” had an enormous influence upon the subsequent development of Islamic concepts about pre-Islamic religion, which for Muslims became a pantheon where Allāh held a superior position, while other deities could not challenge him in terms of power and influence. The notion of the ġahiliyya divine pantheon withstood the challenge of time and easily migrated into contemporary studies, where it acquired different methodological shapes and went through a number of analytic paths. But in all cases, the reasoning ensued from a common premise implying that the concept of Allāh somehow managed to acquire a paramount position in the heathen milieu, which nonetheless remained faithful to the idols too. Yet any attempt to prove the existence of a ġahili pantheon must consider, before everything else, the Islamic perception of history as an intrinsically monotheistic phenomenon, and its strong influence upon later conceptual developments, which affected not only Islamic history, but easily stretched over the epoch prior to the rise of Islam.

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