

The Preservation of Arab Culture in the Age of Ignorance

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1 Foundations of Cultural Heritage

Across societies and historical periods, human communities have exhibited a persistent and inherent concern for the preservation of three interrelated pillars of cultural continuity: territory, language, and religion. The pre-Islamic Arabs, commonly designated as the Arabs of the Days of Ignorance (Jāhiliyyah), are a salient illustration of this dynamic. Although literacy was not widespread among them and written culture did not assume a central role in their intellectual life, they nonetheless displayed a high regard for safeguarding these foundational elements of their heritage.¹ Cultural preservation, therefore, did not depend upon the diffusion of writing. Instead, it was secured through alternative, highly developed mechanisms.

Foremost among these mechanisms was the cultivation of prodigious mnemonic capacity. The Arabs of the Jāhiliyyah relied primarily upon the disciplined faculties of memory and oral transmission rather than upon written documentation. Their chests were metaphorically described as “repositories of knowledge” (*khazā’in al-‘ilm*)² due to the degree to which learning was internalized and embodied. The preservation and dissemination of this knowledge took place through structured social practices, including exclusive literary gatherings and widely attended annual public fairs. These assemblies served as the principal conduits of cultural transmission. They enabled the circulation of poetry, genealogy, legal custom, and collective memory from individual to individual through recurrent and institutionalized forms of oral exchange.

2 Private Academic Gatherings of the Jāhiliyyah Period

Among the customary practices of the Arabs in the Jāhiliyyah period was the regular convening of both private and public assemblies intended to preserve and transmit their intellectual and literary inheritance. Tribal leaders, in particular, were known to gather at dusk

¹ Ibn Sa’d, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*, 3:24, 35, 77, 148; 6:36; Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Buldān*, 3:583.

² Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-Ḥuffāz*, 1:160 (Hyderabad: Majlis Dā’irat al-Ma’ārif al-‘Uthmāniyyah).

in the outer precincts or courtyards of their dwellings, where they would receive companions and engage in discussion on a range of matters.

This mode of conserving learning finds eloquent expression in the poetry of Zuhayr b. Abī Salmā (d. 609 CE). In his praise of Hārim b. Sinān, renowned for his patronage of poets and men of discernment, Zuhayr states:

وَفِيهِمْ مَقَامَاتٌ حَسَانٌ وَجُوهُهُمْ
وَأَنْدِيَةٌ يَتَابُهَا الْقَوْلُ وَالْفِعْلُ

Among them are assemblies, fair of countenance,
And forums frequented by noble speech and deed.

وَإِنْ جِئْتَهُمْ أَلْفَيْتَ حَوْلَ بُيُوتِهِمْ
مَجَالِسَ تُشْفِي بِأَحْلَامِهَا الْجَهْلُ

If you were to attend them, you would find around their homes
Gatherings whose discernment heals ignorance.³

It is instructive to examine several of these assemblies more closely.

1. Among the Arabs, some convened such meetings on a daily basis, while others did so weekly. These gatherings played a formative role in cultivating literary competence and sustaining the transmission of inherited knowledge. It was not uncommon for affluent members of society to host such assemblies, offering hospitality in the form of food while simultaneously fostering intellectual exchange. A notable example is that of Abū Bakr ‘Abd Allāh b. Abī Quḥāfah ‘Uthmān al-Taymī al-Qurashī (634-573 CE), may Allah be pleased with them. According to a report attributed to ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās, may Allah be pleased with them:

كانت قريش تألف منزل أبي بكر رضي الله عنه لخصلتين: للعلم و الطعام، فلما أسلم، أسلم عامة من كان يجالسه.

“The Quraysh frequented the house of Abū Bakr for two reasons: knowledge and food. When he embraced Islam, most of those who sat in his company embraced Islam as well.”⁴

2. Ghaylān b. Salamah al-Thaqafī (d. 664 CE), was known as a man of letters, a poet, and an individual of intellectual refinement. He is reported to have hosted comparable literary gatherings on a weekly basis.⁵ In due course, he too embraced Islam.

3. With the advent of Islam, however, a new and transformative mode of recitation emerged. The Qur’ān began to be proclaimed publicly among the Arabs, morning and evening. Its linguistic power, rhetorical force, and aesthetic excellence captivated its listeners, while its ethical and theological teachings initiated revolutionary changes in individual and collective life.

³ *Dīwān Zuhayr* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1363 AH), 113; Aḥmad Ibrāhīm al-Sharīf, *al-Makkah wa al-Madīnah fī al-Jāhilīyyah wa ‘Ahd al-Rasūl* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-‘Arabī), 37.

⁴ ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa-l-Tabayyun*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, 4:76; Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah*.

⁵ Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-Muḥabbar* (Hyderabad), 357; Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Maydānī, *Majma‘ al-Amthāl*, 1:41 (Egypt); Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *al-Iṣābah fī Tamayūz al-Ṣaḥābah*; Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *al-A‘lām*.

This development elicited deliberate countermeasures from certain leaders of Quraysh. Among them was al-Naḍr b. al-Ḥārith al-Qurashī (d. 642 CE), a chieftain reputed for his familiarity with multiple languages. Perceiving the Qur’ānic proclamation as a threat to established norms and to what might be termed the cultural self-understanding of his community, he organized rival gatherings in which he narrated tales of the kings of Persia and al-Ḥīrah, including Rustam and Isfandiyār. He is also reported to have attended other assemblies and recounted these narratives there.

The Qur’ān characterizes such diversions as *lahw al-ḥadīth*, or discourse that distracts from the remembrance of God.⁶ In Sūrat Luqmān 31:6, it states:

﴿ وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يَشْتَرِي لَهْوَ الْحَدِيثِ لِيُضِلَّ عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ وَيَتَّخِذَهَا هُزُوًا أُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ ﴾

“And among humankind are those who purchase idle discourse, without knowledge, in order to lead others astray from the path of Allah and to take it in mockery; for such there awaits a humiliating punishment.”⁷

4. As noted above, it was customary among the Arabs of the Jāhiliyyah to assemble at the residences of their notables, often convening on raised platforms situated outside their homes. The Prophet Muḥammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, is reported on one occasion to have attended such a gathering in order to present the message of Islam to its participants. He was accompanied by two of his closest Companions, Abū Bakr and ‘Alī, may Allah be pleased with them both. During the exchange, the leading figure of the assembly posed to Abū Bakr a question concerning his tribal lineage. Abū Bakr’s reply was so precise and incisive that the questioner was left confounded. The episode gave rise to a proverbial expression, “Indeed, misfortune is bound to one’s speech” (*inna al-balā’ muwakkal bi-l-mantiq*).⁸

In the early Madinan period, the Qurayshī Muhājirūn (Emigrants) continued the practice of convening such assemblies in Madinah. These gatherings came to be known as *majālis al-qalādah*, literally “assemblies of the necklace” (an expression connoting a stringing together of precious elements, here understood as jewels of knowledge).

5. Among those associated with these circles was ‘Ubayd Allāh b. ‘Adī b. al-Khiyār al-Qurashī, who hosted a *majlis al-qalādah* in his home, located adjacent to the residence of ‘Alī, may Allah be pleased with him. He died during the caliphate of al-Walīd b. ‘Abd al-Malik.

Such gatherings attracted committed seekers of knowledge. Mu‘āwiyah, may Allah be pleased with him, himself is reported to have attended them regularly. If ever prevented from doing so, he would inquire about their proceedings, asking, “What was discussed in the *majlis al-qalādah*?”⁹

⁶ Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, commentary on Q 31:6.

⁷ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suhaylī, *al-Rawḍ al-Unuf*, 1:188–90 (Egypt: Maṭbū‘āt al-Jamāliyyah).

⁸ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Maydānī.

⁹ Mu‘arrij b. ‘Amr al-Sadūsī, *Kitāb Ḥadhf min Nasab Quraysh*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-‘Urūbah), 43.

‘Alī, may Allah be pleased with him, likewise held sessions near the so-called Pillar of Repentance (*ustuwānat al-tawbah*) in the Prophet’s Masjid in Madinah. There, Qurayshī Muhājirūn would assemble and engage in learned discussion. This circle, too, came to be designated a *majlis al-qalādah*.¹⁰ Over time, however, more formalized scholarly circles and institutional settings for instruction emerged, gradually superseding these earlier assemblies and diminishing their central role.

6. In the Jāhiliyyah period, public assemblies were held throughout the year at designated times and locations, structured according to a recognized calendrical cycle. Among the most prominent of these was the market (*sūq*) of Dūmat al-Jandal, situated in northern Najd, which convened in the month of Rabī‘ al-Awwal. In Rabī‘ al-Ākhir, a fair was held in Baḥrayn at Hijr. The market of ‘Umān took place in Jumādā al-Ūlā, followed in Jumādā al-Ākhirah by the market of Mushaqqar in Ḥaḍramawt. The market of Shiḥr, also in Ḥaḍramawt, was held in Rajab. In Sha‘bān, the market of Tihāmah, located between ‘Umān and ‘Adan, drew considerable attendance. During Ramaḍān, the market of ‘Adan animated southern Yemen, while in Shawwāl the markets of Ṣan‘ā’ and Ḥaḍramawt likewise attracted large gatherings and commercial activity.

These seasonal market fairs functioned not merely as commercial centers but as expansive public forums. They afforded opportunities for the exchange of goods, the arbitration of disputes, the recitation of poetry, and the articulation of political and tribal positions. Participation was not formally restricted by religion, tribal affiliation, lineage, or social rank. As a result, Jews and Christians also frequented these gatherings, particularly the largest and most celebrated among them, collectively referred to in later sources as the Aswāq al-‘Arab or Mawāsīm al-‘Arab.

7. Of these annual markets, the most renowned was the market of ‘Ukāz, held in the month of Dhū al-Qa‘dah.¹¹ It represented the principal annual convocation of the Arabs, drawing visitors from diverse regions of the peninsula. Beyond its commercial importance, it served as a preeminent venue for literary competition and intellectual display. Poets presented their compositions before large audiences, and reputations were forged in this arena of public evaluation.

The pre-Islamic poet Abū Dhu‘ayb alludes to the scale and atmosphere of this gathering:

¹⁰ ‘Alī b. Aḥmad al-Samhūdī, *Wafā’ al-Wafā’ bi Akhbār Dār al-Muṣṭafā*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, 2:449 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1393 AH).

¹¹ The ‘Ukāz *sūq* was located near Qarn al-Manāzil on the route to Ṣan‘ā’, approximately twelve miles from al-Ṭā’if, and is described as the market of Qays b. ‘Aylān and Thaḳīf. See Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makkah*, 1:190–91; Aḥmad ‘Aṭīyyat Allāh, *al-Qāmūs al-Islāmī*, 2:450 (Cairo); Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, s.v. “‘Ukāz,” 9:227; Maḥmūd Shukrī al-Ālūsī, *Bulūgh al-Arab*, 3rd ed., 1:267 (Cairo).

As for its present identification, it is commonly situated on the road between Mecca and al-Ṭā’if opposite Wādī Qanīs, regarded as its original site, Qanīs being described as a junction linking Yemen, Iraq, and Mecca. Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī locates it at the place now known as al-Qahāwī in Wādī Layyah near al-Ṭā’if, while Shakīb Arslān suggests that the market may have alternated annually between Qanīs and al-Qahāwī. See Shakīb Arslān, *Mukhtārāt Naqdiyyah fī al-Lughah wa al-Adab wa al-Tārīkh* (Beirut), 90.

When the tents are erected at 'Ukāz,
And trade is set in motion and thousands assemble...¹²

8. The annual literary competitions at 'Ukāz are reported to have commenced around 540 CE. Although the fair encompassed commercial and social dimensions, its most celebrated feature was the prominence accorded to poetic and literary performance. In comparison with other seasonal markets, 'Ukāz enjoyed a distinctive reputation as the principal arena of literary contestation.

For poets and tribal representatives alike, the 'Ukāz market provided a public platform for boasting, disputation, and the assertion of collective prestige. It is said that the very name 'Ukāz connotes disputation or mutual contest. Distinguished poets were accorded marked honor: tents were erected specifically for them, which signaled both their status and the centrality of their craft to the proceedings. When al-Nābighah al-Dhubayānī Ziyād b. Mu'āwiyah (d. 604 CE), attended the fair, he is reported to have taken up residence in a red leather tent prepared for him.¹³

Within this setting, poets recited their compositions before recognized masters of the art, whose critical judgments conferred prestige and shaped reputations.¹⁴ Their opinions were solicited, poems were compared and evaluated,¹⁵ and aspiring poets found in 'Ukāz an unparalleled opportunity to present their verses to attentive and discerning audiences.¹⁶

In the Jāhiliyyah period, 'Ukāz effectively operated as a center of intellectual and cultural circulation and dissemination. Through its proceedings, poetic compositions spread rapidly across the peninsula, transmitted from tribe to tribe until they were widely known and recited. The following episode illustrates the perceived reach of its assemblies. When Umayyah b. Khalaf al-Jumahī disparaged Ḥassān b. Thābit, may Allah be pleased with him, later renowned as the poet of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, Ḥassān responded with a pointed challenge. He warned that his opponent's conduct would be exposed and disgraced at 'Ukāz, declaring:

أَتَانِي عَنْ أُمِّيَّةٍ زُورٌ قَوْلٍ وَمَا هُوَ بِالْغَيْبِ ذِي حِفَاظِ

News has reached me of false speech from Umayyah,
Yet its reality is no hidden matter to the discerning.

سَأَنْشُرُ إِنْ بَقِيَتْ لَكُمْ كَلَامًا يُنْشَرُ فِي الْمَجَامِعِ مِنْ عُكَاظِ

¹² Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, s.v. "'Ukāz."

¹³ Ibn Qutaybah, *al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'arā'*, 1:167 (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1386 AH).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:159, 165.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:344.

¹⁶ Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 4:34.

If I remain alive, I shall proclaim words
That will be spread in the assemblies of ‘Ukāz.¹⁷

The celebrated pre-Islamic cavalier Ṭarīf b. Tamīm al-‘Anbarī once expressed, in boastful verse, the renown he enjoyed at ‘Ukāz:

أَوْكُلَمَا وَرَدَتْ عُكَاظَ قَبِيلَةٍ بَعَثُوا إِلَيَّ عَرِيفَهُمْ يَتَوَسَّمُ

Whenever a tribe arrives at ‘Ukāz,
It dispatches its spokesman to observe and mark me.

فَتَوَسَّمُونِي أَنَّنِي أَنَا ذَلِكُمْ شَاكِي السَّلَاحِ فِي الْحَوَادِثِ تُعَلِّمُ

They recognize me as that very man,
Fully armed, whose mettle is known in battle.¹⁸

The Prophet Muḥammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, is known to have visited the ‘Ukāz market prior to the advent of revelation and heard there the celebrated sermon of Quss b. Sā‘idah, remembered in later tradition for its eloquence and rhetorical force. The address came to be regarded as a notable specimen of early Arabic oratory and continues to be cited in classical anthologies of Arabic literature.¹⁹

It is likewise established in the *sīrah* literature that after the commencement of his prophetic mission, the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, visited the seasonal markets of ‘Ukāz,²⁰ and Dhū al-Majāz²¹, with the noble purpose of inviting the assembled tribes to Islam.

The duration of the Arab’s attendance at the ‘Ukāz, Majannah,²² and Dhū al-Majāz²³ markets followed a customary sequence tied to the lunar calendar. With the sighting of the crescent of Dhū al-Qa‘dah, tribes would gather at ‘Ukāz and remain there for approximately

¹⁷ Muḥammad Ṭāhir Darwīsh, *Ḥassān b. Thābit* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1976), 167.

¹⁸ al-Ālūsī, *Bulūgh al-Arab*, 1:268. The gathering at ‘Ukāz was held during the month of Muḥarram, one of the sacred months in which warfare was prohibited. Notwithstanding this prohibition, horsemen would veil their faces with cloths so as not to be recognized by potential adversaries, while still displaying their valor in combat. The poet alludes to this customary practice.

¹⁹ Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā’il al-Nubuwwah wa Ma‘rifat Aḥwāl Šāḥib al-Sharī‘ah*, 1:453–63 (Cairo, 1380 AH); Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah*, 2:230–37.

²⁰ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah*, 141.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

²² Majannah, situated approximately twelve miles from Makkah, was the territory and marketplace of Kinānah. See Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makkah*, 1:190–91; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, s.v. “Jinn,” 16:254.

²³ Dhū al-Majāz was located to the right of ‘Arafah. See Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makkah*, 1:190–91; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, s.v. “Jawz,” 8:190; Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu‘jam al-Buldān*, 4:142 (Beirut: Dār Šādir); Muṣṭafā Šādiq al-Rāfi‘ī, *Tārīkh Ādāb al-‘Arabīyah*, 4th ed., 3:188 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabī, 1394 AH).

twenty days. They would then proceed to Majannah, where they stayed for ten days. Upon sighting the moon of Dhū al-Ḥijjah, they assembled at Dhū al-Majāz for eight days, after which they departed for ‘Arafah on the Day of Tarwiyah, provisioned with sufficient water for two or three days’ travel.

These gatherings served multiple functions. In addition to trade and the procurement of necessary goods, participants settled outstanding debts, paid compensation where required, negotiated the release of captives, and convened literary assemblies.

The centrality of the ‘Ukāz market in pre-Islamic intellectual life may be appreciated from the fact that the cumulative literary production of the preceding year was publicly presented there for evaluation and acclaim. Established poets recited their latest compositions before discerning audiences, while aspiring entrants into the literary sphere tested their abilities in the same arena. In this manner, cultural memory and poetic convention were transmitted to a new generation through a well-established and socially sanctioned process.

The impact of these fairs extended beyond their immediate setting. When the tribes proceeded to ‘Arafah and Muzdalifah for the pilgrimage, then the largest periodic convocation of the Arabs, the verses and narratives heard at the markets often remained upon their tongues and were recited in those sacred precincts. The Qur’ān, however, sought to reorient this practice. It admonished believers to devote the days of pilgrimage not to tribal boasting or ancestral celebration, but to the remembrance and glorification of God. In Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:200, it declares:

﴿فَإِذَا قَضَيْتُمْ مَنَاسِكَكُمْ فَاذْكُرُوا اللَّهَ كَذِكْرِكُمْ آبَاءَكُمْ أَوْ أَشَدَّ ذِكْرًا﴾

*So when you have completed your rites, remember God as you remember your forefathers, or with even greater remembrance.*²⁴

In 746 CE, Kharijite (Khawārij) forces reportedly plundered the market with such severity that it ceased thereafter to function as the principal annual center of literary exchange.²⁵ In subsequent periods, other urban venues, such as Mirbad in Baṣrah and Kināsah in Kūfah, assumed analogous roles within the evolving intellectual geography of the Islamic world.

Surely, all must come to an end, except the ultimate sovereignty of the Lord, exalted and everlasting.

²⁴ Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān min Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān*, 2nd ed., 2:296–98 (Cairo: Maktabat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1373 AH); Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Aẓīm*, 1:243 (Cairo: ‘Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī); Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, 2:431 (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Dār al-Kitāb al-Miṣriyyah, 1946); ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭī, *al-Durr al-Manthūr fī al-Tafsīr bi al-Ma’thūr*, 1:233 (Tehran: al-Maktabah al-Islāmiyyah, 1377 AH); Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1:266–65 (Cairo: Maktabat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1367 AH).

²⁵ Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Ḥawfi, *al-Ḥayāt al-‘Arabiyyah min al-Shi‘r al-Jāhilī*, 4th ed. (Cairo, 1382 AH), 61.

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