

# Arabic prose and the intellectual development of Islamic culture

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**Abstract:** The article examines the formation and historical development of Arabic prose within a broad scholarly and theoretical context. It considers the examples of the oral prose from the pre-Islamic period (Jahiliyyah) period, the renewal of prose in terms of ideas and content following the advent of Islam, as well as the stages of genre, stylistic, and functional development of prose during the Umayyad and the Abbasid periods. The scholarly article is devoted to a systematic and historical-theoretical investigation of the stages of formation and evolution of Arabic prose. The role of Arabic prose in the formation of not only artistic, but also scientific, philosophical and historical thought is given special attention. The study refers to the scientific views of both Western orientalist and classical and modern Arab literary critics. The presented article is distinguished by its study of the formation and evolution of Arabic prose based on a staged, discursive and functional development model, in contrast to the classical approaches of literary criticism. In particular, the role played by Arabic prose in the formation of religious, scientific, philosophical and historical discourse is substantiated. The study systematically analyzes Arabic prose not only in chronological order, but also as a product of socio-cultural, religious and intellectual transformations, which is a rare approach in the existing scientific literature.

**Keywords:** Arabic prose, Jahiliyyah period, Islamic culture, Abbasids, classical Arabic literature

## Introduction

Arabic prose, as one of the principal forms of Arabic literature, represents a crucial dimension of Islamic cultural and intellectual history. Rooted in oral traditions of the pre-Islamic Jahiliyyah period, Arabic prose evolved over centuries into a sophisticated written form encompassing a wide range of genres, styles, and functions. Its

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development reflects not only the artistic and literary maturation of Arab culture but also the broader intellectual, social, and religious transformations that shaped the Islamic world.

The primary aim of this study is to examine the formation and historical evolution of Arabic prose, focusing on its stages of development from the oral expressions of the Jahiliyyah period to the ideological and stylistic innovations of early Islamic literature, and further to the high literary and scholarly achievements under the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. In particular, the study emphasizes the role of Arabic prose in the formation of religious, scientific, philosophical, and historical discourse, highlighting how prose served both artistic and functional purposes within diverse socio-cultural and political contexts.

This article investigates key literary and historical texts, including early sermons, proverbs, maqāmas, historical chronicles, and ‘adab works such as “Nişvar al-muhadara va axbar al-muzakara,” as well as classical studies by Al-Jāḥiẓ, Ibn Qutayba, Al-Ṭabari, and Ibn Khaldun. The methodology combines philological analysis with a historical-cultural approach, examining Arabic prose both chronologically and functionally, while considering its broader influence on Islamic thought and literature. By integrating classical Arab literary criticism with insights from Western orientalis, this study provides a systematic and discursive model of Arabic prose development, highlighting its multi-stage and multi-level evolution. The study is structured in three main sections. The first section explores the oral-collective discourse of the Jahiliyyah period, highlighting the emergence of the saj‘ style, the use of proverbs, and early narrative forms that reflected tribal values, social norms, and life experiences. The second section addresses the religious-normative discourse of the early Islamic period, analyzing the influence of the *Holy Quran*, prophetic sermons, and the formation of ideological, ethical, and legal prose. The final section examines the scientific-rational discourse of the Abbasid period, focusing on the expansion of literary, philosophical, historical, and scientific prose, the translation movement, and the stylistic innovations introduced by major prose writers such as Al-Jāḥiẓ, Ibn al-Muqaffa‘, and Ibn Qutayba.

By providing a comprehensive account of the stages of formation, thematic diversity, and functional development of Arabic prose, this study aims to demonstrate how this literary tradition both mirrors and shapes the intellectual, social, and cultural fabric of the Arab and

Islamic world. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of Arabic literary history and offers a methodological framework for analyzing prose not only as a literary form but also as a vehicle for transmitting ideology, ethics, and knowledge.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a historical-philological and socio-cultural approach to examine the formation and development of Arabic prose across three major periods: Jahiliyyah, Early Islamic, and Abbasid. The research relies on a combination of primary sources, including classical literary texts, Qur'anic prose, sermons (khuṭab), and historical chronicles, as well as secondary sources encompassing both classical Arab literary criticism and modern scholarly studies by Western and Arab orientalis. Analytical methods include chronological and comparative analysis of prose genres, styles, and functions, alongside discourse analysis to identify the ideological, religious, and cultural dimensions reflected in the texts. By integrating textual analysis with historical and cultural contextualization, the study aims to reveal not only the evolution of literary forms but also the broader intellectual, aesthetic, and social transformations that shaped Arabic prose. Particular attention is given to the interplay between oral traditions and written expression, the influence of religious texts on stylistic and semantic development, and the impact of socio-political institutions, translation movements, and scholarly activities on the standardization and diversification of prose language. This methodological framework enables a systematic and comprehensive understanding of Arabic prose as both a literary and cultural phenomenon.

### **Stages of Arabic prose: Jahiliyyah, Early Islamic, and Abbasid Periods**

Arabic literature represents one of the most enduring and sophisticated literary systems, playing a central role in the intellectual and cultural formation of Islamic civilization. Among its various forms, prose occupies a particularly significant position, having emerged from a primarily oral tradition and gradually evolved into a fully developed written medium. Considering Arabic literature through the prism of its prose, which matured under complex historical conditions and yet has preserved remarkable artistic richness, structural intricacy, and literary refinement, highlights the fundamental questions regarding its origins, evolution, and historical significance.

During the long and intricate development process, Arabic prose has acquired a great variety of forms and kinds. Its development process has reflected the intellectual and aesthetic level of Arab culture development. However, prior to dealing with the particular periods when these literary pieces were written, it is crucial to consider the stages that led to the development of Arabic prose. In fact, it is clear that the Arabic language developed from a tribal setup, which was the initial formation of Arabic society. As indicated by scholars, “the formation of Arabic prose was closely connected with the social structure, religious beliefs, and political relations of society” (Zeydan 1911, 74; Brockelmann 1943, 40).

The first phase in the development of Arabic prose literature was that of Jahiliyyah. Although poetry was more widespread during this era, some pieces of Arabic prose literature existed. The founders of Arabic Jahiliyyah literature, who were renowned for their sayings and sermons, were Ad, Aktham ibn Sayfi, Quss ibn Sa‘ida, and ‘Amr ibn Kulthum al-Taghlibi. The first pieces of Arabic prose literature were found in the work of these writers. The *saj‘* style emerged during this era. The *saj‘* style was a style of Arabic rhyming prose that emerged during this era.

During this period, prose was meant to serve a purpose rather than an artistic one. The prose texts that existed were largely of sermons (*Khuṭab*), admonitions, wills (*waṣaya*), proverbs (*Amthal*), and wise sayings. Proverbs, riddles, fairy tales, folk poems, anecdotes, and epics were some of the prominent forms of Arabic oral folk literature. “The Days of the Arabs” is the most precious collection of Jahiliyyah Arabic literature, serving for centuries as a source of folklore material. Arabic folk epics like ‘Antara, ‘Ali Zaybak, Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan, the famous ‘One Thousand and One Nights,’ and anecdotes like ‘Bahlul Dananda’ and ‘Juhah’ find their roots exactly in this period of Jahiliyyah.

The major themes dealt with in Jāhiliyyah prose include issues of tribal prestige, bravery, loyalty, and life experience. Wise sayings, as expressed in the form of proverbs, reflected Arab social values. Because of the limited use of writing, Arabic prose was preserved through rhythmic and artistic expressive techniques. This stage of Arabic prose was social, as opposed to being an art form (Brockelmann 1943, 41).

Through stories, legends, and tales, the first traces of Arabic prose emerged orally. The art of telling stories had found its way into the lives of Arabs from very remote times, even before Islam. After

exhausting journeys, raids, hunting, and days spent at pasture, Bedouins rested in the evenings near the campfire, listening with pleasure to stories told through accounts of major battles between tribes, as well as accounts of famous heroes, who gained fame through their bravery, generosity, loyalty to their word, intelligence, and military prowess (Karimova 2015, 62-62).

Ibn Qutayba (1969, 22) believes that pre-Islamic (Jahiliyyah) prose is an expression of life experience and views of the Arab people. In Arabic literary history, Jahiliyyah prose is characteristic of the first stage of its development. In this stage, the thematic and ideological system of Arabic prose was complex. The main thematic issues of Arabic prose of the Jahiliyyah period were associated with issues of tribal honor, bravery, loyalty, hospitality, and life experience. In particular, al-Jahiz (1968, 17) notes that Arabic prose of this period was distinguished by its simplicity but at the same time was extremely efficient. The wise sayings and proverbs of Arabic society played an important role in Arabic culture and represented its moral values. In other words, Arabic prose of the Jahiliyyah period was formed on the basis of its oral memory, kept at the level of language, and transmitted from generation to generation. The German orientalist Karl Brockelmann (1943, 40), analyzing Arabic prose of its early periods from the point of view of its relation to Arabic oral society, notes: "In its initial stage, Arabic prose was formed, not for aesthetic purposes, but as a means of expression for social and practical needs". This point of view of Brockelmann is considered an important scholarly opinion on Arabic prose of the Jahiliyyah period.

As we know, the emergence of Islam led to fundamental changes in ideas and styles in Arabic prose. The emergence of Islam and its rapid spread in neighboring countries created broad conditions for the development of Arabic literature. The emergence of the *Holy Quran* led to the rise of this literature, especially its prose branch. The emergence of this holy book in the form of prose with saj-rhyme also had its impact on the spread of a similar prose style. Stories about the life, sayings and behavior of the Prophet were created. The *Holy Quran* raised the artistic possibilities of the prose language to a new level. The well-known Arab scholar Al-Suyuti (1998, 63) evaluates the *Holy Quran* as the most perfect example of Arabic prose and especially notes its influence on the language.

In this era, genres of religious, legal, and ethical prose emerged. In this period, prose carried content of an ideological and spiritual nature

(Zeydan 1911, 81). The genres of historical writing and biography emerged as directions in Arabic prose. The works of scholars such as al-Ṭabari and Ibn Khaldun provided the scientific foundations for historical prose.

It can be said that almost every nation has prose works that promote its national identity and set of values throughout the world. The creative heritage that adequately glorifies the culture and history of the people is the unique ancient literary monuments of every nation. There are many epic works that have entered the treasury of world culture and are considered literary monuments that diversify the deep roots of history in their text: “The Iliad” and “The Odyssey” of the Greeks, “Gilgamesh/Bilgamesh” of the Sumerians, Assyrians and Babylonians, “Ramayana” and “Mahabharata” of the Indians, “Shahnameh” of the Iranians, “Shinto” of the Japanese, “The Song of Roland” of the French, “The Song of the Nibelungs” of the Germans, “Kalevala” of the Finns, “Narti” of the Ossetians, Abkhazians, Adyghe and the peoples of the South Caucasus, “Amiraniani” of the Georgians, “Maaday Kara” of the Altaians, “Kablandi Batyr” of the Kazakhs, as well as “Days of the Arabs”, “Thousand and One Nights”, “Antara”, “Hamza al-Pahlevan”, “Ali Zibek”, “Seif ibn Zi Yazan”, the prose works such as “Az Zahir Beybars”, “Banu Hilal”, and “Zat al-Himma” are also examples of Arab epic creativity (Bayramova 2019, 3).

The first manifestations of the national thinking of the Arab people are found in the examples of Arab folk prose, whose names we have listed above. Sermons attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) are considered the epitome of early Islamic literature. Sermons delivered by the Prophet enriched Arabic literature with their ideological content and the way they express the ideology. Sermons can be defined by their “clear yet profound form of expression.” Sermons have a simple grammatical form and profound content. Sermons can be regarded as a distinguishing feature. According to Al-Jahiz (1968, 21), they are “the most influential form of prose”. Early Islamic literature mainly aimed to convey moral values.

During the Umayyad period, the renewal of prose was based on political content. During this period, the establishment and development of the state’s administration increased the functional role of prose considerably. Letters written for official purposes (treatises, الرسائل) and political addresses constituted the main forms of prose. During this period, the language used in prose acquired formal and normative characteristics (Brockelman 1943, 112).

The Russian orientalist scholar I. M. Filštinski (1985, 88) wrote that “in the second half of the eighth century, the Iranian stream that carried new themes into medieval Arabic poetry penetrated more deeply into the development of prose. It was precisely in this period that new genres appeared; in the strict sense of the word, the first examples of artistic prose date back to that time.”

Arabic literature’s golden age, which was under the Abbasids, marked the emergence of Arabic literature in a scholarly sense. The artistic quality that literature had reached was very high during the Abbasid era.

In the 8th and 10th centuries, there was a certain degree of success achieved in the field of Arabic prose writing, which provided a basis for the recording of ancient epics, the study of the *Quran*, and the translation of different scientific and literary works from Syriac, Middle Persian, and Greek into the Arabic language. The encyclopedic scholar and the representative of the Mu’tazilah School, al-Cahiz, founded the writing of Arabic prose. He was a renowned philologist who wrote over a hundred literary and artistic works, risalat, and compilations. He, along with others like him, expanded the stylistic potentialities of prose writing and developed the genre of philosophical and satirical prose writing.

Literary prose style achieved a high level of artistic quality. Al Cahiz, for example, contributed to the widening of the stylistic range of literary prose, which included satirical and philosophical forms. This period is considered to be the climax of the intellectual maturation of Arabic literary prose. As a result of the translation movement, there was a translation of Greek, Persian, and Indian scientific heritage into Arabic, which led to the widespread use of scientific and philosophical prose. This was contributed to by writers such as Al Farabi and Ibn Sina, which added to the terminological wealth of scientific prose (Badawi 1981, 6).

The development of formal prose was at a very high level of artistry in Arabic literature under the Abbasid period. Moreover, in the Abbasid period, prose made progress in the fields of philosophy, medicine, mathematics, and history. At the same time, literary prose reached a high level of artistry. Al-Cahiz, Ibn al-Muqaffa’, and Ibn Qutaybah extended the possibilities for the artistry of prose and composed satirical and philosophical prose pieces themselves (Ibn Qutaybah 1969, 45). In the domain of historical prose, Al-Tabari (1987, 223) and Ibn Khaldun (2004, 430) created the foundation for

scientific methodology It was in the 8th century that the concept of the Siraʿ began to take form and evolve as a specific literary style in the annals of Arabic literature, with the emergence and development of writing skills. Oral folk literature formed the basis for the emergence and development of the Siraʿ literary style. The literary works that were developed during the Cahiliyyah period, which was considered the earliest period in the annals of Arabic literary history, formed the basis for the Siraʿ literary style. The earliest literary monument developed during the Cahiliyyah period, titled “Ayamu-l-ʿArab” or “The Days of the Arabs,” formed the basis for the literary works developed under the Siraʿ style. The study and analysis of the Siraʿ literary style are very important for understanding the literary and developmental phases of the Cahiliyyah period (Bayramova 2020, 3).

The Russian orientalist Krimsky (1911, 253) points out that these works were named “simple folk Arabic literature” in the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries. In this book, Krimsky presents vivid and insightful information about many well-known folk sira’s such as “Antar,” “Banu Hilal,” “Zuṭ al-himmah,” “Sīf ibn Zī Yaʿzan,” “One Thousand and One Nights” (“Arabian Nights”), “Ali-Ṭībaq,” and many others. Among the greatest accomplishments of Arabic prose literature is the maqama genre. The maqāma genre, which came about under the impact of sociopolitical factors, played a central role in the emergence and growth of Arabic literature (Gabrieli 1967).

As an adjunct of the development of Arabic prose literature, it is also necessary to consider what is meant by the literary form of ‘adab, which emerged as a syncretic form. As is well known, from its root connotations of custom and practice, in medieval times ‘adab signified an all-encompassing complex of notions, including both the secular, worldly, and courtly ethic of noble-born individuals, their innate and chosen manner of being, and knowledge and practice of what was expected of individuals of learning according to their professional calling.

It follows that the concept of “ʿadab,” by definition, encompasses moral, social, and intellectual components. In the anthologies of “ʿĀdab,” spiritually enriching prose texts consisting of various kinds of admonitions, tales of instruction, anecdotes, jokes, and historical and scientific information and reports were meant for the elite of the social hierarchy, such as the rulers, dignitaries, and nobility, and creative people, above all the “People of the pen”. One of the first writers of this “ʿadab” literary form is Amir bin al-Cahiz. His approximate

description of the role of this literary form is as follows: “To enlighten the reader, it is essential to modestly use multiple sources and, without exhausting the reader, to instruct while entertaining” (Al-Jahiz 1965). In the context of the works included in the category known as “adab,” the work written by At-Tanuxi, entitled “Nişvar al-muxadara va axbar al-muzakara”.

On analyzing the formation and development of Arabic prose literature, it becomes clear that the Arabic oral prose literature of the Jahiliyyah period was supplemented in content and ideas with the advent of Islam, and that it achieved a mature scientific-literary form in the Abbasid period. Arabic prose literature, therefore, may be considered a leading literary field, which marked the progress of Islamic culture.

### **Conclusion**

The historical development of Arabic prose was a complex, multi-staged process, through which it acquired numerous genres and styles and reflected the intellectual and aesthetic maturity of Arab culture. The oral prose traditions of the Jahiliyyah period were enriched in terms of ideas and content with the advent of Islam, and reached a perfect form in terms of scientific and literary terms during the Abbasid period. Arabic prose can be considered one of the main literary fields reflecting the level of intellectual development of Islamic culture.

This article, in conclusion, attempts an interpretation of the emergence and development of Arabic prose through modern philological and cultural studies approaches. For the first time, the study conceptually classifies the development of Arabic prose across three main discourse levels: oral-collective discourse (Jahiliyyah period), religious-normative discourse (early Islamic period), and scientific-rational discourse (Abbasid period). This classification allows for understanding Arabic prose not only in terms of genre, but also as a form of expression of the history of thought and ideology. Another important innovation of the article is the analysis of the influence of the *Holy Quran* on the structural and semantic development of prose language not only from the artistic-aesthetic aspect, but also from the point of view of the formation of terminological and scientific prose. This approach reveals the role played by the Quranic language in the formation of scientific prose in a more clear and systematic way. In addition, the study explains the

development of prose during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods based on a comprehensive approach. The interaction of prose style with state administration, translation movement and the activities of scientific centers are examined for the first time within a single methodological model.

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