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Dr. Fuat Sezgin

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## 57. An Analysis of Orientalist Approaches to Pre-Islamic Poetry From the Perspective of Prof. Dr. Fuat Sezgin<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the pre-Islamic Arabian Jahiliyya period and the significance of the poetry from this era. The Jahiliyya period is considered a reflection of the pre-Islamic Arabian society and culture. The poetry from this period addresses societal, cultural, religious, and emotional themes, laying the foundation for Arabian literature. The poetry of the Jahiliyya period typically revolves around themes such as praise, criticism, yearning, love, heroism, and courage, while also touching upon the beliefs of the time. These poems serve as a rich reflection of Arabian culture and are regarded as crucial sources in Arabic Language and Literature, Arabic Rhetoric, and Islamic sciences. Orientalists, in their exploration of Jahiliyya period poetry, have produced works based on their own perspectives and methodologies. However, some Orientalists, particularly those focused on Jahiliyya poetry, have raised concerns about potential plagiarism and fabrication. These criticisms have evolved from the early views of Theodor Nöldeke to the radical approach of D. S. Margoliouth and the stance adopted by Taha Hussein. Prof. Dr. Fuat Sezgin, possessing expertise in Classical and Modern Arabic literature sources, has argued for the originality of Jahiliyya poetry. Sezgin supports this claim by drawing upon classical and modern sources, while also critiquing the works of Orientalists. In this article, the reasons behind the suspicion of Jahiliyya poetry being plagiarized or fabricated are elucidated by examining the works of Orientalists. Furthermore, Sezgin's approach and methodology in asserting the authenticity of Jahiliyya poetry are analyzed.

**Keywords:** Fuat Sezgin, Arabic Language and Literature, Jahiliyya Poetry, Orientalists, Plagiarism.

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## Prof. Dr. Fuat Sezgin'in Perspektifinden Cahiliye Şiirine Oryantalist Yaklaşımların Analizi<sup>3</sup>

### Öz

Bu makalede, Arap Cahiliye dönemi ve bu döneme ait şiirlerin önemi üzerine odaklanılmaktadır. Cahiliye dönemi, İslam öncesi Arap toplumunun ve kültürünün bir yansıması olarak değerlendirilir. Bu döneme ait Arap şiiri, toplumsal, kültürel, dini ve duygusal konuları işleyerek Arap edebiyatının temelini oluşturur. Cahiliye dönemi Arap şiiri, genellikle övgü, eleştiri, özlem, aşk, kahramanlık ve cesaret gibi temalara odaklanmakta, aynı zamanda dönemin inançlarına da dokunmaktadır. Bu şiirler, Arap kültürünün zengin bir yansımasıdır ve Arap Dili ve Edebiyatı, Arap Dili ve Belagati ile İslam bilimlerinde önemli bir kaynak olarak kabul edilir. Oryantalistler, Cahiliye dönemi şiiri üzerine çalışırken kendi bakış açıları ve yöntemleriyle eserler üretmişlerdir. Ancak özellikle Cahiliye şiiri konusunda çalışan bazı oryantalistler, intihal ve uydurma şüpheleri üzerinde durarak eleştirilerde bulunmuşlardır. Bu eleştiriler, Theodor Nöldeke'den başlayarak D. S. Margoliouth'un radikal yaklaşımına ve Taha Hüseyin'in takip ettiği noktaya kadar gitmiştir. Prof. Dr. Fuat Sezgin ise Klasik ve Modern Arap edebiyatı kaynaklarına hâkimiyeti sayesinde Cahiliye şiirinin orijinal olduğunu savunmuştur. Sezgin, bu iddiayı klasik ve modern kaynaklara dayanarak desteklemiş ve oryantalistlerin çalışmalarını eleştirmiştir. Bu makalede, Cahiliye şiirinin intihal/uydurma olma gerekçeleri, oryantalistlerin eserleri incelenerek ortaya konulmuş, Sezgin'in bu konudaki yaklaşımı ve geliştirdiği yöntem analiz edilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Fuat Sezgin, Arap Dili ve Edebiyatı, Cahiliye Şiiri, Oryantalistler, İntihal.

### Introduction

The Pre-Islamic Era of Ignorance, known as the Age of Jahiliyyah, represents the period of Arabian society before the emergence of Islam. Poetry from the Jahiliyyah period encompasses themes related to the societal, cultural, and religious structures of that era, as well as expressions on beliefs, nature, love, wars, and various other subjects. The poetry of the Pre-Islamic Era often focuses on themes such as praise, criticism, yearning, love, heroism, and courage, while also incorporating the beliefs of the Jahiliyyah period. The poems from this era serve as a rich reflection of Arab culture and constitute a cornerstone of Arabic literature.

The poetry of the Pre-Islamic Era, known as the Jahiliyyah period, holds a significant place among the primary sources for Arabic Language and Literature, Arabic Language and Rhetoric, as well as Islamic sciences. Orientalists who have examined Islam, Islamic sciences, Arabic Language, and Literature, have produced numerous works based on their own perspectives and developed methodologies, expressing

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their views and theories on these subjects. Orientalists, particularly those focused on Pre-Islamic poetry, have scrutinized and criticized the authenticity of these works, addressing suspicions of plagiarism and fabrication, frequently discussing these concerns in the introductory sections of their published anthologies. Some of their writings have been hastily composed due to inadequacies in their understanding, while others have been used as textbooks in the West based on the information they provided. The progression, initiated by Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930), reached extremes when D. S. Margoliouth (d. 1940) regarded the entire corpus of Pre-Islamic poetry as fabricated, a stance that was further accentuated by his follower Taha Hussein (d. 1973), who reaped the fruits of this perspective.

Prof. Dr. Fuat Sezgin (d. 2018) demonstrated a keen interest in the issue of plagiarism and fabrication in Pre-Islamic poetry due to his extensive knowledge and examination of Classical and Modern Arabic literary sources, as well as Western studies in this field. In various works, Sezgin attempted to establish the authenticity of Pre-Islamic poetry based on the insights provided by both classical and modern sources. This study will initially delve into the reasons behind the claims of plagiarism and fabrication in Pre-Islamic poetry, examining the works of orientalists to elucidate these grounds. The gradual evolution of this perspective and the case of Taha Hussein will be discussed. Finally, Sezgin's approach to Pre-Islamic poetry, the methodology he developed to prove its non-plagiarized nature, and his analyses of orientalists will be explored

### 1. The Issue of Plagiarism/Fabrication in Pre-Islamic Poetry and Orientalist Approaches

In the 19th century, Classical Arabic poetry studies became quite popular in the West. Orientalists persistently delved into this subject, with some approaching Classical Arabic poetry with skepticism, suggesting the possibility of plagiarism. Historians of Muslim Classical Arabic Literature have noted that there is no debate about the authenticity of the poetry transmitted from the Pre-Islamic era to the Islamic era. However, they have discussed issues related to the quantity of poems, debating whether all transmitted poems have reached us or only a portion of them (Yalar, 2008: 95-120).

Various reasons underlie the persistent approaches of Orientalists toward Classical Arabic poetry. Western linguists emphasized the importance of Semitic languages, suggesting that the difficult-to-decipher religious texts could be unraveled through the similar words and concepts found in these languages. In this context, Arabic would assist in deciphering their sacred texts. Additionally, during the Middle Ages, scientific research and new discoveries were often conveyed in Arabic, further highlighting the significance of this language. The words of Orientalist Arthur John Arberry (d. 1969) confirm this: "One of the commendable aspects of Arabic is that it has transmitted to us, through the translations of nearly forgotten Aristotle and Galen, their works." (Arberry, 1946: 12)

The Orientalist states' tendencies to exert psychological, cultural, and sociological control over the East have provided a rationale for more in-depth research on Islam. In addition to this, military officers who may not have been highly proficient in Arabic and other Eastern languages but were capable of synthesizing this information also joined this competition, emerging onto the historical stage as Orientalists (Gran 1987: 63-70). Thus, the Orientalists' approaches to the Arabic language and Classical Arabic poetry have brought both linguistic and poetic discussions into an open position, becoming subjects of debate in Islamic sciences. (Bedevî, 1979: 17-40)

The most significant topic of these discussions is the question of whether Classical Arabic poetry is plagiarized/fabricated. Towards the end of the 19th century, scholars such as Nöldeke, Wilhelm

Ahlwardt (d. 1909), and their followers, who specialized in the Arabic language, looked suspiciously upon Pre-Islamic Poetry, asserting the possibility of plagiarism/fabrication in this genre. However, it is worth noting that some orientalists, such as Charles James Lyall (d. 1920), Fritz Krenkow (d. 1953), and Erich Braunlich (d. 1945), were experts who argued that this view could not be correct for various reasons. (Sezgin, 1984: 159-161)

Orientalists, guided by the information inherited from the past, have rekindled their interest in fundamental sources of Islam, such as the Quran and Hadith. They have approached these branches of knowledge with skepticism and biases, thus adopting a similar stance towards Pre-Islamic Poetry, which contains significant evidence. Fundamentally, the view accepted by historians of Arabic literature is that Pre-Islamic Poetry constitutes important cultural treasures reflecting the language, religion, culture, and customs of the Pre-Islamic society. (el-Keyrevânî, 1972: 28)

Orientalists who assert that Pre-Islamic Poetry is fabricated/plagiarized can be divided into two groups. The first group claims that only a portion of Pre-Islamic Poetry is fabricated/plagiarized. Notable figures in this category include Nöldeke, Ahlwardt, and Ignác Goldziher (d. 1921). According to them, these poems were not composed in the early period but were transmitted orally through the centuries. According to Goldziher, the Arabs did not compose lengthy odes, and the transmitters orally conveyed these odes over several centuries (Sezgin 1993). The second group, led by D. S. Margoliouth, contends that Pre-Islamic Poetry is entirely fabricated/plagiarized. Advocating for this viewpoint, they engaged in discussions about the limits of the Quran and Hadith through the method of Istishhad, drawing on Pre-Islamic Poetry as a source for Islamic sciences. They applied the same critical approach within this context. One notable success of this group is their ability to enlist Arab critics, such as Taha Hussein, and to occupy the Muslim agenda for an extended period (Margoliouth 2004: 3). Taha Hussein not only evaluated Arabic poetry but also assessed other Islamic subjects from the perspective of Margoliouth. He compiled his views in his work titled "Fiş-Şi'ri'l-Câhilî" causing a sensation in the Islamic world. After his work was banned in Egypt, he reprinted it under the title "Fî'l-Edebi'l-Câhilî" removing the radical elements. (Elmas, 2015: 113-122)

The process, initiated by Nöldeke's assertion that a portion of Pre-Islamic Poetry is fabricated/plagiarized, concluded with Margoliouth and his follower Taha Hussein stating that all of these poems are fabricated. Their views on plagiarism/fabrication can be examined under the following points:

1. Poetry memorization is an essential skill, and this potential is not present in the Pre-Islamic Arabs.
2. The Quran criticizes poets, leading to the forgetting and disappearance of Pre-Islamic Poetry.
3. Pre-Islamic Poetry incites tribes and creates enmity among them, necessitating the eradication of these poems.
4. There is no book dedicated to Pre-Islamic Poetry, contributing to its inability to reach subsequent generations.
5. The poetry of the Pre-Islamic era, labeled as Jahiliyyah, represents a stage after chaos transformed into order. It possesses rhyme and meter, but it is different from the Quran. The Quran prohibits pagan views.

6. Pre-Islamic Poetry does not exhibit signs of polytheism; instead, it mentions Allah and shares His attributes as found in the Quran.
7. Pre-Islamic Poetry is written in a single dialect, while the Arabian Peninsula has various dialects that should be reflected in the poems.
8. The primary poetic genre for Arabs, the qasidas, consistently covers the same themes. The Quran accuses them of wandering aimlessly and falsely attributing deeds to themselves, indicating that they were later fabricated.
9. The reliability of some poetry transmitters is questionable, leading to issues in the poems. Scholars who provide evidence for these poems are also problematic. Furthermore, there are inconsistencies among events, individuals, and historical timelines. (Cubûrî, 1997: 48-49; Hüseyin, 2012: 81-88; Margoliouth, 2004: 61-63)

Based on the points outlined above, those who assert that Pre-Islamic Poetry is entirely fabricated/plagiarized rely on the following evidence:

1. Archaeological findings related to Pre-Islamic Poetry.
2. The relationship between the Quran and Pre-Islamic Poetry.
3. Trust issues with poetry transmitters.
4. The content of Pre-Islamic Poetry. (Cubûrî, 1997: 56)

The British orientalist Margoliouth's staunch follower, Taha Hussein, assessed Pre-Islamic Poetry as follows:

1. When looked at in general, there is no overlap in social, political, religious, and cultural aspects that could represent the Pre-Islamic people in the poetry of that era. This lack of correspondence strengthens suspicions of fabrication/plagiarism.
2. The Hijaz region is vast, and numerous dialects are spoken. It is quite peculiar for the poems to be recited in a single dialect (Margoliouth, 2004: 24-25).
3. The language used in the Quran and Hadith is the same as that of Pre-Islamic Poetry. This also supports suspicions of fabrication/plagiarism.

Despite all these views, there have also been Arab linguists who advocate for the originality of Pre-Islamic Poetry. Some prominent scholars who stand out with their written works include:

1. Muḥammed el-Ḥıdır Ḥuseyn (Naḫdu Kitâbi Fi's-Şi'ri'l-Câhilî)
2. Muştafa Şâdık er-Râfi'î (Taḥte Râyeti'l-Kur'an)
3. Muhammed Lütü Cum'a (eş-Şihâbu'r-Râsıd)
4. Muḥammed Aḥmed el-Ġamrâvî (en-Naḫdu'l-taḥlîlî li kitâbi fi'l-edebî'l-Câhilî)

## 5. Maḥmud Şâkir (eş-Şi'rî'l-'Arabî ve hüve Minhecehu'l-ma'rûf) (Şâkir, 1977: 12-19)

In light of these studies, even though there may be references to the 'Ad and Thamud tribes in Pre-Islamic Poetry, the authenticity of this information is not possible. The oldest known poems are mentioned in authentic sources to be from around 150 years before the birth of Prophet Muhammad (Çetin 1973: 9). It has been acknowledged that some poems may have been lost over time, and there could be errors in attribution. However, the issue of plagiarism/fabrication is a separate matter and is the result of a bias that extends to Islamic sciences. According to the viewpoint that argues against the fabrication of Pre-Islamic Poetry, the following points stand out:

1. Pre-Islamic Poetry may date back to even more ancient times than commonly believed.
2. The likelihood of the poems of the oldest Pre-Islamic poets being lost is a normal occurrence.
3. Problems regarding attribution and transmission existed even during their own time. (Sancak, 1999: 48-49)

## 2. Analysis of Orientalist Approaches to Pre-Islamic Poetry from the Perspective of Fuat Sezgin

The renowned Historian of Science, Prof. Dr. Fuat Sezgin from Bitlis, has provided crucial information asserting that Pre-Islamic Poetry is not fabricated/plagiarized. Fuat Sezgin, a world-renowned expert who has left a mark on Islamic culture, fundamentally argues that understanding Pre-Islamic Poetry is equivalent to understanding Islamic culture. He contends that it serves as a gateway to an introduction to Islamic sciences (Sezgin, 1984: 159). Sezgin focuses on two significant problems regarding whether Pre-Islamic Poetry is fabricated/plagiarized:

1. Problem: Whether Pre-Islamic Poetry was transcribed in written form during the Pre-Islamic era.
2. Problem: Whether Pre-Islamic Poetry was compiled during the Umayyad period and categorized into collections or not.

Sezgin's response to the first problem is quite clear. Goldziher, in his work "Muhammedanische Studien," argues that writing poetry was popular during the Pre-Islamic era, using a poem by the Pre-Islamic poet Tamim ibn Mukbil (d. 70/690) as evidence. Goldziher admits that the long qasidas recited throughout generations in the Pre-Islamic era could not have been transmitted without being in written form. (Sezgin, 1991: 45)

Sezgin has also benefited from the renowned orientalist Carl Brockelmann (d. 1956) on this matter. He examined Brockelmann's encyclopedic work "Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur" (GAL) and identified its deficiencies, suggesting the need for a new supplement. His mentor Hellmut Ritter (d. 1971) shared Brockelmann's shortcomings with Sezgin and supported the idea of completing this project (Özsoy, 2019: 6934). Sezgin noticed in his studies that in the supplement Brockelmann wrote in 1937 for "Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur" (GAL), he did not endorse the view of Margoliouth and Taha Hussein that Pre-Islamic Poetry is entirely fabricated. In that supplement, Brockelmann did not reiterate his previous statement that Pre-Islamic Poetry was not composed during the Pre-Islamic era. (Brockelmann, 1970: 63-64)

Sezgin argues that poetry during the Pre-Islamic era was not entirely but partially written. Asserting that the same practice continued during the Islamic periods, Sezgin examined Pre-Islamic Poetry under three categories:

1. The limited writing of poetry during the Pre-Islamic era continued during the Islamic period.
2. The transmitted and written poems were collected.
3. Linguists created collections (divans) of these poems. (Tekin, 2020: 728)

According to Sezgin, this distinction is similar to the compilation of hadiths. The only difference is the higher religious sensitivity in the transmission of hadiths. Hadith science has undergone three similar stages.:

1. Writing down the hadiths.
2. Collecting the hadiths.
3. Classifying the hadiths. (Sezgin, 1984: 163-164)

According to Sezgin, the answer to the second problem is that the compilation of Pre-Islamic Poetry was done in the very early periods. While acknowledging that there might be some signs of fabrication/plagiarism, Sezgin does not accept that all the poems are entirely fabricated. According to him, these poems cannot have been transmitted solely through oral narration for two and a half centuries. When discussing the potential for errors and fabrications in Pre-Islamic Poetry and hadiths, he emphasizes that writing restricts and records these, preventing them from being solely reliant on oral transmission. (Sezgin, 1991: 45-46)

According to Sezgin, when viewed from a social and moral perspective, the idea of attributing all of Pre-Islamic Poetry to fabrication/plagiarism is detrimental to the values of the Arab-Islamic society (Sezgin, 1993, 315). In a society where oral tradition holds great importance, passing down this culture to future generations is crucial. This is because these poems also carry a moral value. Indeed, Hz. Omar (d. 23/644) regarded poetry as a literary and moral education, instructing the people of Egypt in a letter, "Teach your children to swim and ride horses, and pass on proverbs and poetry to them". (Bakırcı, 2003: 182)

Sezgin mentions that those who relied on Pre-Islamic Poetry in the field of Tafsir had started working on the issue of the authenticity of Pre-Islamic Poetry in the early periods. According to Sezgin, these studies predate the emergence of experts who transmitted Tafsir narratives. 'Abdullah b. 'Abbas (d. 68/687-88) could provide examples from Pre-Islamic Poetry while interpreting, and in the second and third centuries of the Hijra, other commentators followed this method. Sezgin argues that the accusation of "fabricating Pre-Islamic Poetry" cannot be directed at other narrators as it was against Ibn 'Abbas. The later emergence of the problem of fabrication/plagiarism is a concern for the field of History. This is because there is no serious doubt about the reliability of Pre-Islamic Poetry. Numerous studies have been conducted, collections have been written, and traditions have been dedicated to the reliability of Pre-Islamic Poetry. (Sezgin, 1993: 315)



According to Margoliouth, who takes the idea of the fabrication/plagiarism of Pre-Islamic Poetry to the extreme, the transition of the low-quality Pre-Islamic Poetry, which existed before Islam, through centuries of oral transmission to the stage of written composition, despite the excellent Arabic of the Qur'an, is a suspicious and strange situation. Taha Hussein also shares a similar perspective. However, according to Sezgin, these claims do not cast any doubt on the reliability of Pre-Islamic Poetry. This is because there are numerous texts and a large number of people familiar with Pre-Islamic Poetry, limiting the possibility of fabrication/plagiarism. Therefore, the existence of relatively fabricated poems does not undermine the originality of Pre-Islamic Poetry. (Sezgin, 1993: 316).

## Conclusion

Pre-Islamic Poetry holds a significant place in the fields of the Arabic language, literature, rhetoric, and Islamic sciences, making it a focal point of attention for centuries. However, the notion of fabrication/plagiarism was never brought up by classical linguists regarding these poems. Discussions have emerged over partial errors, disputes about authorship, and disagreements about the number of poems, but the idea that they are entirely fabricated/plagiarized has not been identified in any classical work. Particularly in the 19th century, orientalist's increased interest in the Arabic language for various reasons brought forth some debates and discussions around the issue of fabrication/plagiarism. The partial fabrication/plagiarism process initiated by Nöldeke escalated to the extreme positions of Margoliouth and Taha Hussein, who claimed that the entirety of Pre-Islamic Poetry was fabricated/plagiarized.

Margoliouth and Taha Hussein also brought the issue of fabrication/plagiarism to the forefront in the context of other Islamic sciences, particularly focusing on *Istishhâd* (quoting poetry as evidence) and attempting to prove that Islamic sciences were devoid of scientific rigor. Many Muslim scholars and researchers have engaged in the discussion, conducting studies to demonstrate the originality of Pre-Islamic Poetry. Fuat Sezgin, one of these scholars, joined the debate, analyzing both the methods and works of orientalist and classical sources on the subject. He provided evidence to support the authenticity of Pre-Islamic Poetry, refuting claims of fabrication/plagiarism. The arguments and works of those asserting that Pre-Islamic Poetry is fabricated/plagiarized are riddled with contradictions. The similarities between hadith narrations and poetry narrations are notable. Pre-Islamic poems were, to some extent, composed during their era, collected and compiled in the Islamic period, and later transmitted to future generations as *divans* by linguists.

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