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The trace of prostration and other distinguishing bodily marks in the Quran

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Abstract
The mark known as the "trace of prostration" (*sīmā*) that is mentioned in the Quran is well established in Islam as being a physical blemish on the forehead. Such marks on the forehead are widespread in religious traditions, often denoting community membership and piety. The Quranic instance fits this tendency. The forelock is also a symbol associated with the forehead that the Quran mentions, although that piece of hair carries negative connotations. This common feature of a person's appearance can, in other cultural situations, denote membership and piety just like a mark on the forehead. The vocabulary of the Quran incorporates images from the past, although the evidence is too slight to allow origins to be traced; popular religious ideas and practices have many sources beyond scripture.
Keywords: Quran, Trace of prostration, Mark, *sīmā*, Forelock, *nāṣiya*

In newspaper reports over the past few years the Muslim "trace of prostration", currently popularly known in Arabic as a *zabība*, has drawn significant attention. The history of the application of the word *zabība* to the brown mark on the forehead is uncertain. It is frequently connected to the common meaning of the word "raisin", as though the mark resembles that dried fruit in some form; this explanation has the feel of a folk etymology without any particular linguistic value. Lane's *Lexicon* cites a range of Arabic dictionaries that support a meaning of the word to be "a small purulent swelling or pustule, that comes forth upon the hand"[1] which clearly could lie in the background of this modern usage. The formation of such a prayer mark is said to be a particularly male Egyptian habit today, although it is certainly observable in other countries, and it has been known throughout the Muslim world in previous centuries as will become clear below. Notably, Lane does not appear to remark upon its prevalence in Cairo of the 1830s,[2] suggesting that its rise to prominence in contemporary Egypt is relatively recent. Elsewhere in the Islamic world different names for the mark are found; a popular term is *miḥrāb* that is used in Urdu and Punjabi, likely as both a reminder of the place of prayer as well as its

1 Edward W. Lane, *An Arabic–English Lexicon* (London/Edinburgh, 1863–93), 1208, from al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿArūs*, among other sources.
2 See his *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, Written in Egypt During the Years 1833–1835* (London, 1842), which covers issues of appearance and of prayer ritual in some detail.

representation on private prayer rugs.[3] In contemporary Egypt the *zabība* has been remarked to be the symbolic equivalent for a male to the female *ḥijāb*, acting as an external marker of identity and membership related to expressions of piety (a tendency also noted to manifest itself in the emergence of popular pious utterances[4]). Modern attention to the mark often arises in a context of polemic, especially connected most recently with pseudo-scientific investigations of the impact on one's mental health of banging one's head repeatedly (in this context the mark tends to be called a "prayer bump"). This motif has been well analysed by Gabriele Marranci[5] in an insightful blog posting; it does not require any further consideration here.

The idea that there are distinguishing physical marks of pious Muslims, which this notion of the trace of prostration evokes, is certainly worthy of further investigation. Not a great deal of attention has been paid to the phenomenon in scholarly literature, it would seem.[6] It is also evident that this focus on distinguishing attributes on the forehead is certainly not limited to the Islamic context as a glance at other religious traditions will show, nor is it limited to a mark resulting from prayer. This article will explore some of the ideas related to the forehead for a Muslim, including both the trace of prostration and the presence of the forelock, while incorporating some brief references to practices in other

3 More generic words are also used, including *jā-yi muhr*, "seal" or "impression", and *pīneh*, "callus", in Persian; the Arabic *ʿalāma,* "mark", also found in Persian and Urdu; *nishān*, "mark" and *gaṭṭā*, "stiffness" (but also with many other meanings), in Urdu; as well as the Quranic term *sīmā*. I am grateful to Kamran Bashir (Victoria) and Majid Daneshgar (Kuala Lumpur) for clarifying some of these popular usages for me. Also see "*Sīma*" [*sic*], in Cyril Glasse, *The New Encyclopaedia of Islam,* fourth ed. (Lanham MD, 2013), 500, and D.B. MacDonald-[T. Fahd], "Sīmiyā", *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* second ed., last paragraph.

4 See Michael Slackman, "With a word, Egyptians leave it all to fate", *New York Times*, 20 June 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/20/world/middleeast/20inshallah.html. Also see Mark Bardley, "Mark of faith sparks debate", *The National* (Abu Dhabi Media), 23 August 2008, http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/b-focus-b-mark-of-faith-sparks-debate.

5 Gabriele Marranci, "Prayer bumps, Muslim haters, and the danger of scientific popularization", http://marranci.com/2012/12/11/prayer-bumps/, an entry on his blog Anthropology beyond Good and Evil, dated 11 December 2012.

6 Roberto Tottoli has studied several aspects of *sujūd*, "bowing", in prayer in a number of studies and devoted several paragraphs to the "trace" of it; see his "Muslim attitudes towards prostration (*sujūd*) I: Arabs and prostration at the beginning of the Islam and in the Qur'an", *Studia Islamica* 88, 1998, 5–34, esp. 22–3. Tottoli's studies do help put some of the material dealt with here into a broader context; see his "Bowing and prostration", in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (Leiden, 2001–06), I, 254–5; "Muslim attitudes towards prostration (*sujūd*), II. The prominence and meaning of prostration in Muslim literature", *Le Muséon* 111, 1998, 405–26; "Traditions and controversies concerning the *suǧūd al-Qurʾān* in *Ḥadīṯ* literature", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 147, 1997, 371–93; "Muslim traditions against secular prostration and inter-religious polemic", *Medieval Encounters* 5, 1999, 99–111; "The thanksgiving prostration (*sujūd al-shukr*) in Muslim tradition", *BSOAS* 62, 1998, 309–13. On the distinctive Shīʿī rules regarding *sujūd*, see Robert Gleave, "Prayer and prostration: Imāmī Shiʿi discussions of *al-sujūd ʿalā al-turba al-Ḥusayniyya*", in Perram Khosronejad (ed.), *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shiʿism* (London, 2012), 233–53.

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religions that, as we shall see, may have some relevance to understanding the background to this attention to the forehead. Of course, it must be recognized at the outset that it is doubtful that popular religious practice can be traced to normative scriptural sources in any substantive way; the interest in a study such as this must reside in the appreciation of the variety and range of symbols that religions employ to convey their moral and ethical codes within their cultural contexts rather than in the search for origins and contexts.

The Quran makes reference to the "trace of prostration" in the midst of one long segment found at the end of *sūra* 48, *al-fatḥ*, in verse 29. The passage begins by declaring that Muḥammad is the messenger of God and goes on to describe his followers as remaining strong when standing up to the unbelievers and as being compassionate with each other. It then continues by stipulating that these followers of Muḥammad are those who may be seen performing the bowing (*rakʿa*) and prostration (*sajda*), the components of *ṣalāt*. These people may be recognized, the Quran suggests, by the fact that "their mark is on their faces, the trace of prostration"[7] (*sīmāhum fī wujūhihim min athar al-sujūd*). These members of the faithful community are frequently specified in the exegetical tradition as Muḥammad's companions,[8] following a common historicizing tendency that may be observed in most classical Muslim exegesis.[9]

The noun *sīmā* ("mark") is used five additional times in the Quran. In Q. 2:273 the mark is the characteristic of those who receive charity genuinely: "[Alms are] for the poor who are restrained in the way of God, and are unable to journey in the land; the ignorant man supposes them rich because of their abstinence, but you shall know them by their *sīmā* – they do not beg of men importunately". Here, the mark serves to distinguish the pious from the ignorant. Q. 7:46 and 48 use the word in reference to a mark which distinguishes those who deserve the rewards of paradise and those who are in hell. "Between them [the people of hell and the people of paradise] is a veil and on the heights are men knowing each group by their *sīmā*, who shall call to the inhabitants of paradise, 'Peace be upon you'... The dwellers on the heights shall call to certain men they know by their *sīmā*, 'Your amassing has not availed you, neither your waxing proud' ". Here the mark is not restricted to the pious but also marks the evildoers. In Q. 47:30 the mark is again characteristic of evildoers, understood, it would seem, as something separate from the behaviour they manifest in their speech: "Did We will, We would show them to you so that you would know them by their *sīmā*; but you shall certainly know them in their twisting of their speech". Finally, Q. 55:41 presents the mark as the characteristic of those condemned for their sins (*mujrimūn*): "The sinners shall be known by their *sīmā* and they shall be seized by their forelocks and their feet [and then thrown into hell]". This passage draws our attention to the idea that a *sīmā* is

7 Quran translations are based upon A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London, 1955), modified as necessary and/or desirable.

8 See for example al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273), *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿA. al-Turkī (Beirut, 1427/2006), IV, 371 (ad Q. 2:273).

9 See Andrew Rippin, "The construction of the Arabian historical context in Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an", in Karen Bauer (ed.), *The Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur'anic Exegesis (2nd/8th–9th/15th Centuries)* (Oxford, 2013), 173–98.

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not reserved for the pious alone, but it also conveys a general reference to the forehead as a way of distinguishing people.

The word *sīmā* may be connected to other grammatical forms generally understood to be derived from the root *s-w-m* in a basic sense of "having distinguishing marks" as in Q. 3:125 (*musawwimūn*, "those having marks") and 3:14, 11:83 and 51:34 (*musawwama*, "marked"). The use in Q. 3:14 is in connection with horses, so the basic sense is likely a distinguishing mark in the sense of being branded.[10] However, the origin of the word *sīmā* posed some difficulties for classical lexicographers who were uncertain whether they should derive this word from the root *w-s-m* with a transposition of the *wāw* or from *s-w/y-m*.[11] This became muddled because of the usage in Q. 68:16, "We will brand him on the nose" (*sa-nasimuhu ʿalā l-khurṭūm*), and in 15:75 "In that are signs for those who distinguish", in which the term *mutawassimūn* is used. In both of these passages the words providing those senses of branding and distinguishing are understood to be derived from the root *w-s-m*. It is possible that these verbal uses are denominative formations from the noun *sīmā*, thus creating the multiple possible paths for derivation and word formation. Arthur Jeffrey[12] suggested that the word *sīmā* itself entered Arabic from the Greek *sēma*, a sign, mark or token (especially one understood to descend from heaven), via Syriac; the blending of this particular word with meanings derived from the same root letters with a different history may have produced the uncertainty we find in the Arab lexicographers. It is also worthy of note that the word is subject to some variant spellings in the Quran, further indication of the uncertainty surrounding the word; *sīmā* could also be spelled *sīmāʾ* or *sīmiyāʾ*, and occasionally these other spellings were tied to specific meanings.[13] The difficulties connected to verbal stems at question here have been extensively studied by Tilman Seidensticker[14] and an attempt at a resolution of these issues, if such is even feasible, need not detain us further here.

To return to the first Quranic passage, it will be observed that in Q. 48:29 the distinguishing mark of the follower of Muḥammad is specified to be the "trace of prostration"; none of the other passages make this direct link of the mark to prayer as such.[15] The use of *athar*, "trace", here is also the only time that word is

10 Another way of expressing "branding" is also found in Q. 9:35, "The Day they shall be heated in the fire of Hell and therewith their foreheads (*jibāh*) and their sides and their backs shall be branded (*tukwā*) by it. This is the thing you have treasured up for yourselves; therefore taste you now what you were treasuring!" This verse provides the only use in the Quran of this particular verb "to brand" and of this particular noun for "foreheads".

11 See Lane, *Lexicon*, 1476, sub s-w-m and 3053, sub w-s-m.

12 Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Quran* (Baroda, 1938), 183–4, crediting this observation to Karl Vollers, "Beiträge zur Kenntnis der lebenden arabischen Sprache in Aegypten", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 51, 1897, 298.

13 See, for example, al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), *al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl*, ed. ʿĀ. ʿAbd a-Mawjūd, ʿA.M. Muʿawwaḍ (Riyadh, 1418/1998), V, 551 (ad Q. 48:29); Abū Ḥayyān (d. 745/1344), *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, ed. ʿĀ. ʿAbd a-Mawjūd, ʿA.M. Muʿawwaḍ (Beirut, 1413/1993), VIII, 100–01 (ad Q. 48:29).

14 Tilman Seidensticker, *Das Verbum sawwama: Ein Beitrag der Homonymenentscheidung im Arabischen* (Munich, 1987).

15 Some *ḥadith* reports speak of the "trace of prostration", *athar al-sujūd*, especially the idea that God forbids the fires of Hell to consume it. See, for example, al-Bukhārī,

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directly linked to prayer; the more common usage relates to the traces left by walking, either the path or the footprint itself, conveying a definite physical sense.

The exegetical tradition displays a good deal of variation in how to interpret *sīmā*, in Q. 48:29 and elsewhere, in light of its association with the trace of prostration. It would be fair to say that the dominant tendency is to understand it in ways other than seeing it as a reference to a physical blemish on the skin. Interpretive options include the idea that this is the mark that will only become apparent on the day of resurrection as marking the believers. It is also thought of simply as the "glow" that emanates from someone who is faithful in their praying as well as an indication of the believer's general disposition. As well, it is sometimes taken as the look on someone's face that results from staying up all night in prayer. It could also be the trace of dirt left on the face after bowing in prayer. However, it is also explicitly deemed to be like the callus (*thafina*) on the knee of a camel that is the result of prostration; this is sometimes illustrated through the mention of the Shīʿī Imām Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn (d. 94/713) and ʿAlī ibn ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿAbbās (d. 117/736), both of whom are known as *Dhū l-thafināt* because of their piety (as are several other figures of the distant past).[16]

Such variety in interpretation is not limited to the instance of the use of *sīmā* in Q. 48:29 but also extends to the other passages in which the word is used; the meaning of the word in these other instances often incorporates the usage in Q. 48:29 with its focus on the mark being the result of prayer. For example, in the treatment of Q 2:273, the mark is interpreted as the behaviour of "humility and humbleness", or as the "sign of poverty" being seen in tattered clothes, or as not making demands when begging, picking up on the Quranic phrase "not begging from people demandingly" (or, as some have it, not begging as such at all), or as a physical characteristic that is the result of repeated praying or praying all night, including being tired.[17] Thus, while various options were held out for what the exact nature of the *sīmā* might be – clearly an ambiguity that was brought about by the fact that both the righteous and the evildoers are "marked" in some way or another – the idea that a physical prayer mark is meant does have a long history within Islamic culture and its modern resurgence picks up on a firm tradition of understanding the trace of prostration as a mark of the pious person.

It is quite apparent that religions in general employ certain distinguishing body markings as indicators of distinction, membership and piety.[18] The forehead garners particular attention in many of the world's religions as the place

al-Ṣaḥīḥ, book 97 (al-Tawḥīd) nos 7437, 7438 (= ed. M.Z. al-Nāṣir, Beirut, 2001, IX, 128–9). Such reports do not add significant clarification to the issues raised here and will not enter into the discussion.

16 See for example, al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, V, 551.

17 See for example, al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ*, IV, 371.

18 The consideration of such markings is best kept separate from attention to bodily marks that designate specific functions for specific people; the obvious example in the Muslim context is the "seal of prophecy" understood to be a physical mark between Muḥammad's shoulder blades, often associated with the Prophet's encounter with the Christian monk Baḥīrā but also seen on Muḥammad by others as described in various *ḥadīth* reports.

for those displays. In India the marker known as the *tilak* (and its related, specifically female version, the dot known as the *bindi*) provides an indication of group affiliation (depending on the number and colour of the lines); it adorns the forehead of religious devotees and is present in ritual observances and on special occasions as well. It is not necessarily limited to the forehead, but that area certainly gains the most attention. In the Bible perhaps the most vivid use of the forehead is in Revelation 14:1, in which John reports that he saw in his vision a group of 144,000 people "who had his [the Lamb the Redeemer's] name and the name of his Father written on their foreheads".[19] In general, the forehead is a place for symbols of dedication and allegiance, as is shown in its centrality for Aaron's seal as a mark of devotion to God in Exodus 28:36–8. The Revelation of John also speaks of the forehead as the place of a marker of evil; the Beast, the evil counterpart of the Lamb in the visions, causes everyone "to be branded with a mark on his right hand or forehead" in Revelation 13:16, the significance of which is provided in 14:9 (and see 20:4) in which an angel cries out: "Whoever worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on his forehead or hand, he shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured undiluted into the cup of his vengeance". The whore of Babylon has a name written on her forehead according to Revelation 17:5. It is clear that the forehead is the place for distinguishing marks, but they are not by any means always portrayed as positive indicators.

Later tradition develops the symbolism of the forehead in a number of ways. In Christian iconography a bump on the forehead between the eyes appears to be a marker of spirituality; such is prominent in certain representations in mosaic of the Byzantine and Eastern church traditions of Christ Pantocrator, as seen for example in Haghia Sophia.[20] Such a mark is generally interpreted as an indication of spiritual wisdom and piety.[21] It would not be stretching the connections by also considering the smearing of ash on the forehead within the Catholic tradition as a mark of penitence and mortality, a tradition that arose perhaps in the eighth century and in association with ritual observations of Lent leading up to Easter.[22]

The practice of wearing *tĕfillīn* that originated in late-Second Temple Judaism derives from the dictates of Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18 ("You shall bind them [the laws] as a sign (*ōt*) on the hand and wear them as a phylactery (*ṭoṭafōt*[23]) on

19 Biblical translations are from *The New English Bible* (New York, 1976).

20 An example may be seen in http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/52/Jesus-Christ-from-Hagia-Sophia.jpg; also see the twelfth-century mosaic in the cathedral of Cefalù, Sicily, http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/66/Christ_Pantokrator%2C_Cathedral_of_Cefal%C3%B9%2C_Sicily.jpg; the presence of the forelock in the latter should be noted – see below.

21 Some of the discussion of this "box-like" mark is found in the context of speculation about the famous Shroud of Turin; see Diana Fulbright, "Forelocks in early Christian tradition", online at http://www.shroud.com/pdfs/n59part4x.pdf (note that Fulbright argues that the Shroud does not show evidence of a forelock; see below).

22 For some explanation of this, see Martin Connell, "Ash Wednesday: meaning and history", *Liturgy* 15/1, 1998, 7–14.

23 On this word, see Jeffrey H. Tigay, "On the meaning of Ṭ(W)ṬPT", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101, 1982, 321–31. Other translations of the word include "frontlets", "pendants" or "symbols".

the forehead").[24] The *tĕfīllīn* as ritually powerful objects – whether understood as protective amulets, piety reminders, symbols of (male) Jewish community membership or representations of divine presence – have been extensively studied by Yehudah Cohn;[25] the connection of the forehead to the container of four pieces of parchment with centrally important biblical passages inscribed on them (Exodus 13:1–10; 13:11–16; Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21) conveys symbolic value on many levels.

To return to the Islamic context, this significance of the forehead as a place for the marking of membership and of piety in religious contexts, and specifically in the Quran, demands further consideration in light of the content of the rest of the passage regarding the mark as the trace of prostration found in Q. 48:29. After mentioning the *sīmā*, the verse goes on to say, "That is their likeness in the Torah and their likeness in the Gospel is like a seed that sends forth its shoot then makes its strong. It then becomes thick and stands on its own stem, amazing the sowers, so that it enrages the disbelievers thereby". Could there be some connection between the mark that is the trace of prostration and something mentioned in the Torah and/or the Gospel? The syntax of this passage proved challenging for classical exegetes and modern translators alike. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) has an extensive discussions of the intricacies of the grammar here, exploring many options.[26] Fundamentally, the problem revolves around what the referent is of the "that" with which the statement starts. The closest element is the "trace of prostration" marking the believers that is seemingly likened to something in the Torah. However, is the same "likeness" of the trace also to be found in the Gospel, or should one insert a break after the mention of the Torah and see a new parable ("likeness") conveyed by the meaning of the parable of the seed? Of course, the connection also depends upon what one understands *sīmā* to refer to in the first place: if that word conveys the sense of the general disposition of the pious person in prayer, then such could be (and often is) seen as a generic reference to the qualities of the believers, extolled in both the Torah and the Gospel. Such, certainly, is the way much of the exegetical tradition has understood the passage.

However, another understanding that has arisen, perhaps for the first time in the writings of Richard Bell,[27] was to see this "likeness" in a very literal way such that it is a reference to the Jewish *tĕfīllīn*, thus picturing the Muslim trace of prostration as "like" that legacy. The physical sense of the Muslim mark on the forehead is thus reinforced by the literal Jewish interpretation of the biblical command manifested in the *tĕfīllīn*, once that connection is made. This is hardly a compelling reading of the Quranic verse, given its syntactical complexity, but, at the same time, it is evocative in the overall context of the

24 Also see Exodus 13:9 and 13:16 in the context of the celebration of Passover, where the signs on the forehead and hand are deemed reminders of deliverance from Egypt (13:9) and called "phylacteries" (13:16).

25 Yehudah Cohn, *Tangled Up in Text:* Tefillin *and the Ancient World* (Providence RI, 2008).

26 Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut, 1401/1981), XXVIII, 108. Also see the discussion in al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿA. Turkī (Cairo, 1422/2001), XXI, 327–9.

27 Richard Bell, *A Commentary on the Qurʾān* (Manchester, 1991), II, 286.

marks on the forehead as signifying ideas related to piety and membership. It would, however, be hazardous to suggest a direct connection here, given the single reference and the absence of any tangible historical and cultural evidence.

Another extended Quranic passage that includes reference to the mark known as the *sīmā* also invokes the forehead but in a different way. A conjunction of the distinguishing mark and the forelock (*nāṣiya*) is to be found in Q. 55:41 (as cited above) that presents a mark as the characteristic of those condemned for their sins (*mujrimūn*). Those who are distinguished by a mark "will be seized by their forelocks and their feet" and thrown into hell. Mentioned three additional times in the Quran, the forelock widens the range of images employed related to distinguishing marks on the forehead. One instance is in Q. 11:56 in which the image resonates most strongly with that of a horse's mane, being the forelock by which it is led: "Truly, I have put my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord; there is no creature that crawls, but He takes it by the forelock (*bināṣiyatihā*). Surely my Lord is on a straight path." It is striking that there is no association here between being led in this way and one's status as an unbeliever (or believer). Next, Q. 96:13–18 embeds the forelock (mentioned twice) in a story of an opponent of God's message, traditionally held to be Abū Jahl: "If he cries lies and turns away, does he not realize that God sees? No indeed; surely We shall seize him by the forelock (*bil-nāṣiya*), a lying (*kadhiba*), sinful (*khāṭiʾa*) forelock. So let him call on his concourse! We shall call on the guards of hell." The passage continues in verse 19 to emphasize the remedy: "Bow thyself, and draw nigh". The tie-in here to prayer is apparent.

The word "forelock" in these passages is often taken to mean a physical lock of hair that is on the forehead. In explaining the word in Q. 96:15, "We shall seize him by the forelock", al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854), for example, provides the following comment: "The forelock is the hair on the forehead that one lets grow specifically … It is specified here because the accursed one [Abū Jahl] attached great importance to it by combing and perfuming it, and being seized by it is the greatest humiliation for an Arab."[28] The idea that the forelock is declared to be *kadhiba*, "lying", and *khāṭiʾa*, "in error", might, of course, suggest a metaphorical usage of the word so that it simply means having power over someone, as might be implied more clearly by Q. 11:56.[29] In that passage the forelock symbolizes the person as a whole (and is thus functioning as a synecdoche).

The forelock is a powerful and widespread symbol, well known in the Islamic context. Cutting off the forelock occurs in early Arabic poetry to signify "indebtedness for one's life having been spared".[30] The presence of the forelock also becomes a factor related to covering one's hair, especially by women; such is seen to be one function of the *ḥijāb*. Ibn Kathīr (d. 774 /1373) makes the connection in dealing with Q. 24:31 in which the instruction is given to Muslim

28 Al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī* (Cairo, n.d. (*c.* 1353/1934)), XXX, 187.

29 See the comments in Arne Ambros, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic* (Wiesbaden, 2004), 269.

30 See M.M. Bravmann, *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam: Studies in Ancient Arab Concepts* (Leiden, 1972), 203, n. 1. Also see Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* (London, 1966), I, 226–7, on the cutting of hair.

women that they should "cast their veils (*khumur*) over their bosoms". He suggests that the reason the *khimār* should be worn this way is to distinguish Muslim women from the women of the *jāhiliyya* who did not do that; rather, they would walk past men with their chests uncovered and with their necks, locks of their hair (*dhawāʾib shaʿrihā*) and earrings revealed. This interpretation supports an understanding that displaying wisps of hair – reasonably understood to be otherwise called forelocks – is a non-Islamic (i.e. *jāhilī*) practice.[31] Thus, a context is provided for the sense of the forelock as "lying and in error" in a spiritual (*jāhilī*) sense without excluding the literal sense of the forelock as something real, grown on a person's head. This contrasts with a modern interpretation, surprisingly widespread, that seeks to define *nāṣiya* in a fully symbolic mode (thus being something that could not be literally "seized"), reflective of contemporary "scientific" values. This is found in much popular Muslim discourse today that relates the forelock to the "prefrontal cortex" of the brain. Typical is the following:

> A man's forelock (or al-naseyah) is the center of planning, reasoning... and decision-making, such as to become angry and lie; which is medically proven and even taught in medical schools all around the world.
>
> In other words, al-naseyah is the "government" of our nervous system that gives order to our other body parts to carry out good deeds or to commit sins, such as by hitting someone or become angry....
>
> [M]edical studies ... [have shown] that those playing video games and watch[ing] television a lot get a decrease in their forelock activity; which is one of the reasons why one cannot leave the TV to carry out more important things, such as doing homework or perform[ing] the prayers, after having watched TV long enough.[32]

Like the forehead in general, the forelock has ancient significance and is a symbol that conveys multiple values. In ancient times creating the forelock involved shaving (or simply gathering hair) in order to create a tuft of hair on the crown of the head that could then be braided and worn as a ponytail.[33] In Greek and Roman iconography, a forelock especially appears to be a special marker. It has a Hellenistic background within iconography associated with the god Sarapis of the Ptolemies, for example. Aristotle is often portrayed with forelocks, indicating his wisdom. The forelock is also associated in the

31 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿazīm* (Cairo, n.d. (*c*. 1370/1950)), II, 284. Also see Chase F. Robinson, "Neck sealing in early Islam", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, 2005, 410, and n. 39, for historical references to forelocks (and hair) and the meaning of cutting them off. Forelocks (and their cutting) may not be limited to *jāhilī* practice: Teresa Bernheimer, *The ʿAlids: The First Family of Islam, 750–1200* (Edinburgh, 2013), 28, n. 72, notes the possibility that the 'Alids were distinguished by their forelocks (or hair styles).

32 http://heartscience.wordpress.com/tag/forelock/

33 See the discussion in Christine Elizabeth Hayes, *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds: Accounting for Halakhic Difference in Selected Sugyot from Tractate Avodah Zarah* (Oxford, 1997), 87.

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turn-of-the-eras' *Fables of Phaedrus* with Opportunity,[34] who is bald except for a long forelock; as a Renaissance emblem it also becomes applied in a similar manner to Time, leading to the idiom "Grab Time by the forelock" when an opportunity arises.[35] The forelock certainly moved into Christian iconography, not limited to Jesus but also found on John the Baptist.[36] In some Christian paintings the forelock appears to become a simple "mark" of spirituality on the forehead, just like the *sīmā* of the Quran. That likely led to the idea that touching one's forehead when meeting someone (like tipping the hat) is an act of deference and respect, although in current British English that appears to have acquired a negative sense of showing too much deference.[37] That such outward marks of traditional piety and respect constitute a polemical topos is also apparent from Jesus's words in Matthew 6:1–6 and 23:5 and its reappearance today can only be seen as unexceptional.[38]

It is in Judaism again that the forelock particularly draws our attention because of a (not undisputed) Mishnaic prohibition of the forelock as it is the marker of the pagan. Marcus Jastrow understood the meaning of the disputed term *belōrīt* in Mishna *ʿAvōda Zara* 1:3 as referring to "plait or locks, esp. the long hair worn by the Roman and Greek youths of the upper classes and offered to the gods on arriving at puberty",[39] thus what is often understood as a forelock. In this interpretation, the Mishna repudiates the Jewish wearing of the forelock on the grounds of it being a custom of idolaters, although there is a significant difference of opinion among scholars regarding precisely what the word *belōrīt* refers to.[40] Additionally, according to some interpretations, this is part of the context for understanding the use of the *tĕfillīn*, which it is said, must touch the skin; on the head, a forelock could interfere with such.[41]

34 See Henry Thomas Riley and Christopher Smart (trans.), *The Comedies of Terence and the Fables of Phædrus, Literally Translated into English Prose with Notes, to Which is Added a Metrical Translation of Phædrus* (London, 1887), available at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/25512/25512-h/25512-h.htm#smart_V_VIII

35 Elizabeth Knowles, *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, second ed. (Oxford, 2005), 264.

36 See above, notes 19 and 20.

37 Online comments to newspaper articles often have references to "annoying forelock tuggers like you" in responses to matters dealing with royalty.

38 My thanks to Gordon Nickel for reminding me of this passage. On the meaning of "phylacteries" here, see Jeffrey H. Tigay, "On the term phylacteries (Matt 23:5)", *The Harvard Theological Review* 72, 1979, 45–53. Such statements did not prevent Christians from developing ways of marking Jesus and others with distinguishing blemishes: the bump between the two eyebrows is likely intended to represent piety.

39 Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (London, 1903), 172.

40 See the section on "hairstyles" in Beth A. Berkowitz, *Defining Jewish Difference: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, 2012), 100–06; Mireille Hadas-Lebel, "Le paganism à travers les sources rabbiniques dans IIe et IIIe siècles," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* [*ANRW* II] 19/2, 1979, 397–485, esp. 456–7; Oz Almog, "From *blorit* to ponytail: Israeli culture reflected in popular hairstyles", *Israel Studies* 8/2, 2003, 82–117.

41 A parallel might be seen with the female Shīʿī practice of not allowing the head scarf (or other covering) to interfere with the forehead touching the clay tablet known as a *turba*, the place on which to touch the forehead in the *sajda*. Thus, it might be suggested the

Of course, here we see the key conjunction of the marker on the forehead as an indication of membership and piety contrasted with the forelock, the marker of paganism and impiety.[42]

On the evidence of the trace of prostration and the forelock, it is apparent that the vocabulary of the Quran shares in a common universe of images. Understanding the mark on the forehead as a positive symbol of piety and membership has a long heritage in Islam and has found its support in a reading of the Quran. Likewise, the image of the forelock as one with negative associations of identification resonates with the Quran. Both characteristics find their parallels particularly in Judaism, but to suggest paths of transmission between religions in this web of images and symbols related to the forehead would be unwise. There simply is insufficient evidence by which one could establish such a genealogy. Certainly the commonality of the symbols is striking, but an appeal either to biblical or Arab cultural contexts alone will not suffice to provide an "explanation" for the Quran. The passage of time, with all its historical interactions in social, cultural, economic, political and religious contexts, must be allowed to play its part in the development of the meaning of these symbols. The prevalence of the trace of prostration in today's Egypt in particular emphasizes the fact that popular religious practices have their own particular dynamic that cannot be traced directly either to scripture or to well-established expressions of piety.

ḥijāb keeps the forelock out of sight rather than having the law forbid it, at least in women.

42 Ezekiel 8:3 appears to use the symbol in a positive way, the forelock being used to drag Ezekiel to Jerusalem: "He stretched out what seemed to be a hand and seized me by the forelock". However, it is uncertain that the word used here, *tsītsit*, means "forelock" precisely; the word is also used in Numbers 15:38–9 for the tassels on garments. It is also worth noting that the Jewish *pe'ōt*, "side curls", must be distinguished from forelocks, although a common understanding today frequently does confuse the two.

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