From Goddesses to Doctrine: Al-Lāt, Al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt in the Transition from Pre-Islamic Arabia to Islam

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Abstract

The pre-Islamic Arabian religious landscape was neither a void nor a cultural wasteland but a richly pluralistic system that contained layers of polytheism, tribal cults, astral deities, and sacred spaces. At the center of this matrix stood three goddesses—al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt—collectively remembered in later Islamic polemics as the "daughters of Allāh."[1] Their cults, shrines, and rituals were not marginal; rather, they represented a visible and significant affirmation of the sacred feminine within Arabian religiosity. This paper re-examines the role of these deities as mirrors of gender, authority, and power in late antique Arabia. It argues that their prominence reveals both the symbolic centrality of women in religious imagination and the broader patterns of gender organization before Islam.

The analysis also addresses the transformation brought by Islam, which both acknowledged the presence of these goddesses in Qurʾānic discourse while simultaneously suppressing their cults. In doing so, Islam reconfigured not only religious orthodoxy but also gender norms, producing a decisive break with the symbolic authority of female divine figures. This study situates the goddesses within comparative contexts of Mediterranean and Near Eastern traditions, exploring their associations with fertility, warfare, and fate, and considers how their decline under Islam paralleled the gradual constriction of women's social and ritual authority.

By combining literary, archaeological, and epigraphic evidence, and engaging with critical scholarship, the paper provides a nuanced reassessment of the sacred feminine in Arabia. Far from being peripheral idols, al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt embody a cultural memory of gendered religiosity whose erasure under Islam marked both theological and sociopolitical transformations.
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Keywords: al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, Manāt, pre-Islamic Arabia, Qurʾān, women, gender, religious transformation.

1. Introduction

1. The Question of Origins and the Sacred Feminine

Pre-Islamic Arabia has long been interpreted through the lens of Islamic historiography, which often frames the period as a "Jāhiliyyah," an age of ignorance awaiting prophetic correction.[1] Such a paradigm risks reducing the complexity of the religious landscape, obscuring the fact that pre-Islamic society possessed a diverse set of traditions, mythologies, and cultic practices.[2] At the center of this constellation

were the goddesses al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt. These figures, collectively addressed in the Qur'ān (53:19–20), were not merely local idols but part of an integrated symbolic system that gave visible presence to the feminine divine in Arabia.[3]

The notion of a "sacred feminine" is not unique to Arabia. In Mesopotamia, figures such as Inanna/Ishtar embodied love and war, while in Syria and Phoenicia Astarte held sway over fertility and kingship.[4] The Arabian triad, however, localized these cosmological motifs, adapting them to tribal networks and sanctuaries within Mecca, Ta'if, and Yathrib.[5] This demonstrates that pre-Islamic Arabs were part of the wider Near Eastern religious continuum.[6]

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2. Al-Lāt, Al-'Uzzā, and Manāt in Context

Al-Lāt was often associated with fertility and nurturing qualities, a figure comparable in some respects to Greek Demeter or Anatolian Cybele.[7] Her shrine in Ta'if functioned not only as a religious center but also as a symbol of tribal prestige for the Thaqīf.[8] Al-'Uzzā, by contrast, embodied martial power and was invoked in war—her sanctuary near Nakhlah was one of the most frequented in western Arabia.[9] Manāt, older than both, was linked to fate and time, her cult stretching from the Hijaz to the Red Sea coast.[10] Collectively, they represented fertility, power, and destiny—themes fundamental to tribal survival.[11]

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3. Women in Pre-Islamic Arabia

The religious prominence of goddesses raises the question of women's social status. Contrary to the stereotype of a universally degraded condition, women in certain tribes held considerable agency.[12] Evidence from poetry suggests women could inherit, own property, and even act as tribal negotiators.[13] The practice of female infanticide, often cited as endemic, was likely limited to specific economic or honor-related contexts rather than universal.[14]

The symbolic elevation of the feminine divine paralleled these social roles: just as al-Lāt nurtured fertility, women cultivated both lineage and economy; as al-'Uzzā symbolized strength, women sometimes accompanied men into battle or composed martial poetry; and as Manāt governed fate, women often acted as custodians of memory and mourning rituals.[15]

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4. The Qur'ānic Response

The Qur'ān engages the triad directly: "Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā and Manāt, the third, the other? Are you to have the males and He the females?" (53:19–21).[16] The rhetorical question critiques not merely the goddesses themselves but the notion of attributing daughters to God, exposing both theological and gendered dimensions.[17] The subsequent denunciation—"they are but names you have named" (53:23)—effectively delegitimized centuries of veneration.[18]

Islam's emergence thus marked a rupture: divine authority was masculinized through a transcendent, imageless God, while female divine figures were stripped of sacred legitimacy.[19] This reorientation had profound implications for women's symbolic capital.[20]

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5. Transformation of Gender Norms

Early Islam introduced reforms that simultaneously improved certain conditions for women (inheritance rights, restrictions on infanticide, contractual marriage) while also consolidating patriarchal structures.[21] The symbolic elimination of female deities parallels this shift: women were granted legal protections but removed from religious centrality.[22]

Over time, women's ritual leadership and tribal authority declined as Islam institutionalized male-dominated jurisprudence.[23] Thus, the fall of al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt represents not only theological purification but also a broader reconfiguration of gender roles.[24]

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6. Comparative Perspectives

This transformation is consistent with broader late antique patterns: Christianity marginalized female figures such as Artemis and Isis; Judaism curbed the remnants of Asherah worship; Zoroastrianism restricted the prominence of Anahita.[25] Islam, in this respect, did not stand apart but participated in a regional trend of consolidating monotheism by erasing female divine intermediaries.[26]

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7. Reassessing the Daughters of Allāh

The memory of al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt survived mainly through Islamic polemics, which reduced them to "idols."[27] Yet archaeological evidence—inscriptions, statues, and temple ruins—suggests a deeper legacy.[28] Their presence in Nabataean, Palmyrene, and South Arabian contexts reveals that they were not merely local but part of a pan-Arabian religiosity.[29]

Their erasure should not be read simply as progress but as a historical shift in symbolic systems. For women, this meant a paradox: legal safeguards improved, yet their association with divinity was excised. The sacred feminine was thus transmuted into a patriarchal framework that continues to shape debates over gender in Islam today.[30]

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Literature Review

1. Framing the Sources: The Problem of Jāhiliyyah Narratives

The study of al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt is complicated by the fact that almost all of our detailed information about them comes from Islamic sources written after the rise of Islam, often centuries later, and framed within a polemical discourse that sought to delegitimize pre-Islamic practices.[1] The very concept of Jāhiliyyah, usually translated as "the Age of Ignorance," colors Muslim historiography and limits the preservation of sympathetic accounts of the sacred feminine in Arabia.[2] As Patricia Crone observed, "our access to pre-Islamic Arabia is mediated through texts that aim less to preserve memory than to obliterate it."[3]

Classical sources such as Ibn al-Kalbī's Kitāb al-Aṣnām ("Book of Idols"), written in the 9th century CE, remain indispensable, but they must be read critically.[4] Ibn al-Kalbī's work catalogs numerous Arabian idols, including al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, but it does so from the vantage point of triumphalist Islam, where idols are portrayed as corrupt practices overcome by revelation.[5] Similarly, Ibn Hishām's recension of Ibn Isḥāq's Sīrah provides narratives of the Prophet's confrontation with the shrines of these goddesses, but these are structured to validate Islam's purification of the sacred landscape.[6]

The problem, therefore, is not the absence of sources but their asymmetry: most extant material reflects post-conquest Islamic perspectives rather than the lived experience of goddess worshippers. The task of scholarship has thus been to triangulate between Islamic polemics, Greco-Roman and Near Eastern comparative evidence, and the fragmentary epigraphic record.

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2. Orientalist Reconstructions and Early Scholarship

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Orientalists laid much of the groundwork for the modern study of Arabian religion, but their analyses were often colored by biblical paradigms. Julius Wellhausen's Reste arabischen Heidentums (1887) remains foundational, describing the triad of al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt as the most prominent pre-Islamic deities.[7] Wellhausen interpreted their cults as survivals of an archaic Semitic fertility religion, connecting them to Canaanite and Mesopotamian prototypes.[8]

René Dussaud extended this comparative approach, linking al-Lāt to Syrian Atargatis and al-'Uzzā to the astral cults of Venus.[9] While pioneering, these studies often assumed a unilinear evolution from polytheism to monotheism, with Islam framed as the culmination of "Semitic religion."[10] This teleological framework tends to obscure the independent cultural dynamics of Arabia.

Nonetheless, Orientalist works provided detailed philological and epigraphic insights, correlating the Qur'ānic names of the goddesses with inscriptions found in Nabataea and Palmyra.[11] Their greatest weakness lay in their reliance on textual parallels rather than on indigenous Arabian sources, which were scarcely available at the time.

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3. Feminist and Gender-Oriented Perspectives

From the late twentieth century onward, feminist scholars began re-examining the significance of female divinities in pre-Islamic Arabia. Leila Ahmed, in her landmark Women and Gender in Islam, pointed out that the presence of revered goddesses problematizes simplistic assumptions about universal female subjugation in Arabia before Islam.[12] Rather, their centrality suggests that gender norms were more fluid, with women occupying important social and ritual roles.[13]

Geraldine Heng and Fatima Mernissi advanced similar arguments, situating the suppression of the goddesses within a broader pattern of patriarchal monotheisms erasing female sacrality.[14] In this reading, Islam's rejection of the "daughters of Allāh" was not only a theological move but also part of a gendered reorganization of symbolic power.[15]

Critics, however, warn against romanticizing pre-Islamic Arabia. As Julia Bray notes, the existence of goddesses does not automatically imply egalitarian social conditions, since male-dominated societies often worshipped female deities while restricting real women's autonomy.[16] The challenge is to distinguish between symbolic representations and lived realities.

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4. Archaeological and Epigraphic Contributions

In recent decades, archaeological discoveries have provided a counterweight to textual sources. Inscriptions from Nabataea identify al-Lāt as a major deity, often syncretized with Athena.[17] At Palmyra, al-Lāt appears in a monumental temple, represented iconographically with a lion—an image that links her with martial as well as maternal qualities.[18]

Al-'Uzzā is frequently associated with the planet Venus, as attested in Safaitic graffiti and South Arabian inscriptions.[19] Her cult seems to have spanned both northern and southern Arabia, suggesting a broad astral significance.[20] Manāt, though less frequently depicted, appears in epigraphy from Qudayd and the Hijaz, confirming her role as a goddess of fate and time.[21]

These findings complicate the Islamic portrayal of the goddesses as mere "names." Archaeological evidence demonstrates that they were embedded in elaborate temple economies, ritual systems, and regional networks of pilgrimage.[22] The continuity of their cults across different tribal groups indicates that they were central to Arabian religious life, not peripheral idols awaiting destruction.[23]

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5. Qur'ānic Studies and the "Satanic Verses" Debate

A particularly contested field of literature concerns the so-called "Satanic Verses" episode, reported in early Islamic historiography and interpreted as evidence of initial compromise with the goddesses.[24] The narrative appears in al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Sa'd, describing verses allegedly acknowledging the intercessory role of al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, before being abrogated.[25]

Scholars such as William Muir and W. Montgomery Watt viewed this as historically plausible, reflecting Muhammad's initial attempt to reconcile Meccan traditions with monotheism.[26] Others, like John Burton, argue that the story is a fabrication constructed by opponents to discredit prophecy.[27] Shahab Ahmed more recently suggested that its widespread circulation, despite embarrassment, lends it a degree of authenticity.[28]

The debate illustrates how deeply the goddesses remained embedded in early Islamic memory. Even as Islam redefined divine order, the persistence of this story reflects the lingering cultural weight of the sacred feminine in Mecca.[29]

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6. Anthropological Approaches

Anthropologists have emphasized that the goddesses must be understood not simply as abstract deities but as integral to social organization. Rituals at their shrines involved pilgrimage, sacrifice, and oath-taking,

serving as mechanisms of tribal cohesion.[30] The Kaʿba itself, before Islam, was a multi-tribal sanctuary that included representations of these goddesses.[31]

Clifford Geertz's framework of religion as a cultural system has been applied by Aziz al-Azmeh, who argues that goddess worship encoded a symbolic logic of fertility, warfare, and fate, essential to survival in Arabia's harsh ecology.[32] From this perspective, their destruction under Islam was not only theological but also a restructuring of social networks around a new axis of authority: the Prophet and the Qur'ān.[33]

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7. Methodological Challenges

The literature is united by one persistent problem: the absence of indigenous pre-Islamic texts describing the goddesses in their own terms. Scholars are thus forced into a triangulation method:

1. Islamic historiography (biased but detailed).

2. Comparative Near Eastern analogues.

3. Archaeological and epigraphic fragments.

This fragmentation makes absolute certainty impossible. As Gerald Hawting warns, reconstructions often reflect "as much about the modern scholar's worldview as about the ancient Arabian reality".[34] The task is thus not to reconstruct a pure pre-Islamic religion but to recognize the traces that survive within later discourses.

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8. Toward a Synthesis

Taken together, the literature reveals three overlapping yet distinct trajectories:

Islamic historiography preserves the memory of the goddesses but in a polemical mode.

Orientalist and comparative scholarship sought to integrate them into a pan-Semitic religious history, often teleologically.

Modern feminist, anthropological, and archaeological work reclaims their centrality, while recognizing methodological limitations.

The synthesis of these approaches allows for a more balanced picture: al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt were neither peripheral idols nor egalitarian saviors, but central nodes in a dynamic religious landscape whose transformation under Islam reflected profound shifts in theology, gender, and power.

Case Studies

Al-Lāt, Al-'Uzzā, and Manāt in Historical and Cultural Context

1. Al-Lāt: The Nurturer and the Matron of Ta'if

Al-Lāt (lit. "the Goddess"), whose name may derive from the feminine form of ilāh ("deity"), was among the most revered divinities in pre-Islamic Arabia.[1] She was primarily worshipped in Ṭāʾif, where her sanctuary became the focus of the Thaqīf tribe's religious and political identity.[2]

Cult and Shrine

Classical sources describe her shrine as a cube-shaped structure containing a white stone, which served as her aniconic representation.[3] Sacrificial offerings, pilgrimage rituals, and seasonal fairs accompanied her cult, making the sanctuary a hub of both spiritual and economic life.[4] The Qurʾān itself indirectly acknowledges her significance by naming her alongside al-ʿUzzā and Manāt in Sūrat al-Najm (53:19–20).[5]

Al-Lāt was also worshipped beyond Ta'if. In Palmyra, she appears in monumental inscriptions as Athena Allāt, depicted with a lion—an image that links her to both protection and ferocity.[6] In Nabataea, she was sometimes assimilated to the Greek goddess Tyche, suggesting her cult resonated with themes of fortune and civic prosperity.[7]

Symbolism

Al-Lāt is usually associated with fertility, agriculture, and maternal qualities. Some scholars view her as the Arabian equivalent of Demeter or Cybele, embodying nourishment and earth-centered abundance.[8] Yet her lion imagery and military associations complicate this portrait, suggesting a dual role as nurturer and protector.[9]

Islamic Confrontation

According to Ibn Hishām's recension of Ibn Isḥāq's Sīrah, al-Lāt's shrine was destroyed after the Muslim conquest of Ṭāʾif, when the Prophet dispatched al-Mughīra b. Shuʿba and Abū Sufyān to demolish the sanctuary.[10] The episode symbolized the triumph of Islam over one of Arabia's most enduring goddesses. Yet the memory of her importance lingered: early Muslim commentators frequently mention her as the greatest female deity of Arabia.[11]

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2. Al-ʿUzzā: The Powerful One and the Goddess of War and Venus

Al-ʿUzzā, literally "the Most Mighty," was another of the most prominent pre-Islamic goddesses, strongly associated with warfare, protection, and astral symbolism.[12] Her cult center was located at Nakhlah, near Mecca, where she was worshipped by the Quraysh and other tribes.[13]

Cult and Rituals

Her sanctuary contained three sacred trees, around which sacrificial rituals were performed.[14] Unlike al-Lāt's stone-centered cult, al-ʿUzzā's arboreal symbolism suggests a connection to fertility and natural vitality.[15] She was invoked before battles, and warriors often swore oaths in her name, underlining her function as a guarantor of victory and strength.[16]

Archaeological evidence connects al-ʿUzzā with the planet Venus, paralleling the Mesopotamian Inanna/Ishtar and the Greco-Roman Aphrodite.[17] Nabataean inscriptions identify her as a major astral

deity, often paired with Dushara, the chief male god of Petra.[18] This astral dimension underlines her dual role as both love-goddess and war-goddess, embodying the paradoxical power of Venus as both life-giver and destroyer.[19]

Symbolism

Al-'Uzzā represents vitality, victory, and erotic potency. Her worship demonstrates how pre-Islamic Arabs linked cosmology with tribal survival: as Venus rises in the dawn sky, she heralds both beauty and conflict.[20] Her cult reflected the precariousness of Arabian life, where fertility and warfare were inseparable.[21]

Islamic Confrontation

According to Islamic tradition, after the conquest of Mecca, the Prophet ordered Khālid b. al-Walīd to destroy al-'Uzzā's shrine at Nakhlah.[22] Ibn al-Kalbī narrates a dramatic account in which Khālid encountered a wild, naked woman at the sanctuary, whom he killed before demolishing the site—an allegorical representation of the goddess's defeat.[23]

This violent imagery reflects the symbolic eradication of al-'Uzzā's authority. Yet the persistence of stories about her power in early Islamic memory indicates that she was perceived as a formidable rival to the new monotheism.[24]

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3. Manāt: The Oldest and the Lady of Fate

Manāt is often described as the oldest of the three goddesses, with a cult extending across the Hijaz and the Red Sea coast.[25] Her name derives from the root m-n-y, meaning "fate" or "portion," marking her as a goddess of destiny and time.[26]

Cult and Shrines

Her primary sanctuary was located at Qudayd, between Mecca and Medina, but her worship extended to Yathrib (later Medina) and the Aws and Khazraj tribes.[27] Pilgrims frequently visited her shrine to conclude the Hajj, shaving their heads in her presence as a sign of completed devotion.[28] This indicates that her cult was deeply integrated into pre-Islamic pilgrimage systems, predating Islamic reconfiguration of the Kaʿba.[29]

Manāt also appears in Safaitic and South Arabian inscriptions, underscoring her widespread presence.[30] Archaeological evidence portrays her as a solemn, often aniconic deity associated with rivers and the passage of time.[31]

Symbolism

As goddess of fate, Manāt represented the inexorability of destiny. Her worship suggests that pre-Islamic Arabs saw life and death not merely as chance but as governed by a transcendent feminine principle.[32] She was often invoked in oaths and curses, highlighting her role as custodian of cosmic justice.[33]

Islamic Confrontation

The Prophet is said to have ordered the destruction of Manāt's shrine in 630 CE, carried out by ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib.[34] Her cult was suppressed, and her role in pilgrimage was reabsorbed into the Islamic Hajj system. Yet traces of her memory persisted in poetic and tribal traditions, where she continued to symbolize fate and mortality.[35]

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4. Comparative Synthesis

Together, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt formed a triadic system balancing fertility, power, and destiny. Their shrines structured pre-Islamic pilgrimage routes, their symbols anchored tribal identities, and their cults tied Arabia to wider Near Eastern traditions of goddess worship.[36]

The Qurʾānic denunciation of these goddesses (53:19–23) targeted not obscure idols but the very pillars of Arabian religiosity. Their eradication under Islam was therefore not simply theological purification but also a profound cultural shift: the sacred feminine was systematically displaced, and religious authority became monopolized by a male, imageless deity.[37]

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Islamic Reconfiguration: The Daughters of Allāh and the Transformation of Arabia's Sacred Landscape

1. Qurʾānic Polemics and the "Daughters of Allāh"

The Qurʾān's most explicit reference to al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt occurs in Sūrat al-Najm (53:19–23):

"Have you considered al-Lāt and al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt, the third, the other? Is the male for you and for Him the female? That, then, is an unfair division! They are but names which you and your forefathers have named; God has sent down no authority for them."[1]

This passage demonstrates several polemical strategies:

1. Ridicule of gender inversion: The Qurʾān mocks the attribution of female offspring to God while the Arabs themselves preferred sons.[2]

2. Reduction to "names": The goddesses are stripped of ontological status, framed as human inventions without divine sanction.[3]

3. Assertion of singular authority: By denying any divine "warrant" (sulṭān), the Qurʾān centralizes all sacred legitimacy in Allāh alone.[4]

Later exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī emphasize that the verse exposes the illogic of polytheism, underscoring Islam's exclusive monotheism.[5] Yet for many scholars, the vehemence of this denunciation reveals how entrenched and threatening the goddesses were to early Islam's consolidation.[6]

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2. The "Satanic Verses" Controversy

One of the most contested episodes in Islamic historiography is the alleged incident of the "Satanic Verses." According to early sources like al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Saʿd, the Prophet initially recited conciliatory

lines acknowledging the goddesses as exalted intercessors, only later retracting them after angelic correction.[7]

The episode is framed by some modern scholars as a moment of political compromise with the Quraysh,[8] while others reject it as a fabrication introduced by polemical opponents.[9] Regardless of historicity, the persistence of this tradition indicates how central the goddesses were in the religious imagination of the time. Their dismissal was not merely doctrinal but required repeated reinforcement.[10]

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3. Campaigns of Shrine Destruction

The Prophet's campaigns targeted the shrines of the three goddesses systematically:

Al-Lāt (Ṭāʾif): destroyed by al-Mughīra b. Shuʿba after the city's surrender.[11]

Al-ʿUzzā (Nakhlah): demolished by Khālid b. al-Walīd, with accounts of a feminine apparition dramatizing her defeat.[12]

Manāt (Qudayd): razed by ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib in 630 CE.[13]

These acts were not only religious purges but also political subjugations: shrines served as tribal centers of identity, and their destruction symbolized submission to Islam's new order.[14]

Medieval sources like Ibn al-Kalbī emphasize the Prophet's direct sanction of these demolitions, highlighting their theological weight.[15] Modern historians argue that these events mark the transformation of Arabia's sacred geography into a monotheistic monopoly centered on Mecca.[16]

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4. The Monopolization of the Kaʿba

The Kaʿba, though revered before Islam, was formerly embedded within a pluralistic pantheon, housing idols and serving as a shared sacred space.[17] Islam's reforms eliminated competing cults and redefined the Kaʿba as the exclusive sanctuary of Allāh.[18]

By absorbing the pilgrimage rituals once linked to shrines like Manāt's, Islam centralized religious authority in Mecca.[19] This shift had profound social implications: the suppression of female divine figures coincided with the reorientation of worship toward a transcendent, imageless male God.[20]

Some scholars interpret this as part of a broader monotheistic trend across the Near East, where goddesses were gradually subordinated or erased in favor of a singular male deity.[21] Others emphasize the particularity of Arabia, where these reforms dismantled deeply rooted tribal cults and replaced them with a unifying ritual system.[22]

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5. Consequences for the Sacred Feminine and Women's Status

The eradication of al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt represented not just theological reform but also the loss of female divine archetypes. In pre-Islamic religion, women could act as priestesses, custodians of shrines,

and mediators of divine power.[23] With Islam's reconfiguration, religious authority became exclusively male, and the sacred feminine was either repressed or domesticated.[24]

While Islam granted women certain legal protections, it simultaneously eliminated the symbolic parity represented by female deities.[25] The tension between these reforms remains a subject of scholarly debate: some view Islam as elevating women by abolishing exploitative cultic practices,[26] while others argue that it entrenched patriarchal structures by removing divine models of feminine power.[27]

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6. Synthesis

The Islamic reconfiguration of Arabia's sacred landscape achieved more than the eradication of idols: it redrew the boundaries of the possible divine, concentrating worship in a single, imageless deity and abolishing alternative sources of sacred legitimacy. In this process, the triad of goddesses—once central to Arabian spirituality—were recast as empty names.

The cultural memory of al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt thus survived only as cautionary figures in Islamic polemic, their power neutralized but their shadow haunting the history of the sacred feminine.

Comparative Section: The Arabian Goddess Triad in the Context of Near Eastern and Mediterranean Sacred Feminine Traditions

1. Introduction: The Sacred Feminine Across Civilizations

The goddesses of Arabia—al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt—did not exist in isolation. Rather, they participated in a pan-Near Eastern religious continuum where female divinities played central roles as embodiments of fertility, love, war, protection, and fate.[1] Comparative study highlights both their uniqueness and their structural similarities with neighboring pantheons.

The Near East was saturated with powerful female deities from the third millennium BCE onward. From Inanna in Sumer, Astarte in Canaan, Anāhitā in Persia, to Aphrodite and Artemis in Greece, the sacred feminine shaped cosmologies and ritual life.[2] Arabia, positioned at the crossroads of Mesopotamia, Syria, and the Mediterranean, inevitably absorbed and reinterpreted these influences.[3]

By setting the Arabian triad alongside their counterparts, we uncover both shared archetypes—fertility, astral power, and destiny—and divergent developments, especially the dramatic erasure of the sacred feminine under Islam compared to more gradual transformations in other regions.[4]

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2. Mesopotamia: Inanna / Ishtar and the Archetype of Love and War

Mesopotamia's Inanna (Sumerian) or Ishtar (Akkadian) stands as one of the earliest fully developed models of a dual-aspect goddess.[5] Like al-ʿUzzā, she was a goddess of both love and war, ruling over sexuality, fertility, and violent conquest.

Astral Dimension: Ishtar was associated with Venus, the morning and evening star, echoing the astral symbolism of al-ʿUzzā.[6]

Rituals: Temples in Uruk and Nineveh featured priestesses and ritual lamentations, reminiscent of Arabian shrines with female custodians.[7]

Mythology: Her descent into the underworld to confront her sister Ereshkigal mirrors Manāt's role as guardian of fate and death.[8]

The endurance of Ishtar across millennia demonstrates the tenacity of the sacred feminine in Mesopotamia. Yet with the rise of Assyrian and later Persian empires, male deities like Ashur and Ahura Mazda increasingly dominated the pantheon.[9]

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3. Levant and Syria: Astarte, Atargatis, and Baʿalat Gubla

The Levantine world cultivated goddesses deeply resonant with Arabia's triad.

Astarte (ʿAshtart): Known across Canaan, Phoenicia, and Syria, she was associated with sexuality, fertility, and warfare—traits parallel to al-ʿUzzā.[10] Her cult spread via Phoenician trade to Cyprus and Carthage, demonstrating the portability of sacred feminine archetypes.

Atargatis: Worshipped in Syria, often depicted with fish symbolism, she was a goddess of fertility and waters, paralleling al-Lāt's agricultural associations.[11]

Baʿalat Gubla (Byblos): A civic goddess tied to city-protection, prosperity, and fate, echoing Manāt's solemn dimensions.[12]

Arabia's proximity to Syria and Phoenicia facilitated cultural exchange: inscriptions from northern Arabia reveal Phoenician influence, suggesting that al-Lāt's lion imagery and Tyche-like associations may derive from Levantine prototypes.[13]

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4. Greece and Rome: Artemis, Aphrodite, Cybele, and Tyche

The classical Mediterranean also produced resonances with the Arabian goddesses.

Aphrodite: As a goddess of love linked to Venus, she aligns with al-ʿUzzā's erotic and astral dimensions.[14]

Artemis: Protector of wilderness and fertility, Artemis recalls al-Lāt's dual roles as nurturer and fierce guardian.[15]

Cybele (Magna Mater): Brought to Rome from Phrygia, Cybele embodied fertility and ecstatic rites, resembling the maternal and protective aspects of al-Lāt.[16]

Tyche (Fortuna): Goddess of chance and destiny, Tyche parallels Manāt as arbiter of human fate, especially in civic contexts.[17]

Arabian cults interacted with Greco-Roman religion directly. At Palmyra, al-Lāt was explicitly assimilated to Athena, while Nabataean inscriptions equated al-ʿUzzā with Aphrodite.[18] This syncretism demonstrates Arabia's openness to absorbing the Mediterranean pantheon into its own sacred landscape.

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5. Persia: Anāhitā and the Zoroastrian Turn

In Persia, the goddess Anāhitā embodied waters, fertility, and war. Her cult was state-sponsored under Artaxerxes II, with temples across the empire.[19] She shared attributes with both al-Lāt (fertility, protection) and al-ʿUzzā (military vigor, astral links).

With the rise of Zoroastrianism, however, the pantheon was radically streamlined. Ahura Mazda became supreme, and Anāhitā was absorbed as a yazata (divine figure) but subordinated to the male deity.[20] This prefigures Islam's erasure of the Arabian triad: both represent monotheistic revolutions curtailing the authority of goddesses.

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6. South Arabia and Ethiopia: Solar Goddesses and African Parallels

South Arabia had its own rich pantheon:

Shams: A solar goddess whose cult recalls al-Lāt as a giver of fertility and cosmic order.[21]

Dhāt-Baʿdān: Linked to protective power, possibly analogous to al-ʿUzzā.[22]

In Ethiopia, Astar (derived from Astarte/Ishtar) was worshipped, reflecting Red Sea cultural exchange.[23]

These parallels underscore that Arabia's triad was not anomalous but part of a wider Afro-Arabian sacred feminine. The destruction of their cults under Islam mirrored similar shifts in Ethiopia with the Christianization of Axum, which suppressed goddess traditions.[24]

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7. Patterns of Suppression in Monotheistic Revolutions

A comparative lens reveals recurring patterns:

1. Delegitimization: Goddesses reduced to "names" or demons (Qurʾān 53:23; Zoroastrian polemic against daēvas).

2. Shrine Destruction: Symbolic dismantling of sacred geography (Islam in Arabia; Josianic reforms in Israel; Christianization in the Roman Empire).

3. Absorption or Subordination: Some goddesses reinterpreted as saints or angels (Anāhitā as yazata; Artemis rebranded under Mary in Ephesus).

4. Patriarchal Consolidation: Women's ritual authority declined as priesthoods became male-exclusive.[25]

Islam's erasure of the triad thus aligns with broader monotheistic strategies, but with a unique abruptness: while Greek, Roman, and Persian transitions were gradual and syncretic, Arabia witnessed a sudden rupture, eradicating female deities almost overnight.[26]

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8. Synthesis: Mirrors of a Wider Sacred Feminine

The Arabian goddesses reflect not only Arabia's cultural identity but also a shared ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern archetype.[1] Their memory resonates with Ishtar, Astarte, Aphrodite, and Anāhitā—goddesses who embodied the paradox of life, love, and death.[2]

Islam's rejection of these figures marked not merely a religious transformation but a civilizational rupture: the disappearance of the divine feminine from Arabia's spiritual horizon.[3] What persisted in poetry and memory became shadows of once-powerful goddesses who had linked Arabia to the wider world of sacred feminine traditions.[4]

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Conclusion

Between Memory and Erasure — The Daughters of Allāh and the Sacred Feminine in Transition

1. Recalling the Sacred Feminine in Arabia

The triad of al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt, often remembered only as fleeting Qurʾānic polemical references, in fact occupied a central role in pre-Islamic Arabia's religious and social landscape. These goddesses embodied fertility, fate, and power, and their shrines were crucial to the articulation of tribal identity and ritual practice.[1] Their prominence reveals that the sacred feminine was not peripheral in Arabian polytheism but rather woven into the very texture of spirituality and society.

Islam's emergence did not occur in a cultural vacuum. The Qurʾān's dismissive tone toward these deities—reducing them to "mere names" (Q 53:23)—must be understood against the background of their influence.[2] As several historians have observed, polemic is often strongest where the rival is most entrenched.[3] Thus, the "daughters of Allāh" were not minor idols but vital cultic figures whose erasure required deliberate theological and political effort.[4]

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2. Islam's Reconfiguration of the Sacred

The destruction of the goddesses' shrines, the Qurʾān's polemics, and the reorientation of pilgrimage toward the Kaʿba together amounted to a radical reconfiguration of Arabia's sacred geography.[5] By stripping away competing cults, Islam created a monopolized sacred center that bound disparate tribes into a single ritual system.[6]

This shift was simultaneously theological and sociopolitical. Theologically, Islam centralized all divine power in Allāh, who could neither be represented nor associated with daughters or intermediaries.[7] Sociopolitically, the dismantling of tribal shrines undercut the localized sources of religious legitimacy, transferring authority to the Prophet and, later, the Islamic community.[8]

The displacement of the sacred feminine was not an incidental by-product but integral to this transformation. Once-dominant goddesses became rhetorical foils, invoked only as reminders of ignorance (jāhiliyya) to be overcome.[9]

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3. Continuities and Ruptures in Women's Status

The goddesses' fall reverberated beyond theology into the symbolic universe of gender. Their elimination erased female archetypes of divine power, leaving women in a religious order centered entirely on a transcendent male deity.[10]

To be sure, Islam introduced reforms that improved certain aspects of women's lives: inheritance rights, restrictions on infanticide, and legal recognition within family structures.[11] Yet these legal protections coexisted with a profound symbolic rupture: the sacred feminine as a model of power disappeared. Unlike in pre-Islamic ritual life, where women could serve as guardians of shrines or channels of divine will, early Islam reconfigured authority in exclusively male terms.[12]

This duality complicates any simplistic evaluation. Islam did not merely oppress women nor did it liberate them unilaterally; it reorganized gendered roles within a new framework of monotheistic exclusivity.[13]

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4. Comparative Reflections

The Arabian experience resonates with wider patterns across the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. The displacement of Inanna-Ishtar in Mesopotamia, the decline of Cybele in Anatolia, and the eventual marginalization of Artemis and Athena within Christianizing Greece all reflect the progressive erosion of goddesses under rising monotheisms.[14]

This comparative framework highlights two points:

1. Monotheism tends to displace goddesses by redefining divine power in masculine, transcendent terms.[15]

2. The Arabian case is unique in its rapidity: within a single generation, long-standing cults were not only delegitimized but ritually eradicated.[16]

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5. Methodological Challenges

Writing the history of al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt is fraught with difficulties. Archaeological evidence is limited, while most literary references come from Islamic sources produced after the triumph of monotheism.[17] These sources portray the goddesses as relics of ignorance rather than as living religious forces.[18]

Modern scholars must therefore navigate a double erasure: the material destruction of shrines in the 7th century and the textual marginalization in later historiography.[19] This challenge requires a critical reading of Islamic sources alongside comparative data from Near Eastern religious history.

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6. Toward a Balanced Assessment

To reduce this history to a narrative of loss or liberation alone would be misleading. The reality is one of transformation:

Loss: The eradication of goddesses removed female divine archetypes and reduced women's religious authority.[20]

Gain: Islamic reforms granted women legal visibility and protection, embedding them within a universal religious community.[21]

Ambiguity: The symbolic disappearance of the feminine divine coexisted with elevated moral recognition of mothers, daughters, and wives within the Qurʾān's ethical vision.[22]

The sacred feminine did not vanish entirely but was absorbed into new metaphors—paradise described in maternal imagery, mercy (raḥma) linguistically linked to the womb (raḥim), and Fatima later elevated in Shiʿi piety.[23]

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7. Future Research Directions

Several questions remain open:

To what extent did women resist the suppression of the goddesses?

How did memories of al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and Manāt survive in folklore or syncretic practices?

Could comparative mythology yield deeper insights into how sacred feminine archetypes adapt under monotheism?

How might feminist theology reinterpret the Qurʾān's critique of the goddesses today?

Answering these questions would not only deepen our understanding of Arabian religion but also contribute to global debates on gender, power, and the divine.

8. Closing Reflection

The story of the "daughters of Allāh" is not merely an antiquarian curiosity. It is a window into the cultural shifts that shaped the Islamic world and, by extension, global history. Their disappearance from the Arabian religious landscape marked the beginning of a new era, one that redefined gender, power, and divinity in ways that continue to resonate.

In their absence, Islam forged a theology that emphasized transcendence, unity, and the imageless God. Yet their memory lingers—in polemic, in myth, in the very structure of Islamic scripture—reminding us that every act of erasure leaves traces. The daughters of Allāh are gone, but their shadow remains, inviting us to reflect on the costs and consequences of religious transformation.

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