



“In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful”

The confusing calendar system of pagan Arabs

Abu Rayhan Biruni (973 CE-1050 CE) is one of the most distinguished Persian thinkers and scientists. He was born approximately 400 years after Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). In his books, he described the rotation of the earth hundreds of years before anyone else mentioned it. He calculated the radius and circumference of the Earth, and his scientific data was used for centuries in determining precise eclipses and equinox times. With simple experiments, he demonstrated that “vacuum” exists. Using sexagesimal numbering, he was the first person who subdivided the hour into smaller parts such as minutes and seconds. Six hundred years before Galileo, Biruni wrote that the Earth rotates on its axis! Unlike Galileo, his ideas were accepted by religious scholars of the time! That is how Islam values science and knowledge!

He has written many books on languages, history, biology, geometry, physics, astronomy, mathematics, and many other subjects. Romans used to use extra months known as "intercalary months", which were added ad hoc to realign the 355-day Roman year with the solar year.

In his book “[الاثرالباقية عن القرون الخالية](#)”, also known as “[Chronology of Ancient Nations](#)”; Biruni describes in detail the calendar systems of many civilizations such as the Persians, Indians, Jews, Christians, and Arabs. He also demonstrates and explains (as if he is teaching in a classroom) the detailed mathematical calculations regarding those calendar systems.



From the time of Abrahamic Era, there were four forbidden Arabic months (Dhu al-Qadah, Dhul al-Hijjah, Muharram, and Rajab). During these months, many things such as wars and transgression were strictly forbidden to give the society a chance to heal itself, for people to reflect on their ways of living, and possibly to return to God. Approximately 200 years prior to the usage of the current Islamic Hijri Calendar, the ancient Arabs were following the lunar months but were not keeping track of years since they didn't have any starting reference point to count from (i.e., birth of a king, start of a dynasty). Instead, each year was named after an important event that happened during it (e.g., Year of the Elephant). Like Christians and Jews, the pagan Arabs' months were based on the observation of new moons as later it was with the Muslims. However, the pagans started introducing [intercalation](#) into the order of the months. They always preferred the time of the great pilgrimage to Mecca to coincide with when their merchandise would be ready for the market (e.g., fruit, leather, etc.) instead of the true month of pilgrimage (Dhu al-Hijjah).

The underlying reason to shift the “forbidden” months was due to political, financial, and social factors. For example, if it was not convenient to have the pilgrimage during the hot summer, they would simply move it to winter by artificially skipping or adding months. After every pilgrimage to Kaaba, the tribe of “Kinana” would announce to the crowd what the next

Months in the Islamic Calendar

| Month Names | Days |
|--------------------|-------|
| Muḥarram | 29/30 |
| Şafar | 29/30 |
| Rabī' al-awwal | 29/30 |
| Rabī' ath-thānī | 29/30 |
| Jumādā al-ūlā | 29/30 |
| Jumādā al-āakhirah | 29/30 |
| Rajab | 29/30 |
| Sha'bān | 29/30 |
| Ramaḍān | 29/30 |
| Shawwāl | 29/30 |
| Dhū al-Qa'dah | 29/30 |
| Dhū al-Hijjah | 29/30 |

month would be (instead of following the proper order of the months). Some years, the order of the months would not change while other times it would change. Simply put it, they didn't follow the true order of the months, a random chaotic calendar system!

Biruni explains that the first intercalation was applied to the month of "Muharram"; hence the month of "Safar" was called "Muharram" and so on (i.e., the true order would have been "Safar", but they replaced it with "Muharram"). This tradition went on for hundreds of years. When the prophet migrated (Hijra) from Mecca to Medina, the turn of intercalation had come to the month of "Shaban" so the month of "Shaban" was called "Muharram" and month of "Ramadhan" was called "Safar" (almost a jump of 5 months).

Biruni says that almost 10 years later at the time of the Farewell (or final) Pilgrimage, the order of the months **had finally returned to its true natural order** so the system could be changed without any drastic impact on customs, pilgrimage, fasting, and economy. **Sura 9, verses 36 and 37 specifying the correct number of months (12) in a year and prohibiting the intercalation had been already revealed to the prophet a year or so prior to the Farewell Pilgrimage but he had waited for Allah's permission to enact the rule at the proper time.** At the conclusion of the final pilgrimage, in the year 10 AH (631/632 CE), the prophet addressed the people by saying that

***"The season, the time has gone around as it was on the day of
Allah creating the heavens and the Earth"***

meaning that intercalation had to be ended. The **"Farewell Pilgrimage"** is also called the **"Correct Pilgrimage"** since at that time the so-called month of "Dhu al-Hijjah" happened to coincide with the true "Dhu al-Hijjah"! From that point on, the intercalation ("Nasi") was prohibited in Islam and the months followed their natural sequential order.

A couple of years later, after the prophet had passed away, the "Hijra" (the year when the prophet migrated from Mecca to Medina) was officially adopted as the starting reference point of today's Islamic Hijri Calendar. Biruni provides multiple reasons why Hijra was chosen as the calendar's starting point instead of other important historical events such as the Night Journey or the year that Allah (SWT) appointed Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as the last prophet.

The important reason is that Hijra was the **most recent and accurate date** compared to the other events that had occurred years prior to it during the intercalation. After Hijra (for 13 years), proper records of years and intercalated months had been kept by Muslims, so they were able to accurately trace

back to Hijra. As was explained earlier in this chapter, years did not always contain 12 months, and months were intercalated arbitrarily. When the Islamic Hijri Calendar was adopted, it was a couple of years after the prophet's death; about 13 years after Hijra, approximately 25 years after the prophethood, and more than 60 years after the prophet's birthday. Let us assume that an event was reported to be in the month of April more than 50 years ago. However, we're not sure if some of the past years were 12 months or not (maybe some were changed arbitrarily by people to 13 months or 10 months). Additionally, the months had not followed the proper order of January to December. Let's say that during the past 50 years, some months may have been skipped or renamed arbitrarily. For example, jumping from January to March and so on. How can we be sure that an event's reported year/month from 50 years ago is the true date considering the above?! Therefore, it puts the reported year/month in question. Another factor that adds to the mystery is that there are different hearsay dates attributed to certain events during the prophet's life, and we are not 100% certain which one is true. Finally, the earliest books containing such information were written hundreds of years after the prophet.

The date of the Night Journey (prior to Hijra) falls within the era of intercalation and cannot be precisely pinpointed. Considering all the above reasons, we know that a couple of different dates (years and months) have been attributed to the Night Journey (620CE, 621CE) but no one is 100% sure which year/month is the true date. Even if a person recorded the date on the day after the Night Journey, the recording of the date would be based on the arbitrary calendar system (prior to Hijra) explained above so it would have been an intercalated date instead of the true date (year/month). Historical records from hundreds of years after the prophet state that someone heard from someone else who heard it from another person and so on. Generally, scholars investigate ancient hearsay reports based on many parameters and decide how reliable they are. Logically, there is no solid proof about authenticity of the reported dates no matter how you investigate them. You can only claim that some reports have a greater probability of being true than others.

Please note that digital calendar converters must not be used for dates prior to 10 AH or 631/632CE (e.g., the year when intercalation stopped) due to the intercalation problem discussed above. The reconstruction of any true Arabian calendar before the abolition of the intercalation is basically impossible as we discussed it in this chapter.

For the best approximate calculation of Night Journey's date, please see

<https://www.lightofheavens.org/articles-and-research-papers>