

## Classical Arabic zoosynonymy: a source of zoological knowledge among Arabs. The case of lion synonyms

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*Anthropozoologica* est une revue en flux continu publiée par les Publications scientifiques du Muséum, Paris, avec le soutien du CNRS.

*Anthropozoologica* is a fast track journal published by the Museum Science Press, Paris, with the support of the CNRS.

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CP 41 – 57 rue Cuvier F-75231 Paris cedex 05 (France)

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ISSN (imprimé/print): 0761-3032 / ISSN (électronique/electronic): 2107-0881

# Classical Arabic zoosynonymy: a source of zoological knowledge among Arabs. The case of lion synonyms

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Submitted on 16 February 2025 | Accepted on 6 November 2025 | Published on 17 July 2026

Hammoudi O., Aarab A. & Rgoud A. 2026. — Classical Arabic zoosynonymy: a source of zoological knowledge among Arabs. The case of lion synonyms. *Anthropozoologica* 61 (7): 139-144. <https://doi.org/10.5252/anthropozoologica-2026v61a7>. <http://anthropozoologica.com/61/7>

## ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the synonyms of the lion in classical Arabic to highlight the zoological knowledge that pre-Islamic Arabs had about it. To achieve this, we relied on the list compiled by al-Labābīdī in his book *معجم أسماء الأشياء* (*Muḥam asmā' al-ašyā'* – *Glossary of the Names of Things*). The 324 synonyms for the lion provide insight into the various ways Arabs perceived and understood this animal, with each term reflecting a specific trait or symbolic meaning and thus revealing important aspects of their zoological knowledge. The encyclopedic dictionary *Lisān al-'Arab*, written in the 14th century by Ibn Manẓūr, was also essential for extracting, in detail, all the information related to each of these synonyms. The analysis of these synonyms allowed us to classify them into eight categories, reflecting various characteristics of the lion which are as follow: i) predatory and defensive behavior; ii) strength and boldness; iii) morphology; iv) gait and movement; v) coat color; vi) vocalizations; vii) name based on age and sex; viii) social status. By following the same approach, this study could be extended to other animal species, whether domestic or wild, which also have numerous synonyms recorded in medieval Arab encyclopedic works. Such an extension would provide a broader perspective on the zoological knowledge of the Arabs of pre-Islamic era.

**KEY WORDS**  
Arabic zoology,  
Arabic zoological  
terminology.

## RÉSUMÉ

*La zoosynonymie arabe classique : une source de connaissances zoologiques chez les Arabes. Le cas des synonymes du lion.*

Cette étude vise à recenser et à caractériser les synonymes du lion en arabe classique, afin de mettre en lumière les connaissances zoologiques que les Arabes de l'époque antéislamique possédaient à son sujet. Pour ce faire, nous nous sommes appuyés sur la liste établie par al-Labābīdī dans son livre *معجم أسماء الأشياء* (*Muḥam asmā' al-ašyā'* – *Glossaire des noms des choses*). Bien que les seuls mots ne puissent rendre compte de l'ensemble du savoir zoologique, les 324 synonymes recensés dans cette liste constituent

**MOTS CLÉS**  
Zoologie arabe,  
terminologie zoologique  
arabe.

autant d'indices précieux des multiples façons dont le lion était perçu et compris par les Arabes. Chaque synonyme tend à encapsuler un attribut, un comportement ou une association symbolique particulière, offrant ainsi un aperçu précieux – quoique nécessairement partiel – de leurs connaissances zoologiques. Le recours au dictionnaire encyclopédique *Lisān al-‘Arab*, composé au xiv<sup>e</sup> siècle par Ibn Manẓūr, a également été indispensable pour extraire, de manière détaillée, l'ensemble des informations relatives à chacun de ces synonymes. L'analyse de ces derniers a permis de les regrouper en huit catégories, reflétant diverses caractéristiques du lion, qui se déclinent comme suit: i) comportement prédateur et de défense; ii) puissance et audace; iii) morphologie; iv) démarche et déplacement; v) couleur de la robe; vi) cris; vii) appellations selon l'âge et le sexe; viii) statut social. Enfin, grâce à l'exploration de ces synonymes, nous pouvons faire une idée des connaissances que les anciens Arabes possédaient au sujet du lion. En suivant la même démarche, cette étude pourrait être étendue à d'autres espèces animales, qu'elles soient domestiques ou sauvages, lesquelles disposent également d'un grand nombre de synonymes, consignés dans les œuvres encyclopédiques arabes médiévales. Ceci permettra d'obtenir une vision générale des connaissances zoologiques des Arabes à l'époque antéislamique.

## INTRODUCTION

The pre-Islamic Arabs, in particular, had a remarkable mnemonic method for preserving their ancestral knowledge: versification. In other words, they recorded their knowledge in the form of poetry, whose meter and rhyme facilitated memorization while ensuring their preservation and transmission from generation to generation.

In the 8th and 9th centuries, Arabic lexicographers, eager to protect the Arabic language from the influences of the languages of the conquered territories, traveled across Arabic-speaking regions to collect linguistic data from nomads living far from foreign influences. This lexicographical data pertains to a vocabulary deemed to have remained in its “pure” state, i.e., in the Arabic language of the pre-Islamic period. Data was collected in the form of poems, speeches and proverbs. Then, works were composed, some of which are partially or entirely devoted to animal species. Examples of these include al-Aṣma‘ī († 828)'s *Kitāb al-Iḥil* (*The Book of Camels*) (al-Dāmin 2003), *Kitāb al-Ḥayl* (*The Book of Horses*) (al-Dāmin 2009) and *Kitāb al-Šā’* (*The Book of Sheep and Goats*) (al-Tamīmī 1987), as well as al-Ġāhiz's *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* (c. 868-869) (Hārūn 1988), despite the fact that the latter work is not limited to lexicography (Aarab & Lherminier 2015; El Mouhajir & Aarab 2016, 2017; Aarab 2020). The lexicographical tradition continued for several centuries, culminating in the writing of encyclopedic dictionaries such as *al-Muḥaṣṣaṣ* by Ibn Sīdah († 1066) in al-Andalus (‘Abd al-Ḥamīd 2005), *Lisān al-‘Arab* by Ibn Manẓūr († 1312) in Egypt (Anonyme 1956), up to *Tāğ al-‘Arūs* by al-Zabīdī († 1790) in Yemen (Ġawād 1944), the three of which do not focus on animals.

While the practice of versifying knowledge, as a means of preserving it, is well known to specialists, researchers often seem to overlook the nuances of synonyms, a point that can be better appreciated through classical works such as *Al-Bayān wa-l-Tabyīn* (*Eloquence and Exposition*) by al-Ġāhiz († 869) (Juwaydī 2019), *al-Ši‘r wa-l-šū‘arā’* (*Poetry and Poets*) by Ibn Qutayba († 889) (Šākir 2006) and *al-Muqaddima* (*The Prole-*

*gomena*) by Ibn Ḥaldūn († 1406) (Anonyme 1970). Among Arabs, it has been suggested that the number of synonyms associated with an animal (or anything else of value to them, e.g. swords or wine) is proportional to its cultural significance (Pellat 1960; al-Qalqaṣandī 1987; al-Damīrī 2003). Thus, lions, dromedaries, sheep, goats, and horses have numerous synonyms because they are culturally relevant. While the study of poetry as a vehicle of knowledge is well-documented (Anonyme 1970; Ḥaġġī & al-Aḥḍar 1981; al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd 1981; Stetkevych 1986; Chaouch 2008; Payen 2021), the analysis of synonyms remains largely unexplored. In this study, we contend that a “synonym” is not merely a simple equivalent; rather, it conveys additional information about the animal in question. In this sense, these synonyms can be described as connotative, meaning they are differentiated in their nuances. Our aim is therefore to highlight the important role played by synonyms in the preservation of zoological heritage within Arab culture. Addressing all aspects of synonymy within Arabic zoonyms would be an arduous task. Therefore, we will focus specifically on the synonymy related to the lion.

By documenting a rich diversity of terms for the same animal, Arabic lexicographers, whether intentionally or not, contributed to safeguarding and transmitting a wide array of zoological knowledge. We will show that each zoonym referring to the lion highlights one or more of the lion's characteristics, such as its power, aggressive behavior, hunting technique or morphology, among others.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

Several Arab authors mentioned a remarkably high number of synonyms for *asad* (the Arabic common name for the “lion”) in their works. This number rises to approximately 800 in al-Šammārī (1990), 600 in al-Harawī (Arnā‘ūt & Muṣṭafā 2000), and 500 in Ibn Ḥalawayh (al-Darwīš 1989), among others. However, for this study, we have chosen to rely on the list established by al-Labābīdī in his book *Mu‘ḥam asmā’ al-aṣyā’* (*Glossary of the Names of Things*) (‘Abd al-Tawwāb 1894). Although words alone cannot encompass the full

extent of zoological knowledge, the 324 synonyms identified in this list serve as indicators of the multiple ways in which the lion was perceived and understood by the Arabs. Each synonym tends to refer to a particular attribute, behavior, or symbolic association. While this list has the merit of gathering an impressive number of synonyms for *asad*, it does not provide any explanation of each term. The use of the encyclopedic dictionary *Lisān al-‘Arab* and other classical Arabic dictionaries, such as *al-Muḥaṣṣaṣ* by Ibn Sīdah (‘Abd al-Ḥamīd 2005) and *Tāh al-‘Arūs* by al-Zabīdī (Ġawād 1944), therefore proved essential for exhaustively extracting all the information related to each of these synonyms. In order to avoid redundancy, we prioritized in the following discussion those synonyms that illustrate distinct and complementary characteristics within each category. Synonyms exhibiting overlapping semantic features were systematically excluded.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

We observed that some synonyms have multiple derived forms, with up to 12 variants. For example, *haṣṣār* (هَصَّار) has the following variants: *miḥṣār* (مِهْصِير), *haṣwara* (هَصْوَرَة), *hayṣar* (هَيْصَر), *muhtaṣir* (مُهْتَصِير), *miḥṣar* (مِهْصَر), *hāṣir* (هَاصِر), *miḥṣār* (مِهْصَار), *haṣūr* (هَصُور), *hayṣār* (هَيْصَار), *huṣara* (هَصْرَة), *haṣir* (هَصِر), *hayṣūr* (هَيْصُور). These derived forms all retain the same original meaning. This multiplicity of forms can often be attributed to the diversity of dialects that existed across different regions of Arabia, leading to several phonetic or morphological variations of the same word. Once the synonyms from al-Labābīdī’s list were compiled, these variants totaled 141 occurrences. Consequently, the number of synonyms without derived forms amounts to 183.

It should also be noted that among these 183 synonyms, our search in *Lisān al-‘Arab* and other classical Arabic dictionaries yielded no results for 15 of them, leaving their meanings indecipherable. These 15 synonyms are as follows: *ḥabūr* (حَبُور), *dilhām* (دِلْهَام), *martad* (مَرْتَد), *furāsin* (فُرَاسِين), *kaḥmas* (كَهْمَس), *munīḥ* (مُنِيح), *muḡahḡih* (مُغْهْجِه), *sibr* (سِبْر), *nibrās* (نِبْرَاس), *hanbaḡ* (هَنْبَغ), *haḡḡās* (هَاجَّاس), *ḡihbīd* (جِهْبِيد), *ḡā’ibu al-‘ayn* (جَائِبُ الْعَيْنِ), *ḡa’ab* (جَاب), *‘aḡūz* (عَجُوز).

We then analyzed these synonyms to classify them according to their different characteristics. Table 1 presents the distribution of synonyms for *asad* across different categories, along with their respective percentage. The eight categories we have established are as follows: i) predatory and defensive behavior; ii) strength and boldness; iii) morphology; iv) gait and movement; v) coat color; vi) vocalizations; vii) name based on age and sex; viii) social status.

### DISTRIBUTION OF LION SYNONYMS BY CATEGORIES: NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE

#### *Predatory and defensive behavior*

This category accounts for 51% of all lion-related synonyms. It includes terms describing hunting actions and feeding behavior. Here are some illustrative examples were each chosen to highlight a specific aspect conveyed by the corresponding

TABLE 1. — Distribution of lion synonyms by categories: number and percentage.

| Category                         | Number of synonyms | %   |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|-----|
| Predatory and defensive behavior | 102                | 51  |
| Strength and boldness            | 36                 | 18  |
| Morphology                       | 20                 | 10  |
| Gait and movement                | 13                 | 6.5 |
| Coat color                       | 10                 | 5   |
| Vocalizations                    | 9                  | 4.5 |
| Names based on age and sex       | 6                  | 3   |
| Social status                    | 4                  | 2   |
| Total                            | 200                | 100 |

synonym—the same applies to the examples selected in the other categories:

– *Aḍbaṭ* (أَضْبَط): “the ambidextrous”. Ambidexterity is observed in females when capturing prey;

– *Ayyāt* (عَيَّات), *ā’it* (عَائِث), *ayūt* (عَيُوث): “the destructive”;

– *Ḍabūt* (ضَبُوث), *ḍubātī* (ضَبَّائِي), *dabūt* (ضَبِث), *ḍabbāt* (ضَبَّات), *ḍabām* (ضَبَّام): “the seizer”. It relates to the lion’s use of its prehensile claws to seize prey;

– *Fadaḡkas* (فَدَاغْكَس): “the aggressive”. It relates to its tendency to defend itself or attack when threatened;

– *Firās* (فِرَاس), *abū firās* (أَبُو فِرَاس), *firnās* (فِرْنَاس): “the crusher of a prey’s neck”;

– *Furfūr* (فُرْفُر), *furāfira* (فُرَافِرَة), *furāfir* (فُرَافِر), *firfār* (فِرْفَار): “the one that tears apart its prey and breaks its bone”. This term also refers to the lion’s quick and short gait, which would also justify its possible inclusion in the “Gait and Movement” category;

– *Habbār* (هَبَّار): “the striker of prey that tears off flesh”;

– *Haṣṣār* (هَصَّار), *miḥṣār* (مِهْصِير), *haṣwarah* (هَصْوَرَة), *hayṣar* (هَيْصَر), *muhtaṣir* (مُهْتَصِير), *miḥṣar* (مِهْصَر), *hāṣir* (هَاصِر), *miḥṣār* (مِهْصَار), *haṣūr* (هَصُور), *hayṣār* (هَيْصَار), *huṣarah* (هَصْرَة), *haṣir* (هَصِر), *hayṣūr* (هَيْصُور): “the one that subdues its prey by bending or breaking it”;

– *Ḥaṭṭām* (حَطَّام) / *ḥaṭūm* (حَطُوم): “the one that can break bones”;

– *Naḡīd* (نَجِيد), *nāḡid* (نَاجِد): a lion that is “able to intervene powerfully to rescue and defend its peers”;

– *Qa’āṣ* (قَعَّاص): “the one that swiftly finishes off its prey”;

– *Qamūṣ* (قَمُوص): “the one that raises its front legs and strikes down forcefully while crushing its victim with its hind legs”;

– *Qurḍūb* (قُرْضُوب), *muqarḍib* (مُقَرَضِب): “the one with powerful biting and voracious appetite, which devours the prey without distinguishing between flesh and bones”;

– *Ribāl* (رِبَال): “the bold and vigilant during hunting”;

– *Ṭaḡāma* (طَغَامَة): “the vile carnivore”.

#### *Strength and boldness*

This category accounts for 18% of all synonyms of *asad*. It refers to the lion’s strength and its ability to dominate other animals through its power.

– *Ahras* (أَهْرَس), *hurāmis* (هُرَامِس), *hirmās* (هِرْمَاس), *harrās* (هَرَّاس), *haris* (هَرِس): “the Strong”, which is able to crush its prey easily;



- *Aysar* (أَيْسَر): “the light of gait”, which has balanced strength in its left and right forelegs;
- *Azzām* (عَزَام): “the perseverant” when pursuing prey, defending its territory or asserting itself against other animals;
- *Buḥaym*: (بُحَيْم): “the bold”. It is used to refer to the lion because it is difficult to approach it during the hunt, due to its strength;
- *Dalahmas* (دَلَهْمَس): “the brave during its outings and its nocturnal activities”;
- *Dawwās* (دَوَّاس): “the brave, strong, and able to crush all its prey”;
- *Hawwās* (هَوَّاس), *hawwāsah* (هَوَّاسَة): “the prowler at night” in bold pursuit of its prey. The lion is also described in this way because of its voracity and its heavy-footed gait.
- *Hayzam* (هَيَزَم): “the powerful striker, which pierces its prey’s lower abdomen so deeply that it exposes its navel”;
- *Malik al-ḡāb* (مَلِكُ الْغَاب): literally “the king of the forest”. This term refers to the lion due to its perceived dominant position in its natural habitat;
- *Rāhib* (رَاهِب), *rahīb* (رَهِيْب): “the dreadful”;
- *Ṣa‘b* (صَعْب): “the fierce with rebellious character”;
- *Šaranbat* (شَرَنْبَت): “the one with robust forelegs”;
- *Zufār* (زُفَر), *zāfir* (زَافِر): “the one able to lift and drag heavy loads”.

#### Morphology

This category represents 10% of all synonyms of *asad*, and relates to the lion’s physical characteristics (e.g., its size).

- *Aftah* (أَفْتَح): “the one with wide forelegs, whose claws have flexible joints”;
- *Aḡbah* (أَجْبَه): “the one with a wide frontal part”;
- *Aḥnas* (أَخْنَس): “the snub-nosed one”. It has a short and flat nose;
- *Bāsil* (بَاسِل), *basūl* (بَسُول): “the ugly”;
- *Ġayfār* (جَيْفَر): “the one with broad and powerful flanks”;
- *Hadib* (هَدِيب): “the long-maned one”;
- *Hurāṭim* (هُرَاتِم), *harṭama* (هَرْتَمَة), *harṭam* (هَرْتَم): “the one with a septum between its nostrils”;
- *Mādī* (مَادِي): “the one with sharp canines,” which allow it to cut the flesh of its victim.
- *Muṣaddar* (مُصَدَّر): “the one with a powerful chest”;
- *Qasqāṣ* (قَصْقَاص), *quṣquṣ* (قُصْقُص), *quṣquṣa* (قُصْقُصَة): a lion with a large build and great strength.

#### Gait and movement:

This category represents 6.5% of all synonyms of *asad* and describes the various gaits and movements of the lion.

- *Ayyār* (عَيَّار): “the one pacing back and forth over long distances”;
- *Dabīr*, (دَبِير), *ḍabūr* (ضَبُور), *muḍabbir* (مُضَبِّر): “the one with perfect corpulence build, able to bring its legs together before leaping”;
- *Ġādī* (غَادِي): “the one whose gait is characterized by an inclination of the neck”;
- *Hammās* (هَمَّاس), *hamūs* (هَمُوس): “the one with a silent gait, due to its light, almost imperceptible steps”;
- *Masārī* (مَسَارِي): “the one able to travel long distances”;
- *Sibatr* (سَبْطَر): “the one with majestic gait, characterized by a wide and imposing spread of its limbs”.

#### Coat (and mane) color

This category represents 5% of all synonyms for *asad*.

- *Abḡaṭ* (أَبْغَث): said of lions whose coat displays an intermediate shade between white and tawny;
- *Afḍaḥ* (أَفْضَح): said of lions whose coat is white but not immaculate;
- *Aṣbah* (أَصْبَح): said of lions whose coat shifts from black to tawny;
- *Aṣḥab* (أَشْهَب): said of lions whose coat is mainly white, with black marking;
- *Aṣḥab* (أَصْهَب): said of lions whose mane is blond;
- *Ward* (وَرْد): said of lions whose coat is between tawny and yellow.

#### Vocalization:

This category represents 4.5% of all synonyms of *Asad* and refers to the different sounds emitted by the lion.

- *Damir* (دَمِر): “the roaring one when it becomes angry”;
- *Hurāhir* (هُرَاهِر): “the repeatedly roaring one”. It is said of the lion because of its repetitive roar. *Hurāhir* is a quadriliteral word derived from the repetition of the root *harra* (هَرَ), an onomatopoeic verb that imitates the guttural growls or snarls of felines. The repeated form emphasizes the frequent or continuous roaring of the lion;
- *Naḥḥām* (نَحَّام): “the one that emits a sound from deep within”;
- *Nahhāt* (نَهَّات) or *munahhit* (مُنَهِّت) is said of the lion whose cry does not reach the amplitude of a full roar. This term describes a sound that is less impressive than the lion’s usual roar;
- *Qabbāb* (قَبَّاب): “the one whose canines grinds”;
- *Ruzāma* (رُزَامَة), *murzim* (مُرْزِم), *razzām* (رَزَام), *rāzim* (رَازِم), *ruzam* (رُزَم): “the one that emits a subdued yet powerful vocalization while keeping its mouth closed”.

#### Age and sex:

This category represents 3% of all synonyms of *asad*.

- *Dardām* (دَرْدَم): “the male lion”;
- *Hillawf* (هِلْوُف): “the aging lion that becomes heavy and less agile in its movements”;
- *Ġarwān* (جَرْوَان), *ḡarw* (جَرْو): “the cub” that does not participate in hunting yet;
- *Labu’a* (لَبُوَّة): “the lioness”;
- *Šibl* (شِبْل): “the young lion” that has reached the age to participate in hunting.

#### Social status:

This category represents 2% of all synonyms of *asad* and refers to the hierarchical status of the lion within its group.

- *Abbās* (عَبَّاس): “the lion feared by its peers,” who flee from it in fear. It corresponds to the alpha male;
- *Aḡlab* (أَغْلَب): “the one recognized for its status as a victor”;
- *Hādī* (هَادِي): “the one that takes vanguard position when moving in a group”.

The establishment of these eight categories and the definition of their respective synonyms enabled to highlight the particularities of the Arabic language in its approach of lions.

There are admittedly many redundant meanings, which can be attributed to several factors, discussed below.

First of all, it should be noted that in all languages, it is common to find multiple words referring to the same meaning. Each of these words may have, originally, belonged to a different Arab tribal dialect, as we have previously mentioned. As Arabic lexicographers began to compile and systematize the language, particularly from the 8th century onward, they gathered these variant terms into comprehensive dictionaries, often without fully preserving the original dialectal and contextual distinctions. Over time, these entries were interpreted as synonymous, even though some of their semantic nuances or pragmatic constraints may have been lost or leveled out in the process of codification. One must therefore approach Arabic synonymy not as evidence of redundancy, but as a linguistic archive reflecting historical and regional variation.

Furthermore, another category of synonyms includes terms that denote specific observable characteristics of the lion, such as its morphological features, typical behaviours, or functional roles. In such cases, the probable etymology of the word can be reconstructed through perceived associations.

Other synonyms exhibit cases of metathesis, a phonological process whereby two sounds or syllables within a word switch places, resulting in a new lexical form while preserving semantic continuity (Bynon 1977; Versteegh 1997). Metathesis in Arabic can be either total, involving the complete rearrangement of consonants, as in the pair *hizabr* (هَزْبَر) and *hibraz* (هَبْرَز); or partial, involving only a minor shift, as in *dubārim* (دُبَارِم) and *dubārik* (دُبَارِك), or in *daytam* (دَيْتَم) and *daygam* (دَيْغَم).

Some synonyms may also reflect a hyponymy/hypernymy relationship. To illustrate this, let us take as a first example the zoonym 'abbās, which designates the alpha male lion. Since 'abbās refers to a specific type of lion, it is therefore a hyponym of *asad*. As a second example, let us consider the synonym *sabu*, which designates any type of carnivorous animal<sup>1</sup>. Since *sabu* encompasses both lions and other carnivorous species, it is a hypernym of *asad*. In summary, all 'abbās are *asad*, but not all *asad* are necessarily 'abbās. Likewise, all *asad* belong to *sabu*, but not all *sabu* are necessarily *asad*.

It should be noted, moreover, that some synonyms associated with particular characteristics are not exclusive to the lion. They can also refer to other animal species that share the same traits. This is because they are nominalized epithets. Below are some synonyms of *asad* that are also used for other animal species:

- *Aḥnas* (أَحْنَس), meaning “snub-nosed,” also applies to antelopes, cattle and, in some cases, humans;
- *Ifrās* (عَفْرَاس), *ifrīs* (عَفْرِيس), *ufrūs* (عَفْرُوس), and *ifras* (عَفْرَس), meaning “the one with a strong and wide neck,” also applies to dogs, wild donkey and certain humans;
- *Qaṣqās* (قَصْقَاص), *quṣquṣ* (قُصْقُص), and *quṣquṣa* (قُصْقُصَة), associated with a large corpulence, are also used for dromedary and certain men;

- *Ward* (وَرْد), alluding to a coat color that shifts between tawny and yellow, is also used for certain horses with a similar coat;
- *Qabbāb* (قَبَّاب), alluding to a particular cry caused by the grinding of teeth, also applies to a breeding male dromedary;
- *Nahḥām* (نَحَام), alluding to a deep, resonant cry, is also used for cheetah and other carnivores;
- *Hurāṭim* (هُرَاتِم), *hartama* (هَرْتَمَة), and *hartam* (هَرْتَم), alluding to the septum between the nostrils, also apply to dogs;
- *Zayyāf* (زَيَّاف), alluding to a fast, waddling, and majestic gait, is also used for dromedaries and pigeon.;
- *Hawwās* (هَوَّاس) and *hawwāsa* (هَوَّاسَة), alluding to nocturnal hunting activity, also apply to leopards and the wolves;
- *Ġarwān* (جَرَوَان) and *ġarw* (جَرَو), alluding to a lion cub, is obviously also used for a wolf cub, a puppy, and any other young carnivore.

The recurrence of synonymous terms is not the result of a deliberate strategy, but rather a linguistic consequence of the cultural and environmental significance attributed to the animal. Yet, the existence of multiple terms for the same referent may have incidentally contributed to the preservation of the associated knowledge over time. The disappearance of a given term would not necessarily entail the loss of the information it conveys, insofar as this information is likely echoed or reinforced by other synonyms.

The lion's status as an untamed apex predator with unpredictable responses to human presence, combined with the fact that lions generally avoid inhabited areas, restricted opportunities for close observation, often resulting in knowledge that remained superficial and fragmentary, primarily focused on its morphology and physical attributes. However, certain aspects of the lion's predatory behaviour could be inferred indirectly, in particular through the examination of prey carcasses, which provide evidence of its hunting techniques and physical strength.

Thus, when lions or other predatory animals killed their prey, whether wild or domestic, the Arabs could estimate, based on the traces left on the carcasses, such as tooth marks, patterns of flesh removal, and bone breakage, the predator's strength, hunting efficiency, and prey preferences. Similar zooarchaeological approaches have been used in the study of ancient and modern societies, showing how carcass analysis provides valuable insights into predator behaviour and human–carnivore interactions (Pobiner & Braun 2005; Shimelmitz *et al.* 2023).

## CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, this exploration of the synonyms for “lion” in classical Arabic emphasize not only the diversity of the lexicon, but also the depth of zoological knowledge possessed by pre-Islamic Arabs regarding this species, encompassing aspects such a morphology, behaviour, and ecological perception. This study contributes to a broader understanding of the interconnections between linguistic diversity and empirical knowledge in medieval Arab culture. Further comparative research on the synonymy of other animal species, both domestic and wild, may reveal similar patterns and enrich our knowledge of early Arab ethnozoological traditions.

1. The term *sabu* (سَبُع) in classical Arabic refers to any predatory animal, such as the lion, the leopard, the wolf, and other similar species. When referring to birds of prey, the expression *sibā' al-ṭayr* (سَبَاع الطَّيْرِ) is used. Several sources attest to this usage, including *Kitāb al-Hayawān* by al-Ġāhiz (Hārūn 1988: vol. 1, 29; vol. 4, 71) and *Lisān al-'Arab* by Ibn Manẓūr (Anonyme 1956).

## Credits

This article was produced within the framework of Omar Hammoudi's doctoral research. Omar Hammoudi conducted the data collection, analysis, and preparation of the original manuscript. Ahmed Aarab contributed to the conceptualization of the study, supervised the research, and participated in the revision of the manuscript. Abdelouahab Rgoud co-supervised the research and contributed to the methodological framework and manuscript revision.

## Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the reviewers for the quality of their evaluation and the relevance of their comments. Their remarks have significantly contributed to improving the clarity, rigor, and scientific value of this paper. We are deeply grateful to them for the time devoted to this thorough and constructive review. Our thanks also go to Youssef El Mouhajir (Regional Center for Education and Training Professions, Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima Region) for his careful proofreading and insightful comments.

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Submitted on 16 February 2025;  
accepted on 6 November 2025;  
published on 17 July 2026.