Thomas Carlyle’s (1795-1881) commentaries on the religions of pre-Islamic Arabia are perhaps not solely meant to pave the way for his celebrated treatment of the Prophet Muhammad as much as to bear on contemporary problems. Apart from the references to pre-Islamic idolatry (in the age of the Jâhilîyah, the age of Ignorance as the favorite Arabic expression is often translated), that is, those which incidentally appear in “The Hero as Prophet: Mahomet: Islam,” Carlyle’s better references to this topic appear in “The Hero as Priest: Luther: Reformation,” where Arab idolatry is made a metaphor for all types of idolatry and, indeed, subsequent idolatry, especially in Europe. As such, it becomes tenable for him to expand the metaphor to include the “Father of Christendom—the Elegant Pagan Pope.”

His elaborate discussion of Arab idolatry in the latter lecture, as opposed to the lecture on Muhammad, indicates that his interest in this is philosophical rather than historical, as he turns to it to measure the spiritual and social deterioration of various eras and races. He can, thereby, compare Luther to Muhammad as “a Prophet Idol-breaker; a bringer back of men to reality.” The comparison culminates when he states that

Mahomet said, These idols of yours are wood; you put wax and oil on them, the flies stick to them: they are not God, I tell you, they are black


\[^3\] *Heroes*, p. 133.
wood. Luther said to the Pope, This thing of yours that you call Pardon of Sins, it is a bit of rag-paper with ink. It is nothing else.4

Rather than a “Dryadust” whose pursuit of history is destined to be shallow, Carlyle attempts to retreat to the past like a “Sacred Poet” whose insight reveals that the history of worship is essentially the history of philosophy, the latter being the core of history proper.5 Carlyle upholds this significant notion when he deals with the Mageans who inhabited the north-eastern parts of the Arabian peninsula, having come from Persia, the birthplace of their religion. Once again he strengthens the impression that he is after the meaningful philosophical implications of the past, when he states in “On History” (1830) that philosophy is

the soul, of which Religion, Worship, is the body; in the healthy state of things the Philosopher and Priest were one and the same . . . Scarcely since the rude era of the Magi and the Druids has that same healthy identification of the Priest and the Philosopher had place in any country.6

Conceived as a universal “Letter of Instructions,”7 history broadens its significance to Carlyle as it sets him free from the limitations of a self-contained European culture. Thus he is enabled to incorporate within his study of the past various non-European historical personalities and religions. On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History is a good example of this aspect of his thought as it contains significant references to the Sikh teacher Baba Nanac,8 the Tibetans,9 the ancient Scandinavian pagans,10 and the Hindus.11 He writes down his belief in universal history when he characterizes “The Perfect in History” as “he who understood all that the whole family of Adam had hitherto been and hitherto done.”12 Not only does this approach enable him to consider history as the “Autobiography” of Mankind,13 but it also facilitates his selectivity. Only such milestones as those which actually contributed to the development of history, and those which could produce

4 Heroes, p. 134.
9 Heroes, p. 5.
10 Ibid., pp. 1-41.
11 Ibid., pp. 33-4.
13 Ibid., p. 173.