

Book Reviews

Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam

Peter Webb

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. 416 pages.

I often tell graduate students that there are three constituent parts to cutting-edge scholarship: (1) the requisite linguistic and historical training, (2) creativity and imagination, and (3) a bold vision that desires to take inherited ideas and subject them to new and rigorous analyses. Very few can do this, but those who can end up radically transforming our understanding of a topic. I am happy to say that Peter Webb has met all three of these criteria in his wonderful and thought-provoking *Imagining the Arabs*. He has presented us with a paradigm-shifting study, and all subsequent work on the topic will have to wrestle with his monograph.

Webb's goal is sufficiently bold: to rethink the Arabs – who they were, what they believed, where they came from, and how they were imagined by various elites in the early Islamic period. Received opinion has, like so much in early Islamic history, simply repeated what the earliest sources (paradoxically from later periods) tell us. The assumption is that such sources must be true because there is no reason why they should not be. Why, for example, should they cultivate untruths or spread ideological rumors? Instead of adopting, as so many do, a posture of gullibility, Webb prefers to see such texts as engaged in the dual processes of ethnogenesis and mythopoesis.

Tradition assumes that the Arabs were a homogenous group of Bedouins that have inhabited the Arabian Peninsula since Antiquity. This would be akin, as Webb informs us, of assuming that all of the first nations in North America were essentially the same with respect to religion, culture, and ethnicity, and something that ignores that the aforementioned terms have distinct lineages in modern political and nationalist thought. Then in the seventh century CE, so the story continues, these Arabs adopted a new faith, to wit, Islam, and rapidly conquered the Middle East and beyond. Study after study has simply assumed that these “Arabs,” while sensitive to poetry, represented a form of militarized

nomadism that characterized the *mentalité* of pre-Islamic Arabia. Since all of the inhabitants of this region shared an ethnic and cultural unity, they were easily able to engage in their conquest activities. It is this past, again so the assumption goes, that helped to unite the first generations of Muslims.

Rather than buy into this narrative, Webb subjects it all to critical analysis. He works on the hypothesis that since modern Arabs are heterogeneous and impossible to define using tidy categories, why do we continue to assume that pre-modern Arabs were any different? Why, in other words, should we base our analysis on the fact that the Arabs constituted a unified ethnic community? Even further, he asks, why should we assume that there were “Arabs” before the emergence of Islam?

The main problem with the traditional model presented above is that it posits a unified and monolithic pre-Islamic Arabian culture/ethnos that flies in the face of the available sources. Arabian populations were too fragmented to constitute a cohesive group that could be realistically treated as a single people. Moreover, these populations did not even refer to themselves as “Arabs,” but employed names such as Ma‘dd, Ghassan, Himyar, and Tayyi’, all of which were based on distinct regional (and even religious) differences. There are, then, very few pre-Islamic sources that mention “Arabs.” And those that do, do so less in the technical sense of a distinct ethnic group and more in the generic sense of “outsiders” (p. 121).

Our traditional assumption of the Arabs is the result, as Webb convincingly argues, of later romantic fancy and less historical reality. They “become” Arabs, on his reading, based upon a set of later retrojections made by these inchoate sets of groups struggling for identity in the midst of rapid social and political change: “the inhabitants of the geographical area now known as Arabia did not call themselves Arabs, they struggled with divisive political alignments, they neither possessed a common religious creed nor shared similar lifestyles and they did not speak one standardized language” (p. 95)

From where, then, did the term “Arabs” originate? According to Webb, the Qur’an refers to itself as *an* (not *the*) “Arabic” Qur’an (*qur’ān ‘arabī*), thereby connoting a distinct revelation as opposed to a unique people. The Qur’an thus uses *arabī* not to refer to a distinct ethnic group, but in its original meaning of that which is “clear” or possesses an intrinsic sense of “clarity.” It was only under the early Umayyads, Webb argues, that the purity of Qur’anic *‘arabī* was converted into an ethnonym to refer to a new ethnic group, *al-a‘rāb*, that could make sense of itself and that would help distinguish this group from other groups in a post-conquest religious community (p. 124). Given the absence of any pre-Islamic evidence of Arab cohesion or

self-expression, early Muslim conquerors, Webb suggests, used their common worship of an 'arabī Qur'an and their ability to understand its 'arabī language to promote the name 'arabī as a focal point of their collective difference from those they conquered.

The movement from language to ethnos and from koine to kin facilitated group cohesion, what he calls ethnogenesis, which could then be neatly inserted into poetry, Hadith, and other literary genres. Since the pre-Islamic Arabs did not even refer to themselves by that name, Webb reasons that it was the earliest Muslims who invented them, to make sense of themselves and to give themselves a distinct genealogy. It was the Qur'an, in other words, that created the Arabs as opposed to vice versa. Whereas earlier his main data consisted of pre-Islamic poetry, inscriptions, and external (e.g., Byzantine) histories, his main data now shifts to classical dictionaries in order to show the shift in semantic expression during the ninth and tenth centuries.

Under the early Abbasids, however, the paradigm began to change somewhat. As Arab interest groups became less important and as Arabia became increasingly less significant on a geopolitical scale, we witness a curious transformation. Now "the development of the pre-Islamic *Jāhiliyya* paradigm involved a degrading of Arab culture before Islam to highlight Islam's supreme salvation" (p. 338). Arab "national" history was thus subsumed under Muslim "world" history. The increasingly firm line between pre-Islamic and Islamic meant that Muslim (as opposed to just Arab) writers detached Islam from the Middle East. The romantic Bedouin idea now became a way that later thinkers presented "a perfect language possessed by perfect fools in a pristine desert" (p. 358). It is this paradigm that our textbooks and other works reproduce uncritically.

In all of these discussions, Webb does a wonderful job of showing how "Arabness" – like any other ethnic identity – functions as an "intellectual construct" (p. 357) that morphed to meet changing historical circumstances. Whereas Arabness remained contested for several centuries as various Muslim groups sought to forget their diverse pasts and reframe it under the new rubric of "Arab unity," by the tenth century it had become but a remote concept as Islam was conceived to be a universal and transnational identity as opposed to an Arab faith.

What makes Webb's analysis so significant, at least for me, is his willingness to engage other disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology. His discussion represents a nuance lacking in many studies devoted to early Islam. Moreover, his theoretical interest in ethnogenesis means that this book will be of interest not just to specialists in early Islam, but also to those interested in social formation and identity studies. There is, in other words, a

very rich discussion here that understands that ethnicities are pliable and that demonstrates how group membership can be expanded and restricted almost at will to meet changing circumstances.

I will leave it to others to adjudicate his knowledge of pre-Islamic inscriptions or whether a handful of entries in classical dictionaries that refer to the locution '*arab* are sufficient. My interest in this book is in how it rethinks the inherited and forces us to look anew at that which we assumed was self-evident. It is in this latter sense that Webb's book presents a rich and fascinating study, one that is destined to become a classic in the field.

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