

Book Review

Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 403pp. ISBN: 9781474408264, Price: \$44.95 (Paperback).

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Peter Webb's *Imagining the Arabs* re-examines the relationship between the advent of Islam and the emergence of the Arabs. Turning much received wisdom on its head, he argues that there was no homogenous Arab people that lived in pre-Islamic Arabia to whom Muhammad delivered his message. Rather, he argues, Arabness was a product of a post-conquest environment, in which the conquerors emphasized language and descent as a means of excluding new converts from claiming the massive resources of the new caliphate. Arab identity is not a legacy from pre-Islamic times but a new solution for post-conquest questions of self and community in the Marwānid period (129-41).

Webb argues that the ethnonym Arab is absent from securely dated pre-Islamic poetry and that the term 'arabī in the Qur'an simply means 'clear', as opposed to 'ajam, unclear or distorted (119). To imagine that the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula share an identity is, therefore,

to accept the stereotypes of external powers, ranging from the Assyrians to Romans, in their descriptions of nomadic and changeless barbarians (23-36).

Building on the work of the late Rina Drory, Webb argues that it is only in the Abbasid period that events like the Sasanian defeat at Dhū Qār in 609 were read as victories of an Arab people over Persian opponents (rather than as a victory by members of Shaybān and Qays) (88-95; 185). He plausibly argues that this re-reading of history needs to be understood against a context of cultural competition between proponents of Arab and Persian heritage in Baghdad. This was the world in which genealogists such as Ibn al-Kalbī traced the tribal lineages of ninth-century Baghdadis or sought to map paths of descent all the way back to Ishmael (194-8; 262). Such acts could obscure the matrilineal descent of many converts to Islam to Persian or Aramaic speaking populations and allowed a complete amnesia over the distinctive culture of pre-Islamic Yemen, which was

now rendered simply as a part of the Arab past (203; 210-20).

I found Webb's nuanced reading of the Abbasid representation of the *jāhiliyya* especially persuasive. It was not simply a period of ungodly impiety for all writers, and he emphasizes the degree to which authors like al-Balādhurī recognized a nobility among pre-Islamic Arabs that anticipates the cultural competition between their (alleged) descendants and non-Arab Muslims (268).

This is a wide-ranging and ambitious book. I would like to raise several points where I disagreed with Webb's interpretation, but I should stress that this should in no way undermine my praise for its breadth and scholarship: to be stimulated to disagree is a sign that one has encountered a work that is provocative and thought-provoking.

At a number of points, Webb attacks those who have placed too much weight on what he (following Frederick Barth) calls "culture stuff" (language, custom, notions of shared descent and territory) in explaining shared Arab identity, to the exclusion of "creed, politics and economy". I am certainly sympathetic to his warning against presuming a natural shared identity across the peninsula and his interest in how boundaries are constructed. Nevertheless, I think there are several areas where he presses this line of argument too far. In particular, I feel that he gives rather short shrift to the possibilities of using parallels to other Roman frontiers to build more complex models for what was occurring in the Arabian Peninsula on the eve of Islam.¹

1. I think in particular of work on the Rhine and Danube that differentiates clearly between different

Webb holds a minimalist position on the spread of Old Arabic, the ancestor of the Arabic spoken and written by the 'Arabs' of the early caliphate: "The absence of 'Old Arabic' inscriptions and the almost complete absence of development of the Arabic script itself implies that Arabic lacked a body of writers promoting its use in pre-Islamic times, and it perhaps lacked prestige too [...] Pre-Islamic 'Old Arabic' speakers [...] were possibly a tiny minority" (61). He argues that inscriptions of Old Arabic in what we now call Arabic script are restricted to a cluster in the north of modern Saudi Arabia, with examples in Jordan and southern Syria (62).

However, this minimal position is untenable in the light of extensive discoveries of fifth-century Arabic

phases of contact with Rome: 1) the acquisition of military experience and resources by barbarians that generates social stratification across the frontier; 2) conflict in the course of migration that causes different, but related cultural groups to merge and 3) the propagation of specific forms of post-Roman identity in successor kingdoms. I have found the works of P. Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1996); G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376-568* (Cambridge, 2005) and F. Curta, *South-eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500-1250* (Cambridge, 2006) especially helpful. R. Hoyland, "Arab kings, Arab tribes and the beginnings of Arab historical memory in the Late Roman epigraphy," in H. Cotton, R. Hoyland, J. Price and D. Wasserstein (eds.), *Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge, 2009), 374-400; G. Fisher, *Between Empires. Arabs, Romans and Saracens in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2011) and P. Crone, "Quraysh and the Roman army: Making sense of the Meccan leather trade," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 70 (2007), 63-88 are all explicitly influenced by studies of other parts of the Roman frontier in their examination of pre-Islamic Syria and Arabia. Y. Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique Romaine (IV^e-VII^e siècle.)* (Rome, 2004) may also offer fruitful comparisons to the situation in Arabia.

inscriptions, written in a transitional Nabateo-Arabic script, by Frédéric Imbert near Najrān in 2012.² This shows that the language had a much wider distribution than Webb presumes, and this means that our analysis needs to give greater weight to the mechanisms that gave Arabic a distribution across the peninsula (as a spoken and written language) before Islam.

In particular, I think we should emphasize the prestige contexts in which Arabic script is used before Islam and the uniformity with which it is written. The examples that Webb refers to from Syria and Jordan are dedicatory inscriptions made by Jafnid phylarchs or those allied to them that were situated on Christian religious sites alongside inscriptions in Greek and Arabic. Michael MacDonald comments that script has no simple connection to ethnicity (quoted by Webb at 63, note 17), and he is surely correct across the peninsula as a whole. But the inscriptions at Zebed and Ḥarrān are cases where Arabic has been raised to the status of Greek *within* the Roman empire, and this should be taken as a key sign of the significance of script and language for the elites who created these buildings.

Likewise, we should also point to the uniformity of epigraphic Arabic compared to many of the Ancient North Arabian scripts such as Safaitic. Arabic is inscribed with

2. <http://www.arabnews.com/news/art-culture/611411> and <http://www.leparisien.fr/international/arabie-saoudite-decouverte-de-la-plus-vieille-inscription-en-arabe-du-monde-01-08-2014-4041101.php>. Cf. C. Robin, A. al-Ghabban, S. al-Said, "Inscriptions antique de la région de Najrān (Arabie séoudite méridionale): nouveaux jalons pour l'histoire de l'écriture, de la langue et du calendrier arabes," *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des inscriptions et de belles lettres* 3 (2014), 1033-1128.

a clear *ductus* and reasonably consistent letter forms in the very early decades of Islam (as on the dam built by Mu'āwiya in the Hijaz in 661).³ To my mind, this suggests that the use of the script already had a history of formal use before Islam, which enabled it to compete with the rival statements made in Greek or other scripts in the seventh century.

Webb objects to the idea that pre-Islamic Arabic was standardized. But the linguistic variety of the peninsula does not preclude the existence of standardized *written* expression. The development of the Arabic script from 'transitional Nabatean' suggests widespread use of script on perishable materials, probably in institutional contexts such as royal or ecclesiastical scriptoria.⁴ And the use of Arabic in papyri from Egypt very soon after the conquests to issue receipts,⁵ or the use of non-Roman legal terminology,⁶ suggests that the conquerors drew on a pre-conquest experience of using Arabic for administration. The choice to administer conquered lands in the language of the conquerors as well as those of the conquered is a symbolic as well as a

3. Published in G. Miles, "Early Islamic Inscriptions near Ṭā'if in the Hijāz," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 7.4 (1948), 236-42.

4. L. Nehmé, "Aramaic or Arabic? The Nabataeo-Arabic Script and the Language of the Inscriptions Written in This Script," in A. Al-Jallad (ed.), *Arabic in Context. Celebrating 400 years of Arabic at Leiden University* (Leiden, 2017), 75-98.

5. PERF 558, cited and discussed in A. Papaconstantinou, "Administering the Early Islamic Empire: Insights from the Papyri," in J. Haldon (ed.), *Money, Power and Politics in Early Islamic Syria: A Review of Current Debates* (Ashgate, 2010), 57-74, at 65.

6. G. Khan, "The Pre-Islamic Background of Muslim Legal Formularies," *Aram* 6 (1994), 193-224.

practical choice, and is a key factor that differentiates the Arabs from the Goths or Franks in the Roman West. I think we have to see the use of Arabic in formal contexts as an important differentiating symbol that bound the conquerors together, which a literate class had inherited from their pre-conquest experience.

A second area where I disagree with Webb is the role of the Naṣrid and Jafnid kings in providing patronage for the kinds of cultural forms that gave prestige to the Arabic script and language (chiefly poetry and epigraphy). He argues that it would be “remarkable if a sense of Arab communal cohesion could have been incubated across northern Arabia” in light of the contradictory lifestyles of the Naṣrid and the Jafnids and peoples of the interior (78-79) and he stresses the internal religious divisions of the royal houses and the confederations they ruled (80).

There was indeed debate among later genealogists and exegetes about whether or not the men of al-Ḥīra could be included as Arabs (e.g. 186). This seems to be a function of their Christian associations and the efforts by some to render the pre-Islamic Arabs as proto-Muslims. And some of the pre-Islamic poetry does mock the unmanliness of the kings of al-Ḥīra.

But I think it is too great a leap to imagine that *all* of peoples of the interior of the peninsula had no affiliation to the Beduinizing poetry written at al-Ḥīra. To my mind, this poetry seems to champion a martial ethos that it claims both for the Bedouin and for the Ḥīran kings. Indeed, the reason that the Sasanians or the Romans sponsored the Naṣrids and the Jafnids was because of their ability to

suborn other ‘Saracen’ populations in a way that the great powers could not accomplish directly.

Similarly, Isabel Toral-Niehoff plausibly suggests that nomadic groups gradually settled, Christianized and acculturated at al-Ḥīra.⁷ If she is correct, then we have to envisage the Naṣrids communicating across a cultural continuum within Arabia rather than shouting unheard across a void. I do not think that religious diversity would have prevented this either: Jafnid princes sponsored pagan temples as well as Christian churches, and the Naṣrid queens founded Christian monasteries and churches while their husbands remained pagan. An element of religious and cultural code-switching was a key part of the utility of both dynasties to their sponsors, and it should help us to understand how ideas and practices from the world of the great powers was disseminated and reformulated into the Arabian Peninsula.

The third area where I disagree with Webb is his treatment of “Christian Arabs” (including the descendants of those who had once served the Jafnids and Naṣrids). He notes that “Christian groups which had assisted the first Conquerors but did not subsequently convert to Islam faced intractable problems for they could not easily become ‘Arabs’ without nudging their monotheistic belief toward Islam too” (156). He situates the anxiety about where to place these groups within the definition of both Muslim and Arab identities under the Marwānids, as “the ecumenical believers’ movement” began to set up new boundaries to preserve its resources.

7. I. Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra. Eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext* (Leiden, 2014).

I think he is correct to stress the emphasis on religious boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims under the Marwānids and the pressure this placed on Christian populations who had once served the caliphate in a military capacity. Thus Mu'āwiya made extensive use of the Banū Kalb and married two Christian Kalbis, but al-Walīd I was responsible for several persecutions of the Banū Taghlib. Michael the Syrian even accuses him of eating the flesh of a martyred Taghlib chief.⁸

But Webb's statement imagines that Arabness is created under the Marwānids and that conquerors who are not Muslims (or quasi-Muslims?) are ejected at this point. He is forced into this position by his earlier argument that 'Arabness' is a product of the Marwānid *amṣār* and has no other basis (130-39). Yet this ignores the fact that Christian Arab groups such as the Taghlib were not migrant conquerors and dwelt in the Jazīra between Aleppo and Mosul, where they had been converted to Miaphysite Christianity in the late sixth century. Several reports indicate that the Taghlib were considered as, and considered themselves as, Arabs. Abū Yūsuf states that 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb had deemed it desirable to tax the Taghlib harshly since they were Arabs, and therefore more susceptible to conversion.⁹ Al-Balādhurī

reports that the Taghlib paid the double *ṣadaqa* (rather than the humiliating *jizya*) because they were "Arabs [and] too proud to pay the poll tax".¹⁰ Later sources even describe the Taghlib approaching 'Umar II for the right to wear the turban and to be reckoned as Arabs.¹¹ This request seems to have been a pitch for higher status on the basis of shared ethnic affiliation without converting to Islam and without being migrants or conquerors. The "culture stuff" of language, lifestyle and custom mattered in this instance, since it was the basis of a claim to the caliph that others could not make.

Finally, Webb argues for the post-Qur'anic origins of the term *'arabī* as an ethnonym. He sees its original meaning as 'pure/clear', as opposed to *'ajam*, 'impure/unclear'. For Webb, it is only later that it came to mean a pure people, to distinguish the conquerors from those around them. I do not find this convincing.

Webb lays great store by the stereotypical nature of the outside sources that describe the Arabs of the Peninsula, which he compares to the stereotyping of Native Americans as a homogenous unchanging people (40). But stereotypes can be inverted and reclaimed, and the terms used to vilify disparate peoples can end up giving them a shared identity. This is exactly what many scholars have suggested occurred

8. Michael the Syrian, ed. and tr. J.-B. Chabot, *Le chronique de Michel le Syrien* (Paris, 1899-1910), ed. IV: 451-52, trans. II: 481-82. Chabot's translation has al-Walīd forcing the martyr to eat his own flesh, but the Syriac is ambiguous. Here I follow C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs and the Making of an Islamic Society in the Post-Conquest Period*, Phd dissertation (Princeton, 2015), 60.

9. Abū Yūsuf, *Kitāb al-kharāj*, ed. I. Abbas (Cairo, 1985), 121-22, tr. E. Fagnan, *Le livre de l'impôt foncier* (Paris, 1921), 186.

10. Al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-buldān*, ed. M. De Goeje (Leiden, 1866), 182, tr. P. Hitti, *The Origins of the Islamic State* (New York, 1916), 285.

11. Y. Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam; Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge, 2004), 64-65. Cf. M. J. Kister, "'The Crowns of this Community'...Some Notes on the Turban in the Islamic Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 24 (2000), 217-45.

in North America, where populations that fled the “shatter zone” of the east coast built new confederations further inland, which embraced more expansive notions of ‘Indian’ identity.¹²

To my mind, the origin of the ethnonym ‘Arab’ is more profitably sought in this kind of inversion of Roman imperial stereotype. The catch, as the work of Fergus Millar indicates, is that no seventh century Roman would have expected their conquerors to have called themselves Arab, since the term had not been used by the Romans for the inhabitants of the peninsula since the early second century.¹³ Webb recognizes this shift in usage (47-48, 111-15), but he seems to make the fact that

the Romans had once used the term Arab as simply a curious coincidence, unrelated to the Qur’an’s use of ‘*arabī*. But I think the very use of this term after such a time-lag suggests that it was adopted as an ethnonym by a population in the peninsula during the first century (though this tells us nothing about how widely the term was disseminated). So while Webb is right to highlight how important the settlement of the Arabs was for the development of an Arab identity, I would argue that language, script, poetry and ethnonym all have a pre-Islamic history as articulations of different kinds of common identity that were important ingredients for Islamic-era assertions of Arabness.

12. R. Ethridge, *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone: The Colonial Indian Slave Trade and Regional Instability in the American South* (Lincoln, NE, 2009); W. Lee, ‘The Military revolution of Native North America. Firearms, forts and politics,’ in W. Lee (ed.), *Empires and Indigenes. Intercultural Alliance, Imperial Expansion and Warfare in the Early Modern World* (New York, 2011), 49-80, esp. 68-70.

13. F. Millar, *Empire, Church and Society in the Late Roman Near East* (Leuven, 2015) would have been a fruitful text for Webb to have engaged with, especially his observations on the role of Christian ethnography (e.g. Cyril of Scythopolis) in re-imagining the inhabitants of Arabia as Saracens or Ishmaelites. M. MacDonald, ‘Arabs, Arabia and Arabic before late antiquity,’ *Topoi* 19 (2009), 277-32, not cited by Webb, stresses the use of Arabic as a self-description in epigraphy from Ptolemaic Egypt and elsewhere. MacDonald sees ‘Arab’ as a pre-Islamic self-designation based on a complex of cultural and linguistic features.