

The origin of Arabs: Middle Eastern ethnicity and myth-making

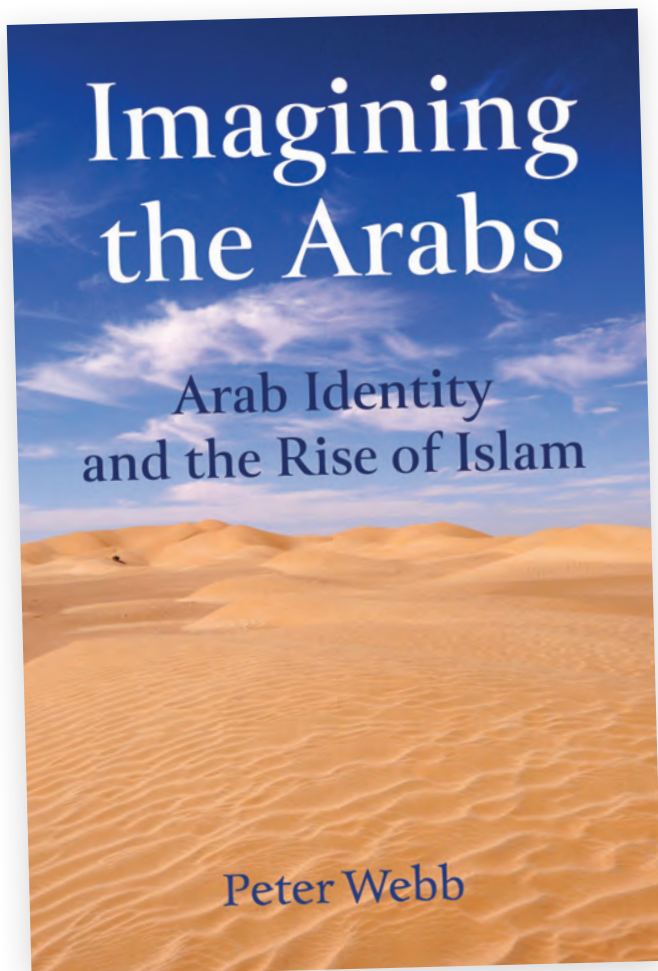
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The Arab world', never a region far removed from the light of public attention, has now a seemingly firmer grip on the imagination than ever. 9/11 and then the 2011 Arab Spring saturated our media with the misadventures of foreign intervention, the flamboyant

path of Arab Gulf states surfing waves of swelling oil prices, and apprehensions about political Islam. And today, the current mass migration of Arab peoples is physically transplanting the Arab world from headlines to the highways of central Europe. The prominence of Arabs in public consciousness is accompanied by a concomitant interest in Arab identity: who are the Arabs, and can understanding their history help make better sense of the present? In search for answers, the questions' complexities invite careful consideration of traditional assumptions about Arabs.

The familiar conception of 'the Arab' often condenses in images of an ancient desert Arabia where bescarved, independent-minded clusters of Bedouin herd camels into narratives of Arab origins. It is then assumed that, following this ancient Bedouin incubation, Arab migrations at the dawn of Islam in the 7th century CE spread the Arabs across the Middle East, and the core of their expansion laid the ground of today's Arab world.



European accounts

Such principal archetypes about Arab origins have, at least, a long pedigree. Some 2,500 years ago, Greek writers crafted a literary ideal of 'the Arab' via composite admixtures of exotic distance, harsh deserts, frankincense, and nomadic warriors. Strabo's accounts of Arabians as 'tent dwellers and camel herds' in central Arabia, 'subsisting upon [camel] milk and flesh', melded with fabulous impressions of Arabia's remote shores where Agatharchides reports the

fragrance which greets the nostrils and stirs the senses of everyone – indeed, even though those who sail along Arabia's coast may be far from the land, that does not deprive them of a portion of the enjoyment ... the sweet odours exhaled by the myrrh-bearing and other aromatic trees penetrate to the near-by parts of the sea.

The sum of classical Greek literature pinned Arab identity onto an archaic tableau, entrenching an iconic image of the Arabs' original state in a sublime, exotic desert, and the Greeks bequeathed their ideas to the present. Our



Figure 1
Assyrian wall relief depicting Assyrian combat against 'Aribi' (reign of Ashurbanipal 668-627 BCE). Photo: British Museum 124926.

world is much beholden to Hellenistic heritage: a Greek lens is often grafted onto the eyes of our intellectual enquiries; but taking classical Greeks at their word has downsides, as ethnographers have recently found. The Greeks were fond of marshalling stereotypes to label distant populations whom they little understood, and as a result, they inaugurated one-dimensional images of, for example, 'Celts' and 'Berbers' alongside 'Arabs' to epitomise vast groups of people whom they classified as 'barbarians'. Modern groups redeployed Greek archetypes of Celts and Berbers to underwrite manifold nationalist discourses from Ireland to Algeria, but scholars now radically deconstruct former assumptions about ethnic identities and move beyond Greek testimony to reconstruct ancient history. Consequently, Celtic and Berber origins are much revised today, yet the idea of 'Arabs' has mostly escaped critical scrutiny.

The old association of Arabs with desert 'barbarians' has survived thanks, in part, to its usefulness for later Europeans. The idea that 'authentic Arabs' were primitive Bedouin fitted squarely within the Enlightenment search for specimens of humanity in a 'state of nature', and set European scholarly enquiry on an inexorable skew privileging Bedouin as the paragons of Arab identity. Arabic speakers in the towns and villages of the wider Middle East were somewhat less interesting: prejudices relegated them to a dull halfway house, neither in their 'natural', 'authentic' desert habitat, nor fully developed to the then prevailing notions of 'civilisation'. The Victorian explorer W.S. Blunt was typically adamant, declaring Arab racial purity vested in Arabian Bedouin, not urban Middle Easterners whom he dubbed 'the Arabic-speaking Copt of Egypt, the Canaanites of Syria ... and the bastard Iraqi'. Bedouin also enticed Bible savants, for they believed that the 19th-century central Arabian lifestyle had changed so little since Antiquity that Bedouin were thought still to perpetuate the lifestyle

of Moses's wandering people. In this vein, another Victorian, Charles Doughty, offered his travelogue, *Arabia Deserta* (the title pointedly resurrects classical Greco-Roman geographic nomenclature to define 19th century Arabia), for readers to gain 'insight and understanding' into the Old Testament. Explorers and historians took excited plunges into Arabia for opportunities to watch the Bible and Antiquity play out before their eyes in Bedouin campsites, and the weight of Greek tradition accentuated by several centuries of European writing leaves the public today with an abiding emphasis on the ancient, exotic and often the primitive as the prism through which Arabness materialises.

Lost amidst the manifold opinions about 'authentic Arabs' however, was the voice of Arabs themselves. Who do Arabs think they are, which actual Middle Eastern populations expressed their own identity as 'Arab', and what has the word 'Arab' meant to those who invoked it to describe their community? The questions invite us to step away from Greco-Roman, Enlightenment and Colonialist discourses, and take a fresh plunge into the archaeology of ancient Arabia and Arabic literature. Such an enquiry has preoccupied my research to date, and the findings in my first monograph, *Imagining the Arabs*,¹ have stirred a host of new questions now clamouring for scrutiny in my British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship. Let us consider what happens when we begin to rethink the Arabs.

Pre-Islamic 'Arabs'?

History reports its first apparent 'Arab' in annals of the Iraqi-based Neo-Assyrian Empire (911-612 BCE). The

1. Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* will be published by Edinburgh University Press in summer 2016 (ISBN 978-1474408264).

Assyrians pushed their frontiers towards south-western deserts where they encountered nomadic camel-herding peoples whom their administrators labelled with names such as *Arba-a*, *Aribi*, *Urbi* etc. (Figure 1). These names sound to us like 'Arab', and thus purportedly depict the earliest generations of 'the Arab people', but examination of Assyrian texts reveals that the names were likely coined by the Assyrians. 'Arab'-sounding words in the Assyrian language connoted 'desert steppe', 'outsider', 'westerners' and 'locusts': the names we encounter in Assyrian records therefore articulate what Assyrians thought of distant, disparate and pesky groups along their frontier, and do not necessarily reflect how Arabian groups organised themselves. Pointedly, inscriptions from inside Arabia neither contain reference to the name 'Arab' nor indicate that central Arabian populations imagined themselves as one communal unity. What appeared to Assyrian administrators as a vast desert filled with 'Arabs' was instead a patchwork of disparate groups whose memories are now lost casualties of history. The word 'Arab' thus began its history not as the term of self-reference for one ancient Arabian race, but instead as a generic label applied by outsiders to describe any group whom they thought was a 'Bedouin locust/menace'.

After the fall of the Assyrians, the succeeding Babylonian and then Achaemenid Persian empires inherited the Assyrian administrative system, and as they occupied the same frontiers, they perpetuated the Assyrians' 'Arab'-sounding words to label various groups who buffeted the borders over subsequent centuries, but inner Arabian populations still left no records in which they refer to themselves as 'Arabs'. It was into this worldview whereby empires used the word 'Arab' generically for dimly perceived desert outsiders that the Greeks emerged and began writing 'Arabs' into their histories. Like the Assyrians, the Greeks had little direct contact with Arabia beyond the desert frontier, and their unfamiliarity with the region permitted their generalisation that outside the Fertile Crescent lived a world of roughly homogenous 'Arabs'. 'Arab' became a convenient device to cut-and-dry the 'barbarians' to the south, and what appears in classical literature as the supposed original state of 'the Arab people' is very much like Greek generalisations about 'Celts': an imprecise guesstimate augmented by literary flourish, not a reflection of a budding Arab community across Arabia.

Suspensions that there was no ancient 'Arab community' in Arabia are corroborated by Arabian voices from the centuries before Islam. Archaeologists have unearthed thousands of pre-Islamic inscriptions from Yemen to Jordan, and reference to 'Arab' as a label for oneself or one's own community is absent within this corpus. Even evidence for the Arabic language itself is trace. It appears that Arabians in the first centuries CE were a scattered array of very diverse peoples, speaking somewhat related but distinct languages, and lacking a sense of political, communal or cultural unity. There are no ancient indigenous myths of common origin tying Arabian populations together into an imagined 'Arab family', and there was neither a common religion nor a set of shared symbols which communities could use to construct unities, as Arabia's confessional map was

divided between Christians, Jews, polytheists and some less ascertainable monotheistic creeds. Instead of a pre-Islamic Arabia filled with 'Arabs', we find that peoples in central Arabia referred to themselves as Ma'addites, southern Arabia (Yemen) was organised into kingdoms with very particular languages and state structures, populations on the eastern Gulf were oriented towards Iran with limited political or cultural commonalities with other Arabians, and in the north the Roman/Byzantine and Persian empires warred against each other, creating divisive alliances that blocked pathways by which peoples could unite under a common identity.

The straightforward Greek projections of Arab origins in a Bedouin mould thus seem, upon close analysis, to be most misleading. Numerically, most of Arabia's pre-Islamic populations were not Bedouin, they did not express a common unity, and it appears that none called themselves Arabs. The ingredients needed to classify pre-Islamic Arabians as members of one Arab ethnicity are wanting. And accordingly, Victorian impressions about the Arab racial purity of Bedouin are misplaced too, since Arab identity does not stem from an archaic lifestyle. To use the word 'Arab' as descriptive of a primitive way of life merely replicates prejudices of Assyrian and Greek writers, taking us away from a truthful understanding of Middle Eastern communities.

Finding the first Arabs

To begin reconstructing the history of people who called *themselves* 'Arabs', we must cross into the Islamic period. During the century after Muhammad (d. 632), poetry is recorded in which individuals make novel expressions of being Arab. The first Islamic century is also when Arabic-language inscriptions proliferated across Arabia and the Middle East (Figure 2). And the first two centuries of Islam witnessed both the earliest discernable attempts to write Arab history in Arabic, and the genesis of genealogies and myths of origins that tie pan-Arabian populations together into one ethnic community. The evidence indicates that people became conscious of being Arab and took the first tangible steps to define Arab identity after their conversion to Islam.

The stark proliferation of 'Arabs' following Islam's rise invites the correcting of old stereotypes and paves new avenues to understand Arabness. The first people who called themselves Arabs were the elite of the early Caliphate. They inhabited new towns founded by Muslims across the Middle East (e.g. the places we know as Cairo, Basra, Baghdad), and they rigorously distinguished themselves from Bedouin. As far as my research has taken me, being Arab did not signify an antique sense of Arabian nomadic origin, but was instead a novel means for early Muslims to express what it meant to belong to their exclusive group of converts to Islam and to the elite of a new, mostly urban empire. Arabness emerges as an end-product of the remarkable success of early Islam whereby the new religion, conquest and reorganisation of the Middle East created a whole new way in which Middle Eastern peoples understood their communities. The pathways by which early Muslims



Figure 2
Inscriptions from Jabal Says (southern Syria, 7th Century CE), the text includes part of Qur'an 30:4 and is an example of the marked proliferation of Arabic writing following the dawn of Islam. Photo: the author.

became 'Arabs' were complex, and Arabness took almost a century to gain consent as a collective identity. But these findings now enable us to appreciate better the creative energies of Islam's rise and the powerful forces it mustered which stamped major and enduring changes on the region's society and culture.

Tracing the origins of Arabness as a means for various Muslim groups to conceptualise their identity also helps explain why many today believe that 'Arab' is synonymous with 'Muslim'. At the outset, the two did connote very closely related ideas, but as Islam expanded beyond its original elites, and as the elites' social standing evolved over time too, Arab and Muslim identities struck separate paths and acquired rich histories: their common origins nonetheless remain intertwined and important to remember. When thinking of Arabs today, the legacies of empire and monotheism are closer to the intellectual underpinnings of Arab national identities than camels and idols.

The Islamic-era origin of Arab identity also renders Arabs much in common with European nations. The early medieval period was an apparently fertile moment of community creation across Eurasia, a peculiar time when people were empowered to discover radically new ways to imagine and articulate their identities, and generated traditions that endure to the present. Unlike the exotic 'othered' Bedouin of Colonialist fancy, we can now appreciate that Arabs stepped into history at the same time and under similar conditions as European nations.

My monograph, *Imagining the Arabs*, tracks the tale of Arab ethnogenesis from the divided and diverse world of

pre-Islamic Arabian Ma'addites, Himyarites, Ghassanids and others, to the Muslim-era Arabs across the Middle East. Against the grain of long-standing traditional assumptions about the antiquity of the Arabs, the book tackles the empirical questions of 'when, where and who' in order to give clarity to the path by which peoples thought their way into becoming Arabs. It also traces how the meaning and significance of Arab identity shifted in line with major social changes during Islam's first four centuries. As the Muslim faith and Arabic language eventually embedded themselves across the Middle East, the numbers of people identifying themselves as 'Arabs' ironically decreased, and the fate of Arab communities in medieval times tracked a fascinating path shared between the unusual combination of Muslim political elites, armed Bedouin bands and urban Iraqi grammarians.

With the ground thus cleared for new avenues of reflection, even more complex issues now arise. They solicit a shift from the macro-question of 'who are the Arabs?' to a subtler analysis of 'how did individuals change who they thought they were and imagine themselves as Arabs?' Such lines of research hold promises to understand better the different layers upon which Arab identity was constructed, and moreover, because Arabness and Islam are so intimately interconnected, the study offers a direct path to apprehend better the formative period of Islam itself. Imagining an Arab identity involved articulating the contours of being Muslim, and unfurls the panoply of ways early Muslims interpreted the meaning and significance of their Islamic faith, and established the first layers of Muslim identity.



Figure 3
The tales of 'Antar and 'Abla have enduring popularity: they are now frequently illustrated, and have even been serialised for Arabic television audiences. Image: 20th-century painting on glass by Abousoubhi Tinawi; © The Art Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.

Thinking about Arabs and Islam afresh

Communities need to construct a shared sense of the past in order for their members to gel into one cohesive group; and because a given group's members usually hail from diverse backgrounds, that sense of past unity is quite often imaginary. In the case of early Islam, Arabs created myths about pre-Islamic Arab origins to replace pre-Arabic memories and to forget the fact that consciousness of Arab identity only coalesced in the Islamic era. Their stories were popular, they circulated widely and were much augmented over time, indicating their importance to the members of early Muslim communities. Medieval Muslim interest in Arabs and pre-Islamic Arabia has bequeathed us a vast library of Arabic literature invoking memories of pre-Islam. The literature was formerly considered a store of data which could be mined for 'facts' about pre-Islamic Arab ways, but with the realisation that pre-Islamic Arabness was cobbled together by Muslims to create a novel sense of mythic 'Arab' history, we now need to appraise the old stories afresh.

At this juncture, the award of a British Academy Post-

doctoral Fellowship makes my new enquiry possible. My new questions require a shift of focus from ethnicity and historiography to theories of memory and literature, in order to grasp the mythologies and aesthetics that coloured and informed the worldviews of early Arabs.

My new subjects of analysis are Muslim tales of giants and ghouls, heroic warriors and swashbuckling bandits, bygone civilisations and past prophets. The stories speak to us from an array of different kinds of books, ranging from texts about the Prophet Muhammad, in which he refers to pre-Islamic times and practices, to philological discussions of the Arabic language where stories of pre-Islamic Arabia are developed to prove the correct 'purity' of Arabic grammar, to histories and popular story cycles where poetry and prose mixed into epic tales sharing intriguing parallels to the structure and content of Norse sagas. The processes of narrative generation were much involved: for example, we encounter the half-Arabian, half-African 'Antara, whose memory began with one famous pre-Islamic ode, and then, over several centuries was elaborated into the epic of 'Antar, a desert warrior and star-crossed lover whose betrothal to an oft-kidnapped bride spawned an endless multi-volume

narrative of travails (Figure 3).

The task of my analysis is two-fold. First, I aim to discern how Muslim writers confronted vestiges of pre-Islam and wove them into new discourses. Edifices of bygone empires from Antiquity still stood as reminders of the past (Figure 4): in what ways did Muslims remember these places, and can we discern a rationale to help explain what history they chose to forget, and what they opted to remember? Comparing the testament of pre-Islamic inscriptions and Late Antique historiography with the Muslim-era versions of history can elucidate answers. And second, the Muslim narratives themselves deserve concerted scrutiny: how were they crafted over time, how were they in dialogue with each other, and how did Muslims marshal stories of pre-Islam to construct a sense of their own origins? My impression is that the ingredients of pre-Islam in medieval Muslim imaginations were apprehended with senses of wonderment and the sublime, fascination and sometimes (but not often) revulsion. Tales of the past desert contrasted with medieval Muslim writers' urban present, and pre-Islamic Arabia represented something of a 'Wild West', an Arcadia and a Parsifal-esque narrative for the Arab hero, melding to form the fictional underpinning of Muslim civilisations.

My aim is to write a second monograph, provisionally entitled *Memory and Myth: The Muslim reconstructions of pre-Islam*. For an academic, such a move from one book to another with the added need to develop a distinct theoretical method of textual analysis is a little akin to a farmer seeking multiple crops from the same field. One needs good rains and time. The British Academy grant and its three-year timeframe provides such nurturing for my research, facilitating the application of modern theories to reappraise old texts, and hopefully permitting fresh answers to the difficult questions about how myth, entertainment and polemic offered Muslims an array of avenues to explain who they thought they were.



Figure 4
Petra, a 1st-century CE capital of the Nabataean kingdom. Muslims reinterpreted Nabataean ruins as the bygone cities of Thamud, an obscure people mentioned in the Qur'an, but absent in Judeo-Christian scripture. Muslims believed that a prophet Salih had been sent to Thamud, and they depicted Salih as an Arabian monotheistic precursor to Muhammad. Photo: the author.