

Introduction

The spirited defense of the Arabs that unfolds in Ibn Qutaybah's *The Excellence of the Arabs* addresses us from an intellectually fertile but politically and socially precarious moment of early Islam. The old order of the caliphate was being challenged by political instability from which it would never fully recover, yet scholars were spearheading an unprecedented period of book production that yielded many classics of Arabic literature. This book is the product of one of the most prolific scholars of that age, and it addresses one of the central questions confronting his writerly community and its elite patrons.

The lifespan of the author, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh ibn Muslim ibn Qutaybah (213–76/828–89), coincided with a changing of the guard in the Abbasid Caliphate. At the time of Ibn Qutaybah's birth, the caliphate had just emerged from a war between the two sons and joint heirs of the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 170–93/786–809), which resulted in the sack of the caliphate's capital, Baghdad, considerable damage to the Iraqī heartland, and a reorganization of power under the victor, the Caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 198–218/813–33). Al-Ma'mūn and his successors edged out the Arab noble families who had enjoyed preponderant power in the caliphate since its inception, as they replaced Arab military elites with Turkic and other mercenaries imported from outside the imperial borders. Al-Ma'mūn's immediate successor, al-Mu'taṣim (r. 218–27/833–42), moved the capital from Baghdad to the new palace city of Samarra, where the Turkic generals and personal retainers from various backgrounds, notably eastern Iranians, established new cliques and personal networks of power. By the time Ibn Qutaybah was in his thirties, the Turkic generals had seized opportunities for personal gain, and instability, intrigue, and regicide followed. Five caliphs in succession were murdered between 247/861 and 256/870; the wider Iraqī economy deteriorated; and caliphal central authority declined sharply as many regions of the empire, including North Africa, Egypt, Arabia, and eastern Iran, asserted increasing local autonomy.

The last nineteen years of Ibn Qutaybah's life, however, held some promise of an upturn. A new caliph, al-Mu'tamid (r. 256–79/870–92), curbed the power

of the Turks, returned the capital to Baghdad, and survived a twenty-one year reign without any recorded attempts on his life, and while in hindsight this Abbasid revival would be short lived, Ibn Qutaybah died before the onset of the next wave of difficulties. Perhaps Ibn Qutaybah's last years thus afforded some moments of optimism, though the negative opinions he expresses of some of his contemporaries suggest that the political and economic decline during his lifetime made him aware that the "good old days" of Abbasid power were past. Ibn Qutaybah was a state-appointed judge and moved in courtly circles; the sense of loss and whatever prospects of renewal that accompanied al-Mu'tamid's reign were therefore in his full view. From that context, Ibn Qutaybah emerges as a man who considered himself a bastion of knowledge, piety, and good sense, which he dutifully shared in a large number of books penned in efforts to combat what he perceived as a "dumbing-down" in the court culture of his day.

If we distance ourselves from Ibn Qutaybah's particular worldview and consider Iraq's cultural scene in the latter half of the third/ninth century more broadly, the situation seems somewhat brighter, as there was much intellectual growth across diverse fields of learning, from philosophy and mathematics to history and jurisprudence. Scholarly endeavors were augmented by a rapidly expanding industry of book production, and Baghdad remained the preeminent cultural capital of the Muslim world, despite the political instability and fragmentation. We can thus appreciate that Ibn Qutaybah and his peers would have lamented the disintegration of the caliph's power and yearned nostalgically for what they perceived to be the better times of the past two centuries, yet the remarkable books they wrote established a new legacy that would influence centuries of subsequent Muslim intellectual growth. From our perspective, therefore, Ibn Qutaybah's lifetime represents not the end of the road, but rather the first fruits of what we identify as classical Muslim civilization. This was an era when the manifold ideas circulating in earlier generations were distilled, assimilated, and disseminated in new ways that survived the test of time. This book is an important marker in the emergence of that Arabic tradition: its subject was of central importance, and its argument both looks backward to those "better days" and points forward to the new ways Muslims interpreted Arab culture and the origins of Islam.

Virtues of the Arabs and Arabic in the Third/Ninth Century

The Excellence of the Arabs is one of the most explicit, sustained, and detailed descriptions of Arab identity written before modern times. We do not know precisely when Ibn Qutaybah wrote it, though it was probably toward the end of his career, that is, during al-Mu‘tamid’s caliphate, since the text refers back to several books of Ibn Qutaybah’s own oeuvre. The book’s purpose is to extol the virtues of the Arabs and to explain their preeminence among all peoples of the world. Such ideas about Arab identity and the merits of the Arab people were very much at the center of third/ninth-century political, social, and intellectual concerns.

Arab history is the subject of much debate. Most modern European writers have treated “the Arabs” as a homogenous group of predominantly Bedouin people inhabiting the Arabian Peninsula since antiquity. But recent inquiry into Arab archetypes reveals this approach to be misleading, and the Arab story to be more convoluted. From the ninth century BC, various Middle Eastern peoples used words resembling “Arab” to describe nomads and sometimes settled groups, but the terminology exclusively connoted the idea of distant outsiders and never referred to one specific ethnicity. It appears that people only began to call themselves “Arabs” and to use the term to express group solidarity after the dawn of Islam.¹ Evidence suggests that the Muslim faith originally spread among different groups living in what is now the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, and Iraq, and that the very first Muslims saw themselves as a broad-based faith community, rather than one interrelated ethnic group. But the situation soon changed: over two or three generations, the Muslim conquerors sought to maintain their distinctiveness from subject populations by developing strategies to segregate themselves, including the creation of a novel sense of belonging to an “Arab” community. In the early second/eighth century, Arab identity became widely invoked to connote an elite, conqueror status and, since very few of the conquered peoples converted during Islam’s first century, it also laid claim to Islam as the “Arab faith.” Many urban Iraqis identified themselves as “Arabs” by claiming lineage (real or perhaps imagined) to Arabian tribes. Specialists of Arabic poetry, genealogy, and history such as al-Aṣma‘ī (d. 213/828), Abū ‘Ubaydah (d. 210/825), and Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204/819) began the process of creating a sense of pan-Arabian, pre-Islamic Arab identity, and repackaged a vast lore from pre-Islamic times into an imagined origin story about the Arabs.

Ibn Qutaybah wrote *The Excellence of the Arabs* some 150 years after Arab identity had been well established, and he drew most of his source material from the opinions and anecdotes from these late second/eighth century specialists. He wrote it just as many of his contemporaries began to drop the sense of Arabness from their identity. They spoke and wrote in Arabic, but they were dissociating themselves from a sense of Arab community. Instead of counting themselves as members of an Arab race (expressed in terms of Arab *ummah*, *jīl*, or *nasab* [Arab “people” or “kin”]), the majority of Iraqis were choosing instead to identify by their locale, profession, or sectarian affiliations—or, more upsetting to Ibn Qutaybah, by Persian and other ethnic affiliations.²

The reasons behind the changes in self-perception and presentation were manifold: Iraq was a cosmopolitan place, and the mixing of populations in its great cities, especially Baghdad and Basra, would have made it difficult to maintain pure tribal/racial lineages for long. Baghdad in particular had expanded massively since its founding in the 760s; by the time Ibn Qutaybah wrote *The Excellence of the Arabs*, many of these immigrants had little or no sentiment of Arabness. Ibn Qutaybah’s contemporaries also lived at least a generation after the official termination of the *dīwān al-‘aṭā’*, an official state stipend which the caliphate had paid to the descendants of the original Muslim conquerors of the Middle East. Since the Umayyad era, the stipendiary payment had bestowed an economic advantage to members of Arabian tribal groups, and the status and wealth associated with the stipend played a substantial role in maintaining the sense of Arab identity in urban Iraq. As long as the caliphate paid the stipend, being “Arab” paid dividends. But the system broke down at the dawn of the third/ninth century. Thus, the fall of Arab political factions, increased migration to Iraq, the disintegration of the caliphate into more regional blocs, and the underlying process of cosmopolitan assimilation in Iraq’s towns made it difficult and impractical to preserve a unified sense of Arab identity across the Muslim world.³

In an intriguing contrast to political and social factors that were eroding the value of Arabness as a social asset, intellectually the star of Arabic was rising. Abbasid-era Muslim identity was underwritten by distinctly Arab cultural capital: the Qur’an was in Arabic, Ibn Qutaybah’s peers firmly believed that Muḥammad was an Arab prophet, and they memorialized early Islam as a movement that established a simultaneously Arab and Muslim rule over the Middle East. Such historical projections of Islam’s roots in Arabness were further

augmented by the remarkable spread of the Arabic language. Arabic notionally became the official language of all caliphal administration during the reign of the Umayyad ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 65–86/685–705), and in the ensuing 150 years, Arabic supplanted most of the Middle East’s pre-Islamic vernaculars, namely Greek, Middle Persian, and Aramaic dialects. Ibn Qutaybah and most of his contemporary Iraqis did not, therefore, claim direct kinship with the early conquerors of Iraq. But by virtue of their speaking Arabic, by their learning of the Arabic language and Arabic poetry, and by translating the philosophical, medical, and scientific traditions of other peoples into Arabic, Iraqi writers of the third/ninth century could cement their culture in a firmly Muslim identity. It hardly mattered that Ibn Qutaybah’s own father hailed from Merv (in modern Turkmenistan) or that he reckoned himself a non-Arab. Arabicization had become the marker of Islam: in a cosmopolitan world where individuals came from multiple and mixed backgrounds, Arabic as a lingua franca offered a means for cultural production to unify in an otherwise socially and politically fragmenting time. By extolling the virtues of the Arabs, Ibn Qutaybah was perhaps most concerned to establish that Arab culture constituted a worthy heritage and that the Arabic language was a preeminently worthy language of which a Muslim of any background could be proud.

Arabs and Non-Arabs

The Excellence of the Arabs can productively be read as a circling of the wagons to defend the social prestige of Arabness in the waning political system of the centralized Abbasid caliphate. In the earlier period of substantial political unity and tremendous economic opportunity, the political structure had been dominated by Arab groups. The association of current decline with the rise of the Turks, and the commensurate association of bygone prosperity with the old Arab elites, would have weighed on the minds of Ibn Qutaybah, his peers, and perhaps even the Caliph al-Mu’tamid himself. If the caliphate was to be revived, was a return of the Arab elites necessary?

One of the most interesting aspects of Part One of *The Excellence of the Arabs* is the contempt Ibn Qutaybah expresses for Persians, compared to the generally favorable treatment he gives to other peoples from the eastern reaches of the caliphate—including Turks, who posed a very real and visible threat. Persians were a meaningful presence at court and in cultural circles running back to the mid-eighth century or even before. The early Abbasids valued many aspects of

the pre-Islamic Sasanian model of kingship and hired Persian courtiers, who transmitted knowledge about statecraft and Iranian history. *Kalilah and Dimnah*, a collection of animal fables likely originating in the Sanskrit *Panchatantra* tales, had been transmitted a century earlier through Middle Persian into Arabic and enjoyed great popularity. Baghdad had long been a major center for translations into Arabic from Persian and other languages. Since the Persians were hardly parvenus, what, then, accounts for the vitriol against them? The answer is likely threefold. Ibn Qutaybah sensed the increasing cultural confidence of his Persian colleagues and perceived this as a disregard for the proper place of Arabs and Arabic. His manual for court secretaries, *Instruction for Court Secretaries (Adab al-kātib)*, in which he instructs courtiers on the proper pronunciation and writing of Arabic, says as much. It would take another century for Persian literature to begin its ascent, but Persians were beginning the long process of writing themselves into the story of Islam, and were increasingly asserting themselves on political and cultural fronts too. Secondly, one could critique current society by casting aspersions against Persians without fear of the same sort of reprisal that one might face from Turks, who held military power. Thirdly, it is likely that Ibn Qutaybah blamed Persians for opening the door to what the scholar Ignaz Goldziher over a century ago termed “the foreign elements in Islam.”⁴

Ibn Qutaybah’s favorable treatment of Khurasan—a region in what today comprises eastern Iran and contiguous territory—gives a good sense of the fine political line he walked. Ibn Qutaybah treats its inhabitants as a distinct group, quoting sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad that anticipate the great partnership between the Arab caliphs and the Khurasanian allies that helped bring the Abbassids to power. Among Khurasanians, Ibn Qutaybah singles out ethnic Turks with a widely circulated hadith in which Muḥammad is reported to have said, “Leave the Turks alone so long as they leave you alone.” He also gives Khurasanians credit for prophetic statements about Persians. For Ibn Qutaybah, when Muḥammad says, “If faith were hung from the Pleiades, the Persians would be able to reach it,” he meant the Khurasanians. He supports this improbable interpretation by arguing that at the dawn of Islam, the Persians were the Muslims’ implacable enemies, and that for the Arabs, Persia and Khurasan “were one and the same thing because they share a border and also a common language, namely Persian.” The Arabs, says Ibn Qutaybah, “therefore refer to both peoples as ‘Persians.’”⁵ He accordingly places the history and culture of Khurasan in a most favorable light, speaking at length about the forbearance of the pre-Islamic

Khurasanians in the face of Sasanian treachery, and about the great learning of the region's scholars after the coming of Islam. He writes: "In general, man's desire for virtue, knowledge, and culture tends to wane and decline, but among the Khurasanians it increases and is constantly renewed."⁶

Ethnicity in the Abbasid Iraqi Context: Terms and Concepts

Ibn Qutaybah addresses his book to the Abbasid elites, for whom the people, places, and cultural references he makes were familiar and required no explanation. For readers today, however, it is important to draw attention to two key terms he uses when referring to non-Arabs.

The Bigots

Ibn Qutaybah never names his opponents individually, choosing instead to label them all "Shu'ūbīs," a term which we render in English, for reasons that will become clear, Bigots. The Arabic term al-Shu'ūbiyyah ("Shu'ūbism") and the related term "Shu'ūbī," or partisan of Shu'ūbism, have exercised the imagination of scholars. Scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw Shu'ūbism as a form of premodern Iranian nationalism. Hamilton Gibb, acknowledging the shortcomings of the nation-state as a prism for analyzing medieval Iraq, proposed that the Shu'ūbist "movement" was in fact a reflection of competing cultural values and a struggle over the "inner spirit of Islamic culture." In Gibb's influential interpretation, the Shu'ūbīs were a group touting egalitarianism, while at the same time seeking to promote Sasanian institutions and values as models for the caliphate to emulate.⁷ In the sources, the label Shu'ūbism is applied mainly to Abbasid insiders living during the late eighth and early ninth centuries—but it is applied retrospectively, including by other Abbasid insiders, to persons they considered bigoted (thus prompting our use of the term "Bigots"). Lexicographers repeat the statement that a "Bigot" [Shu'ūbī] is someone who belittles the significance of the Arabs and who does not see them as having precedence over others.⁸ Following such interpretations, many scholars have read Ibn Qutaybah's work as evidence for the existence of an active and indeed popular Shu'ūbī movement, but a close reading of *The Excellence of the Arabs* and its context should prompt circumspection. The identity of Ibn Qutaybah's living opponents is, after all, elusive, and the ideological content of Shu'ūbism as described in the sources is quite vague. Whereas the premodern biographers do say, for instance, that the Shu'ūbīs insulted Arabs, they give no

indication that the Shu‘ūbīs specifically promoted Persian culture. Neither do the biographers characterize Shu‘ūbism as a cultural phenomenon in any meaningful way, such as by attributing to it an agenda, proponents, or a public profile.⁹ Shu‘ūbism was evidently an emotive idea for Ibn Qutaybah, but the precise parameters of its significance remain a subject of debate. Therefore, given Ibn Qutaybah’s tenor in *The Excellence of the Arabs*, we have chosen to use “Bigots” for “Shu‘ūbīs” and “Bigotry” for “Shu‘ūbism”; we recognize that elsewhere, the term might warrant a different English translation.

Easterners

We are on somewhat firmer ground with “‘Ajam.” Etymologically, it is related to words for an incomprehensible sound, or silence. When Ibn Qutaybah and his contemporaries marshalled the word, they often had in mind peoples possessed of *‘ujmah*, that is, a confused and unclear way of speaking. As this was usually intended as contrast to the clear eloquence of Arabic speakers, ‘Ajam thus at times conveyed a pejorative sense. From the contexts in which he uses it in *The Excellence of the Arabs*, Ibn Qutaybah seems primarily concerned with peoples from further east, whom we might call “Iranians,” though this was not a term Ibn Qutaybah himself would have used since the parameters of “Iranian” identity were the product of much later times. On occasion, he specifies the people of Fārs (i.e., “Persians” from the southwest quadrant of the Iranian plateau, the traditional homeland of the pre-Islamic Sasanian Empire) as being included among the ‘Ajam; elsewhere he extends the term’s ambit to the northeastern Iranian region of Khurasan, although he also notes the inhabitants of Khurasan should not be confused with Persians. While the precise boundaries (and subdivisions) of the ‘Ajam community are therefore ambiguous, the divide between ‘Ajam and Arab was stark, and the contrast runs through his book.¹⁰ We use “Easterners” in our translation and hope the choice conveys Ibn Qutaybah’s own ambiguity.

Contents

Ibn Qutaybah’s book is divided into two parts. The first part, *Arab Preeminence* (*Faql al-‘Arab*), takes the form of an extended, somewhat meandering argument for Arab privilege that is defensive in tone. The second part, *The Excellence of Arab Learning* (*Al-Tanbih ‘alā ‘ulūmihā*), contains descriptions of the fields of

knowledge in which Ibn Qutaybah believed the pre-Islamic Arabians excelled, such as horse husbandry, astronomy, divination, wisdom, and poetry.

Ibn Qutaybah begins *Arab Preeminence* by accusing the Bigots of being envious of the blessings that God, in His wisdom, has bestowed upon the Arabs, going so far as to say that by opposing the Arabs, they oppose God Himself. He exemplifies their slanderous behavior by invoking Abū ‘Ubaydah Ma‘mar ibn al-Muthannā (d. 210/825), a leading scholarly figure of fifty years earlier. Abū ‘Ubaydah (like Ibn Qutaybah) did not claim to be an Arab, but he was nonetheless an important early Arabic philologist. Ibn Qutaybah alleges that he distorted and misrepresented the virtues of the Arabs. When Abū ‘Ubaydah ridiculed the famous bow of Ḥājib, for example, his ridicule completely missed the point, namely that Arabs place a high premium on weapons because they are seen as the repository of a man’s glory and nobility. Ibn Qutaybah also asserts that Abū ‘Ubaydah and his ilk cannot take any pride in Persia’s royal past, in spite of their claims to the contrary. They do not, after all, have any genealogical relationship to any of its kings, fiscal administrators, state secretaries, chamberlains, knights, or other elites. “What business does a member of the vast rabble of the Easterners with no recognizable genealogy or famous forefather have with Khosrow’s throne, crown, silks, and fineries?” Ibn Qutaybah asks.¹¹

Arab Preeminence is written as a rebuttal though it is not clear of whom, since Ibn Qutaybah never identifies his opponents (Abū ‘Ubaydah, for example, was long dead), nor does he go deeply into their positions. His assumptions about his readers’ familiarity with these opponents’ arguments suggest either that Ibn Qutaybah’s text originally also included the arguments he is rebutting, or that he is responding to a pamphlet or other piece of writing that circulated in his own day. A fourth/tenth century Andalusian text by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *The Unique Necklace (Al-‘Iqd al-farīd)*, which includes excerpts from *Arab Preeminence*, also excerpts statements attributed to the Bigots that may very well have been the material to which Ibn Qutaybah was responding.¹² These excerpts are brief, but give a sense of what so exercised Ibn Qutaybah. For example, so-called Bigots are quoted as saying:

If the non-Arabs were to ask you whether you consider the basis for glory to be kingship or prophethood, what would you say? If you were to claim it is kingship, we would say to you that all the kings on earth have been from us—pharaohs, Assyrian kings and Amalekite kings, khosrows and caesars. Can any Arab claim anything like

the reign of Solomon, to whom mankind, jinn, birds, and the winds humbled themselves? . . . And if you were to claim, instead, that the only basis for glory is prophethood, we would say that without exception all prophets and messengers beginning with Adam were non-Arabs, except for four—Hūd, Šāliḥ, Ishmael, and Muḥammad; and we would say that this world’s “chosen ones,”¹³ Adam and Noah, were also from us—they are the two roots from which mankind branches out. This makes us the root and you the branch. You are merely one of our branches.¹⁴

In *Arab Preeminence* Ibn Qutaybah dismisses these ideas as nonsense. He maintains that the bonds between the Arabs and prophets run deep—indeed, to a time before the Arabs even spoke Arabic.¹⁵

Ibn Qutaybah would defend the superior status of the Arabs as the natural order of things—just like other forms of differentiation and hierarchy that keep the world going. Humans have natural inborn qualities that differentiate them, and so, too, do peoples—most notably the Arabs, whose virtues of hospitality and courage distinguish them. The Quraysh, in particular, deserve special respect because of their connections to the sacred territory of Mecca prior to Islam and because of their maintenance of the “original monotheism” they inherited from their forefather Ishmael, the son of Abraham.¹⁶ After God brought Islam, He blessed the Arabs, generally, and the Quraysh specifically. As Ibn Qutaybah sees it, it was God Himself who gave power to the Arabs when He endowed them with the caliphate.¹⁷ In the present scheme of things, the Arabs’ partners are, as already mentioned, the Khurasanians.

Ibn Qutaybah devotes a sizeable part of *Arab Preeminence* to countering specific slights to Arab culture by asserting the Arabs’ innate sense of self-sacrifice and generosity. For him, reports about Arabs eating repulsive dishes such as bloodied fur and snakes, or consuming drinks such as the stomach juices and blood of camels, point to their poverty and desperate times. The Arabs’ comparative deprivation only goes to show their innate merits. Whereas Persians had the benefit for wealth, weapons, and the leadership of a king, the Arabs fought bravely without any such benefits; their successes, well attested in the poetic tradition, show just how fierce and intrepid they are.

Toward the end of *Arab Preeminence*, Ibn Qutaybah gets around to mentioning the Qur’anic verse from which the term “Shu’ūbism” was said to derive. The full verse reads: «We have . . . made you into peoples [*shu’ūb*] and tribes

[*qabā'il*] so that you might come to know each other. The noblest of you in God's sight is the most pious.»¹⁸ Ibn Qutaybah would have us believe that the “Bigots” used this verse to cite not just the equality of the Persians, but their superiority too, since they, as one of God's “peoples” (*shu'ūb*) are mentioned before the Arabs, or God's “tribes.” To this, Ibn Qutaybah replies that “a thing may be mentioned first but this does not mean that it has priority in merit.”¹⁹ What's more, Ibn Qutaybah asserts, the term *shu'ūb*, as “peoples,” can just as well apply to Arabs as to their opponents.

Throughout, Ibn Qutaybah supports his arguments with citations from the Qur'an and prophetic hadiths, often widely reported ones appearing in the contemporaneous canonical collections. When citing hadiths, he occasionally cites chains of transmission, but does not systematically provide these. He also quotes poetry, proverbs, and something he characterizes as one of the Easterners' own books. He is also very interested in pre-Islamic lore, whether Arabian or Iranian.

In *The Excellence of Arab Learning*, the second part of *The Excellence of the Arabs*, Ibn Qutaybah presents the body of evidence upon which he rests his case for the Arabs' superiority. He opens with a general statement, which flows naturally from the first part of the book, namely that the Arabs are a very learned people whose intellectual tradition is as venerable as, and even richer than, those of other peoples. Lest his declaration be discounted as mere bombast and partisanship, he provides a long list of empirical examples of Arab intellectual prowess, which he classifies according to an array of fields of knowledge, each of which, he argues, is unique to the Arabs.

The flow of the argument is now straightforward: each section opens with a brief description of the nature of the specific field of learning in question, followed by examples demonstrating the Arabs' cultivation of it and their wide expertise. Some of the examples take the form of short anecdotes and prose statements, but the majority of the evidence consists of lines of poetry. This was a common approach developed by Arabic writers, who considered poetry, as “the archive of the Arabs” (*dīwān al-'Arab*), the most truthful and most bountiful source of Arab knowledge. Poetry also had a distinct empirical appeal; stories were accepted as definitively true only if they were corroborated by poetry. Much of classical Arabic literature has in fact been prosimetric, that is, consisting of a mixture of prose and accompanying poetic corroboration. Ibn Qutaybah's book is thus an excellent introduction to a style of early Arabic discourse in which writers follow statements with a selection of verses intended

to prove the veracity of the author's position. Seldom does Ibn Qutaybah provide definitive conclusions in *Excellence of Arab Learning*; rather, he assumes that readers will find the poetry to be sufficient proof. His editorial comments in this second part of the book, much like those of many of his contemporaries in their works, are relatively sparse.

Readers accustomed to encountering stand-alone poems may find unusual Ibn Qutaybah's adducing of two or three verses in support of his points. Arabic poems could be very long, often running into dozens of lines, but in the second part of the book Ibn Qutaybah is concerned not with the complete poem as a work of art, but rather with the evidence that can be deduced from individual lines. The quoted verses rarely reveal any overt clues about the intended context, but Ibn Qutaybah and most of his readers would likely have known most, or at least many, of these verses, having acquired them during the course of their education (a literary and ethical learning known as *adab*). We are left to commend the erudition of readers in his day, and this is part of the charm of encountering the period's literature.

Notwithstanding the brevity of Ibn Qutaybah's comments and the seemingly scattergun approach that results in peppering *The Excellence of Arab Learning* with isolated lines of poetry, the message is clear. The proof adduced for the Arabs' mastery over each of the fields of knowledge Ibn Qutaybah enumerates is the existence of a specialist vocabulary, preserved in Arabic poetry, for each field—something the Arabs could only have developed over a long period of time and as a result of long-standing and close attention to the cultivation of knowledge. Add to the poetry, the prose anecdotes and the specialized vocabulary found in their aphorisms, and we have further proof of the Arabs' independent, native intellectual prowess, which Ibn Qutaybah hopes to demonstrate was not innate among other peoples.

It is noteworthy that Ibn Qutaybah's evidence for his arguments comes almost exclusively from poetry and prose expressed by peoples who lived long before his own time. The most recent anecdote (§2.7.8) refers to the time of al-Ma'mūn (r. 198–218/813–33), an Abbasid caliph whose reign ended when Ibn Qutaybah was but a young child; moreover, the vast majority of material dates to the pre-Islamic and Umayyad eras. Likewise, Ibn Qutaybah does twice cite the poetry of the early third/ninth-century poet Abū Tammām (§2.8.2), but those two poems specifically describe the past. Ibn Qutaybah's sense of Arab merit is decidedly rooted in the past, as is also the case with his contemporary

al-Jāhiz.²⁰ This perspective is perhaps a reflection of the troubled times in which Ibn Qutaybah lived. It would seem that Ibn Qutaybah intended his readers to see that the heyday of the Arabs was past, and that they were a worthy people whose greatest achievement was to carry Islam from Arabia to the world.

This projection of Arabness into the past and the distancing of Arab achievements from Ibn Qutaybah's own society are matched by a tendency to view Arab achievement as a function of desert life. For Ibn Qutaybah, the "sciences of the Arabs" (*'ulūm al-'Arab*) are horse husbandry, observation of the stars and other physical phenomena, the use of natural ingredients in medical practice, and the composition of poetry, oratory, and wisdom in an oral environment. These are not the province of urban folk, with their bookish culture, but of the Arabian desert nomads. Ibn Qutaybah accordingly constructs a temporal and spatial barrier between his contemporary urban Iraq and the desert Arabia of the past where "proper" Arab traits were developed. The purpose of *The Excellence of Arab Learning*, then, appears to be to create a stereotyped projection of Arab-Bedouin identity in order to characterize the rise of Islam as a uniquely "Arab venture." Ibn Qutaybah was not an Arab, but he invites his readers to appreciate the contribution of this ancient desert people in shaping a new world order, one in which he was an appreciative resident.