“Arabs” and “Iranians”: The Uses of Ethnicity in the Early Abbasid Period

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1 Introduction

In Ramaḍān 219/September 834, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal was brought before the caliph al-Muʿtaṣim and asked to assent to the doctrine that the Qurʾān was created.¹ When he refused, he was flogged until he lost consciousness. He was then released into the custody of Iṣḥāq ibn Ibrāhīm, the governor of Baghdad. After several hours he was allowed to go home. His cousin Ḥanbal b. Iṣḥāq (d. 273/886) describes his departure as follows:

At sunset, [Aḥmad] was led out of the house on a mount belonging to Iṣḥāq ibn Ibrāhīm and rode to his own house surrounded by the caliph’s officials and his own people. When he reached the gate, I heard ʿAyyāsh, the Master of the Bridge, say, when he saw [Aḥmad] approaching – I heard ʿAyyāsh say to Iṣḥāq’s man, with everyone standing there – Tāzīh tāzīh, which means ʿarabī ʿarabī.²

What can ʿAyyāsh have meant? As the storyteller informs us, tāzīh (Middle Persian tazig, modern tāzi) means ʿarabī: that is, an Arab.³ By the usual genealogical criterion, Aḥmad certainly fit the bill: his biographers purport to trace his

¹ This paper has been much improved by the comments and corrections of Patricia Crone, Amikam Elad, Michael Morony, and Behnam Sadeghi. I have not responded adequately to all their objections; I can only hope that the differences have more to do with emphasis (since they are historians and I am a philologist) than with substance. Any remaining errors of fact or interpretation are entirely my responsibility.
² Ḥanbal, Dhikr, 60.
³ I thank M. Rahim Shayegan for explaining the forms. The word also refers to a kind of hunting dog (Anvari, Farhang, s.v. tāzi). One reader of this paper suggested that this might be the intended meaning, the point being to insult Aḥmad. But the story itself tells us that the word means ʿarabī. Also, it seems to me that calling someone a dog requires calling him a dog, not a beagle or a poodle.
ancestry through Shaybān back to Ismaʿīl. But ʿAyyāsh clearly had something besides genealogy in mind. Of the various possibilities I have considered, the likeliest is that suggested to me by Professor Crone: namely, that “Arab” in this context means a rigid, legalistic scholar. In this case Aḥmad earned the title by withdrawing from theological argument and refusing to acknowledge the religious authority of the Abbasid caliph.

In her recently published *Nativist Prophets*, Professor Crone offers an insightful survey of the various meanings of the word “Arab.” In its literal sense, she writes, the word referred to “a person who descended from an Arab tribesman on his or her father’s side.” Among Khurasani revolutionaries it had a narrower meaning: “a bigoted member of the Umayyad establishment who ascribed religious and political significance to his descent.” In the early Abbasid period, the term was often broadened to include anyone “who professed Islam, spoke Arabic (well or badly) and saw himself as a member of the polity ruled by the caliph.” In this latter sense, one could even speak of Arabs “who were Iranian by descent.”

In her studies of Arab and Iranian responses to the Islamic conquests, Professor Crone has also been attentive to the ways in which the set of persons designated by a particular ethnonym may lose certain attributes and acquire new ones. In “Post-Colonialism in Tenth-Century Islam,” she argues that the many non-Arabs who had converted to Islam “were in the disagreeable position of owing their innermost convictions to people they disliked.” Initially, the *shuʿūbiyya* had responded to this predicament by offering new universalist histories of Islam and downplaying the contributions of the Arabs. Later, even though ethnicity had ceased to matter as much on the ground, the search continued for a religious stance that was not bound up with a particular political regime. Skepticism, relativism, and messianism all flourished for a time, but eventually Sufism, which legitimized the spiritual experience of ordinary believers, emerged triumphant. In “Imperial Trauma: The Case of the Arabs,” she argues that in becoming conquerors, the Arabs lost what they most valued about themselves. Try as they might, they could neither shun the cultures of the subject peoples nor prevent non-Arab converts from adopting theirs. The creative synthesis that followed upon the formation of the Islamic empire, as

5 Patricia Crone (personal communication). She notes that Bābak referred to Muslims as *yahūd* for the same reason: both (he thought) believed in a distant god who issued “an endless stream of restrictive rules” (Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 273).
7 Crone, “Post-Colonialism,” citations at 12 and 15.