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BOOK REVIEW

ARABS: A 3,000-YEAR HISTORY OF PEOPLES, TRIBES, AND EMPIRES BY
TIM MACKINTOSH-SMITH

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Mackintosh-Smith, Tim. *Arabs: A 3,000-Year History of Peoples, Tribes and Empires*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019, pp. 656, paperback \$18.

British Arabist and widely acclaimed writer Tim Mackintosh-Smith wrote this formidable tome in his adopted country of Yemen, where he has lived for over three decades atop the ruins of an ancient Sabaean city. Writing with his heart on his sleeve, Smith undertakes the daunting task of tracing three thousand years of Arab history, an effort muddled from the start—by his own admission—because to define ‘*the*’ Arabs “would be to try to pin down Proteus” (xvi), the shape-shifting Greek sea god. The word itself, ‘*arab*’, also eludes the efforts of historians and philologists alike, because “it seems,” he writes, “that when you try to draw meaning from the very bottom of the semantic well, it comes up muddy” (40). Yet nearly 600 pages lie before the reader at this point, and it is not the failure to philologically pin down Proteus that defines this book. In the attempt to put a finger on what it means to be ‘*arab*’, Smith furnishes a lucid and up-to-date reconstruction of the Arabian past, which is “certainly less well known and much less knowable” (xviii) than its Ancient Near Eastern and Late Antique neighbors.

Smith’s point of departure from previous histories is the recognition that Muḥammad marks the halfway point of Arab history—not the beginning: “The first known ancient inscription mentioning the Arabs dates from 853 BC; I am writing these words in AD 2017; according to tradition, the boy Muhammad was

first recognized as a prophet in AD 582—the precise midpoint between that inscription and now” (xviii). Thereafter, his book is organized around three waves of Arab unity: the first (900 BCE–630 CE) catalyzed by the coalescence of high Arabic (*‘arabbiyyah*), the “rich, strange, subtle, suavely hypnotic, magically persuasive, maddeningly difficult...language that evolved on the tongues of tribal soothsayers and poets” (xvii); the second (630 CE–1350 CE) by the “new and thrilling audio-spiritual universe of the Qur’an” (8); and the third (1350 CE–present) by the nationalist movements of nineteenth century Europe. It is exclusively the first wave with which we are concerned here as it relates to the Ancient Near East and Late Antiquity more broadly.

A cursory glance at academic departments in the aforementioned fields is sufficient to note that ancient Arabia is an orphan amidst its prestigious kin of the Levant. However, it is a mistake to neglect the region, as Smith makes the case, that has “preserved, pristine, many of the earliest features of those [Semitic] tongues,” which “is another reason to look at both areas together, as a subcontinent in terms of plate tectonics and linguistics” (22). Up until the present, Arabs and the Arabian Peninsula have been, at best, peripheral in Ancient Near Eastern and Late Antique historiography. The reasons are clear. As Smith observes, the academic disconnect between Islamic and pre-Islamic studies, as well as a general tendency of historians to compress the long Islamic and Arab past into “a few prolegomena to a Muslim year zero” (52), has given the impression that these are two discrete and immiscible periods. “Islam began with such a flash,” he writes, “that it tends to blind us to what was there before” (xviii). The tides are rapidly changing, however, and this book is a testament to that.

Since the 1970s, Michael Pregill has observed, the field of Late Antiquity has expanded beyond the Roman East, eventually integrating Early Islam into its fold. Recent works by Robert Hoyland (1997, 2001, 2014), Stephen Shoemaker (2012, 2018, 2021), G.W. Bowersock (2012, 2013, 2017), Aziz Al-Azmeh (2014), Emran El-Badawi (2014), Angelika Neuwirth (2019), Greg Fisher (2019), Sean Anthony (2020) and others, have made tremendous strides in this regard. What was once believed to be a cultural vacuum and overwhelmingly pagan milieu of *jāhiliyyah* (pre-Islamic Arabia, lit. ‘ignorance’) is now more correctly viewed as a ‘sectarian milieu,’ a time of monotheistic encroachment and well-established Jewish and Christian presence in the peninsula (though the exact nature and extent are unsettled). The subfield of Quranic Studies has also witnessed an explosion in the last two decades, uncovering countless nodes in the historical matrix of that most enigmatic book. Most recently, for example, the possible relationship between the Qur’anic proclamation and the ‘last great war of antiquity’ has begun to be more thoroughly probed. Looking back in time, or rather, down the deep well of history,

has also been recently facilitated by the collection, digitization, and analysis of Safaitic inscriptions in the basalt deserts of northern Jordan and Southern Syria. Written in South Semitic script and grouped with the Ancient Northern Arabian family, these epigraphic records have only recently begun to come into full light. As recently as 2012, Ahmad Al-Jallad observed that our understanding of these inscriptions was still in its infancy. Since then, he has published *An Outline of the Grammar of the Safaitic Inscriptions* in 2015, and 2022 will see the release of *The Religion and Rituals of the Nomads of Pre-Islamic Arabia: A Reconstruction Based on the Safaitic Inscriptions*. In sum, the background and genealogy of this orphaned region of the Levant are continually coming to light and will have ever-increasing ramifications on what we think we know about the Ancient Near East and Late Antiquity.

All this being said, Smith's is the first attempt to piece together the emerging data and weave it into a cogent, tentative, yet fluid narrative. For a concrete example of how Smith has brought emerging data to bear on Early Islamic historiography, we now turn to South Arabia. Before the Arabization of the entire peninsula, powerful kingdoms like Ḥaḍramawt, Ḥimyar, Qataban, and Saba' (believed to be the biblical land of Sheba) thrived in the south. In one of many instances, Smith marshals evidence from their epigraphic records to reveal one of the long-time blind spots for historians. That Islam was "the first attempt in the history of Arabia at a social organization with religion, rather than blood, as its basis" (54) has entered common parlance to the point of it becoming a given. But Early Sabaean inscriptions from the seventh century BCE point to the existence of unions formed in the name of the high god Almaqah, preceding Islam by about a thousand years. Pre-Islamic hydraulic engineers in the region erected an impressive number of irrigation dams, even drilling through a small mountain. These are no small tasks, requiring large-scale political unity for maintenance and quickly fall into disrepair without it, to which the collapse of the Marib dam attests. But the fact remains that unity had indeed been conjured up in the name of a high god, not merely by blood loyalty. Moreover, the word *ḥbl* that is used in an early Sabaic inscription to describe what the communal leader (*mkrb*) helped establish, is the same word that appears in the Qur'an: "and hold fast, all of you together, to the *ḥabl* of Allah and do not be divided among yourselves" (54). Throughout this book, Smith compiles a substantial amount of similar evidence to show that there is a case to be made for continuity between the ancient past and Islam, and down into the present. His thesis for this first section of the book can be summed up by his statement that "when we do take that longer, wider view, we find that Islam was not something that shot up suddenly in Mecca; it is a vast slow growth whose roots lie deep in time and all over the peninsula" (54).

If I may indulge in a bit of metaphorical imagery to close, the Great Mosque of Sana‘a in Yemen (*Al-Jāmi‘ al-Kabīr bi-Ṣan‘ā*) is an apt emblem of the historical confluences that Smith has attempted to elucidate through narrative. Being one of the oldest mosques in the world, it appears to have been constructed atop the ruins of the Palace of Ghumdan, the residence of the last Ḥimyarite king. This image is appropriately emblematic of the historical picture, revealing the geological sediments upon which Islam was built, and a transectional anatomy of the *Zāhir* (outward, manifest) and the *Bāṭin* (inward, hidden). As if to gesture towards this reality, the attic wall of the mosque divulged its manuscript contents during a 1972 restoration project, which turned out to be the oldest Quranic manuscripts to date, and even more striking, palimpsests revealing an erased Quranic text that has since stimulated lively debate still requiring much work to be done. The relationship between Islam, Arabs, and the broader currents of world history call for more attention than ever.

This book is an answer to that call and a welcome contribution to those efforts. Smith’s elegant prose and erudition are up to the task of reaching a general audience as well as engaging experts in the fields concerned. It is a first of its kind and stands as an indictment of reductionistic historical dogmas and lazy narratology. Just as Queen Sheba came from the south bearing gifts for Solomon, studies of Ancient Arabia bear gifts for studies of the Ancient Near East and Late Antiquity. But like Sheba, it comes first and foremost “to test [it] with hard questions” (1 Kings 10:1).