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**William F. McCants,
Founding Gods, Inventing Nations: Conquest and Culture Myth
from Antiquity to Islam
Princeton University Press, 2012**

Reviewed by Tseggai Isaac

William F. McCants' book is a solid scholarly work. It integrates theological, philosophical, mythological and scientific sources to recount the development of "culture myth" driven by political, religious, and military interactions in the Near East.

The book is small, but it is hard-hitting, rich in details and based on an encyclopedic knowledge of what the author calls "culture myth." Culture myth is defined as "the origin of arts and sciences." The author defines arts and sciences as "the disciplines that are learned, that alter humanity's relationship with nature, and that are commonly associated with complex urban societies" (pp. 3-4). The key components of arts and sciences are philosophy, medicine, and the "exact sciences." Their utilitarian and aesthetic values constitute elements of civilization, expressed in "carpentry tools, cities, clothing manufacture, farming practices, government, metallurgy, weaponry, musical instruments, religious practices, medicine and astronomy, sports, and transportation." All had their origin in what the author categorizes as "human inventors" and "divine benefactors." Collectively they are the foundation of human wisdom and civilization.

The author's approach to his topic can be analyzed from the perspective of two concepts that he introduces: *Protography* and its Arabic meaning, *Awail*. The author defines "*Protography*" to mean "writing about firsts." He gives its Arabic rendition as *awail*, meaning the first inscriptions and documents of historical records.

The geographical focus of the study is civilization in the context of its origin in Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Iranian, Greece, and Hebrew traditions. Protographical material explains the pre-Islamic civilizations via the supporting documents McCants deploys. *Awail* refers specifically to protographical documents written by Iranian and Arab scholars to address the founding of Islamic Civilization.

The emergence of Islamic civilization necessitated identifying the "founding" of the Near Eastern civilization and the antecedent civilizations that had influenced them. Who can be credited with "founding" their divine origin and "inventing" their political formation as nations and empires of dominant stature? McCants answers this question in five well-documented chapters.

The introduction gives highlights and summarizes the evolution of civilizations. The time period is the first three hundred years after rule by the Greeks and Romans over the Near East. The beginning of wisdom is to be found in the "myths" and cultural

“lore” believed by societies to be authentic. The sources from which the author generates his data and references are the myths that provide the ancient narrative of each of these civilizations. “The Mesopotamian myth survived in poems and medicinal texts inscribed in clay tablets, Egyptian myth in paintings and inscriptions adorning funerary structures and other monuments, and Iranian myths in oral traditions” (p. 11).

Chapter 1 (“Gifts of the Gods: The Origins of Civilization in Ancient Near Eastern and Greek Mythology”) discusses stories of civilizations as gifts from gods to mankind. The ancient Mesopotamians, the Egyptians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans and the Arabs each had their own myths and cultural beliefs they believed to be uniquely their own, given by their specific gods, who communicated the knowledge to humans. However, when their records and “protographical material” are studied, what each group had considered as theirs alone can be found instead to have been embedded as elements of previous civilizations.

Chapter 2 (“The Beneficent Sky God: Cultural History in the Qur’an”) addresses the prominent role of spirituality in the Quran.

The protographical sources state that the development of “exact science” is contested by the Egyptians, the Mesopotamians, the Persians and the Greeks. Chapter 3 (“Who was First?”) discusses the debate and, in general, credits the Egyptians with origin of numerous discoveries that evolved to become the basis for exact sciences. The Mesopotamians are equally credited with their own vast creativity. The Greeks, the Romans, and the Persians each recount their claim to validate the rich overflow of their specific civilizations, after acknowledging their debt to Hermes, Noah’s grandson from Mesopotamia.

The answer to the question “Who was First?” occurs to Herodotus during his visit to Egypt in 430 BC.

During his trip, he (Herodotus) noticed a number of Egyptian religious practices and beliefs that were similar to those in Greece. He concluded that Greece must have borrowed these from the Egyptians, a conclusion encouraged by the native priests he spoke with (p. 61).

Chapter 4 (“Inventing Nations: Post-conquest Native History of Civilization’s Origins”) is devoted to the ways in which ancient Persian and Greek scholars imparted nationalist spins to their accounts of civilizations.

Chapter 5 (“The Sciences of the Ancients”) discusses the Arab civilization and its equivocal position between faith and a secular outlook. The early Arabs are reticent about attributing knowledge and science to mankind. Instead, they argue that the *awail* (primary knowledge) came from Allah as a gift to man through the words of the Quran.

This is similar to the Hebrew and Christian view of sciences, which the Muslims inherited, except that the Muslims also added a heavy dose of local lore and mythology to form the totality of Islamic Civilization. The *awail* sources provide a mixed reformatory-and-revolutionary history of Islam.

The “all beneficent Allah” is the giver of all knowledge, but that cannot be translated into material facts articulated in the tangible and visible realities of the Arabian Peninsula where Islam was founded. The Arabs’ gift to the world of civilization is Islam in its orthodox form, unadulterated by the worldly rationalizations of sciences.

The author explains the scientific illiteracy of classical Islam as follows:

The Greeks and the Romans came to the Middle East with learned high culture and the native elites contested it, adapted it or modified it. But the conquering Arabs had no comparable learned culture; consequently, the conquerors and the conquered argued over the next three centuries about the content of not only ‘Islamic’ identity, but also ‘Arab’ identity and scholarship.

As this book demonstrates, the orientation of early Islamic culture was not fixed toward Arabia, and its content drew as much from pagan learning and mythology as it did from religious scriptures. What we know today as Islamic culture is the product of a contested process of self-legitimization in the first three centuries of Islamic era – a process reflected in the mythmaking of the period and whose protagonists drew heavily on the lore of non-Arab and pagan antiquity.” (p. 2)

When the Arabs stormed the Near East and brought their religion, how did they adapt to the civilization that had existed before their arrival? The Arabs were conflicted between religious orthodoxy in the dictates of the Quran and endorsing science as defined by those societies on whose lands they settled through conquest.

Before the Islamic conquest, the Persians claimed their civilization was given to the Persian people. The Persians perceived themselves as qualitatively gifted, ordained to create, facilitate, and administer governmental systems in accord with heavenly order.

The Hebrews claimed that arts and sciences were given to man, the embodiment of God. Ever since Adam was driven out of the Garden of Eden, man was commanded by God to make his living by the sweat of his brow. In his efforts to till the earth, Adam and his descendants adapted the culture of tool making and crafting of instruments to harness the earth and its bounties. Christians, who were also Jews at the beginning of the foundation of Christianity, accepted the Jewish view of science and God.

The pre-Abbasid Arabs remained conservative traditionalists with deep skepticism about non-Islamic ideas. Their conquest of vast lands and ancient civilizations exposed them to cultural and civilizational practices without which they could not maintain their empire. The conquerors divided into two camps over the origin of philosophy, medicine and the exact sciences. Those who had unflinching dedication to the Arabian founding fathers could not be reconciled to culture myths based outside the Quran. By contrast, the Abbasid Dynasties incorporated Persian, Greek and Christian methods of rationality and attempted to harmonize Islam with culture myths rooted in science. The Abbasid Dynasties were positioned in the heart of a cosmopolitan culture that had fostered an environment of enlightenment, intellectual and scientific activity.

The Abbasids succeeded in accomplishing a fusion of Persian and Byzantine exact sciences and sciences of governance. They were thus able to reconcile the sacred and the secular bases of science. “The new dynasty, the Abbasids, styled themselves as model Iranian kings, and since being a good Iranian king meant supporting the translation of scientific texts, they patronized the translation of Greek scientific texts into Arabic (p.120). Abbasid efforts paid off, creating an Islamic Civilization that could articulate its own *avail*.

Even though McCants’ book is about the emergence of ancient and classical civilizations, its research focuses strongly on Islamic Civilization, drawing heavily upon ancient Islamized Persian philosophers at the Abbasid court. The author elaborates the extent to which Islamic Arabs contributed to Islamic Civilization and the degree to which Islamic Civilization owes its civilizational material to other civilizations before it. Islam, being the last of the revealed faiths, inherited culture myths from the rest.

However, Islam faced the dilemma of acquisition, incorporation, and rejection. To accept culture myths that were not based on the Quran represented heresy. To reject rational science was also a point of concern with respect to faith and secularism. For this reason, Islam was unable to solve the dilemma until the Iranians abandoned their stellar civilization based on their ancestors and accepted Islam in its Bedouin garb, modified it at the Abbasid Court, and attempted to become its champions, with little success. They paid dearly for conforming to the faith of their enemies, the Sunnis, by jettisoning the far superior civilization of their forefathers.

The answer to the author’s question: “Who was first?” is an unsettled debate. It depends upon whether a Greek, a Roman, or an Islamic scholar is the oracle, showing intellectual and scholarly confidence and loudly claiming the superiority or predominance of his or her civilization.

What appears to be conclusive is the repeated consensus among Greek, Persian, and Abbasid scholars and philosophers to give deference and preference to Egypt as a primary founder and giver of the social and “exact” sciences.

As for the mathematical sciences, classical Greek authors after Aeschylus believed these originated in the Near East, mainly in Egypt. Aristotle, echoing Isocrates, claimed all of them originated in Egypt because the priestly class there was allowed the leisure to pursue them. Herodotus believed that geometry developed out of Egypt land surveying; later authors were only split on whether it was Thales or Pythagoras who had brought it to Greece (p.124).

Founding Gods, Inventing Nations is solid scholarly work that will serve as a useful source for research and study. Its detailed footnotes include Arabic, German, and Latin sources, providing added value to scholars with eclectic interests on the “founding” of civilizations.