



Jan Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads*. (London & New York: Routledge Curzon 2003), 684p.

The book is about the history of the Arabs, as the title indicates. But it is not written in an orthodox way, that is, with the objective of following events as they unfold in time and space. Rather, its objective is to rely on known events and historical records to elucidate the meaning and the reference of the term “‘arab” as used by Arabs themselves and by outsiders. Words which have social and political meanings develop nuances that are negotiated and renegotiated as alliances are formed or dissolved to give way to new ones. Since the same word tends to appear in more or less the same form in different records pertaining to different historical periods, there is a risk that historians will confer on it one meaning without taking much heed of the semantic changes that affected it in the course of time. Thus, Retsö’s book is a work in the semantics of the word “‘arab” as much as it is a history of the Arabs.

Jan Retsö himself is also both a historian and a linguist. His background at Goteborg University was in Arabic and Semitic linguistics, especially in comparative and diachronic studies. But his interest in languages lead him into the history of pre-Islamic Arabia and the Middle East. Therefore, the present work is the fruit of his interdisciplinary studies in Semitic linguistics and the history of the Near Eastern civilizations.

The Arabs in Antiquity is divided into three parts, in addition to an introduction. The first part is articulated into five chapters and is titled “The remembered origins”. These chapters deal with the Islamic sources which abound with data concerning the identity of the Arabs, although much of this data needs to be reread in the light of knowledge of previous historical periods as well as the political situation in the Islamic period. The second part, titled “The forgotten origins”, consists of fourteen chapters, each treating a category of records from the cuneiform sources to the Talmudic sources.

These sources are scrutinized in search for an outsider view of who the Arabs were. Finally, the last part under the title “The solution of an enigma?” is an attempt at recapitulation and synthesis. It consists of three chapters and a summary. With these twenty-two chapters, it is obvious that the book is quite voluminous, with detailed discussions of events and the sources which make reference to them.

But in spite of the book’s length and the author’s scrutiny of the sources, which some readers may find too detailed, there is a single thread that binds all the chapters together. This thread consists of the attempt to answer one single but thorny question: who are the Arabs? The author makes no assumption that this question has only one answer. On the contrary, he starts right from the prolegomena by recording the different uses of the word “arab” among present-day people of the Middle East. These people would identify themselves as “arab”, meaning by that that they are speakers of the Arabic language. But on other occasions, they would restrict the use of the concept to a population among them living in the desert or in neighboring rural areas. Among these populations, the word “arab” (pl. ‘urbān) is used in different ways not all of which are synonymous. Under one of its senses, the word denotes a way of living which consists basically of herding sheep and goats and moving in a limited area. Those who follow this way of living call themselves “arab al-dīra”. In comparison, those who breed camels and move far into the desert, sometimes practicing the *razzia*, call themselves “badw”. There is still another use according to which the word denotes one’s kin as in “arabna nazalū” (our Arabs have camped) or “man mina l-‘arab inta?” (from which Arabs are you?) to which the answer would be the name of a tribe or some such social unit. These examples should show how meticulous the author is about the semantics of the word, a practice that goes well through the whole book.

Retsö is very explicit about his objective: it is not to study the history of Arabia but rather to write a history of the Arabs. For this purpose, he starts with the Islamic period in which there is plenty of data and takes the reader back in history to the earliest mention of this group in Babylonian records, rather than take the opposite direction, as is usual practice in more orthodox historiography. By adopting this methodology, he intends to cast doubt on much of the received knowledge among historians of Middle Eastern civilizations. His scrutiny of the Islamic sources shows that Arabs did not form a well-defined ethnic group, nor did this group include all the inhabitants of central and northern Arabia. The word “arab” kept extending and shifting its reference in accordance with the changes in the internal politics of the

Umayyads. The Yemenites, for example, probably remained outside the Arab circle until the second civil war when their military might waned and their alliance with the Umayyad dynasty terminated. It was at that time that some Yemeni propagandists invented the category “arab ‘āriba” (the real Arabs) to claim that they were the original Arabs whereas the descendents of Mudar or Adnan were outsiders who adopted the Arabic culture.

Another caution that the author makes concerns the distinction between internal and external mentions of the term “arab”. The sources in which the word was used by Arabs themselves are extremely scanty; so, the historian is left only with uses by outsiders. There is no evidence that what Assyrians, Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, South Arabians and others meant by Arab corresponded exactly with how Arabs categorized themselves. In fact, the external sources in all likelihood included within the category of Arabs many peoples who did not consider themselves Arab in any sense of the word. According to Retsö, “the question must always be posed to what extent the understanding of the outsiders may coincide with that of the Arabs themselves, whoever they were. We must always be attentive to the possibility that the concept may have changed over time among both the Arabs themselves and the outsiders.” pp. 8-9.

Perhaps the best example in which there might have been discrepancy between outsiders and insiders concerns the Nabateans. This people lived in Transjordan and formed for themselves a kingdom which lasted up to 160 BC. Non-Nabatean sources usually referred to them as Arabs, but the Nabatean sources generally did not. Their kings, for example, were quite clear that they were kings of NBTW. So, were they a sub-group of Arabs in the sense that anyone who was Nabatean was also by definition Arab, or were the two groups distinct from each other? If they were distinct groups, how can be explained the use of the concept ‘Arab’ to refer to the Nabateans in the various outsider sources? In these sources, mention is often made of the ‘Rock’ as the name of the capital of the Arabs. The traditional interpretation is that this ‘Rock’ is nothing else but the city of Petra, the capital of Nabateans. If this indeed was the case, the outsiders were using a term to refer to Nabateans which was different from the one used by Nabateans themselves. But Retsö advances another hypothesis according to which the original Rock was the capital of Arabs in the Negev, but this group moved to Transjordan where the peaceful people of Nabateans used to live on farming and trade. Apparently, this hypothesis solves the problem of texts in which both Arabs and Nabateans are mentioned. It also accords with the Islamic sources, which did not consider the Nabateans as Arabs.

After his journey through the historical periods spanning from the Umayyads to the Assyrians in a quest for the original meaning of the concept 'arab', Retsö reaches the following radical conclusion:

The term 'Arab' originally designated a community which was the special property

of a semi-divine hero, leading them as a kind of police force during certain renewal festivals. It existed in several places in Arabia as well as in the border regions. Membership was constituted by an initiation ceremony, which included a nightly vigil and cropping of one's hair as an outer sign of dependence on the semi-divine leader-hero. This figure was represented by an official or a chief, functioning as a commander. The initiation took place at a specific asylum or sanctuary named HGR. The Arabs remained a closed community, settled in special villages spread among the other settlers or situated on the border between the desert and the sown. They stood under special taboos which prohibited them from living in built houses, tilling the soil or using wine. Because of these taboos they tended to live in symbiosis with farmers and tradesmen, whom they served as protectors. These were called *nabat*, Nabataeans. The Arabs were not the only community of their kind in Arabia or the ancient Middle East, but they had a characteristic feature not shared by others: their handling of the camel, an animal which already played a role in the initiation. Its preference for large pasture grounds and dry climate determined the whereabouts of the Arabs in regions outside the main settlements, wandering between the desert and the sown. (p.324)

In other words, Arabs did not form an ethnic group in which an individual became Arab by birth; nor were they a group defined by its way of life, as '*badw*' seems to be. They were some kind of warriors under the leadership of a religious commander. This original institution did not last unchanged but, like any other human institution, changed in the course of time until it completely vanished in the Islamic period.

Retso's conclusions may raise doubts, but they have certainly managed to shake deep-rooted ideas about the identity of Arabs, their language and their history. *The Arabs in Antiquity* is a ground-breaking work that will be considered a major contribution in the field for very long.

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