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## Introduction

IN THE NINTH century AD, Abū Maʿshar, an Iranian Muslim astronomer from Balkh (in modern-day Afghanistan), wrote that Adam and his grandson Hermes had founded the arts and sciences before the biblical Flood. Fearing that the coming Flood would eradicate “all the arts,” Hermes inscribed knowledge of them for posterity in temples he built in Egypt. After the Flood, a second Hermes from Babylon retrieved this knowledge, and, through his student Pythagoras, it passed to the Greeks.<sup>1</sup> Prefacing this account, Abū Maʿshar explained that the Hebrews equated the first Hermes (a god in Greek mythology) with the biblical Enoch; that the Arabs equated him with the mysterious Idrīs mentioned in the Qurʾan; and that the Persians equated him with the ancient Iranian king Hōshang and identified Adam with their first man and king, Gayōmart.

Abū Maʿshar’s account is heavily indebted to pre-Islamic thought about the origins and transmission of the arts and sciences.<sup>2</sup> But it also reflects the social and intellectual tensions of ninth-century Iraq, the center of an Islamic empire whose Arab founders were losing their political dominance. At that time, scholarly elites with divergent learned traditions were competing for cultural ascendancy. Some of them were oriented toward Mecca and Jerusalem, others toward Persepolis, and still others toward Athens. They, like Abū Maʿshar, wrote about the origins and transmission of the arts and sciences not only out of antiquarian interest but also to tell their contemporary audiences what arts and sciences they should value and who should preserve them. Through their accounts of civilization’s origins, they defined themselves and their groups, legitimated their authority, and differentiated their learning from competing traditions and claims. Comparing their accounts synchronically provides a map of early Muslim elites and the tensions between them; comparing them diachronically shows how the identity of these elites changed in response to political and social developments.

To understand what is unique about early Muslim theorizing on the origins

<sup>1</sup> Ibn Juljul, *Ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbāʾ*, 5–10.

<sup>2</sup> See Van Bladel’s *Arabic Hermes* for a thorough discussion of the textual genealogy of Abū Maʿshar’s account.

of civilization, it is necessary to compare it to similar periods of intense writing on the subject. The best analogs are the three hundred years following the establishment of Greek and Roman rule over the Near East (respectively 323–30 BC and 31 BC–337 AD),<sup>3</sup> which roughly approximates the three hundred years of prolific writing on civilization's origins following Muḥammad's death and the establishment of the Arab Islamic empire over almost the entire Near East (632–934 AD). All three conquering peoples hailed from the margins of the Near East, and their conquests united separate, complex societies with ancient native traditions of learning and legitimation distinct from those of the conquerors and one another.<sup>4</sup> The status of these traditions and those of the conquerors were worked out textually in the postconquest period through lists and histories of civilizational firsts. What these texts suggest is that the dominant understanding of civilization's origins that emerged three hundred years after each conquest was the product of a complex process of borrowing in which the conquerors took from the conquered and vice versa, and the conquered took from one another. Their reasons for doing so had as much to do with the immediate political and social dilemmas created by empire as they did with the workings of detached antiquarian pursuits.

There is at least one major difference between the three postconquest periods. The Greeks and Romans came to the Near East with a learned high culture, and native elites contested it, adopted it, or did something in between. But the conquering Arabs had no comparable learned culture; consequently, the conquerors and conquered argued over the next three centuries about the content of not only "Islamic" 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 scripture. What we know today as Islamic culture is the product of a contested process of self-legitimation in the first three centuries of the 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.

In all three postconquest periods, etiological speculation clustered around four subjects: divine providence, first inventors, founders of native civilization, and the origins of the sciences. A fifth subject, theories of cultural formation in prehistory (*Kulturentstehungslehre*), was a feature of only pagan Greco-

<sup>3</sup>The periods are not exactly analogous because unlike Alexander's conquest of the Near East, the extension of Roman rule over the region covered less territory and was a gradual process, beginning with the defeat of Asia in 188 BC and its establishment as a Roman province in 133 BC. Seleucid-ruled Syria and Ptolemaic-ruled Aegyptus did not become Roman provinces until the mid- to late first century BC.

<sup>4</sup>Compare this with the Mongol conquests of the Near East in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries AD, which did not lead to the proliferation of culture myths. The relative homogeneity of Near Eastern elite culture at that time (compared with the three periods treated here) and the conquerors' adoption of it may explain the difference.

Roman society. Other peoples, including many Greeks and Romans, rejected the idea of an ancient, unknowable history and instead explained the origins of culture by attributing it to heroes living at the dawn of recorded events (*Kulturgeschichte*).<sup>5</sup>

The modern terminology used to describe this material and its object of study can be confusing. Folklorists use the term *etiology*, which they apply to any myth about the origins of things (e.g., rituals, rocks, alchemy).<sup>6</sup> A more apt but less used term is *culture myth*, or myths about the origins of the arts and sciences.<sup>7</sup> *Culture heroes* are famous figures who originated them.<sup>8</sup> In this book, I prefer *culture myth* because it is more restrictive than *etiology*, but I use both terms interchangeably to refer to myths about the origins of the arts and sciences of civilization. Similarly, my use of the word *culture* refers to these arts and sciences. This is a more restrictive definition of culture than that employed by anthropologists, which can include all learned thought and behavior.

As for what constitutes “the arts and sciences,” it depends on whom one asks. The Sumerians used the term *me* and the ancient Greeks *technai* to refer to everything associated with complex civilization, but they did not define their terms; definitions have to be inferred from usage and can include arts like poetry and pottery as well as sciences like mathematics. The Sophists, who were among the first to think about cultural formation in prehistory, limited *technai* to skills based on knowledge and experience that improved life and embellished it; for them, geometry and astronomy were not included.<sup>9</sup> In the fourth century BC, Plato and Aristotle disagreed with the Sophists’ negative valuation of the mathematical sciences, which they classified as *epistēme* (knowledge as such), but concurred that they should be separated from *technai* (knowledge that serves practical needs), giving us our phrase “arts and sciences.” Nevertheless, there was and still is confusion over what disciplines belong to each category.<sup>10</sup> For this book, I define “the arts and sciences” as disciplines that are learned, that alter humanity’s relationship with nature, and that are commonly

<sup>5</sup> On the distinction between theories of cultural formation in prehistory and the history of culture, see Zhmud, *Origins*, 48–49, 51, 54. The explanation for why theorizing on prehistory was confined to pagan Greco-Roman authors is in Matthew Goodrum’s “Prolegomenon” and “Biblical Anthropology,” but he incorrectly singles out the early Church Fathers for rejecting the idea of an ancient, unknowable history. A number of Greek and Roman authors, going back to Hesiod in the eighth century, held the same view.

<sup>6</sup> Childs, “Etiological Tale,” 388; Sharon, *Patterns*, 74, 76; Niesiolowski-Spanò, “Two Aetiological Narratives,” 369–70.

<sup>7</sup> Spence, *Introduction*, 149; Rüpke, *Religion of the Romans*, 128. *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary* defines a culture myth as “a myth accounting for the discovery of arts and sciences or the advent of a higher civilization, as in the Prometheus myth” (1998).

<sup>8</sup> Spence, *Introduction*, 119; Leeming, *Storytelling*, 130–31; Seal, *Folk Heroes*, 51–53; Bastian and Mitchell, *Native American Mythology*, 83; Hansen, *Classical Mythology*, 141–43; Yang, An, and Turner, *Chinese Mythology*, 261; Espin and Nicholoff, *Introductory Dictionary*, 302.

<sup>9</sup> Zhmud, *Origins*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 20–21; Cuomo, *Technology*, 13, 18.

associated with complex urban societies. The one exception is language, which, although it is a feature of both simple and complex societies, is included here because the Greeks, Romans, and Arabs believed it to be the necessary precursor of complex civilization.

Classicists, biblical scholars, and scholars of the ancient Near East have thought more about culture myths than have Islamicists (academic scholars of Islam). One reason is that the first three groups have long debated the influence of Near Eastern myths, including culture myths, on the Bible.<sup>11</sup> Another is that classicists have been interested in whether antique authors had a concept of progress.<sup>12</sup> More recently, classicists have explored modern postcolonial approaches to understanding the nature of native identity after conquests of the ancient Near East.<sup>13</sup> All of these inquiries involve culture myths. In comparison, there has been little discussion of the notion of progress<sup>14</sup> or postcolonial<sup>15</sup> identity in early Islam,<sup>16</sup> and Islamic culture myths have less relevance to the debate about the Hebrew Bible's date and origin.

Because the study of pre-Islamic culture myths is so well developed compared with the study of early Islamic culture myths, I have foregrounded the former and used it to frame the Islamic material in the following chapters. This framing also reflects my belief that Islamic thinking about the origins of civilization is deeply indebted to antique thought on the subject, both in content and assumptions. Furthermore, Muslim authors were shaped by social and political circumstances that were similar to those confronting Hellenistic- and Roman-

<sup>11</sup> For a good example of how this debate still embroils scholars of ancient, classical, and biblical mythology, see Gmirkin's attempts to justify a late date for the Pentateuch (*Berosus and Genesis*).

<sup>12</sup> For example, Dodds, *Ancient Concept of Progress*; Edelstein, *Idea of Progress*; Guthrie, *In the Beginning*.

<sup>13</sup> See Bohak, "Recent Trends"; Malkin, "Postcolonial Concepts"; Moyer, "Limits of Hellenism"; Barclay, "Empire Writes Back"; and Lyman, "Justin and Hellenism."

<sup>14</sup> The only treatment of the idea of progress in classical Islam of which I am aware is Khalidi's "The Idea of Progress in Classical Islam." His attempt to divide classical Islamic thinking on progress into three periods is undermined by his anachronistic quotations. Thus, he adduces Jāhīz (d. 869 AD) as an example of stage-two optimism about scientific progress, which lasted from 900 to 1100 AD (282). As I will argue in chapter 5, pessimism and optimism about scientific progress were concurrent. To his credit, Khalidi acknowledges that the reality may be more complex and offers his article as a starting point for others (284–85).

<sup>15</sup> As Patricia Crone ("Post-Colonialism," 2) recently observed, scholars of early Islam are not comfortable with the term, which includes the immediate postconquest period. Presumably, it is out of fear of anachronism. That is a shame, since there are a number of historical parallels with classical and modern postcolonialism, and the early Islamic period can enrich the theoretical literature and also benefit from it.

<sup>16</sup> Crone ("Imperial Trauma" and "Post-Colonialism") has analyzed early Arab Muslim anxieties about their fading power but does not look at how the conquered peoples represented themselves. Tavakoli-Targhi ("Contested Memories") has engaged with postcolonial theory, but only to look at the creation of the dominant Muslim discourse about Iranian history. Similarly, Bashear (*Arabs and Others*) looks at how Arabs saw others, not how others represented themselves to Arabs.

era authors and thus share many of their concerns and solutions to intellectual and cultural dilemmas. Finally, by bringing Islamic material into the debates of classicists, I hope to encourage scholarly communities on both sides of the Arab conquests to consider the Mediterranean and Near Eastern patrimony through a wider-angle lens.

The indebtedness of Islamic culture myths to antiquity is not only evidenced by the fact that Islamic culture myths cluster around the same subject areas as pre-Islamic culture myths but also by the fact that there are numerous linkages between the myths themselves. I have organized the chapters around these subject areas, preceded by an introductory chapter on ancient culture myths to set the stage and provide a point of reference.

Thinking about the origins of civilization is as old as written history. Nearly all of ancient Near Eastern mythology that treats the subject depicts the gods or their divine interlocutors as purveyors of civilization's arts, which are wholly beneficial. Greek and Jewish myths are different, perhaps because they are comparatively new (i.e., first millennium BC rather than third or second). Greek myth preserves the Near Eastern model of a beneficent deity, but the deity teaches humans the rudiments of civilization only after another god punishes them by making them toil for their sustenance. Humans later invent ironsmithing, which leads to violence and eventually humanity's demise. Jewish myth is similar to the Greek in that humans acquire culture after a deity punishes them with toiling for their sustenance; however, they acquire culture of their own ingenuity. The deity has nothing to do with it and frowns on their innovations, which eventually lead to the invention of ironsmithing and the destruction of humanity. Ironically, these two pessimistic stories of civilization's origins, written on the margins of the great powers of the Near East, were the primary culture myths of civilizations that came to value human ingenuity.

Although the Qur'an is a "biblical" text in the sense that it draws heavily on the stories of the Bible, the Qur'anic conception of cultural origins is similar to that of the ancient Near Eastern authors: a beneficent sky god, Allah, gives culture—even ironsmithing—to humans. However, this is not a revival of ancient mythology but the confluence of two Hellenistic developments. The first is that of Jews and Christians adopting the Greek Stoics' notion of divine providence, in which God must be the provider of everything. The second development is noncanonical Jewish and Christian scriptures that envision a more positive role for God in the development of civilization. The author of the Qur'an draws on the examples and arguments found in these separate literary traditions to bolster his claim that if humans do not properly worship their ultimate Provider, He will give their possessions to others. This claim may have provided a justification for the Arab conquests of the complex civilizations of the Near East.

The Arabs were politically dominant for only a century following the conquests. As their dominance faded, scholars in Iraq began compiling lists of

cultural “firsts” (*awā'il*) attributed to biblical and Arab heroes.<sup>17</sup> Their writing about firsts, an activity I call “protography,”<sup>18</sup> reflects their scholarly interest in the biblical background of the Qur'an and the Arab environs that produced it. Their lists were also an attempt to make sense of a century of religious and cultural innovation and inter-Arab rivalry by grounding it in pre-Islamic tradition. A similar period of innovation and rivalry preceded the creation of Greek protography,<sup>19</sup> suggesting a correlation between cultural competition and the flourishing of protography.

Muslim authors of *awā'il* lists were initially reluctant to recognize the contribution of ancient foreign civilizations to their culture. Indeed, some authors in the ninth century wrote *awā'il* lists that studiously ignored foreign influences, emphasizing only the Arab and Abrahamic character of the empire at a time when it was rapidly turning toward Iran. Pre-Islamic Greek and Roman protographical lists, in contrast, almost always included foreign influences, although some authors were no less uneasy about it than their Muslim counterparts. Christian apologists in the Roman era exploited these lists of foreign firsts to

<sup>17</sup>The best bibliographical surveys of *awā'il* lists are Rosenthal's article on *awā'il* in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2nd ed.) and 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Mānī's English introduction to his edition of Ibn Bāṭish's (d. 655 AH/1257 AD) *Ghāyat al-wasā'il* (al-Mānī, “An Edition of *Ghāyat al-wasā'il*”). For brief treatments of the place of *awā'il* literature in Islamic historiography, see Noth, *Historical Tradition*, 104–7; Wansbrough, *Sectarian Milieu*, 36; Khalidi, *Historical Thought*, 34; Dziekan, “Origins of Things,” 26. See Lang, “*Awā'il*,” for a more extended discussion.

<sup>18</sup>Classicists call this material *heurematography*, or writing about discoveries. The term is based on the Greek *prōtoi heuretai*, “first discoverers,” which is a genre of literature that originated in fourth-century BC Greece. *Heurematography* has the virtue of being more restrictive than *etiology* (myth of origins) and describes a genre of literature that is more self-consciously about civilizational firsts. However, it implies that civilizational firsts should be thought of as discoveries or inventions, which is not always the case; Greek texts often have gods revealing technology to humans. The Arabs, on the other hand, use the less restrictive term *awā'il*, “firsts,” for the same type of material. In a nod to the linguistic and textual similarities between the Greco-Roman and Arabic texts, I prefer the term *protography*, or “writing about firsts,” which is less expansive than *etiology* but not as restrictive as *heurematography*. I sometimes refer to an instance of protography as a “protograph” or “protographical material.”

<sup>19</sup>There have been several good surveys of Greek and Latin etiological literature written in German, the most recent of which is Klaus Thraede's article on inventors (“Erfinder II”). There has also been one attempt to link this literature with Arabic *awā'il* lists in an 1867 article by Richard Gosche, “Das Kitāb al-*awā'il*.” Later *awā'il* lists, whether scattered throughout chronologies and biographies or compiled into lists, are almost always drawn from works written in the first three centuries. For good examples of *awā'il* digests, see al-Shiblī's (d. 769 AH/1367 AD) *Maḥāsin al-wasā'il fī ma'rīfat al-awā'il* and Suyūṭī's (d. 911 AH/1505 AD) *Wasā'il ilā ma'rīfat al-awā'il*. The same could be said of medieval European literature on inventors, which consisted basically of catalogs of classical etiological literature (for a good example, see Polydore Vergil's *On Discovery*). In both cases, the respect of later authors for the earlier classical traditions made them more inclined to compile earlier opinions on the origins of culture rather than to posit their own—a sort of closing of the *wasā'il al-awā'il*. There were also social and political reasons why new etiologies were not devised after this period.

demonstrate that Greco-Roman culture was barbarian derived and thus no less foreign than Christianity.

Muslims who wrote lists of Arab cultural achievements were modest in their own way, claiming only parochial firsts for the Arabs. But this could also be exploited by the conquered, as when Iranian authors supplemented lists of underwhelming Arab accomplishments with the universal achievements of ancient Iranian kings, such as their invention of statecraft. Iranians did the same in early postconquest histories of Iranian civilization. Although they wrote them in Arabic and retained the biblical and Qur'anic narrative of events and personalities, they also emphasized the secular achievements of the first Iranian kings.

These native accounts of civilization's origins do not fit neatly into the categories of resistance, assimilation, or hybridity in postcolonial theories of native literature.<sup>20</sup> They neither explicitly challenge the dominant discourse nor merely reproduce and reinforce it.<sup>21</sup> Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity is a better fit, since the resulting historiographical mix was neither wholly Islamic nor wholly Iranian and thus destabilizing for both.<sup>22</sup> But scholars looking for a hegemonic culture that native authors were resisting, assimilating to, or mixing with may miss the fact that there was no dominant culture. Instead, the cultural orientation of Islamic scholarship was heavily contested, and Iranian authors were just as likely to try to persuade the conquerors to become more like the conquered as they were to adopt their culture. In this, some Iranian histories of civilization written in Arabic are similar to accounts of civilization's origins written in Greek by native elites after the Greek and Roman conquests of the Near East. These earlier native histories sought to correct cultural misunderstandings, teach the foreign rulers to behave like local kings, bolster the author's status as custodian of an ancient culture, and diminish the achievements of other competing civilizations. The early Iranian native histories functioned in the same way. They also became the basis of a national epic, the *Shāhnāmīh*, and legitimized the establishment of independent Iranian dynasties, demonstrating the ambiguity of boasting about ancient cultural achievements. Such boasting could be intended to draw the conquerors closer as well as to push them away.

The growing Iranian influence on the Islamic empire led to the translation of Greek scientific texts into Arabic because the Muslim rulers styled themselves as Iranian kings, one of whose functions was to patronize translations of this

<sup>20</sup> There is a growing body of literature that argues for the application of postcolonial theory to the premodern period, particularly in biblical (Seesengood, "Hybridity," 10n3), Hellenistic (Malkin, "Postcolonial Concepts," passim; Barclay, "Rhetoric," 318), and Roman studies (Lyman, "Justin and Hellenism"). There are also dozens of monographs that apply the theory (for example, Vasunia's *Gift of the Nile*).

<sup>21</sup> For the two categories, see Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 195, and Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 296.

<sup>22</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 102–22; Barclay, "Empire Writes Back," 317.

sort. Muslim and non-Muslim elites also needed scientific texts for practical purposes, such as the practice of medicine, and for resolving the religious quandaries of the day, which had become acute in cosmopolitan Baghdad.

The translation of these texts led to speculation about the origins of some of the disciplines they described—mainly philosophy, the mathematical sciences, and medicine. In antiquity, such speculation had arisen in periods of intense social and political disruption and centered on the question of the role that the Greeks had played in creating the sciences. First, had the Greeks originated anything of their own or taken it from others? The Greeks certainly originated many sciences, but their tendency to attribute Eastern origins to them encouraged non-Greeks to do the same. Second, could humans develop complex sciences with the unaided human mind? Many believed they could not and instead required divine revelation to get things started.

The same two questions are found in early Islamic histories of science, with advocates on both sides of each question. The solution that won out was that the sciences had come from the biblical prophets, who were more ancient and who had access to revelation. This was the same solution arrived at by some Roman-era Jews and the Church Fathers. But whereas Jews and Christians had advanced this argument primarily to blunt the pagan charge of being cultural traitors, Muslims advanced it to make the sciences safe in the eyes of their coreligionists.

In recounting these culture myths, authors worked out their place in post-conquest society. By describing the origin and transmission of science, they tell us where they stand in relation to that tradition, to their contemporaries who practice it, and to those who detract from it. By writing histories of the cultural exploits of ancient heroes, they tell us how they think of their ethnic origins and how others can join or be excluded from their group. By making lists of beneficial arts and sciences, they encode the ideal cultural genealogy of their societies and provide the knowledge needed to navigate it. By demonstrating how God works in the world, they explain how society should be ordered and who should maintain it. These scholarly activities were at no time more important than after conquest, when the place of the conqueror and the conquered were both unstable and in need of mooring to the ancient past.

Although the primary material surveyed in this book is old, it is hard not to draw parallels to groups and historical processes today, living as we do only a few decades after the end of European rule in large parts of the Near East. I have resisted this temptation until the conclusion—and there treated it only tentatively—so as not to distract from the subject at hand or force it into a framework too shaped by modern concerns. That said, the parallels are striking: conquerors leaving behind languages of scholarship and science in which the conquered articulate their native traditions; the competition over cultural priority; the heightened interest in civilization's origins; and the emergence of a

new story of civilization's development that is neither that of the conquerors nor that of the conquered.

Perhaps the parallel that will strike readers most, because of its immediacy, is the similarity between Jews living under Roman rule and Muslims living in the West today. The hostility the Jews faced and the strategies they developed to overcome it while preserving their identity remind one of the hostility Western Muslims currently face and the thin line Muslim elites walk between assimilation and resistance. As this book demonstrates, early Islamic identity was fluid and a product of more than the Arabian desert, which should give pause to both Muslims and non-Muslims who claim Islam is incompatible with modernity and civilization. Indeed, Jews living under Roman rule, who were similarly accused and who had a scripture that took a dim view of civilization, created a form of Judaism—Christianity—that became the religion of their conquerors and laid the foundations of Western civilization.