

living stones, supported by its members. The external presence of these cycles on the crown of the buttress frame advertised and defined the sacred space of the building and the power of those who controlled it.

The fourth chapter explores the symbolic protections offered by buttressing frames, noting the connections between buttress piers and contemporary military architecture. Hutterer connects the strategic positioning of buttress uprights and flyers to the architectural trend of distinguishing support from fill, observing that builders increasingly reinforced defensive structures with buttresses or towers and used the wall itself as a kind of skin or barrier between interior and exterior, rather than constructing uniformly thick walls. Buttresses might be viewed as symbolic towers, parallel to the use of crenellations on churches (and occasionally incorporating that feature): fortified churches seem to have existed as an expression of power or privilege rather than as practically defensible sites. Gargoyles may also be related to the expression of protection. While they are often badly eroded, replaced, or invented additions, Hutterer is able to connect the gargoyles of two case studies, Rouen Cathedral and Notre-Dame de l'Épine, using the apotropaic defense of church boundaries, with the caveat that this proposed meaning does not supersede others.

The book is well illustrated with black-and-white photographs, although a handful of additional images, including color images, would further Hutterer's arguments: for example, a plan of the Le Mans chevet to help explain the chapel spacing; images of comparative sites that are described but not pictured; and color reproductions of stained glass and manuscript leaves to clarify the distinctions made in representing buttressing. Overall, however, *Framing the Church* takes a step on a much-needed path in the study of Gothic by emphasizing grounded and specific meanings of buttresses, and Hutterer's methods can and should be applied across a full span of sites and media where flying buttresses occur.

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IBN QUTAYBAH, *The Excellence of the Arabs*, ed. JAMES E. MONTGOMERY and PETER WEBB, trans. SARAH BOWEN SAVANT and PETER WEBB. (Library of Arabic Literature.) New York: New York University Press, 2017. Pp. xxxiii, 304. \$40. ISBN: 978-1-4798-0957-8. doi:10.1086/717706

As part of the NYU Abu Dhabi Institute's Library of Arabic Literature series, a team of three scholars, James E. Montgomery, Sarah Bowen Savant, and Peter Webb, have edited and translated an encomium-cum-anthology entitled *The Excellence of the Arabs*, which is attributed to the ninth-century polymath Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh ibn Muslim ibn Qutaybah (828–89?). A critical edition of the text was published by Walīd Maḥmūd Khālīš in 1998, but this is the first complete translation of the text into English. Because translation is the Library of Arabic Literature's core mission and because *Speculum* attracts relatively few readers of Classical Arabic, this review will focus on the English translation of the text, its connection to current scholarship, and its intelligibility to those outside the field of early Islamic history—and here I include undergraduate students of history.

The text is divided into two sections, "Book One: Arab Preeminence" and "Book Two: The Excellence of Arab Learning," which were translated by Savant and Webb respectively. Both are the authors of recent monographs that study the reconstruction of pre-Islamic ethnic histories in the context of imperial Muslim historiography and culture: Savant's *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion* (2013) and Webb's *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (2016). Both studies make use of Khālīš's edition of the text under review and the link between the scholars' research interests and this translation project is clear and pragmatic. These studies should be read alongside a cascade of recent scholarship, including monographs by the late Patricia Crone and Thomas Sizgorich, as well as

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by Scott Savran and Elizabeth Urban. Montgomery, who produced the Arabic edition of book 1 of *The Excellence of the Arabs*, is an expert on the cultural history of ninth-century Iraq, which is where the oldest extant narrative sources for pre-Islamic and early Islamic history took their original shape. *The Excellence of the Arabs* was written in a new imperial capital at a time of intense and world-shaping political conflict among elite men, which was articulated primarily through the vocabulary of ethnicity, linguistic community, and belief. For this reason, the translation under review is an excellent example of the narrative sources available to historians of West Asian late antiquity and early Islam.

Some readers' ears may have just pricked up. What makes an intra-imperial polemic written in ninth-century Iraq a source for historians of late antiquity? To understand the importance of texts such as this and their potential salience for historians who do not work with Arabic sources, we have to consider the knot of methodology and ideology that makes the negotiation of early Islamic sources so stimulating. Here methodology describes the stark imbalance between the relative paucity of extant narrative and documentary sources from before the ninth century as compared to the explosion of all manner of textual sources in the centuries that followed. This state of affairs is not unique or onerous per se, but it is made more complicated because of the ideological orientation of early Islamic historiography. In texts such as the one under review, the immediate pre-Islamic past—aka late antiquity—was the main setting for the production and interpretation of historical meaning. This meaning-making informed cultural and religious legitimacy, political authority, social status, and many other contentious conditions of the imperial Islamic present. We can see this retrospective ideological orientation already in the Qur'an, one of the earliest historiographical sources in Arabic, which is very invested in the stakes of the late antique past.

These are well-traveled academic roads for sure. Historians are familiar with reading between lines and against grains and are sensitive to the literary construction of historiographical texts. Concepts developed in memory studies are now an essential part of the historian of early Islam's toolkit. Nonetheless, it is salutary to make exemplary texts such as this translation available to an audience outside of Islamic history in order to complement the innovative and careful arguments developed over the past few decades. The editors and translators of this volume are to be congratulated for inviting others to join this important conversation.

The volume's colophon foreshadows a looming debate, which the wider community of historians should be invited to participate in. This methodological hurdle is less prominent than the well-known challenges described above, but I think it is potentially more significant. The oldest surviving copy of Ibn Qutaybah's polemic was made in 589/1193. The only other copy, an incomplete one, was made in the twelfth/eighteenth century. Historians working with early Islamic sources such as this one face a double empirical bind: not only do early Islamic historical sources narrate events that took place a few centuries before in order to preserve information about them and to reflect on their meaning in the historical present, they often survive in versions that are themselves mediated by a further historical remove of a few or several centuries. Scholars have learned to read these sources as reflections of their own political moment, rather than as positivistic sources of late antique history, but the next step, if I can end on a prediction, will be to read these sources not only as products of the periods in which they were being composed but also of the periods in which they were copied and as a result to pay more attention to their reciprocal relationship to new histories being composed contemporaneously.

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