Fragmentation and integration: a response to the contributions of Hugh Kennedy and Walter Pohl

Webb, P.A.; Pohl, W.; Kramer, R.

EMPIRES AND COMMUNITIES IN THE POST-ROMAN AND ISLAMIC WORLD, C. 400–1000 CE

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Empires and Communities in the Post-Roman and Islamic World, c. 400–1000 CE

Edited by
Walter Pohl and Rutger Kramer

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Preface

This volume is the result of a memorable collaborative effort. The authors of the chapters met in Vienna four times to discuss topics, presentations, and drafts of papers, in order to arrive at a more differentiated picture of the relationship between late antique and early medieval empires and particular communities within their range of control. Specialists in the late antique/early medieval West, Byzantium, and the early Islamic period contributed their different perspectives on the Roman Empires in East and West and the Umayyad/Abbasid caliphates. Rather than using a strict common grid of questions and criteria, we worked with the different angles that emerged from a divergent source base and disciplinary state of the art, and we explored differences and commonalities resulting from the various case studies. It was an intellectually stimulating venture, and we hope that readers will be able to share some of this experience.

Contributors

Leslie Brubaker
Professor of Byzantine Art
Director of Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies
Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies
University of Birmingham

Stefan Esders
Professor of Late Antique and Early Medieval History
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Freie Universität, Berlin

John Haldon
Emeritus Shelby Cullom Davis '30
Professor of European History
Emeritus Professor of Byzantine
• History and Hellenic Studies
History Department
Princeton University

Hugh Kennedy
Professor of Arabic
School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)
University of London

Rutger Kramer
Assistant Professor
Department of History, Art History and Classics
Radboud Institute for Culture and History
Radboud University, Nijmegen

Walter Pohl
Director of the Institute for Medieval Research
Austrian Academy of Sciences

Professor of Medieval History
University of Vienna

Helmut Reimitz
Professor of History
Director of the Program in Medieval Studies
History Department
Princeton University

Daniel Reynolds
Lecturer in Byzantine History
Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies
University of Birmingham

Petra M. Sijpesteijn
Professor of Arabic
Faculty of Humanities
Leiden Institute for Area Studies
Leiden University

Peter Webb
Lecturer in Arabic
Leiden Institute for Area Studies
Faculty of Humanities
Leiden University

Chris Wickham
Emeritus Chichele Professor of Medieval History
Faculty of History
University of Oxford

Fragmentation and Integration

A Response to the Contributions by Hugh Kennedy and Walter Pohl

Peter Webb

A comparative history project probing why Western political communities developed differently from Eastern political communities lays a delicate line for historians to walk. I am reminded of Roland Barthes's acerbic review of the film *The Lost Continent.* Barthes critiqued the film's presumptions of fundamental human unity that led it to blur lines between Orient and Occident and to interpret differences between peoples as merely an "oecumenicity of forms," that is, just variations within one pan-human whole.[1] For Barthes, universalizing approaches risk obscuring the significance and real meaning of difference, and accordingly, comparison of post-Roman and post-Abbasid state formation is confronted by a challenge. We cannot presume that an essential core of human existence unfurls an eternal compositioning of men into communal units when an empire falls, and Kennedy and Pohl, in their chapters in this volume, make a key observation that the Roman and Abbasid decompositions constitute two "different historical cases." This in turn invokes a further wrinkle from Barthes, for he wonders whether, as a matter of theory, all different places and times have enough capital-H "History"[2] in common to epistemologically ground comparison. This "History" I interpret to mean the legacy and lived experience of intellectual traditions, and so, as Kennedy and Pohl debunk the hackneyed notions of a "parting of ways" between East and West and the putative superiority of Europe's ethnic nations, we are now challenged with striking a balance that avoids essentializing while still entertaining consideration that humans can develop very different traditions for conceptualizing themselves and their communities and that long-term ramifications flow from these differences.

Herein, the ten broad categories that Kennedy and Pohl identify as contrasting the post-Roman and post-Abbasid experiences of territorial reorganization unfurl

the specter of very meaningful divides. The differing effects of local and imperial traditions on disparate, situational contexts appear to have shaped relationships between power consolidation strategies and conceptions of communal solidarity into forms which may have been more intrinsically different than we might at first suppose.

Into the thicket of difference, the nexus between "ethnicity" and "community" looms saliently. Pohl reveals how protracted the road to the rise of European ethnically labeled communities was, but nonetheless, the widespread use of ethnonyms to establish legitimate senses of kingship in the fragmenting Roman Empire clearly contrasts the absence of ethnic language underwriting the successor states to the Abbasid caliphate. As a phenomenon, therefore, post-Roman military leaders could "integrate their ethnic following," but is it a matter of whether they were able to do so "more easily" than post-Abbasid rulers? This suggests that ethnos was a form of conceiving community available to both and that circumstances enabled post-Roman rulers to put it to more concerted use. When appraising this second-level issue of comparison, the analytical framework of "ethnos" itself may become our problem. The conceptual category of "ethnos," alongside "state," "empire," and other labels for community, direct the kinds of questions research poses to historical material and impose particular analytical lenses to view the past. I wonder whether these paradigms distort our vision of post-Abbasid communities, such that we seek comparisons between cases that are much more uneven than our methods reveal. We might then take a step further back from the ring of comparing, and via consideration of one event in early-eleventh-century Cairo and its ramifications, I would like to proffer a rationale.

The event is recorded in the annals for the month of Ṣafar 415 AH (April 1024 CE). An envoy of the Ghaznavid sultan (*Ṣāḥib Khurāsān*)—Khurasan was a vast region that included Eastern Iran and Afghanistan—had performed the hajj in Mecca with pilgrims from Ghaznavid territory, but insecurity on the pilgrim routes from Arabia back to Iraq and Iran made it dangerous for them to return. Fearful of kidnap and ransom, or worse, at the hands of northeastern Arabian Bedouin groups, the envoy went westward, and as he presented gifts at the Fāṭimid court in Egypt, the contemporary chronicler, al-Musabbiḥī recorded further detail:

> News reached us that the People of Khurasan were prevented from returning by the Mecca-Baghdad road by which they had come, and hence necessity compelled them to travel to Ayla, and thence to al-Ramla from where they returned to Baghdad via the Syrian road. It was said that their caravan was 60,000 camels-strong; there were 200,000 pilgrims. The Purified Presence [the Fāṭimid caliph] had official decrees sent to all the governors of the garrisons in Syria with orders to meet and give generous

hospitality to the Khurasanians, and to ensure that each locality was stocked with food and fodder for them. This was done, and the pilgrims beheld such justness of the Purified Presence and such bounty in the lands that they could never have imagined! The Syrian people (*ahl al-Shām*) provided funds, and the Khurasanians were delighted to visit and make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This purged the former opinions they had held about the apostasy and religious depravity of our Blessed State, and they returned to their country thankful and singing our praises. We thank God for seeing this boon served to our State.[3]

The context of the story is typical of the interstate competition following the collapse of the Abbasid caliphate. The Fāṭimids were an Ismaili Shi'a state ruled by imam-caliphs who claimed descent from a privileged line tracing to Muḥammad, and at the time of the anecdote, they controlled parts of North Africa, Egypt, and Syria (along with nominal power in Mecca itself). On the other side, the Ghaznavids were a Sunni state run by a Turkic warlord and his entourage; they controlled Eastern Iran to the borders of India and were vocal supporters of Sunni Islam and the then very anemic Baghdadi Abbasid caliphate, whom the Ghaznavids loudly swore to protect and uphold against what they claimed was the apostate Fāṭimid Shi'a movement. And in Arabia, a complete lack of central control had made it a dangerous place for outsider travelers in the tenth and eleventh centuries, including pilgrims (as the Ghaznavids experienced). In order for the Ghaznavid pilgrims to return home safely in 415/1024, they had to venture into Fāṭimid-controlled Syria, from whence they took a safer road back east. Despite the doctrinal friction and tense political relations between Fāṭimids and Ghaznavids, the Fāṭimid caliph made great show of magnanimity toward the Ghaznavid pilgrims while they were in his territory, in the hope of demonstrating that he was far from the unbelieving heretic as claimed by official Ghaznavid rhetoric and that he was instead a truly righteous ruler. Our Fāṭimid chronicler believes they took the message to heart.

From the perspective of empires and communities, this anecdote and its surrounding context are an insightful window into the complexity of such concepts in medieval Islam. Our Fāṭimid chronicler, al-Musabbiḥī, does not refer to the Ghaznavids as a family dynasty but instead refers to their sultan as *Ṣāḥib Khurāsān*—the "Ruler of Khurasan," and his subjects are equally not "Ghaznavids" but instead are called "Khurasanians" (*ahl Khurāsān*); expressly spatial terminology identifies them. Khurasan was a familiar toponym: while its precise borders were variable, it stood for a large territory that the contemporary reading public would recognize. Why al-Musabbiḥī did not use a dynastic term or an ethnic term (e.g., "Turks") to refer to the Ghaznavid sultan and his people is intriguing. It is quite common in Arabic literature to find rulers referred to as the "lords of a place," but perhaps it is also a slight—instead of acknowledging

the rival as a dynast, al-Musabbiḥī may intend to belittle the Ghaznavids' importance by merely referring to them as current occupiers of a region, a more transient and perhaps less legitimate portrayal of leadership.

To refer to his own state, in which al-Musabbiḥī was a relatively high-ranking official, we find terminology mixing the divine and the temporal: it is a "Blessed State" (*al-dawla al-mubāraka*), and the caliph is alluded to impersonally as the "Purified Presence" (*al-ḥaḍra al-muṭahhara*), thus melding the Fāṭimid ruler with the conceptual center of the realm and the center of God's blessing. When referring to the Syrian governors and subjects of the Fāṭimid caliphate, however, al-Musabbiḥī does not use terms of communal inclusion: they are neither "our governors/subjects" nor "the Fāṭimid governors/subjects" nor "righteous elect/Divinely-sanctioned servants of the blessed realm," and Syria is not referred to possessively as "our territory" or dynastically as "the caliph's territory"; it is simply referred to as a space, and no pretension of its inclusion with Egypt under the umbrella of one "natural" empire is betrayed. The mixture of a universal "divine" label for the Fāṭimid caliph with a prosaic, purely spatial, fragmented description of the realm begins to uncover intriguing complexities involved in al-Musabbiḥī's conception of empire and community.

The Fāṭimid dynasty was declared at the beginning of the fourth/tenth century. Prior to that, its precise roots are unclear: the Fāṭimids maintained that their first leaders lived in hiding in Syria, while their agents spread their messianic message through Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and North Africa during the third/ninth century. Doctrinally related movements enjoyed success in parts of Syria, Iraq, and Arabia, but the Fāṭimid caliphate itself rose thanks to a political message embraced by a Berber tribe, the Kutāma, in what is now the border region between Algeria and Tunisia. When the Fāṭimids declared their caliphate after replacing the nominal governors of the Abbasids in Tunisia, their armies mainly consisted of Berbers, sub-Saharan African slave soldiers, and some Tunisians and Sicilians. They never played to any of these identities, however, and interestingly, once their regime gained expansionist power, the caliphs adopted a curious naming pattern. The given name of their third caliph, al-Manṣūr, was Ismāʿīl (Ishmael), his son, the caliph al-Muʿizz was named Maʿadd, and his son, the caliph al-ʿAzīz, was named Nizār. The names Ismāʿīl, Maʿadd, and Nizār are instantly recognizable to Arabic-speaking audiences as the three key root-generations of the Arab family tree as it was imagined at the time.[4] The Fāṭimid naming practice therefore projected their caliphs as mirroring the founding generations of mythical Arab ancestry, while they controlled an army of non-Arab Africans and while simultaneously projecting their leadership as a messianic movement of divinely approved rulers who would lead their

community to heaven on Judgment Day. And although they originated in North Africa and established their capital in a brand-new town, al-Mahdiyya, which they projected as the epicenter of their pure messianic community as expressed by its very name (the "City of the Savior"), they soon moved to a new capital of al-Manṣūriyya, named after the caliph al-Manṣūr, and shortly thereafter, to Egypt, where they established a newer new capital, Cairo, "The Victorious" (and *not* named after its founding caliph).

Returning to our anecdote, we have on one side the Ghaznavids, represented as a spatially identified entity, versus the Fāṭimids, whose empire straddled several separable regions, whose capitals were deliberately situated in uniquely proprietary cities, whose lineage traced to Muḥammad, whose caliphs named themselves after primordial Arabs, who controlled a multiethnic, multitribal army (of which almost no members were actually Arabs at all), and who projected themselves as a divinely ordained movement of global salvation. And while the Ghaznavids are identified spatially as Khurasanians, a key point of contention between the two is presented as a matter of faith: the very Muslim identity of the Fāṭimids was in dispute, and such discourses were a linchpin in the Ghaznavid rhetoric against Fāṭimid claims of legitimacy. In short, we are confronted by the most multifaceted array of ways to define community possible, and this extreme multivalence in thinking about peoples and rulers is further and comprehensively reflected at the fundamental level of the terminology that Arabic literature itself uses to think about peoples.

A full discussion of Arabic terms for "peoples" is for a different forum.[5] Here it may suffice to note that there are some twenty different premodern Arabic words to express the concept of 'peoples' or 'tribes', not including a panoply of other terms to delineate smaller groups. The terms for large-scale communities of people—*milla, umma, shaʿb, jins, jīl, qawm, maʿshar, qarn, ahl*—all have varying connotations, too. *Milla* was almost always used to connote peoples united by faith; *shaʿb* usually referred to those united by common descent; *ahl* often connoted spatial identities; but there were few hard-and-fast rules, and peoples could be defined by different terms and with different conceptualizations. The array of different terms and their frequent citation illustrate that issues of social identity were operative in the minds of medieval Arabic writers, but they were expressed in manifold guises, which appear more multivalent than examples from Latin literary contexts, where the number of ethnic terms is much lower and the connotations of ethnic groups somewhat more familiar.[6]

During the waning years of the Abbasid caliphate, one could pretend to be an

Arab, like the Syrian-Christian poet Abū Tammām: everybody seemed to know his claim was false, but no one seemed to mind. One could write in Arabic, like our Fāṭimid al-Musabbiḥī, but he only reserved the ethnonym "Arab" in his writing to connote pesky Bedouin groups outside of both central control and urban domicile.[7] The name of a famous Arabic poet in the Umayyad era, Ziyād al-Aʿjam, means, literally, "Ziyād the non-Arabic-speaker," but it might actually have intended a spatial meaning, "Ziyād the Khurasanian." The Fāṭimid rulers articulated an Arab genealogy, but conversely, this began at a time when they sought control over Berber tribes, and they never would claim that they were natural leaders of an Arab *shaʿb* (people/ethnos). In the third/ninth century, populations in Iraq began dropping the Arab tribal affiliations they had embraced since the Muslim conquests, whereas populations in Muslim Spain conversely began articulating more express self-identification as "Arabs" than ever before. The word ʿ*ajam* in some cases meant any "non-Arabs," whereas in others, it connoted the ethnonym "Persians" specifically, while in yet other cases, it was used synonymously with the spatial term "Khurasanians."[8] Other ethnonyms— Persian (*furs* and/or *fārisī*, in addition to ʿ*ajam*), Berber, Turk, Kurd, Arab, Copt, and so on—circulated fast and frequently in literary sources, but the ever-presence of these identities in texts is contrasted by the near complete absence of "ethnic" states in the political realm; however, there are nonetheless rare exceptions, such as the twelfth- to fourteenth-century Kurdish kingdom al-Mamlaka al-Ḥasina al-Akrādiyya (*Akrād* is the plural of *Kurd*).[9] And where faith intersected with communal terminology, all Muslims nominally fit within one *umma* (or one *milla*), but Fāṭimids and Ghaznavids mutually vituperated each other as apostates, while also exchanging gifts on occasion.

The Arabic terminology and its usage reveal a multivalence of identity across the East, but there is a perceptible importance of "faith community" embedded in the terms, as well as in some salient cases of imperial ideology. In this vein, the Fāṭimids did pitch their legitimacy in terms of messianic salvation, which, in the round, was rather clever. Instead of championing a limited community of "Berbers" or "Arabs," they could articulate a highly inclusive platform which theoretically enabled them to appeal to all Muslims and thus legitimized expansion across different regions of the Middle East. Various other empires were associated with a doctrinal identity—for example, the al-Murābiṭūn (Almorads) and the al-Muwaḥḥidūn (Almohads) used a message of radical Sunni reform to forge empires straddling Morocco, Mauritania, and Spain; the fourth/tenth-century Būyids in Iran and Iraq and the Ḥamdānids in Syria were known as Shi'a; the Seljuks and Ayyūbids promulgated Sunni revival and intra-

Sunni reconciliation as they formed multiregional empires. The appeal of "faith" as a marker of legitimate and unique identity accordingly had some traction. In contrast, Pohl demonstrates that while some European states developed in close connection with the Church of their realm, these nonetheless shared an overarching existence within the "Roman" Church, which obstructed chances to use faith as a means of competing with or usurping other states. Groups with divergent Christian doctrines, such as the Arian Goths, faced challenges in promoting their particular belief systems as a centerpiece of an independent identity. In contrast, Muslim rulers could advertise the uniqueness and urgent superiority of their particular sect to the broader Islamic umbrella. Europeans would not be able to truly enjoy this kind of freedom of political legitimation until the rise of Protestantism, and by that time, they had been "thinking ethnic" for a millennium.

Although faith points us toward an important ingredient in Middle Eastern states, far from everyone was invested enough in matters of faith to enable its use as a sure-fire means of political mobilization. The Fāṭimids never converted many Egyptians to Shi'ite Islam, yet Egypt's Sunni majority was content to have Shi'ite "Purified Presences" run their land, whereas Berber tribes that presumably embraced more of the Shi'ite rhetoric were in fact the first groups to break away from Fāṭimid control. And likewise, radical Sunni movements such as the al-Murābitūn and the al-Muwaḥḥidūn violently punished what they deemed aberrant practices amongst their Muslim subjects at first, but they mellowed quickly and did not involve themselves in forced conversions of, or vigorous proselytizing to, their Christian and Jewish subjects.

Another Fāṭimid-era example well illustrates the equivocal position of sectarianism in politics. The Fāṭimids captured Cairo in 358/969 and Damascus in 359/970, but they soon faced challenges from several directions: Damascene urban groups were resistive, remnants of Damascus's previous regime sought to retake the city, and a rival Shi'ite group, the Qarāmiṭa, aimed to take over both Damascus and Cairo for themselves. Damascus changed hands several times, Cairo was threatened, and in this instability, the scope for sectarian mobilization seems obvious, but Arabic historiographical sources are divided on the extent to which faith actively features as a legitimizer of political action and a basis of communal consolidation.

Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) laments the Fāṭimids' imposition of the Shi'ite call to prayer and their sectarian bias against Islam's first two caliphs, and he writes an exasperating prayer (one usually recited upon hearing the news of a death) when concluding his remarks on the Fāṭimids' changes to the public performance of Islamic ritual when they conquered Egypt.[10] Ibn Kathīr usually identifies the

Fāṭimids as *al-Fāṭimiyyūn*—a term that articulates their claims to Shi'a ancestry —and hence he embraces a doctrinally charged name for their regime.[11] Ibn Kathīr also refers to the Qarāmiṭa as *al-Rawāfiḍ* (the "Rejectors"), another doctrinally charged label used in Sunni polemic against Shi'a. And in the same vein, he relates a report in which a political leader contemporary with the events declared that if he had ten arrows, he would fire nine at the Fāṭimids and only one at the Byzantines, since the Byzantines were just Christians, whereas the Fāṭimids had "changed the religion of the *umma* (i.e. Muslim community)."[12] Concerning the strife in Damascus, Ibn Kathīr expressly states that the population of Damascus opposed the Fāṭimid garrison because they were both (1) oppressive, and (2) of a different sectarian "creed" (*iʿtiqād*). Ibn Kathīr was first and foremost a Sunni traditionalist, and hence scholars of his kind could evidently explain the conflict attendant upon the rise of the Fāṭimids in faith-based terms of Sunni resistance to Shi'a expansion.

Other historians are not nearly so clear-cut. Ibn al-Qalānisī (555/1160) also reports that the local Damascenes were opposed to the "creed" (*iʿtiqād*) of the Fāṭimids, but this was merely in addition to an aversion to their oppressive behavior (*qubḥ sīra*) and for being illiterates *(ummiyyūn)*.[13] Probing further, Ibn al-Qalānisī makes no other reference to the Fāṭimids' Shi'ism when explaining the unrest in Damascus, and he does not, in fact, refer to the Fāṭimids via their Shi'ite-inspired name "Fāṭimids," and instead Ibn Qalānisī prefers to label them *Maghāriba* ("Westerners"), a spatial term expressing the soldiers' origins in Tunisia and Algeria, or to the regime itself, which originated in Tunisia—note also that he does not refer to them ethnically as "Berbers." Ibn al-Qalānisī was Damascene himself, and in an instance where he describes violence waged between "the locals (*al-baladī*) and the Westerners," he reveals his perception of the history as a conflict between "us" and "them," but he constructs that narrative to reveal the violence in Damascus as the tragic fallout between the rapacious, foreign, "Westerner" garrison and the urban mob of Damascus's ne'er-do-wells; the bulk of Damascenes are portrayed as bystanders trying to broker peace between belligerent elements within their own society and the belligerent occupiers. Sectarianism is thereby accorded almost no causal relationship to political action and violence.[14]

Ibn al-Qalānisī's spatial, nonsectarian interpretation is salient in al-Maqrīzī's (d. 845/1442) two accounts of the events in *Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ* and *Kitāb al-Muqaffā*, where he avoids matters of faith altogether.[15] The Fāṭimid garrison is only referred to as "Westerners," and the violence is explained as stemming from a clash between Damascene ruffians, exacerbated by the Westerners' rapacious

and oppressive antics.[16] According to al-Maqrīzī, the Damascenes considered the Westerners as "ugly-faced, shoddy-dressed, foul-talking unreasonable boors" (*jufāt qibāḥ al-manẓar wa-l-zayy wa-l-kalām nāqiṣū al-ʿuqūl*), but he never connects the discord to Shi'ism,[17] and al-Maqrīzī places the blame for the disorder on the Westerner commanders' failure to control the situation.[18] His narrative features economic interests and political intrigue more than faith-based mobilization, even concerning conflict between the Fāṭimids and their rival Shi'ite movement, the Qarāmiṭa.[19] Al-Maqrīzī, though trained as a Sunni scholar like Ibn Kathīr, was reasonably well disposed to the Fāṭimids,[20] and he interpreted the violence and the creation of Fāṭimid rule in Syria without recourse to Sunni-Shi'a tension. Medieval historians thus do not all distill history through a sectarian funnel; while some, like Ibn Kathīr, could view political community with faith at the fore, others left the complexities of conflict bare, enabling us to discern a range of concerns and options. And notably, spatial aspects—the status of local stakeholders and control over resources on local levels—feature in the perceptions of community and social boundaries.

Turning to space directly, the ready mutability of imperial borders in the post-Abbasid Middle East ostensibly suggests the weakness of midsized territorial identities within the Muslim world. This contrasts with the European case, and it appears to explain why territorial-ethnic identities did not catch on in the East, unlike in Western Europe. Such a view, however, is ultimately not quite sustainable. We saw how regional identities featured in narratives of the Fāṭimid takeover of Damascus and how al-Musabbiḥī conceptualized the Ghaznavids via the region of Khurasan, which was a mainstay in the political map of early Islam, and many individuals, including powerful political groups, thought of themselves, at least on occasion, as *Khurāsānī*.[21] Likewise, pride for being Egyptian or Syrian was effusively expressed in the post-Abbasid world: Egyptians wrote books on the merits of Egypt, while Syrians retorted with the merits of *al-Shām*.[22] The sense of place, proprietary regional history, and even the articulation of prophetic links with territory were sufficiently developed to cement midsized regional identities and could have formed the basis of state legitimation, but this was not fully consummated in the medieval period. Like doctrinal identities, spatial belonging was an emotive marker of community, but it was nonetheless not productive as a nexus for states or imperial communities.

Conceptions of social identity and markers of political community accordingly crisscrossed the medieval Middle East in configurations that we still do not wholly grasp. The European ideas of looking for "land" or looking to "ethnos" do not solve our questions, but neither do essentialized Islamic ideas

such as "faith community" or "messianic leadership." The basis on which states formed; the unique power of Turkic war bands in Central Asia in contrast to the very settled regional identities in Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq; and the perceived triangulated relationship between the identity of rulers, the ruled, and faith confound strict application of the analytical categories of ethnos, empire, and space that emanate from the European examples, which, as Pohl's findings demonstrate, formed in a rather different world.

While Edward Said admonished the Academy for its habit of exoticizing "the East," full flight from the specter of difference also can lead us away from understanding the histories of disparate regions. I wish to close here by drawing attention to a fascinating point Pohl raises—which also forms his concluding remarks—about the long and venerable tradition of thinking about foreign peoples in ethnic terms among the elites of the classical world.

From an imperial Roman perspective, different, separable, and identifiable *gentes* surrounded the empire, which itself, since the Edict of Caracalla, was legally recognized as populated by one *gens*, the *populus Romanus*, the Roman people. When outsider groups inherited parcels of the collapsing empire, they had already been ethnically identified by Roman officials, and they partitioned the empire along geographical lines that melded contingent configurations of space with impressions of the origin and affiliation of the military groups that occupied them. The new rulers remained impressed by the traditions of Rome, and Pohl shows that the tradition of thinking about the world as an amalgam of *gentes* seems to have persisted as one of the important ingredients in subsequent vocabularies and paradigms to legitimize post-imperial state formation. Most of these fourth- and fifth-century *ethnē*/*gentes* disappeared, but in hindsight, it is not surprising that some persisted and that an "ethnic gaze" survived best in those parts of late antique Europe that had previously been organized for centuries of Roman rule.

Pushing Pohl's findings further, the Abbasid caliphate was established on starkly differing paradigms in this respect. The caliphate had been shaped and organized by militarized groups hailing from Arabia in the seventh century CE, a region that was not so rich in ethnic taxonomies. There were myriad ways of thinking about smaller-scale lineage groups within pre-Islamic Arabia, and there was awareness of "others," but crucially, there is scant evidence for an awareness of large-scale pan-Arabian senses of "self." Thinking along Western ethnic paradigms, Western scholars have long liked to think of Arabia as the home of "the Arabs"; after all, the Romans thought as much. But when we ask pre-Islamic Arabians if they thought of themselves as "Arabs," their records greet us with silence. Arabia was divided into zones of political and

geographical fragmentation which seem to have effectively prevented senses of a single, commonly held ethnic community from congealing. This also is reflected in the ways pre-Islamic Arabians conceptualized others. For some, the world was based around tribes—Romans were *Banū al-Aṣfar* (Sons of the Yellow Skin), while Persians were *Banū al-Aḥmar* (Sons of the Red Skin), but in other cases, Romans were called *Rūm*, while Persians were *Furs*—Arabic pronunciations for the groups' own names. And matters were yet more complicated. Arabic writers later wondered if the Persians were *Furs* because they hailed from the region of *Fārs* (a spatial identity, then) or because they were the descendants of an eponymous *Fāris* (an ethnic affiliation, in this case) or perhaps both; while some even opted to imagine that the Greeks were originally Arabs, that Alexander the Great's father was Yemeni, and that the Persians were descendants of Isaac.[23] Moreover, Persian control over Iraq did not make all of its inhabitants "Persian": from the Arabic perspective, the rulers were *Furs*, but the actual inhabitants of the land were *Nabaṭ*, a word of uncertain origin which seems to have been coined as a reference to their occupational identity as farmers, neither a race nor a space. Likewise, not everyone who lived in the former Roman Empire were *Rūm*, while *Rūmī* was also used to connote peoples outside of the empire;[24] Arabic terminology evidently paid little heed to Caracalla's Edict. Empire and community were thus not axiomatically linked in Arabic terminology, peoples were not all conceptualized as lineage groups, and not all Arabians had one form of community to describe themselves before Islam, either.

Into this mix, the caliphate arose. Compared to the Roman Empire, it was an unusual state, and it faced its task differently. The caliph called himself the "Commander of the Believers" (*amīr al-muʾminīn*), but caliphs did not seek to forge religious homogeneity in their realm. Unlike Roman efforts to legally ground the empire in Christianity, the caliphs let the majority of their subjects practice religions other than Islam, and hence their strategy reveals itself as a doctrinally legitimized office of leadership over a heterogenous state. In the Marwanid period of the Umayyad caliphate (64–132/684–750), efforts to articulate an ethnic unity of the military elite under the term "Arab" are discernible—this is the first time Arabic records evidence people readily identifying themselves as "Arabs,"[25] but the caliphs themselves nonetheless preferred to retain the doctrinally legitimizing title for their office; they make no efforts to rebrand themselves as "King of the Arabs." This makes sense, since there was no dominant ethnos within the caliphate—Arabian groups who called themselves "Arabs" enjoyed status, but the precise ways in which "Arab" groups

related to one another were uncertain in the Umayyad era, as an Arab family tree had yet to be articulated in a standardized form, and power, though in tribal hands, was not vested in every tribe. The micro-sized lineage groups of the Meccan Quraysh had the ultimate power: legitimate caliphs could only arise from Quraysh families, and access to real power in the Umayyad period involved proximity to the ruling circles dominated by Qurayshite political figures or, in some cases far from the center, sub-clans of military commanders.

The Umayyad and then Abbasid caliphs thus labeled themselves with a doctrinally rooted title, but their office was available only to members of particular lineage-based clans, and they controlled an empire populated with only a small minority of "Believers," who were not all organized as one cohesive ethnos and who did not possess traditions of thinking about themselves as one ethnic group or about the wider world in terms of "ethnic peoples." This is a very polyvalent set of affairs indeed, and this kind of empire is not going to fragment in the same way as a rigorously managed one where one state religion was officially enforced, where administrators had long traditions of labeling peoples and military units as ethnic groups, and where expressions of pan-Roman citizenship within the empire had been current for centuries. The open-ended notions of community and identity in al-Musabbiḥī's excerpt on the Fāṭimids and Ghaznavids, in short, reflect rather well the unsettled communal boundaries within the caliphate that preceded his generation. His worldview may seem unwieldly to those more accustomed to Roman models, but in contexts where power crossed lines of space, ethnicity, and faith and where communal terminologies themselves were defined by a wide array of concepts, the absence of coherent ethnic groups in the post-Abbasid world seems a natural corollary of their lived reality.

It may be innate for all people to think in terms of "us" and "them," but how that "us" is constituted, how far "us" is deemed worth extending, and the importance of insisting on "us" as a collective are not givens. The Abbasid world was managed by and then taken over by peoples who had no immersion (or even connection) with the ways in which Rome had conceptualized "us" and other peoples. As difficult as it may be for a Western-trained historian to accept, they did not seek to emulate Roman rule, nor did they seek great influence from the Hellenized Christian communities they contacted and controlled. Their world was their own, they developed it in their image, and the caliphate fragmented along the already fascinatingly fragmentary lines upon which it had been built.

1. Barthes, *Mythologies*, pp. 109–111.
2. Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 111.
3. Al-Musabbiḥī, *Akhbār Miṣr*, ed. Millward, pp. 42–43.
4. For the linking of Maʿadd and Ismāʿīl with Arab prophetic genealogy, see Webb, *Imagining*, pp. 205–213.
5. Webb, "Naming."
6. In the post-Roman West, ethnic terminology tended to cluster around just three terms: *gens*, *natio*, and *populus*. These terms were not used with exact consistency, but they seem to have had less contradiction and complexity as compared to the Arabic. The terminological streamlining may reflect what Pohl identifies as a background tendency toward "ethnic" thinking in post-Roman state formation.
7. See, for examples, al-Musabbiḥī, *Akhbār Miṣr*, ed. Millward, pp. 40, 181, 183.
8. For an outline of critical appraisal of the term *ʿajam*, see Savant and Webb, "Introduction," p. xvii. Though the word most commonly connotes "Persian," the range in meanings is rich. For example, in North African contexts, it is found to label populations as distinct from the Arab peoples of Kairouan (see, e.g., al-Mālikī *Riyāḍ al-nufūs*, ed. al-Bakkūsh, pp. vol. 1, pp. 33, 234).
9. James, "Construction."
10. Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, ed. Mulḥim et al., vol. 11, p. 284. He writes: "We are from God, and to Him we return."
11. Ibn Kathīr refers to the Fāṭimids once spatially, as "Westerners" (for more on this term, see below), whereas "Fāṭimid" is used throughout his text (Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, ed. Mulḥim et al., vol. 11, p. 287 [for "Westerners"]; pp. 295, 299–300 [for "Fāṭimid"]).
12. Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, ed. Mulḥim et al., vol. 11, p. 304.
13. Ibn al-Qalānisī, *Tārīkh Dimashq*, ed. Zakkār, p. 30; see also p. 31.
14. Ibn al-Qalānisī, *Tārīkh Dimashq*, ed. Zakkār, pp. 7–20.
15. The editor of al-Maqrīzī's *Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ* considers the possibility that al-Maqrīzī based his narrative on al-Qalānisī's account (al-Maqrīzī, *Ittiāʿẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ*, ed. Sayyid, vol. 1, p. 247, n. 1), though, as discussed here, al-Maqrīzī downplays the sectarian element even further than al-Qalānisī.
16. Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Muqaffā* ed. al-Yaʿlāwī, vol. 1, pp. 81–86; *Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ*, ed. Sayyid, vol. 1, pp. 242–246.
17. Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Muqaffā*, ed. al-Yaʿlāwī, vol. 3, p. 32.
18. Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Muqaffā*, ed. al-Yaʿlāwī, vol. 1, p. 86; vol. 3, p. 35; *Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ*, ed. Sayyid, vol. 1, pp. 242–243.
19. Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Muqaffā*, ed. al-Yaʿlāwī, vol. 3, p. 168.
20. See al-Maqrīzī, *Ittiʿāẓ al-Ḥunafāʾ*, ed. Sayyid, vol. 1, pp. 32, 41–42, 235.
21. Al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, ed. Hārūn, vol. 1, p. 49; vol. 3, p. 366. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr's *Kitāb Baghdād* also treats Khurasanians as an identity (p. 316), but elsewhere, when quoting from Khurasanians themselves about the inside of their community, we see that they sometimes imagined a multiplicity of identities within the *Ahl Khurāsān*: Turk (*atrāk*), "Persian," or, perhaps more accurately, "native Khurasanian" (*ʿajam*) and "Arab-Persian" (*abnāʾ*), betraying the presence of some ethnic lines of categorization (Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*, ed. al-Thāmirī, pp. 97–98).
22. Books with titles on the theme of "Virtues of Egypt" (*Faḍāʾil Miṣr*) appear relatively early: al-Kindī (d. 350/961), Ibn Zūlāq (d. 387/997), al-Quḍāʿī (d. 454/1062–63); see also the ninth-/fourteenth-century Ibn Ẓahīra. In Syria, the earliest extant "Virtues" book (*Faḍāʾil al-Shām wa Dimashq*) is by al-Rabʿī (d. 444/1052–53), another was written by al-Samʿānī (d. 562/1166–67), and there are several from the seventh/thirteenth and eighth/fourteenth centuries. The Syrian texts are collected and edited in *Faḍāʾil al-Shām*, ed. Abū ʿAbd Allāh ʿĀdil ibn Saʿd.
23. For outlines of views on the origins of Persians, Greeks, and Romans, see Ibn Nubāta, *Sarḥ al-ʿUyūn*, ed. Ibrāhīm, pp. 55–56, 61, 63–64.
24. For the wide and mutable ambit of "Rūm" in Arabic geographical writing, see Durak, "Who Are the

Romans?"

25. For the rise of self-identification as "Arabs" in Arabic writing, see Webb, *Imagining,* pp. 85–88.