



## ‘AJAM

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‘AJAM, the name given in medieval Arabic literature to the non-Arabs of the Islamic empire, but applied especially to the Persians. In origin, the verb *‘ajama* simply means “to speak indistinctly, to mumble;” hence ‘Ajam or ‘Ojm are “the indistinct speakers,” sc. the non-Arabs. The Arabic lexica state at the outset that *‘ajama* is the antonym of *‘araba* “to speak clearly,” so that *‘ojma* becomes the opposite of *foṣṣa*, “chaste, correct, Arabic language” (cf. *Lesān al-‘arab*, Būlāq, 1300-07, XV, pp. 278ff.; and *Tāj al-‘arūs*, Cairo, 1889-90, VIII, pp. 389ff.). The term could accordingly be applied to any of the speakers of non-Arabic languages with whom the conquering Arabs came into contact, just as the ancient Greeks had applied the term *barbaroi* “indistinct, i.e. non-speakers of Greek,” to their less civilized neighbors. In Muslim Spain, the term ‘Ajam was applied to speakers of the indigenous Hispanic languages of the Iberian peninsula; and, in the later Middle Ages, the linguistic term *aljamía* denoted the Hispanic languages written in Arabic script and used by Muslims and crypto-Muslims then living under Christian rule.

But, just as the Greeks applied the term *barbaroi* especially to their great enemies the Persians, so also the Arabs in the early Islamic period applied “‘Ajam” particularly to the Persians. This distinction of ‘Arab and ‘Ajam is already discernible in pre- and early Islamic poetry. Cf. the *‘ajam temtemī* “stuttering barbarians” of ‘Antara (cited by Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien* I, p. 103; tr., I, p. 99) and the *tanāwom al-‘ojm*, “lulling to sleep of the Persian kings” in a poem of the Mesopotamian poet ‘Abd-al-Masīḥ b. ‘Asala Morrī (*al-Mofazzalīyāt*, ed. C. J. Lyall, Oxford, 1918-24, I, Arabic text, p. 556; II,



Eng. tr., p. 220).

In general, ‘*Ajam* was a pejorative term, used by Arabs conscious of their political and social superiority in early Islam. But by the 3rd/9th century, the non-Arabs, and above all the Persians, were asserting their social and cultural equality (*taswīa*) with the Arabs, if not their superiority (*tafzīl*) over them (a process seen in the literary movement of the Šo‘ūbīya). In any case, there was always in some minds a current of admiration for the ‘*Ajam* as heirs of an ancient, cultured tradition of life. Even the great proponent of the Arab cause, Jāḥeẓ, wrote a *Ketāb al-taswīa bayn al-‘Arab wa’l-‘Ajam* (C. Pellat, “Essai d’inventaire de l’oeuvre ġāḥiẓienne,” *Arabica* 3, 1956, p. 152, no. 22). After these controversies had died down, and the Persians had achieved a position of power in the Islamic world comparable to their numbers and capabilities, “‘*Ajam*” became a simple ethnic and geographical designation; hence in geographical literature of the Saljuq period and after we find Mesopotamia referred to as ‘*Erāq ‘Arabī*, in contrast to northwest Persia or *Jebāl*, the ancient Media, called ‘*Erāq ‘Ajamī*.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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See also the general discussion of the initial rivalry and then the symbiosis between the Arabs and non-Arabs in I. Goldziher, “Arab und ‘*Agam*,” *Muhammedanische Studien*, Halle, 1889-90, I, pp. 101ff.; tr. London, 1967-71, I, pp. 98ff.