



The Excellence of the Arabs (Library of Arabic Literature)

Ibn Qutaybah

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Written by one of the most prolific scholars of the early Abbasid era, *The Excellence of the Arabs* is a spirited defense of Arab identity—its merits, values, and origins—at a time of political unrest and fragmentation.

In the cosmopolitan milieu of Baghdad, the social prestige attached to claims of Arab tribal affiliation had begun to decline. Anxious to uphold the elite status of Arabs and their superior heritage in the face of change and uncertainty, Ibn Qutaybah (213-76 H/828-89 AD) expresses contempt for the Shu'ubiyyah movement that belittled Arabness and vaunted the glories of Persian heritage and culture.

The Excellence of the Arabs has two parts. The first, *Arab Preeminence*, accuses partisans of the Shu'ubiyyah movement of blasphemous envy, and takes the form of an extended argument for Arab privilege. The second, *The Excellence of Arab Learning*, describes fields of knowledge in which Ibn Qutaybah believed pre-Islamic Arabians excelled, such as astronomy, divination, horse husbandry, and poetry. And by incorporating extensive excerpts from the poetic heritage—“the archive of the Arabs”—Ibn Qutaybah aims to demonstrate that poetry is itself sufficient corroboration of Arab superiority.

Eloquent and forceful, *The Excellence of the Arabs* addresses one of the central questions at a time of great social flux: what did it mean to be Arab at the dawn of classical Muslim civilization?



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