

Opinion

Iranian or Arab Scholars?

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It seems a truism that in modern day academia, all historical scholars who wrote in Greek are known as Greeks and all those who wrote in Arabic are known as Arabs. A curious fact is that all those scholars in all of medieval European Christendom who wrote in Latin are always referred to by their country of origin.

Does this curious historical fact betray some form of cultural bias?

The ancient Mediterranean Greek speaking world were a disparate group of cultures spreading from southern Italy through North Africa to Anatolia and western Mesopotamia. Even the Athenians considered themselves apart from Spartans and Macedonians and they were always in conflict.

Modern European scholars often disregard the debt that these Greek speaking thinkers owed to the concepts which they freely borrowed from their Egyptian, Babylonian, and Persian neighbors without mention of their reference sources and consider their ideas as of primarily 'Greek' origin. This 'Hellenistic' bias of Europeans has a complicated root which is outwith the scope of this essay.

In the middle Ages and the Renaissance in Europe, Latin was the *lingua franca* of science and philosophy, and all the thinkers in all of Christendom wrote their treatise in Latin. From John Scotius (Scot meaning Irishman) to Thomas Aquinas (from Aquino near Naples), Adelard of Bath, William of Occam (from Ockham in Surrey or Yorkshire), the Danish Tycho de Braeh, the Italian Galileo, the Englishman William Harvey etc..., without exception are known by their place of origin despite writing in Latin. None have ever been referred to as Latin or Christian scientists irrespective of their script or religion.

Even the Greeks were known by their polis or the small island from where they hailed. Anaximander and Thales of Miletus, Pythagoras of Samos, Archimedes of Syracuse, the Athenian Socrates and Plato etc....

The curiosity regarding 'Arab' or 'Islamic' scholars needs a little elucidation.

In the middle Ages when the Europeans came into contact with the Islamic civilization, they translated many works of science and philosophy from Arabic into Latin, mainly in Toledo and Sicily. The Islamic world extended from Spain through North Africa to the Middle East consisting of varied

ethnic populations. The *lingua franca* of the Islamic world was Arabic as was Greek in the Aegean and Latin in medieval Europe. Thus, the authors whose scientific and philosophical books were translated from Arabic into Latin became erroneously known as Arabs in later European history from the Renaissance to the present day.

The true Arabs of the peninsula were a small ethnic group of tribes who spread with Islam and settled in parts of the Islamic territories including parts of North Africa, Andalusia and the Middle East. The Egyptians, Syrians, Lebanese and Iranians do not consider themselves as Arabs though some may share Arabic as their language and Islam as their religion. The Iranians speak Farsi (Persian), though they wrote their scientific treatises in Arabic during the *golden age of Islamic science* (9th – 12th centuries C.E.).

Professor Edward G. Brown gave a series of lectures at Cambridge University in 1921 which was later published as a book entitled 'Arabian Medicine'. In that book he writes "I have used the term 'Arab civilization' in preference to 'Islamic civilization' for reasons that I shall give below. As Latin was the language of science and culture in Europe during the Middle Ages, so was Arabic the language of science and culture in the Islamic world and thus it must be noted that the terms 'Arab science' or 'Arab medicine' are terms applied only to what was written in Arabic and has no other implications. Most of these scientific treatises were written by Iranians, Syrians, and Jews and to a lesser extent by Greeks and only an insignificant number of them were actually written by Arabs."¹

In recent years various Arab and Western authors have erroneously mentioned many Iranian scientists, who wrote in Arabic during those years, as Arabs, I shall briefly mention a few Iranian astronomers,² mathematicians,³ and physicians⁴ of world renown who are often erroneously mentioned as 'Arab' in the world literature, to illustrate my grievance.

Khwarazmi (780 – 850 C.E.) from whose name the word algorithm remains, was a mathematician who introduced the Hindu numeral system to Europe, which thus became known as 'Arabic numerals' and the word algebra derives from one of the basic operations with equations that he described. Abu Rayhan Biruni (973 – 1048 C.E.) was an Iranian polymath and a friend of Abu Ali Sina famed as Avicenna in Europe (865 – 925 C.E.) who wrote on subjects including astronomy, mathematics, physics, anthropology, history, and geography. In his astronomy he mentions that the Earth rotates around its axis and discusses the heliocentric concept as a philosophical possibility but asserts that as the move-

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ment of the Earth, the Sun and the planets concern relative motion, the calculations of planetary movements give the same results irrespective of the heliocentric or the geocentric assumption. The third astronomer-mathematician that I wish to mention is Omar Khayam (1048 – 1122 C.E.) who made a significant contribution to algebra but is better known in the West as a poet through Fitzgerald's translations of his quatrains. Of the Iranian physicians that are well known in the west and who dominated the European medical curricula for several centuries up to the 19th century, but are again referred to as 'Arab' scientists by both European and modern day Arab authors, I wish to mention Ali Ibn Rabban Tabari (838 – 870 C.E.), Zakariya Razi (865 – 925 C.E.), Ali Ibn Abbas Majoosi Ahwazi (died 982 or 994 C.E.) known in the West as Haly Abbass. Of these scholars, Khawrazmi and Biruni were both born in Khawrazm, part of Greater Khorasan in northeastern part of the Iranian empire (present day Uzbekistan) and Khayam was born in Nishapur, (in Khorasan) and is buried there. Of the physicians, Tabari was from a Jewish Iranian family in Tabaristan (present day Mazandaran Province of northern Iran); Razi was born and died in Rayy, an ancient town south of present day Tehran; Ahwazi

was born in Ahwaz, southwestern Iran and Avicenna was from Afshana, near Bukhara, again in Greater Khorasan. Many of these scholars visited Baghdad, the center of the Eastern Caliphate, and taught at one of the institutions there, but most returned to their homeland at a later date.⁵

One may wonder why this bias has crept into the world of academia in the past and has been promulgated in recent years. Iranians are extremely sensitive and take umbrage at being referred to as Arabs and it would be helpful if Western and Arab scientists could appreciate this seemingly simple fact and give credit where it is due.

References

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5. The biographies of the individual scholars are available on Wikipedia. Available from: URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/> (Accessed 1 December 2010)