

SFB VISCOM and FSP Gemeinschaftskonzepte, Identitäten und politische Integration (Universität Wien)

present

PETER WEBB (SOAS London)

# BECOMING YEMENI:

## The Origins and Meanings of Yemeni Identity in Early Islam

Friday 30 October 2015 • 16:30 -18:00 • Seminar Rooms • Wohllebengasse 12-14 • A-1040 Wien

### ABSTRACT

South Arabians were major stakeholders in the venture of Islam. The mobilisation of South Arabian manpower enabled Islam's rapid territorial expansion, and as the Caliphate organised into an empire, the descendants of South Arabian conquerors constituted a powerful faction. But as South Arabians helped build Islam, they were also building a new sense of community and identity for themselves. South Arabians became 'Yemenis', the idea of 'Yemen' became an asset for political organisation, rich traditions of 'Yemeni' genealogy, history, mythology and symbols entered Arabic literature, and, for the first time, Yemenis began to call themselves 'Arabs'. The cumulative effects of conversion, conquest, migration and elite status of South Arabian communities in Islam's first century catalysed a novel Yemeni ethnogenesis, and modern Yemeni identity and the status of Yemenis as integral members of the Arab World can be traced to this Muslim-era construction of the Yemeni-Arab community.

Marshalling pre-Islamic South Arabian inscriptions, Arabic poetry, hadith and a range of mythic narratives surrounding Yemeni and Muslim origins, this talk critically examines the earliest layers of Yemeni imagined community and explores how South Arabians began to think of themselves as Yemenis, how other groups joined the Yemeni cluster, and how they constructed Yemen's place in the Arab family tree and the history of Islam. The con-

struction of Yemeni identity will be shown as a vibrant and contested process intimately connected with the political fissures of the early Caliphate and competition amongst Muslim elites for power and priority. When descendants of the pre-Islamic Sabaeen and Himyaritic kingdoms embraced Islam, they carved a unique pathway of stories that embedded them and their imagined past into the classic tales of Islam's origins.

### BIOGRAPHY

Peter Webb (PhD SOAS, University of London, 2014) is an Arabist whose research interests focus on early Islamic history and the cultures, literatures and arts of the classical Muslim world. His first monograph, *Imagining the Arabs* (Edinburgh UP, in press), explores the story of the Arab people in early Islam, examining the emergence of Arab identity, the rise and fall of Arab communities, and the ways in which Muslims creatively reconstructed the pre-Islamic past to articulate Arab origins. He has also published a number of scholarly articles and book chapters on Arabic literature and Muslim narratives of pre-Islamic history, with the Saudi Archaeologist, Saad al-Rashid, he co-authored *Medieval Roads to Mecca*, a history of the early Hajj, and he is preparing critical editions and translations of classical Arabic texts for both the Library of Arabic Literature (NYU Press) and the Bibliotheca Maqriziana (Brill).

Webb is currently a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow (2015-18) at SOAS, where his project furthers the investigation into community and myth in early Islam. The first part investigates the construction and uses of Yemeni and Ma'addite identities, and the second employs narratological, mythopoeic and aesthetic theories to uncover how Muslims formed notions of their origins and identities by converting memories of pre-Islam (al-Jāhiliyya) into Islamic origin myths.