

F. E. PETERS

Mecca

*A Literary History of the Muslim
Holy Land*



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A LITERARY HISTORY OF THE MUSLIM HOLY LAND

F. E. Peters

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

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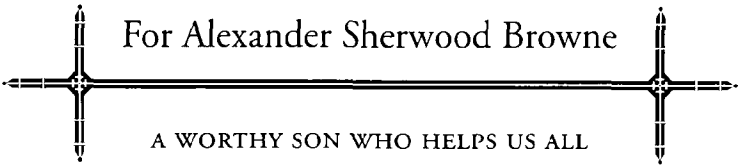
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For Alexander Sherwood Browne

A WORTHY SON WHO HELPS US ALL

GET OVER THE LOSS OF A

REMARKABLE DAD

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List of Illustrations

FOR INFORMATION on photographers and archival collections, see “Mecca and Medina in Early Photo Documents,” which follows this list.

Following p. 105

1. Al-Ula, Last Stop for Europeans on the Hijaz Railway. This view comes from an extremely rare compilation of German military photographs published during World War I. The editors emphasize in their introduction that all pictures made eastward from this border station had been provided to them by their Muslim comrades in arms. Here, an Ottoman officer commands local tribal gendarmes. They stand in the foreground between two somewhat incongruously exotic features: a metal windmill, similar to those used for pumping water in the American West; and a newly built railway station, which had been designed in Germany with steep roofs and high chimneys. [NA&S: 60]

2. The Little Port of al-Wajh from the east in 1914. Photographed with a special panoramic camera, this picture (and numbers 3 and 4 as well) was exposed during 1914, possibly by a cameraman attached to the Imperial German Navy before passage through the Suez Canal was denied to German warships in September of that year. [NA&S: 84]

3. Yanbu^c from the southwest in 1914. [NA&S: 83]

4. Jidda, the West Gate in 1914. Here the German panoramic camera has preserved a particularly valuable view of the intricate facade of the large, no longer extant building in the center of the picture: the *Hawsh al-Sharif*, which contained apartments for many separate households of the Sharifal family. Each apartment was equipped with elaborately carved bay windows called *roshan*. [NA&S: 82]

5. The Dutch Consulate in Jidda. From this stately building, which was rented to the Netherlands Colonial Service by the Ali Reza family, has come a wealth of still untapped documentation for the Hajj and the holy cities. Unique among Dutch diplomatic posts, this consulate monitored and facilitated the pilgrimages of East Indians, who usually constituted the single largest group of pilgrims on each year's Hajj. Most of Jidda's Dutch consuls were trained personally by C. Snouck Hurgronje in Leiden, where they received six years of Arabic and Islamic studies in advance of their six-year assignments on the Red Sea. During those assignments, Snouck's students were expected to send back to him photographic reports to help train their successors. It should be noted that the

timbers for the ornate porticoes and window screens (*roshan*) had to be imported, usually from East Indian hardwood forests. [L/OI:D.1]

6. Some Notables of Jidda. From left to right: D. Tonicic, Austrian Consul; P. Lepissier, Acting French Consul; N. Scheltema, Dutch Consul; J. H. Monahan, English Consul; A. Salim, Lieutenant Sergeant and Dragoman; D. Dimitrief, Russian Consul; Miller, Italian Consul (an Englishman); Joannou, Health Inspector (a Greek). The setting for this extraordinary international assemblage is the Netherlands Consulate, whence Scheltema sent many photographic reports back to Snouck in Leiden. The British Consul Monahan later produced an English-language translation and one-volume abridgement of Snouck's *Mekka*. [L/OI:D.9]

7. The Qaimmaqam of Jidda [ca. 1884]. Mounted upon heavy cardboard (27 × 22 cm), this albumen print (13 × 10 cm) is one of a series of pictures with labels printed in German, presumably to assist Snouck in his Leiden University lectures from 1907 until his death in the mid-1930s. The glass-plate negative from which this print came was exposed by Snouck in 1884 and published by him in 1889 in the *Bilderatlas* portfolio accompanying his two-volume *Mekka*. Quite probably this picture records the visage and formal uniform of the official in front of whom Snouck made his profession of faith prior to visiting Mecca. [NINO: 1.45]

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8. Mecca. [Debbas 83.6.1: H. Mirza of Delhi (probably pre-1904)]

9. Mecca (The Mosque) [1880]. This photograph by M. Sadiq Bey—made with the formal permission of Sharif Awn al-Rafiq—is quite certainly the first of the Haram at Mecca. The Egyptian geographer and military officer distributed a portfolio of his prints in 1881 at the Third International Congress of Geographers convened in Venice, where his work was awarded a medal. [SB: 11]

10. A view of the Ka'ba and the houses of Mecca; Atop the Mount is the Mosque of Abu Qubays. The caption for this picture translates the Arabic-language annotation found on the reverse of the original albumen print (a photographic technique that in general antedates the twentieth century). This print (with thirty others) was found in an envelope labeled "from van der Meulen," the name of a student of Snouck who served as consul in Jidda for the first time between 1926 and 1932. Several of these prints record events that can be dated considerably earlier than van der Meulen's service, however. Undoubtedly, Consul van der Meulen assembled a cluster of historic photographs of varying dates and sent them back to his mentor in Leiden. [L/OI:A.10]

11. Mount Abu Qubays [ca. 1888]. Signed "Photography of al-Sayyid Abd al-Ghaffar, physician of Mecca." [L/OI:F.6]

12. The Quarter of Ali; left: The Minaret of the Prophet's Birthplace [ca. 1888]. Signed "Photography of al-Sayyid Abd al-Ghaffar, physician of Mecca." This photograph and the preceding one are part of a series of masterly views of Mecca taken by the physician whose work was used—without mentioning his name—by Snouck for his *Bilder aus Mekka* (1889) but whose identity was first re-established in 1981 by F.H.S. Allen and C. Gavin in *Mecca: The Earliest Photographs*. [L/OI:F.8]

13. The Cemetery of Ma'ala. [Debbas 83.6.4: H. Mirza of Delhi (pre-1904?)]

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14. Medina. [Debbas 53.6.9: H. Mirza of Delhi (pre-1904)]

15. Medina [1880]. By M. Sadiq Bey. [SB: 12]

16. Anbari Gate, Medina. [Debbas 83.6.6: H. Mirza of Delhi (pre-1904)]

17. Interior Courtyard of the Mosque at Medina as seen from the North. [Rif'at: 177]

18. Medina: al-Baqi Cemetery. [Debbas 83.6.11: H. Mirza of Delhi (pre-1904)]

19. Nephew of the Reigning Sharif [Awn al-Rafiq; 1884]. Photographed by H. Snouck Hurgronje (for publication in his *Bilderatlas*), this child wears the boots, astrakhan cap, and military kaftan characteristic today of the Circassian household guards for the Hashimites. At the beginning of the last century almost identical uniforms were worn by the "Georgian Janissaries," who, Burckhardt observed, had been protecting the Sharifs since the seventeenth century. In this case the child has been identified as the Sharif Abdullah (later Amir and still later King of the Transjordan) by his surviving sister; although she herself had never known him so young, she instantly recognized his stance and expression. [NINO: 1.71]

Mecca and Medina in Early Photo Documents

C. E. S. GAVIN

Authentic visual records for al-Haramayn rarely antedate with much significant detail the first photographs made there during the 1880s. From the mid-sixteenth century, Ottoman diagrams provide schematic layouts for the great mosques at Mecca and Medina with meticulous annotations in Arabic or Turkish to identify specific kiosks, gateways, pulpits, and other features within each sanctuary. That the tradition of such annotated diagrams antedated the reign of Suleyman can be shown by a detailed plan of the Haram in Mecca found on an early fifteenth-century Hajj certificate preserved in the British Library (Add. MS 27566).

Perhaps the first serious effort by a European to depict al-Haramayn accurately can be dated to 1712, when the Viennese architect Fischer von Erlach attempted to interpret annotated diagrams for Mecca and Medina that had been brought to him from Istanbul by the Hannoverian and British ambassador to the Sublime Porte. From later in the same century should be noted: an Englishman's memories of his Hajj as a captive sailor in 1685, as applied in 1731 to the annotation of a Dutch interpretation of an Ottoman plan for the Haram in Mecca; Bauernfeind's 1762 map of the two streets inland from the Jidda quay, where Carsten Niebuhr's expedition was permitted to pace; and d'Ohsson's reproduction in 1789 of panoramas over Mecca and Medina that had been painted on the Hajj of 1778.

In the nineteenth century, Ali Bey al-Abbasi's extensive observations of Meccan architecture were made during his pilgrimage of 1806, while John Lewis Burckhardt's plans of the pilgrim encampments at Arafat date from 1814. Richard Francis Burton published his drawings of Wahhabis and pilgrimage scenes in 1855, describing how he had torn his originals into little pieces en route, hid the fragments inside dark-colored medicine bottles, and eventually pieced his pictures back together in Cairo. In fact, Burton's plans are based upon Ali Bey's, while his panorama of Medina derives from d'Ohsson.

Early photographs have only recently regained attention as sources of documentation for Mecca and Medina. In 1981, F.H.S. Allen and C. Gavin used *Mecca: The Earliest Photographs* to announce the reidentification of the work of Abd al-Ghaffar, whose signature had been erased from photographs published in 1889 by Professor C. Snouck Hurgronje.

Snouck's work has been reissued by Angelo Pesce: *Makkah a Hundred Years Ago or C. Snouck Hurgronje's Remarkable Albums* (London: Immel, 1986). A broader view of surviving photographic records as been presented by Badre El-Hage in *Saudi Arabia: Images from the Past* [in Arabic] (London: Riad el-Rayes, 1989).

Here we have drawn upon several previously unavailable private collections, and especially—with the gracious permission of Dr. E. van Donzel, President of Het Oosters Instituut in Leiden—those extraordinary pictorial records first assembled by, and then later for, Snouck Hurgronje. Elizabeth Carella has rephotographed the originals (often challengingly deteriorated) and prepared for publication the ones chosen by Professor F. E. Peters. Much of the research necessary for tracing, locating, and identifying these rare documents was made possible by the foresight and generosity of the Custodian of the Holy Mosques, who in September 1982 established the King Fahd Archive “to find and preserve endangered or previously inaccessible photographic collections important for the history of the Middle East.” In the companion volume to the present work (*The Hajj*, pp. xiv–xv), we have provided more details about the fascinating personalities of the early photographers of al-Haramayn.

COLLECTIONS OF EARLY PHOTO DOCUMENTS

Debbas: The extremely important photographic collections of Fouad C. Debbas of Beirut and Paris were begun as an individual's effort to preserve at least one record of Lebanon's cultural heritage amid the wholesale devastation of his homeland from the mid-1970s. We are grateful for Mr. Debbas's graciousness in permitting us to present here for the first time reproductions made from his rare pre-1904 Indian-Muslim albumen prints by H. Mirza & Sons of Delhi, which are mounted on cardboard and adorned with calligraphed borders.

KFA (King Fahd Archive): To avert further loss and to counteract perils threatening fragile emulsions that have almost miraculously survived neglect, chemical dangers, and warfare, help from expert preservation teams was formally requested in October 1981 by the officials and scholars participating in the (second) UNESCO-sponsored International F.O.C.U.S. Conference. Responding graciously to the F.O.C.U.S. Conference plea for technical guidance, surveys, and rescue missions, King Fahd ibn Abdul Aziz al-Saud initiated KFA efforts in 1982. The work of cataloguing, safely storing, and selectively rephotographing important visual documents was primarily conducted between 1982 and 1985 at more than

thirty widely scattered repositories. KFA efforts produced extraordinary results, including the totally unexpected rediscovery of long-forgotten early sound recordings from the Middle East. Systematic publication of KFA discoveries (for which copyrights are retained in each case by the repository that permitted the KFA preservation teams to conduct research) is currently being planned.

L/OI (Leiden, Oriental Institute): Het Oosters Instituut was founded after the death of Professor C. Snouck Hurgronje to honor Snouck's memory and to serve as a repository for some of the collections assembled by Leiden's—and arguably Europe's—most eminent Islamicist. These precious collections now reside in modern university buildings along the Wittesingel.

NA&S: Amid wartime difficulties, in an effort to signal the Central Powers' solidarity, Imperial Germany produced several intriguing publications. The abbreviation NA&S designates one of these very rare and valuable collections: B. Moritz (ed.), *Bilder aus Palastina, Nord-Arabien, und dem Sinai* (100 pictures from photographs with explanatory text) (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer [Ernest Vohsen], 1914). No German photographers are named by Moritz, who carefully insists that photographs near al-Haramayn were obtained from Turkish military sources from plates exposed by Muslim photographers.

NINO: Two large clusters of important photographs were found at L/OI's younger sister organization NINO, the Netherlands Institute for the Near East (Nabije Oosten). KFA analyses have increasingly confirmed, by photo techniques, handwriting, and numerous internal dating criteria, that NINO photographs really belong among the materials assembled by Snouck primarily in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, NINO documents will eventually be redesignated (with L/OI rubrics) as KFA editing nears completion.

Rif'at: By this designation we refer to the photographs included in the two-volume work by Liwa (Lieutenant General) Ibrahim Rif'at (also "Rifaat") Pasha: *Mira'at al-Haramain wa al-Rahalat al-Hijaziyat waa-Hajj wa Masha iruhu ad-diniyay* (Cairo: National Library Press, 1925). Most of these photographs seem to have been made by the general himself on three pilgrimages between 1903 and 1913; others were given to him by fellow pilgrims whom he befriended along the way to the holy cities. A few illustrations seem to have been photographed from Burton's drawings and plans.

SB (Sadic Bey): This designation has been used for a rare series of mounted albumen photographs (from glass plates exposed in 1880) by Colonel Mohammed Sadiq Bey. They were distributed in portfolio format by the Khedival Geographic Society in 1881. Most frequently, the photographer spelled his name "Sadic" when signing his prints in Western script.

Preface

MY WORK has by now become so cumulative, it is almost impossible to thank everyone who has made a contribution somewhere along the lengthy way that has led here. But I would surely be remiss if I did not acknowledge and once again thank Jack Hayes, who has stood behind so many of my academic projects, as well the Mobil Oil Corporation and Mobil Saudia, who got the professor to the Kingdom and back without once asking, "What's in this for us?" It was all appreciated.

More immediately, I must express my gratitude to the marvelous people who are the Princeton University Press: to Margaret Case, who first blessed this enterprise; to Ann Wald, who cheerfully and patiently guided it to completion; to the indefatigable Gretchen Oberfranc, who not only held my feet to the flames on the altar of the *Chicago Manual of Style* but made me write better and more clearly than I knew how; and to the others there who pushed and prodded and shaped. Thanks too to my cheerful friends late at the Harvard Semitic Museum, Carney Gavin, Elizabeth Carello, and Lisa Thyne, who gave pleasure to my work and a more elegant look to this book.

Much nearer to home, but no less helpful, were my own graduate students and research assistants, notably Elisabeth Kohldorfer Cain, Imad Khachchan, and Livia Alexander. May they one day have the like to help them. Yes, and the usual suspects: the Eamon and Carol Brennan Foundation for its life-sustaining grants; the paradigmatic E. P. Fitzsimmons; my helpful, productive, and entertaining colleagues, Ed Oakes and Ken Zysk; and Mary Peters, *prima donna assoluta*.

And a final and personal note. This book began in my head as a joint project with my former teacher, R. Bayly Winder, who knew far more about Arabia than I will ever hope to. He was already ill, as we both knew, when I broached the idea to him, but he reacted with his customary interest and eagerness. I think the idea gave pleasure to both of us as we plotted the distribution of labor, though we may have both realized that he would not survive to see it even fairly begun. Unhappily he did not, and both I and the reader have missed the opportunity of sharing in his almost jaunty mastery of Arabian history. But the pleasure of the thought remains, and it almost assuages the loss of the event. Thanks, Bayly, for all your help.

Stockport, New York

April 15, 1994

Acknowledgments

TRANSLATIONS done by others are noted either in the text itself or in the final section entitled "Works Cited," where all particulars regarding authors, publishers, and dates and places of publication are provided. Nevertheless, the author wishes to make special acknowledgment to the following for their kind cooperation in the use of previously published and copyrighted material: E. J. Brill, Cambridge University Press, Jonathan Cape, Constable and Company, The Hakluyt Society, the Controller of Her Britannic Majesty's Stationery Office, Oleander Press, Oxford University Press, The Persian Heritage Foundation, Princeton University Press, and The State University Press of New York.

Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK about a place, about Mecca in the first instance, and then about the entire Holy Land that surrounds that most sacred of Islamic cities. As might be expected, the Muslims are generous with definitions of what constitutes their Holy Land. Just as rabbis and Zionists, to say nothing of the Bible itself, have their own definitions of *Eretz Israel*, so Muslim lawyers and statesmen have shrunk and expanded boundaries and limits as seems appropriate or useful for different political, social, legal, or pietistic purposes, excluding this or including that in a definition of a physical terrain whose real boundaries are spiritual. This book will gratefully follow in their ambiguous steps. Here the Holy Land shall be, without embarrassment, Mecca and Medina and their spiritual environs. This area can be defined, in the former case for example, by the places where would-be pilgrims from various directions must don the special ritual garb, or, for both cities, by the limits beyond which only the Muslim may approach those places.

The exclusionary boundaries for non-Muslims would seem, in fact, useful guides in marking off the Muslim's Holy Land. But these are illusory. For a long time non-Muslims coming into Arabia from the north were not permitted to proceed beyond the vicinity of Mada'in Salih, or Tabuk, or even Mudawwara, thus plainly suggesting that western Arabia, or perhaps the entire peninsula, was a "holy land." But at least from the seventeenth century, there was a permanent and acknowledged European, non-Muslim presence in the port city of Jidda, a mere forty-five miles west of Mecca. To cite only two contrary examples, the British occupied Aden in the nineteenth century, and British and German officers led Muslim troops all across western Arabia—Mecca and Medina alone excluded—in the second decade of the twentieth, without provoking a holy war or even notable religious objections.

In these pages the Holy Land will also mean the Hijaz, the Arabs' own, primarily geographical designation of the region in which Mecca and Medina are situated. Like most other regions in Arabia, the Hijaz is not easily or precisely defined, as we shall see. It is clearly bounded on the west by the Red Sea, but it ends in the north wherever the ancient Midian begins and in the south where the Yemen commences or, to cut it more finely, where the region called Asir begins. East of the Hijaz is steppe, the Najd, an area chiefly fertile in boundary disputes. There will be, then, no scrupling here with such definitions. They may be useful for purposes of piety or as *casus belli* but not, surely, for writing about Mecca and its hinterland.

I call what I have done a literary history, and it could hardly be other. Between the presence of both chronic flooding and constant rebuilding, and the absence of scientific archeology in and around Islam's most sacred shrines, there is little or no material evidence of the earlier history of Islam's holy cities. The historian is reduced, then, principally to literary texts. From Muhammad to Sharif Husayn, a great many Muslims embarked upon the extraordinary voyage called the Hajj. Most of them were silent on the experiences, or shared them only with family and friends. But a great many *hajjis*, and some who were simply visiting, recorded their impressions of both the event and the place for the instruction or edification of other Muslims, some of them in quite extraordinary detail, like the eleventh-century traveler Ibn Jubayr and the early twentieth-century scholar-bureaucrat Batanuni. The former incorporated his immediate Hajj experience into a more broadly framed travel book, a *rihla*, while Batanuni's more qualified title, *A Hijaz Journey (al-rihla al-hijaziyya)* betrays his narrower focus on the Hajj itself.¹

If travel literature is an important resource for this enterprise, it is not the only locus for reflections on Mecca and the Hijaz. Early geographers like Muqaddasi and Ibn Rusteh paid particular attention to the holy cities in their specialized works, as did Islam's universal historians from Tabari to Ibn Khaldun, the first to explain, the latter more often to illustrate. And there are of course the professed chroniclers of Mecca and Medina, not so many as one might expect perhaps, but precious witnesses nonetheless. In their histories Azraqi, Faqihī, Fasi, and Qutb al-Din on Mecca and Samhudi on Medina span the eras from the Abbasids to the Ottomans.²

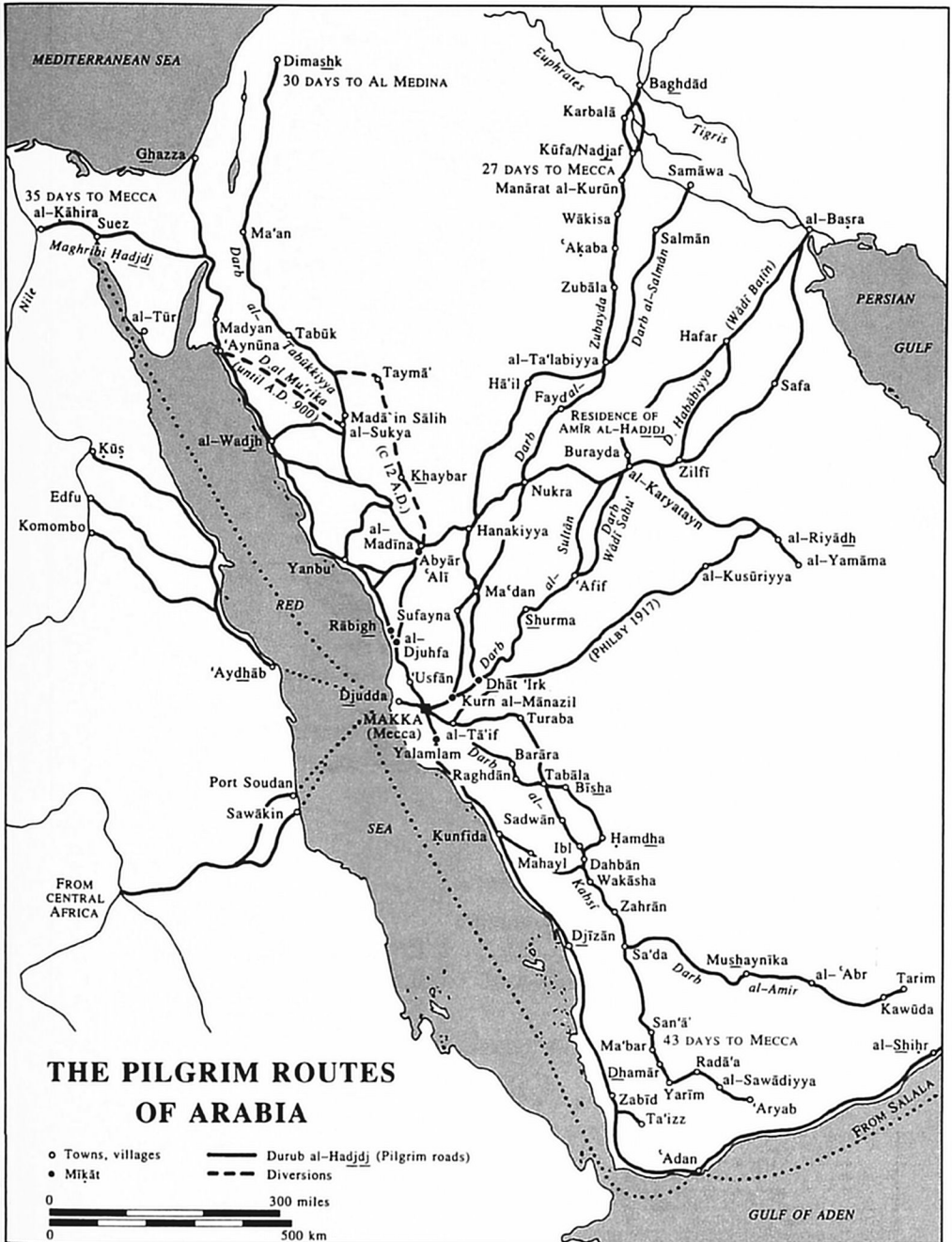
Finally, there is archival material. From the sixteenth century onward, the Ottoman rulers of western Arabia kept ever more systematic and complete records of taxes, disbursements, and judicial procedures in the Hijaz and required an equally detailed accounting of the finances of the Hajj, for which they were then responsible. From about the same time various pieces of political and financial *Ottomanica* show up in the archives of European foreign ministries. In the nineteenth century, when the Muslim holy cities were identified as major transmission centers for cholera, the European powers began to count heads as well as customs dues and tax receipts. I have attempted to make some use of such material in the later chapters, but there is much more to be investigated, some of it lying close to the surface in the works of Batanuni and Rif'at Pasha,³ much more buried deeper in the Ottoman archival records in Cairo, Damascus, and Istanbul.⁴

Some of the most circumstantial reports of Mecca and the Hijaz in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are by Europeans who were in Arabia neither as travelers nor as pilgrims. They were rather interlopers in a spiri-

tually protected environment, since then as now non-Muslims were not permitted to approach the holy cities. But many did, and most of them successfully, it would seem.⁷ Those European observers who did manage to get to Mecca and Medina, whether through their own deceit, or simple accident, or even Muslim connivance, are important witnesses to the Muslim Holy Land. The testimony of some of them—John Lewis Burckhardt at the beginning of the nineteenth century, for example, and Christian Snouck Hurgronje at its end—will often be cited in this literary history for the simple reason that they were skilled and trained observers. More, the eyes of such visitors, whether religious skeptics or not, were generally wider in a secular wonder akin to our own than those of the genuine *hajjis*, most of whom were, as might be expected, far more accustomed to the journey to and from the holy cities and then, once arrived there, more concerned with the spiritual graces, the *barakat*, that accompanied the Hajj rather than astonished by the far more mundane circumstances that often surrounded those blessings.

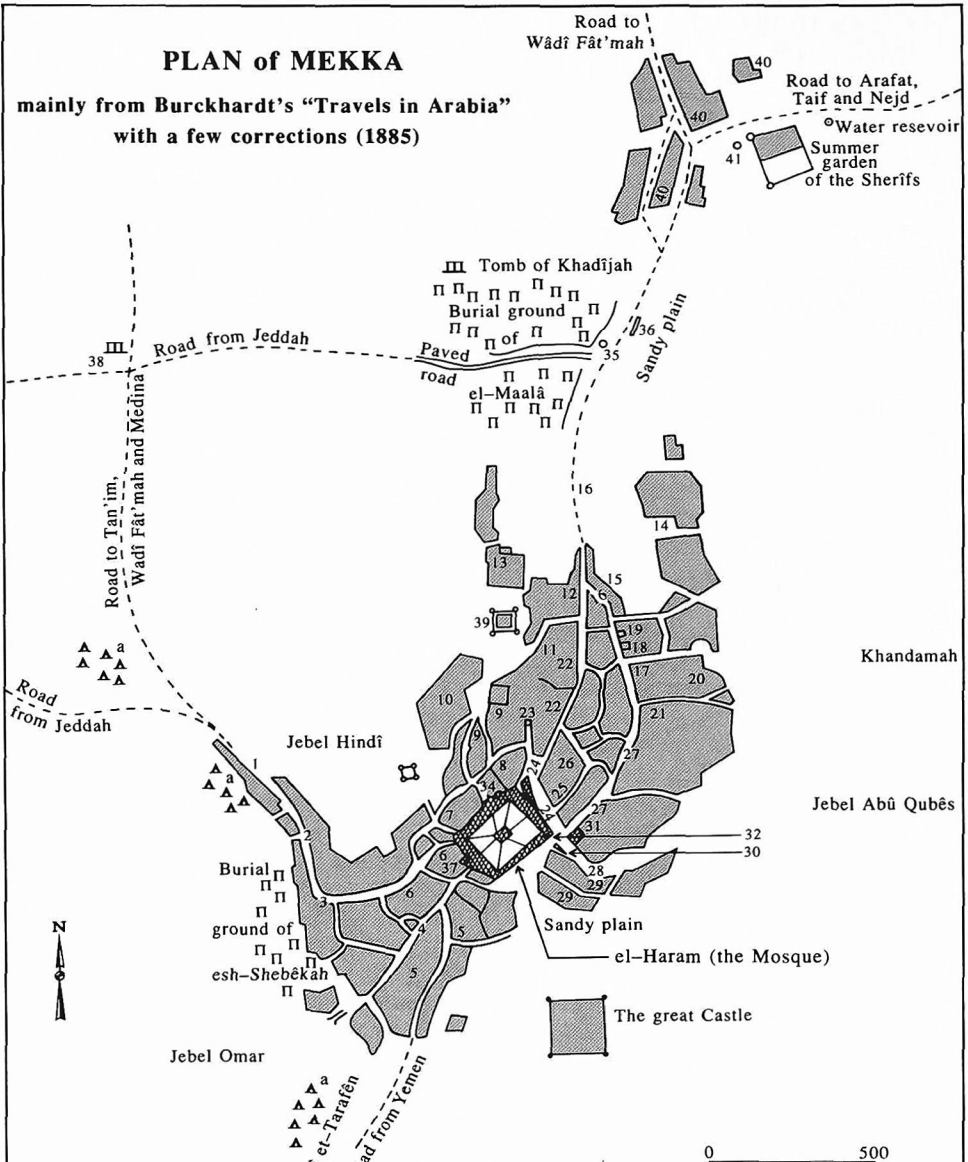
Everyone, heathen and holy man, will be summoned into the dock here, and so we shall hear from European spies, frauds, soldiers, explorers, and consuls as well as from Muslim saints, sinners, and despots. Their accounts will be assembled, arranged, and explained where that is required, not, certainly, to exalt or to denigrate the motives that drove them to the Hijaz, but simply to give a sense of the historical traditions and urban life of what are for Muslims the first and second holiest places on earth.

Maps

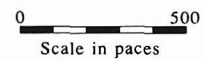


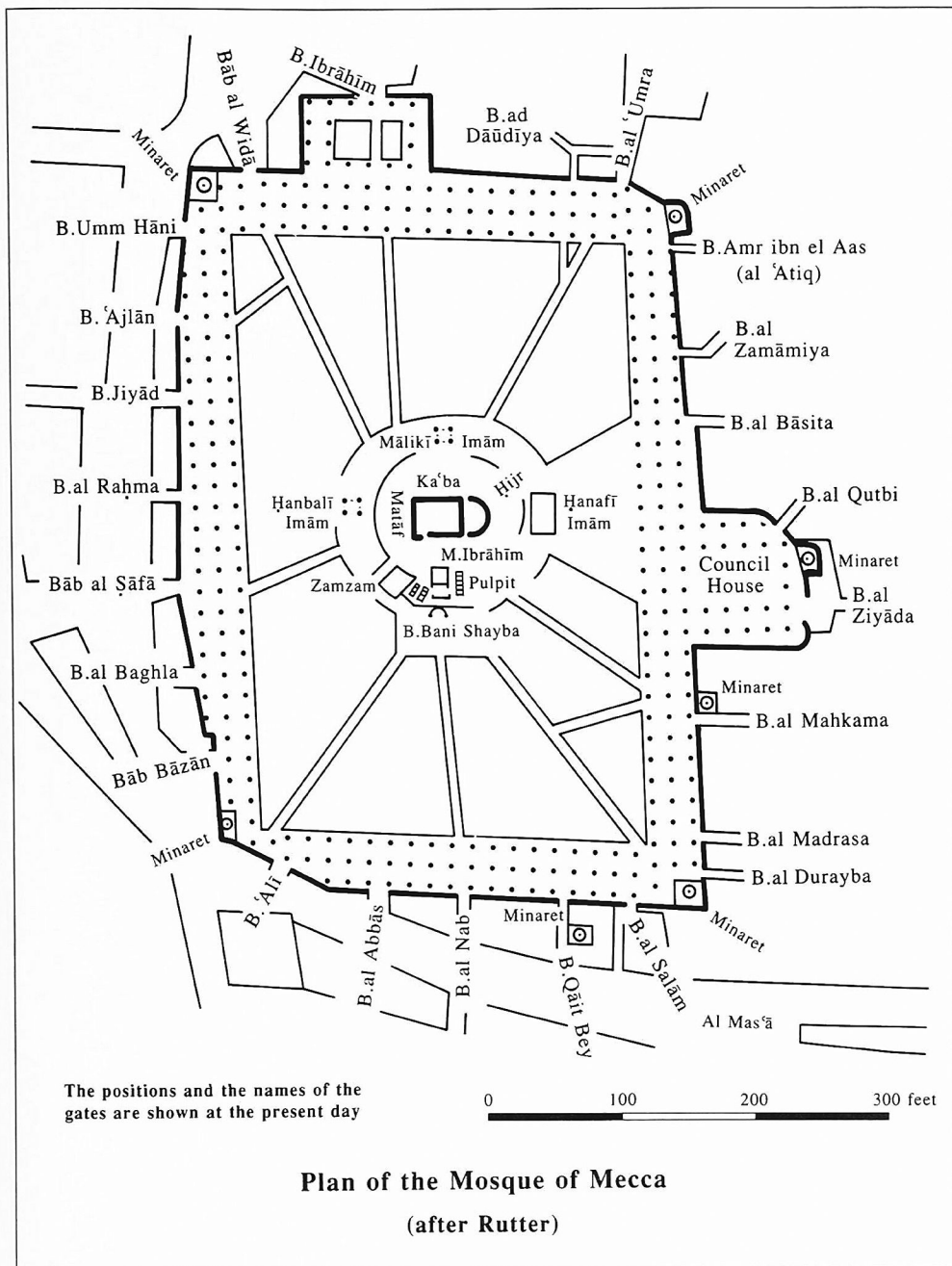
PLAN of MEKKA

mainly from Burckhardt's "Travels in Arabia"
with a few corrections (1885)



1. The Quarter of Jirwal.
 2. The Quarter of el-Bāb.
 3. The Quarter of esh-Shebēkah.
 4. The Quarter of Sūq es-saghir.
 5. The Quarter of el-Mesfalāh.
 6. The Quarter of Bāb el-'Umrah.
 7. The Quarter of Shamiyyah.
 8. The Quarter of Sūeqāh.
 9. The Quarter of Qarārah.
 10. Hurs.
 11. The Quarter of Rakūbah.
 12. The Quarter of en-Nāqa.
 13. The Quarter of es-Selēmāniyyah.
 14. The Quarter of Shi'b 'Amir.
 15. The Haddādīn (Blacksmiths' Street).
 16. The Street el-Maalā.
 17. The Ghazza-quarter.
 18. Palace of the Grand-Sherif 'Aun ar-Rafīq (1882—1905) built by his father Muhammed ibn 'Aun.
 19. Palace of the Grand-Sherif Abdallah (†1877) elder brother of 'Aun ar-Rafīq.
 20. The Quarter of Shi'b el-Maulid.
 21. The Quarter of Sūq el-'Iḥī.
 22. The Quarter of el-Muddā'a.
 23. El-Merwah.
 24. El-Mas'a.
 25. Stone Street (Zuqāq el-Hajar).
 26. Maulid Sittānā Fāt'mah.
 27. The Quarter of el-Qushāshiyah.
 28. Es-Safā.
 29. The Quarter of el-Jiād (in this quarter are the Egyptian Tēkkiyye Foundation Building, and the new Government Building).
 30. Main guard-house.
 31. House of Wālī (Governor) of the Hejaz, the Police Office etc.
 32. Madrasah, now used as office of the Committee for the Aqueduct of Zubaydah and bureau of the Rēyis (chief of the mu'addhins).
 33. Birket Mājīn (vulg. pronounced Mājīd) great cistern in connexion with the aqueduct.
 34. Court of Justice and dwelling house of the Qādhi.
 35. Tomb of Abū Tālib (uncle of Muhammad).
 36. Water place in connection with the aqueduct.
 37. Tomb of Seyyid 'Aqil.
 38. Tomb of the Saint Sheikh Mahmūd.
 39. Jebel Qu'ēqi'an.
 40. The Quarter of Ma'ābdah.
 41. Reservoir of water from the aqueduct. Several such reservoirs are now in all the main streets.
- a. Beduin huts.





The positions and the names of the gates are shown at the present day

0 100 200 300 feet

Plan of the Mosque of Mecca

(after Rutter)

Mecca

A Speculative History of Mecca in the Age of Ignorance

WE CAN WRITE no history of Mecca in the centuries before Muhammad, during what the later Muslim authorities called “The Barbarism” or “The Ignorance” (*jahiliyya*). They were referring, of course, to an absence of religious enlightenment in the days before God sent down the Quran, but the characterization is equally true of the history of the Abode of Islam. We are not totally at a loss regarding some parts of the peninsula. North, south, and east, Arabia came into the view of literate cultures who noted down their impressions and views of the indigenous societies. Archeology too has nibbled at those same fringes, as we shall see. But the Hijaz—roughly the western coast and highlands of Arabia from the modern border with Jordan to that with the Yemen—was unknown to outsiders and inhabited during that early era by nomads and oasis dwellers whose culture was still oral. And in much of that same area, and particularly around Islam’s two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the evidence of archeology is all but nonexistent. For the early history of the cities where Islam was born and Muhammad lived and died we must rely almost entirely on what later—in some cases, much later—Muslims tell us.¹

Those Muslim savants were far more interested in “The Ignorance” than its characterization would suggest, and they in fact thought they knew a great deal about the pre-Islamic Hijaz. We are not as certain as they are about that knowledge. Now tendentious, now legendary, it is almost always unverifiable from outside or contemporary sources and yet almost certainly preserves some authentic traditions.²

One source is undoubtedly contemporary and undoubtedly authentic. The Quran comprises the revelations proclaimed by Muhammad over some twenty-two years at Mecca and Medina until his death in 632 C.E. But the Quran is as little interested in Mecca as the Gospels are in Nazareth. Only briefly does it turn to the town—which is named only once (48:24),³ in connection with what appears to be a military operation—and then chiefly to comment on what was clearly the principal building:

Remember, We made the house a place of assembly and a place of security. Take you the station of Abraham as a prayer place. And We covenanted with Abraham and Ishmael that they should sanctify My house for those who circumambulate it, or those who are in retreat or those who bow or those prostrate themselves (there).

And remember, Abraham said: Lord, make this land secure, and sustain its people with fruits, those, at least, among them who believe in God and the Last Day.

And remember, Abraham and Ishmael raised the foundations of the house, (saying) "Our Lord, accept this from us." (Quran 2:125-127)

By all indications, the verses just cited were proclaimed by Muhammad not in Mecca in the shadow of what is elsewhere referred to as "this sacred House" (Quran 5:100) or "this ancient House" (Quran 22:29)—the Ka'ba—but in distant Medina, and perhaps even in the last year of his life, when his attention turned more directly back to his native city and particularly to the rituals practiced there. The verses in question are the effective Islamization of cult practices that had long gone on—from Abraham's day, the Quran asserts—in and around Mecca, its sacred precinct (*haram*), and the cubical building (*ka'ba*) that stood in its midst.

If we are to believe the Quran, then, the biblical patriarchs Abraham and Ishmael are the only notable figures in Meccan history, and notable chiefly in connection with its shrine. We are not surprised. The Quran views the past uniquely as sacred or salvation history, the unfolding of God's promises to mankind, and the principal agents in that process are the prophets, among whom are numbered Abraham and Ishmael. Whereas the other prophets mentioned in the Quran are connected only sketchily to places,⁴ the concrete association with "this house" in Mecca arises from the intended purpose of the Quran: nothing less than a revival of the authentic "religion of Abraham" (2:130, 136), the one once celebrated at Mecca with ritual turnings around God's house, the *Bayt Allah*.⁵

Of the political history of Mecca and of its remote or even its recent secular past, the Quran tells us nothing. But the people who lived there certainly knew more than the Quran chose to reveal, though precisely how much more is difficult to say, since the Quran's perspectives had necessarily to become those of every subsequent Muslim historian. Biblical information, which was obviously mined from various Jewish and Christian sources, was later mingled with the Arabs' own, more secular memories of the past to produce what are our sources: eighth- and ninth-century histories and chronicles whose authors attempted to harmonize the two strains that dogma and memory had built into the past of the holy city of Mecca.

THE RISE OF QUSAYY AND THE QURAYSH

The earliest preserved Muslim histories begin with Creation and tell us that God's house was first built in Mecca by Adam according to a heavenly prototype and was then destroyed in the same flood survived by Noah and his family.⁶ Thus Abraham and son were actually reconstructing an older, more cosmic edifice. How did Abraham and Ishmael come to be in Mecca? What happened afterward? Where the Quran does not explain, the Muslim tradition had many and varied answers to both questions.⁷ It is tempting to accept them for what they seem to be, the Muslims' legendary-exegetical embellishments of a doctrinal given: the Quranic placement of Abraham and Ishmael in Mecca. But there were more than a few Jews in sixth-century Arabia, north of Mecca in Medina, for example, and south in the Yemen. No one can say for sure when or whence they came, or what historical traditions they brought with them. Even if we dismiss Abraham as a historical figure, either from the Bible or from the Quran, we cannot overlook the possibility that Jews and Jewish rituals and stories were at work on or at the Meccan sanctuary from a very early date.⁸

After Abraham, other motifs are introduced into the Mecca story. The settlement's history suffered godless interruptions between the era of Ishmael's immediate descendants down to the time in the sixth century C.E., when God revealed His Book to Muhammad. These interruptions were the bouts of paganism—the association of “partners” with God, as the Muslims expressed it—that engulfed the Arabs for long intervals even in God's favored place at Mecca. Viewed more generally, God's original promises and commands to Abraham, those made in Palestine, were periodically renewed through later prophets—most notoriously, of course, through Moses and Jesus.⁹ By Muslim accounts, however, the paganism at Mecca went unchallenged and unrelieved from the time when Abraham's offspring began to drift away from the holy city until the moment in the month Ramadan of 610 C.E. when Muhammad received his prophetic call.

The Quran offers no help in filling in that enormous space, and the prospect of turning elsewhere for information does not excite optimism. The northern and southern regions of western Arabia, that is, the Syro-Palestinian frontier and the Yemen, have preserved archeological and even literary traces of their pre-Islamic religious past. The physical remains of shrines, inscriptions, the interested observations of Greco-Roman authors, the information collected by church historians or remembered by Christian missionaries, and the experiences of holy men who fecklessly wandered the frontiers of the bedouin lands all help in the construction of

at least an outline of the forms and modes and vagaries of pre-Islamic worship and belief in those regions.¹⁰ But no such resources are available for the central stretch of the western Arabian coast and its hinterland between Mada'in Salih in the north and Najran in the south, what the Arabs called the Hijaz. This was the nomads' terrain, remote, rocky, and inhospitable. It supported a meager settled population in a few scattered upland oases like Yathrib—later Medina—and Khaybar, an occasional stretch of fertile garden land like the Wadi Fatima or Ta'if, and, of course, the shrine city of Mecca. The Red Sea coast offered no easily accessible ports, and the steamy coastal plain, the Tihama, invited disease rather than habitation. Oasis dwellers and bedouin alike were illiterate,¹¹ it appears, and the region was beyond even the energetic reach of both Greco-Roman imperialist-entrepreneurs and equally literate and historically minded Christian missionaries.

The remembered past of this region of pre-Islamic Arabia lay only in local oral traditions, which, even after the coming of Islam, savored what were regarded as old tribal genealogies—none of them very reliable as history¹²—and the tribes' poetry of love and war. There were even, it seems, some dim memories of other gods worshiped in other times. The later biographers of the Prophet and historians of Mecca drew upon these memories to piece together the history of Arabia as Muhammad doubtless understood it but as the Quran never spells out: how the holy house called the Ka'ba and the town of the biblical patriarch and his son passed into the hands of this or that Arab tribe and finally into those of the Quraysh, Muhammad's own ancestors; and how that passage of power from the Ishmaelites was accompanied by a lapse into polytheism and idol worship. That was the gist of the great historical triptych of Ibn Ishaq (d. 768), which was later pared down to a simple—and still available—biography of the Prophet by Ibn Hisham (d. 833) but was used with profit in its unabridged form by Tabari (d. 923) and others.¹³ This is one strain of tradition. The other is the information collected and topically arranged by Hisham ibn al-Kalbi (d. 819) in his *Book of Idols*, the most substantial treatment we possess of the religious practices of pre-Islamic Arabia.¹⁴

Finally, we must return to the Quran. Though the Book shows no interest in the history of such things, it polemicizes against the still flourishing paganism of Muhammad's day and at the same time incorporates some aspects of Meccan ritual—notably the Hajj or pilgrimage—into the emerging picture of Islam.¹⁵ And information comes not only from what the Quran says but also from how it says it. The religious vocabulary of the Quran is itself an undisputed product of the religious life of the holy cities and so an unconscious witness, particularly in its use of "borrowed" terms, to the paganism it attempts to combat and the new religious sensibilities it strives to instill.¹⁶

Mecca after Abraham

According to the traditional accounts preserved in Tabari and the Meccan chronicler Azraqi,¹⁷ Abraham, Ishmael, and the latter's family were the first to govern the district of the Ka'ba, then apparently an isolated ruined building in an uninhabited area. But there were neighbors, peoples called the Jurhum and the Amaliqa.¹⁸ So, we are told, in order to coexist peacefully with his powerful neighbors, Ishmael had eventually to marry a woman of the Jurhum, Sayyida bint Mudad, who bore him twelve sons. The Amaliqa are transparently the Amalekites, another biblical people; but to identify the Jurhum, the Arab accounts are constrained to pass over into an entirely different tradition, a native Arabian one.

The Quranic commentators, who generally worked verse by verse, had no obligation to produce a continuous historical line from Abraham to Muhammad, but the Muslim historians attempted just that: the standard life of Muhammad opens with a genealogy that connects Muhammad, as the Gospels do Jesus,¹⁹ with the biblical patriarch. The material at hand did not easily lend itself to this enterprise. The Quran and the Muslim tradition had little sense of what went on among the Israelites after Ishmael—Jacob, Joseph, David, and Solomon are all isolated figures on the Quran's biblical landscape—and their own Arab genealogies led the Muslims back into the past along a path that had no apparent connection with the Bible. There was a further complication, as we shall see. Their history gave the Muslims two pieces of information about Muhammad's immediate ancestors at Mecca, the Quraysh: first, they were remembered as relative newcomers to Mecca, replacing another Arab people; and second, they were obviously pagans. Thus there appear on the Meccan stage the Jurhum, an Arab people who replaced the Banu Ishmael at Mecca and who introduced paganism into Abraham's sanctuary.²⁰ The Jurhum had other tribal cousins, the Qatura, who had come northward to Mecca with them. Ishmael's future father-in-law Mudad ibn Amr settled with the Jurhum in the upper part of Mecca while the shaykh Sumayda' settled his Qatura in the lower part of the town.

It is not entirely certain who the "Amaliqa" actually were. In Arab eyes both they and the Jurhum were "genuine Arabs" in that Arabic was their native tongue, as contrasted, for example, to the Banu Ishmael, "made Arabs," because "they only spoke these (Arab) peoples' languages after they had settled among them."²¹ There are biblical Amalekites, of course, Israel's sworn enemies (Exodus 17:8–16; 1 Samuel 15), but whoever their Arab counterparts actually were—possibly Nabateans²²—their presence in the traditional accounts provides yet another opportunity to connect the Mecca-Medina tradition to the earliest biblical narratives. But if the Bible knows the Amaliqa, it is as enemies of Moses and Israel in the

southern Negev (Exodus 17:8–16), and not in distant Mecca. The same Amalekites reappear somewhat later in the Bible (1 Samuel 15:2–3)—this part of the story is ignored in the Muslim tradition—apparently still in the same general area in the Negev-Sinai. Thereafter the Amalekites disappear forever over the Bible's historical horizons.

But not from the Muslims' memory. To return to their traditional version of sacred history, Moses did not pursue the Amalekites into the Hijaz in person, and when the Israelite soldiers he had sent after them returned to Palestine and discovered that their prophet-leader had perished, they turned and marched back to Arabia, thus establishing a permanent Jewish presence there. Other versions have Moses and Aaron making pilgrimage to Mecca, with Aaron dying near Medina and being buried on Mount Uhud there. The more general inclination in the Muslim sources is to date the Israelite emigration to Arabia not to the Moses era but to the period of the Babylonian destruction of the Temple in the sixth century B.C.E.²³

To return once again to Abraham, at the patriarch's death Ishmael became the sole master not so much of Mecca—there is still no great interest in the settlement as such in the sources—as of the Ka'ba, the "ancient house." When Ishmael died and was buried next to his mother Hagar near the Ka'ba,²⁴ he was succeeded by his son Nabat. Nabat, whose mother was a Jurhumite, experienced no problems in his wardenship, but at his death his family was apparently too small to compete with the waxing strength of their Jurhum cousins, and the latter soon took over the sanctuary.

As has already been noted, the Muslim chroniclers of the pre-Islamic history of Mecca had two events to reckon with—or rather, a fact and a preconception that had to be accounted for. The fact was that, even though the Quran made it clear that Mecca was originally a shrine settlement in the service of the One True God, the God of Abraham and Ishmael, it was in the Prophet's own day a pagan city under the control of a pagan or paganized tribe, Muhammad's own ancestors, the Quraysh. The preconception was that there were two racial strains among the Arabs: the northern "would-be" or "Arabized" Arabs, and the southern or Yemeni "made" or "genuine" Arabs. Genealogists and chroniclers—among the latter principally Ibn Ishaq, Tabari, and Azraqi and their sources—assigned the Ishmaelites and Muhammad's Quraysh to the first group, while the "genuine" southern Arabs like the Jurhum and Khuza'a were responsible for the various interregna that disturbed Mecca between the death of Ishmael and the return to power of one of his descendants, the Qurayshite Qusayy.

According to Ibn Ishaq's account, then, the newly arrived Jurhum lived

on the western slopes and heights of the vale of Mecca and so controlled the “upper” passage in and out from Jidda and the Batn al-Marr, later the Wadi Fatima.²⁵ Their allies, and soon rivals, the Qatura, occupied the slopes of Jabal Abu Qubays on the east and monitored the entry from the Yemen. The two groups were thus in careful separation but in extremely close quarters in the narrow confines of the Meccan valley. Neither seems to have been in control of the shrine itself at that point—such a political vacuum is curious, unless a remnant of “sacred” Ishmaelites clung to their wardenship of the Ka‘ba—but both apparently attempted to take their sustenance from the same source, a tax on “those who entered Mecca,” obviously pilgrims to an already existing shrine, and they soon fell out. Hostilities followed, and the Qatura were subjugated by Mudad, leaving the Jurhum as the sole civil and religious authorities in the shrine city, though some at least of their Ishmaelite relatives by marriage were still living there. The final departure of these latter was apparently under demographic pressure, though obviously reinforced by political considerations.

Then God multiplied the offspring of Ishmael in Mecca and their uncles from Jurhum were rulers of the temple and judges in Mecca. The sons of Ishmael did not dispute their authority because of their ties of kindred and their respect for the sanctuary lest there should be quarreling or fighting therein. When Mecca became too confined for the sons of Ishmael they spread abroad in the land, and whenever they had to fight a people, God gave them the victory through their religion and they subdued them. (Ibn Ishaq 1955: 46)

This conclusion puts a kind light on the Ishmaelites, who reasonably and respectfully take their leave of the holy city. But the Muslim sources make it clear that at their departure from Mecca the sons of Ishmael began to turn toward the paganism they would so staunchly defend when they returned to the city as Quraysh.²⁶

The Jurhum, meanwhile, had new neighbors as tribes like the Azd and Quda‘a continuously migrated northward from the Yemen. Some, like the Aws and the Khazraj, settled further north in the Hijaz, notably in the oasis that would later be called Medina; others, like the Banu Ghassan, continued their trek into Syria, where they eventually became the federated allies of Byzantium. Finally, there were those who “split off” (*in-khaza‘a*) and settled in the coastal Tihama of the Hijaz. How precisely the “split-off” southerners called Khuza‘a wrested control of Mecca from the Jurhum was unknown even to the early Arab experts—or so we must conclude from the five diverse and distinct traditions on the subject.²⁷ In his *Annals* Tabari combined the motifs of divine vengeance—“God sent

bleeding of the nose and a plague of ants against the Jurhum and destroyed them”—with a Khuza‘i attack. Ibn Ishaq prefers the simpler political explanation:

Afterwards the Jurhum behaved high-handedly in Mecca and made lawful that which was taboo. Those who entered the town who were not of their tribe they treated badly and they appropriated gifts which had been made to the Ka‘ba so that their authority weakened. When the Banu Bakr ibn Abd Manat of the (Meccan) Kinana and the Ghubshan of Khuza‘a saw that, they came together to do battle and drive them out of Mecca. War was declared and in the fighting the Banu Bakr and the Ghubshan got the upper hand and expelled the Jurhum from Mecca. (Ibn Ishaq 1955: 46–47)

The Jurhum era in Mecca appears to have lasted three generations, from sometime about 100 C.E.—if we connect them with the end of the Nabateans—to the first half of the third century. The Khuza‘a may have ruled the city for about the same span of time, from the middle of the second century to early in the fifth century, when they were displaced by the Quraysh.

Saint Qusayy

Then Ghubshan of Khuza‘a controlled the sanctuary instead of the Banu Bakr ibn Abd Manat, the man who was controlling it being Amr ibn al-Harith al-Ghubshani. The Quraysh at that time were in scattered settlements and tents [or “houses”] dispersed among their people, the Banu Kinana. So Khuza‘a possessed the temple, passing it on from son to son until the last of them, Hulayl ibn Habashiyya. (Ibn Ishaq 1955: 48)

Thus the Khuza‘a somehow permitted the return of the descendants of Ishmael, here called the Quraysh of the Kinana, who had moved away, but not very far, from Mecca. The Quraysh, however, no longer had any say in running the shrine or any share in its revenues. It is at this point that all the sources introduce Qusayy, the semi-legendary figure who brought together the large tribal group called the Quraysh and founded the settlement—in his day no more than a small town—of Mecca.

If he belongs to history and not legend, Qusayy would have been born ca. 365 C.E. According to the traditional accounts in Ibn Ishaq, Tabari, and Azraqi, when his Qurayshite father Kilab died, the young Qusayy was taken by his mother back to the more northerly pasturing grounds of her own tribe, the Banu Udhra of the Quda‘a.²⁸ His mother remarried there, and as Qusayy grew up he had no reason to believe that he was anything but one of the Quda‘a. But when he reached young manhood and found

that he was not Quda'ai, Qusayy asked his mother to which tribe he belonged. She told him the entire story: "You are the son of Kilab ibn Murra ibn Ka'b ibn Lu'ayy ibn Ghalib ibn Fihr ibn Malik ibn al-Nadr ibn Kinana al-Qurashi."²⁹ The revelation awoke in Qusayy a strong desire to return to Mecca and join his own people, the Quraysh. Qusayy's mother advised him that the safest course was to wait for the period of the sacred truce in the pilgrimage season. He followed her advice and eventually arrived in Mecca under the protection of the sacred month. Then, when the other Banu Udhra returned north to their homes, Qusayy remained behind with his newly discovered Meccan kinsmen. The story moves rapidly from this point. The newcomer Qusayy asked for the hand of the daughter of Hulayl ibn Hubshiyya (or Habashiyya), the Khuza'i leader. Hulayl agreed, "recognizing his lineage and regarding him as a desirable match."³⁰

If the report about Hulayl is true—Tabari may have had some doubts—Qusayy had married very well indeed: his bride was the daughter of the "king" of Mecca, a post identified with control of the Ka'ba. Qusayy apparently took up residence in his father-in-law's household, and his wife eventually bore him four sons, who bore the family's traditional theophoric names: Abd al-Dar, "Servant of the House"; Abd Manaf, "Servant of Manaf"; Abd Uzza, "Servant of Uzza" (Manaf was a Quraysh idol and Uzza one of the familiar Meccan "daughters of Allah"); and finally the somewhat mysterious Abd, "Servant," or perhaps "Servant of Qusayy."³¹

When Hulayl al-Hubshiyya died, Qusayy thought he had a better right to the Ka'ba and to rule over Mecca than the Khuza'a and the Banu Bakr, since the Quraysh were the noblest and purest of the descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham. He spoke to some of the men of the Quraysh and the Banu Kinana and called upon them to expel the Khuza'a and the Banu Bakr from Mecca. They accepted his proposal and swore an oath of allegiance to him to do this. Then he wrote to his half-brother Riza ibn Rabi'a who was in his tribal lands (northward toward Syria), asking him to come to his assistance and fight along with him. Riza ibn Rabi'a stood up among the Quda'a and called upon them to come to the assistance of his brother and to march with him, and they answered his call. (Tabari, Annals 1.1094 = Tabari VI: 20–21)

According to this account, which Tabari got from Ibn Ishaq, the critical moment in Qusayy's reach for power came during the annual pilgrimage. The Khuza'a were the lords of Mecca and its Ka'ba, but control of one or more of the pilgrimage rituals of the Hajj remained as an inheritance in the hands of clans from the old Jurhum days at Mecca, and particularly one called Sufa. They controlled the dispersals of the pilgrims from the

stations of Arafat and Mina a few miles east of Mecca. One year Qusayy and his followers challenged the Sufa over their privilege, simply asserting: "We have a better right to this than you." Fighting broke out, and Qusayy and the Kinana Quraysh prevailed.³²

The Muslim chroniclers, as usual, found more than one version of these events in circulation.³³ Tabari knew and told other, somewhat different stories of the passage of power. In one, the elderly Hulayl handed over the authority to his daughter, and when she pleaded her incapacity to open and close the door of the Ka'ba, he appointed one Abu Ghubshan as her assistant. Qusayy bought the privilege from Abu Ghubshan for a skinful of wine and a lute, an act that disturbed Hulayl and led to war. In another, a plague struck the Khuza'a, and after they vacated Mecca out of fear, Qusayy simply moved in his own people and took over the Ka'ba. Ibn Ishaq gives his own summary of events:

Thus Qusayy gained authority over the temple and Mecca and brought in his people from their dwellings to Mecca. He behaved like a king over his tribe and the people of Mecca and so they made him king. But he had guaranteed the Arabs their customary rights because he felt it was a duty upon himself which he did not have the right to alter. Thus he confirmed the family of Safwan [who were then granting pilgrims the permission to depart from Arafat] and of Adwan [who were then granting the permission to depart from Muzdalifa] and the intercalators and Murra ibn Awf in their customary rights, which obtained until the coming of Islam when God put an end thereby to them all.

Qusayy was the first of the Banu Ka'b ibn Lu'ayy to assume kingship and be obeyed by his people as a king. He held the keys to the temple, the right to water the pilgrims from the well of Zamzam, to feed the pilgrims, to preside at assemblies, and to hand out the war banners. In his hands lay all the dignities of Mecca; he divided the town into quarters among his people and he settled all the Quraysh into their houses in Mecca which they held.

People assert that the Quraysh were afraid to cut down the trees of the sanctuary in their quarters, but Qusayy cut them down with his own hand or through his assistants. The Quraysh called him "the uniter" because he had brought them together and they drew a happy omen from his rule. So far as the Quraysh were concerned, no woman was given in marriage, no man was married, no discussion about public affairs was held and no banner of war was entrusted to anyone except in his house, where one of his sons would hand it over. . . . His authority among the Quraysh during his life and after his death was like a religious law which could not be infringed. He chose for himself the house of meeting [that is, the dar al-nadwa] and made a door which led to the mosque of the Ka'ba; in it the Quraysh used to settle their affairs. (Ibn Ishaq 1955: 52-53)

There follows in Tabari's account a description of the offices that Qusayy succeeded to—or perhaps inaugurated³⁴—at Mecca.

Qusayy took control of the Ka'ba and ruled over Mecca, and gathered together his tribe from their dwellings and settled them there. He assumed rule over his tribe and the people of Mecca, and they accepted him as their king. . . . He held privileges of being doorkeeper of the Ka'ba, providing the pilgrims with food and drink, presiding over the assembly, and appointing standard bearers, thus taking all the honors of Mecca for himself. He also divided Mecca into quarters for his tribe, settling every clan of the Quraysh into the dwelling places assigned to them in Mecca.

His authority among his tribe of Quraysh, in his lifetime and after his death, was like a religion which people followed. They always acted in accordance with it, regarding it as filled with good omens and recognizing his superiority and nobility. He took for himself the assembly house (dar al-nadwa) and made the door which (later) led from it to the mosque of the Ka'ba. The Quraysh used to decide their affairs in that house. (Tabari, Annals 1.1097–1098 = Tabari vi: 24)

Dimly through these lines written by a later staunch monotheist we can see the faint outlines of the cult in pre-Islamic Mecca. Qusayy had become, if not the political master of the city, at least the holy man of Mecca's sacred enclosure.³⁵ But the impression we are given is that Qusayy was a religious conservative who was eager for the transfer of authority to his own hands but, like the Khuza'a before him and like his illustrious descendant, quite unwilling to introduce any radical changes in the cult.

Qusayy remained in Mecca, held in honor and high esteem by his tribe. . . . As regards the pilgrimage, he confirmed the rights of the Arabs to continue their previous customs. This is because he considered these to be a religious duty which he should not change. The Sufa thus continued as before, (and did so) until they died out, their rights then passing by inheritance to the family of Safwan ibn Harith. . . . The Adwan also continued as they had, and likewise the intercalator from the Banu Malik ibn Kinana and Murra ibn Awf. (Tabari, Annals 1.1098 = Tabari vi: 25)

The Quraysh

Arab historical memory recalled Qusayy as the "unifier": he was, the tradition reported, "the first of the Kinana who achieved the rulership, and who united his tribe, the Quraysh." The later Arabs were perfectly clear as to who was Quraysh and who was not, but were somewhat uncertain as to where that people had come from, chiefly, perhaps, because of the absence from the tribal genealogy of any eponymous ancestor named

“Quraysh,” as Ibn al-Kalbi confesses. The founder of the house’s power was Qusayy, it was agreed, and his lineage reportedly went back to one Fihri, the “gatherer” of the Quraysh, the son of Malik. In his discussion of the latter, Tabari reflects on the more general question of who precisely the Quraysh were.

It is said that the Quraysh were so called after one Quraysh ibn Badr . . . of the al-Nadr branch of the Kinana. This is because when the caravan of the Banu al-Nadr arrived, the Arabs used to say “the caravan of Quraysh has arrived.” They say that this Quraysh was the guide of the Banu al-Nadr in their travels and was responsible for provisioning them. He had a son named Badr who dug the well at (the place called) Badr, and the well called Badr is named after him.

Ibn al-Kalbi (maintains that) Quraysh is a collective name and cannot be traced back to a father or mother, or to a male or female guardian. Others say that the descendants of al-Nadr ibn Kinana were called Quraysh because al-Nadr ibn Kinana came out one day to his tribal assembly and they said to one another, “Look at Nadr, he is like a quraysh camel.”³⁶ Others say that Quraysh were so called after a creature who lives in the sea and eats other sea creatures, namely, the shark (qirsh). The descendants of al-Nadr ibn Kinana were named after the qirsh because it is the most powerful of sea creatures.

And so the not very convincing etymologies continue. At least one of them suggests that the term *quraysh* is of a more recent coinage:

Some say that al-Nadr ibn Kinana was himself called Quraysh, while others deny this and maintain that al-Nadr’s descendants continued to be called the Banu al-Nadr until Qusayy ibn Kilab gathered them together; they were then called Quraysh because they had been gathered together, which is the meaning of the word taqarrasha. The Arabs used to say taqarrasha Banu al-Nadr, which means that they were gathered together. (Tabari, Annals 1.1103–1104 = Tabari VI: 29–30)

How Was Mecca Governed?

When they come to speak of the approaching death of Qusayy, the chroniclers of the Mecca’s history provide a somewhat more detailed and systematic account of the privileges possessed by the holy man of the city and by his holy family after him.³⁷ As Ibn Ishaq’s narrative reveals, there was—or rather, had been—a problem in the succession. The historian was well aware that it was not the offspring of Qusayy’s eldest son, Abd al-Dar (“Servant of the House”), who ruled Mecca or were even, as their name openly indicates they should have been, in control of the Ka’ba:

When Qusayy grew old and feeble, he spoke to Abd al-Dar. He was his firstborn, but Abd Manaf had become famous during his father's lifetime and done all that had to be done along with Abd Uzza and Abd. Qusayy said: "By God, my son, I will put you on a par with the others; though they have a greater reputation than yours, none of them shall enter the Ka'ba until you open it for them; none shall give the Quraysh the war banner but you with your own hand; none shall drink in Mecca except you allow it; and no pilgrim shall eat food unless you provide it; and the Quraysh shall not decide any matter except in your house." He gave him his house, it being the only place where the Quraysh could settle their affairs, and he gave him the formal rights mentioned above.

The account is redolent of much later feuding over position and privilege among Mecca's aristocracy, but there may be some historical kernels amidst the tendentious chaff. One of the privileges accorded to Qusayy by reason of his position was the collection of a special tax, the *rifada*, which is here described as supplying the means by which Qusayy provided food and drink to the pilgrims. It was also very likely one of the sources out of which he and his successors funded their commercial ventures. The *rifada* was still current in Ibn Ishaq's day, and so his account has a dual purpose: to explain the tax and so justify its continued practice:

The *rifada* was a tax which the Quraysh used to pay from their property to Qusayy at every festival. With it he used to provide food for the pilgrims who were unable to afford their own provisions. Qusayy had laid this upon the Quraysh, saying: "You are God's neighbors, the people of His temple and sanctuary. The pilgrims are God's guests and the visitors to His temple and have the highest claim on your generosity; so provide food and drink for them during the pilgrimage until they depart out of your territory." Accordingly they used to pay him every year a tax on their flocks and he used to provide food for the people therefrom, while they were at Mina, and his people carried out this order of his during the time of barbarism until Islam came. To this very day it is the food which the sultan provides every year at Mina until the pilgrimage is over. (Ibn Ishaq 1955: 55-56)

The offices and privileges that Qusayy settled upon his sons were not only honorable and prestigious. They were, as we shall see, profitable as well, and they reveal the fundamental outlines of the economy of what was, from Qusayy's day, the shrine city of Mecca.³⁸ Moreover, these offices, which Qusayy either established or laid claim to when he took control of the settlement, afford clear evidence that in the Qusayy era Mecca was not yet a commercial center. What pass for municipal offices have to do only with military operations (which our sources never show in action)

and with control of the shrine. In a city that enjoyed a considerable mercantile reputation among later Muslim authorities, there is no sign that commerce was regulated or that any municipal institution governed or encouraged it; indeed, there is a suggestion that at this point the Quraysh may not have traded at all.³⁹ The principal *functioning* offices, as far as we can tell, were all connected with the shrine and the pilgrimage, and were regarded as religious in character.⁴⁰

Primary among the offices claimed by Qusayy was the wardenship (*hi-jaba*) of the Ka'ba,⁴¹ including control of access to it, later symbolized by possession of the keys to the building.⁴² As noted, Qusayy also held watering and provisioning rights for what the tradition sometimes regarded as needy pilgrims. More likely this was an exclusive franchise—"no man shall eat food in the pilgrimage other than your food"—a privilege that, obviously, could be turned to great profit, as it unquestionably was in later times.⁴³

In addition to the profits that might have accrued from the buying and selling of pilgrimage goods and services, there were other opportunities for income, whether for Qusayy individually or, as seems more likely, for the ruling families of the Quraysh collectively. Investigation of the Muslim sources has revealed a whole range of charges and taxes imposed upon arriving and departing pilgrims and upon the merchants who took advantage of the "truce of God" surrounding the pilgrimage period to conduct their business at the fairs that followed the rituals.⁴⁴ Thus the early Quraysh, who were wardens of the trade at Mecca, though not yet participants in it, must have begun to accumulate from the event of the pilgrimage a small capital stake that offered them not only subsistence but also the foundation for later, more expansive commercial ventures that would lead them out of the narrow confines of the Meccan Haram.

How these arrangements were organized and administered, we have almost no information, far less, surely, than we possess for Palmyra, with its wealth of commercial inscriptions. Qusayy, and after him one or another of his sons, is simply said to have been in charge. What little pre-Islamic evidence there is seems to indicate that the leadership at Mecca was a collective one. Fasi, a later historian of the city, says quite explicitly that "among the chiefs, no one of them exercised authority over the rest of the Quraysh except by a benevolent concession on their part,"⁴⁵ thus scaling the founding father back from exalted "kingship" to the role of a tribal shaykh. Further, there is no mention in the sources—the bare list of Qusayy's prerogatives aside—of any *functioning* officials or magistrates, though it is difficult to imagine the collective performance of many of what were doubtless collective responsibilities.

The most concrete evidence of Mecca's governance in pre-Islamic days is the *dar al-nadwa*, or council hall.⁴⁶ It was simultaneously Qusayy's resi-

dence and the administrative center of the city; or, if that is too grandiose a notion, it was the place where certain important tribal acts—betrothals, circumcisions, and declarations of war—had necessarily to be performed. Of taxes or commerce in connection with this building in the shadow of the Ka'ba, there is not a word. It was here, certainly, that the shaykhs of the ruling houses of Mecca—the Abd Manaf, Makhzum, and Umayya—met and took common counsel, apparently only as the occasion arose. This would have been the site of the meetings of the *mala'*, or grand council, the only government body the Quran seems aware of.⁴⁷ So the tradition suggests. But it is curious that at no time during Muhammad's career at Mecca, when frequent consultations debated what to do with this newly declared prophet, were there any meetings of the *dar al-nadwa*, if it was an institution, or even in the *dar al-nadwa*, if it was only a place. The early Muslims may in fact have exaggerated the importance of the *dar al-nadwa*.⁴⁸ Whatever the case, the rapid political evolution of the Islamic commonwealth, which unfolded at Medina rather than Mecca, soon rendered the *dar al-nadwa* otiose. It was later the private and obviously the secular property of one Hakim ibn Hizam, who eventually sold it to the Caliph Mu'awiya.⁴⁹

The Sons of Qusayy

According to the tradition received by Ibn Ishaq, the sons of Qusayy divided the territory of the settlement into "quarters," which were either allocated to their own newly sedentary clans—the later first families of Mecca—or else sold to allied tribes.⁵⁰ It was at that point that the problem anticipated in Ibn Ishaq's account of Qusayy's disposition of his powers occurred: Qusayy's son Abd al-Dar was deprived of his offices by his nephews Abd Shams, Hashim, Muttalib, and Nawfal, the sons of Abd Manaf, who "considered that they had a better right to them because of their superiority and their position among the people."

The move divided the Quraysh: some of the tribes sided with the Banu Abd Manaf and other with the Banu Abd al-Dar. Both sides collected their allies at the Ka'ba and swore oaths of solidarity and allegiance. It was a somewhat curious ritual, unless the story was invented by Ibn Ishaq or his sources to explain a befuddling epithet. The Banu Abd Manaf and their allies all dipped their hands in a bowl of scented liquid as they took the oath of solidarity and then rubbed their hands on the Ka'ba. Thus they came to be known as the "Scented Ones." Although the Abd al-Dar performed a similar rite, they were known simply as the "Confederates." Civil war seemed to loom, but then—and Ibn Ishaq does not know how it came about—a compromise was worked out: the Banu Abd Manaf would have the profitable rights of supplying water to the pilgrims and

collecting the tax for them, while the Abd al-Dar would continue to control access to the Ka'ba and would remain in possession of the standard of war and the *dar al-nadwa*. And so, concludes Ibn Ishaq, "This was the state of affairs until God brought Islam."⁵¹

THE FOUNDING OF MECCA CITY

The evidence is not plentiful, but from what can be pieced together from the pages of Ibn Ishaq, Tabari, and Azraqi it appears likely that the establishment of Mecca as a permanent settlement was the work of Qusayy ibn Kilab, the Qurashite whose career we have just inspected, and that this occurred sometime about 400 C.E.⁵² The sources agree that a shrine was there from a very early date, but the immediate area seems not to have been settled: witness the fact that the earlier tribes camped on the mountain slopes above the valley and that Qusayy took the secular initiative in clearing the immediate shrine area of trees, normally a forbidden act in a *haram* or *hawta*. He settled his own people, who formerly lived in "widely scattered settlements," in the newly cleared area, with a defined territory eventually assigned for the domicile of each tribe. To view it from a slightly different perspective, at the birth of Muhammad, Mecca had been a genuine settlement for somewhat more than a hundred years and the Quraysh had led sedentary lives there for that same length of time.⁵³ Close in on this now reduced Haram area Qusayy built the *dar al-nadwa* to serve as his own residence as well as the assembly place for the community, "in which the Quraysh used to decide their affairs,"⁵⁴ affairs that included all community activities from political acts to religious rituals. In a later generation, no one could enter the *dar al-nadwa* unless he was a direct descendant of Qusayy, and it was forbidden to anyone to take part in the affairs of the community until he had reached the age of forty.⁵⁵ Finally, and significantly, as has already been noted, Qusayy's house gave direct access to the Ka'ba.

When the Quraysh moved into Mecca, it was perhaps Qusayy himself who allotted them two quite distinct quarters of the new settlement. The principal tribes—the Hashim, Umayya, Nawfal, Zuhra, Asad, Taym, Makhzum, Adi, Jumah, and Sahn—lived in a valley bottom in the immediate vicinity of the shrine, while the lesser tribes were settled on the outskirts with what remained of the non-Qurashi inhabitants.⁵⁶ Contrary to what convenience or strategy or simple urban common sense might seem to dictate, the choicest part of the city, though the least habitable and least defensible, was exactly what it is today: the wadi bottom, as close to the shrine as possible. It was perhaps as Qusayy is reported to have said:

"If you will live around the sanctuary people will have fear of you and not permit themselves to fight you or attack you."⁵⁷ Near association with the shrine would render the Quraysh themselves taboo.

The Origin of the Sanctuary

If Qusayy was the founding father of Mecca, he was not such for the shrine. Mecca the *haram*, the holy place, appears to antedate Mecca the city. That there was a shrine before a settlement in that inhospitable valley we assume simply from the circumstances of the place: Mecca possessed none of the normal inducements to settlement—none, certainly, that would give the place a history or even a long tradition of contested possession. A holy place, on the other hand, requires little beyond the sanctity of the site, a sanctity connected with a spring, a tree, or a mountain. Only its sanctity, however obscure the origins of that holiness, explains the existence of Mecca, and only a shrine yoked to corollary considerations—social, economic, or political—explains the eventual presence of a city there.

Arab explanations of the origins of the sanctuary are inevitably Muslim explanations derived from the Quran: the Meccan Ka'ba and its surrounding *haram* were founded and, in the case of the Ka'ba, built by Abraham and his son Ishmael (Quran 2:125–127). Some of Muhammad's pagan contemporaries may well have thought the same even before the Quran announced it, but few modern scholars are inclined to agree. They prefer something simpler: the Meccan shrine and its rituals were the product of ancient Arab paganism, which Muhammad made acceptable to Muslim consciences by identifying them as authentic survivals of the "religion of Abraham," a notion the Prophet developed at Medina. This explanation may in fact be too simple. We know a good deal about the pre-Islamic cult in Mecca and its environs because Muhammad not only incorporated much of it intact in the Islamic pilgrimage ritual but also tended to polemicize against it in the Quran.⁵⁸ Literary antiquarians such as Ibn al-Kalbi and al-Azraqi also supply some valuable information, and the picture that emerges from both bears a notable resemblance to cult practices followed elsewhere among the Semites. This much is not surprising: the Arabs too were Semites, and even in antiquity their ethnic connection with the Jews—the Arabs were commonly called "Ishmaelites" long before Islam—was recognized and acknowledged.⁵⁹

But what of more proximate causes? Perhaps the Meccans' rituals were influenced by a Jewish presence in that city, and perhaps this presence inspired not only the resemblances between Meccan and Jewish rites but even the origin of the Abraham story? That suggestion was put forward by

Reinhart Dozy in 1864 and twenty years later provoked a refutation from another Dutch scholar, Christian Snouck Hurgronje. Hurgronje offered no new information on the Meccan rituals; what he did strenuously argue was that, on the evidence of the Quran, the connection between Abraham and Ishmael and the Ka'ba did not appear *until* Muhammad was at Medina and thus in contact with—and opposition to—the Jewish community there. Hurgronje's position became part of Western scholarly orthodoxy.⁶⁰

Leaving aside the issue of Muhammad's use of the Abrahamic connection to the Ka'ba—and it should be recalled that the implicit point of the Abraham connection with the Meccan sanctuary is precisely to exclude a Jewish one—the question of the remote origins of the Meccan Haram remains. While it is possible, even likely, that there were Jews in or passing through Mecca in Muhammad's day,⁶¹ it is highly unlikely that Jews sanctified the sites or founded the rituals there. Far more probable is that the Zamzam, or one of several such springs, or perhaps the two high places called Safa and Marwa, established the sanctity of the site of Mecca, though how long before Qusayy we cannot say.⁶² Our sources, as we have seen, trace the sanctity of the Meccan Haram exclusively to the Ka'ba, the edifice built at God's express command by Abraham and Ishmael. We cannot confirm or deny this belief through archeology, which is neither vigorously pursued nor much encouraged in the vicinity of Mecca. More promising are other examples of shrine phenomenon, some from ancient sources and some reflecting more contemporary practice in Arabia, which can be used to understand and interpret the often random information supplied by the early Muslim authors.

Before Islam, Arab law was what it continued to be in many places even afterward, namely, customary law, a set of procedures that governed the behavior of one member of a tribe toward all other members of the same tribe. This "internal" law was neither divinely prescribed nor supernaturally guaranteed but was rather constituted by a type of *mos majorum*, defined by constant usage within the tribe and reinforced by the tribe's willingness to punish its own members for violations. No such system prevailed *among* the tribes, however, and the Arab version of international law had to appeal to other, more universal grounds. We are less certain of how this larger order operated, under what aegis tribe met tribe and conducted social and economic business or resolved differences in an atmosphere of security. Though we can find no divinely revealed or guaranteed law and order prevailing among tribes, the religious component seems more apparent on this international scale than it does within tribes. The tribes came together in sacred months, on sacred terrain, and often under the (temporary) tutelage of what are clearly religious figures.

There was and is more than one holy domain at Mecca. At the heart of the present city, and of the settlement for as long as we have records, there is a holy building, the Ka'ba, which is venerated by a series of ritual acts but which is apparently no more taboo than the space that surrounds it: entry is not restricted, for example, as it was in the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem.⁶³ The Ka'ba is in turn surrounded by two larger areas, both defined in the manner of a *temenos* and both marked by prohibited and privileged behavior within them. The one immediately surrounding the Ka'ba is called the "sacred shrine" (*al-masjid al-haram*) and was later regarded by Muslims as a mosque. A third and far larger area, the true *haram* and called simply by that name, extends well beyond the settled area of Mecca city and is defined by stone boundary markers (*ansab al-haram*).⁶⁴ This is the sacred territory prohibited to non-Muslims throughout Islamic history.

The Site of Mecca

Mecca had little save its own holiness to recommend it as a site for settlement. A poet later described it as a place where "winter and summer are equally intolerable. No waters flow . . . not a blade of grass on which to rest the eye; no, nor hunting. Only merchants, the most despicable of professions."⁶⁵ The Quran itself is willing to concede the point. Here Abraham addresses his Lord:

O, our Lord, I have made some of my offspring dwell in a valley without cultivation, at Thy sacred House, in order, O Lord, that they may establish regular prayer [salawat]. So fill the hearts of some among men with love toward them, and feed them with fruits so that they may give thanks. (Quran 14:37)

The vale of Mecca was not always such perhaps: the prayer of Abraham may be a projection back to the patriarchal age of the perceptions of a later generation that found Mecca situated in a barren and unappealing place. The Arab tradition asserted that when the Jurhum came to Mecca, "they saw a town blessed with water and trees and, delighted with it, they settled there."⁶⁶ The tradition even recalls the presence of trees in the valley bottom of Mecca in more recent times,⁶⁷ trees that, as we have seen, were cut down by Qusayy to make room for his city. But, given the unvarying climate of Mecca, it is unlikely that the trees were much more than scrub.

"The climate of Mecca is sultry and unwholesome." So begins a northern European's description of the city of the Prophet in the opening years of the nineteenth century. Another traveler who was there at about the

same time, one Ali Bey al-Abbasi, wrote from his own experience the definitive gloss on the above verse of the Quran that describes Mecca as located in “a valley without cultivation” (14:37). Mecca, says Ali Bey,

is situated at the bottom of a sandy valley, surrounded on all sides by naked mountains, without brook, river or any running water; without trees, plants or any species of vegetation. (Ali Bey 1816: 2:112)

And then, casting his eye in a somewhat broader arc:

The aridity of the country is such that there is hardly a plant to be seen near the city, or upon the neighboring mountains. . . . We may not expect to find at Mecca anything like a meadow, or still less a garden. . . . They do not sow any grain, for the too ungrateful soil would not produce any plant to the cultivator. The soil refuses to yield even spontaneous productions, of which it is so liberal elsewhere. In short, there are but three or four trees upon the spot where formerly stood the house of Abu Talib, the uncle of the Prophet; and six or eight others scattered here or there. (Ali Bey 1816: 2:110)

Mecca, it is often said in an attempt to explain its prosperity or simply why people chose to settle there in the first place, stood at the nexus of natural trade routes. In fact, it does not. The natural route between the Yemen and the north lies well east of Mecca, and caravans going there obviously made a detour.⁶⁸ There were many places in the near vicinity of Mecca, Ta²if, for example, with better soil, more water, and a better climate.⁶⁹ What Mecca possessed and they did not, though we cannot explain how or why, was an intrinsic holiness. The Quran explains it, and there were no denials from the Quraysh: Mecca was important because it was a holy city, and that holiness dates back to Abraham.

The Shape and Form of the City

By all accounts, Mecca must have been an extremely modest place in the fifth and sixth century C.E., a valley running roughly northeast-southwest, tightly bracketed by two high ridges of mountains. Did Muhammad claim to be a messenger of God, the Lord of the Worlds? “So ask your Lord who sent you,” the Quraysh remarked derisively, “to remove us from these mountains that enclose us. Straighten out our country for us and open up rivers like those of Syria and Iraq.”⁷⁰ Into this valley was jammed the settled population, close to the Ka⁶ba and close to each other. The center of town was wrapped in “suffocating heat, deadly wind, clouds of flies,” as an Arab geographer later described it, while the so-called outskirts were little more than mud huts clinging to the slopes of the inhospitable mountains.⁷¹

And in the midst was the small area known as the shrine (*masjid*), defined from the beginning only by the fact that it was an open space between the walls of the facing mud houses. The “gates of the Haram” were nothing more than the alleys between the houses that opened onto that space. On the testimony of Ibn Ishaq and Azraqi, business was conducted in the open courts of houses or in the Haram itself, particularly at the Station of Abraham or while leaning at ease against the low wall called the *hatim* opposite the northwestern face of the Ka’ba.²

Indeed, the early city must have looked much as it did in 1814, when John Lewis Burckhardt saw it, even after centuries of investment of money and energy:

The town is situated in a valley, narrow and sandy, the main direction of which is from north to south. . . . In breadth this valley varies from 100 to 700 paces; the chief part of the city being placed where the valley is most broad. In the narrower part are single rows of houses only, or detached shops. The town itself covers a space of about 1500 paces in length, from the quarter called al-Shubayka to the extremity of the Mala. . . . The mountains enclosing this valley are from 200 to 500 feet in height, commonly barren and destitute of trees. The principal chain lies on the eastern side of the town: the valley slopes gently toward the south. . . . The rainwater from the town is lost toward the south . . . in the open valley called Wadi al-Tarafayn. Most of the town is situated in the valley itself; but there are also parts built on the sides of the mountains, principally on the eastern chain, where the primitive habitations of the Quraysh, and the ancient town, appear to have been placed. (Burckhardt 1829: 103)

The houses of the Quraysh were indeed primitive. The Caliph Mu’awiya (r. 661–680) is credited with being the first to build there with baked brick,³ and in the Prophet’s own lifetime the inhabitants were incapable of roofing the Ka’ba and had to wait until fortune brought a carpenter into their midst. The Ka’ba, the most important building in the town, was constructed of unmortared stones laid one atop the other.

The Ka’ba was built in the Age of Ignorance with loose stones, without clay. Its height was such that young goats could burst into it. It had no roof, and its clothes [the veil later called kiswa] were merely laid upon it, hanging down. (Ma’mar al-Rashid, Fath al-bari 3.350⁻⁴)

All the other buildings, as far as we can tell, were constructed of mud mixed with straw.

Nor did they very long stand. Snouck Hurgronje, who not only read the chroniclers but lived in Mecca in the 1880s, remarked, “God gave to His guests [a name the Meccans liked to give themselves, “God’s Guests”] only stones, sand and an intolerable temperature. And not content with

this, He placed, to the east of the vale of Mecca, a permanent threat to their lives and their goods, the *sayl*." The *sayl* is the torrential flooding that has plagued Mecca for most of its history and has succeeded in leveling even the most substantial of structures, to say nothing of the humble abodes of the fifth- and sixth-century Quraysh. As Hurgronje noted, showers to the east of the city inevitably resulted in flash flooding in Mecca itself, with its holiest place, the Haram and its Ka'ba, situated directly athwart the drainage line of the valley where the city was built.

Destructive floods did not relieve the town's perennial shortage of drinking water. Even before Mecca began to grow under Islamic auspices, the task was not so much to supply water to the permanent residents—who were doubtless few in number—as it was to provide for the increased population that came there as pilgrims. That, at any rate, is how we construe the presence among the officials of the city of one whose task it was to supply drinking water under those circumstances. In the Islamic era there was a ceremony to induce rain,⁷⁵ and it would not be surprising if the ritual was as old as the pilgrimage itself.

THE MECCA TRADING COMPANY

As the later Muslims understood the history of the "mother of cities," Mecca was a rich and important commercial center in the century before the birth of Muhammad, and the Prophet and his fellow Quraysh were the beneficiaries of a thriving mercantile enterprise there. There is little consistency in the details, however. When we attempt to assemble the widely dispersed and diverse evidence about the commercial activity of pre-Islamic Mecca into a coherent picture of plausible enterprises unfolding in an identifiably historical place,⁷⁶ the results are often as varied, and perhaps as little convincing, as some of the sources themselves. Writers from the eighth to the twelfth century and even beyond may indeed have preserved the kernel of historical truth, or at least a long remembered tradition that stretches somewhere back toward the origins of Islam. But which particular elements of that tradition might be true is almost impossible to discern. Often we are reduced to remarking what is likely *not* true of the mercantile life of Mecca before the birth of the Prophet.

That the Khuza'i shaykh Amr ibn Luhayy transformed Mecca from a simple holy site into a syncretistic shrine complex we have no reason to doubt.⁷⁷ Nor that Qusayy some centuries later created the political conditions conducive to Mecca's growth into a genuine urban settlement. Its economy at that stage was probably still the somewhat limited one of a holy city, that is, a city whose income was chiefly generated by visitors to