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## **If Mecca Did Not Exist in the Time of Muhammad, then Who Was Muhammad and Where Did He Live?**

### **Introduction**

Muslims claim that Muhammad was born in Mecca and the earliest parts of the Qur'an were revealed to him there. Indeed, without Mecca the whole story of Muhammad would have to be re-evaluated and the very foundations of Islam would have to be questioned. However, recent archaeological and historical research calls into question whether Mecca even existed in the traditional time of Muhammad (570-632 AD). There are no archaeological artifacts from Mecca until the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, the first direct mention of Mecca in external literature occurs in 741 AD, and the first time Mecca is listed on a map of the Middle East was 900 AD. Indeed, if Mecca did not exist in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, then who was Muhammad and from where did he come?

This paper will consider the Muslim evidence for the existence of Mecca in light of the research of a number of recent scholars who have suggested that Mecca was probably neither a center of trade nor a religious center or pilgrimage site in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. One issue for consideration is that the geographical descriptions of the city of the prophet in the Qur'an do not match up with the barren landscape of Mecca. Furthermore, the qiblas, or the direction of prayer in the mosques, did not point to Mecca until 727 AD. The evidence also may indicate that Muhammad probably did not have anything to do with Mecca, especially since it may not have even existed at that time. Finally, a mounting body of evidence suggests that the Nabataean

kingdom of Petra in Northeast Arabia might have actually been the center of the origin of Islam, and Muhammad a much different religious leader than the one traditionally portrayed by Islam.

## **Muslim Claims about Mecca**

Muslims believe that Mecca is the “mother of all cities” (Q. 6:92; 42:7) and tradition states that it goes back to the first home for Adam and Eve after they were cast out of heaven (Q. 7:24). Later, around 2,000 BC, Abraham and his eldest son, Ishmael, repaired the Ka’ba in order to worship God (Q. 21:51-71). Subsequently, according to Islam, in the time before Muhammad, Mecca had become a center of idolatry during the “Age of Ignorance.” To correct this injustice and put man on the “right path,” Allah raised up the prophet Muhammad, and through his leadership the city was restored as a center of Muslim worship as well as the most important city in the Islamic world.

Muslims claim that Muhammad lived in Mecca from 570 AD to 622 and died in Medina in 632. Islamic tradition states that after his death all mosques began to face Mecca. Muslims also claim that Mecca was the center of trade and caravans would take a detour from the main route in order to worship at the Ka’ba. If all of this is true, Mecca should be one of the best known and best documented cities in history.

Even though the name “Mecca” is only mentioned in the Qur’an once (Q. 48:24), Muslims believe that inferences to “Mecca” in the Qur’an and the Hadith indicate that the city is not only the center of Islam, but also the center of history. Therefore, many anonymous and indistinct references to locations mentioned in the Qur’an are assumed to refer to Mecca. For example, as mentioned above, Muslims believe that [Mecca]<sup>1</sup> is the “mother of all settlements,” or the “mother of all cities” (Q. 6:92; 42:7), and therefore must have existed from the time of

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<sup>1</sup> The brackets indicate that the name “Mecca” is assumed but not present.

Adam and Eve (Q. 7:24). They also believe that [Mecca] is also referred to as “the place of the prophet” (assuming that the “prophet” must refer to Muhammad), and has a number of geographical and vegetative characteristics that are listed in the Qur’an. These inferences describe [Mecca] as being in a valley with a parallel valley (Ibn Hisham; Al Bukhari 2:645, 2:685, 3:891, 2:815, 2:820, 4:227), with a stream near the Ka’ba (Al Bukhari 2:685), with ruins outside the city, and a pillar of ‘salt’ nearby (Q. 37:133-138; referring to Lot’s wife). The city is also surrounded by fields (Al Bukhari 9:337), has trees (Sahih al-Tirmidhi 1535), including olive trees (Q. 6:141; Q. 16; Q. 80), grass (al Bukhari 9:337), fruit (Al Bukhari 4:281), clay and loam (Al Tabari VI 1079 p.6). The city is also described as having mountains close enough so that they overlook the Ka’ba (Ibn Hisham; Al Bukhari 2:645, 2:685, 3:891, 2:815, 2:820, 4:227). However, as we shall see later, the actual city of Mecca is not in a valley, and has none of these horticultural assets listed above, mainly because it is in a desert where it is just too arid and dry for these things to survive. Is it possible that the Qur’an and these Hadith are actually describing a different city in a location far away?

The Standard Islamic Traditions also indicate that [Mecca] is the burial place of many of the biblical prophets. This list would include Adam and Eve, their son Seth, Ishmael, Noah, Hud (the great-great grandson of Noah), Salih (the grandfather of Hagar), the Queen of Sheba, the prophet Daniel, as well as up to 300 other prophets.<sup>2</sup> According to the various sources, these

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<sup>2</sup> Wheeler, Branno, “Mecca and Eden: Ritual, Relics, and Territory in Islam”, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, 105; Uri Rubin, “The Ka’ba: Aspects of Its Ritual Functions and Position in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Times.” Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam - From Jahi-liyya to Islam - Part 2 (1986), 121; Muhammad Ibn Abd Allah al-Kisai, and Wheeler M. Thackston, “Tales of the Prophets (Qisas Al-Anbiya)” Great Books of the Islamic World, Kazan: Kazi Publications, 1997, 100-101; William Brinner, The History of al-Tabari: Volume 2: Prophets and Patriarchs. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987, 47; Umar S. al-Ashqar, “The Messengers and the Messages in the Light of the Qur’an and Sunnah”, Translated by Nasiruddin al-Khattab. Islamic Creed Series. Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005, 143; Gustav Weil, “The Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud, or Biblical Legends of the Mussulmans: Compiled from Arabic Sources, and Compared with Jewish Traditions, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855, 243-244; Ibn Kathir, “Stories of the Prophets”, Rashad Ahmad Azami. Riyadh: Dar-us-Salam, 2003, 519-520.

people all would have lived for some time in Mecca, or died there. This would mean that parts of the Bible would come into question and the focus of the stories would need to be re-directed 600 miles further south. However, while there is much historical and archaeological evidence to corroborate the Biblical narrative, there is almost nothing to support these claims of Islam. In addition, if all these prophets died and were buried in Mecca, then where are their graves and their remains?

## **The Historical Considerations**

There are a number of historical problems with Mecca being the city where Muhammad grew up and where Islam began. First of all, there is a problem with the Islamic sources being too late and too distant. The standard sources that are used to corroborate the Standard Islamic Narrative are the Qur'an, the *Hadith*, the *Sira* (biographies of Muhammad), the *Tafsir* (commentaries on the Qur'an), and the *Tarikh* (early histories of Mankind). More and more scholars are following the judgment of John Wansbrough<sup>3</sup> and regard the collection and the canonization of the Qur'an as taking place in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century. Without the actual *Sira* of Ibn Ishaq (d. 765), the earliest we can date the oldest biography of Muhammad is in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, using Ibn Hisham's purported recension of Ibn Ishaq's work (Ibn Hisham d. 833). This is almost 200 years after Muhammad's death. The *Hadith* were collected in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century by scholars such as al-Bukhari (d. 870), Sahih Muslim (d. 875), and Abu Dawud (d. 899), but some of the extant copies of these collections are not even available before the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (NY: Prometheus Books), 2004.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10654/> (1017 AD copy of Volume 3 of Sahih al-Bukhari).

This gives revisionists a lot of time to make changes or construct additional traditions. In addition, since the commentaries and the first histories are also over 200 years after the fact (Al Tabari d. 923), many of the entries rely on traditions that cannot be verified. Indeed, as more and more evidence from 7<sup>th</sup> century archaeological, numismatic, and epigraphic sources comes to light, these later Muslim sources become more problematic because they do not correspond with the information that is being discovered.

Another very interesting area of discrepancy for the Standard Islamic Narrative comes from the realization that the Meccan Arabic script is not the one that is used for writing the Qur'an. The Qur'anic script is from North Arabia rather than from the Hejaz where Mecca is located. South of Medina the script used was Sabaic, which originated in Yemen. Unlike the earliest Qur'anic script, which only had the *rasm*, or the consonantal letters, the Sabai script had already developed vowels as well as consonants. However, the Arabic script that was used for the Qur'an apparently comes from Nabataean Aramaic, which contains unique grammatical characteristics not found in the Sabaic Arabic, and in its earliest form only contained consonants. There are four Arabic grammatical usages that were developed that distinguish the Northern style of writing Arabic, which was commonly used in the region of Jordan.<sup>5</sup> First, there are the unstressed inflectional short final vowels, marked with diacritics, known as *i'rab* because they were characteristic of Bedouin dialects. Second, Qur'anic Arabic incorporates the following three grammatical features that are not present in the Arabic of South Arabia:

- **Ta' Marbuta:** “The *addition of two superimposed dots...to give ّ (ta' marbuta) ...indicating that the letter ha' is to be pronounced as /t/*”
- **Alif Maqsurah:** “The *word-final dotless 'ya'’*” (ﺀ), placed at the end of the word, where an alif cannot occur, goes back to an earlier ‘-ay’
- **Definite Article ‘al’:** “*Introduced to following coronal consonants*”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Durie, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Reflexes: Investigations into the Genesis of a Religion* (Lexington Books, 2018), 15-17.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Durie, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Reflexes*, 15-17.

Due to these unique features, Durie concludes that this provides “evidence that the Arabic of the Qur’an was not a Meccan dialect, but instead conformed to features of the southern Levantine dialects,” and “was most likely a Nabataean Arabic dialect... developed from Nabataean Aramaic.”<sup>7</sup> This means that the 7<sup>th</sup> century script available in Medina, which was in the Hejaz, would not accommodate the text of the Qur’an.

Perhaps the most damaging historical problem in regard to the existence of Mecca in the 7<sup>th</sup> century is that it seems to be a city that has no previous history. The earliest literary reference to Mecca’s existence is found in the *Continuatio Byzantia Arabica*, also known as the Byzantine-Arab Chronicle of 741, which was written during the early reign of caliph Hisham. Thus, the first direct mention of Mecca in literature outside the Qur’an occurs in 741 AD.<sup>8</sup> In addition, even though there are a number of maps of the Arabian peninsula in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the Hadith literature claims that Mecca was at the crossroads of significant international caravan trade routes, Mecca is not included on a map until 900 AD.<sup>9</sup> What makes this strange is that a number of other cities in the area, such as Najran, Ta’if, Sana’a, Yathrib (Medina), and even Petra are mentioned in great detail during the same time period. If Mecca was such an important city, even the city of the prophet, why is there nothing that mentions Mecca in the literature until over 100 years after Muhammad’s death? Finally, if Mecca was the center of trade, then why is it not located on any maps until 900 AD, almost 300 years after Muhammad supposedly lived there?

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Durie, *The Qur’an and Its Biblical Reflexes*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Crone, Patricia, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 1987), 6-7. Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery: Probing the Black Hole at the Heart of Muslim History* (Peter Townsend, 2018), 48. In addition, if the Qur’an was not actually finalized until the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, then it may be a possibility that the one time Mecca is found in the Qur’an could have been inserted toward the end of the process.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Townsend, *The Mecca Mystery*, 49.

## The Archaeological Considerations

Whenever new construction is considered in ancient cities like Jerusalem and Damascus, archaeologists are called in to make sure that historic sites are not disturbed, or, if discoveries are made of ancient artifacts, these records of the past can be collected and preserved. However, this apparently is not the case with Mecca. Recently, Muhammad's traditional birthplace, the house of Khadija, Muhammad's first wife, the house of Abu Bakr, as well as a number of the earliest known mosques and tombs have been destroyed in Mecca. In fact, an estimated 95% of the historic buildings in Mecca have been destroyed since 1985.<sup>10</sup> The reason that is given is either that these historical sites are being destroyed so that Muslims will not worship them, or, more pragmatically, that these sites need to be removed in order to make more room for hotels, parking lots, and even bathrooms for the growing number of pilgrims swarming to Mecca during the annual Hajj. However, a more sinister reason may be that these earliest remnants of Muhammad and the origins of Islam in the city may be disappearing because they did not exist as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Saudi government does not allow archaeological work to be performed in Mecca or Medina. This may be simply a "coverup" for a lack of archaeological evidence that could be used to support the existence of Mecca in the time of Muhammad.

When Dan Gibson, a veteran archaeologist of many years in the Middle East, attended a conference on Nabataean Studies in Petra in 2002, he asked leading archaeologists from Saudi Arabia and Jordan about the archaeological record in Mecca. He was very surprised when "they admitted there was no archaeological record in Mecca before 800 AD."<sup>11</sup> If this is an accurate assessment by the Arab archaeologists in regard to Mecca in the time of Muhammad, then the

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/latenightlive/why-have-meccas-historical-buildings-been-destroyed/5869064>

<sup>11</sup> The Sacred City. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtIyeREGCYI>. Start at minute 3:15.

real reason for the destruction of so many of the historical sites that supposedly link back to Muhammad may be that these buildings and mosques did not exist in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, but rather they were constructed at a later time. Therefore, destroying evidence that would undermine the historicity of Islam would be necessary to protect their historical claims. Peter Townsend points out that Muslims accept the concept that “history underpins every aspect of Muslim faith.”<sup>12</sup> However, Townsend also reminds us that “when we study the inscriptions, documents and archaeological evidence produced by Mecca’s Arab near-neighbors and the imperial powers that dominated the ancient Near-East (Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian, and Roman), we do not find a single reference to Mecca.”<sup>13</sup> If the history cannot be verified, then the religion itself will be open to claims of fraud, deception, hypocrisy, and illegitimacy. Muslims will no longer be able to claim that their religion came from Allah and that their Qur’an is the final word from God. Islam will merely fall into the category of a man-made religion.

## **The Geographical Considerations**

In addition to archaeological inconsistencies, there are a number of geographical descriptions in the Qur’an and the Hadith that seem to point to a city much farther north in Arabia than Mecca. First of all, in the 6,236 verses in the Qur’an, there are only 65 geographical references and 9 places named, mostly referring to people. For comparison, the gospel of Luke in the New Testament is divided up into 1,151 verses that refer to 110 geographical locations and 31 specific places named. In addition, while the geographical features in the Qur’an seem to be pointing to a place 600 miles to the north rather than to Mecca and Medina, Luke has been shown to be correct in naming all 110 geographical locations in the right places. Curiously, of

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<sup>12</sup> Townsend, *Mecca Mystery*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Townsend, *Mecca Mystery*, 71.

the 65 geographical references in the Qur'an, 54 refer to three places and people in Northern Arabia. There are 23 references to the people of 'Ad, or the biblical city of Uz in the land of Edom, 24 references to Thamud, which is another name for the Nabataeans, who cut dwellings into mountains, and 7 references to Midian or the Midianites. All of these people lived over 800 miles north of the Hejaz in what is today Northern Arabia and Jordan.

As we mentioned previously, the city of Mecca is not mentioned in external literature until 741 and it does not appear on a map until 900. However, the Nabataeans are well known historically from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, and Petra was the center of their kingdom for many years. Midian and Edom also have an established history and are referenced throughout the biblical record. On the other hand, Mecca is only mentioned once by name in the Qur'an (6:92), and as we have seen above, it has a dubious record historically.

Furthermore, we would expect that if Mecca were the "mother of all cities," and the "birthplace of the prophet" Muhammad, and the origin of the religion of Islam, then we would expect that the qiblas, or the direction of prayer from the mosques,<sup>14</sup> would also point to Mecca from the very beginning. The Qur'an indicates that Muhammad received a revelation in 624 that the direction of prayer from all the mosques should point toward Mecca rather than Jerusalem, where the Muslim faithful had been facing in their prayers. However, as Dan Gibson has abundantly demonstrated, the qiblas for the first 100 years did not face Mecca, but rather they faced Petra. Gibson visited many of the locations of the earliest mosques in the Middle East and with great care measured the direction of their main walls or their qiblas. He determined that up through the year 706, all the qiblas faced Petra. The first time the qibla of a mosque faced Mecca

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<sup>14</sup> In the earliest mosques, the qibla was determined by the longest wall. Later, in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, the direction was marked with a niche called the *mihrab*.

was not until 727.<sup>15</sup> That is almost 100 years after Muhammad's death. However, this information fits very well with the statement of Arab archaeologists that artifacts indicating an active population did not show up in Mecca until 800. In addition, if the city of Petra was the focus of worship in these mosques for the first 100 years, and with the many references to the people of 'Ad, Thamud, and Midian mentioned in the Qur'an, then it is more than likely that Petra and Northern Arabia played a significant role in the formation of the religion that became Islam. Moreover, when we also consider that the Arabic used in the Qur'an was developed from Nabataean Aramaic, then the picture becomes even clearer.

### **Vegetative Descriptions in the Qur'an**

Not only does the evidence from the early qiblas, or the majority of the references to people and geographic locations point to Petra and Northern Arabia, but even the vegetative descriptions in the Qur'an and the Hadith describe a land of fields, streams, and flocks rather than the barren land of rocks and sand that describes Mecca.

Earlier, we noted a number of geographical and vegetative descriptions from the Qur'an and the Hadith that Muslims linked with Mecca. While these features do not fit Mecca at all, they fit very well with Petra. For example, Petra has two main valleys that are parallel, with a number of streams as well as indications of former irrigation channels and cisterns. One of the streams would have run near a place that archaeologists consider to be a Ka'ba. There are ruins outside the city (caused by several major earthquakes), and within a short journey would be the place where the Old Testament relates that Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt. In addition, the land is fairly fertile and includes fields with grass for herds of animals. There are also trees, including fruit trees as well as olive trees, which at that time were only found in the

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<sup>15</sup> Dan Gibson, *Early Islamic Qiblas: A survey of mosques built between 1 AH/622 C.E. and 263 AH/876 C.E.* (Independent Scholar's Press, 2017), 5.

Mediterranean regions. The valleys have steep sides, so there are mountains close enough that they overlook the ruins of the Ka'ba. These are the descriptions that Muslims accept for the city of Mecca, but as we can see, they fit Petra much better.

Petra was also a major center of worship of the pre-Islamic god Dushara (also known as Dusares or “the Lord’s only-begotten”), who is thought to have been the son of Al-lat (also known as Manat as well as al-Uzza), and the precursor to al-illah, the God, or “Allah” (though other traditions name Al-lat as the consort of Allah).<sup>16</sup> Dushara was worshipped through a cubic stone, sometimes referred to as the “Ka’ba.” It is also interesting to note that one of the ways to worship Dushara was to circumambulate around a stone cube seven times.

### **Muslim Evidence for Mecca**

In their counter argument to the evidence presented above, Muslims claim that they have strong arguments for the existence of Mecca centuries before the advent of Muhammad. One of the earliest arguments in favor of Mecca is a reference in the Samaritan *Asatir*, also known as The Samaritan Book of the “Secrets of Moses.” It contains a line which says that “all the sons of Nebaioth reigned... from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates, and they built Mecca.” Moses Gaster, a British rabbi and Orientalist, believed that the *Asatir* reflected an early stage in Samaritan thought and placed the compilation around 200 BC. However, two other specialists, Ze’ev Ben-Hayyim and Christophe Bonnard, propose a range of dates for the *Asatir* from the late tenth century to the end of the eleventh AD, therefore making it a later retrojection of the narrative.<sup>17</sup> Though the *Asatir* is cited by Arabic authors in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is no

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<sup>16</sup> <https://allpropastors.org/petra-was-mecca/>

<sup>17</sup> Alan D. Crown (ed.), *The Samaritans*, Tübingen: Mohr 1989, 466.

longer considered by most scholars to be a pre-Islamic reference to Mecca since it is simply too late.

In 1788, Edward Gibbon, in his book, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 5, states that the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus referenced “Mecca” in his 1st century writings. Diodorus quoted Agatharchides (2nd c. BC) who wrote: “A very sacred temple has been established there which is highly revered by all the Arabs.”<sup>18</sup> However, the name “Mecca” was never mentioned and further research determined that Gibbon was wrong since the description of the location that Agatharchides refers to lies near the Gulf of Aqaba, many hundreds of miles north of Mecca. It is also important to note that a temple is being referenced and not a Ka’ba. In addition, at that time the “Arabs” that are mentioned were probably only the ones who lived in Arabia Patraea, a province of Rome in what is now Northern Arabia near the city of Petra. This would not have included the Hejaz where Mecca and Medina are located.

One of the best arguments regarding an historical reference to Mecca involves a “map” of Arabia constructed by the Greek scholar Claudius Ptolemy (90-168 AD). However, Ptolemy did not actually draw a map, per se, nor did he visit any of the places he mentions in Arabia. Rather, he calculated the latitude and longitude for many cities, mountains and other geographical features known in his day. Apparently, in an eight-volume compendium called *The Geography* he plotted his coordinates on a large physical ball or a globe. Although Ptolemy was quite accurate with known areas close at hand, his system was based on 81 degrees north and south rather than the 90 degrees that is used today. His lack of knowledge of the vast deserts of the Arabian peninsula also caused distortions to maps that were later drawn according to his measurements.

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<sup>18</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*

One city that Muslims want to equate with Mecca is called “Macoraba,” which Ptolemy lists as being one of the cities in Arabia. This would then give evidence that Mecca would have been known as far back as the first century BC. However, there are several problems with this assumption. First, Mecca ( مكة ) and Macoraba ( ماکورابا ) are not similar names at all in Arabic except that they begin with the same letter. Second, Ptolemy’s coordinates do not place Macoraba in the same place as Mecca. Due to the inconsistencies in the coordinates, Ian Morris, and others, place Macoraba Southeast of Medina and hundreds of miles from the present city of Mecca, which is near the coast.<sup>19</sup> Gibson, after adjusting the coordinates according to the ancient rivers and in order to account for the distortions caused by Ptolemy’s miscalculation for the size of the desert, placed Macoraba further south near Yemen.<sup>20</sup> Patricia Crone, in her best seller, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, devoted a number of pages arguing against the supposed evidence for Macoraba. She also noted that it was situated in the wrong place. In the end, she concluded, “*The plain truth is that the name of Macoraba has nothing to do with that of Mecca, and that the location indicated by Ptolemy for Macoraba in no way dictates identification of the two.*”<sup>21</sup>

Another argument set forth by Muslims for the early existence of Mecca is that the Arabian trade route would have passed through or near Mecca on the coast and that its prominence as a place of worship based on the Ka’ba would have certainly drawn many travellers to the city. However, since the Arabian trade route was on the eastern side of the Arabian plateau, in order for camel caravans to pass through Mecca, they would have to leave the plateau at Taif and head down 1,000 meters to Mecca, which would have been a barren place

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<sup>19</sup> Ian Morris, *Mecca and Macoraba*, *Al-Usur al-Wusta* 26 (2018): 1-60.

<sup>20</sup> <http://thesacredcity.ca/PtolemyMecca.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, 134-35.

with little water or food for animals. Then, the caravans would have had to climb back up the 1,000 meters to resume their trek along the plateau trail. Dr. Patricia Crone realized two glaring problems for this scenario. First, after searching through all the available travel documents for centuries leading up to the time of Muhammad, she did not find one mention of “Mecca,” even though there were many references to other cities nearby, such as Taif, Najran, and Yathrib (later Medina). This absence of any mention of Mecca is surprising if it actually had been an important worship stop on the caravan routes. In addition, Crone also discovered that most of the trade during the 7<sup>th</sup> century would have made its way by ship up through the Red Sea rather than on land since it was more convenient as well as a great deal less expensive. In the end, Crone concludes

Not a single source outside Arabia mentions Mecca before the conquests, and not one displays any sign of recognition or tells us what was known about it when it appears in the sources thereafter. That there was a place called Mecca where Mecca is today may well be true; that it had a pagan sanctuary is perfectly plausible (Arabia was full of sanctuaries), and it could well have belonged to a tribe called the Quraysh. But we know nothing about the place with anything approaching reasonable certainty. In sum, we have no context for the prophet and his message. The suspicion that the location is doctrinally inspired is reinforced by the fact that the Qur’an describes the polytheist opponents as agriculturalists who cultivated wheat, grapes, olives, and date palms. Wheat, grapes and olives are the three staples of the Mediterranean; date palms take us southwards, but Mecca was not suitable for any kind of agriculture, and one could not possibly have produced olives there.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Thus, we return again to the probability that the “Mecca” inferred in the Qur’an, as well as the traditions, seems to point us to a place 800 miles north of present day Mecca to the city of Petra, which was the center of the Nabataean kingdom and located at the crossroads of major

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<sup>22</sup> Crone, Patricia. *What do we actually know about Mohammed?* 2008. [https://cmes.uchicago.edu/sites/cmes.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/Outreach/Resources/History/Patricia%20Crone\\_What%20do%20we%20actually%20know%20about%20Muhammad%20%28from%20openDemocracy.net%29\\_June%202008.pdf](https://cmes.uchicago.edu/sites/cmes.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/Outreach/Resources/History/Patricia%20Crone_What%20do%20we%20actually%20know%20about%20Muhammad%20%28from%20openDemocracy.net%29_June%202008.pdf)

trade routes. Petra fits the historical, geographical, archaeological, and Qur'anic claims much better than Mecca. Petra was the source of the Qur'anic Arabic, Mecca was not. Petra was a wealthy trading city on a crucial international trade route. Mecca was not. Petra was close to the pilgrimage sites associated with Abraham. Mecca was not. Petra was close to the site of Lot's wife who turned into a pillar of salt. Mecca was not. Petra was close to the people of Ad, Thamud and Midian (the places mentioned in the Qur'an). Mecca was not. Petra was the epicenter of Arab culture and civilization. Mecca was not. Petra had extensive agriculture, streams of water, and geological formations which the Qur'an mentions. Mecca did not. Petra has an extensive archaeological record before the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Mecca does not. Petra had cubic shrines called Ka'bas, and a sacred meteorite, known as the "black stone" before Mecca did. All of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and some of the 8<sup>th</sup> century qiblas faced Petra, not Mecca. In fact, none of the early maps, up to 900 AD, show Mecca at all, nor is the name "Mecca" found in any of the external literature until 741AD. In addition, the Muslim arguments for a rocky, barren, water-deprived area once being the "mother of all cities," the birthplace of the prophet Muhammad, the cradle of the Qur'an, and the launching pad for the Islamic religion, can no longer be substantiated. The facts tell a much different narrative. These facts also bring us to a very important question: If Mecca did not exist in the time of Muhammad, then who was Muhammad and where did he live?