

The Hijaz in Late Antiquity

Social and Economic Conditions in the Cradle of the Qur'an

It is genuinely surprising how little we actually know about the social and economic conditions of the Qur'an's traditional milieu during the early seventh century. To a certain extent, the severe limitations of our evidence for this region have largely forestalled any efforts to critically investigate the history of Mecca and Yathrib in late antiquity. Yet at the same time, the almost complete absence of any information at all regarding the central Hijaz in our late ancient sources tells its own tale: once again, such silence can speak volumes. Indeed, the near total invisibility of this region in any of our late ancient sources is seemingly a clear sign that it was isolated from and insignificant to the broader world of late antiquity. Nevertheless, despite the severe paucity of our evidence, some efforts have been made to reconstruct the society and economy of Mecca and Medina, even if the majority of these studies are less than fully critical in their willingness to embrace the collective memory of the later Islamic tradition. Perhaps the single most famous and influential such study is Henri Lammens's *La Mecque à la veille de l'Hégire*, wherein this priest-scholar almost single-handedly invented the myth of Mecca as the wealthy financial center of a vast international network of spice trade. It is certainly not without considerable irony, one must note, that this notoriously hostile critic of Islam singularly bears the most responsibility for reifying what can only be considered as some of the most dubious elements from the Islamic tradition's sacred history of its traditional birthplace.

Lammens received a considerable assist in promoting this myth from the Scottish historian Montgomery Watt, whose widely popular and influential books on Muhammad in Mecca and Medina effectively established the baseline knowledge for much subsequent scholarship on early Islam, particularly in Anglophone contexts. Yet even more than Lammens before him, Watt's biographies of Muhammad

present little more than a slightly critical summary of how Islam's prophet is remembered in the hagiographies of the later Islamic tradition. The result of this combination is such that Watt's studies promulgate, as Peter van Sivers rightly notes, a deceptively "secular" version of the "sacred vulgate" of the period of origins as remembered by the later Islamic tradition.¹ In full lockstep with Lammens, Watt conjures forth a vision of late ancient Mecca as swimming in riches from the spice trade, on the basis of which he then constructs the image of Muhammad as a "liberal" social reformer and champion of the poor against their exploitation by wealthy capitalists, a narrative of earliest Islam for which his work is especially famous. I have elsewhere discussed the implausibility and inspirations of this modern myth of Islam's founding prophet, but presently we are concerned with evaluating its imagined economic basis, as fashioned by Lammens and Watt. As it turns out, their collaborative vision of Mecca as in effect a kind of Dubai of ancient Arabia rests on an insufficient scrutiny of the available evidence and a willing assent to some of the most questionable elements of the Islamic tradition's memory of late ancient Mecca. Indeed, as we will see, the most probable reconstruction of the social and economic conditions in Mecca and Yathrib at the beginning of the seventh century could hardly be farther from the wealthy and cosmopolitan financial capital conjured forth by Lammens and Watt.²

We have Patricia Crone in particular to thank for dispelling this myth of Mecca as the wealthy hub of an international spice trade, which she thoroughly debunked in her meticulous study *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Despite some initial resistance—some of it quite hostile and even ad hominem—the legacy of this study is a definitive and final refutation of the myth of Mecca as the wealthy center of a sprawling network of trade in luxury goods—most notably, spices and perfumes. In response, some scholars have recently sought to salvage Mecca's riches by finding an alternative source of immense wealth in the mining of precious metals in late ancient Arabia. Yet, as we will see, the evidence for such claims, despite their frequent repetition, remains entirely lacking. Other attempts to find some sort of basis for Meccan affluence all founder on a variety of problematic issues, as Crone has noted in her most recent consideration of the Meccan economy, "Quraysh and the Roman Army." There she introduces the possibility that the Roman army's insatiable need for leather goods could possibly have commanded sufficiently high prices that it may have theoretically made sense for some of the Meccans to travel to the Roman frontier to trade their hides for a better price. Yet at the same time, she also notes—a point that has often gone unnoticed by many scholars of early Islam—that this is merely a hypothesis and one that is problematic in its own right, involving a number of questionable assumptions at that. Instead, as we will see, both Mecca and the Yathrib oasis, the future Medina, were by all indications at the beginning of the seventh century small, sleepy, out-of-the-way places with little economic or other significance to the outside world. Accordingly, as this chapter will demonstrate, moving forward we must adjust our assumptions about

the Qur'an's traditional milieu(x) in order to conceive of its initial formation in far more humble conditions than often have been envisioned. Indeed, it is nothing short of astonishing how persistent this scholarly fiction of Mecca's mammon remains, even after its thorough unmasking.³

MECCA AND THE MYTH OF THE SPICE TRADE

According to the Islamic tradition, Mecca's commerce consisted primarily in some sort of trade, and there is even some indication that Muhammad himself was a merchant who was active in this trade.⁴ Since the landscape of Mecca, "set among barren rocks," could not support agriculture, it seems reasonable to assume that its economy must have involved some sort of exchange. The only question, however, is exactly what the nature of this trade was. Long was it assumed that Mecca was an extremely prosperous center of trade, whose wealth accrued from its important position in the network of spice and incense trade from the south of Arabia and points farther to the east. On this basis, it was even supposed that Mecca must have been a major financial center, where, as Watt maintains, "financial operations of considerable complexity were carried out."⁵ Of course, one imagines that the complex transactions of such a major financial center would require a high level of literacy within the community, which, as we will see in the following chapter, is not in evidence. To the contrary, as Peter Stein concludes, the level of literacy evidenced in Arabia outside the northern oases and South Arabia was not sufficient to suppose any "ability, or even interest in drawing up complex economic documents."⁶

This Orientalist myth, which is not even very well evidenced in the historical sources, has since been thoroughly dispelled by Crone. Her *Meccan Trade* completely dismantles the conceit of Meccan trade in luxury goods for lack of any sufficient evidence to support this scholarly mirage: Mecca, she observes, "was not just distant and barren; it was off the beaten track as well." Instead, she convincingly identifies the Meccan economy as primarily pastoralist, since its barren landscape could support little else.⁷ One imagines, accordingly, that "devoid of food and other amenities that human beings and other animals generally require to engage in activities of any kind," it must have held a relatively small population.⁸ Fred Donner comes to much the same conclusion, noting that, in the absence of such international trade, we must recognize that Mecca "remained a very small settlement, for it is located in an area ill-suited to agriculture."⁹ When considered within the broader context of settlement patterns in the late ancient Near East, Mecca certainly was not a city or even a town.¹⁰ According to a reliable recent estimate based on data from the early Islamic tradition, it was a very small village with only a few hundred inhabitants, perhaps around five hundred or so, with around 130 free adult men.¹¹ Therefore, although this myth of Mecca as a major mercantile

center of considerable wealth and with a far-reaching network is, as Sean Anthony notes, a central part of the *Heilsgeschichte*, the “sacred history,” of the early Islamic tradition’s memory of its origins, it bears little resemblance whatsoever to the conditions in Mecca in the early seventh century.¹²

Crone ultimately determines that “Whether the Meccans traded outside of Mecca on the eve of Islam or not is a question that cannot be answered on the basis of these stories. Indeed the very theme of trade could be legendary.” Any such trade in which the Meccans were engaged therefore “was a local trade. Moreover, it was an Arab trade, that is to say, a trade conducted overwhelmingly with Arabs and generated by Arab rather than foreign needs.”¹³ It was a trade in which the Meccans would exchange goods from their pastoralist economy, the only economy that their landscape could support, for other goods produced in settled agricultural communities, particularly foodstuffs. Mecca could not produce enough food to support even its very meager population, as both Frank Peters and Fred Donner have also determined.¹⁴ Predictably, Crone’s devastating exposure of the spice trade fallacy initially drew some inimical, knee-jerk reactions from the wardens of the scholarly guild, most famously from Robert Serjeant, but in the years since, her correction of this Orientalist myth seems to have emerged as the new scholarly consensus.¹⁵

Indeed, we may look to Peters’s book on *Mecca* as an example of the extent to which *Meccan Trade* established a new *status quaestionis* on the Meccan economy, even among scholars taking a more traditional approach to the Islamic sources. As Peters writes,

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, the results are often as varied, and perhaps as little convincing, as some of the sources themselves. . . . Often we are reduced to remarking what is likely *not* true of the mercantile life of Mecca before the birth of the Prophet. . . . The city’s connections with what we know to be the broader commercial networks of the fifth and sixth century are far more problematic, however. The later Arab sources strongly urge such a connection, but everything that we know about international trade in the Near East on the eve of Islam raises serious doubts about the claim. . . . What information we do possess suggests the very opposite: there was little money in Mecca. . . . Mecca’s pre-Islamic commercial prosperity is, in fact, an illusion at worst and a considerable exaggeration at best.¹⁶

Mecca was therefore no major center of international trade, but rather a small, remote village with a subsistence economy based in pastoralism.¹⁷ Mecca’s location is in fact so desolate that it is difficult to imagine it even as having been a viable way station along any caravan route, and indeed, “only by the most tortured map reading can [its location] be described as a natural crossroads between a north-south route and an east-west one.”¹⁸

More recently, Crone returned to this topic, with the same goal as before of trying to determine “the extent to which the standard account of Meccan trade is defensible in terms of *any* evidence in this tradition.”¹⁹ In this instance, she considers the value that leather likely had for outfitting the Roman army as it stood watch along the marches of the frontier across the Syrian desert. Perhaps, she suggests, the high prices that tanned hides could command from the Roman soldiers, owing to their pressing need for leather products, could have made it financially profitable for some Meccans to travel in caravans up to the southeastern fringe of the Roman Empire to trade their wares. While this proposal remains uncertain, it is one possible explanation for the reports of Meccan trade with Syria in the Islamic historical tradition. Yet at the same time, one must underscore in this instance the purely hypothetical nature of Crone’s conjecture. All too often one finds references to this study suggesting that in this article Crone established the existence of a long-distance Meccan trade in leather goods, when she does nothing of the sort. Such assertions elide the extremely tentative nature of her proposal even in this instance. Indeed, as she deliberately concludes her article, “a case can be made for it, but not proved,” and “for the moment, the hypothesis that Quraysh were suppliers to the Roman army must be said to involve an uncomfortable amount of guesswork.”²⁰ Still, even if one were to grant that in some manner the Meccans sold the tanned hides from their flocks to the Roman army, the picture of Mecca in the early seventh century would change very little, if at all. As Crone remarks, it is “not likely that the inhabitants of a remote and barren valley should have founded a commercial empire of international dimensions on the basis of hides and skins.”²¹

MINING IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA: FOOL’S GOLD

Over the past few decades, a handful of scholars have sought to find some other commodity that could potentially replace the illusory spices of the Orient and still provide both Mecca and the Hijaz with a robust and wealthy economy. The new contender for the source of Mecca’s riches would appear to be trade in precious metals, particularly gold. For instance, as Aziz al-Azmeh maintains, scholars, in their quest “to challenge untenable assumptions about the spice trade,” have mistakenly “overshot” the underlying importance of precious metals in the Meccan economy in late antiquity.²² Nevertheless, despite a recent trend adducing trade in gold and silver as the new basis of a prosperous Meccan economy, it turns out that this alleged commerce in precious metals proves to be no less of a mirage than the spice trade of old. The primary inspiration for this latest effort to enrich Mecca’s otherwise subsistence pastoralist economy would appear to be a 1999 article by Gene Heck on “Gold Mining in Arabia and the Rise of the Islamic State.” In this article, Heck argues that the early caliphate drew a significant amount of its financial resources from precious metals mined in various locations across the Arabian Peninsula. On this point, his hypothesis seems quite sound, and there is

in fact archaeological evidence indicating active mining across the region at the end of the Umayyad period, starting in the early decades of eighth century. Yet it was only in the Abbasid period that the extraction of precious metals really took off and was conducted on a wide scale, a development owing itself especially to “the stark lack of mineral resources in the Mesopotamian heartland of the Abbasid Empire.”²³ Indeed, according to the most recent archaeological surveys of mining in the region, “all the sites fall within the Abbasid period and confirm that the Abbasids were highly committed to the exploitation of copper and gold on the Arabian Shield.”²⁴

Accordingly, one wishes that Heck had been content to stick to his initial observation that the C-14 data from the Arabian gold mining sites generally “indicate late ‘Abbāsid 10th–13th century mining activities.”²⁵ On this point at least, he appears to be entirely correct—if only he had left it at that. Instead, his study has muddied the waters considerably by introducing some unsubstantiated claims regarding evidence for mining precious metals in the lifetime of Muhammad. With regard to the sixth and seventh centuries, as well as for several centuries prior, I have not seen any archaeological evidence at all indicating mining activity at any of these sites for well over a thousand years before the eighth century CE. And it is on this crucial point that Heck’s article has greatly misled much recent scholarship in the field.²⁶ The primary basis for Heck’s claim consists of charcoal slags discovered at a particular mining site, Mahd adh-Dhahab, which he reports were dated using radio-carbon analysis to 430 CE–830 CE. According to Heck, these tailings provide solid evidence of gold mining activity there in the pre-Islamic period, a claim that he also repeats in his monograph on *The Precious Metals of West Arabia*.²⁷ Of course, these tailings on their own establish no such thing, since, based on the figures given by Heck, they could just as easily date to 700 CE as to 500 CE. For this reason, one must look to other factors, including the broader archaeological context in which the samples were discovered in order to determine the date more precisely.

Fortunately, in addition to Heck’s studies, we have a number of geological and archaeological surveys of this site, most of which present a more careful analysis of both Mahd adh-Dhahab and other Arabian mining sites as well. If we look at the most important and authoritative study of Mahd adh-Dhahab, for instance, we find that the scientists from the US Geological Survey who studied the site concluded that, on the contrary, “the Mahd adh Dhahab gold-silver mine . . . was worked extensively during the reign of Solomon (961–922 B.C.) and during the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 A.D.)” Otherwise, they found no evidence of any mining activity at this site during antiquity.²⁸ So, too, the archeological surveys of mining sites across western Arabia, including Mahd adh-Dhahab, have persistently determined that the only evidence of mining activity in the region is either from more than a thousand years before Muhammad was born, or one hundred years after his death.²⁹ In regard to Mahd adh-Dhahab specifically, one should note Hussein Sabir’s important observation (following K. S. Twitchell) that the

archeological context of the radiocarbon dated materials from this site clearly determines the Abbasid era as the period when mining activity was underway: “Kufic inscriptions found among ancient tailings at the Mahd adh Dhahab mine indicate that the age of the tailings is from A.H. 130 to A.H. 545 (A.D. 750 to A.D. 1150).”³⁰

In addition, it turns out that the radiocarbon dates cited by Heck are not accurate but instead appear to reproduce raw, uncalibrated radiocarbon data indicating a date of 1350 BP \pm 200 years—although I have not yet been able to determine where this data was originally published. Sabir refers to the US Geological Survey report authored by R. J. Roberts and others as his source for this information, but this document provides no such data and instead confirms the other reports in finding that mining was conducted at Mahd adh Dhahab only at two periods prior to the mine’s revival in the twentieth century: about 950 BCE and from 750 CE to 1258 CE.³¹ It would appear that Heck’s main source for this information is another US Geological Survey report by Hilpert, Roberts, and Dirom, which provides the raw data, along with an extremely misleading interpretation of it as “show[ing] that mining and smelting in the area continued from A.D. 430 until 830.”³² Of course, as we have just seen in the previous chapter, this radiocarbon dating shows no such thing and indicates instead mining activity only at some specific point during that range of dates. Yet more importantly, once we calibrate the C-14 data for these slags, we find a very different range of dates from what Heck and others following him have reported: the radiocarbon measurements yield not a range of 430 CE to 830 CE but instead, according to the most recent calibration curve, evidence of mining activity at some point between 250 CE and 1148 CE (see figure 3). Such a broad range—nearly a full millennium—can hardly establish gold mining at this site during the sixth and seventh centuries in the absence of any other reliable evidence indicating as much. This is particularly so when all our other evidence indicates instead that such mining began only late in the Umayyad period and was active especially under the Abbasids.

Heck also maintains that there is similar evidence from a gold mine at Jabal Makhiyat (Jabal Mokhyat), from “gold placers” that have been radiocarbon dated to 626 CE. On this point he appears to follow an earlier article by Keith Ackermann, who reports radiocarbon evidence of mining near Jabal Mokhyat that has been radiocarbon dated to 660 CE. Nevertheless, the published sources cited in both studies do not actually verify either claim.³³ Ackermann refers to an “internal memorandum” from 1974 by D. L. Schmidt of the US Geological Survey in support of his claim. Yet, if one looks to the official USGS report, on which Schmidt was the lead author, there is no evidence of gold mining at this site at this time. And it is certainly odd that while Ackermann cites this unpublished memo from 1974 in his own article of 1990, he makes no reference to this formal USGS report published by the same author in 1981. According to the official report, to which, I propose, we must cede authority in this case, all the radiocarbon datings for the site relevant to the early Islamic period returned dates with a broad range between

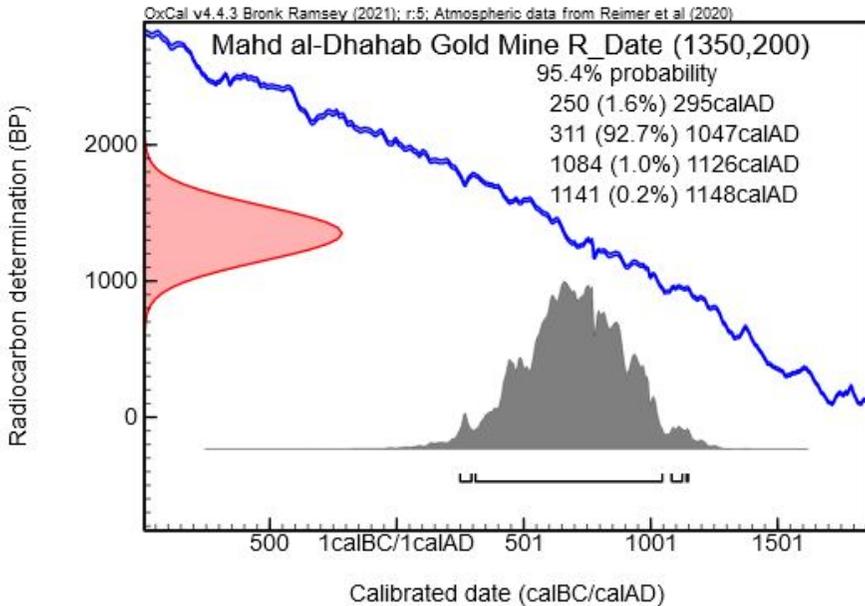


FIGURE 3. Radiocarbon Dating of Slags from the Mahd adh Dhahab Mine.

the eighth and tenth centuries CE. There are no radiocarbon datings in this report that would indicate any seventh- or sixth-century activity, or any earlier for that matter—other than the first millennium BCE.³⁴

The actual date given by this report for the gold placers in question is instead $2,600 \pm 250$ years before the present in one instance and $2,620 \pm 250$ in another; these yield calibrated dates of 1407 BCE to 159 BCE or 1414 BCE to 173 BCE! Later in the same report the authors give an uncalibrated date range for these samples of “645 + 250 years B.C.”: could it be that a BCE date here has been mistaken by Ackermann for CE?³⁵ The USGS report does elsewhere report radiocarbon evidence of “gold-quartz” mining at a site around fifty kilometers north of Jabal Mokhyat sometime 950 ± 300 years before the present, for a calibrated range of 433 CE–1618 CE, which the authors rightly conclude, based on correlative evidence, reflects mining activity in the Abbasid period.³⁶ On the very the same page the report also mentions evidence of *copper* mining near Jabal Mokhyat (discussed below), for which it gives a date of 660 CE, the same date indicated by Ackermann.³⁷ Although Ackerman refers here generally to evidence of “mining activity” near Mokhyat, the clear implication from the immediate context in his article is that he has gold mining, rather than copper, in view. It would appear that Heck has followed Ackermann’s misleading claim in this context, although, if so, it is admittedly not clear at all how he comes up with a date of 626 CE in this instance: indeed, one struggles to identify the basis of this claim.

Heck also reports radiocarbon dated evidence for mining of silver at Samrah in the al-Dawadimi district between 668 and 819 CE, on the basis of an

unpublished report at the Saudi Arabian Directorate General of Mineral Resources. Fortunately, we have the raw radiocarbon datings for these materials in Ahmed M. Shanti's report on the site, and according to the most up to date calibration curve, IntCal 20, the datings of these two samples are between 668–976 CE and 684–990 CE. Yet one must note that this data, even with the most recent calibration, confirms Shanti's clear finding that there is no evidence of any pre-Islamic mining activity at this site.³⁸ One should also note that according to the US Geological Survey report for this site, these charcoal samples were dated instead to 700 and 725 CE in a finding that has also been repeated in other subsequent studies of this site. Nevertheless, the meaning of these numbers is not clear, since they do not reflect the range of dates that one would expect for uncalibrated dates; nor does it appear that they have been calibrated in any way.³⁹ Therefore, in light of this clear evidence to the contrary, it is utterly astonishing, then, to find Ackermann citing these very same datings as if they somehow provide "confirmation of mining in the fifth and sixth centuries" at Samrah.⁴⁰ I fail to see how such a conclusion could possibly be warranted on the basis of this evidence, and it only adds further to confusion to an already highly muddled discussion of this topic.

This brings us, then, to consider the evidence for copper mining; and, as was the case with gold and silver, so it is with copper. While there is abundant archaeological evidence for the mining of copper during the late Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, there is in fact no clear evidence for the pre-Islamic period. Tailings from copper mining near Jabal Mokhyat, mentioned just above, have a calibrated radiocarbon date of sometime between 229 and 1222 CE, which is almost identical to those from another copper mine at Jabal ash Shizm, which date to between 248 and 1228 CE.⁴¹ In both cases, however, once again the wide range of the possible datings, nearly one thousand years as was also the case with Madh adh-Dhahab, hardly provides confidence to assert that these sites were actively mined in the sixth and seventh centuries. Indeed, given the clear pattern that we have seen indicating an Arabian mining boom that began only in the eighth century, unquestionably the most probable conclusion to draw from this evidence is that, again like Madh adh-Dhahab, these findings are indicative of copper mining at these sites during the eighth and ninth centuries.⁴² One suspects the same is also true of the wide range of dates indicating silver mining noted in the paragraph above: presumably these, too, reflect activity most likely during the Abbasid period. Therefore, given the startling lack of evidence to support Heck's claim that precious metals were mined in the Hijaz during in the time Muhammad, one can only note that it is highly unfortunate that his misrepresentations of the data have led numerous recent scholars to assert the importance of trade in gold in Mecca during the sixth and seventh centuries when there is in fact no such evidence.⁴³ It is a classic case in which a claim is made that confirms what scholars expect and hope to find, and so it is received and repeated without a thorough vetting.

At the same time, even if evidence were to emerge that could verify Heck's claims, one must consider just how small the impact would truly be for our understanding of the Meccan economy in the sixth and early seventh centuries. Only James Montgomery and Timothy Power have expressed the appropriate amount of caution in response to Heck's article. Montgomery notes, for instance, that only in one instance does Heck purport to have evidence of gold mining before Muhammad's death—in "circa 626 CE."⁴⁴ Here Montgomery unfortunately reproduces Heck's unfounded claim regarding Jabal Mokhyat, which, it turns out, is simply not in evidence in any published report that I have seen cited by Heck or anyone else. Power, for his part, accepts Heck's reports of archaeological evidence for gold and copper mining at some indeterminate time in the period between the fifth and tenth centuries CE at face value. As we have seen, however, the data actually indicate a range between the third and thirteenth centuries CE, which we can narrow with a high degree of probability to 750 CE–1150 CE based on the archaeological context of the radiocarbon dated materials. Yet Power is unquestionably right that even if one were to accept that gold was mined at Mahd al-Dhahab sometime between the fifth and ninth centuries CE, "the balance of evidence does not at present support the contention that mining was a significant part of the economy in the pre-Islamic Hijaz."⁴⁵

Indeed, one must also consider the fact that the mining sites in question were all in the remote and punishing desert interior of the Arabian Peninsula. The closest site to Mecca, Mahd al-Dhahab, was more than 250 kilometers northeast of Mecca, separated by towering mountains and a treacherous wasteland. Are we really to believe that, despite the lack of any positive archaeological evidence and other evidence to the contrary, gold was being mined there and, for some bizarre reason, was carted back to the small and isolated shepherding community of Mecca, particularly when the markets for such commodities would have lain directly to the north? In the case of more distant and desolate areas, the logic becomes only more strained. For instance, the two sites with potential, albeit unlikely, copper mining during this period would almost certainly have had no impact at all on the Meccan economy. Jabal Mokhyat is nearly 450 kilometers east of Mecca, and is also deep within the desert, while Jabal ash Shizm is nearly six hundred kilometers to the north, close to al-'Ulā. It is true, one must note, that the Sasanians appear to have been engaged in silver mining to the south in Yemen during the sixth century. Nevertheless, there is no reason at all to imagine that any of this silver would have passed through Mecca or had any impact on its economy. Instead, as Power explains, this silver was transported from the mine along garrisoned roads heading south, where it was exported from the port of Aden.⁴⁶

It is true, as many of these studies of early Islamic mining have noted, that the literary sources from the ninth and tenth centuries occasionally boast of the tremendous wealth of the region's gold mines during the pre-Islamic period.

Nevertheless, in the absence of any corroborating archaeological evidence, there is no reason to place much stock in these fanciful reports, which, as Power observes, have “a legendary flavor” and are regularly “put to hagiographic uses.”⁴⁷ Montgomery similarly judges that even if Heck’s claim regarding gold mining were valid, it “does not prove the veracity of the pre-modern Muslim sources which attest to an astonishing abundance of gold.”⁴⁸ One imagines that the Arabian mining boom that took place during the Abbasid period stimulated the imagination of these much later historians to project the conditions of the age in which they were writing back onto the Arabia of three centuries prior. Given the notoriously unreliable nature of the early Islamic historical tradition for knowledge of late ancient Arabia on the whole, these reports are best left to the side in the absence of any sort of corroborating evidence. This is all the more so since, as Crone has demonstrated with devastating force, the accounts of the seventh-century Meccan economy found in the later Islamic historical tradition have little to no basis in the historical realities of the early seventh-century Hijaz. Likewise, in regard to these later reports of an abundance of gold specifically, Crone brings to our attention other literary traditions indicating, to the contrary, a decided scarcity of gold and silver in the seventh-century Hijaz.⁴⁹ Therefore, we are left to conclude, with Crone and Peters, among others, that Meccan trade was based above all on Mecca’s privation and its pressing need to obtain food for humans and livestock alike, as well as a need to obtain *qaraz*, a plant they used to tan the hides they traded.⁵⁰

THE MECCAN SHRINE

There is one remaining factor to consider in evaluating the economy and society of late ancient Mecca—namely, the alleged economic impact of the so-called Meccan shrine. The notion that Mecca was in late antiquity a major pilgrimage destination continues to serve as a cornerstone of the Orientalist myth of Mecca as a center of great wealth. Accordingly, scholars have frequently maintained that Mecca regularly hosted myriads of visitors who traveled from the far corners of Arabia to venerate its holy shrine, bringing with them their commerce. Moreover, on this same basis scholars also have frequently asserted that Mecca was itself a *haram* or religious sanctuary, a place that was inviolable and in which no violence or bloodshed could be committed. Not only, then, did Mecca’s annual pilgrimage traffic bring considerable wealth to town, as is commonly supposed, but the city’s sanctuary status also encouraged people to settle there and brought visitors year-round, on account of the safety afforded by the inviolability of its precincts. Thus, Mecca’s sanctuary status formed the basis for its emergence as a major center of international trade in luxury goods, since, as Watt maintains, people could come to trade there “without fear of molestation.”⁵¹ Yet it turns out that the image of Mecca in so much modern scholarship and in the early Islamic tradition as both a major pilgrimage center and a sanctuary is also no less of a scholarly mirage

than the envisaged Meccan spice trade to which these notions have become so closely bound.

Once again, we have Crone largely to thank for disabusing us of these false notions. This she does with relative ease, by simply reviving arguments made already at the end of the nineteenth century by Julius Wellhausen, a compelling analysis that much subsequent scholarship has forgotten and continues to overlook. The logic is as simple as it is seemingly inescapable. In the first place, the Islamic tradition itself is unanimous in indicating that Mecca was not the site of any pilgrimage fair. There are reports of annual pilgrimage fairs that took place in relatively close proximity to Mecca, but none specifying any pilgrimage to Mecca itself or any corresponding pilgrim market. As such, as Crone rightly observes, in the case of the scholarly fiction of Mecca as hosting an annual pilgrimage fair, just “as in the case of the Meccan spice trade, the axiomatic truths of the secondary literature have only a tangential relationship with the evidence presented in the sources.”⁵² Nevertheless, perhaps it was at one of these nearby pilgrimage markets, which, in contrast to Mecca, were in fact inviolable sanctuaries or *ḥarams*, that the Meccans of late antiquity traded the various goods of their pastoralist economy for the other foodstuffs and supplies they so desperately needed.

Therefore, not only was Mecca not the site of any pilgrim fair or a sanctuary city in late antiquity; it was by all indications also not the focus of any sort of pre-Islamic pilgrimage, with or without a corresponding market. Here, in particular, Wellhausen’s logic is quite compelling, making its neglect in so much subsequent scholarship a regrettable source of misunderstanding regarding the “Meccan shrine.” As Wellhausen rightly observed, the most important elements of the Islamic pilgrimage to this day still take place at locations outside Mecca, around ten kilometers from the city, a fact that affords crucial evidence indicating that the pre-Islamic pilgrimage rites at these nearby sites—Arafat and Mina—almost certainly did not involve Mecca at all. The visits to Mecca before and after the pilgrimage in subsequent Islamic practice clearly seem to be more recent additions to a more ancient practice. Indeed, in all the discussions of the ancient pilgrimage to Arafat and Mina in the pre-Islamic period, the sources consistently present Mecca as an afterthought, if they do so at all. There simply is not sufficient evidence even from the later Islamic tradition to support the existence of any pilgrimage to Mecca prior to the rise of Islam. Its incorporation into the pre-Islamic practices as a launching and landing pad for rites that took place at some distance from Mecca clearly appears as a secondary, post-Islamic development that seeks to Islamicize these more ancient practices. And so Mecca, as Gerald Hawting persuasively argues, seems to have been incorporated into the *hajj* only sometime well after Muhammad’s lifetime, most likely in the later seventh century.⁵³

So, what about the Meccan shrine, then? Well, it seems abundantly clear that it was not the cause of any pilgrim fair or sanctuary; nor was it even the object of pilgrimage from outside Mecca. Did it even exist then? I think it is entirely

reasonable to assume on general principles that the herdsmen of this small, remote village and their kith and kin would have had some sort of sacred shrine, as is customary in most cultures. Just what the nature of this shrine may have been, however, is a difficult question that is not easily answered based on the limited and much later information that we have from the Islamic tradition, as both Crone and Hawting have made clear. The existing structure of the Meccan Ka'ba does not help us much in this quest, since it is not only off limits to investigators, but this shrine was destroyed and rebuilt twice in close proximity at the end of the seventh century.⁵⁴ So what survives today is not the shrine of pre-Islamic Mecca but a product of competing religious interests during the second Islamic civil war, at a time when Mecca became newly incorporated into the older pilgrimage practices.

One thing we must consider is whether Mecca's shrine was in fact a "pagan" holy place, dedicated to one of the deities of the pre-Islamic Arabian pantheon, as the Islamic tradition remembers, or if it was instead a monotheist place of worship, as the Qur'an itself seems to suggest. As Hawting and Crone have both persuasively argued, the Qur'an's response to its opponents seems to indicate its origin within a context that was thoroughly monotheist.⁵⁵ The Qur'an's primary disagreement with its "associator" opponents does not appear to concern the number of gods but instead whether or not it is appropriate to associate any intermediary spiritual powers with the one God, who was seemingly confessed and worshipped by both parties. So, if the Qur'an truly reflects a Meccan context in its contentings with these associators, then we need to radically rethink what the nature of their local shrine may have been. Presumably, it would have been already dedicated to the one God, Allah, the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. In such case, would it have been something resembling a church or a synagogue? The lack of evidence to support any Christian or Jewish presence at all in Mecca, as we will see in more detail in the final chapter, complicates any such simple solutions to the nature of either the Qur'an's monotheist opponents or their shrine. In any case, however, there is no reason why we should suppose that such a monotheist shrine would have been of any significance for anyone beyond the local inhabitants of Mecca, and there is likewise nothing to suggest that it was a major pilgrimage destination for Abrahamic monotheists of late antiquity.

As for the Islamic tradition's memories of Mecca's shrine as a "pagan" temple, Crone in particular has laid bare the deeply contradictory and confused nature of these reports. For instance, according to tradition, the Meccan shrine was dedicated to the Arabian deity Hubal, although Muhammad's tribe, the Quraysh, who were supposed to have been the guardians of the shrine, are said to have served the god Allah. Nevertheless, as Crone observes, no pre-Islamic Arabian shrine is ever said to have housed more than one male god, as the later Islamic tradition would compel us to suppose in this case. It is an important first sign that something is not quite right with these accounts. Likewise, the tradition's identification of the Quraysh as the shrine's guardians is not compatible with its separate memory of

them as far-flung traders, unlikely though that tradition is in its own right. Here again, broad inconsistencies in the Islamic tradition's account of Mecca's "pagan" shrine do not inspire much confidence. Indeed, the conflicting facets of these traditions appear to indicate their design at some historical distance in order to provide the Qur'an with a more tangibly and credibly "pagan" context, rather than bearing any resemblance to historical realities of the early seventh century.⁵⁶ To be sure, it is not impossible that there may have been a shrine at Mecca dedicated to one of the pre-Islamic deities, but it suffices to say that this hypothesis is not compatible with the image of the "associators" as they appear in the Qur'an; nor should we assume that we have reliable information concerning this shrine from the Islamic tradition. Instead, any shrine that once existed in this small, hard-scrabble village, whether it was monotheist or "pagan," is highly unlikely to have been of any significance for anyone beyond Mecca's few hundred inhabitants and perhaps some of the nomads in its surroundings. As such, it can hardly be imagined to have had enough financial significance to improve Mecca's subsistence pastoralist economy in any meaningful way.

In order to round out this discussion of the Meccan shrine, we should also note that the Qur'an occasionally identifies its sacred House with *al-masjid al-ḥarām*, that is, "the inviolable place of prayer," whatever that may have been. Indeed, the Qur'an itself is not always precise and consistent in regard to just what it means by *al-masjid al-ḥarām*. Of course, in the decades following Muhammad's death, *al-masjid al-ḥarām* came to be identified with the mosque that was built around the Meccan shrine, but it seems rather obvious that no such mosque would have existed in the pre-Islamic period, and so this designation must mean something else in the Qur'an. According to the later Islamic tradition, *al-masjid al-ḥarām* was in Muhammad's lifetime the name given to the empty space surrounding the House, effectively anticipating the subsequent construction of an Islamic *masjid* around the House during the early caliphate. In this case, however, as Hawting observes, we come to the rather peculiar and unsatisfying conclusion that "a name figuring so prominently in the Qur'an should be applied to an empty space without any apparent function."⁵⁷ There are a few passages in the Qur'an that suggest some sort of relation between *al-masjid al-ḥarām* and the House, but in each case "the details are not clear."⁵⁸ Since Mecca is otherwise not known in the Islamic tradition as having been either a *ḥarām* or the focus of a pilgrimage before the rise of Islam, it would seem to follow that in the pre-Islamic period, any *al-masjid al-ḥarām* must have been elsewhere. The nearby holy sites of Mina and Arafat offer possible candidates, inasmuch as the Islamic tradition identifies them as having been *ḥarāms* in the pre-Islamic period, but this is not at all clear from the Qur'an itself.

What we find in the Qur'an, then, is not a simple reflection of Mecca's pre-Islamic religious status or the role of its shrine in an annual pilgrimage. Instead, as Hawting rightly discerns, the Qur'an reflects the process of Islamicizing the

pre-Islamic religious practices of a *hajj* and perhaps a related *masjid al-harām* by linking them directly with Mecca and establishing Muhammad's hometown as a distinctively Islamic holy place. It was a process that was still ongoing at the time when the Qur'an itself was being composed, which explains the messiness of the Qur'an's representations of the pre-Islamic pilgrimage and sanctuary.⁵⁹ Accordingly, it seems we may safely conclude that prior to the rise of Islam, Mecca was not in fact some sort of renowned and important holy place, and likewise there is no reason to imagine that the Meccan economy was greatly enriched by the presence of any sort of major pilgrimage shrine. Rather, pre-Islamic Mecca remains little more than an obscure, sleepy, out-of-the-way village deep within the deserts of Arabia, with no particular religious significance and a subsistence economy based in pastoralism.

Nor can we even say with any certainty that the Ka'ba and the House of the Qur'an refer to a shrine in Mecca. After all, the Qur'an explicitly identifies the location of the House as "Bakka" rather than Mecca (3:96). Judging on the basis of the Qur'an itself, and not the later Islamic tradition, Bakka clearly seems to be a different place from Mecca. The Islamic tradition is of course desperate to identify this Bakka and its sanctuary with the Meccan shrine still revered by Muslims today. Therefore, in order to remedy the Qur'an's highly inconvenient location of its shrine in Bakka, many later Islamic scholars simply decided, without any actual historical basis, that either Bakka is an older name for Mecca or else Bakka refers specifically to the Ka'ba itself and its immediate surrounding in Mecca. There is, however, no justification for identifying Bakka with Mecca either in whole or in part other than a determined need to bring the Qur'an fully into agreement with the Islamic tradition.⁶⁰ Nothing allows us to assume that when the Qur'an says Bakka it means Mecca, particularly since it correctly names Mecca elsewhere.

Scholars have of course scoured ancient literature searching for some toponym resembling Bakka that could somehow be aligned with Mecca, generally to no avail. There is in fact only one other reference to a place known as Baka, in Psalms 84:6–7, and here the psalm explicitly identifies Jerusalem's Holy House with a barren place named Baka. Moreover, scholars are widely agreed that Psalm 84 is a "pilgrim psalm," giving voice to the experience of pilgrims to Jerusalem as they drew near to the Temple.⁶¹ It is thus a truly remarkable parallel to Qur'an 3:96–97, and one that is far too close to be simply ignored, as has long been the case. This biblical Baka was, it turns out, the place where, in Jewish memory, pilgrims to the Temple would gather and make their ascent to the Temple Mount. Accordingly, the Qur'an's location of its "House" (*al-Bayt*) in Bakka draws this shrine directly into the orbit of Jerusalem's "Holy House" (*Beit HaMikdash*).⁶² Likewise, we should further note that the name "valley of Baka" in essence means "a valley of drought" or "a desert valley," as modern commentators are agreed.⁶³ Thus, this valley lying just below God's Holy House, through which its pilgrims must process, is described by the psalm as a dry and desert place. How interesting, then, that

the Qur'an's Holy House is not only located in a place called Bakka, where it drew pilgrims, but the Qur'an also specifically indicates its location near a "valley where no crops are sewn" (14:37).

If we are to take seriously the Qur'an's intertextuality with the Psalter, then we must acknowledge this instance as in fact a textbook example: it describes pilgrimage to a Holy House dedicated to the God of Abraham, founded by Abraham, at a place named Baka, which is an uncultivable valley. Ironically, this close correspondence has not been lost at all on many modern Muslim scholars, who often assert that in Psalm 84 the Hebrew Bible directly refers to the ancient sanctuary founded by Abraham at Mecca (since for them Bakka is the same as Mecca), even as it presents the Meccan shrine in deliberately obscured and disguised form as the Jerusalem Temple.⁶⁴ Yet, while this interpretation obviously makes perfect sense to a devout Muslim, for the historian, let alone the historian of religion, such a reading of the psalm is of course simply preposterous. At the same time, however, this interpretation, apologetic though it may be, is undeniably correct in identifying the important connection between these two passages.

As Neuwirth has frequently noted, the Qur'an's pronounced interest in associating its House directly with the Jerusalem Temple often leads to some significant slippage between the two in the text.⁶⁵ Otherwise, however, the connection between the Qur'an's shrine and Jerusalem's Holy House still remains relatively unexplored. The fact that Muhammad's earliest followers initially prayed facing Jerusalem and are reported to have had an intense interest in restoring worship and dignity to the site of the Jerusalem Temple certainly steers us in this direction. Likewise, the failure of the non-Islamic witnesses from the seventh century to locate the shrine revered by Muhammad's followers in Mecca also strongly invites us to consider other possibilities regarding the "House" of the Qur'an.⁶⁶ To be sure, the Qur'an's presentation of the House is highly complex, and its identification of the House with the Temple is not always such a simple matter as it is in case of Bakka/Baka. But we must understand that the traditions of the Qur'an remained a work in progress seemingly for decades, and therefore it is no great surprise to find that in its presentation of the House the early identification of this Qur'anic shrine with the Jerusalem Temple has become increasingly blurry as other currents have influenced the emerging collective memories of Muhammad's followers. It is a topic that I hope to return to soon in another context.

THE YATHRIB OASIS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

The economic situation in Yathrib/Medina was certainly different from Mecca, although it was not much better. Like Mecca, Yathrib was not sizeable enough even to be called a town, let alone a "city." It was in fact not a single organized settlement but rather "an oasis comprising a somewhat looser collection of disparate settlements" located around the region's various water sources that made

possible the cultivation of dates and possibly some limited amount of grain as well.⁶⁷ As none other than Montgomery Watt, for instance, describes Yathrib at the time of Muhammad, “It was not so much a city as a collection of hamlets, farms, and strongholds scattered over an oasis . . . surrounded by hills, rocks, and stony ground—all uncultivable.”⁶⁸ The total population of Yathrib was seemingly larger than Mecca, although not dramatically so. One would guess that there were probably around one thousand inhabitants scattered across the approximately twenty-square-mile oasis. There were more than a dozen small settlements in the oasis, none of which, one imagines, would have been individually as large as Mecca, and presumably no single settlement had a population of more than a couple hundred people, while most probably had fewer than one hundred inhabitants.⁶⁹

Yathrib of course was in a more economically viable location since, unlike Mecca, it could support some agriculture. Yet again, there is no indication that Yathrib was any sort of major center for trade, and its exchange was almost certainly limited to trading locally produced goods with other nearby settlements. There surely was no long-distance trade of Yathrib’s main commodity, dates, since these were—and are—ubiquitous throughout western Asia. Date farming offered Yathrib’s inhabitants a slightly more robust economic basis than the Meccans enjoyed, since they could produce enough food to feed themselves and presumably even enough surplus for some exchange. But this was by no means a high-value commodity: dates famously are “the bread of the desert,” and while such a basic food staple would have been in demand, there certainly was no shortage of supply.⁷⁰ As noted by Paul Popenoe, who introduced date cultivation to California’s Coachella Valley in the early twentieth century, “date growing is not a ‘get-rich-quick scheme’” by any measure.⁷¹ Still, dates were essential foodstuff for the inhabitants of ancient Arabia, serving as a primary source of nutrition that could easily be transported and stored over long periods.

Yet, since dates were so abundant everywhere in the late ancient Near East, Yathrib’s dates could hardly command a premium; nor should one imagine that they were traded over long distance to the Roman and Sasanian worlds, which had no need whatsoever for such imports. Indeed, our best source of information regarding date cultivation in the Near East at the end of antiquity comes from the Yadin papyri discovered in 1961 near the Dead Sea. These papyri once belonged to a Jewish woman named Babatha who owned a date farm in the Nabatean village of Maoza, on the southwestern shore of the Dead Sea, which her father acquired from a Nabatean woman named ‘Abi-‘adan. Several of the documents in this collection of papyri, written in Nabatean Aramaic, directly concern her ownership of the date orchard. When she first took possession of the date farm, Maoza was a part of the Nabatean kingdom, with a mixed population that included a Nabatean majority and a sizeable Jewish minority. Yet it was not long thereafter that Maoza, along with the Nabatean capital Petra, would become part of the Roman Empire as the province of Arabia.⁷² The dates of this region were very famous in the late

ancient Near East, earning the nearby city of Zoara the title “City of Dates”: one could hardly imagine that with such an abundance of high-quality dates there was any profit in bringing dates from Yathrib to this nearest part of the Roman Empire.⁷³ Philip Esler has recently studied these papyri, in part to reconstruct Babatha’s economic activities as a date grower. Esler reaches the conclusion that despite Babatha’s ownership of the orchard and her father’s ability to purchase land, her economic status nevertheless stood at the upper end of what was ultimately a peasant economy.⁷⁴ One would certainly not expect any more than this of Yathrib’s growers, inasmuch as they were far more economically isolated and likewise were presumably without a sophisticated irrigation system comparable to that of the Nabateans.⁷⁵

It is relatively common for scholars of early Islam to assert that Yathrib stood at a crossroads linking major trade routes, and so it must have been a significant economic center, but this simply does not follow in the way they would assume. There does not seem to have been any sort of main town to the region; nor would we expect in these conditions that there was any kind of significant central marketplace for exchange. The economies of these small farms and hamlets must have been on a very small scale, and there is no indication at all that they operated in any sort of collective fashion to create a larger regional economy. To the contrary, by all indications there was profound political disunity among these various homesteads and hamlets before Muhammad’s arrival. Indeed, most of the archaeological remains in Yathrib from the pre-Islamic period consist of various private fortifications, small towers called *uṭum*, which were maintained by the individual communities for their defense amid constant feuding with their neighbors. And so G. R. D. King, in considering the lack of any more substantial fortifications in Yathrib, concludes that given “the anarchic political conditions at Yathrib before the Prophet arrived. . . too little agreement existed among the tribes to allow a wall to be built.” The lack of any such collective defenses reflects, in King’s estimation, the “profound divisions” and “political disunity among the inhabitants of Yathrib” before Muhammad’s arrival.⁷⁶ Need it be said that it seems highly unlikely that the quarrelsome farmers of Yathrib’s scattered settlements would have come together in some sort of economic cooperative with a central market? It is safe to conclude, I think, that no less than Mecca, the Yathrib oasis was an economically insignificant and culturally isolated collection of small settlements. And again, like Mecca, Yathrib appears as an extremely unlikely context for the Qur’an, one that was simply not capable of producing or even comprehending such a rich and sophisticated collection of late ancient religious traditions, as we will consider in the chapters to follow.

CONCLUSIONS: THE QUR’AN IN THE “EMPTY HIJAZ”

By all measures, the central Hijaz, and especially Mecca, appears to have been culturally isolated, except perhaps for the quite hypothetical possibility of some

long-distance traders who might have interacted with Romans near the desert frontier. It is highly significant, one should note, that no source prior to the Qur'an makes any mention of Mecca, and the Qur'an itself mentions it only a single time (48:24).⁷⁷ Despite the fact that we have detailed descriptions of western and southern Arabia from various Roman historians, including Procopius (ca. 500–570 CE) most notably, Mecca seems to have been completely unknown to the classical and late ancient worlds. The fact that Mecca is not named even once in any Greek, Latin, Syriac, Nabatean, Persian (etc.) source provides strong evidence that Mecca did not have any significant cultural, economic, or political ties to the broader world of the late ancient Mediterranean and Mesopotamia. Of course, once we recognize that Mecca was a small village with only a few hundred inhabitants and a subsistence economy, its omission becomes perfectly understandable.

There are, it is true, a few references to the Yathrib oasis, ranging from an ancient Babylonian inscription from the sixth century BCE to a South Arabian inscription from the sixth century CE.⁷⁸ Yet in each case the reference is entirely perfunctory. Yathrib appears merely as the name of a place in Arabia, usually in a list with other nearby places, without any further significance or information ascribed to it. Clearly, it too was a place of little interest and significance for late ancient authorities and intellectuals. Likewise, as we noted above, there is no evidence that the Yathrib oasis, or Mecca for that matter, stood at the center of a network of long-distance international trade in late antiquity. Although modern scholars have often sought to reconstruct the hypothetical routes of this trade, there is simply no convincing evidence of Mecca or Yathrib's involvement in such an international trade network in late antiquity.⁷⁹ Rather, the evidence at hand makes clear instead that such trade bypassed both cities on its way to the Mediterranean world, moving across the Red Sea by ship, as Crone in particular has painstakingly demonstrated. As she rightly observes, once this trade had shifted to sea transit, "it is hard to believe that the overland route survived this competition for long."⁸⁰ Perhaps there may have been caravans that passed through the Yathrib oasis from time to time, but in such cases they would truly have been merely passing through an insignificant collection of hamlets along their way. Perhaps they traded for some local dates and other basic foodstuffs as provisions for their journey to the next settlement, but we should not imagine that these caravans were laden with expensive luxury goods, nor that they had any business in Yathrib beyond preparing to move along further on their journey.

Medina/Yathrib of course served as the center of the Believers' polity during the first few decades of its existence, and so it is no surprise to find that the *Khuzistan Chronicle* briefly mentions Medina/Yathrib around the middle of the seventh century. Mecca, however, is not mentioned at all by any source other than the Qur'an before the so-called *Byzantine-Arab Chronicle*, a Latin chronicle written in Spain around 741 CE, which nonetheless incorrectly locates Mecca in Mesopotamia rather than the Hijaz!⁸¹ One must admit that this collective and persistent

disregard for Mecca and Medina militates strongly against any easy assumption that this region and these two cities were integrated with the broader world of late antiquity, as some scholars are wont to imagine.

As Neuwirth rightly observes, the Qur'an clearly demands an audience that is "best described as educated individuals familiar with late antique traditions." Accordingly, she continues, "we must assume that an extensive transfer of knowledge had already taken place and that a broad scope of not only local but also Biblical and post-Biblical traditions was familiar to Muhammad's audience."⁸² Likewise, Michael Pregill rightly observes that the Qur'an's "many allusions to monotheistic scripturalist tradition presuppose a great deal of familiarity with biblical tropes and themes, which its audience would presumably have found meaningful. In addressing the significant residuum of biblical lore in the Qur'an, scholars have generally acknowledged that the revelation's intended audience must have understood such references, especially given their frequent opacity."⁸³ Based on what we have seen in this chapter, then, the question must be asked: does this sound anything like what we might reasonably expect of the one hundred or so herdsmen of Mecca, or the feuding date farmers of the Yathrib oasis? There is simply no basis, I think, to presume that the inhabitants of these places would have been either well educated or deeply familiar with the cultural traditions of Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity. For this reason, it seems far more reasonable to assume that any significant cultural contact between Muhammad's early followers and the world of late antiquity must instead have occurred somewhere outside the central Hijaz. Indeed, it is largely for these reasons that scholars such as Cook, Crone, Wansbrough, Hawting, and others have postulated that the beginnings of Islam must have occurred somewhere much farther to the north.⁸⁴

On this very point the recent trend toward reading the Qur'an as a late ancient text in sophisticated conversation with the religious cultures of the late ancient Near East, a development that in itself is certainly quite welcome, encounters substantial difficulties. In order for such cultural dialogue to have occurred we must assume either one of two things, both of which are problematic. One option is to move the Qur'an, at least in some significant part, out of the central Hijaz and into the world of late antiquity, as Wansbrough, Crone, and others propose. Otherwise, the only alternative is to import the full panoply of late ancient religious culture into the central Hijaz, as presumed, for instance, in the work of Neuwirth and her coterie. Nicolai Sinai, for instance, directly advocates inserting the cultural world of late antiquity fully into the Hijaz, in order to make it conceivable that the Qur'an could have been produced there.⁸⁵ So, too, Pregill builds his otherwise excellent study of the traditions of the Golden Calf on an assumption that Mecca was imbued with the cultural and religious traditions of Mediterranean and Sasanian late antiquity.⁸⁶ And although Neuwirth invokes a catena of scholars of late antiquity in support of her claim that the Hijaz was filled with "Late Antique knowledge," the works that she cites do not in fact provide any evidence for

the presence of late ancient culture anywhere near Mecca or the Yathrib oasis.⁸⁷ We will return to this topic again in the final chapter, when we consider the nature of the cultural and religious context that seems to be implicit in much of the Qur'an's content. Nevertheless, as we will now see in the next chapter, given the state of literacy in the Hijaz in the early seventh century, on this basis alone it does not seem possible for the region to have been steeped in the rich cultural heritage of the late ancient Roman and Sasanian worlds.