

Supporting Evidence that Petra was the original Holy City of Mecca

Part Seven of Early Islamic Qiblas

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Introduction

Many of the early Islamic writers mention the original city of Mecca. They give brief comments or descriptions of something in the city, but none of them spend any time describing the city to us in detail. Sometimes they do not reference Mecca by name, but rather speak of “Masjid al Ḥarām” (the Forbidden Meeting Place, such as Quran 2:127), or the Ka’ba, the Sacred House, the Sanctuary, or other names. Since all early mosque Qiblas pointed to Petra in Jordan, and since all early Muslims obeyed the Qur’ān by facing “Masjid al Ḥarām” we can only conclude that the original Masjid al Ḥarām was located in Petra. In this paper we will search for some of these early descriptions and match them to what is known of Petra today. While some descriptions may fit both Petra and Mecca it is important that none of the ancient descriptions contradict a Petra location.

This research is taken from a variety of early Islamic literature. If you are unfamiliar with a source, please check it in the bibliography. Many of these resources are available online but some of them are available only in the Arabic language.

The twenty four points below are not arranged in any particular order but are numbered to help the reader retrieve the information later. Much of this material was published previously in my book *Qur’ānic Geography* and is repeated here, sometimes with additional references or comments. Additionally, the book *Qur’ānic Geography* contains further points which are not repeated here.

Supporting Evidence that Petra was the Original Holy City of Mecca

1. The original Holy City had clay and loam

Al Ṭabarī relates the story of how 'Abdallāh, the father of Muḥammad visited a wife whom he had in addition to Aminah.¹ He had been working in the field and traces of soil were still on him. When he invited her to lie with him she made him wait because of this, so he went out, performed his ablutions, washed off the clay and went to Aminah's quarters instead. In this way the prophet Muḥammad was conceived. R.B. Serjeant, in his comments on Alfred Guillaume's translation of the same story in the *Sirah*,² explains that the Arabic word used here for soil means a cultivated plot or field, and notes that there is little cultivatable land near Mecca.³

While there is only sand and rock at the current Mecca site with no evidence of ancient cultivation, the city of Petra had fields and soil in the various places. There were private and public gardens, as well as running water brought to the city through aqueducts and clay pipes. Archeologists have described fruit trees, grapes and gardens existing in ancient Petra. Even today there are cultivated plots of land between Petra and al-Baiḍhā or Little Petra which is 5 km away. Researchers have discovered that only one hundred years ago the hills around Petra were covered with several indigenous tree species including Kermes oak, Phoenician juniper, Mt. Atlas pistachio, and carob trees.⁴



Left: A pistachio tree in the center of Petra beside the Nymphaeum is claimed to be over 450 years old. (Petra Archeological Park, <http://www.petrapark.com>)

1. Ṭabarī, Volume VI, 1079, pg 6

2. Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, xxi,1958, pages 1-14

3. See Ishāq, pg 69 for the parallel account

4. <http://www.petrationaltrust.org/UI/ShowContent.aspx?ContentId=57>

In addition to this, beside al-Baiḏhā is a Neolithic village where archeologist Diana Kirkbride-Helbaek excavated from 1958 to 1967 and again in 1983.⁵ During her excavation Dr. Kirkbride-Helbaek discovered old granaries and hypothesized that it was at al-Baiḏhā or nearby villages like this where grains were first domesticated, demonstrating that plots of cultivation existed in the Petra area many centuries before the time of Muḥammad. When reading the descriptions of trees, grasses, glens, fields and soil near the Holy City, would Petra not be a better fit than the barren wadi bed of present day Mecca?

2. The Holy City is called Bacca in Qur'ān (3:96)

“Behold, the first Sanctuary appointed for mankind was that at Bakka, a blessed place, a guidance to the peoples.”

Muslims have long associated the word “*bacca*” (or *Bakka*) with the city of Mecca. *Bacca* is an ancient Semitic word that means to *weep* or *lament*. If a location was assigned the title “*Bacca*” it would mean the place of *bacca*. For example *The Valley of Bacca* means the *Valley of Weeping* or the *Valley of Tears*. This is usually because some calamity happened there that caused people to weep.

By associating Mecca with *Bacca*, Islamic theologians tell us that the original location of the Holy City was a place of calamity. Some Islamic writers explain this by claiming an old legend related to us by several early writers: *“Any king who came to profane its sanctity died on the spot. It is said that it was called Bakka because it used to break the necks of tyrants when they introduced innovations therein.”*⁶ Ibn Hishām adds: *Now in the time of paganism Mecca did not tolerate injustice and wrong within its borders and if anyone did wrong therein it expelled him; therefore it was called 'the Scorcher', (al-Nassa.) and any kind who came to profane its sanctity died on the spot. It is said that it was called Bakka because it used to break (From the verb bakka , he broke) the necks of tyrants when they introduced innovations therein.*⁷ However, there is no mention of Mecca or Becca by any of the surrounding nations histories in this part of Arabia.⁸

In another case the Islamic writers relate *Bakka* to the Arabic word *tabakku* or “crowded.” They tell us this story: Ibn Hishām adds to this: *“Abū 'Ubayda told me that Bakka is the name of the valley of Mecca because it is thickly populated (tabakku) and quoted to me the verse: When great heat overtakes him who waters his camels with yours, leave him alone until his camels are rounded up.”* The problem with this concept is that Mecca was very scarcely populated until 800 AD.

6 Guillaume, 2006, page 47

7. Ibn Hishām 24

8 See #18 in this paper, the lack of evidence from north and south of Mecca

The Qur'ān itself hints at a different explanation, associating Becca with Hagar weeping over Ishmael. (also in Genesis 21:14) By associating this story with Bekka (and ultimately Mecca) we can bring many different ideas together to better understand why this valley was sacred from ancient times. First, since the valley of Becca is synonymous with the location of Masjid al Ḥarām, we should be able to compile a list of descriptions and events that took place in this valley and decide if they could fit the valley of Petra which is known as Seir in the Bible.

1. This location was recognized as a named location from very early times (Qur'ān 2:124, Qur'ān 3:96) (Genesis 14:6, 32:3,14-16; Genesis 36:8-30)
2. Abraham and his family (Lot, Hagar and Ishmael) lived near this valley (Qur'ān 2:124-127 and Genesis 13:10-12) *Behold, the first temple (house) ever set up for mankind was indeed the one at Bakka: rich in blessing, and a source of guidance unto all the world. Remember! We revealed the site of the Sacred House to Abraham ...* (Qur'ān 3:96-97) Note: Abraham's nephew Lot moved to near Zoar, 80 km from Petra (Genesis 19:27). Abraham could see the Zoar valley from where he lived.
3. Abraham and Ishmael built a temple in the Becca sanctuary area (Qur'ān 2:125-127)
4. The two mountains on either side of the valley have names: Marwa and Safa. These mountains are symbols set up by God and pilgrims should stride to and fro between them in worship. (Qur'ān 2:158)
5. Pilgrimage should also climb and descend from "Arafat mountain" and end up celebrating the praises of God at Masjid al Ḥarām. (Qur'ān 2:197) (Note: This makes three mountains mentioned)
6. Abraham settled some of his people near the Sacred House (Qur'ān 14:35-37)
7. Hagar was sent to this valley when expelled from Abraham. There she wept, possibly giving the valley its name.

From the Bible: (Genesis 21:14-19) *And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness ... And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs. And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bowshot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lift up her voice, and wept. And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation. And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink.*

From the Hadith:

When the water in the water-skin had all been used up, she (Hagar) became thirsty and her child also became thirsty. She started looking at him (i.e. Ishmael) tossing in agony. She left him, for she could not endure looking at him, and found that the mountain of Şafa was the nearest mountain to her on that land. She stood on it and started looking at the valley keenly so that she might see somebody, but she could not see anybody. Then she descended from Şafa and when she reached the valley, she tucked up her robe and ran in the valley like a person in distress and trouble, till she crossed the valley and reached the Marwa mountain where she stood and started looking, expecting to see somebody, but she could not see anybody. She repeated that (running between Şafa and Marwa) seven times. (Şaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī Ḥadīth 4:583; 5:85)

7. Safa and Marwa were tall mountains, that needed “climbing.”

Climbing Safa and Marwah and making supplications for one’s material and spiritual well being and welfare is encouraged. During the supplications one should face the Ka’ba. It is well known that the Prophet (peace be upon him) went through the Safa Gate, and on approaching Şafa he recited the Qur’ānic verse 2.158 “ (Fiqh us-Sannah 5:90)

When the verse: “And warn your tribe of near kindred.” (26.214) was revealed, Allāh’s Apostle went out, and when he had ascended al-Safa mountain, he shouted, “O Sabahah!” The people said, “Who is that?” “Then they gathered around him, whereupon he said, “Do you see? If I inform you that cavalymen are proceeding up the side of this mountain, will you believe me?” They said, “We have never heard you telling a lie.” Then he said, “I am a plain warner to you of a coming severe punishment.” Abū Lahab said, “May you perish! You gathered us only for this reason?” Then Abū Lahab went away. So the Sūrat: “Perish the hands of Abū Lahab!” was revealed. (Şaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī Ḥadīth 6:495)

Şafa and Marwah as they used to do in the days of Jahiliyya while two idols were set on top of Şafa and Marwah. (Fiqh us-Sunnah 5:86)

8. The trip between Şafa and Marwa was so strenuous that some people could not do the seven crossings in one day:

The author of Al-Mughni observes: “Aḥmad says there is no harm in delaying the Sa’i after performing ṭawāf until one is rested, or postponing it until evening. ‘Aṭa’ and Al-Ḥasan also see no harm in someone making ṭawāf early in the day and postponing the Sa’i between Şafa and Marwah until evening. Al-Qāsim and Sa’id bin Jubair followed this, because the continuity of Sa’i is, as such, not a condition, much less the continuity of ṭawāf and Sa’i. Sa’id bin Maṣṣūr reported that Saudah, the wife of ‘Urwah bin al-Zubair performed Sa in

between Şafa and Marwah and because she was a big and heavy woman, she completed it in three days. (Fiqh us-Sunnah 5:88a)

9. Idols were set up on the two mountains.

'Amr set up an image on al-Şafa called Nahlik Mujawid al-Rih and one on al-Marwa called Mut'im al-Tayr. (Ishāq 56, pg 30)

How does this compare to Mecca today? Şafa and Marwah are two large rocks housed right inside the mosque building in Mecca. There is no way to climb these rocks, so pilgrims no longer climb them. There is no evidence of ancient gates and no evidence an idol was ever set up on them. But today in Petra, the two mountains have evidence of idol platforms, gates, processional ways going up the side, and a road leading directly from one mountain to another for *ṭawāf* between the two mountains. Plus there is a rainwater passage running beside this road which is described by Bukhārī: *When the Prophet performed the ṭawāf of the Ka'ba, he did Ramal during the first three rounds and in the last four rounds he used to walk, and while doing ṭawāf between Şafa and Marwa, he used to run in the midst of the rain water passage. (Şaḥīḥ Al Bukhārī Ḥadīth 2:685)*

From all of this, I believe that the valley of Petra can favorably be compared to the Qur'ānic valley of Bekka (also known as Mecca) where Hagar was weeping, as well as to the Biblical story Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar. Since Abraham wandered throughout the mountains, from Israel down to Egypt, it would not come as a surprise that Abraham and Ishmael may have stopped in the Petra Valley and built some sort of altar or structure there to worship the Lord. It would not surprise us if this is actually the valley that Hagar fled with young Ishmael. The Qur'anic accounts fit the Petra valley far better than the barren Mecca valley in Saudi Arabia.

3. Earthquakes may give the valley its name

While there is no evidence for any substantial tragedies occurring at the Mecca site in Saudi Arabia before 800 AD, there are a number of tragic events that took place at Petra including the following major earthquakes:

363 AD – Recorded by Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem⁶

551 AD – Darawcheh, Sbeinati, Margottini, & Paolini, 2000⁷

713 AD – Recorded by Al Ṭabarī XXIII⁸

5 Byrd, 2007

7 Russell, 1985

6 Brock, 1977

8 Hinds, 1990, 1256, page 204

There is archeological evidence that these earthquakes caused a great deal of damage. The greatest damage was probably inflicted in 713 AD when not only was Petra affected, but the entire Mediterranean seacoast. Even the mosque in Jericho was destroyed, so much so that it was never rebuilt.⁹ It may have been that in 713 AD, Petra was finally abandoned since no records of Petra exist after this date.

Since ancient cities were built of stacked rocks and timbers, earthquakes brought massive destruction and the deaths of many people. This massive destruction over so many years would certainly have caused the nick-name “Valley of Weeping” to have continued use over the centuries.



Left: Petra is littered with fallen columns. Below: In 1962 archeologists began reconstruction work in Petra, lifting columns and walls back into place. In many cases they could easily tell how to do the reconstruction as the columns and walls lay completely on their sides. (The Illustrated London News, March 31, 1962, Page 502/503, Archeological Section no 2085, Used by permission.)



4. The well of Zamzam

Every Muslim accepts it as fact that the Well of ZamZam is located beside the Ka'ba, and that this well is located in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Many Muslims believe that this well is sacred, and many healing or health improving properties are given to the water taken from this well. During my research I was struck with the name z-m-z-m. I searched through my personal electronic database of ancient manuscripts and writings and was surprised to have only one result. It was from the Bible in Deuteronomy 2:20. The Zamzummims were renowned in ancient times as giants who lived in the land of Seir, Edom and Ammon. The Edomites "overthrew them, and dwelt in their stead." It would seem to me that if one was looking for the well of Zamzam they would need to look in the land of Seir or Edom in the mountains near Petra. Other than this, I found no other reference to z-m-z-m.

Al Wāqidī mentions that 'Umar ibn Ṣālih related to him on the authority of Nāfi', mawlā of the Banū Makhzūm that Khālīd bin Abdallāh said in a sermon that the original water of ZamZam was salty, and that water from another well used to be transported and placed in leather containers beside Zamzam, as it was superior to the water of Zamzam.¹¹

It is interesting to note that the Arabic word for *well* and *cistern* are the same. So while most Muslims believe Zamzam was a well, there is also a possibility that it was a cistern, with large doors across the entrance. Tabari tells us that in 66 AH men "broke the wooden bolts (*a`wdd*) of Zamzam, went inside."¹² It seems that ZamZam was either in a building, or else it was a cistern with a doorway across the entrance. Abū Daoud¹³ records how the Arabs swept out Zamzam and removed the snakes, which makes it sound more like a cistern than a well. Interestingly enough, Petra is known as a city of cisterns.

The Zamzam well in Mecca is also called the Well of Ishmael.¹⁴ It is 35 meters deep and is marked by an elegant dome. The water is considered health-giving, and pilgrims collect it in bottles to bring back home to their own countries. Sometimes a pilgrim tries to dip his or her future burial clothes in the waters of Zamzam. Muslim tradition holds that the well of Zamzam was opened by the angel Gabriel to save Hagar and her son Ishmael from dying of thirst when they were out in the desert.

11 Al-Ṭabari XXIII page 147-148 and Ibn al-Athīr

12 Al Ṭabari XXI page 61

13 Sunan Abū Daoud 2507

14 Ibn Hishām 24

The story of Zamzam being associated with Hagar fits the Petra valley rather than Mecca in Saudi Arabia. The Bible tells us that Abraham grazed his sheep on the hills overlooking Sodom and Ghomorah.¹⁵ While most Bible scholars imagine that this was on the western side of the Araba valley there is no reason why Abraham could not have also grazed his sheep on the eastern side. If this is the case, then the Petra valley would have been a natural place for the sons of Ishmael to live along side of their cousins the Edomites.¹⁶

5. The Qur'ān's attention on northern Arabia

I presented arguments in my book *Qur'ānic Geography* that the people of 'Ad, Thamud and Midian, were all north Arabian civilizations. If you want to follow this argument in detail, please refer to *Qur'ānic Geography*.

But briefly, I argue that the people of 'Ad (Edomites) and the people of Thamud (Nabataeans) all dwelt in northern Arabia in the Petra region. The tribes that descended from Ishmael also settled in northern Arabia. Since all of the geographical references in the Qur'ān are from northern Arabia, it is natural to conclude that the Qur'ān was written to people who had a north Arabian perspective. In other words, when the prophet spoke to the "Meccans" about 'Ad, he simply had to point to the remains that they left behind. In much the same way, the people Muḥammad was speaking to lived in the shadow of the great Thamudic monuments. These references were not incidental.

In the minds of Muḥammad's audience, there had been three times in the past when Arabia was great. The first time was when it was united under the tribal confederacy led by Edom and was known as 'Ad. (2nd millennium BCE) Muḥammad speaks of 'Ad only when he addresses the people in the Holy City (Petra). The second time Arabia rose to prominence was when the tribes of Arabia united under the leadership of the Midianites who oppressed and raided the settled peoples to the north.(end of 12 century BCE) Muḥammad only speaks of the land of Midian when he addresses the people in the city of Medina which was in the heartland of Midian. The third and most significant time the Arabian Peninsula united was under the leadership of the Thamudic people who established what we know today as the Nabataean empire. (200 BC - 200 AD) This empire controlled not only all of Arabia, but also lands all the way to Damascus in the north, and the entire Negev to the west. It was not by chance that Muḥammad referred to these people. They were significant people in the minds of his listeners. This leads us to believe that Muḥammad was addressing an audience in North Arabia, the homeland of Ishmael, 'Ad, Thamud, and Midian.

¹⁵ Bible Genesis 21

¹⁶ *Qur'ānic Geography*, page 224, 229, 236, 308-311

6. The Holy City's high and low side

The Hadith literature contains many references to the high and low side in “Mecca.” as if the city was half way up a mountain. For instance: *When the Prophet came to Mecca he entered from its higher side and left from its lower side.*¹⁷ There are many more mentions of the high side and low side between 2:645 and 2:657.

*We (’Ā’isha speaking) set out with the Prophet with the intention of performing ḥajj only. The Prophet reached Mecca and performed ṭawāf of the Ka’ba and between Ṣafa and Marwa and did not finish the Ihṛām, because he had the Hādi with him. His companions and his wives performed ṭawāf (of the Ka’ba and between Ṣafa and Marwa), and those who had no Hādi with them finished their Ihṛām. I got the menses and performed all the ceremonies of ḥajj. So, when the Night of Ḥasba (night of departure) came, I said, “O Allāh’s Apostle! All your companions are returning with ḥajj and ’umra except me.” He asked me, “Didn’t you perform ṭawāf of the Ka’ba (’umra) when you reached Mecca?” I said, “No.” He said, “Go to Tan’im with your brother ’Abdur-Raḥmān, and assume Ihṛām for ’umra and I will wait for you at such and such a place.” So I went with ’Abdur- Raḥmān to Tan’im and assumed Ihṛām for ’umra. Then Ṣafiya bint Huyay got menses. The Prophet said, “’Aqra Ḥalqa! You will detain us! Didn’t you perform ṭawāf-al-ifāda on the day of nahr (slaughtering)?” She said, “Yes, I did.” He said, “Then there is no harm, depart.” So I met the Prophet when he was ascending the heights towards Mecca and I was descending, or vice-versa.*¹⁸

When considering the topography around Mecca, the phrase “ascending the heights towards Mecca” does not make sense. This term however could apply to the Petra region where the city has the Araba Valley below it, and the Edomite hills above it. In essence Petra is half way up the escarpment, with a clear a higher and lower side to the city.

*During the year of the conquest (of Mecca), the Prophet entered Mecca through its upper part through Kada.*¹⁹

*Then she said, “O Allāh’s Apostle! Your companions are returning with the reward of both ḥajj and ’umra, while I am returning with (the reward of) ḥajj only.” He said to her, “Go, and let ’Abdur-Raḥmān (i.e. your brother) make you sit behind him (on the animal).” So, he ordered ’Abdur-Raḥmān to let her perform ’umra from Al-Tan’im. Then the Prophet waited for her at the higher region of Mecca till she returned.*²⁰

17 Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī Ḥadīth 2:647

18 Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī Ḥadīth 2:815

19 Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī Ḥadīth 5:586

20 Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī Ḥadīth 4:227

*Allāh's apostle came to Mecca through its higher region on the day of the conquest (of Mecca) riding his she-camel on which Usāma was riding behind him.*²¹

*Now al-Khaṭṭāb had so harassed Zayd that he forced him to withdraw to the upper part of Mecca, and he stopped in the mountain of Hira facing the town.*²² It is interesting to note that Mount Ḥira was located in the “upper part of Mecca.” However, today Mount Ḥira (Nour) is located behind Jebal Marwān and Khandima.

Today people sometimes call the area around Mecca a valley, but in actuality it is a large open area, with low rocky mountains rising out of the sand. It is my belief that the early description of Mecca and its mountains do not fit Mecca today, which is flat and surrounded by barren rocks rising from the desert floor. The terms higher and lower part of the Holy City could easily be applied to Petra, which was split apart by a colonnaded road in the middle. The higher part of the city was to the north and the lower part of the city to the south. In the north is a large mountain with an impressive cave filled with baetyls that could easily fit the description of Ḥira.

7. The Holy City could be entered and exited by a crack in the rock or a narrow mountain path.

*Allāh's Apostle used to enter Mecca from the high thaniya and used to leave Mecca from the low thaniya.*²³ The thaniya is a narrow mountain pass. *The Prophet went on advancing till he reached the thaniya (i.e. a mountainous way) through which one would go to them (i.e. people of Quraish).*²⁴

*Ibn 'Umar used to spend the night at Dhū-Tuwa in between the two thaniyas and then he would enter Mecca through the thaniya which is at the higher region of Mecca, and whenever he came to Mecca for ḥajj or 'umra, he never made his she-camel kneel down except near the gate of the Masjid (Sacred Mosque) and then he would enter (it) and go to the Black (stone) Corner and start from there circumambulating the Ka'ba seven times: hastening in the first three rounds (Ramal) and walking in the last four. On finishing, he would offer two Rakat prayer and set out to perform ṭawāf between Ṣafa and Marwa before returning to his dwelling place. On returning (to Medina) from ḥajj or 'umra, he used to make his camel kneel down at Al-Batha which is at Dhū-al- Ḥulifa, the place where the Prophet used to make his camel kneel down.*²⁵

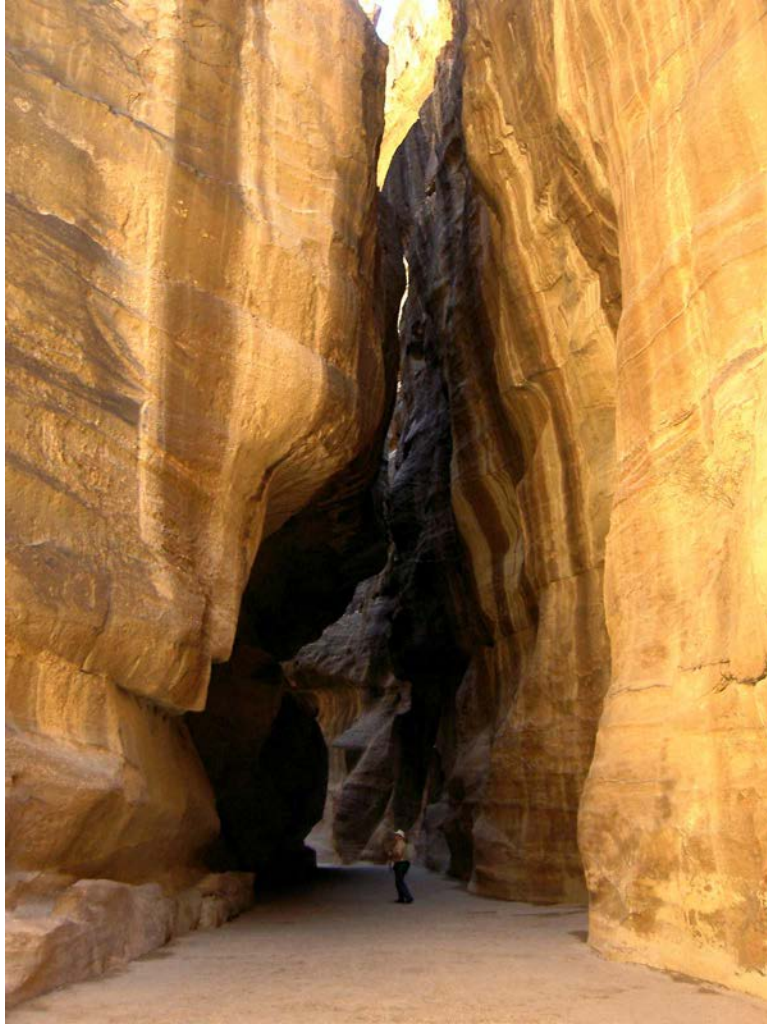
21 Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī Ḥadīth 4:231

24 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī Ḥadīth 3:891

22 Ishāq 148, pg 102

25 Ṣaḥīḥ Al- Bukhārī Ḥadīth 2:820

23 Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī Ḥadīth 2:645



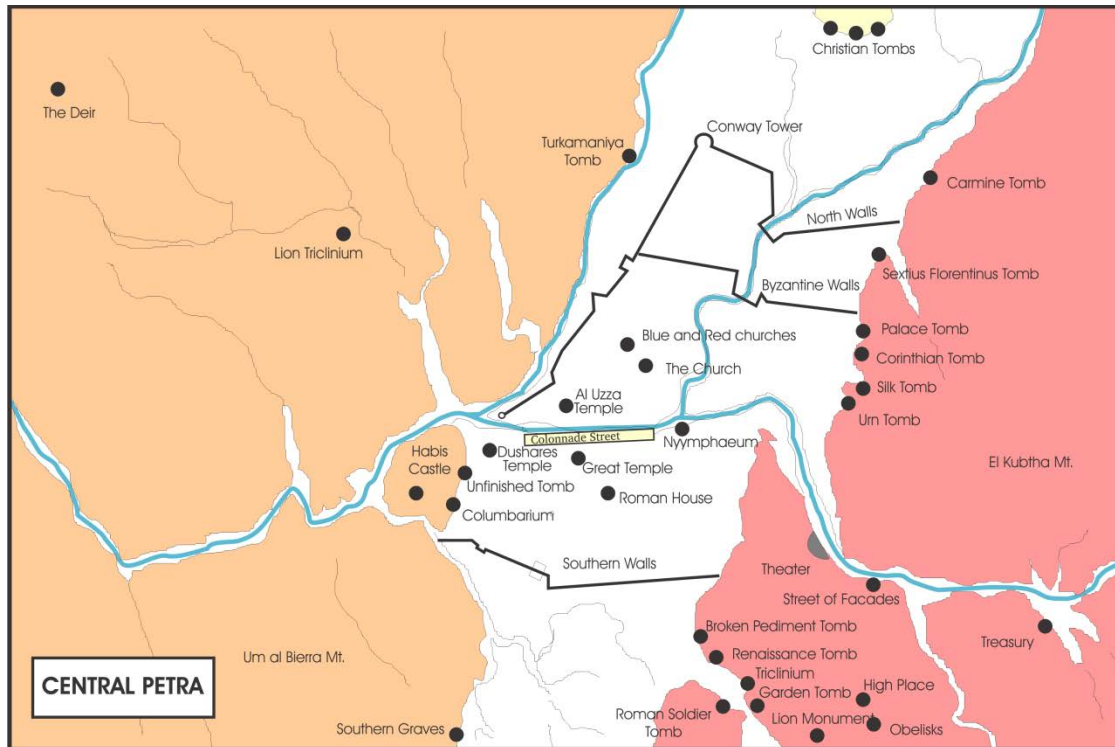
Left: The author made over 60 trips into Petra between 1979 and 2009 examining all parts of the city and much of surrounding area. Here he admires the thaniya walls in Petra, now called the Siq. Note the water channel to the left of the path. The mountain here towers 400 feet above the thaniya floor.

There are four ways into the Petra basin. Since Petra is in a valley, one could enter from either end of the valley. One end is considerably higher than the other, hence the higher and lower side of Petra. However, there are two *thaniya* entrances that could be used. One of these is the famous siq that tourists pass through to enter the city. The other is on the far side of the colonnaded street and leads into the maze of canyons that eventually empty out into Wadi Araba. (See the city map on the following page)

8. The Holy City had walls

Ibn Ishāq records²⁶ “...they surrounded him as he was at the side of one of the walls of Mecca...” There is no archeological evidence that the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia ever had city walls. Yet here the Holy City is described as having walls. The city of Petra had two walls which crossed the valley protecting the high and low side of the city.

²⁶ Ishāq, 823, Pg 554



Above: The Petra valley showing walls and two thaniyas with a stream running across the valley from one thaniya to the other. The north side of the Colonnade Street is higher than the south side of the street. Between the thaniyas there is a stream bed.

9. The Holy City has a stream from one mountain to another mountain.

The ḥadīths tell us: *When the Prophet performed the ṭawāf of the Ka'ba, he did Ramal during the first three rounds and in the last four rounds he used to walk, and while doing ṭawāf between Ṣafa and Marwa, he used to run in the midst of the rain water passage.*²⁷

As there is no natural water flow in Mecca today, this is a puzzling statement. Safa and Marwa are described as “mountains” but today they are large rocks, housed right inside of the mosque complex. The description of running in a rain water passage between the two “mountains” of Marwa and Safa do not fit what we see in Mecca. But in Petra a stream ran directly from the mountain on one side of the valley to the mountain on the other, through the thaniyas. Could these mountains have been Ṣafa and Marwa with a stream bed running between them?



Above: One of the towers on the walls of Petra

²⁷ Ṣaḥīḥ Al Bukhārī Ḥadīth 2:685

10. The Zumurrud

Abū al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā ibn Ishāq al-Rawandi was born in Marwarrudh Iraq, about the year 815 AD. As a young man he joined the Mutazila of Baghdad and gained prominence among them. Around the age of forty he became estranged from this group and formed close alliances with more traditional Muslims as well as non-Muslims such as Manichaeans, Jews and also Christians. He wrote against the Mutazila, and they reciprocated in kind.

While most Muslim theologians described him as an outspoken and dangerous heretic, some appear to present him in a neutral or even positive light. One of his more controversial books is known as *Kitāb al-Zumurrud* in which he mentions the miracles of the prophets such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad. The text of the *Zumurrud* has not survived to our times, but we can surmise his arguments from the writings of various later scholars who quoted him and argued against him.

The *Zumurrud* contained arguments both for and against the existence of prophets. This is stated explicitly in the *Majalis Muayyadiyya* of the Ismā'īlī al-Muayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi (1077 AD). The *Majalis Muayyadiyya* is the only source that contains relatively long citations of arguments against prophecy which are identified explicitly as belonging to the *Zumurrud*.²⁸ While this is not a place to argue Muslim theology, it is important to notice that al-Rawandi argues that Muḥammad's night journey to Jerusalem was not a miracle because these two cities are close enough together so that a person could go from one to the other and back in one night.²⁹ Muslim scholars have rejected the authenticity of the *Zumurrud* because of statements like this. Since they believed he was obviously wrong on this point, all of the materials in the *Zumurrud* are considered wrong. However, if the original Holy City of Islam was located at Petra, this description would be absolutely correct. The distance from Petra to Jerusalem is only 100 miles. Later historians would think he was speaking of Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

While it would be a strenuous trip on a horse, one could indeed travel from one to the other and back in one day. Thus al-Rawandi's argument supports the idea that Islam's Holy City was in Petra, not in Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Years later when the Muslims only remembered Mecca, al-Rawandi's arguments seemed totally absurd. Everyone knew that Mecca was more than 760 miles from Jerusalem, and that the passage crossed some of the most barren and challenging deserts in the world.

²⁸ Kraus, 1994

²⁹ Stroumsa, 1994

11. The Petra region contains mention of gods found in the Qur'ān, hadiths and histories

Around 200 years after the founding of Islam, Abu-al-Mundhir Hishām ibn-Muḥammad ibn-al-Sa'ib ibn-Bishr al-Kalbi, better known as ibn-al-Kalbi (d. A.H. 206/ A.D. 821-822) wrote the book *Kitab al-Asnam*, or *The Book of Idols*. Al-Kalbi basically went through the literature available at his time, and made a list of the early pagan idols and what was known of them. This list of idols and some basic information about them is helpful in understanding the role that Petra played in early Islamic history.

Among the list of idols is Allat. It is interesting to note that the one known existing temples to Allat is in Wadi Rum only 83 kilometers from Petra. A later *Lion of Allat statue* was built in Palmyra, which was a Nabataean/Arab trade city in Syria. Allat is mentioned in the Qur'ān in Sura 53:19–23. Allat was supposed to be worshiped in Ta'if as well as among the Nabataeans in general.³⁰ There is no other existing physical evidence of Allat anywhere else in the Arabian Peninsula.



Many gods in Petra were represented by a square cut block. In the beytel to the right we can see three gods within one larger god, corresponding to Sura 53:19-20 “have you thought upon al-Lat, and al-Uzza and al Manat, the third, the other?” This beytel is found along the siq entrance to Petra.

30 Book of Idols, translated from the Arabic version by Hishām Ibn-alKalbi bu Nabih Amin Faris, 1952
Wadi Rum Photo: Berthold Werner, GNU Free Documentation License



Another god mentioned in early Islamic records is Dushara. (ذو الشرى) (Ibn Hishām 78) There are two known temples to Dushara, first in Madain Salih (al Hijr) in northern Saudi Arabia (a Nabataean sister city to Petra) and a temple in Petra itself. This temple (left) is the largest freestanding structure in Petra today.





Al 'Uzza's temple is also found at Petra. (Sura 53:19, and in the hadiths. eg. Bukhari 4:276, 6:383, 8:314 and Ibn Hishām 17, 41.

The presence of one or two temples does not prove much, but when we take into consideration the qibla direction of all of the early mosques of Islam, it is striking that all of them point to the Petra region, the home of all of these gods.

12. Petra was the centre of a twice yearly pilgrimage

In order to understand the Arab pilgrimage to Petra, we need to understand something of the early Nabataean burial practices. Tourists often wonder if the majestically carved Nabataean facades in Petra were really tombs, or if they had some other function. The presence of numerous dining halls among these monuments seems to point to something else.

One Nabataean inscription found at Egra on a tomb clearly states: *"This is the tomb made by Wshuh daughter of Bagrat, and by Qayamu and Mashkuya her daughters, of Teima, for each of them, and for Amirat and Usranat, and Elanat their sisters, daughters of Wshuh and for their clients."* Bagrat and Teima were located quite some distance from Egra. From this, it appears that the dead were transported to these central burial places and not buried in their home villages.

There are over one thousand burial monuments in Petra and hundreds of others in the other smaller Nabataean burial cities. If these were for family and tribal units as is commonly thought, then the tombs in total could have contained tens of thousands of people.



Above: The Oblysk tomb in Petra has a dining room directly under the tomb.

The city of Petra functioned as a religious center for twice-yearly festivals, and it also functioned as a burial city. It was complete with numerous temples, a festival theater, a nymphaeum, bathhouse, several sacred ways, monumental gates, many pools, wells and cisterns, as well as several other public buildings.

From ancient records we can deduce that the Nabataean merchants traveled widely. So what would have happened to them if they had died while they were in a distant county or somewhere in the deserts of Arabia? This is a key question in understanding the glue that held this merchant empire together. Some historians and archeologists believe that the Nabataeans practiced bone collection and buried the bones of their dead rather than complete bodies.³¹

31 Negev, Avraham, *Nabatean Archaeology Today*, New York University Press 1986, pg 69

This system of burial was used by the Persians and also by some Jewish groups during the Second Temple period.³² The bodies were placed on a high location on a rack so that once the flesh and organs had been stripped away by vultures or decomposed, the bones would fall through the rack into the carved-out space below. After the bones had dried, they would be collected and placed in a tomb.

Around the city of Petra there are a number of high platforms that seem to be exposure platforms. If a Nabataean died while on a caravan journey his body would have been exposed to the elements, the bones dried, and then transported back to one of the sacred burial sites. Those who died near the burial cities would have been exposed to the elements right in the city itself. There are a number of things that support this theory.



All around Petra are steps to the tops of hills with very little on top for markings except a rectangular hole cut in the rocks.. Some of these are 1.5-2 meters long and .5 meters wide. A good example of one of these exposure platforms can be found across from the Obelisk Tomb on the way into Petra. Every person going into Petra walks past a large square rock which has steps cut into it on two sides leading to the top. On the top of the rock, a rectangular hole has been cut, and around the edges of the hole is a groove where the rack would have been placed. As the vultures stripped off the flesh, the bones would have fallen into the hole underneath, and would have been retrieved later for burial in one of the nearby tombs.

Why did the Nabataeans use this form of burial? First, the use of communal graves for families and tribes makes sociological sense, as the Nabataean culture was structured on a tribal basis.

³² Patrich, 1997

As larger families would have established their own particular tomb, members of that family would have wanted their bodies buried in their family tomb, even if they died hundreds or thousands of miles away. The practice of transporting bones rather than bodies would have been a practical way to deal with people who died while on journeys to distant places.³³ This would explain the tombs that are present at Egra, Petra and Meda'in Šālīḥ in Saudi Arabia. Each of these centers was a stopping place along the caravan routes, and the bones of the dead could be buried there in style. This explains why inscriptions in Egra indicates that people living in Teyma were buried in Egra. It also explains why there are so many tombs in the Petra valley compared to the amount of space for the living.

The practice of bone collection would explain why the Nabataeans made pilgrimages to Petra. People would gather at the burial city to worship in the temples, participate in burial ceremonies, and to eat memorial feasts for the dead at the family tomb. The presence of scores of dining halls among the tombs indicates that eating in the presence of the dead ancestors was part of the early pilgrimage. However, with the coming of Christianity in the fourth century, the custom of bone collection and meals celebrating the dead declined.

The discovery of a zodiac dated to the second century AD leads us to believe that there were two Nabataean pilgrimages to Petra. Zodiacs were well known throughout the ancient world. They expressed a belief in the cyclical passage of time and the power of the stars and planets to affect earthly events.

The Nabataean zodiac has many images similar to Roman zodiacs of the time. However, one of the symbols portrays Allat, the female goddess of fertility, with a lance or sword which can faintly be seen above her left shoulder. This may have symbolized an ancient festival which was celebrated by the Nabataeans and their nomadic neighbors when the birthing of lambs marked the spring season. It was a time when grazing was good and the earth was green from the spring rains. The Nabataean equivalent of Sagittarius is rendered as the bust of a jovial youth, possibly al-Kutbay, the god of learning and commerce. Capricorn is shown in the Nabataean panel as the damaged bust of a human figure rather than the traditional Roman fish/goat that was common throughout the Roman Empire. The remaining symbols of the Nabataean zodiac conform to their Roman counterparts, but they are enlivened with original touches of artistic creativity. However, by far the most significant difference in the Nabataean zodiac is the arrangement of the order of the houses within the zodiacal circle.

33 Genesis 50:25 & Exodus 13:19

Al Ṭabarī notes that during the days before Islam, there were two pilgrimages.³⁴ The lesser was known as 'umrah. He notes that 'Abd al-Muttalib (Muḥammad's grandfather) performed 'umrah on one occasion. This was at a time when the forbidden sanctuary held many pagan idols, among them Hubal³⁵ and Isaf and Na'ilah.³⁶ The Qur'ān tells us that these pre-Islamic pagan pilgrimages were known respectively as ḥajj³⁷ and 'umrah, commonly called the greater and lesser pilgrimage.



From ancient time the Arabian pilgrimage was always to the religious center of Arabia, the forbidden sanctuary, the holy burial city of Petra. It was in this city that the Nabataean dead were buried, and it was in this city that the living gathered to eat a ritual meal with their extended family in the presence of the long departed ancestors. This custom was part of the cultural and ethnic make-up of the Nabataeans, and was the glue that held them, a nomadic merchant people, together as a society.

There are no other records of a major pilgrimage in the Arabian Peninsula. What is striking about this is that.

13. Petra is missing in all early Islamic literature.

For centuries Petra was the center of the trade-route and the focus of the twice-yearly pilgrimage in Arabia. While the earthquakes of 363 AD and 551 AD damaged the city, life continued on there for several more decades.

Until recently, it was thought that Petra was largely destroyed by the earthquake in 551 AD. However, since the discovery of the Petra scrolls, the existence of Byzantine Petra has come to light. In 1993, Hamoudi al-Bedoul, a local Bedouin, discovered the first remains of carbonized papyrus scrolls while excavating at a Byzantine Church in Petra.

34 Ṭabarī VI page 12

35 Ṭabarī VI, page 3

36 Ṭabarī VI, page 4

37 Qur'ān 2:158, 196

The 152 “Petra Scrolls” represent the largest collection of ancient texts yet discovered in Jordan. They contained a variety of personal records including sermons, wills and contracts from the 5th and 6th centuries. It would seem logical to believe that the scrolls were preserved by the 551 earthquake; however, the scrolls contain documents from 528, and others from the reign of Tiberius Mauricius 582-602 AD, meaning that some are dated more than fifty years after the earthquake. None of the documents that have been deciphered refer to damages or lost property that could be attributed to an earthquake. In fact, according to leading papyrologist Ludwig Koenen who is in charge of deciphering half of the Petra Scrolls, “indications create the overwhelming picture of Petra as a viable city with a functioning hinterland throughout the sixth century.”³⁸

If this is the case, then why is there no mention of Petra in any of the early Islamic literature? There are Islamic records of people passing through the region and even armies marching through this area, but Petra is never mentioned. At the very same time, non-Islamic literature mentions Petra, but never Mecca. There is no mention of Mecca in any literature until 740 AD when it first appears in the *Continuatio Byzantia Arabica*.³⁹



Right: A mosaic floor from a Byzantine church in Petra.

If Petra is the first Islamic Holy City before the Black Stone was moved to Mecca, then would it not make sense that later writers would eliminate every mention of Petra? Is it possible that the descriptions of Petra were transferred in people’s minds to Mecca in Arabia, and thus every mention of Petra was removed from future Islamic literature?

³⁸ Koenen 530

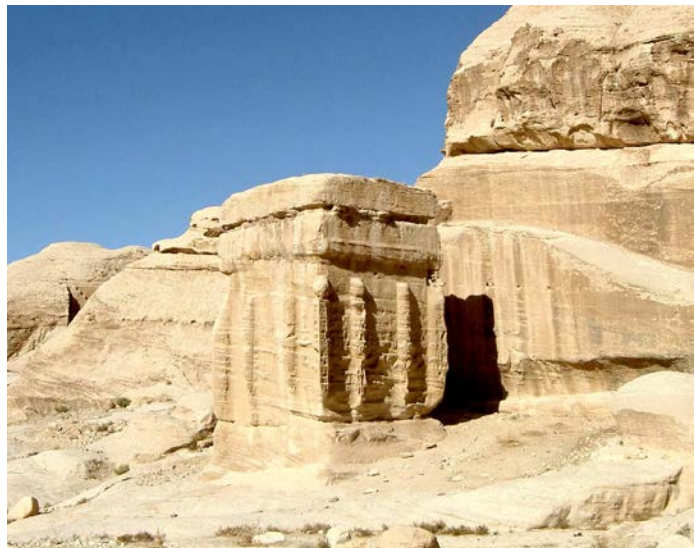
³⁹ Crone-Cook 1977, page 22,171

14. The sacred area was marked out by large stones

Early Islamic records⁴⁰ tell us about killings and revenge killings between the Khaza'a and the Hadrami tribes near Masjid al Ḥarām. The sons of a prominent sheik were attacked beside Mount 'Arafat at the boundary stones of the sacred area. This story is repeated in several places, as it was very important, since the killings seemed to take place inside the boundary that marked out the sacred area.

These statements show us two things. First, the sacred area was quite large, extending all the way to 'Arafat mountain. In today's Mecca the distance between the Ka'ba and the base of Mount 'Arafat is around 18 kilometers. Second, it speaks of boundary stones that mark the boundary of the sacred area. In the minds of many readers, this might mean small stones laid out to show the boundary. Small stones however, could be moved, and they would be lost or buried in the desert plains that surround Mecca and Minā. Much larger stones would have been more appropriate, but alas, there are no large boundary stones around Mecca to show travelers where the sacred precinct began and ended.

All around the city of Petra, however, there are large stone blocks carved out of the mountain. Each stone is about 20 feet tall. The stone shown on the right is one of several that tourists pass as they enter Petra via the siq path. All together there are over 25 of these giant square blocks surrounding the greater city area.⁴¹ Is it possible that these stones mark out the sacred precinct of the Holy City?



⁴⁰ *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* by Ibn Ishāq, Guillaume, 2006, pg 540; Ibn Hishām 164 (page 390)

Who marched from the sacred stones; Ibn Hishām 185 (page 390) killed them in 'Arafat at the boundary stones of the sacred area; Ibn Hishām 185 (page 185) They had wronged us and behaved as enemies And were the first to shed blood at the sacred boundary.

⁴¹ Browning, Petra, 1994, page 110

15 Games of chance

In the ḥadīths it is recorded that games of chance and the use of azlams were common in the original Holy City. Azlams refer to any method of obtaining a result by chance. In some instances they were arrows, sometimes they were dice, or they could simply be sticks thrown down as used by Bedouin today. In the account where Muḥammad removed the idols from the Holy Sanctuary, Bukhārī records the following:

*When Allāh's Apostle came to Mecca, he refused to enter the Ka'ba with idols in it. He ordered (idols to be taken out). So they were taken out. The people took out the pictures of Abraham and Ishmael holding azlams in their hands. Allāh's Apostle said, "May Allāh curse these people. By Allāh, both Abraham and Ishmael never did the game of chance with azlams." Then he entered the Ka'ba and said Takbir at its corners but did not offer the prayer in it.*⁴²

As far as I know there are no records of games of chance recorded as being used in or around the modern city of Mecca. However, in Petra there are many ancient game boards carved in the rocks all around the city. At the Second Conference on Nabataean Studies held in Petra, Jordan, October 2002, Dr. Bilāl Khrisat and Ṭalāl 'Akasheh presented a paper called *Gaming Boards from the Nabataean Capital City of Petra: Documentation and Study*.⁴³ It was at this conference that I first took interest in these ancient gaming boards, and soon afterwards a group of us tried to catalogue our own findings at the Nabataea.net website: <http://nabataea.net/games1.html>



Regarding azlams, these were often “arrows that the Arabs used, and dice that the Persians and Romans used in gambling.”⁴⁴

Left: The remains of a game board in Petra, one of dozens of games of chance found around the city of Petra.

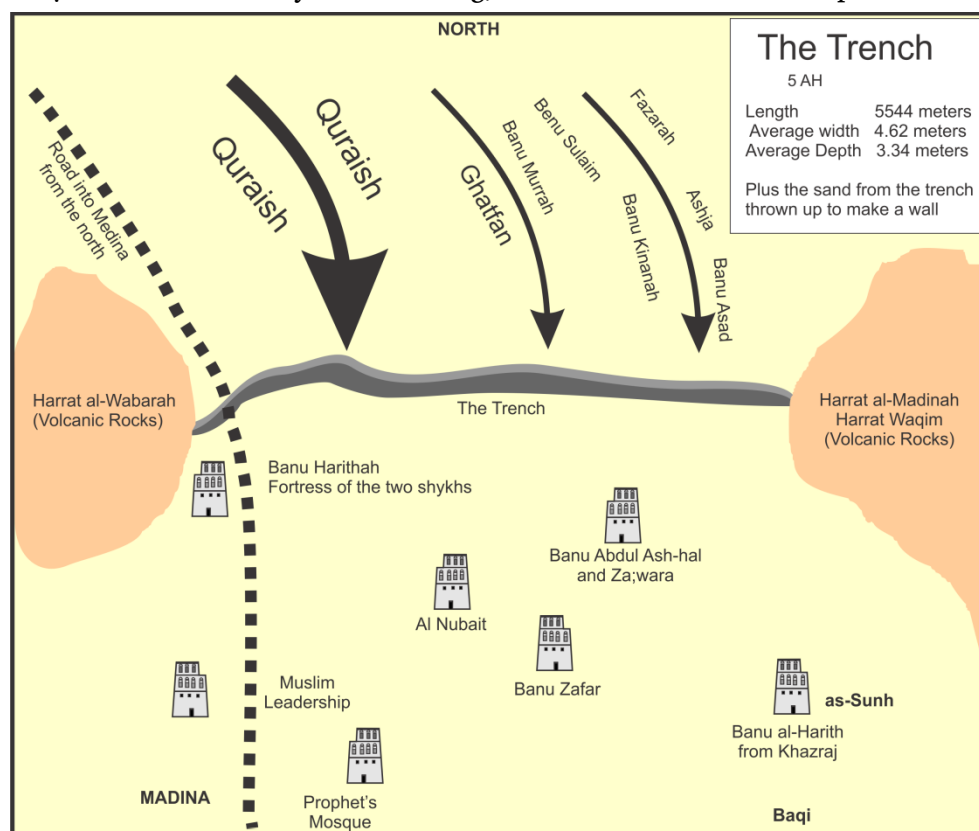
⁴² Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī Ḥadīth 2.671

⁴³ <https://www.auac.ch/bns/research/conferences.html>

⁴⁴ (*The Meaning and Explanation of the Glorious Qur'ān*, Volume 2, Muḥammad Saed 'Abdul-Raḥmān, MSA Publication Ltd., 2007 page 362) (Also see Sūra 5:90-92)

16. Battle for Medina (The Battle of the Trench)

In year 5 AH, the Quraysh assembled several tribes to attack the new Muslim sect in Medina.⁴⁵ Muḥammad heard they were coming, so he laid out a trench to protect Medina.



This map has been styled after a similar map in the “Atlas of the Qur’ān” by Dr. Shauqi Abu Khalil, (Darussalam, 2003).

It is noteworthy that the Quraysh tribe attacked Medina from the north. This is very peculiar because Mecca, where the Quraysh lived, was south of Medina. However, as the map illustrates, the battles against the Quraysh were always on the north side of Medina.

In this case the two armies faced each other for twenty two days and nights. It seems strange that the Quraysh wouldn't also have attacked from the south if they were marching up from Mecca, which was in the south. However, the record says that they approached Medina coming from the Holy City from the north. This wasn't some chance thing. The prophet Muḥammad made plans well before they arrived, so that they had a trench already prepared when they arrived.

If the Quraysh were coming from Petra, then they would have definitely come along the road from the north. While different Islamic commentators have tried to explain this anomaly away, once we accept that Petra was the first Mecca, this anomaly disappears.

17. Battle with the Banu Lihyān

The following year in 6 AH the Muslims marched out of Medina to attack the Banu Lihyān. The Lihyānites had traditionally occupied an area quite far north of Medina, up to and including the areas south of Petra in what is today Wadi Rum. Lihyānite inscriptions can be found all through this part of the desert, but never south of Medina. Al Ṭabarī records the journey and battle⁴⁶ He notes how the armies marched north out of Medina, and traveled past Makhid to the region of al Batra. Then they took the left road and went to the Holy City of Petra (Mecca in the text) where the Benu Lihyān lived.

These people had been alerted and were fortified in secure positions on the mountain tops, so Muḥammad's plans were thwarted. This paragraph would make perfect sense if they were attacking Petra, but Al Ṭabarī claims they were attacking Mecca. He writes in "To take the enemy by surprise he pretended to be taking out for the north."⁴⁷ With this insertion, Al Ṭabarī tries to make sense of the geography that otherwise didn't make sense to him, since by his day Mecca was considered south of Medina.

However, for those who believe that Petra was the Holy City, the paragraph makes perfect sense without the insertion. They went north from Medina into the region south of Ma'an and east of Ras al Naqab to the area known to the Bedouin as Al Batra even to this day, and then veered left to Petra. The Benu Lihyān had fortified themselves in the mountains, so the Muslims returned home.

18 Al-Hajjāj and the city of Khaybar

In 7 AH the Muslim armies from Medina marched north again. Their first target was Khaybar, a city 150 kilometers north of Medina that had often opposed the Muslims. After the Muslim army defeated Khaybar, Ḥajjāj (who was not yet a military leader) decided to go on to the Holy City because he had a wife, son and property there.

Al Ṭabarī describes his arrival in the Holy City.³⁷ *I departed and arrived in Mecca [Petra]. On the mountain trail at al-Bayḍā I met some men from Quraysh who were eager to hear news and were asking about what happened to the Messenger of God. They had heard that he had gone to Khaybar and knew that it was the leading town in the Ḥijaz in fertility, defenses and men, so they were seeking news.*

⁴⁶ Ṭabarī Vol. VIII pg 126

⁴⁷ Ṭabarī Vol. VIII, page 42-43

There are two striking things about this paragraph. First, Ḥajjāj arrived on the mountain trail by al-Bayḍā. We have already seen that al-Bayḍā is a town close to Petra (5 km) on the northern route into the city. I'm sure Ḥajjāj approached from the east, so he could travel towards the south into Petra. That way it wouldn't appear he was coming directly from Khaybar, for the Quraysh were at war with the prophet. There is no al-Bayḍā near Mecca, so Yāqūt, writing 600 years AH⁴⁸ tells us that Al-Bayḍā is another name for Tan'im which would have been outside the sacred territory encircling Mecca. The geographer Yāqūt gives no sources or reasons for his conclusion.

The second striking thing about this paragraph is that the Quraysh are so concerned. If the Holy City was indeed south of Medina, they should not have been too concerned. After all, they were the leading city, the mother-of-all-cities in the south. Khaybar lay far to the north of Medina. However, if the Holy City was Petra, then the fall of Khaybar would have been of great concern to them, as it was the only major center between Medina and Petra. The men insist on hearing news, so Ḥajjāj then tells them lies. He says that Khaybar defeated the Muslim army and that Muḥammad was made a prisoner and was being sent to Mecca. The Quraysh rejoice and are happy, so Ḥajjāj goes about his business collecting his property. This is indeed an interesting story, for if the people of Khaybar had captured Muḥammad, the last place they would have taken him was Mecca, for it would mean a journey through Medina!

They might have tried to slip around the coast, or across the vast deserts to the east, but however they might have wanted to try it, a trip from Khaybar to Mecca without passing Medina would have been difficult, especially with such a prisoner as Muḥammad! However, if the Holy City was north of Khaybar, then the people of Khaybar could easily have taken Muḥammad north to the Holy City (Petra) so he could stand trial there. Ḥajjāj makes good his escape from the Holy City before the news reaches them that Khaybar was actually defeated and Muḥammad is on his way at the head of the army to fight them.

19. The order of the Battle for Mecca (The Victory of Islam)

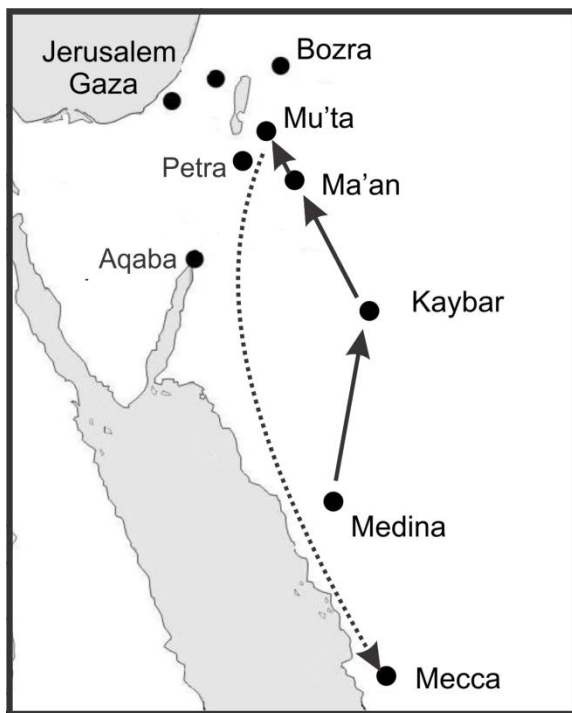
After defeating Khaybar, the Muslims raided a number of locations in northern Arabia, and then they prepared to march further north to meet the Roman (Byzantine) armies.⁴⁹

48 Mu'jam al-Buldan, II, 335

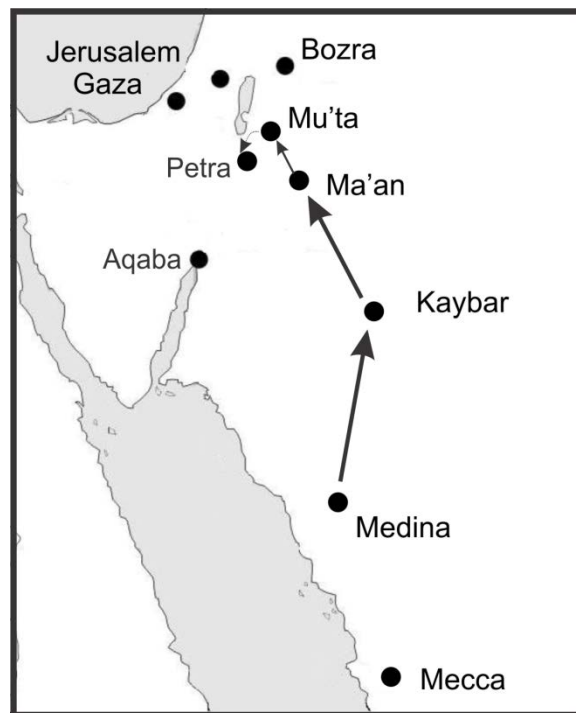
49 Ṭabarī Volume VIII, page 152 and onward

“They encamped at Mu’tan (Ma’an) in the land of Syria. The men learned that Heraclius had encamped with 100,000 Byzantines at Ma’ab⁵⁰ 51 The men journeyed on. When they were within the boundaries of al-Balqa, they were met by Heraclius’ armies of Romans and Arabs at a village of al-Balqa called Masharif ... the Muslims withdrew to a village called Mu’ta.⁵²

The battle of Mu’ta was a stalemate and the Muslims were in a bad way as many were killed. It is important to note here that the Anṣār fought in this battle.⁵³ The two armies retired from each other for a time. What happens next is puzzling, especially if you accept the traditional geography of the Holy City being Mecca in southern Arabia. After a short campaign into Syria Muḥammad decides to attack Mecca next.⁵⁴ This is a very strange occurrence. The armies of Muḥammad, the Emigrants and the Anṣār apparently all march to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.⁵⁵



This map shows the traditional journey: leave Medina and march north to Khaybar, then to Ma’an, and the battle of Mu’ta. Then Muḥammad decides to take Mecca, and marches all the way back south.



Above: If Petra is Mecca then they leave Medina and march north to Khaybar, then to Ma’an, and the battle of Mu’ta. Then Muḥammad decides to take Mecca, only a few miles away.

Consider these two options. First, we know the Muslim armies march all the way from Medina north to fight at Mu’ta in southern Jordan. Did then then over 100 kilometers back across the burning Nafud Desert to take Mecca? Wouldn’t it make more sense if the Holy City was in Petra instead of being south of Medina?

50 Rabbah Moab, 10 kilometers north of Kerak

51 Ṭabarī Volume VIII Page 152

52 Ṭabarī Volume VIII page 156

53 Ṭabarī VIII page 156

54 Ṭabarī VIII, page 160

55 Ṭabarī VIII page 168

Consider the distances the armies had to march. Medina to Mu'ta is about 900 kilometers, taking the most direct route. Mu'ta to Mecca is another 1,200 kilometers. Then travel from Mecca back to northern Arabia to continue campaigning is another 1000 kilometers. In total this would be 3,100 kilometers across some of the most difficult terrain in the world: rugged mountains, burning deserts, and waterless plains.

The answer that Muslim writers 300 years after the fact give us, is that despite the Anṣār warriors being mentioned as present in all locations, they claim there were three Muslim armies. Otherwise, the treks back and forth in Arabia would have been impossible.

20. The back way into the Holy City

The descriptions that Ṭabarī gives of the Mecca district are puzzling.⁵⁶ *When approaching Minā: he met Ikrimah in a canyon and routed him so that he drove Ikrimah back into the walled gardens of Mecca....*

There are numerous references to the Holy City being surrounded by canyons and rough terrain. While Mecca in Saudi Arabia is surrounded by low rocky mountains, this description is not true of the Mecca region today, which can be approached from various different angles.

For instance, when Muḥammad led his army from Medina back to Mecca to conquer it, the prophet asks: “*Who is a man who will lead us forth on a way other than the one on which they are?*” According to Ibn Ḥumayd – Salamah- Ibn Ishāq-’Abdallāh ibn Abū Bakr: *A man from Aslam said “I will, Messenger of God.” He took them on a rough and rugged path among canyons. When they emerged from it, it was exhausting for the Muslims – they reached level ground at the end of the valley, the Messenger of God said to the people:... ”*⁵⁷

It is interesting to note that Muḥammad who was born and raised in the Holy City, and who roamed the mountains in his youth, needed a guide. Apparently the area was so contorted that even Muḥammad needed a guide. Historians have not been able to trace this route into Mecca in Saudi Arabia as the description of “mazes of canyons ending in a level valley” does not fit any landscape around Mecca.

56 Ṭabarī VIII, page 71

57 Ṭabarī VIII, page 72

The story continues: *Turn right amid the salt-bushes on a path that will bring [the army] out over al-Murar Pass to the descent of al-Hudaybiyah below Mecca.* The Murar Pass with a descent of al-Hudaybiyah has never been identified and historians are unsure what is meant by “below Mecca.” *The Messenger of God set out, but when he entered al-Murar Pass, his camel kneeled down....*⁵⁸

The Thaniyyat al-Murar (Bitter Bush Pass) has also never been identified in Mecca, although Yāqūt mentions it.⁵⁹ It appears to be a narrow path that leads down from Mecca to lower heights.

If this description was applied to Petra, then the army would have approached from the south. And ...there is a mountain pass that goes through a maze of canyons south of Petra. It is unused today except by the local Bedouin. In 2002, a group of adventurous enthusiasts and myself traveled this route into Petra. The undertaking was difficult and despite our GPSs we ended up requiring help from the Bedouin. The pass opened up in a flat area just south of the city. The journey was arduous, but it proved that it was possible to travel through the maze of canyons into the very south end of the city, just as al-Ṭabarī describes the armies coming into the Holy City. These photos are from that expedition.



The narrow thaniya pictured above opens into a maze of canyons, some of them wider, like the one on the left, and many smaller, narrower ones. Without a guide, we quickly became lost, despite our GPS units and maps.

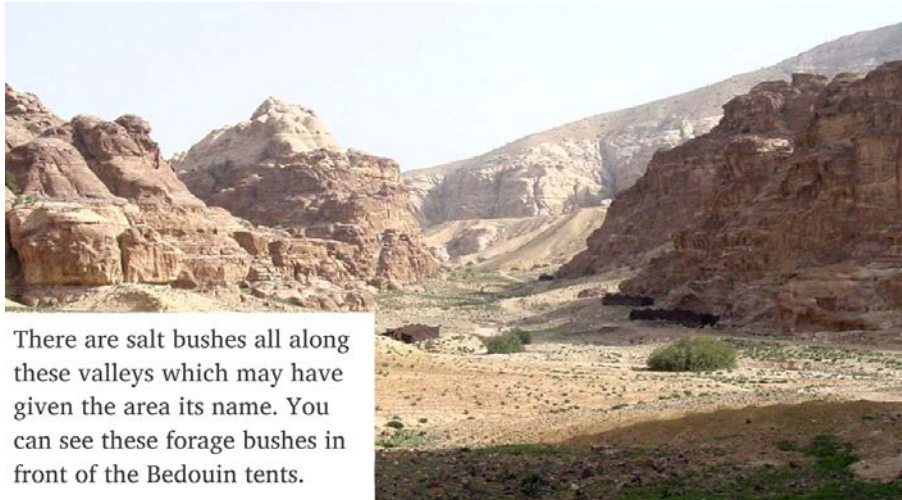
58 Ṭabarī VIII, page 73

59 Yāqūt, Muʿjam al-buldan, VIII 3

Right:

Bedouin live near the end of what is possibly Thaniyyat al-Murar just before it opens into the south end of Petra.

There are salt bushes all along these valleys which may have given the area its name. You can see these forage bushes in front of the Bedouin tents.



21. The current location of the Quraysh tribe

As Islam spread, the Quraysh tribe spread with them. Today it is possible to find people who claim to be descended from the Quraysh tribe all across the Middle East. Almost all of the Muslim Quraysh are Sunni, but there are also some who are Christians, belonging to the Orthodox Church (Antioch), the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Ancient Church of the East, as well as a few in the Aḥmadiyya community. This wide dispersion of people from a Quraysh background would be expected, as the Quraysh were among the leaders of Islam as it spread west to Spain and east to Afghanistan. An internet search of Quraysh or Qureshi will produce an interesting list of people with this last name.

When living in southern Jordan doing survey work of ancient Nabataean sites, I became aware of many Quraysh tribesmen living around (especially south and west) of the city of Ma'an. I asked a local clinic if I could survey the names in their registry and found an amazing number of Quraysh names. Ma'an is only 30 kilometers east of Petra. These tribesmen living in the Ma'an vicinity claimed they were descendants of the original Quraysh tribe.

But what about in antiquity? The city of Ḥumeima was a Nabataean town on the incense route, some 40 kilometers south of Petra. It flourished during the Nabataean Empire (100 BC – 300 AD) and was not abandoned until 746 AD when a large earthquake destroyed much of Ḥumeima and also Petra.⁶⁰ The Ḥumeima site has five Byzantine churches, two Umayyad-Abbāsid farmhouses, a large early Abbāsid fortified house and a mosque that served as the residence of the famous Abbāsid family.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Oleson, 1995

⁶¹ Oleson, 2005

The Abbāsīd families left Ḥumeima for Kūfa in Iraq in AH 132 / AD 749 where they would later become rulers. Among them were two of the first Abbāsīd caliphs: Abū al-'Abbās al-Saffāh and Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr, both of whom were born and grew up at Ḥumeima. Excavations have uncovered three buildings associated with the Abbāsīd family including the qaṣr (fortified house) and the small mosque.

Right: A photo of the foundations of the Abbāsīd Qaṣr or fortified house in Ḥumeima.



Why is Ḥumeima important? When the Muslims of Baghdad wished to find a member of Muḥammad's family to support their revolt against the Umayyad rulers in Damascus, they went to the region of Petra. It is interesting that they did not find members of Muḥammad's family at Mecca in southern Arabia, but rather looked to northern Arabia, to a town only 27 miles south of Petra.

22. The lack of evidence from north and south of Mecca

Muslims commonly believe that ancient Mecca in Saudi Arabia was a major city on the caravan routes between the kingdoms of Arabia. However, history does not prove this to be so. One would think that kingdoms like Yemen, which is immediately south of present day Mecca, and those north of Mecca would substantiate Mecca's existence, but this is not the case. The ancient kingdoms of Yemen utilized the skill of writing since the 10th century BC (Kitchen, 1994, page 135) and yet, with the thousands of inscriptions, graffiti and other writings that have survived to this day, there is not a single mention of the city of Mecca. Looking north from Mecca to the cities of Dedan, Teyma and Khaybar, thousands of inscriptions, graffiti and other writings have survived to this day, and once again we have not a single mention of the city of Mecca in any literature prior to 900 AD.

Farther north are the Nabataean cities of Meda'in Šālīḥ, Petra and the Nabataean cities in the Negev. In the inscriptions, graffiti and other records, once again, there is not a single mention of the city of Mecca.

If Mecca was indeed a major center that had existed since the days of Abraham, it should have appeared somewhere in the ancient and classical records.

In contrast, many of the small kingdoms that existed in Yemen are well documented. The Kingdom of Haram was founded in 600 BC by King Yaharil (Kitchen, 1994, page 239) and ended with King Maadikarib Raydan. (190-175 BC).⁶²

There was also the Kingdom of Inabba, whose most prominent ruler was King Waqahil Yafush. (550-530 BC)⁶³ Another kingdom, Kaminahu, was founded by King Ammiyitha (585-570 BC) ⁶⁴ and ruled by a number of kings until Ilisami II Nabat, 495–475 BC. Then there was the kingdom of Nashan, whose first documented ruler was King Ab'amar Saqid. He reigned in 760 BC.⁶⁵ Later a king named Yadi'ab Āmir ruled from 500-480 BC.⁶⁶ If historians and archeologists can date so many small kingdoms north and south of Mecca, why can they not find any reference to the city of Mecca supposedly existed in this region for thousands of years?

Dr. Michael Macdonald at the Faculty of Oriental Studies in Oxford University has been working on a database of Safaitic inscriptions found in Arabia. So far he and his colleagues have recorded over 28,000 inscriptions. You can read about the database at <http://www.orinst.ox.ac.uk/staff/iw/mmacdonald.html>. To date, not a single reference to the city of Mecca has been discovered, despite thousands of pieces of graffiti written by people going on the pilgrimage.

While there is much evidence of people going on pilgrimages to Petra, one wonders why Mecca is never mentioned. It is as if it never existed.

⁶² Kitchen, page 181, 239

⁶³ Kitchen, page 181, 239

⁶⁴ Kitchen, page 182

⁶⁵ Kitchen, page 183

⁶⁶ Kitchen, page 240

23. Khālīd's pilgrimage

In the massive collection of writing produced by Abbāsīd authors between 750 - 950 AD (132 - 340 AH) the Muslim writers seldom mention the city of Mecca and never once mention the city of Petra. Sometimes when early Abbāsīd writers do mention Mecca, they go out of their way to demonstrate just where Mecca was located. This is illustrated in Al Ṭabarī's comments in the following story.⁶⁷

Khalid and a group of young men were together with the army of Abū Bakr as it marched along the Euphrates River in Iraq. It was a slow moving army, following the long bends of the river. The young men were bored, when one of them got an idea. They should make a quick dash across the desert and perform the pilgrimage in the Holy City and then dash back. Could they make it in time before the army arrived at its destination? They raced off, performed the pilgrimage and raced back to al- Ḥīraīrah arriving just when the rear of the army entered the city. It was a brilliant feat, but soon word got out and Abū Bakr sent the young men back to Syria as punishment.

Al Ṭabarī tells the story and then notes some items. These items have no isnād or line of succession to give indication of where this information came from. We can only assume that Al Ṭabarī himself inserts this information on his own behalf. Abū Ja'far relates the story: *Khālīd set out as a pilgrim from al-Firād (Iraq) on 25 Dhū al-Qa'dah (31 January 634) but kept his pilgrimage a secret. He had with him a number of his companions. He traveled through the land until he arrived at Mecca by dead reckoning. That came to him easily, in a way that it would not come to either guide or ribāl. He traveled on one of the roads of the people of al-Jazīrah, no stranger way nor one more appropriate than it despite its difficulty has been seen. Therefore his absence from his troops was short, so that the last of them had not arrived in al- Ḥīraīrah before he came to them in the company of the commander of the rear who he had appointed, and the two of them arrived together. Khālīd and his companions had shaven their heads. His pilgrimage was unknown except to those in the rear whom he had told about that. Abū Bakr did not learn of that until later, when he reproached him for it. His punishment was that he was sent to Syria.*

(Here starts Ṭabarī comments.) Khālīd's journey from al-Firād crossed the width of the land randomly by his own reckoning. The road from al-Firād passed through Ma'al-Ambari, then Mithqab, then ended at Dhat al'Irq. The road then headed east from there, bringing him from 'Arafat to al-Firād. That road is named al-Sudd.

67 Ṭabarī XI, page 68

There are several things that one can note from this passage. First is that Khālīd calculated he could make a quick pilgrimage to Mecca while his troops marched from al-Firād to Ḥira. The troops would travel a distance of 475 kms on a direct route, or around 700 kms if they followed the meandering river.

The overland trip to Mecca in Saudi Arabia however was over 1500 kms in one direction, and the return journey would make the total distance well over 3000 kilometers. Second, after the account is finished, al-Ṭabarī seems to insert the short section to describe Khālīd's route to Mecca, in case anyone objects to this rather long and tedious journey being made in such a short time.

The paragraph: *Khālīd's journey from al-Farād crossed the width of the land by his own reckoning. The road from al-Firād passed through Ma'al-Ambari, then Mithqab, then ended at Dhat al'Irq. The road then headed east from there, bringing him from 'Arafat to al-Firād. That road is named al-Sudd.*) reads more as an intrusion into the text than a part that flows from it. Al-Ṭabarī gives no source other than himself for this section.

The question then faces us: Which is more probable, a quick trip to Petra, or a quick trip to Mecca in southern Arabia? If one assumed that Khālīd's pilgrimage was to the religious center of Petra, the journey would have been much shorter. (475 kms to Petra versus 1500 kms to Mecca in the south) On a journey to Petra, dead reckoning would have been necessary to find the ancient water cistern that connected Wadi Sirḥān to Jafr. This cistern was used by ancient camel caravans enabling camels to cross directly west from Wadi Sirḥān to Jafr and then on to Ma'an and finally to Petra. This route was first suggested to me by John Hill, when he was preparing his translation of the *Xiyu juan* or "Chapter on the Western Regions" from the *Hou Han shu* as the Chinese described traveling to Petra arriving directly from the east. At the time, Hill required some help tracing out the Chinese routes, and I was in the Middle East, living in the desert between Petra and Wadi Rum.

As John Hill translated the Chinese text⁶⁸ he became convinced that a trade route used to exist between Petra and Wadi Sirḥān to the east. Such a trade route would cross the desert to link Petra directly with Jawf, and subsequently to the trade routes that ran east from there to Gerrha and the ports at the head of the Persian Gulf. This proposed trade route would have provided a direct link between Gerrha and the more northern ports such as Charax Spasinu on the Persian Gulf, and Gaza and Rhinocorura (modern al-'Arish) on the Mediterranean Sea.

68 Section 12.21 and 12.24

This route would have been known as the “Mesopotamia Route” or “Northwest Route” to Petra. It is interesting to note that the term al Ṭabarī gives it means exactly that: “al Jazīrah.”⁶⁹

The Chinese text that John Hill was referring to is one known as the *Wei lue* (or “Short Account of the Wei Dynasty”) composed by Yu Huan between 239 and 265 AD.⁷⁰ It provides much additional material on Parthia and DaQin or the Roman Empire than was included in the earlier account of these regions in the *Hou Han shu*, which were based on the reports of the Chinese envoy Gan Ying who reached the Persian Gulf in 97 AD, and presented in an address to the Chinese Emperor circa 125 AD. The new material in the *Wei lue* appears to date from the late 2nd or early 3rd century AD and seems to be based on accounts from Arab sources.

According to John Hill, the ancient Chinese text claims that “*from Qielan (Wadi Sirhān) one can travel due west 600 li (250 km) to the kingdom of Sifu (Petra).*”⁷¹

The basic units of measurement employed in the *Hou Han shu* (the li and the chi) have varied considerably through the ages and at times, from district to district. Fortunately, however, they remained stable over the Qin and Han periods and a bronze standard measure, dated 9 AD, has been preserved at the Imperial Palace in Beijing. This has allowed accurate conversions to modern measurements, and the li is calculated to be 415.8 meters in length. Other ancient measurements were the Greek stadium (201.5 meters), the Roman stadium (185 meters), and the Roman mile (1,482 meters).⁷² There were several problems with the trade route that John Hill suggested.

First, this route does not appear on any modern maps of ancient trade routes of the Arabian Desert. Such a route would cross a wide desert expanse between Jafr in Jordan and Wadi Sirhān in Saudi Arabia. Second, the Chinese text suggested that there was a wang or “king” of Wadi Sirhān, and as far as we know, Wadi Sirhān never was a kingdom, although it appears to have been a major part of the Midianite kingdom as I demonstrate in chapter nine of *Qur’ānic Geography*.

Wadi Sirhān is the name of a wadi (valley) that runs southeast from the ancient site of Al-Azrak in eastern Jordan, eventually crosses the border into Saudi Arabia and ends at the wells of Maybu. It is about 140 kilometers (87 miles) in length, and 5-18 kilometers (3-11 miles) wide. Musil called it: “a sandy, marshy lowland, surrounded by low hillocks.”

69 also see note 658, Al Jazīrah, page 180 Al Ṭabarī Volume XII, page 180

70 see the list of Chinese explorers in Paper 5

71 Hill, 2004

72 Hill, 2004

As far as I could tell, any reference to a “king” of this area by the Chinese explorer must have referred to a local sheik. Hill explains it this way: “The Chinese word, ‘wang’, usually translated as “king,” is employed for everyone ranging from tribal chiefs to emperors - so there is no difficulty assuming it is used here for “sheik.”

Now, trade routes can be funny things. Most Westerners think in terms of major nations trading with other major nations through established and well known routes. The Arab mind set was different. The Bedouin think in terms of being middlemen without those two centers having contact with each other. This is significantly different. Camel caravans were making profit by bringing goods from one center to another, but they were not the official representatives of either center, and endeavored to limit direct communication between the two.

The governments of these centers made money by taxing the caravans. The caravan owners made better profits by avoiding taxes. So trade routes were in constant flux. There were, and are, many ways to cross the desert. Each route has its positive and negative points.

So any caravan passing through a settled area would have to pay something to the sheik who controlled that area. Settled areas, however, were usually located around water spots, and caravans needed water. As I mentioned in chapter eleven of *Qur’ānic Geography*, the Nabataeans grew in wealth and power because they developed secret water collection systems in the desert, enabling their caravans to pass through areas that others could not travel, thus avoiding some of these taxation centers. Thus a cat and mouse game developed between caravan owners and those with the power to tax caravans passing through their region.

This constant flux makes it difficult for historians to accurately plot ancient trade routes. While major routes did occur, other routes that bypassed certain centers were used whenever it was profitable.

As mentioned before, based on Chinese records, John Hill suggested that a trade route existed between Petra in the west and Gerrha in the east. The part of the route that ran east from Petra to Ail, then to Ma’an and finally to Jafr is quite acceptable, and follows a natural course of travel between these centers. There is also enough water along this route for major camel caravans to pass.

The problem with Hill’s suggested route was getting a caravan from Jafr to a spot with water in Wadi Sirhān. Since camels require about 80 - 100 liters of water each, a small caravan of 100

camels would require 8000 - 10,000 liters of water. Thus there had to be a major watering point between Jafr and Wadi Sirhān with a minimum of 10,000 liters and, preferably, much more.

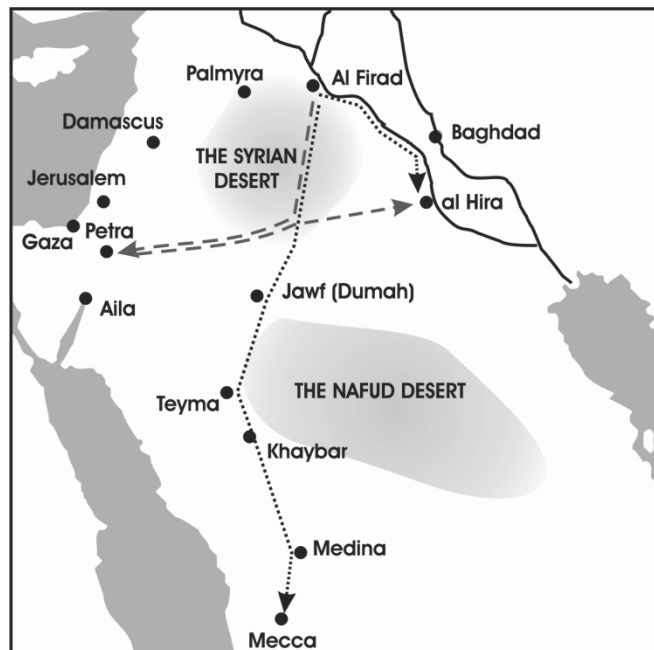
A well would not usually provide this kind of water, unless it was located in an area with close surface water. Such an area would have been an oasis, such as is found in Ma'an. If there was no oasis or active well, then a rain-water collection system that fed into a large cistern was required. If camel caravans used this route, then there must have been a major source of water about half way between Jafr and Wadi Sirhān.

I began my search in the Jordanian village of Abū Lissan where the Darawsha tribe of Bedouin live. They originally herded camels south and east of the Jafr area, before being settled by the Jordanian government around the well at Abū Lissan. After much discussion regarding the area and possible routes, the old men of the village told me of a large, ancient water cistern located in the desert east of Jafr. However, as it is very hard to gain government permission to visit this area, we couldn't just drive on out to look for it. Then a few days later, while digging around in the basement of ACOR (American Center for Oriental Research) in Amman, I came across an old map that actually showed the location of this large cistern.

Is it possible that Khālīd's men remembered the ancient Nabataean trade route and tried a daring quick trip to the Holy City while their army marched back to Hira? Rather than taking the longer trip around the top of Syria, they made a dash through the desert and approached Petra directly from the east.

While their army marched along the winding river bank on foot for nearly 700 kms, their camels raced across the desert covering 800 to 900 kilometers, depending on which desert track they took. The men

quickly performed the pilgrimage and then rushed back to their troops before the rear guard made it to Hira. It is just the kind of dashing bravery that young Bedouin men often demonstrate or aspire to. It must have been a shock to them when Abū Bakr disciplined them for their act of devotion to Islam.



The rain-water collection system and storage cistern is located almost exactly half way between Jafr and Al Isawiyah at a place where Wadi Hadrai and Wadi el 'Abyaḍ meet, collecting water from both wadis. This would enable caravans to water at a spot directly between Petra from Wadi Sirḥān and would have provided a way for Khālīd to perform the pilgrimage to Petra and quickly return to al-Firād or al- Ḥīra on the Euphrates River.

A journey to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, a thousand kilometers south of Petra would have been impossible for Khālīd to undertake in the same time period. Therefore, this story better illustrates that Khālīd and his men actually traveled to Petra and not Mecca.

24. Trebuchet Stones

During the civil war with Ibn Zubayr⁷¹ the Syrian army attacked the Holy City, and during the month of October destroyed the Ka'ba in the center of the city with a trebuchet which hurled large stones into the Ka'ba area.⁷²



Above: Manjanik rocks found by Brown University in their excavations of the center of Petra.

In the city of Mecca there is no evidence of trebuchet stones ever being used against the city, or even city walls over which a trebuchet would have thrown stones. In Petra, archeologists from Brown University have uncovered hundreds of trebuchet stones which were hurled into the area in front of the temple of Dushares, the bathhouse and in front of the “Great Temple area”. Using the fallen roof tiles from the Great Temple, it is possible to date the fortified area and stones to sometime after the earthquake of 551 AD.

The area was covered in rubble from the later earthquake of 713 AD. Is it not an amazing coincidence that a manjanik (early tebuchet) was used against Petra at exactly the same time as

Conclusion

The twenty four arguments presented in this paper are intended to support the proposal that the city of Petra was the original Holy City of Islam. These arguments are intended to supplement the archeological evidence given in the first paper, rather than stand alone. When taken together with the archeological evidence of early mosque qiblas there seem to be no question that the original Qibla faced towards Petra, and that the Petra is indeed the place where the original of Masjid al Ḥarām was location, and the original Holy City of Islam where the prophet Muḥammad was born, and where the first four rightly guided caliphs worshiped.

71 64 AH, 683 AD

72 Cosman, 2008, pg 305 and Ṭabarī XIX: 223-224