

Is Petra Islam's true birthplace—or Mecca?

For centuries Muslims have revered Mecca as the site of their holiest shrine, the Kaaba. However, in 1977 John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook published books arguing for a radically different approach to Islam's origins.¹ Among other things, these revisionists contended that Mecca was not Islam's birthplace, which they located somewhere in the Fertile Crescent. Though Crone and Cook later repudiated the theory advanced in their book, Crone at least held fast to the idea that Islam's origins were likely in the Fertile Crescent, possibly in Nabatea.

Forty years later revisionism is still alive and well. Some scholars still promote the idea that the Kaaba was not originally in Mecca. Some say it was in or near Petra, while others refuse to speculate on the location. Their combined evidence was enough to convince popular historian and documentary filmmaker Tom Holland.² Since Muslims everywhere pray facing Mecca, this view means they all naively face the wrong direction.

Revisionists variously claim the following evidence supports their theory:

- The textual and cartographic data
- The Qur'an's geographic data
- The hadith's picture of Mecca
- The archeological record
- Al-Tabari's historical record
- Mecca's geographic conditions

In addition to these six lines of evidence, we must also consider how plausible it is that the Muslim community "reassigned" its origins to a different city than that of its actual birthplace. Most revisionists believe Muslims made this change during Islam's classical period for political reasons. But is this believable? Did Islam originate in Mecca or Petra?

The evidence

First, some scholars are unimpressed that the earliest textual evidence for Mecca is so late—from the late seventh century. They claim the first map documenting Mecca's existence is late also. I believe Herodotus included Mecca, as "Makoraba," on his second-century BCE map of Arabia, but revisionists are unconvinced. Regarding textual evidence, only a small percentage survives from any ancient culture. And unlike the Mediterranean world at the time of Christ, Arab culture was oral during Islam's first two centuries, producing precious little written Arabic before the

¹ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 23-24, John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Other Western scholars had previously questioned the hadith basis of the traditional origins story, but Wansbrough, Cook and Crone can be credited with beginning Islamic revisionism as a school of thought.

² Tom Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword: The Birth of Islam and the Rise of the Global Arab Empire* (New York: Doubleday, 2012) and the film *Islam: The Untold Story*.

ninth century. However, wishing we had earlier evidence does not license us to discount the evidence we do have. And all the early textual evidence points to Mecca, none to Petra.³

Second, regarding the Qur'anic evidence, the fact that the Qur'an names Mecca just once⁴ looks suspicious when compared with the New Testament's naming Jerusalem nearly 150 times. However, the two scriptures are radically different books. By way of comparison, the former names Islam's founder just four times, while the latter uses Jesus' name over a thousand times.

Some scholars think the Qur'an's other geographic data locate Islam's origins in Nabatea. For example, a woodenly literal reading of Q 37:137 locates Muhammad's audience beside Sodom's Nabatean ruins. A freer reading allows for the traditional interpretation, which puts the ruins beside the Arabs' caravan route to Syria. Q 80:24-32 and other Meccan passages speak of God's provision of fruit and *an 'ām*—sometimes translated “cattle”—which Mecca's climate will not allow. But *an 'ām* can also be translated “beasts,” which includes camels. In that case, the verse's provisions “for you and your beasts” would have been relevant to traders and camel herders alike. There is also no reason to reject the traditional Muslim view that these texts speak universally (after the pattern of the psalms⁵). Q 6:136-139 implies that Muhammad's opponents were themselves agriculturalists. But such passages may well have been regional in scope, for example, detailing practices of pagan Ta'if's residents, just 87 kilometers (54 miles) from Mecca. In fact, none of the Qur'an's agricultural references require a locale further afield than Ta'if, famous for its grapes, pomegranates, figs, etc. Thus, everything in the Qur'an's early suras is compatible with its Hijazi origins.

Revisionists must reckon with two other facts which argue strongly against Islam's Nabatean or northern origins:

- Qur'anic references to the pagans' practices of idol worship and animal sacrifice
- The presence of no less than 200 Amharic and Ethiopic loanwords in the Qur'an⁶

The Byzantines had forbidden both idol worship and animal sacrifice long before Muhammad's time—including in their province of Arabia Petraea.⁷ Yet the Qur'an repeatedly refers to idolatry as a contemporary practice, calling the unbelievers to forsake their idols, which they look to for protection (e.g., Q 2:256-57, 16:36). Abraham is repeatedly presented as the great prophetic hero who challenged his people's idolatry (e.g., Q 26:69-102), even as Muhammad is now doing. G.R. Hawting has argued that Muhammad challenged only the “spiritual idolatry” of retrograde monotheists.⁸ But in its listing of proscribed foods, Q 5:3 says, “Forbidden to you are carrion, blood, pork... whatever has been sacrificed to idols.” This was clearly pagan idolatry, which points to an Arabian region, like the Hijaz, outside the bounds of the Byzantine Empire.

³ See pp. 4-5 below for my treatment of the 9th-10th century testimony of Thomas Artsruni.

⁴ It also names Bakka—said to be an alias for Mecca—as the site of Abraham's sacred house, the Kaaba.

⁵ Angelika Neuwirth, “Qur'anic Reading of the Psalms,” in *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2010) 733-78.

⁶ Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938).

⁷ Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A historical-critical introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017) 61.

⁸ G.R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Regarding loanwords, significant linguistic borrowing suggests extensive cross-cultural interaction. When goods and ideas are exchanged, words often are as well. Cultural dominance may play into linguistic borrowing also, and Ethiopia ruled the Hijaz briefly during the 6th century. If the Qur'an's early suras were given in Petra, one might expect more Coptic than Amharic and Ethiopic loanwords since Nabatea had a much closer cultural connection with Egypt than with Ethiopia. Yet Amharic and Ethiopic words in the Qur'an stand in a 20:1 ratio to Coptic words. (Aramaic and Syriac, on the other hand, exerted major influence on the entire region, even far-off Yemen.) Thus, from both these perspectives the Hijaz is the more likely location of Islam's emergence. And while the Qur'an mentions Mecca by name only once, it never mentions Petra at all. Thus, the Hijaz is the more likely location of Islam's emergence when both the Qur'an's references to idolatrous worship and its vocabulary are taken into account. And while the Qur'an mentions Mecca by name only once, it never mentions Petra at all.

Third, since the hadith clearly exaggerate in glorifying Mecca, we must take their hyperbolic descriptions of its grandeur and lush vegetation for what they are.⁹ Crone is doubtless right to argue that western Arabia's economy was insufficient to support the populations mentioned in the hadith.¹⁰ Neither was Mecca ever on any trade route. But again, we must not allow fictional accounts and hyperbolic descriptions to mislead us into looking for a large city at the nexus of a trading empire. Hadith sources consistently disagree when hyperbolizing. It is where they consistently agree that we should pay attention. And they consistently make Mecca Islam's birthplace.

Fourth, revisionists make two claims about the archeological record. The first relates to the fact that we have no evidence that Mecca was inhabited in the seventh century. Due to the Saudi government's absolute dread of *shirk*—roughly translated, idolatry—it adamantly forbids all archeological study of Mecca's historic sites. Indeed, the Saudis seem determined to obliterate the city's historic record in their rush to dwarf the Kaaba with skyscrapers. An estimated 95% of Mecca's historic buildings have been demolished to allow for this building spree. Any remaining historic sites are treated with a strange combination of fear, contempt and scholarly avoidance, lest they be idolized.¹¹ This leaves us with no archeological evidence whatsoever, either for or against Mecca's being Islam's birthplace.

The other archeological claim some revisionists make relates to early mosque orientation. Writer and documentary filmmaker Dan Gibson claims close agreement in the *qibla*, or prayer direction,

⁹ In his unpublished paper "Petra in the Qur'an," Dan Gibson claims that Petra was also called Mecca, and that the hadith accurately described the alleged Petran Mecca. But it defies logic that Muslims would have named an Arabian city by the very same name, without ever distinguishing the two, unless to cover their tracks. <http://thesacredcity.ca/Petra%20In%20The%20Qur%27an.pdf> Accessed Sept. 12, 2018.

¹⁰ Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004).

¹¹ One example of this fear and contempt is that the Saudis have turned the house of Khadijah, Muhammad's first wife, into a block of toilets. Likewise, while radical clerics have repeatedly called for the demolition of the house in which Muhammad was born, the Saudis have used it as a cattle market for many years. Ziauddin Sardar, *Mecca: The Sacred City* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) 346-47.

of most of Islam's earliest mosques—but to Petra, not Mecca.¹² Frankly speaking, however, this is impossible since their builders used conflicting methods to determine the *qibla*, just as American Muslims do today.¹³ In keeping with the early Muslims' conflicting methods for *qibla* determination, the mosques they built do not agree, though their builders oriented them all to Mecca.

The level of agreement Gibson claims to have found is impossible for other reasons also. Islamic science historian David A. King explains, “The first generations of Muslims had no means whatsoever for finding the direction of Petra [or Mecca either] accurately to within a degree or two, not least because they had no access to any geographical coordinates, let alone modern ones, and no mathematics whatsoever.” The early Muslims calculated the *qibla* accurately by the standards of the day, based on the best folklore-based methods at their disposal.¹⁴ But with only primitive astronomy and maps and no mathematics, they could not achieve anything close to modern-day accuracy. The only reasonable explanation for any early mosque accurately oriented toward either Petra or Mecca—if, indeed, any exists—would be coincidence. Thus, rightly understood, early mosque data support Islam's having originated in Mecca, not Petra.

Fifth, Gibson, reading between the lines, suggests that al-Tabari's account of Ibn al-Zubayr's trip to Mecca in 70 AH (689-90 CE) may point to the Muslim community's relocation from Petra to Mecca.¹⁵ Tabari says Ibn al-Zubayr took with him “many horses and camels and much baggage” to Mecca. To begin, had the rebel Ibn al-Zubayr's trip represented a communal move and relocation of the Black Stone to Mecca, why would his enemies not have reversed it upon his defeat? As for the horses mentioned, he would have needed them to mount the defense of his desert refuge. Regarding the money Ibn al-Zubayr took, transferring power from Damascus involved outfitting and rewarding his supporters, and money was bulky in those days. Tabari also says that many camels were slaughtered on his arrival in Mecca—doubtless to celebrate his victory, fleeting though it was. There is nothing to suggest that this points to the Muslim community's relocation of Islam's sacred shrine.¹⁶ And while Tabari never mentions Petra, he elsewhere repeatedly names Mecca as home of the Kaaba.

Sixth, some believe Mecca's harsh conditions and geographic isolation make it a wretched choice for the spiritual center of the world.¹⁷ But however ambitious Muhammad was, it seems

¹² Gibson claims the exceptions face halfway between Petra and Mecca. Dan Gibson, *The Sacred City: Discovering the Real Birthplace of Islam* (Glasshouse Media, 2017); and Dan Gibson, *Qur'anic Geography* (Surrey, BC: Independent Scholars Press, 2011). Missing in both Gibson's book (and film) is precise archeological evidence for each of the mosques studied. And no amount of cinematic wizardry can make up for this lack. Coordinates based on satellite imagery are unreliable due to the fact that many early mosques have multiple foundations.

¹³ Many American mosques face southeast, based on Mecca's direction on a flat map, while others face northeast, based on the shortest distance around the globe.

¹⁴ <http://www.muslimheritage.com/article/from-petra-back-to-makka> Accessed July 8, 2018. King has written numerous books and articles on early *qibla* determination.

¹⁵ Gibson, *The Sacred City*.

¹⁶ https://archive.org/stream/TabariEnglish/Tabari_Volume_21#page/n9/mode/2up Accessed July 8, 2018.

¹⁷ Most revisionists hypothesize that the early Muslims relocated Islam's center to Mecca for its remoteness, in order to make the Kaaba (with its vital Black Stone) immune to political intrigue. But it is not hard to imagine every rebel spirited the stone off and rebuilding its shrine in his preferred location. That did not happen in all the centuries since the stone was allegedly moved to Mecca because it is precisely Mecca's Muhammadan history that sanctifies it to Muslims.

likely that he initially hoped to make his hometown simply the center of his Arabian theocracy. He could not have known when he first began how much of the globe his armies would subdue.

The issue of plausibility

The last issue for us to consider in assessing the theory that Petra or another city in the Fertile Crescent is Islam's real birthplace is that of plausibility. This issue comes to the fore when we ask how the Muslim community seamlessly made and accepted the move from Islam's "original birthplace" to Mecca, its "pseudo-birthplace," without leaving any evidence of the move in the written record.

Of the proposed answers to this question, two call for our consideration. Gibson puts forward a highly implausible hypothesis that Muslims formerly called Petra "Mecca," a hypothesis endorsed by Christian apologist Jay Smith. This would mean there were two Meccas, the first being Petra, the second being the Kaaba's current home in Saudi Arabia. Gibson bases this theory on the testimony of a 9th-10th century Christian historian named Thomas Artsruni, who wrote that Muhammad had preached in Mecca, located in "Arabia Petraea Paran." According to Gibson, Thomas locates Mecca in Petra, "in southern Jordan."¹⁸

However, Thomas locates Mecca, not in the city of Petra at all, but only in the Byzantine province of Arabia Petraea, specifically in its Paran region—in Sinai. Two things explain Thomas's mistake. First, he wrote in distant Armenia of places he had never seen. Second, he undoubtedly placed Mecca in Paran because Muslims say Mecca was the site of Hagar and Ishmael's exile, an event Genesis 21:22 clearly locates in Paran. In other words, Thomas mistakenly assumed that Mecca must be in Paran since the author of Genesis set Hagar and Ishmael's story there.¹⁹ Thus, we should overlook Thomas's error, not expand upon it.

The standard revisionist explanation for the hadith's total silence on the topic of the Muslim community's alleged move of its central shrine from Petra or some other town in the Fertile Crescent to Mecca is that the Muslims covered their tracks. They supposedly did this because they did not want it known they had moved the *qibla*, lest it diminish Mecca's sanctity and legitimacy. This theory is also implausible for a number of reasons:

- Having the correct *qibla* has always been vitally important to Muslims.
- The Muslim community was already widely distributed when the alleged change and subsequent cover-up happened.
- So deeply divided was the early community that Sunni, Shia, Khariji and other Muslims killed each other to gain or retain power.

¹⁸ Gibson, "Petra in the Qur'an," 14.

¹⁹ Gibson's presupposition that the original Kaaba was in Petra led him to see Thomas as explaining why Muslim accounts always named Mecca, never Petra, as Islam's birthplace—or as he sees it, "why Petra is continually referred to as Mecca in the Islamic accounts"; Gibson, "Petra in the Qur'an," 14. But even supposing that Muslims used the name Mecca for Petra before relocating the Black Stone to the new Mecca (in Saudi Arabia), this does not explain why they never again referred to Petra as Mecca (or "Old Mecca") after that historic move.

- Though not written down until much later, the hadith do reflect the early Muslim community's divisions and disagreements in numerous respects.

To think that so sprawling and so unruly a community could have unanimously agreed to relocate its sacred center and could have done so without leaving a single trace of the move is highly implausible, to say the least.

By my reckoning, then, the score is Mecca 7, Petra 0. Muslims do not mistakenly face the wrong direction when they pray. All the available evidence points to Mecca as Islam's true birthplace.