Journal of Religious Movements
Vol. 1. No. 1 (2026), pp. 42-58
DOI: 10.66277/jrm.1.1.398

e-ISSN: xxxx-xxxx
Elkuator Research & Publication

The Ka'bah, Religious Mobility, and Quraysh Authority: Negotiated Centrality in Pre-Islamic Arabia

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Received: 20 February 2026 | Revised: 10 May 2026 | Accepted: 12 June 2026

Abstract
Pre-Islamic Mecca is often described through two compressed images. One presents the Kaʿbah as an uncontested religious center for Arabia, while the other explains Quraysh authority through long-distance trade. Both images overlook the plurality of Arabian cults and the institutional work required to sustain recurrent pilgrimage. This article examines how the Kaʿbah became a center of religious mobility without erasing regional sanctuaries or placing the Arabian Peninsula under Meccan rule. Historical and textual analysis is applied to Ibn al-Kalbī's Kitāb al-Aṣnām, Ibn Isḥāq–Ibn Hishām's al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah, Ibn Ḥabīb's al-Munammaq fī Akhbār Quraysh, and later Meccan histories, read alongside modern scholarship on pilgrimage, mobility, and early Arabian history. The evidence indicates a polycentric sacred landscape in which Manāt, al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, and other cults remained active, while Mecca acquired wider ritual significance through recurrent pilgrimage and intertribal encounter. Quraysh superiority grew through custodianship, collective provisioning, deliberation, and negotiated route security rather than systematic territorial conquest. These practices strengthened Meccan authority by linking ritual service with mobility, exchange, and recognition among diverse tribal groups. The article argues that the Kaʿbah functioned as sacred infrastructure. Its recurrent rituals gathered people, goods, obligations, and recognition, enabling Quraysh to convert ritual centrality into relational authority across tribal boundaries without requiring political sovereignty over Arabia. This perspective reframes Meccan centrality as negotiated, recurrent, and institutionally sustained authority.

Keywords: Kaʿbah; Quraysh; religious mobility; sacred infrastructure; pre-Islamic Arabia

Introduction

Reverence alone does not explain how a sanctuary becomes historically consequential, for sacred reputation acquires social force only when people can repeatedly act upon it: travelers must be able to reach the site, recognize periods in which movement is permitted, obtain water and food on arrival, and accept, however provisionally, the standing of those who organize the encounter.[1] Yet these practical conditions remain peripheral in many narratives of pre-Islamic Mecca (Makkah), where the Kaʿbah tends to appear either as a sacred inheritance whose authority scarcely requires explanation or as the religious setting of a commercial city already connected to distant markets.[2] Both images preserve something of the city's later memory, but they leave a more difficult

[1] Michael A. Innes, "Protected Status, Sacred Sites, Black Holes and Human Agents: System, Sanctuary and Terrain Complexity," *Civil Wars* 10, no. 1 (2008): 1–5, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698240701835417.
[2] Simon O'Meara, *The Ka'ba Orientations: Readings in Islam's "Ancient House"* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

historical question unresolved. How could recurrent ritual movement generate authority beyond the residential community of Quraysh without turning Mecca into a territorial state, especially in a western Arabian landscape where Manāt, al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, domestic cult objects, tribal sanctuaries, and the Kaʿbah continued to coexist?

One common solution has been to move too quickly from sacred reputation to political superiority. Older accounts sometimes treated the concentration of cult objects around the Kaʿbah as evidence that Arabia already acknowledged a single religious center, while Quraysh prominence was explained through guardianship and caravan trade.[3] In its stronger form, this interpretation imagines defeated tribes surrendering their cult objects to Mecca and thereafter being drawn, or compelled, into Meccan pilgrimage. The surviving narratives certainly preserve conflict, removal, alliance, and competition over sanctuary offices; they do not, however, describe a regular Quraysh policy of conquering neighboring territories and transporting the gods of the defeated to the Kaʿbah.[4] Religion and power plainly met in Mecca, but that observation is only the beginning of the problem. What requires explanation is the mechanism by which one sacred destination, surrounded by other active cultic centers, acquired durable supra-tribal standing.

Recent writing on pre-Islamic Arabia has made universal claims of this kind increasingly difficult to sustain. Robert Hoyland assembled inscriptions, external chronicles, archaeology, poetry, and Islamic historical writing to recover a peninsula whose political and religious life cannot be reduced to a preface for Islam. Valentina Grasso has pressed the argument further by placing Arabian societies within Late Antiquity and by treating cult, elite conversion, trade, and identity as connected developments rather than signs of a timeless *jāhiliyyah*. Her reconstruction has attracted criticism over particular readings, yet the larger historiographical shift remains valuable. Arabia appears as a field of regional societies situated beside Rome, Iran, and Aksum, and not as an undifferentiated tribal desert awaiting unification. The implication for Mecca is important. Meccan prominence must be demonstrated within that field rather than assumed from the city's later status in Islam.[5]

Protected space complicates the picture in a similar way. Harry Munt's discussion of *ḥaram* and *ḥimā* draws attention to zones marked by restriction, protection, and remembered acts of sanctification; although Mecca possessed the most consequential *ḥaram* in later Islamic history, the idea of protected sacred space was not a Quraysh monopoly. A center could therefore command wider and more regular recognition than neighboring sanctuaries without erasing them, and its reach could depend on agreements made well beyond its own boundary because pilgrims still had to cross territories governed by other communities. Meccan centrality, viewed in this way, was neither equivalent to local cultic attachment nor evidence of political rule over the roads that led toward the city.[6]

Victor Turner located much of pilgrimage's analytical significance in *communitas*, especially in its capacity to loosen ordinary social distinctions, while John Eade and Michael Sallnow complicated that image by treating shrines as arenas in which meaning, access, and authority remain open to contestation. Later approaches moved still further away from the shrine as a self-contained destination: Thomas Tweed emphasized crossings and dwellings, whereas Simon

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3 Mikhail D. Bukharin, "Mecca on The Caravan Routes In Pre-Islamic Antiquity," in *The Qurʾān in Context*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth et al. (BRILL, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004176881.i-864.25.

4 Mahmood Ibrahim, "Social and Economic Conditions in Per-Islamic Mecca," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14, no. 3 (1982): 343–58, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800051977.

5 Robert G. Hoyland, Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam (London: Routledge, 2001), 1–12, 155–72; Valentina A. Grasso, Pre-Islamic Arabia: Societies, Politics, Cults and Identities during Late Antiquity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 1–38, 208–20.

6 Harry Munt, The Holy City of Medina: Sacred Space in Early Islamic Arabia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 16–41.

Coleman and John Eade drew attention to mobility itself, including the routes through which sacred journeys take form. None of these frameworks can simply be laid over late antique Arabia. Most emerged from modern ethnographic settings, and none resolves the evidentiary distance separating later Muslim memory from pre-Islamic practice. Their value here is therefore heuristic rather than genealogical; they make it possible to ask not simply what a sanctuary meant, but who moved toward it, what traveled with them, who sustained the journey, and what repeated movement did to the relative standing of hosts and visitors.[7]

Peter Webb's use of pre-Islamic poetry has recently sharpened the debate over the antiquity and shape of the Meccan pilgrimage. Poetry associated with the generation before Muḥammad refers to journeys and ritual acts that make a complete denial of pre-Islamic pilgrimage increasingly difficult. Webb nevertheless finds stronger evidence for regional and Quraysh participation than for a fully integrated pan-Arabian institution whose communal boundaries were already fixed. This conclusion sits well with the differentiated cultic attachments preserved in Arabic historical writing. It allows the hajj to be treated as a real and recurrent practice while leaving open the extent of its geographical reach, the diversity of those who attended, and the degree to which later Muslim accounts projected Abrahamic unity backward.[8]

Trade introduces a second historiographical tension. Patricia Crone famously challenged the image of Quraysh as masters of an international luxury commerce, questioning whether the commodities, routes, and scale attributed to Mecca could carry the explanatory burden placed upon them; Uri Rubin, by contrast, approached *īlāf* through Sūrat Quraysh and the exegetical tradition, connecting seasonal journeys with the protection associated with the *ḥaram*. The difference between these positions is important, but it need not be resolved by choosing between commercial insignificance and mercantile empire. Hunger, fear, travel, protection, and exchange could belong to the same political economy even when trade remained comparatively modest. A recurrent network of transport, safe passage, credit, and exchange was capable of strengthening intermediaries without requiring Mecca to dominate the entire long-distance economy.[9]

The political literature on pilgrimage begins mostly in the Islamic period, when caliphs, rebels, governors, and regional rulers competed over the leadership of the hajj and over public performance in Mecca. McMillan shows how the pilgrimage could become a stage on which both rulers and opponents sought legitimacy, a scale of political contest that cannot simply be projected backward onto Quṣayy or Hāshim. Even so, the later history makes visible a more durable principle: organizing access, provisions, public order, and ritual leadership is never a merely devotional task. The pre-Islamic offices of Quraysh can therefore be read as an earlier and more limited configuration of the same relationship between service and authority, one embedded in clan functions and negotiated recognition rather than state administration.[10]

A further difficulty concerns the character of the Arabic historical record. *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, *al-Munammaq fī Akhbār Quraysh*, and the histories of Mecca were written after

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7 Victor Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94–130; John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, eds., Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage (London: Routledge, 1991), 1–29; Thomas A. Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54–79; Simon Coleman and John Eade, eds., Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion (London: Routledge, 2004), 1–25.

8 Peter Webb, "The Hajj Before Muhammad: The Early Evidence in Poetry and Hadith," Millennium 20, no. 1 (2023): 33–74, https://doi.org/10.1515/mill-2023-0004.

9 Patricia Crone, Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 3–17, 231–50; Uri Rubin, "The Īlāf of Quraysh: A Study of Sūra CVI," Arabica 31 (1984): 165–88; Uri Rubin, "Meccan Trade and Qurʾānic Exegesis (Qurʾān 2:198)," Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 33, no. 2 (1990): 113–48.

10 M. E. McMillan, The Meaning of Mecca: The Politics of Pilgrimage in Early Islam (London: Saqi Books, 2011), 1–19, 137–76.

Islam had transformed the Kaʿbah and its past. Idolatry could be narrated as deviation, Quraysh genealogies could be arranged around later prestige, and offices that survived into Islamic times could acquire an appearance of continuity more orderly than the conflicts that produced them.[11] Fred Donner, Chase Robinson, Andreas Görke, and G. R. Hawting have approached these materials from different directions, but all make naïve reading untenable. Distance from the event does not empty the narratives of historical value. It requires comparison of wording, institutional vocabulary, narrative purpose, and the points at which later theological explanation becomes visible.[12]

Taken together, the scholarship has unsettled several assumptions without yet fully reconnecting the pieces. Arabia contained multiple sacred places; pre-Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca is historically plausible and increasingly supported by poetry; Quraysh commerce must be discussed without presuming domination of a vast luxury economy;[13] and the Arabic historical record remains indispensable precisely because it is retrospective. What is less developed is the relationship among these findings. Custodianship, collective provisioning, deliberation, seasonal travel, and route protection are still commonly assigned to separate histories of religion, commerce, or tribal politics, even though their conjunction reveals the social labor that made ritual convergence repeatable. Read in relation rather than isolation, these practices show how particular Quraysh lineages could turn service into precedence without converting western Arabia into a Meccan polity.

Against this background, the article asks how control and institutionalization of the Meccan sanctuary enabled Quraysh to build authority across tribal boundaries while western Arabia continued to sustain several active cultic centers. Its central claim is that the Kaʿbah functioned as sacred infrastructure: a material and social arrangement in which protected space, ritual offices, water, food, deliberation, and negotiated passage made recurrent religious mobility possible. Quraysh superiority grew through the management of convergence rather than systematic annexation. Meccan centrality was consequently negotiated, since visitors could recognize the sanctuary without abandoning local ritual ties, route leaders could protect travelers without becoming Quraysh subjects, and competing Quraysh families could contest offices while preserving the institutional order from which their own distinction emerged.

Method

Historical textual analysis is used to reconstruct a limited institutional history rather than a continuous chronology. The primary corpus centers on Ibn al-Kalbī's *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, the Ibn Isḥāq material transmitted and edited by Ibn Hishām, Ibn Ḥabīb's *al-Munammaq fī Akhbār Quraysh*, and Meccan traditions preserved by al-Azraqī and al-Fākihī. Each work answers different questions. Ibn al-Kalbī maps cult objects, regional sanctuaries, and tribal attachments. Ibn Isḥāq–Ibn Hishām places Quṣayy, Hāshim, pilgrimage service, and the introduction of idols inside a prophetic history. Ibn Ḥabīb supplies dense genealogical and institutional narratives about Quraysh offices,

[11] Majied Robinson, "The Population Size of Muḥammad's Mecca and the Creation of the Quraysh," *Der Islam* 99, no. 1 (2022): 10–37, https://doi.org/10.1515/islam-2022-0002.

[12] Fred M. Donner, Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), 5–31; Chase F. Robinson, Islamic Historiography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15–38; Andreas Görke, "The Relationship between Maghāzī and Ḥadīth in Early Islamic Scholarship," Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 74, no. 2 (2011): 171–85; G. R. Hawting, The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–13.

[13] Michael Bonner, "3. The Arabian Silent Trade: Profit And Nobility In The 'Markets Of The Arabs,'" in *Histories of the Middle East*, ed. Margariti Eleni Roxani et al. (BRILL, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004184275.i-282.11.

alliances, and *īlāf*. The Meccan histories preserve topographical memory and later explanations of how sacred offices were distributed.

A name, a location, or even a chain of transmission does not by itself secure the historical value of a report, particularly in a corpus whose surviving forms were shaped after Islam had transformed both Mecca and the memory of its past. Greater evidentiary weight is therefore given to institutional vocabulary recurring across different works, to descriptions whose details correspond to the practical demands of pilgrimage, and to divergences that expose the interests of later narrators. Etiological accounts are treated with corresponding caution: the story of stones carried from the *ḥaram*, for instance, illuminates a conception of portable sanctity without establishing how widespread the practice actually was, just as genealogical praise of Quṣayy becomes more historically useful when read alongside the concrete functions associated with *ḥijābah*, *siqāyah*, *rifādah*, *liwāʾ*, *qiyādah*, and *nadwah*. Comparison, rather than the accumulation of reports, thus governs the reconstruction.

Three concepts provide the analytical vocabulary, but they are deliberately kept at a descriptive scale. Religious mobility refers to recurrent movement shaped by ritual, route, season, and material need; negotiated centrality identifies a center whose prominence depends on recognition from communities that remain beyond its direct control; and sacred infrastructure names the arrangements through which reverence becomes durable social coordination. Used together, the concepts make visible forms of organization that are more structured than episodic pilgrimage yet less centralized than a state. They do not imply that Quraysh had already created territorial government, nor that pre-Islamic pilgrims constituted a single bounded religious movement.

Results and Discussion

A Polycentric Sacred Landscape

A traveler approaching Mecca from the north did not move through an empty religious landscape. Near Qudayd, at al-Mushallal, Ibn al-Kalbī locates the sanctuary of Manāt and records sacrifices performed there by Arab groups, with al-Aws and al-Khazraj maintaining a particularly close attachment even as people connected with Mecca and Madinah also honored the site.[14] The geography matters because it places ritual obligation along the road itself: movement toward the Kaʿbah could pass through a landscape already punctuated by sacred claims. Manāt was therefore not external to Arabian pilgrimage culture but one of the regional anchors within which Meccan centrality had to take shape.[15]

Ṭāʾif offers a different configuration of the same plurality. Al-Lāt, represented by a square stone and enclosed within a building, was served by custodians from Thaqīf; sacrifice, gifts, lineage, and urban standing converged around the shrine, giving sacred space a recognizably institutional form. Ibn al-Kalbī nevertheless adds that Quraysh and other Arabs also honored al-Lāt. The line between a sanctuary closely identified with one community and a destination recognized more widely was therefore permeable: privileged custodianship did not require exclusive devotion, and outside recognition did not dissolve the local claims through which the shrine was maintained.[16]

Quraysh itself demonstrates the same overlap. Al-ʿUzzā at Nakhlah was not a marginal object visited by communities unrelated to Mecca. Ibn al-Kalbī calls it the most highly honored idol among Quraysh and writes, *wa-kānū yazūrūnahā wa-yuhdūna lahā wa-yataqarrabūna ʿindahā bi-al-dhabḥ*, 'they visited it, presented gifts to it, and sought nearness beside it through sacrifice.' The

[14] Hishām ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb Al-Aṣnām*, ed. Aḥmad Zakī Pāshā (Maṭbaʿat Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1994), 13.

[15] Suleyman Dost, "Pilgrimage in Pre-Islamic Arabia: Continuity and Rupture from Epigraphic Texts to the Qur'an," *Millennium* 20, no. 1 (2023): 15–32, https://doi.org/10.1515/mill-2023-0003.

[16] Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb Al-Aṣnām,* 16.

administrators of the Kaʿbah therefore moved within a wider devotional geography. Their relationship to Mecca did not require exclusive attachment to a single sanctuary.[17]

Placed beside one another, these attachments resemble less a catalogue of separate religions than a layered map of ritual proximity. Thaqīf held al-Lāt in a special position, Quraysh privileged al-ʿUzzā, and al-Aws and al-Khazraj were closely associated with Manāt; at other scales, household objects accompanied departure and return, clans maintained inherited cults, neighboring communities shared regional sanctuaries, and some of the same people still traveled to the Kaʿbah. [18] Modern denominational language tends to flatten such arrangements by asking which 'religion' a group followed, whereas the sources more often register degrees of attachment, inherited service, ritual preference, and overlapping participation.

The Kaʿbah gathered this plurality inside its own sacred enclosure. A compact statement in *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* reads:

وكانت لقريش أصنام في جوف الكعبة وحولها، وكان أعظمها عندهم هبل

'Quraysh had idols inside and around the Kaʿbah, and the greatest of them in their estimation was Hubal.'[19]

Hubal makes the concentration of functions inside the Kaʿbah particularly visible. Seven arrows placed before the idol were consulted when lineage was disputed, travel contemplated, or another uncertain course of action had to be settled; cultic practice and practical decision-making thus met in the same sacred space without turning the sanctuary into a bureaucratic government office. People came to the Kaʿbah to perform ritual acts, yet the authority of the place could also be invoked in matters of movement, kinship, and collective risk. Sacred recognition was accumulating in layers, and not all of them were reducible to worship in a narrow sense.[20]

The presence of numerous idols around the Kaʿbah offers no sufficient warrant for imagining a systematic transfer of cult objects from conquered tribes. Hubal itself is remembered through another trajectory: Ibn Isḥāq–Ibn Hishām associates the introduction of idols with ʿAmr ibn Luḥayy and connects his encounter with idol worship to al-Balqāʾ. The account is plainly shaped by a later Muslim search for the origins of religious deviation, so its chronology cannot be accepted without reserve; nevertheless, the narrative directs attention toward adoption, imitation, and circulation rather than confiscation after conquest. Practices could travel with people, elites could appropriate symbols of prestige, and a sanctuary visited by different groups could accommodate objects recognizable beyond the immediate community of its custodians. [21]

At the household level, the same religious landscape becomes quieter but no less significant. Ibn al-Kalbī remembers Meccan households keeping cult objects that were touched before departure and again on return, gestures that connected travel with familiar sacred material without requiring a journey to a regional shrine. Because domestic ritual leaves little institutional trace, it is easy to treat it as peripheral; yet its persistence warns against imagining that the rise of the Kaʿbah emptied ordinary sacred life into a single public center.[22] Residents could enter the

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17 Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb Al-Aṣnām*, 18.

18 Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb Al-Aṣnām*; Peter Webb, "The Hajj Before Muhammad: The Early Evidence in Poetry and Hadith," *Millennium* 20, no. 1 (2023): 33–63, https://doi.org/10.1515/mill-2023-0004.

19 Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 27–28.

20 Marjo Buitelaar and Richard Van Leeuwen, *Narrating the Pilgrimage to Mecca: Historical and Contemporary Accounts* (BRILL, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004513174.

21 ʿAbd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah, ed. Majdī Fatḥī al-Sayyid, vol. 1 (Ṭanṭā: Dār al-Ṣaḥābah li-l-Turāth, 1990), 94–96; Hawting, Idea of Idolatry, 1–13.

22 Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb Al-Aṣnām*; J. Marvin Spiegelman, "Divine Among in Islam: The Hajj or Pilgrimage to Mecca," *Psychological Perspectives* 48, no. 1 (2005): 136–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/00332920500283005; Sylvia Chiffoleau, "Economics: Agents, Pilgrims, and Profits," in *The Hajj*, 1st ed., ed. Eric Tagliacozzo and Shawkat Toorawa (Cambridge University Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139343794.010.

sanctuary's seasonal rhythms while continuing devotional acts at home. Meccan centrality expanded by concentrating recognition and functions, not by making every smaller site of protection, memory, or blessing disappear.

Custodianship also existed beyond Quraysh, Thaqīf maintained the service of al-Lāt, and other Arabian sanctuaries had families or groups whose honor was tied to protection of a sacred place. Quraysh did not invent the relation between lineage and shrine. What distinguished Mecca was the gradual concentration of a broader set of functions around one destination. The Kaʿbah, its *ḥaram*, the pilgrimage season, the distribution of water and food, deliberation among Quraysh, and agreements securing travel eventually formed a denser institutional cluster than the descriptions preserved for Manāt or al-Lāt.

Centrality, then, is better understood as concentration than exclusivity. Recognition of the Kaʿbah did not require visitors to erase their ties to Manāt, al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, or domestic cult objects, because a shared destination could gather people whose ritual lives remained otherwise differentiated. The arena created by that convergence was nonetheless unequal: Quraysh lineages controlled offices unavailable to visitors, and proximity to the sanctuary generated advantages in honor and exchange.[23] Plurality did not dissolve hierarchy; it made the organization of hierarchy, and the ability to render it acceptable across different attachments, all the more consequential.

Sacred Materials in Motion

A short passage on stones taken from Mecca reveals a different dimension of the city's reach. Ibn al-Kalbī writes:

كان لا يظعن من مكة ظاعن إلا احتمل معه حجراً من حجارة الحرم، تعظيماً للحرم وصبابة بمكة

'No one departed from Mecca without carrying a stone from the stones of the *ḥaram*, out of reverence for the sacred territory and longing for Mecca.'[24]

The narrative continues with the stone being placed at a stopping point and circumambulated in imitation of the Kaʿbah. Ibn al-Kalbī embeds the practice within a theological story of decline from the religion of Ibrāhīm and Ismāʿīl toward stone worship, a sequence that cannot be treated as an ethnographic record of origins. Yet the wording remains historically suggestive because sanctity is imagined as capable of leaving Mecca without becoming independent of it. The transported stone retained meaning through its origin in the *ḥaram* and through a copied movement that recalled circumambulation at the Kaʿbah; what traveled outward was therefore not a rival center so much as a material reference to the center left behind.[25]

The movement imagined in this account was not one-directional, while people traveled toward Mecca at appointed times, stones, memories, and ritual gestures traveled outward with those who departed. Such dispersion need not have diminished the center.[26] On the contrary, the reproduction of circumambulation elsewhere could preserve the Kaʿbah as the measure against which a distant ritual act became intelligible; the transported stone derived its significance not from independence from Mecca, but from remembered proximity to it. Sacred geography could therefore expand

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23 Kim Knott, "Religion, Space, and Place: The Spatial Turn in Research on Religion," *Religion and Society* 1, no. 1 (2010), https://doi.org/10.3167/arrs.2010.010103.

24 Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 6; Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, 1:95–96.

25 Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb Al-Aṣnām*; Robinson, "The Population Size of Muḥammad's Mecca and the Creation of the Quraysh"; Lily Filson, "Intersections of Material and Literary History in Religion and Ritual of Ancient Arabia through Islam," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 11, no. 1 (2021): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2021.1935681.

26 Anna-Katharina Rieger, "Loose Bonds and Porous Boundaries among Mobile People as Religious Agents in the Greco-Roman Arabian Desert," *Religion in the Roman Empire* 3, no. 1 (2017): 11–49, https://doi.org/10.1628/219944617X14860387744186; Benjamin Kirby, "Religious Infrastructure: Designations, Transformations, Entanglements," *Religion, State and Society* 52, nos. 2–3 (2024): 96–113, https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2024.2353416.

without becoming geographically uniform. Distance did not simply carry pilgrims away from the center; under certain conditions, it became one of the means through which the center continued to be remembered.[27]

More quietly, the passage also joins materiality to emotion. *Ṣabābah bi-Mecca* - longing for Mecca - gives the stone a mnemonic function: the traveler carried not merely a fragment of landscape but a portable trace of protected territory, something through which attachment could be reenacted after departure. A sanctuary enters social worlds partly through such remembered gestures, especially among people who do not reside permanently within its vicinity. In this sense, memory could travel before institutions did, widening the field within which Quraysh custodianship might later acquire recognition.

Yet portable sanctity could not, by itself, make Quraysh superior. Stones might evoke Mecca, but they could not provision a seasonal crowd, settle rivalries among Meccan lineages, or secure passage across territory controlled by others. The more consequential transformation began when sacred attachment was joined to recurring offices, collective contributions, and negotiated protection. In the retrospective institutional memory of Quraysh, Quṣayy stands at precisely this threshold.

Quṣayy and the Institutionalization of Sacred Custodianship

Later Quraysh memory names Quṣayy *Mujammiʿ*, 'the gatherer,' an epithet preserved in poetry and genealogy through the image of the dispersed descendants of Fihr being brought together around Mecca. Whether one leader performed every deed subsequently attributed to him is less important here than the political grammar embedded in the memory: authority over the sanctuary begins not with residence alone, but with the capacity to assemble a coalition. The Kaʿbah did not automatically empower whoever lived beside it. Kin had to be mobilized, established custodians confronted, rivals persuaded or defeated, and only then could sacred service be reorganized.[28]

Conflict is therefore integral to the institutional story rather than an embarrassment to be removed from it. The traditions surrounding Quṣayy include claims against Ṣūfah and conflict with Khuzāʿah, although Ibn Isḥāq - Ibn Hishām frames the transfer through a genealogical right linked to descent from Ismāʿīl and later Quraysh prestige clearly shaped the narration. Even so, the struggle is not remembered as a campaign to occupy the homelands of every pilgrim. Armed force, alliance, and arbitration converged on Mecca because the sanctuary and its offices were the object of competition; when the conflict ended, the remembered settlement distributed not provinces but keys, water, food, the banner, and deliberative authority.[29]

With Dār al-Nadwah, the new arrangement acquired a place in which Quraysh could act collectively. Located beside the sacred precinct, the building became associated with consultation, marriage, banners, and decisions concerning the clan coalition, so that political deliberation was neither spatially nor symbolically detached from the sanctuary. This proximity mattered: the same elite that managed sacred obligations also assembled to resolve public affairs, and the architecture of consultation made nearness to the Kaʿbah part of the architecture of Quraysh precedence.[30]

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27 Bukharin, "Mecca On The Caravan Routes In Pre-Islamic Antiquity"; Valerie Gonzalez, "The Kaʿba Orientations, Readings in Islam's Ancient House: Simon O'Meara, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2020), 264 Pages, £95 (Hardback), ISBN: 9780748699308," *Al-Masāq* 33, no. 2 (2021): 226–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2021.1935788.

28 Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb, al-Munammaq fī Akhbār Quraysh, ed. Khurshīd Aḥmad Fārūq (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1985), 29; Ibn Hishām, al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah, 1:143–44.

29 Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, 1:136–49.

30 Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, 1:144–48; Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq*, 32.

What later tradition attributed to Quṣayy was not a bureaucracy in any recognizable state form, but a differentiated field of obligations whose separation made Quraysh authority increasingly legible. *Ḥijābah* concerned custody of and access to the Kaʿbah; *siqāyah* and *rifādah* organized the provision of water and food; *liwāʾ* and *qiyādah* attached honor to the banner and leadership; and *nadwah* located deliberation within a recognized institutional setting. These functions remained embedded in lineages and could be inherited, contested, divided, or reassigned after the death of a prominent holder. Precisely because they were distinguishable, however, they transformed service from a generalized claim to nobility into a series of publicly recognizable duties, each capable of accumulating memory and, eventually, hereditary distinction.[31] Ibn Isḥāq-Ibn Hishām preserves Quṣayy's allocation to ʿAbd al-Dār in emphatic language. No one would open the Kaʿbah without him, no banner would be tied except by his hand, water and food would pass through the offices placed under his control, and Quraysh would not decide its affairs except in his house. The speech is stylized and likely magnifies personal command. Its details nevertheless show what later memory considered the essential components of Meccan leadership. Access, hospitality, military symbolism, and collective decision belonged to one field of honor.[32]

Divisibility did not make these offices private possessions in any simple sense. One lineage might hold the key, another organize water, and another carry the banner, yet the value of each office depended on the continued existence of the wider gathering. An inherited claim therefore remained exposed to the judgment of Quraysh rivals and to the experience of visitors who could observe whether access, provision, and order were successfully maintained. No council audited the custodians, but reputation traveled through poetry, genealogy, and the repeated visibility of pilgrimage; season after season, the crowd became a public before which Quraysh honor had to be performed.[33]

Predictably, an order that made service publicly valuable also made service worth contesting. Descendants of ʿAbd Manāf challenged the distribution held by Banū ʿAbd al-Dār, and Quraysh divided into alliances before a settlement was reached. The episode resists any overly harmonious account of sacred custodianship, offices did not remove clan rivalry but gave rivalry an institutional object, since control over water, food, or access carried recognition before a wider public. The eventual compromise redistributed benefits without dismantling the framework that made those benefits meaningful. What Quṣayy represents in this memory, then, is the conversion of control over a place into a recurring field of obligation. Sacred authority acquired rooms, offices, contributions, genealogical holders, and -most importantly- a rhythm of repetition, because every pilgrimage season renewed the need for access, water, food, and order. A single victory might alter who controlled the sanctuary, but it was seasonal performance that gave custodianship temporal depth. Institutions endured where conquest alone could only begin them.[34]

At precisely this point the limits of Quraysh power become visible. The coalition associated with Quṣayy may have regulated Mecca more effectively, but its authority thinned beyond the sanctuary and its immediate networks, where pilgrims returned to communities with their own leaders and routes passed through territories governed by others. Quraysh had become superior at a node of convergence, not sovereign over the landscape around it. The next enlargement of that

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31 Chiffoleau, "Economics"; O'Meara, *The Ka'ba Orientations*.

32 Ibn Hishām, al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah, 1:147–48.

33 Mahmood Ibrahim, "Social and Economic Conditions In Per-Islamic Mecca," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14, no. 3 (1982): 343–58, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800051977; Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, "The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhilī Meccan Sanctuary," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49, no. 1 (1990): 23–44, https://doi.org/10.1086/373417.

34 Ella Landau-Tasseron, "Alliances among the Arabs," *Al-Qanṭara* 26, no. 1 (2005): 141–73, https://doi.org/10.3989/alqantara.2005.v26.i1.120; Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Arabs: A 3,000-Year History of Peoples, Tribes and Empires* (Yale University Press, 2019).

superiority therefore depended less on extending territorial command than on making the node worth returning to.

Serving Pilgrims, Producing Honor

Pilgrimage concentrated vulnerability as surely as it concentrated devotion. In Mecca's environment, a large seasonal gathering could not sustain itself without preparation, so *siqāyah* and *rifādah* mattered because they answered needs that were material, recurrent, and immediately visible. Translated merely as ceremonial titles, the offices lose much of their political significance. Watering and feeding were performances of capacity, and their failure would have damaged both the practical viability of the gathering and the reputation of those who claimed to serve it.

The description of *rifādah* in Ibn Isḥāq–Ibn Hishām is unusually explicit:

وكانت الرفادة خرجاً تخرجه قريش في كل موسم من أموالها، فيصنع به طعاماً للحاج

'The *rifādah* was a contribution that Quraysh brought forth from its wealth each season, from which food was prepared for the pilgrims.'[35]

Read institutionally, the phrase *kharjan tukhrijuhu Quraysh* sits somewhere between spontaneous generosity and formal taxation. The sources describe no tariff, coercive apparatus, or fixed assessment, yet the contribution recurred each season, drew on collective wealth, and passed through an office whose holder acquired honor through distribution. Quraysh households contributed according to capacity while a leading lineage coordinated the movement of resources from private possession into a service experienced publicly by pilgrims. The political importance of *rifādah* lay precisely in this conversion of wealth into visible obligation. Hāshim's remembered speech gives this obligation a moral vocabulary. Pilgrims are addressed as 'the visitors of God' and 'the guests of His House,' while Quraysh is reminded that proximity to the sanctuary carries duties as well as privilege; each person is called upon to contribute according to his means so that food may be prepared until the visitors depart.[36] Wealth is thereby placed under the sign of sacred hospitality. Lineage and commerce might make a Quraysh notable prosperous, but the rhetoric insists that distinction becomes publicly credible only when resources move outward toward those whose presence confirms Mecca's standing.[37]

To feed and water pilgrims was therefore to enter an asymmetrical relationship that could generate authority without creating subjects. The visitor received provisions, while the provider displayed competence before a temporary public drawn from beyond Mecca; with every successful season, that performance became visible outside the resident population. The resulting authority was neither reducible to generosity nor equivalent to command. It rested on recognition shaped by dependence, pilgrims did not become politically subordinate to their hosts, yet they encountered Quraysh as the community whose organized service made the sacred journey practicable. Unlike genealogical prestige, which could be asserted and disputed in words, the distribution of food and water could be seen, consumed, and remembered. Hāshim's later association with bread broken into broth belongs to this politics of visibility, and even if subsequent memory enlarged the scale of his generosity, the persistence of the story indicates what Quraysh audiences considered honorable leadership. Wealth acquired moral value when it circulated toward the sanctuary's

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35 Ibn Hishām, al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah, 1:148; Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Munammaq, 32–33.

36 Ibn Hishām, al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah, 1:156–57.

37 Ibrahim, "Social and Economic Conditions in Per-Islamic Mecca"; Bonner, "3. The Arabian Silent Trade"; Peter Webb, "Power and Money on the Ḥajj: Connections between Caliphate and Pilgrimage in Early Islam," in *Land and Trade in Early Islam*, 1st ed., ed. Hugh Kennedy and Fanny Bessard (Oxford University PressOxford, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198863083.003.0005.

guests. Prosperity kept for itself could signal success; prosperity converted into *rifādah* produced a different kind of standing.[38]

Because prestige was distributed across several offices, no single Quraysh family possessed every avenue of distinction. Custody of the Kaʿbah, the banner, deliberation, water, food, and leadership could fall into different hands, a dispersion that generated rivalry but also multiplied elite investment in the survival of the sanctuary. More than one lineage had something to lose if pilgrimage declined or disorder made the journey unattractive. Competition could therefore remain intense without becoming institutionally suicidal, because the rivals shared a dependence on Meccan centrality. Seasonal service brought ritual and exchange into sustained contact without collapsing one into the other. Those who arrived for worship also needed animals, food, cloth, shelter, information, and transport; markets profited from the crowd, while the availability of goods helped make the journey possible. Commerce did not manufacture sanctity, just as sanctity did not erase material interest. Their intersection instead enlarged the importance of actors able to coordinate both, and Quraysh standing thickened where sacred duty, hospitality, and circulation met.

Īlāf and the Security of Movement

Once movement left the *ḥaram*, the limits of sanctuary-based authority became unavoidable. A protected city could not ensure that a caravan crossed every intervening territory without attack, and Ibn Ḥabīb's account of *īlāf* begins from precisely this modest horizon: Quraysh trade, he reports, initially remained within Mecca, where foreign merchants brought goods that local traders redistributed among themselves and to nearby Arabs. Expansion under Hāshim is therefore remembered not as the automatic reward of geography but as an achievement requiring political labor.[39]

At the northern end of the route, that labor appears in Hāshim's attempt to secure written protection for Quraysh merchants and their commerce. Later memory embellishes the episode, and the identity of the ruler remains difficult, but the political logic does not depend on resolving every detail. Recognition from a distant power might secure one segment of travel; it could not neutralize all the communities between Syria and Mecca. Safe passage had to be assembled locally, agreement by agreement, across a route that no single Meccan authority controlled.

Ibn Ḥabīb explains the term in language that deserves direct attention:

والإيلاف أن يأمنوا عندهم في أرضهم بغير حلف، وإنما هو أمان الناس بعضهم عند بعض

'*Īlāf* meant that they would be safe among them in their territory without entering a confederation. It was the security that people granted one another.'[40]

The definition is politically revealing because it distinguishes safe passage from incorporation into another confederation. Quraysh merchants entered territory governed by others and received protection there, while local notables retained jurisdiction and travelers acquired recognized security only for the duration and purpose of passage. *Īlāf*, in this sense, cannot be redescribed as Quraysh rule over the road. Its effectiveness depended on acknowledgment distributed among several authorities, each of whom remained sovereign within a more limited sphere.

Protection was strengthened further by reciprocity. Quraysh transported goods belonging to communities along the road, returned their capital, and shared profit, so a caravan could embody interests wider than those of Meccan merchants alone. An attack then threatened not only outsiders but also the property of groups whose leaders had granted passage. Risk did not

[38] Spiegelman, "Divine Among in Islam"; Buitelaar and Van Leeuwen, *Narrating the Pilgrimage to Mecca*.
[39] Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Munammaq, 42.
[40] Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Munammaq, 42–43.

disappear, but incentives shifted: security became more likely when the success of the moving caravan also served those through whose territories it moved. Rubin's reading of Sūrat Quraysh places winter and summer journeys beside relief from hunger and fear. The correspondence does not settle every historical detail of *īlāf*, but it captures the combination visible in Ibn Ḥabīb. Travel required security, successful exchange supported provisioning, and the protected standing of Mecca strengthened the reputation of those who organized the journey. Crone's criticism of exaggerated trade remains relevant. None of this requires Quraysh to have controlled the late antique luxury economy. A recurrent network of transport and protection was politically consequential even at a more limited scale.[41]

Caravans carried information no less than goods. Agreements communicated which communities could be approached, whose protection could be trusted, and what obligations attached to passage; merchants returned with knowledge of rulers, prices, routes, and political tensions, while communities along the road learned to recognize Quraysh caravans as vehicles for their own commercial interests. Brokerage grew through this circulation of knowledge. Quraysh did not need uniform command over every participant to become increasingly difficult to bypass, because the capacity to connect sanctuary and route made Mecca useful, and usefulness reinforced the prestige already generated through ritual service.[42]

The same roads that carried Quraysh prestige outward also exposed the limits of that prestige. Within Mecca, Quraysh received visitors as hosts, provisioning the pilgrimage and presenting themselves as guardians of an ordered sacred space; beyond the *ḥaram*, however, they entered territories in which their own safety rested on the recognition of others. This recurring passage between host and guest reveals something essential about the authority being formed. Quraysh influence did not depend on uninterrupted dominance along the route, but on an ability to move between political worlds, converting Meccan standing into agreements abroad, and then returning the security, information, and commercial advantages generated by those agreements to the sanctuary. Authority, in this setting, was strongest not where dependence disappeared, but where dependence could be successfully negotiated.[43]

Time itself lent durability to these arrangements. Pilgrimage, winter travel, summer travel, and recurring contributions brought similar lineages and route communities into repeated contact, allowing agreements to be remembered, inherited, and renegotiated rather than invented anew on every journey. Repetition did not abolish conflict; it produced expectations. A route known to be profitable and usually protected became easier to organize again, just as the recurrent performance of *siqāyah* and *rifādah* at the Kaʿbah gradually turned service into precedent.

Negotiated Centrality and the Genealogy of Religious Mobilization

Negotiated centrality is clearest where Mecca's authority reached people whom Quraysh could not command at home. A pilgrim might accept the rules of the *ḥaram*, rely on Quraysh provisions, and acknowledge the honor of its custodians while remaining politically attached to another tribe; a route leader might protect Quraysh merchants without yielding jurisdiction over his own territory. Such relationships were episodic but patterned. The center mattered because many actors

41 Rubin, "Īlāf of Quraysh," 165–88; Crone, Meccan Trade, 231–50; Patricia Crone, "How Did the Quranic Pagans Make a Living?" Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 68, no. 3 (2005): 387–99.

42 Chiffoleau, "Economics"; Seyed Kazem Sadr, *The Economic System of the Early Islamic Period* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-50733-4; Ahdi Ahdi and Hamdan Firmansyah, "Buy and Selling in the Perspective of Jahiliyah and Islam a Comparison Study a Review of Sharia Economic History," *International Journal of Nusantara Islam* 8, no. 2 (2021): 264–73, https://doi.org/10.15575/ijni.v8i2.11987.

43 Ibrahim, "Social and Economic Conditions In Per-Islamic Mecca"; Landy Trisna Abdurrahman et al., "Rethinking Assets in Islamic Law: Understanding the Logic of Camels as Authorized-Value in Socio-Economic Context," *Az-Zarqa': Jurnal Hukum Bisnis Islam* 17, no. 2 (2025): 279–301, https://doi.org/10.14421/az-zarqa.v17.i2.4710.

needed what it offered at particular times, not because they had been absorbed into a permanent body of Meccan subjects. None of this implies an egalitarian order: Residence near the sanctuary, hereditary office, and control over access gave Quraysh families structural advantages, while visitors entered a field of service whose principal roles were already attached to Meccan lineages. Contributions to pilgrimage provision enhanced donor prestige, and concentrated exchange favored merchants familiar with the city; sacred language could further legitimize these asymmetries by presenting privilege as inherited responsibility. Part of Quraysh's political achievement lay in making advantage and obligation appear as two sides of the same custodial role.[44]

The arrangement also required internal compromise. Banū ʿAbd al-Dār, Banū ʿAbd Manāf, and other Quraysh branches competed over offices, yet none benefited from destroying the pilgrimage order itself. Division of functions distributed prestige across the coalition and reduced the likelihood that one dispute would permanently collapse the system. Dār al-Nadwah provided a setting for collective decisions, while seasonal service offered a public arena in which families demonstrated worth. Competition and cooperation were not opposite conditions. They sustained one another. Seen together, these arrangements are described more accurately as sacred infrastructure than as a Meccan 'state.' The Kaʿbah and the *ḥaram* supplied a recognized destination; ritual seasons concentrated movement; *ḥijābah*, *siqāyah*, and *rifādah* organized access and subsistence; Dār al-Nadwah attached custodianship to deliberation; and *īlāf* extended security beyond Mecca through agreements with other authorities. No single institution explains Quraysh superiority. Their conjunction made repeated convergence sufficiently dependable and, in doing so, made Quraysh increasingly visible as the community responsible for that dependability.[45]

Institutions become most visible when they outlive the personalities through whom narratives first explain them. Quṣayy, Hāshim, and other prominent figures dominate the remembered origins of Meccan order, yet recurring tasks could not remain dependent on one leader's immediate capacity, offices passed through lineages, contributions returned with the season, and agreements were remembered beyond a single generation. Personal prestige may have initiated or enlarged particular arrangements, but repetition gradually separated founder from function. Quraysh authority thus became less reliant on the coercive capacity of one individual and more reliant on an expectation that recognized families would continue to perform established duties. A qualification is necessary, because infrastructure is not a synonym for neutrality. Arrangements that eased pilgrimage could reproduce hereditary privilege; markets that provisioned visitors could enrich families already well positioned near the sanctuary; and agreements that reduced violence along a route could still exclude travelers who lacked recognized protection. Sacred service produced shared benefits, but those benefits moved through unequal relations. The same structures that widened participation could therefore consolidate advantage at the center.[46]

Centrality also need not produce uniform identity. Participants did not have to imagine themselves as members of a single movement before their actions became coordinated, since shared time, route knowledge, ritual expectations, and recognizable forms of service were already sufficient to create patterned convergence. Tribal identities could remain intact and cultic

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[44] Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb Al-Aṣnām*; Landau-Tasseron, "Alliances among the Arabs"; Spiegelman, "Divine Among in Islam."

[45] Walter Dostal, "Mecca before the Time of the Prophet – Attempt of an Anthropological Interpretation," *Der Islam* 68, no. 2 (1991), https://doi.org/10.1515/islm.1991.68.2.193; Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*, vol. 4 (Dar Al-Ma'arif, n.d.); Nevo and Koren, "The Origins of the Muslim Descriptions of the Jāhilī Meccan Sanctuary."

[46] Peter Webb, "Al-Jāhiliyya: Uncertain Times of Uncertain Meanings," *Der Islam* 91, no. 1 (2014), https://doi.org/10.1515/islam-2014-0005; William C. Young, "The Kaʿba, Gender, and the Rites of Pilgrimage," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 2 (1993): 285–300, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800058530.

attachments could remain local while pilgrimage generated a broader field of recognition. Quraysh benefited from precisely this incomplete integration, a more centralized order may have demanded coercive capacities Mecca did not possess, whereas a flexible sacred center could gather difference without first requiring its disappearance. From the perspective of religious movements, the Meccan case therefore draws attention to a stage earlier than formal organization. There was no unified membership list, standardized movement bureaucracy, or single doctrine binding every participant, yet collective religious action acquired rhythm and structure through a sacred calendar, established routes, recurrent offices, portable memories, and expectations shaped by previous journeys. What was organized first was not necessarily a bounded community but the conditions under which people moved and met. Organization, in other words, could reside in the arrangement of movement before it appeared as an organization with fixed membership.[47]

This does not make the Kaʿbah the first religious movement, nor does it establish a direct genealogy for every later Islamic formation. The historical contribution is narrower. Sacred places can precede and condition organized movements by producing routes, public encounters, hierarchies of service, and forms of authority recognized across community boundaries. The Kaʿbah became consequential not merely because people believed it was sacred, but because belief was repeatedly translated into travel and travel into a social order.[48] Islam therefore transformed an existing institutional field rather than beginning from an empty one. Cult objects were rejected, pilgrimage was rearticulated through monotheistic memory, and political authority later operated on a scale unavailable to Quraysh before Muḥammad; nevertheless, the sanctuary, the *ḥaram*, seasonal gathering, water, provisions, and the prestige attached to serving pilgrims remained intelligible elements of Meccan public life. The earlier infrastructure did not predetermine the Islamic future. It furnished practices and expectations that could be criticized, retained, redirected, and placed within a different theological and political order.

Conclusion

The question posed by this article can therefore be answered without imagining either a Meccan empire or an uncontested Arabian cultic monopoly. Quraysh developed supra-tribal authority by controlling and institutionalizing a recurrent point of convergence: conflict around Quṣayy reorganized custody of the sanctuary, but the durable outcome lay in the repeated allocation of access, water, food, deliberation, leadership, and public responsibility among Quraysh lineages. Once these obligations became seasonal and recognizable, authority no longer depended solely on the memory of an original victory; it was renewed through performance. That authority remained compatible with a polycentric sacred landscape. Manāt, al-Lāt, al-ʿUzzā, domestic cult objects, and other sanctuaries continued to organize ritual attachment at different scales, while Quraysh itself honored al-ʿUzzā beyond Mecca. What made the Kaʿbah exceptional was therefore not the immediate extinction of competing sacred places but the density of functions gathered around one destination. Meccan centrality grew by accommodating overlapping loyalties and drawing them periodically into a wider arena of encounter.

Service was the mechanism that converted this concentration into relational authority. *Rifādah* and *siqāyah* made pilgrimage materially sustainable and displayed Quraysh capacity before outsiders; Dār al-Nadwah connected custodianship with collective decision; and *īlāf* extended movement through reciprocal arrangements across territories Quraysh did not rule. Mecca's position was consequently built on mutual, though unequal, dependence. Visitors required services

[47] Mackintosh-Smith, *Arabs*; Filson, "Intersections of Material and Literary History in Religion and Ritual of Ancient Arabia through Islam"; Buitelaar and Van Leeuwen, *Narrating the Pilgrimage to Mecca*.
[48] O'Meara, *The Ka'ba Orientations*.

organized within the sanctuary, while Quraysh required recognition, protection, and repeated participation from communities beyond it. The Kaʿbah can consequently be understood as an early infrastructure of religious mobilization, not because it constituted a religious movement in the later organizational sense, but because repeated movement around it generated routes, obligations, memories, hierarchies of service, and forms of recognition that crossed community boundaries. Quraysh acquired precedence by managing these relations and by presenting hereditary privilege as responsibility toward the sanctuary and its guests. This formulation preserves the political force of Meccan centrality without requiring the stronger claims that every Arabian cult was subordinated to Mecca or that Quraysh routinely transferred the idols of conquered groups to the Kaʿbah.

The argument nevertheless remains constrained by the character of the evidence. The principal Arabic narratives are retrospective, uneven in chronology, and shaped by theological, genealogical, and institutional interests that limit any attempt to reconstruct the scale of participation or the precise sequence through which particular offices developed. Future research could test the model of negotiated centrality against a wider comparative corpus, especially inscriptions, archaeological evidence, and the institutional histories of other Arabian sanctuaries, in order to determine more precisely where Meccan arrangements were distinctive and where they belonged to broader regional patterns of sacred mobility.

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