The social history of prisons and carceral institutions in early Islam remains largely unwritten, and until relatively recently, the subject has suffered neglect, with only a few notable exceptions. Arabian society before Islam, especially in the Hijāz, apparently knew little of formal, carceral institutions within the sphere of its social geography. Mentions of the institution's existence in this period are exceedingly rare, and rarer still are mentions of specific prison structures and/or their locations. However, the practice of incarceration itself, under...
punitive or other sundry circumstances, was neither unknown nor foreign to the inhabitants of the Hijāz. Rather, as I have discussed elsewhere, carceral practices permeated Arabian society even in the absence of any truly ‘prison-onesque’ institutions, occurring primarily on an ad hoc basis and within the domestic sphere instead. Yet, following the advent of Islam and contemporaneous with what could arguably be called the rise of the Islamic ‘state’ prior to and during the initial conquests outside the Arabian Peninsula, early Muslims adopted and normalized carceral institutions with uncanny speed.

Leaving aside the question of why there occurred such a swift adoption of the prison in the conquest period, this essay examines, instead, a concrete case of how this institutional adoption occurred by investigating the history of one of the earliest prisons about which the sources preserve an unusually sizeable body of materials: the Meccan prison of the counter-caliph ‘Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr. In what follows, I argue that, although certainly not the only Hijāzī prison utilized by the Zubayrids, Ibn al-Zubayr’s Meccan prison offers a particularly fascinating case study of an early Hijāzī prison inasmuch as the bounty of data concerning its origins and use are unique and, thus, can potentially shed

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3 The clearest example of this comes from Balādhurī (d. 279/892), who informs us that, when the garrison of Basra was founded by ʿUtba b. Ghazwān in 14/635, a prison featured in the urban planning of the settlement from the outset, writing, “ʿUtba built the governor’s residence (dār al-imāra) separate from the mosque in the clearing (raḥba) that today is called the Raḥba of the Banū Hishām and had been called al-Dahnāʾ; in it was the prison and the register (wa-fiḥā l-sīj wa-l-dīwān).” See Ahmad b. Yahyā al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-buldān*, ed. M.J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1866), 346f. For further examples, see Anthony, art. cit.