

MECCA ON THE CARAVAN ROUTES IN PRE-ISLAMIC ANTIQUITY

Mikhail D. Bukharin

Introduction

One of the principal questions in the history of pre-Islamic Mecca is whether Mecca did maintain close trading connections with South and North Arabia and Mesopotamia and participated in the Trans-arabian caravan trade, or whether it was an isolated enclave whose rise had nothing to do with commercial activity. An important contribution to the study of pre-Islamic Meccan trade has been made by Patricia Crone in her *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, which has once again raised the question of Mecca's position in Arabian trade as a whole, and on the Incense Road in particular. Above all, Crone objects to the idea of Meccan commercial supremacy, especially in spices.¹

According to Crone, transportation of perfumes by sea had become the norm already in the first century BCE, and the overland routes could have survived the competition for long.² Crone therefore concludes: "It is not clear why some scholars believe the overland route to have continued into the fourth century CE, or even later or why Islamicists generally assume it to have retained its importance until the time of Mecca's rise to commercial prominence, or to have recovered it by then."³

Though Meccan traders were active in areas as far away from Mecca as Syria and Najrān,⁴ Crone intends to show that they did not trade there in any kind of perfumes or spices.⁵ The main commodities of the Meccans were leather and other merchandise of local importance,

¹ Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 50.

² *Ibid.*, 24.

³ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴ The sources even affirm commercial relations with the Yemen, yet according to Crone they appear to apply this term to "the area between Mecca and Najrān rather than the southernmost corner of the peninsula" (*ibid.*, 132).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51–83.

which had never been scarce anywhere else.⁶ In addition to the predominance of the sea routes, Crone adduces other reasons why Mecca could not have participated in the incense trade: Mecca lay far away from the Incense Road,⁷ and Arabian frankincense and related products had ceased to be of economic importance in the Greco-Roman world, since by the third century CE the Roman market for perfumes had begun to collapse and was never to recover.⁸

Crone's work has been subjected to a careful analysis by R. B. Serjeant, who has concentrated primarily on the Arabic sources. Serjeant's starting-point is the fact that the valley of Mecca had been settled by Quṣayy in spite of its lack of natural resources, and that the Meccans consequently had been forced to import their foodstuffs, i.e., to engage in long distance caravan trade. They therefore had to have some kind of income, and pilgrimage to the Meccan sanctuary must have involved trading.⁹ Serjeant points out that Yemen and Syria were the most important suppliers of Mecca with grain.¹⁰ In his re-reading of the Arabic sources, he shows that the Qurashī merchants did trade in Yemenite luxury cloth, perfumes, and spices, that they could buy them in Aden, where their presence is attested fairly well, that the leather goods of the Meccans could have been of high importance to remote markets such as Dhofar and Syria, and that the Meccans did really trade in those kinds of wares, either producing them themselves or buying them from elsewhere.¹¹

Serjeant points out that the sources which Crone calls into question do not suggest that the Meccans dominated the exchange of goods between northern Arabia and southern Syria.¹² That the Quraysh did engage in trading, however, is much less unlikely than Crone makes it out to appear. Even though she denies that Q 106:1–4 mention the Quraysh's winter and summer caravans, Serjeant convincingly defends the notion that the passage does refer to the Meccans' trading journeys to Yemen and Syria, which were based on security pacts with the neighboring tribes.¹³ Of crucial importance for a proper understanding of the role of Mecca in trans-Arabian commerce, are the special

⁶ *Ibid.*, 107–108.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 134–136.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹ Serjeant, "Meccan Trade," 473.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 474.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 474–476, 482.

¹² *Ibid.*, 475.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 478–479.