CHAPTER 1

The Founding Fathers

Such is the celebrity of the later shrine and the growth of the modern city that it is difficult to imagine Mecca in the sixth century of the Christian era, when Muhammad first heard the words of God there. The Quran itself describes it as a place “in a valley without cultivation” (Quran 14: 37), and Ali Bey, a visitor to the city in the early years of the nineteenth century wrote from his own experience the definitive gloss on that verse. Mecca, says Ali Bey, “is situated at the bottom of a sandy valley, surrounded on all sides by naked mountains, without brook, river or any running water; without trees, plants or any species of vegetation” (Ali Bey 1816, vol. 2, p. 112).

For the rest, there was in Muhammad’s day only a collection of rude mud huts clustered around a spring and a cubelike house of stone, the dwelling, it was said, of a god. If it was a market town, it was a long way away from the great emporia where a later generation of Arabs imagined their Meccan ancestors traded. At the ordinary pace of a caravan—20 to 25 miles a day, a fairly sprightly pace of 4 miles an hour for six hours a day1—Gaza lay thirty-odd days to the north of Mecca, and the Yemeni centers all of that and more to the south.2

There were Christians at Gaza and Christians and Jews in the Yemen, but none of either so far as we know at Mecca, where the Quran unfolds in what is unmistakably a pagan milieu. The revelations granted to Muhammad confound and condemn what then passed as divine worship in his native city, to be sure, but their vision is somewhat broader and deeper than the here and the now. As the Quran itself makes clear, what was occurring at Mecca in the name of religion was in part the work of a debased paganism, it is true, but it also bore some trace of an earlier tradition, what the Holy Book calls the “religion of Abraham” (2: 130), namely, the practices that God had earlier commanded should be insti-
tuted in connection with what is referred to as His "sacred House" (5: 100), or His "ancient House" (22: 29), in that city.

ABRAHAM AND ISHMAEL IN THE HIJAZ

Though the Quran, unlike the Bible, does not begin with Creation—its various revelations address "occasions" rather than develop into a narrative line—it often comments upon it. It knows too about the cosmological Adam, and Noah consistently appears in its enumeration of the prophets sent to humankind; but by the frequency, length and importance of its references to Abraham, it is clear that he is the central figure in the development of God's relations with His human creation, and not merely as a prophet. The Quran is more generous than the Bible in providing details of Abraham's "conversion" to the worship of the One True God (Quran 2: 74–79, 21: 52–71, etc.), but it passes thence directly to Abraham and his son Ishmael in Mecca and God's command to father and son to construct the Ka'ba there.³

There is no mention in the Quran of Hagar or Sarah, nor any reference to the Bible's elaborate stories of the early days of Ishmael and Isaac. Their history was left for the later Muslim tradition, and so too was the explanation of how Abraham and Ishmael got from the land of Israel to Mecca. Later writers responded with enthusiasm to the challenge, and there is more than one medieval Muslim version of how it came about. The historian Tabari (d. 923 A.D.) had read a number of them and presented his own conflation of the different traditions on Abraham's transit to the Hijaz of Western Arabia.⁴

According to . . . al-Suddi: Sarah said to Abraham, "You may take pleasure in Hagar, for I have permitted it." So he had intercourse with Hagar and she gave birth to Ishmael. Then he had intercourse with Sarah and she gave birth to Isaac. When Isaac grew up, he and Ishmael fought. Sarah became angry and jealous of Ishmael's mother. . . . She swore to cut something off her, and said to herself, "I shall cut off her nose, I shall cut off her ear—but no, that would deform her. I will circumcise her instead." So she did that, and Hagar took a piece of cloth to wipe the blood away. For that reason women have been circumcised and have taken pieces of cloth (as sanitary napkins) down to today.
Sarah said, “She will not live in the same town with me.” God told Abraham to go to Mecca, where there was no House at that time. He took Hagar and her son to Mecca and put them there. . . .

According to . . . Mujahid and other scholars: When God pointed out to Abraham the place of the House and told him how to build the sanctuary, he set out to do the job and Gabriel went with him. It was said that whenever he passed a town he would ask, “Is this the town which God’s command meant, O Gabriel?” And Gabriel would say: “Pass it by.” At last they reached Mecca, which at that time was nothing but acacia trees, mimosa, and thorn trees, and there was a people called Amalekites outside Mecca and its surroundings. The House at that time was but a hill of red clay. Abraham said to Gabriel, “Was it here that I was ordered to leave them.” Gabriel said, “Yes.” Abraham directed Hagar and Ishmael to go to the Hijr, and settled them down there. He commanded Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, to find shelter there. The he said “My Lord, I have settled some of my posterity in an uncultivable valley near Your Holy House . . . ” with the quote continuing until “. . . that they may be thankful.” (Quran 14: 37) Then he journeyed back to his family in Syria, leaving the two of them at the House.

At his expulsion from Abraham’s household, Ishmael must have been about 16-years-old, certainly old enough to assist his father in the construction of the Ka‘ba, as described in the Quran and is implicit from the last line of the preceding. Tabari’s version of what next occurred is derived from Genesis 21: 15–16, transferred from a Palestinian setting to a Meccan one. Its object is now clearly to provide an “Abrahamic” explanation for some of the features of the Mecca sanctuary and the Islamic Hajj or pilgrimage. The helpless Ishmael sounds much younger than 16 in these tales, and some Muslim versions of the story do in fact make him a nursing infant, which means, of course, that Abraham will have to return on a later occasion to build the Ka‘ba with his son.

Then Ishmael became very thirsty. His mother looked for water for him, but she could not find any. She listened for sounds to help her find water for him. She heard a sound at al-Safa and went there to look around and found nothing. Then she heard a sound from the direction of al-Marwa. She went there and looked around and saw nothing. Some also say that she stood on al-Safa praying to God for water for Ishmael, and then went to al-Marwa to do the same.
Thus is explained the origin of the pilgrimage ritual of the "running" back and forth between the two hills of Safa and Marwa on the eastern side of the sanctuary. Tabari continues:

Then she heard the sounds of beasts in the valley where she had left Ishmael. She ran to him and found him scooping the water from a spring which had burst forth from beneath his hand, and drinking from it. Ishmael's mother came to it and made it swampy. Then she drew water from it into her waterskin to keep it for Ishmael. Had she not done that, the waters of Zamzam would have gone on flowing to the surface forever... (Tabari, Annals, vol. 1, pp. 278–279 = Tabari 1987, pp. 72–74)

The Quran is quite explicit on the subject of Abraham as the builder of God's House, though it describes it with what are to us, at least, some unfamiliar, and so presumably authentic, Meccan cult terms:

Remember We made the House a place of assembly (mathaba) for the people and a secure place; and take the station (maqam) of Abraham as a prayer-place (musalla); and We have made a pact with Abraham and Ishmael that they should sanctify My House for those who circumambulate it, those using it as a retreat ('aqifun), who bow or prostrate themselves there.

And remember Abraham said: My Lord, make this land a secure one, and feed its people with fruits, those of them who believe in God and the Last Day...

And remember Abraham raised the foundations of the House, yes and Ishmael too, (saying) accept (this) from us, for indeed You are All-hearing and All-Knowing. (Quran 2: 125–127)

And again, "Behold, We gave to Abraham the site of the House; do not associate anything with Me (in worship)! And sanctify My House for those who circumambulate, or those who take their stand there (qa'imin), who bow (ruk'at) or prostrate themselves (sujud) there" (Quran 22: 26).

What the Muslims were told on divine authority about the ancient cult center at Mecca is summed up in those verses, and it was left to the piety and curiosity of later generations of Muslims to seek out additional information on what was not merely an antiquarian survival but the most sacred building in the world. And many of them did. The authority here is the classical exegete Zamakhshari (d. 1144 A.D.), commenting on Quran 2: 127 with
special insistence of the identity of the Abrahamic Ka‘ba with its heavenly prototype:

Then, God commanded Abraham to build it, and Gabriel showed him its location. It is said that God sent a cloud to shade him, and he was told to build on its shadow, not to exceed or diminish (its dimensions). It is said that he built it from five mountains: Mount Sinai, the Mount of Olives, Lebanon, al-Judi, and its foundation is from Hira. Gabriel brought him the Black Stone [that is, the stone embedded in the southeast corner of the Ka‘ba] from Heaven.

It is said that Abu Qubays brought it [that is, the Black Stone] forth, and it was drawn from inside it, where it had been hidden during the days of the Flood. It was a white sapphire from the Garden, but when menstruating women touched it during the pre-Islamic period, it turned black.

It is said that Abraham would build it as Ishmael handed him the stones.

*Our Lord* (2:127) means that they both (and not Abraham alone) said “Our Lord,” and this activity took place in the location where they erected (the House) in (its) position. Abdullah demonstrated that in his reading, the meaning of which is: “The two of them raised it up, both of them saying, “Our Lord.” (Zamakhshari, *Tafsir*, 311)

Zamakhshari’s information does not pretend to add historical detail; it simply fleshes out the story at one or another point, as does the commentator Tabarsi (d. 1153) on Quran 2: 125, though by Tabarsi’s day most commentators were convinced that the Quran’s not entirely self-evident reference to a “station of Abraham” (*maqam Ibrahim*) referred to a specific stone venerated in the Mecca *haram*:

God made the stone underneath Abraham’s feet into something like clay so that his foot sunk into it. That was a miracle. It was transmitted on the authority of Abu Ja‘far al-Baqir (may peace be upon him) that he said: Three stones were sent down from the Garden [the heavenly Garden of Eden, that is, Paradise]: the Station of Abraham, the rock of the children of Israel, and the Black Stone, which God entrusted Abraham with as a white stone. It was whiter than paper, but became black from the sins of the children of Adam.

*Abraham raised the foundations of the House* (2:127). That is, the base of the House that was (already there) before that, from Ibn Abbas and Ata who said: Adam was the one who built
it. Then its traces were wiped out. Abraham ploughed it (in the original place to establish the foundations). That is the tradition from our Imams. But Mujahid said: Abraham raised it up (originally) by the command of God. Al-Hasan used to say: The first to make the pilgrimage to the House was Abraham. But according to the traditions of our comrades, the first to make the pilgrimage to the House was Adam. That shows that he was [the one who built it] before Abraham. It was related on the authority of al-Baqir that he said: God placed four columns beneath the Throne. . . . He said: the angels circumambulate it. Then, He sent angels who said, “Build a House like it and with its measurements on the earth”. He commanded that whoever is on the earth must circumambulate the House. (Tabarsi, Tafsir, vol. 1, pp. 460, 468)

This, then, is how most later Muslims understood the proximate origin of the Ka’ba, alluded to in Quran, to wit, that the Patriarch Abraham, on a visit to his son Ishmael in Mecca, put down, on God’s command, the foundation of the House on a site already hallowed by Adam.12

Mecca After the Patriarchs

According to the traditional accounts preserved in the historian Tabari and the Meccan chronicler Azraqi,13 Abraham and Ishmael were the first ones to govern the district of the Ka’ba, then apparently an isolated building in an uninhabited area:

It [that is, the Ka’ba] had not had any custodians since its destruction in the time of Noah. Then God commanded Abraham to settle his son by the Ka’ba, wishing thereby to show a mark of esteem to one whom he later ennobled by means of His Prophet Muhammad. Abraham, the Friend of the Compassionate,14 and his son Ishmael were custodians of the Ka’ba after the time of Noah. Mecca was then uninhabited, and the surrounding country was inhabited by the Jurhum and the Amaliqa. (Tabari, Annals, vol. 1, p. 1131 = Tabari 1988, p. 52)

Ishmael, the biblical scion, had two orders of neighbors. The Amaliqa is a transparent reference to the Amalekites, another biblical people, whereas in introducing the tribe of the Jurhum, the Arab accounts have passed over into an entirely different tradition, a native Arabian one. The Quranic commentators, who generally worked verse by verse, had no obligation to produce a continuous
historical line between Abraham and Muhammad, but the Muslim historians attempted just that—the standard Life of Muhammad opens in fact with a genealogy that connects Muhammad, as the Gospels do Jesus, with the biblical Patriarch. The material at hand did not easily lend itself to this end, however. The Quran and the Muslim tradition did not have much sense of what had gone on among the Israelites after Ishmael, while their own Arab genealogies, long as they were, led back into the past in a direction that had no apparent connection with the Bible. There was a further complication, as we shall see. Their own history told the Muslims that Muhammad’s immediate ancestors at Mecca, the Quraysh, were in the first place relative newcomers to Mecca, that they replaced another Arab people; and second, that they were pagans. Thus the appearance in the story of the Jurhum, an Arab people who replaced the Banu Ishmael at Mecca and who introduced paganism into Abraham’s sanctuary.

So, we are told, to coexist peacefully with his powerful new neighbors, the Jurhum and the Amaliqa, Ishmael had eventually to marry a woman of the Jurhum, Sayyida bint Mudad, who bore him twelve sons. It is not entirely certain who the “Amaliqa” actually were, except that in Arabs’ eyes both they and the Jurhum were “genuine Arabs” in that Arabic was their native tongue, as contrasted, for example to the Banu Ishmael, “made Arabs,” because “they only spoke these (Arab) peoples’ languages after they had settled among them.”

There are biblical Amalekites, of course, Israel’s sworn enemies (Exodus 17: 8–16; 1 Samuel 15), but whoever their Arab counterparts actually were—possibly, it has been guessed, the Nabateans—their presence in the traditional accounts provides yet another opportunity to connect the Mecca-Medina tradition to the earliest biblical narratives, even though the biblical Amalekites have nothing to do with Medina but according to Exodus 17: 8–16 were found in the southern Negev.

The same Amalekites reappear somewhat later in the Bible—this part of the story is ignored in the Muslim tradition—though apparently still in the same general area in the Negev-Sinai, when Saul is commanded to destroy them utterly (1 Samuel 15: 2–3). Contrary to the Lord’s specific orders, Saul spared the Amalekite king Agag and the tribe livestock, to his own eventual discomfort, but the Amalekites themselves disappear from the Bible’s historical sight.
But not from the Muslims’. To return to the latter’s traditional version of Sacred History, Moses did not go to Arabia in person, and when the army despatched by him to the Hijaz in pursuit of the Amalekites returned to Palestine, they discovered that their prophet-leader had perished. They then returned to Arabia, thus establishing a permanent Jewish presence there. Other Muslim versions of the Moses tradition have Moses and Aaron making pilgrimage to Mecca, with Aaron dying near Medina and being buried on Mount Uhud there. Both these accounts serve to explain the later presence of Jews in Western Arabia, but the more general inclination in the Muslim sources is to date the Israelite emigration to Arabia to the sixth century B.C. period of the Babylonian destruction of the Temple.\textsuperscript{19}

We return to the era of Abraham and Ishmael:

At Abraham’s death Ishmael became the sole master of the Ka‘ba, and when he too died aged 130, his son Nabat succeeded him, apparently without difficulty. The difficulty arose in the next generation: at the death of Nabat, whose mother was a Jurhumite, as we have seen, his sons and grandsons were too few to compete with the powerful Jurhum, who took over the sanctuary. Mudad, the father-in-law of Ishmael, was the first Jurhumite to govern the district of the Ka‘ba. Ishmael the son of Abraham begot twelve sons: Nabat, the eldest, Qaydhar, Adhbul, Mabsha, Misma‘, Mashi, Dimma, Adhr, Tayma, Yatur, Nabish, Qaydhuma. Their mother was Ra‘la daughter of Mudad, son of Amr, of the Jurhum. . . . According to report, Ishmael lived 130 years and when he died he was buried in the sacred precinct (\textit{bijr}) of the Ka‘ba next to his mother Hagar.\textsuperscript{20}

As has already been noted, the Muslim chroniclers of the early, that is, the pre-Islamic, history of Mecca had two events to reckon with, or rather, a fact and a preconception that had to be accounted for. The fact was that, even though the Quran made it clear (2: 125–127) that Mecca was originally a shrine-settlement in the service of the One True God, the God of Abraham and Ishmael, it was, in the Prophet’s own day, a pagan city under the control of a pagan or paganized tribe, Muhammad’s own ancestors, the Quraysh. The preconception was that there were two racial strains among the Arabs, the northern “would-be” or “Arabized” Arabs, and the southern or Yemeni “made” or “genuine” Arabs, a distinction based on whether a people were “native speakers” or had acquired the language.\textsuperscript{21} The genealogists and the chroniclers,
among the latter principally Ibn Ishaq, Tabari, and Azraqi and their sources, assigned the Ishmaelites and Muhammad’s Quraysh to the first group, while the southerners like the Jurhum and Khuza’a were responsible for the various interregna that disturbed Mecca between the death of Ishmael and the return to power of one of his descendants, the Qurashite Qusayy.

The story of Jurhum, of their filling in (the well of) Zamzam, of their leaving Mecca, and of those who ruled Mecca after them until Abd al-Muttalib [that is, the grandfather of Muhammad] dug the Zamzam . . . is that Ishmael the son of Nabat was in charge of the shrine as long as God willed, then it was in charge of Mudad ibn Amr of the Jurhum. The sons of Ishmael and the sons of Nabat were with their grandfather Mudad ibn Amr and their maternal uncles of Jurhum—Jurhum and Qatura who were cousins being at that time the people of Mecca. They had come forth from the Yemen and travelled together, and Mudad was over Jurhum, while Sumayda’, one of their men, was over Qatura . . . When they came to Mecca they saw a town blessed with water and trees and, delighted with it, they settled there. Mudad ibn Amr, with the men of Jurhum, settled in the upper part of Mecca in Qa‘ayqi‘an and went no farther. Sumayda’ with Qatura settled in the lower part of Mecca in Ajyad, the lower part of Mecca, and went no farther. Mudad used to take a tithe from those entered Mecca from above, while Sumayda’ did the same to those who entered from below. Each kept to his own people, neither entering the other’s territory. (Ibn Ishaq 1955: 45–46)

According to this account, then, the Jurhum lived on the western slopes and heights of the valley, and so controlled the “upper” passage in and out from Jidda and the fertile Batn al-Marr, later the Wadi Fatima, while their allies, and soon rivals, the Qatura, sat on the slopes of Jabal Abu Qubays on the east and monitored the entry and exit toward the Yemen. The two groups were thus in careful separation but in extremely close quarters in the narrow confines of the Meccan valley. Neither seems to have been in control of the shrine itself at that point, but both were apparently attempting to take their sustenance from the same source, a tax on “those who entered Mecca,” obviously pilgrims to an already existing shrine, and they soon fell out. Hostilities followed and the Qatura were subjugated by Mudad, and the Jurhum were thus the sole civil and religious authorities—“rulers of the temple and
judges”—in the shrine city, though some at least of their Ishmaelites relatives by marriage—Ishmael, it will be recalled, married a Jurhum woman—were still living there. The final departure of these latter was apparently under demographic pressure, though obviously reinforced by political considerations.

Then God multiplied the offspring of Ishmael in Mecca and their uncles from Jurhum were rulers of the temple and judges in Mecca. The sons of Ishmael did not dispute their authority because of their ties of kindred and their respect for the sanctuary, lest there should be any quarrelling or fighting therein. When Mecca became too confined for the sons of Ishmael they spread abroad in the land, and whenever they had to fight a people, God gave them the victory through their religion and they subdued them. (Ibid., p. 46)

This puts a kind light on the dispersed Ishmaelites, but the same sources make it clear that it was at their departure from Mecca that the sons of Ishmael began to turn toward the paganism they would so staunchly defend when they returned to the city as Quraysh.22

The Jurhum, meanwhile, had new neighbors. Tribes were continuously migrating northward from the Yemen, the Azd, for example, and the Quda‘a, some of whom, like the Aws and Khazraj, settled further north in the Hijaz, notably in the oasis that would later be called Medina, whereas others, like the Banu Ghassan, continued their trek into Syria. Finally, there were those who “split off” and settled in the Tihama or coastal areas of the Hijaz. “When the Banu Amr ibn Amir dispersed from the Yemen, the Banu Haritha ibn Amr split off (inkhaza‘a) from them, settled in the Tihama and became known as the Khuza‘a . . . ” (Tabari, vol. 1, p. 1132 = Tabari 1988, p. 53).

How precisely the southerners called Khuza‘a wrested control of Mecca from the Jurhum was unknown even to the early Arab experts. Or so we must conclude from the fact there were five diverse and distinct traditions on the subject.23 Tabari (Annals, vol. 1, p. 1132) combined the motifs of divine vengeance—“God sent bleeding of the nose and a plague of ants against the Jurhum and destroyed them”—with a Khuza‘i attack, although Ibn Ishaq prefers the simpler political explanation.

Afterwards Jurhum behaved high-handedly in Mecca and made lawful that which was taboo. Those who entered the town who
were not of their tribe they treated badly and they appropriated gifts which had been made to the Ka'ba so that their authority weakened. When the Banu Bakr ibn Abd Manat of the (Meccan) Kinana and the Ghubshan of Khuza'a perceived that, they came together to do battle and drive them out of Mecca. War was declared and in the fighting the Banu Bakr and the Ghubshan got the upper hand and expelled the Jurhum from Mecca. (Ibn Ishaq, 1955, pp. 46–47)

Throughout this section Ibn Ishaq or his source invokes events to explain names, chiefly of places. Both he and Tabari, for example, offer an appropriate etymology, and in consequence, a theodicy, for “Bakka,” an early and mysterious name of Mecca (cf. Quran 3: 96).

The first of the Jurhum to be custodian of the Ka'ba was Mudad, followed by his descendants, generation after generation. Eventually the Jurhum acted wrongfully in Mecca, held lawful that which was forbidden, misappropriated the wealth which had been presented to the Ka'ba, and oppressed those who came to Mecca. . . . During the Era of Ignorance, any person who acted wrongfully or oppressively in Mecca, or any king who held lawful what was forbidden there, perished on the spot. Mecca was called . . . Bakka because it used to break (tabukk) the necks of evil-doers and tyrants when they acted wrongfully there.) Tabari, Annals, vol. 1, pp. 1131–1132 = Tabari 1988, pp. 52–53)

The Jurhum era in Mecca appears to have lasted no more than 300 years, from ca. 200 to ca. 400 A.D. in the uncertain chronology of the time, and before he left, the last Jurhumite did something that led directly to the later prominence of Abd al-Muttalib. “Amr ibn Harith ibn Mudad the Jurhumite brought out the two gazelles of the Ka'ba and the corner stone and buried them in the well Zamzam, going away with the men of Jurhum to the Yemen. They were bitterly grieved at losing the kingship of Mecca . . . .” (Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 46–47).

Once in control of the city and the shrine, the Khuza'a began to make their own dispositions:

The Ka'ba was taken over by the Khuza'a, except that there were three functions which were in the hands of the tribes of (the group called) Mudar. The first of these was the ijaza, the giving permission to the pilgrims to leave Arafat. This was in
the hands of al-Ghawth ibn Murr, who was (of the clan of) Sufa. . . . The second function was the ifada, the permission to the pilgrims to disperse to Mina on the morning of the sacrifice. This was in the hands of the Banu Zayd ibn Adwan. . . . The third function was the nasi, the delaying or postponement of the sacred month (by intercalation). The right to decide this was in the hands of al-Qalammas, who was Hudhayfa ibn Fuqaym ibn Adi, of the Banu Malik ibn Kinana. . . . When Islam came, the sacred months had returned to their original times, and God established them firmly and abolished the “postponement” (nasi). (Tabari, Annals, vol. 1, p. 1134 = Tabari 1988, p. 55).

How Paganism and Idol Worship Came to Mecca

One aspect of the worship of the pre-Islamic Arabs that attracted the attention not only of later Muslim authorities on the “Era of Ignorance” or “Barbarism,” as they called pre-Islamic days, but even of the Greek and Latin authors who had come in contact with Arab society, was a widespread cult of stones. From the perspective of both sets of observers it seemed an odd practice to venerate stones, whether these latter were totally unshaped or fashioned into some kind of very rudimentary idol.24 The practice is testified to both among sedentary tribes like the Nabateans of Petra or the priestly tribes of Emessa in Syria, who had enshrined one such stone within their temple—which their high priest Elagabalus carried off to Rome with him when he became emperor—as well as among the nomads who carried stones enclosed in portable shrines into battle with them.25

Later Muslim had some idea of these practices and they traced them back to the earliest history of Mecca, when the sons of Ishmael lapsed into paganism. Ibn al-Kalbi (d. 821), the scholar who made a special study of the pre-Islamic past of Arabia in his Book of Idols, connected it directly to the degeneracy of the Banu Ishmael.

The reason that led them [that is, the descendents of Ishmael] to the worship of images and stones was the following. No one left Mecca without carrying away with him a stone from the stones of the Sacred House as a token of reverence to it, and as a sign of deep affection to Mecca. Wherever he settled he would erect that stone and circumambulate it in the same manner he used to circumambulate the Ka‘ba (before his departure from Mecca), seeking thereby its blessing and affirming his deep affection for
the Holy House. In fact, the Arabs still venerate the Ka‘ba and Mecca and journey to them in order to perform the pilgrimage and the visitation, conforming thereby to the time-honored custom which they inherited from Abraham and Ishmael.

In time this led them to the worship of whatever took their fancy, and caused them to forget their former worship. They exchanged the religion of Abraham and Ishmael for another. Consequently they took to the worship of images, becoming like nations before them.

At this point Ibn al-Kalbi ties his story to an explanation of Quran 71: 20–24 and incidentally provides the names of some of the gods worshipped in pre-Islamic Arabia: “Noah said: ‘O Lord, they rebel against me, and they follow those whose riches and children only aggravate their ruin.’ And they plotted a great plot, and they said, ‘Forsake not your gods; forsake not Wadd and Suwa’, nor Yaghuth and Ya‘uq and Nasr.’ And they caused many to err . . .”

Ibn al-Kalbi’s text continues: “They sought and determined what the people of Noah had worshipped of those images and adopted the worship of those which were still remembered among them.”

To a later generation of Muslims it was obviously important, in the light of Muhammad’s own adoption of certain of the cult practices current in the Mecca of his day, to maintain some kind of continuous link with the authentic Abrahamic past.

Among these devotional practices were some which had come down from the time of Abraham and Ishmael, such as the veneration of the House and its circumambulation, the Hajj, the ‘umra [or lesser pilgrimage], the “standing” on Arafat and Muzdalifa, sacrificing she-camels, and raising the voice (tablil) (in acclamation of God) at the Hajj and ‘umra, but they introduced into the latter things that did not belong to it.

Ibn al-Kalbi then supplies an example of just such an “unorthodox” pre-Islamic acclamation-prayer (tablīyya): “Here we are, O Lord! Here we are! Here we are! You have no partner save the one who is yours; you have dominion over him and whatever he possesses.”

Ibn al-Kalbi continues his own remarks: “Thus they declared His unity through the talbiyya and at the same time associated their gods with Him, placing their [that is, their gods’] affairs in
His hands . . . ” (Ibn al-Kalbi, Book of Idols, pp. 6–7 = Ibn al-Kalbi 1952, pp. 4–5).

Stone worship is not quite the same thing as idol worship, as even Ibn al-Kalbi understood. According to most authorities, including Ibn al-Kalbi himself, the pagan practices in Mecca took a new turn when the Khaza’a under their leader Amr ibn Luhayy—who had married the daughter of Amr ibn al-Harith, the Jurhum chief—replaced the Jurhum as the paramount tribe in the settlement.

When Amr ibn Luhayy came (to Mecca) he disputed Amr ibn al-Harith’s right to its custody, and with the aid of the Banu Ishmael he fought the Jurhumites, defeated them and cleared them out of the Ka’ba; he then drove them out of Mecca and took over the custody of the House after them.

Amr ibn Luhayy then became very sick and was told: There is a hot spring in Balqa in Syria.26 If you go there, you will be cured. So he went to the hot spring, bathed therein and was cured. During his stay there he noticed that the inhabitants of the place worshipped idols. So he questioned them: “What are these things?” To which they replied, “To them we pray for rain, and from them we seek victory over the enemy.” Thereupon he asked them to give him (some) and they did. He took them back with him to Mecca and erected them around the Ka’ba . . . (Ibid., p. 8 = Ibn al-Kalbi 1952, p. 7)

Later Ibn al-Kalbi turns his attention to the cult of the idols newly introduced into Mecca and its vicinity:

Every family in Mecca had at home an idol which they worshipped. Whenever one of them purposed to set out on a journey, his last act before leaving the house would be to touch the idol in hope of an auspicious journey; on his return, the first thing he would do was to touch it again in gratitude for a propitious return . . .

The Arabs were passionately fond of worshiping idols. Some of them had a temple around which they centered their worship, while others adopted an idol to which they offered their adoration. The person who was unable to build himself a temple or adopt an idol would erect a stone in front of the Sacred House [that is, the Ka’ba at Mecca] or in front of any other temple they might prefer, and then circumambulate it in the same manner in which they would circumambulate the Sacred House. The Arabs called these stones “betyl” (ansab),
but whenever these stones resembled a living form they called them "idols" (asnam) and "images" (awthan). The act of circumambulating them they called "circumrotation" (dawar).

Whenever a traveler stopped at a place or station (to spend the night), he would select for himself four stones, pick out the finest of them and adopt it as his god, and then use the remaining three as supports for his cooking pot. On his departure he would leave them behind, and would do the same at the other stops.

And, like many other Muslims, Ibn al-Kalbi was convinced that Arab paganism was at base simply a degenerate form of rituals of the Ka'ba:

The Arabs were accustomed to offer sacrifices before all these idols, betyls and stones. Nevertheless, they were aware of the excellence and superiority of the Ka'ba, to which they went on pilgrimage and visitation. What they did on their travels was merely a perpetuation of what they did at the Ka'ba, because of their devotion to it. (Ibid., pp. 32–33 = Ibn al-Kalbi 1952, pp. 28–29)

Ibn Ishaq provides a kind of catalog of which tribes worshipped which idols and where. He resumes:

The Quraysh had by a well in the middle of the Ka'ba an idol called Hubal. And they adopted Asaf and Na'ila by the place of Zamzam, sacrificing beside them. They were a man and woman of Jurhum—Asaf ibn Baghy and Na'ila bint Dik—who were guilty of sexual relations in the Ka'ba and so God transformed them into two stones.27 Abdullah ibn Abu Bakr ... on the authority of Amra bint Abd al-Rahman ... that she said, I heard Aisha [one of the wives of Muhammad] say, "We always heard that Asaf and Na'ila were a man and a woman of Jurhum who copulated in the Ka'ba so God transformed them into two stones." But God alone knows the truth ...

And in a slightly different version of the same detail reproduced by Ibn al-Kalbi:

Every household had an idol in their house which they used to worship. When a man was about to set out on a journey he would rub himself against it as he was about to ride off: indeed that was the last thing that he used to do before his journey. And when he returned from his journey the first thing he did was to rub himself against it before he went into his family ...

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Now along with the Ka'ba the Arabs had adopted *tawaghit*, which were temples which they venerated as they venerated the Ka'ba. They had their guardians and overseers and they used to make offerings to them as they did to the Ka'ba and to circum-ambulate them and sacrifice at them. Yet they recognized the superiority of the Ka'ba because it was the temple and mosque of Abraham the friend (of God) . . .

Al-Lat (was a goddess who) belonged to the Thaqif in Ta'iif, her overseers and guardians being the Banu Mu'attib of the Thaqif. Manat was worshipped by the Aws and the Khazraj, and such of the people of Yathrib who followed their religion, by the sea-shore in the direction of al-Mushallal in Qudayd. (Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 38–39)

**FATHER QUSAYY AND THE QURAYSH**

Eventually the Khuza'a permitted the return to Mecca of the descendants of Ishmael; namely, the Quraysh of the Kinana. The tribal eponym Kinana stands fifteen generations after Ishmael in the line of direct descent, and Qusayy, the chief actor in what follows, is eight generations after Kinana. Thus, according to the traditional reckoning, Ishmael's descendants returned to their father's town some seven centuries after he and Abraham built the Ka'ba there. In the meantime the Ishmaelites, now called *Quraysh*, had generally lived dispersed in "scattered settlements" throughout the neighborhood.

Ghubshan of Khuza'a controlled the sanctuary instead of the Banu Bakr ibn Abd Manat, the man who was in charge being Amr ibn al-Harith al-Ghubshani. The Quraysh at that time were in scattered settlements and tents [or "houses"] dispersed among their people, the Banu Kinana. So the Khuza'a had possession the shrine, passing it on from son to son until the last of them, Hulayl ibn Habashiyya . . . (Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 48)

At that point all the sources introduce Qusayy, "the first of the Kinana to achieved the rulership, and who united his tribe, the Quraysh."

When his Qurayshite father Kilab died, the young Qusayy, who must have been born sometime early in the second half of the fourth century A.D., was taken by his mother back to the northern pasturing grounds of her own tribe, the Banu Udhra of the
Quda’a. Qusayy’s mother remarried, and as he grew up he had no reason to believe that he was anything but one of the Quda’a. But when he reached young manhood and found that he was not a Quda’ai, Qusayy asked his mother to which tribe he belonged. She told him the entire story: “You are the son of Kilab ibn Murra ibn Ka’b ibn Lu’ayy ibn Ghalib ibn Fihr ibn Malik ibn al-Nadr ibn Kinana al-Qurashi.” This revelation awoke in Qusayy a strong desire to return to Mecca and join his own people, the Quraysh.

According to the traditional account, Qusayy’s mother advised him that the safest course was to wait for the period of the sacred truce in the pilgrimage season. He followed her advice and eventually arrived in Mecca under the protection of sacred month. Then, when the other Banu Udhra returned to their homes, Qusayy remained behind with his newly discovered Meccan kinsmen. The sources then move rapidly:

Qusayy was a strong man of good lineage, and when he asked Hulayl ibn Hubshiyya [or Habashiyya] the Khuza’i for the hand of his daughter Hubba, Hulayl, recognizing his lineage and regarding him as a desirable match, gave his consent and married her to him. At that time, it is claimed, Hulayl was in charge of the Ka’ba and ruled in Mecca. According to Ibn Ishaq, Qusayy stayed with him [that is, Hulayl] and Hubba bore him Abd al-Dar, Abd Manaf, Abd Uzza and Abd. His progeny increased, his wealth multiplied and he became greatly honored. (Tabari, Annals, vol. 1, pp. 1093–1094 = Tabari 1988, p. 20)

If the report about Hulayl is true, and Tabari may have had some doubts, Qusayy had married very well indeed: his bride was the daughter of the “king” of Mecca, a post identified with control of the Ka’ba. He apparently took up residence in his father-in-law’s household, and his four sons all bore the family’s traditional theophoric, shrine-tied names: “Servant of the House,” “Servant of Manaf,” “Servant of Uzza”—the latter two the familiar Meccan goddesses—and finally the somewhat mysterious “Servant” tout simple, or perhaps, “Servant of Qusayy.” The young man could hardly be blamed if he harbored ambitious dreams.

When Hulayl al-Hubshiyya died, Qusayy thought he had a better right to the Ka’ba and to rule over Mecca than the Khuza’a and the Banu Bakr, since the Quraysh were noblest and purest of the descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham. He spoke to some of the men of the Quraysh and the Banu Kinana and
called upon them to expel the Khuza‘a and the Banu Bakr from Mecca. They accepted his proposal and swore an oath of allegiance to him to do this. Then he wrote to his half-brother Riza ibn Rabi‘a who was in his tribal lands (northward toward Syria), asking him to come to his assistance and fight along with him. Riza ibn Rabi‘a stood up among the Quda‘a and called upon them to go to the assistance of his brother and to march with him, and they answered his call. (Tabari, Annals, vol. 1, p. 1098 = Tabari 1988, pp. 20–21)

According to this account, which Tabari got from Ibn Ishaq, the critical moment came during the annual pilgrimage. Control of one or more of the rituals of the Hajj had remained as an inheritance in the hands of certain clans from the old Jurhum days at Mecca, and particularly the one called Sufa.

The Sufa used to drive the people away from Arafat and give them permission to depart when they dispersed from Mina. On the day of dispersal they went to stone the pillars and a man of the Sufa used to throw stones for the pilgrims, none throwing until he had thrown . . .

And no matter how forcefully he was urged by “those who had matters to attend to,” the Sufa custodian stoutly refused to begin the ritual until the sun began to set. Even then, the Sufa stood by their prerogatives:

When they had finished with the stoning and wanted to disperse from Mina, the Sufa would occupy both sides of the pass of al-Aqaba and detain the pilgrims. The pilgrims would say, “Give the permission to depart, Sufa!” Nobody left till the Sufa passed through; when they had dispersed and left, the other pilgrims were free to go, and set out after them. (Tabari, Annals, vol. 1, pp. 1095–1096 = Tabari 1988, pp. 22–23)

This is all there is by way of explanation of the precedent and the ritual. Tabari and his sources then return to the nearer present, to Qusayy’s day.

This year the Sufa acted as usual. The Arabs recognized their right to do this, since they regarded it as a religious duty during the rule of the Jurhum and the Khuza‘a. Qusayy ibn Kilab, accompanied by his followers from his own tribe of Quraysh, from the Kinana and the Quda‘a, came to the Sufa at al-Aqaba (near Mina) and said. “We have a better right to this than you.” At that they opposed one another and began to fight. A fierce battle broke out, as a result of which the Sufa were put to flight,
and Qusayy wrested from them the privileges which had been in their hands... When this happened the Khuzā‘a and the Banu Bakr drew back from Qusayy ibn Kilab, knowing that he would impose prohibitions upon them as he had upon the Sufa, and that we would exclude them from the Ka‘ba and the control of Mecca. When they drew back from them, Qusayy revealed his enmity to them openly and resolved to do battle with them. (Ibid.)

Battle they did, and after both sides took heavy casualties, the matter was submitted to arbitration. The arbitrator was from another branch of the Banu Kinana, and his verdict does not seem very surprising, that Qusayy had a better right to the Ka‘ba and to rule over Mecca than the Khuzā‘a. This was not the only version of events that was current, however. Tabari knew and told other, somewhat different stories of the passage of power, how the elderly Hulayl handed over the authority to his daughter, and when she pleaded her incapacity to open and close the door of the Ka‘ba, he appointed one Abu Ghubshan as her assistant. Qusayy bought the privilege from Abu Ghubshan for a skinful of wine and a lute, an act that disturbed Hulayl and led to war; or even that a plague struck the Khuzā‘a and that after they vacated Mecca out of fear, Qusayy simply moved his own people in and took over the Ka‘ba.31 Ibn Ishaq and Tabari each gives his summary of events:

Thus Qusayy gained authority over the temple and Mecca and brought in his people from their dwellings to Mecca. He behaved like a king over his tribe and the people of Mecca and so they made him king. But he had guaranteed the Arabs their customary rights because he felt it was a duty upon himself which he did not have the right to alter. Thus he confirmed the family of Safwan [who were then granting pilgrims the permission to depart from Arafat] and Adwan [who were then granting the permission to depart from Muzdalifa] and the intercalators and Murra ibn Awf in their customary rights which obtained until the coming of Islam when God put and end thereby to them all.

Qusayy was the first of the Banu Ka‘b ibn Lu‘ayy to assume kingship and be was obeyed by his people as a king. He held the keys to the shrine, the right to water the pilgrims from the well of Zamzam, to feed the pilgrims, to preside at assemblies, and to hand out the war banners. In his hands lay all the dignities of Mecca; he divided the town into quarters among his people and he settled all the Quraysh into their houses in Mecca which they held.
People assert that the Quraysh were afraid to cut down the trees of the sanctuary in their quarters, but Qusayy cut them down with his own hand or through his assistants. The Quraysh called him "the uniter" because he had brought them together and they drew a happy omen from his rule. So far as the Quraysh were concerned, no woman was given in marriage, no man was married, no discussion about public affairs was held and no banner of war was entrusted to anyone except in his house, where one of his sons would hand it over. . . . His authority among the Quraysh during his life and after his death was like a religious law which could not be infringed. He chose for himself the council house (dar al-nadwa) and made a door which led to the mosque of the Ka'ba; in it the Quraysh used to settle their affairs. (Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 52–53)

There follows an account of the offices to which Qusayy succeeded at Mecca.

Qusayy took control of the Ka'ba and rule over Mecca, and gathered together his tribe from their dwellings and settled them there. He assumed rule over his tribe and the people of Mecca, and they accepted him as their king. . . . He held privileges of being doorkeeper of the Ka'ba, providing the pilgrims with food and drink, presiding over the assembly, and appointing standard bearers, thus taking all the honors of Mecca for himself. He also divided Mecca into quarters for his tribe, settling every clan of the Quraysh into the dwelling places assigned to them in Mecca . . .

His authority among his tribe of Quraysh, in his lifetime and after his death, was like a religion which people followed. They always acted in accordance with it, regarding it as filled with good omens and recognizing his superiority and nobility. He took for himself the council house (dar al-nadwa) and made the door which (later) led from it to the mosque of the Ka'ba. The Quraysh used to decide their affairs in that house. (Tabari, Annals, vol. 1, pp. 1097–1098 = Tabari 1988, p. 24)

Dimly through these lines written by a later staunch monotheist, we can see the faint outlines of the cult in pre-Islamic Mecca. Qusayy had become not only, or perhaps not even, the political master of the city, but certainly the holy man of Mecca's sacred enclosure, a prototype of the same kind of arrangements that remained current into modern times in South Arabia. 32 But the impression we are given is that Qusayy was a religious conserva-
tive who was eager for the transfer of authority to his own hands but, like the Khuza‘a before him and like his illustrious descendant, was quite unwilling to introduce any radical changes in the cult.

Qusayy remained in Mecca, held in honor and high esteem by his tribe. . . . As regards the pilgrimage, he confirmed the rights of the Arabs to continue their previous customs. This is because he considered these to be a religious duty which he should not change. The Sufa thus continued as before, (and did so) until they died out, their rights then passing by inheritance to the family of Safwan ibn Harith . . .; the Adwan also continued as they had, and likewise the intercalator from the Banu Malik ibn Kinana and Murra ibn Awf . . . (Tabari, Annals, vol. 1, p. 1098 = Tabari 1988, p. 25)

Another passage in Tabari gives us some ideas of Qusayy’s widely ranging powers, most of them, we suspect, already traditional for the master of the Meccan Haram. We have already seen, for example, how he took over the community council hall called the dar al-nadwa and made it into his own home.

People allege that the Quraysh were afraid to cut down the trees of the Haram in their settlements, and that Qusayy thus cut them down with his own hands, and that they then helped him. . . . No woman or man of Quraysh was married anywhere but in the house of Qusayy ibn Kilab, nor did the Quraysh consult together about any matter affecting them anywhere but in his house. When they were about to fight another tribe, banners were tied only in his house, where one of his own sons would hand the banner over . . . (Ibid., p. 1097 = Tabari 1988, p. 24)

Arab historical memory recalled Qusayy as the “unifier,” because he was, it was alleged, “the first of the Kinana to achieved the rulership, and who united his tribe, the Quraysh.” The later Arabs themselves were perfectly clear who was Quraysh and who was not, but were somewhat uncertain as to where they had come from, chiefly, perhaps, because of the absence of any eponymous “Quraysh” in the tribal genealogy, as Ibn al-Kalbi confesses. The founder of the house’s power was generally thought to have been a Qusayy, as we have seen, and his lineage went back through his father Kilab to a certain Fihr ibn Malik, called the gatherer of the Quraysh, and in discussing the latter, Tabari reflects on the more general question of who precisely the Quraysh were.
It is said that the Quraysh were so called after Quraysh ibn Badr . . . of the al-Nadr branch of the Kinana. This is because when the caravan of the Banu al-Nadr arrived, the Arabs used to say "the caravan of Quraysh has arrived." They say that this "Quraysh" was the guide of the Banu al-Nadr in their travels, and he was responsible for provisioning them. He had a son named Badr who dug the well at (the place called) Badr, and the well called Badr is named after him.

Ibn al-Kalbi (maintains that) Quraysh is a collective name, and cannot be traced back to a father or mother, or to a male or female guardian. Others say that the descendants of al-Nadr ibn Kinana were called Quraysh because al-Nadr ibn Kinana came out one day to his tribal assembly and they said to one another, "Look at Nadr, he is like a quraysh camel." Others say that Quraysh were so called after a creature who lives in the sea and eats other sea creatures, namely, the shark (qirsh). The descendants of al-Nadr ibn Kinana were named after the qirsh because it is the most powerful of sea creatures . . .

And so the not very convincing etymologies continue, and at least one of them suggests that the term Quraysh is a more recent coinage. It is clear that the Arabs, who remembered such things, had no clear idea of who the Quraysh were or where they had originally come from.

Mecca Town

The evidence is exceedingly thin, but what seems likely from the pages of Ibn Ishaq, Tabari and Azraqi is that the establishment of Mecca as a permanent settlement was the work of the same Qusayy ibn Kilab, the Qurashite, sometime after 400 A.D. The tradition is unanimous that there was a shrine there from a very early date, but the immediate area seems not to have been settled: witness the fact that the earlier tribes camped on the mountain slopes above the valley and that Qusayy took the secular initiative in clearing the immediate shrine area of trees, normally a forbidden act in a hawta. He settled his own people, who formerly lived in "widely scattered settlements," in the newly cleared area, with a defined territory assigned for the domicile of each tribe. To view it from a slightly different perspective, at the birth of Muhammad, Mecca was somewhat over a hundred years old as a genuine settlement and the Quraysh were at that same remove from their earlier lives as nomads.
Close in on the now reduced Haram area Qusayy built—or perhaps simply appropriated—the dar al-nadwa to serve as his own residence as well as the council hall for the community, “in which the Quraysh used to decide their affairs.” These affairs included all community activities from political acts like declarations of war to religious rituals, circumcision, and marriage rites. In a later generation, no one could enter the dar al-nadwa unless he was a direct descendant of Qusayy, and it was forbidden to anyone to take part in the business of the community until he had reached the age of 40. And finally, and significantly, as has already been noted, Qusayy’s house gave direct access to the Ka’ba.

The Quraysh, we are told, now moved into Mecca. Perhaps it was Qusayy himself who allotted them two quite distinct quarters of the new settlement. The principal tribes—the Hashim, Umayya, Nawfal, Zuhra, Asad, Taym, Makhzum, Adi, Jumah, and Sahm—lived in the valley bottom in the immediate vicinity of the shrine, while the lesser tribes were settled in the outskirts with what remained of the non-Qurashi inhabitants. Contrary to what convenience or strategy or simple urban common sense might seem to dictate, the choicest part of the city, though the least habitable and least defensible, was exactly what it is today, the wadi bottom, as close in to the shrine as possible. It was perhaps as Qusayy is reported to have said: “If you will live around the sanctuary, people will have fear of you and not permit themselves to fight you or attack you.”

Mecca had little save its own holiness to recommend it as a site for settlement. A poet later described it as a place where “winter and summer are equally intolerable. No waters flow . . . not a blade of grass on which to rest the eye; no, nor hunting. Only merchants (dwell there), the most despicable of professions.” The Quran itself is willing to concede the point. The speaker here is Abraham addressing his Lord: “O, our Lord, I have made some of my offspring dwell in a valley without cultivation, at Thy sacred House, in order, O Lord, that they may establish regular prayers (salawat). So fill the hearts of some among men with love toward them, and feed them with fruits so that they may give thanks” (Quran 14: 37).

The vale of Mecca was not always such perhaps: the prayer of Abraham may be a projection back to the patriarchal age of the perceptions of a later generation who found Mecca situated in a barren and unappealing place. The Arab tradition asserted that
when the Jurhum came to Mecca "they saw a town blessed with water and trees, and delighted with it, they settled there." It even recalls the presence of trees in the valley bottom of Mecca in more recent times, trees that, as we have seen, were cut down by Qusayy to make room for his city. But given the unvarying climate of Mecca, it is unlikely that the trees were much more than scrub.

Mecca, it is often said, in an attempt to explain either its prosperity or simply why people chose to settle there in the first place, stood at the nexus of natural trade routes. It in fact does not: the natural route between the Yemen and the north lies well east of Mecca, and caravans going there were obviously making a detour. Many places in the near vicinity of Mecca, Ta‘if, for example, had better soil, more water, and a better climate. What Mecca possessed and they did not, though we cannot explain how or why, was an intrinsic holiness. The Quran explained it, and there were no denials from the Quraysh: Mecca was important because it was a holy city, and, it is further explained, that holiness went back to Abraham.

By all accounts, Mecca must have been an extremely modest place in the sixth century A.D., a valley running roughly northeast-southwest, held, or perhaps trapped, between two high ridges of mountains. Did its native son Muhammad claim to be a messenger of God, the Lord of the Worlds? "So ask your Lord who sent you," the Quraysh remarked derisively, "to remove us from these mountains that enclose us. Straighten out our country for us and open up rivers like those of Syria and Iraq." And into this valley was jammed the settled population, close to the Ka‘ba and close to each other. The center of town was wrapped in "suffocating heat, deadly wind, clouds of flies," as a geographer later described it, and the so-called outskirts were little more than mud huts clinging to the slopes of the inhospitable mountains.

And in the midst was the small area known as the shrine, literally, a "place of prostration" (masjid), defined from the beginning only by the fact of its being an open space between the walls of the facing buildings. The "gates of the Haram" were originally nothing more than the alleys between the houses that opened onto that space. On the testimony of Ibn Ishaq and Azraqi, business was conducted in the open courts of houses or in the Haram itself, particularly at the "Station of Abraham," or leaning at ease against the low wall called the hatim opposite the northwestern face of the Ka‘ba.
The houses of the Quraysh must have been extremely primitive. The Caliph Mu‘awiya (r. 661–680) is credited with being the first to build with baked brick in the town, and in the Prophet’s own lifetime the inhabitants were incapable of roofing the Ka‘ba and had to wait until fortune cast a carpenter into their midst. The Ka‘ba, the most important building in the town, was constructed of unmortared stones laid one atop the other, and everything else was built, as far as we can tell, of mud mixed with straw.

Rulers of the Shrine

When they come to speak of the approaching death of Qusayy, the chroniclers of the city’s history provide a somewhat more detailed and systematic account of the privileges possessed by the holy man of Mecca and by his holy family after him. As Ibn Ishaq’s narrative reveals, there was, or rather, had been, a problem in the succession because the historian was well aware that it was not the offspring of Qusayy’s eldest son, Abd al-Dar, who ruled Mecca or were even, as their name, “Servants of the House,” openly indicates they should have been, in control of the Ka‘ba:

When Qusayy grew old and feeble, he spoke to Abd al-Dar. He was his first-born but Abd Manaf had become famous during his father’s lifetime and done all that had to be done along with Abd al-Uzza and Abd. Qusayy said: “By God, my son, I will put you on a par with the others; though they have a greater reputation than yours, none of them shall enter the Ka‘ba until you open it for them; none shall give the Quraysh the war banner but you with your own hand; none shall drink in Mecca except you allow it; and no pilgrim shall eat food unless you provide it; and the Quraysh shall not decide any matter except in your house.” He gave him his house, it being the only place where the Quraysh could settle their affairs, and he gave him the formal rights mentioned above.

One of the privileges accorded to Qusayy by reason of his position was the collection of a special tax, the rifada, which is here described as supplying the means by which Qusayy provided food and drink to the pilgrims but that was also very likely one of the sources out of which he and his successors funded their commercial ventures. It was still current in Ibn Ishaq’s day and so his account has a dual purpose, to explain the tax and to justify its continued practice:
The *rifada* was a tax which the Quraysh used to pay from their property to Quṣayy at every festival. With it he used to provide food for the pilgrims who were unable to afford their own provisions. Quṣayy had laid this upon the Quraysh, saying: "You are God's neighbors, the people of His temple and sanctuary. The pilgrims are God's guests and the visitors to His temple and have the highest claim on your generosity; so provide food and drink for them during the pilgrimage until they depart out of your territory." Accordingly they used to pay him every year a tax on their flocks and he used to provide food for the people therefrom, while they were at Mina, and his people carried out this order of his during the time of barbarism until Islam came. To this very day it is the food which the sultan provides every year at Mina until the pilgrimage is over. (Ibn Ishaq 1955, pp. 55–56)

These were not only honorable and prestigious positions at Mecca; they were, as we shall see, profitable as well, and they reveal the fundamental outlines of the economy of what was, from Quṣayy's day, the shrine-city of Mecca.48 What emerges from these offices that he either established or laid claim to when he took control of the settlement is clear evidence that in the Quṣayy era Mecca was not yet a commercial center. What passes as the "municipal offices" of Mecca have to do only with military operations, which our sources never show us in operation, and with the control of the shrine. In a city that enjoyed a considerable mercantile reputation among later Muslim authorities, there is no sign of the regulation of commerce nor of any municipal institutions governing or encouraging it; indeed, there is a suggestion that at this point the Quraysh may not have traded at all.49 The principal *functioning* offices, as far as we can tell, were all connected with the shrine and the pilgrimage, and were regarded as religious in character.50

Primary among the offices possessed by Quṣayy was the wardenship (*bijaba*) of the Ka'ba,51 including control of access to it, later symbolized by the possession of the keys to the building.52 As noted, Quṣayy also possessed watering and provisioning rights for what the tradition sometimes regarded as needy pilgrims but that was more likely an exclusive franchise—"no man shall eat food in the pilgrimage other than your food"—and one that, in addition to the element of control it implied, was a privilege that could obviously be turned to great profit, as it unquestionably was in later times.53
In addition to the profits that might have accrued from buying and selling pilgrimage goods and services, other unmistakable sources of income, whether for Qusayy individually or, as seems more likely, the ruling families of the Quraysh collectively, lie just below the surface. Lammens’s investigation of the sources has uncovered a whole range of charges and taxes imposed upon arriving and departing pilgrims and the merchants who took advantage of the “truce of God” surrounding the pilgrimage period to conduct their business at the fairs that followed the rituals.54 Thus the early Quraysh, who were wardens of the trade at Mecca, though not yet participants in it, must have begun to accumulate from the event of the pilgrimage a small capital stake that not only offered them grounds for subsistence but the foundation for later, more expansive commercial ventures that would lead them out of the narrow confines of the Meccan Haram.

On how these arrangements were organized and administered we have little information; far less, of course, than we possess for Petra, and certainly Palmyra, with its wealth of commercial inscriptions. Qusayy, and after him one or other of his sons, is simply said to be in charge, whereas whatever small pre-Islamic evidence there is seems to point to the fact that the leadership at Mecca was a collective one. Fasi, a later historian of the city, says quite explicitly that “among the chiefs, no one of them exercised authority over the rest of the Quraysh except by a benevolent concession on their part.”55 No mention is made in the sources—the bare list of Qusayy’s prerogatives aside—of any actual officials or magistrates, though it is difficult to imagine the collective performance of many of what were doubtless collective responsibilities.

The most concrete example of Mecca’s governance in pre-Islamic days is the dar al-nadwa or council hall.56 It was at the same time Qusayy’s residence and the administrative center of the city, or if that is too grandiose a notion, it was the place where certain important tribal acts had necessarily to be performed: betrothals, circumcisions, declarations of war; on taxes or commerce in connection with this building in the shadow of the Ka’ba, there is not a word. It was here, certainly, that the shaykhs of the ruling houses of Mecca, the Abd Manaf, Makhzum, and Umayya, met and took common counsel, apparently only as the occasion arose. This would have been the site of the meetings of the mala’ or Grand Council, the only government body the Quran seems aware of.57 So the tradition suggests, but it is curious that at no
time during Muhammad’s career at Mecca, when there were frequent consultations on what to do with this newly declared prophet, were there any meetings of the dar al-nadwa, if it was an institution, or even in the dar al-nadwa, if it was only a place. The early Muslims may in fact have exaggerated the importance of the dar al-nadwa,58 but whatever the case, the rapid political evolution of the Islamic commonwealth, which unfolded, moreover, at Medina rather than Mecca, soon rendered the dar al-nadwa otiose. The building was later the private and obviously the secular property of one Hakim ibn Hizam, who eventually sold it to the Caliph Mu‘awiya.59

THE SONS OF QUSAYY

After the death of Qusayy his sons assumed his authority over the people and marked out Mecca in quarters, after he had allotted space there for his own tribe. They allotted quarters among their people and among other allies, and sold them. The Quraysh took part in this without discord or dispute. (Ibn Ishaq 1955, p. 56)

At that point, after living space—the “quarters” of the text is obviously anachronistic—had been allocated to the various tribal units of the newly sedentarized Quraysh, the problem anticipated in Ibn Ishaq’s account of the Qusayy’s disposition of his powers occurred: Abd al-Dar was deprived of his offices by his nephews, Abd Shams, Hashim, Muttailib, and Nawfal, the sons of Abd Manaf, who “considered that they had a better right to them because of their superiority and their position among the people.” The move created an even deeper rift among the Quraysh: some of the tribes sided with the Banu Abd Manaf and other with the Banu Abd al-Dar. Both sides collected their allies at the Ka‘ba and swore oaths of solidarity and allegiance:

The Banu Abd Manaf brought out a bowl full of scent (they assert that some women of the tribe brought it out to them) and they put it for their allies in the shrine (masjid) next to the Ka‘ba; then they dipped their hands into it and they and their allies took a solemn oath. Then they rubbed their hands on the Ka‘ba strengthening the solemnity of the oath. For this reason they were called the “Scented Ones.” The other side took a similar oath at the Ka‘ba and were called the “Confederates.” . . .

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When the people had thus decided upon war, suddenly they demanded peace on the condition that the Banu Abd Manaf should be given the rights of watering the pilgrims and collecting the tax; and that access to the Ka‘ba, the standard of war and the dar al-nadwa should belong to the Abd al-Dar as before. The arrangement commended itself to both sides and was carried out, and so war was prevented. This was the state of affairs until God brought Islam . . . (Ibid., p. 57)

Mecca, then, was the site of frequent tribal strife in the generations after Qusayy. It was not merely individuals who were struggling for power—the power most often symbolized by control of the religio-economic functions associated with the rituals of the Haram—but extended families, and particularly those associated with Abd al-Dar and Abd Manaf. The Abd al-Dar had been given extended privileges by Qusayy himself, but among his grandsons it was the four chiefs of Abd Manaf—Abd Shams, Hashim, Muttalib, and Nawfal—whose exploits fill the pages of the Arab historians; and one of them, Hashim, is signalled by all the sources as the second founder of the fortunes of the Quraysh.