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ANCIENT CARTOGRAPHY AND THE HISTORICAL IDENTITY OF MAKKAH: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF DAN GIBSON'S CLAIMS

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Abstract
The historical identity and antiquity of Makkah have become central issues in contemporary revisionist scholarship on the origins of Islam. Among the most influential proponents of this approach, Dan Gibson argues that Petra, rather than Makkah, was the original sacred city of Islam and that Makkah did not emerge as an inhabited and religiously significant centre until the late first Islamic century. His reconstruction relies primarily on the alleged absence of Makkah from two ancient cartographic sources: Ptolemy's Geographia and the Madaba Mosaic Map. This article critically evaluates the historical and methodological validity of this argument through a contextual analysis of these two maps and the wider body of relevant historical evidence. The study demonstrates that Ptolemy's geographical account is characterised by substantial cartographic inaccuracies arising from methodological limitations, reliance on second-hand information, and systematic errors in the calculation of latitude and longitude. It further argues that the geographical discrepancy between Makoraba and present-day Makkah cannot reasonably be regarded as evidence against their identification. Likewise, the Madaba Map is shown to be a regional representation of the Holy Land and its surrounding biblical landscape rather than a comprehensive map of the Arabian Peninsula. Consequently, the omission of Makkah from this map carries no historical or methodological significance. The article also examines references to Makkah preserved in Greco-Roman, Assyrian, and Egyptian literary traditions and identifies significant internal inconsistencies within Gibson's own reconstruction, particularly concerning the alleged transfer of the Kaʿbah from Petra to Makkah. The study concludes that Gibson's thesis is founded upon a selective interpretation of cartographic evidence, methodological weaknesses, and internally inconsistent arguments. When the available cartographic, literary, and historical evidence is examined within its proper historical context, it does not support the claim that Makkah was absent or historically insignificant before the ninth century CE. Instead, the cumulative evidence strongly supports the historical antiquity and enduring religious significance of Makkah in early Islamic history.

Keywords: *Makkah, Petra, Ancient Cartography, Dan Gibson, Revisionist Scholarship.*

1. Introduction

The historical status of Makkah in early Islamic history has become a significant subject of scholarly debate among Orientalists and revisionist historians. Rather than relying on the traditional Islamic sources, a number of Western scholars have attempted to reconstruct the

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origins of Islam through ancient maps, archaeological evidence, and geographical data. Among the most prominent proponents of this revisionist approach is Dan Gibson, who argues that Petra, rather than Makkah, was the original sacred city of Islam, and that Makkah was neither a prominent nor an inhabited city during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), but emerged only in a later period. To substantiate this claim, he primarily relies on the alleged absence of Makkah from ancient maps, particularly Ptolemy's Map and the Madaba Map.

A well-established principle of historical methodology holds that the silence of one or two sources cannot, by itself, constitute conclusive evidence for the non-existence of a historical reality, especially when those sources differ in their purpose, geographical scope, and historical context. Moreover, drawing far-reaching historical conclusions while overlooking the limitations, inaccuracies, and intended functions of ancient cartographic materials is inconsistent with the accepted standards of critical historical inquiry.

This article offers a critical assessment of Dan Gibson's argument concerning the alleged absence of Makkah from ancient maps. It examines the historical background, geographical scope, and scholarly value of Ptolemy's and the Madaba maps and, in light of contemporary academic research, demonstrates that these cartographic sources do not provide sufficient grounds to deny the historical existence of Makkah. Rather than advancing a purely confessional defence, this study seeks to evaluate Gibson's claims through a balanced and evidence-based analysis grounded in the principles of historical research and critical scholarship.

2. Dan Gibson's Argument

Dan Gibson argues that Makkah is, in fact, a relatively recent city and that it did not exist during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). According to him, the area where present-day Makkah is located was merely an uninhabited and barren valley in the seventh century CE. He further contends that the settlement of Makkah began to emerge only toward the end of the first Islamic century and gradually developed into the sacred city of Islam. Gibson repeatedly advances this thesis throughout his writings, presenting it as one of the principal arguments in support of his broader claim that Petra, rather than Makkah, was the original sacred city of Islam.

To support his position, Gibson maintains that no map produced before the ninth century CE (third century AH) contains any reference to Makkah. He acknowledges that not every location appears on every ancient map; nevertheless, he argues that the absence of a city as religiously and commercially significant as Makkah is both striking and historically problematic. Had Makkah been omitted from only a single map, such an omission might reasonably be attributed to oversight or coincidence. However, Gibson contends that its consistent absence from all surviving ancient maps raises serious doubts regarding the city's antiquity.

Gibson bases this argument primarily on two ancient maps: Ptolemy's Map, dating from the second century CE, and the Madaba Map, dating from the sixth century CE. With regard to Ptolemy's map, he acknowledges the presence of a place identified as "Makoraba," which many Muslim scholars associate with Makkah. He rejects this identification, arguing that the geographical position assigned to Makoraba by Ptolemy lies at a considerable distance from the location of present-day Makkah, making the two sites geographically incompatible.

Turning to the Madaba Map, Gibson argues that it likewise contains no reference to Makkah. He notes that although the original mosaic was considerably larger, only approximately twenty-five square metres of it have survived. He further claims that, following the alleged relocation of the Ka'bah from Petra to present-day Makkah toward the end of the first Islamic

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century, certain zealous Muslims deliberately erased Petra, Damascus, and several other important locations from the map in an act of religious and political revision.

On the basis of these two ancient maps, Gibson concludes that the absence of Makkah from the available cartographic record constitutes compelling evidence that the city did not exist as a recognised, inhabited, or historically significant settlement during the early Islamic period.[i]

3. Critical Evaluation of Dan Gibson's Argument

Although Dan Gibson advances remarkably broad claims, the evidence upon which he relies is limited to only two maps: Ptolemy's Map and the Madaba Map. His entire argument is constructed on the basis of these two cartographic sources, as he presents no other independent evidence to substantiate his claim.

3.1 Ptolemy's Map

Claudius Ptolemy (c. 100–170 CE), commonly known as Ptolemy, was a distinguished Greek astronomer, mathematician, and geographer of the second century CE. He lived in Alexandria, the foremost intellectual and cultural centre of Roman Egypt. Ptolemy's scholarly contributions exerted a profound influence on the development of astronomy and geography for many centuries. Among his most celebrated works are the Almagest, devoted to astronomy, and the Geographia, his monumental treatise on geography.

Ptolemy's Geographia is widely regarded as one of the earliest and most influential works in the history of geographical science. Originally composed in Greek, it was later translated into Arabic, reportedly under the patronage of the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun by the eminent Muslim scholar Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī. In this work, Ptolemy attempted to map and describe the known world of his time. Spanning eight volumes, the Geographia contains detailed information on thousands of geographical features, including cities, mountains, rivers, islands, canals, and springs. It records more than four thousand locations, among them numerous sites in the Arabian Peninsula. Ptolemy further divided Arabia into three geographical regions: Arabia Petraea, Arabia Deserta, and Arabia Felix.

Referring to Ptolemy's map, Dan Gibson argues that the absence of Makkah demonstrates that the city did not exist at that time. He further contends that although Ptolemy's map includes a place identified as "Makoraba," and many Muslim scholars identify this location with Makkah, such an identification is mistaken. According to Gibson, the geographical position assigned to Makoraba by Ptolemy differs significantly from that of present-day Makkah, rendering the two locations incompatible.

It is true that the geographical location of present-day Makkah does not precisely correspond to that of Makoraba as depicted in Ptolemy's map. However, this observation cannot be considered in isolation. The discrepancy is not unique to Makkah; rather, numerous locations throughout Arabia are similarly misplaced in Ptolemy's geographical account. Indeed, many of the Arabian sites identified by Ptolemy differ substantially from their actual geographical locations. Nevertheless, Gibson overlooks these broader inconsistencies while selectively relying on the discrepancy concerning Makoraba in an attempt to substantiate his hypothesis.

The principal reason for these discrepancies is that Ptolemy never personally visited Arabia. Alexandria, where he resided, served as a major commercial hub frequented by Arabian merchants and caravans. Consequently, his geographical description of Arabia was compiled largely from second-hand reports supplied by traders rather than from direct observation or systematic field investigation.

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For this reason, Ptolemy's geographical account of Arabia must be approached with caution. In the absence of first-hand observation, the reliability of geographical information is inevitably diminished. This difficulty was particularly acute in the case of Arabia, where much of the population followed a nomadic way of life, making the precise identification and localisation of settlements inherently problematic. Moreover, the transmission of geographical information from Arabic into Greek introduced additional sources of error, including semantic shifts, phonetic alterations, the limited geographical knowledge of merchants, and reliance upon oral reports.[ii] Collectively, these factors rendered not only the geographical positions of many places uncertain but also the identification of their names open to considerable doubt.

Even the distinguished historian J. B. Bury described Ptolemy's geographical account of Arabia as a compilation of imaginary and artificial place names.[iii] By contrast, the German Orientalist Aloys Sprenger, in his 1875 work The Ancient Geography of Arabia, sought to demonstrate the geographical reliability of Ptolemy's place names and to establish plausible identifications for the locations mentioned in the Geographia. However, this attempt was critically evaluated by Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī, who observed that, with the exception of a few names, the proposed identifications of the remaining localities are largely speculative and highly conjectural.[iv]

Furthermore, when the names of various Arabian localities were transliterated from Arabic into Greek, they underwent such substantial phonetic and linguistic transformations that establishing their correspondence with the original Arabic names became exceedingly difficult. The renowned fourth-century AH Muslim geographer Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī (d. 346 AH) drew attention to this problem, noting that the Greek place names recorded in Ptolemy's Geographia are extremely difficult to identify and interpret.[v] A similar observation was made by the eminent seventh-century AH geographer Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626 AH), who remarked that most of the localities mentioned by Ptolemy were unfamiliar to him and beyond his ability to identify, since the passage of time had obliterated their traces and rendered them completely unrecognisable.[vi]

In fact, Ptolemy's geographical work contains numerous inaccuracies, a fact acknowledged not only by the overwhelming majority of modern scholars but also by Dan Gibson himself.[vii] Consequently, most researchers agree that the discrepancies between the locations recorded by Ptolemy and their present-day geographical positions are primarily attributable to these inherent inaccuracies. Some of the most significant of these errors are discussed below.[viii]

1. An Erroneous Estimate of the Earth's Circumference

Ptolemy estimated the Earth's circumference to be approximately 28,985 kilometres, whereas modern scientific measurements place it at 40,075 kilometres. His estimate underestimated the Earth's actual circumference by nearly 28 percent, a discrepancy that inevitably affected the accuracy of his geographical calculations and resulted in erroneous coordinates for the locations recorded in his work.

2. Fundamental Errors in the Determination of Latitude and Longitude

Ptolemy committed a number of significant errors in determining latitude and longitude. He adopted the Fortunate Islands (generally identified with the modern Canary Islands) as the

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Prime Meridian. However, the position he assigned to these islands was itself several degrees east of their actual location. Consequently, the longitudes of all the places recorded in his Geographia were systematically overestimated, causing the eastern regions of the known world to be depicted considerably farther west than their true geographical positions.

Likewise, Ptolemy misplaced the Equator too far to the north in his calculations of latitude. As a result, the latitudes of several regions—including Constantinople, Egypt, and parts of Asia—were inaccurately calculated. Similarly, portions of northern Europe and Asia were represented much farther north than they actually are, a depiction clearly inconsistent with geographical reality.

3. Exaggeration and Underestimation of Regional Dimensions

Ptolemy's maps frequently portray certain regions as either disproportionately large or considerably smaller than their actual size. For example, Sri Lanka, referred to by Ptolemy as Taprobane, is depicted many times larger than its true dimensions, whereas the southern part of Africa is represented as remarkably small and flattened. By contrast, well-known regions such as Rome, Egypt, and Italy are portrayed with greater precision and spatial prominence, largely because more reliable geographical information concerning these areas was available to him.

4. Inclusion of Imaginary and Unverified Geographical Features

Ptolemy's Geographia also incorporates a number of details derived from unverified and unreliable sources. For instance, he refers to rivers in the Arabian Peninsula that, in reality, never existed. This is only one example among many inaccuracies that occur throughout his geographical work.

In view of these well-established deficiencies in Ptolemy's geographical system, it is hardly surprising that a number of the locations identified in his Geographia do not correspond to their actual geographical positions. It is for this reason that many scholars have attributed the discrepancy between Makoraba, as depicted in Ptolemy's map, and the location of present-day Makkah to the inherent inaccuracies of Ptolemy's cartography rather than to the non-existence of the city itself.[ix] Accordingly, Dan Gibson's assertion that present-day Makkah is absent from ancient literature, and particularly from Ptolemy's Map, is neither historically convincing nor methodologically sustainable.

4. References to Makkah in Ancient Literary Sources

According to many scholars, Makkah is explicitly or implicitly referred to in a number of ancient literary sources. They maintain that the place designated as "Mochorba" in the Roman geographer Pliny the Elder's (d. 79 CE) renowned work Natural History is, in fact, present-day Makkah. Likewise, several names occurring in Assyrian records, Egyptian inscriptions, and other ancient literary sources—including Maketa, Makatu, Maka, and Maga—have also been identified with Makkah. These references are regarded by many scholars as further corroborating the historical antiquity and enduring significance of this sacred city.[x]

5. The Madaba Map

Madaba is an ancient and historically significant city in present-day Jordan, situated approximately 30 kilometres southwest of Amman, the country's capital. Its most celebrated landmark is the Church of Saint George, whose floor preserves an extraordinary Byzantine mosaic map created between 542 and 570 CE by skilled artisans using coloured stone tesserae. Composed of approximately two million individual mosaic pieces, this remarkable work is not only an outstanding masterpiece of Byzantine art but also an invaluable repository of

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geographical, historical, and religious information. Widely known as the Madaba Map or the Madaba Mosaic Map, it is regarded as the oldest surviving cartographic representation of Palestine and the Near East and is one of the most significant geographical artefacts of the early Christian period. Its principal focus is the depiction of biblical sites, making it an invaluable historical and religious document.

Originally, the Madaba Map covered an area exceeding one thousand square feet. However, a substantial portion of the mosaic has been lost over time, and only about one-third of the original map survives today. The extant section depicts the Holy Land and its adjoining regions, extending from Beirut in the north to the Sinai Desert in the south, from Jordan in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west.

The primary purpose of the map was to guide Christian pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem and other sacred sites. It identifies more than 150 locations, including Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jericho, the Dead Sea, the River Jordan, Jacob's Well, the Mediterranean Sea, Mount Sinai, the Nile River, Karak, Hebron, Nablus, Gaza, Galilee, Tiberias, and numerous other places of biblical significance. In both content and structure, the Madaba Map closely resembles the celebrated Onomasticon of Eusebius of Caesarea, a gazetteer of biblical places composed in Greek around 395 CE and subsequently translated into Latin by Jerome around 490 CE.

We may now turn to Dan Gibson's contention that the Madaba Map contains no reference to Makkah.

As is characteristic of Gibson's methodology, he once again presents a selective reading of the available evidence. As noted above, the Madaba Map was specifically designed to depict the Holy Land and the biblical sites situated within and around it. Its geographical scope is confined to the region extending from Beirut in the north to the Sinai Desert in the south, from Jordan in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. It does not include other parts of the world, particularly Central and Southern Arabia. Since Makkah lies in Central Arabia, its absence from the Madaba Map cannot reasonably be regarded as evidence for the city's non-existence. A location that lies entirely outside the geographical scope of a map cannot be expected to appear on it.

At this point, Gibson advances a highly speculative and unsubstantiated allegation against the Muslims. He claims that, following the alleged transfer of the Kaʿbah from Petra to present-day Makkah at the end of the first Islamic century, the Umayyad Caliph Yazīd II ordered zealous Muslims, acting out of revenge, to erase Petra, Damascus, and several other important cities from the map.[xi]

This assertion, however, exposes a fundamental contradiction within Gibson's own thesis. On the one hand, he argues that Petra served as the qiblah during the Umayyad period and that the ʿAbbāsids subsequently transferred the qiblah to Makkah. According to this reconstruction, the Umayyads were proponents of Petra, whereas the ʿAbbāsids promoted Makkah. On the other hand, he simultaneously claims that the Umayyads themselves deliberately removed Petra and other Syrian cities from the map.

This raises an obvious question: if Petra truly functioned as the Umayyads' qiblah, why would they intentionally erase their own sacred centre from the map? Likewise, why would they remove cities under their own political authority, such as Petra and Damascus? If their alleged motive was retaliation against the ʿAbbāsids, one would expect them to target places associated with the ʿAbbāsids rather than cities identified with their own rule.

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Gibson's arguments therefore undermine one another. His later assertions directly contradict his earlier claims, revealing significant internal inconsistencies that substantially weaken the credibility of his overall hypothesis. Rather than constituting a coherent historical reconstruction, his theory rests upon mutually incompatible propositions that fail to withstand critical historical scrutiny.

6. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that Dan Gibson's claim regarding the non-existence of Makkah in the early Islamic period cannot be sustained on historical or methodological grounds. His argument rests almost exclusively on the absence of Makkah from two ancient cartographic sources—Ptolemy's Map and the Madaba Map—while overlooking the inherent limitations, inaccuracies, geographical scope, and historical purpose of these maps. The silence of a limited number of cartographic sources cannot, in itself, constitute conclusive evidence for the non-existence of a historically attested city. A critical examination of Ptolemy's Geographia reveals that its geographical data are affected by numerous inaccuracies arising from methodological limitations, reliance on second-hand information, and errors in the calculation of latitude and longitude. Consequently, the discrepancy between the location of Makoraba and present-day Makkah cannot reasonably be regarded as proof that the two refer to different places. Likewise, the Madaba Map was never intended to depict the entire Arabian Peninsula; rather, its geographical scope was confined to the Holy Land and neighbouring biblical regions. The omission of Makkah from a map whose geographical coverage does not extend to Central Arabia is therefore historically insignificant and methodologically incapable of supporting Gibson's conclusion. Furthermore, the existence of references to Makkah in a variety of ancient literary traditions—including Greco-Roman, Assyrian, and Egyptian sources—provides additional evidence that the city was known long before the rise of Islam. These literary testimonies, when considered alongside the acknowledged deficiencies of the ancient maps, substantially weaken the evidential basis of Gibson's reconstruction. Equally significant are the internal inconsistencies within Gibson's own hypothesis. His explanation of the alleged transfer of the Kaʿbah from Petra to Makkah and his claim that the Umayyads deliberately erased Petra and other Syrian cities from the Madaba Map are mutually incompatible and unsupported by reliable historical evidence. Such contradictions considerably diminish the coherence and credibility of his broader revisionist thesis. In conclusion, the present study finds that the absence of Makkah from Ptolemy's and the Madaba maps does not constitute credible historical evidence for denying the antiquity or historical existence of Makkah. On the contrary, when these maps are examined within their proper historical, geographical, and methodological contexts, they fail to substantiate Dan Gibson's claims. The available cartographic, literary, and historical evidence collectively supports the conclusion that Gibson's reconstruction is based upon selective use of evidence, methodological weaknesses, and internally inconsistent arguments, and therefore cannot be regarded as a convincing explanation of the historical identity and antiquity of Makkah.

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