ARABIA WITHOUT SPICES

Arab tribe in southern Syria, we are hardly to take it that her commercial activities were radically different from those in which Khadija or Abü Sufyân had engaged. The sources, in other words, assume the Meccans to have traded directly with private customers in southern Syria, not to have handed over their wares to wholesalers in Gaza or Damascus. In short, Meccan trade is envisaged as an exchange of local goods. And this exchange is presented as having been conducted overwhelmingly within Byzantium and the Byzantine sphere of influence, not in the Sasanid empire.

As regards the second point, it is obvious that if the Meccans had been middlemen in a long-distance trade of the kind described in the secondary literature, there ought to have been some mention of them in the writings of their customers. Greek and Latin authors had, after all, written extensively about the south Arabsians who supplied them with aromatics in the past, offering information about their cities, tribes, political organization, and caravan trade; and in the sixth century they similarly wrote about Ethiopia and Adulis. The political and ecclesiastical importance of Arabia in the sixth century was such that considerable attention was paid to Arabian affairs, too; but of Quraysh and their trading center there is no mention at all, be it in the Greek, Latin, Syriac, Aramaic, Coptic, or other literature composed outside Arabia before the conquests.

This silence is striking and significant. It is so striking that attempts have been made to remedy it. Thus we are told that Quraysh are indi-
rectly attested in Pliny's *Dabanggoris regio*, that Ptolemy mentions Mecca under the name of Macoraba, a name supposed also to be reflected in Pliny's *portus Macoraba*, identified as Jeddah (sic); and that Ammianus Marcellinus likewise mentions Mecca, this time under the name

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3 Tabari, *Tabārī* , II, 3 pp. 1766 f. Compare the similar story told ibid. about 'Uthma b. Abū Sufiya, who had engaged in trade as governor of the tribe of Khirāna.

4 Not only that the fact that Gaza was a port goes unmentioned in the traditions on Meccan trade.


6 Cf. A. Grobmann, "Macoraba," with reference to Ptolemy, *Geography*, vi, 7, 32 and earlier literature. This identification has been accepted by *El*, i.e. Ka'ba.

7 Thus Grobmann, "Macoraba," citing Glaser with reference to Pliny, *Natural History*, vi, 150. Von Wissmann, on the other hand, locates *portus Macoraba* opposite the island of Na'mān in the northern end of the Red Sea and finds Jeddah in Ptolemy's *Arga Kômè* (H. von Wissmann, "Madīma." col. 330; id., "Macoraba").
of Hierapolis. All these suggestions should be dismissed out of hand. *Dahangoris regio* cannot be construed as *Dhā Bani Quraysh*, "the (area) pertaining to Bani Quraysh," as von Wissmann would have it. For one thing, such a construction would be South Arabian rather than Arabic, the language one would have expected to be reflected here. For another, the expression “Bani Quraysh” is impossible, Quraysh being no patronymic as a descent group Quraysh were Bani Fihir. But above all, Pliny locates the region in question in southeast Arabia, more precisely somewhere between Ommania and the Ḥḍramawt, and the same is true of *partus Macborae*, mentioned in the same passage. That places explicitly identified as southeast Arabian should have been misconstrued as Qurashi domains says much about the intoxicating effect of Mecca on the source-critical faculties of otherwise sober scholars. So does the identification of Ptolemy’s Macoraba with Mecca, which has gained almost universal acceptance. It was first made on the ground that the names were vaguely similar and the location vaguely right, Macoraba being assumed to reproduce a name such as Makka-Rabba, “Great Mecca.” But this is a most implausible construction, which has since been replaced by *makrub* or *mikrāb*, meaning temple. But in the first place the root *krb* does not denote holiness in Arabic, as opposed to South Arabian, so that once again the language reflected would not be the one expected. In the second place, a name composed of the consonants *mkk* cannot be derived from the root *krb*. It follows that Ptolemy would be referring to a sanc-

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1 Grohmann, “Makoraba,” with reference to Ammianus Marcellinus, xxii. 6. 47.
2 In Arabic, of course, such a construction would mean the owner of the one endowed with B. Quraysh. It is not impossible that South Arabian (or for that matter Aramaic) was the *lingua franca* of the area at the time, but *lingua franca* do not normally affect place names.
3 Pliny starts VI. 147, by saying that “we will now describe the coast from Charax onwards” and duly proceeds via Gerrha to Ommania and other ports on the Persian Gulf, which he reaches in VI. 149, arriving in south Arabia with its Charramites and Sabean frankincense in VI. 154. How then could VI. 150 refer to the coast near Mecca?
4 Not that von Wissmann was noted for his sobriety, but Grohmann’s identifications are no souder, and there are examples of even wilder proposals by earlier scholars in his “Makoraba.”
5 It was justified with reference to names such as Rabbah-Mosab or Rabbab-Annab (cf. Grohmann, “Makoraba”). But the parallel is far from such as these names are constructed, whereas Makka-Rabba is not. It would at all events have to be Makka al-rabba, but *rabb* is not used as an adjective in Arabic, nor is Mecca known as *Makka al-kubra*.
6 It is hard to share Robinson’s belief that the name of Mecca could be derived from the South Arabian form behind Macoraba, “perhaps by abbreviation” (Mohammed, pp. 38 f.).
tuary town which was not called Mecca. Why then identify the two? Rescue attempts such as mikrāb Makka, "the sanctuary of Mecca," are no better than Makka-Rabba, for all that we clearly need some sort of addition to account for the feminine form reflected in the Greek. The plain truth is that the name of Macoraba has nothing to do with that of Mecca, and that the location indicated by Ptolemy for Macoraba in no way dictates identification of the two. If Macoraba was located in an Arabic-speaking environment, its name is more likely to reflect an Arabic form such as *Maqarraba than a derivation from South Arabian krb; if it was located among speakers of South Arabian, it cannot have been the city of interest to us; and if Ptolemy mentions Mecca at all, he calls it Moka, a town in Arabia Petraea. Naturally, there is no Mecca in Ammianus Marcellinus.

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14. Cf. von Wissmann, "Makoraba." A name such as mikrāb Makka would presumably be rendered in Greek with a final k rather than h; it is unlikely that Macoraba should reproduce mikrāb with just a feminine ending taken from Makka. Buhl, who rightly notes that the name of Mecca cannot be derived from the Semitic word behind Macoraba, refers to Mecca's alternative name of Balqa, but this clearly does not help (F. Buhl, *Das Leben Muhammed*, p. 107).
15. As von Wissmann asserts in his "Makoraba," Ptolemy locates Lathrippa at longitude 71, and this is accepted by von Wissmann as the longitude for Yathrib (cf. his Ptolemaic map of northern Arabia in "Madaniy", col. 5). But Macoraba is located at longitude 73, or, in other words, two degrees further east, giving it a location somewhere in the middle of Arabia instead of near the coast (cf. the Ptolemaic map after Sprenger, Stevenson, and von Wissmann in Groom, *Frankincense*, p. 26, where this location is duly reproduced; and compare the actual relationship between Mecca and Medina at p. 192). Naturally, Pliny's longitudes and latitudes are inexact, but if they are inexact, one cannot identify places on the basis of them alone.
17. Ptolemy, *Geography*, v. 17: 5 (this was drawn to my attention by M. A. Cook).
18. Cf. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum Gestarum Libri*, xxiii. 6: 47. Ammianus here lists seven *civitates caesare* of Arabia Felix, that is, Geopolis, another five cities, plus Dioscuris (presumably oocra). Grohmann noted that the five cities in question recur as metropoleis in Ptolemy, where they are listed in the same order and followed by *Dioskiridou polis*, 106 (*Geographia*, vi. 7: 38-45). This suggested to him that Ammianus and Ptolemy were using the same list and that Ammianus' Geopolis ought to be mentioned in Ptolemy, 110. He proceeded to find it there in the form of Makoraba, arguing that a variant reading of Geopolis is Hierapolis, or, in other words, that Ammianus translated the name of the sanctuary town where Ptolemy merely transcribed it (Grohmann, "Makoraba"). This conjecture falls on the fact that Ptolemy mentions Geopolis under that very name (*Gata polis*, vi. 7: 29). Hierapolis is thus a mistaken reading; and given that Makoraba is unlikely to have been Meca, a reference to it would not have been a reference to Mecca, anyway.
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