

## Chapter 1: Makka in the Sixth Century

Makka in the sixth century AD. was an important emporium in Arabia. It was at the crossroads of international commerce and trade. Cargoes coming from India such as spices, fruits, grain, ceramics and textiles, were unloaded at the ports of Yemen, and were carried from there, with the produce of Southern Arabia itself, such as coffee, medicinal herbs, aromatics, and perfumes, by camel caravans to Makka, and thence, to Syria and through Syria to the Mediterranean world.

Makka itself was the destination of many of the caravans of the "Incense Road" of Arabia and of the "Spice Road" of India. Other caravans passed through Makka and Yathrib on their way to various destinations in the north where they made a link-up with the caravans of the Silk Road of China.

The caravans coming from the north, also halted in Makka. They changed their camels and horses, replenished their supplies and then marched on to the ports in the south of the peninsula, on the Arabian Sea.

Makka was also a center for the exchange of goods and commodities, both for the sedentary and nomadic Arabian tribes; and it was a point of distribution of agricultural produce and manufactured goods to the hinterland of Hijaz. The tribesmen came from as far away as central Arabia and even eastern Arabia, to buy those goods which were not available in their territories. Most of this inter-tribal trade was carried on in Makka by the barter system.

The Quraysh of Makka was the most important tribe of Western Arabia. All its members were merchants. By providing trans-shipment of silk from China, produce from East Africa and treasures from India – the Quraysh dominated trade between the civilizations of the East and those of the Mediterranean.

Clearly much of this trade was in luxury goods but ordinary goods were traded too, such as purple cloth, clothing, plain, embroidered or interwoven with gold, saffron, muslin, cloaks, blankets, sashes, fragrant ointments, wine and wheat.

In this manner, the production, sale, exchange and distribution of goods had made the Quraysh quite

rich. But there was one more thing to make them rich. Makka housed the Kaaba with its famous Black Stone. The Arabs came to Makka to perform pilgrimage at the Kaaba. For them, Makka held the same sanctity that Jerusalem did for the Jews and the Christians.

Kaaba was the pantheon of the idols of the various Arabian clans and tribes. The pilgrims brought rich and exotic offerings with them for the idols they worshipped. When the pilgrims left Makka to return to their homes, the priests of the pantheon appropriated all the offerings for themselves. The pilgrim traffic was a very lucrative source of revenue for the citizens of Makka.

If the Quraysh of Makka did not engage in trade for themselves, they would still become rich merely by providing the vast range of services, which they did, on a year-round basis, to the caravans – both northbound and southbound – and to the pilgrims. But many of them were enterprising merchants as noted before, and brought much wealth to Makka from the neighboring countries.

Though the merchants of Makka sent only one caravan to Syria and one to Yemen in the whole year, there were numerous other little caravans which plied between various points within the Arabian peninsula throughout the year. Most of them either originated in Makka or they passed through Makka. Therefore, the caravan traffic in Makka was quite brisk.

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The caravans varied in size. They ranged from "local" caravans of as few as ten camels to "international" caravans of as many as thousands of camels. The organization of caravans was a major industry in Arabia.

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