

Lecture 3:

Mecca and the Jahaliya

Previous lecture

- 2 dominant empires Byzantine and Sassanid
- A period of great political and religious tension
- A growing trend to think religion in terms of cultural and political identity
- Empires in constant war

Aim of Today's lecture:

To further our understanding of the historical context but at a local rather than regional scale

Arabia and Mecca

- Not isolated backwater
- Inhabitants often agents of Imperial ambitions
- Very active traders

- But inhabitants also not fully 'in the mix'
- Religious identity fluid
- Rebuffed Imperial attempts to align religious and political allegiance

Lecture structure: 3 parts

1. The geography and settlements of the region
2. The movements that brought ideas through the Peninsula
3. The city of Mecca itself (emphasis of lecture)

Geography and settlement of Arabia

- The Arabian peninsula is mostly desert but not only desert
- There are both settled and Bedouin communities
- Arabia has remarkable diversity and flexibility in regard to economy and settlement

Bedouin of Arabia

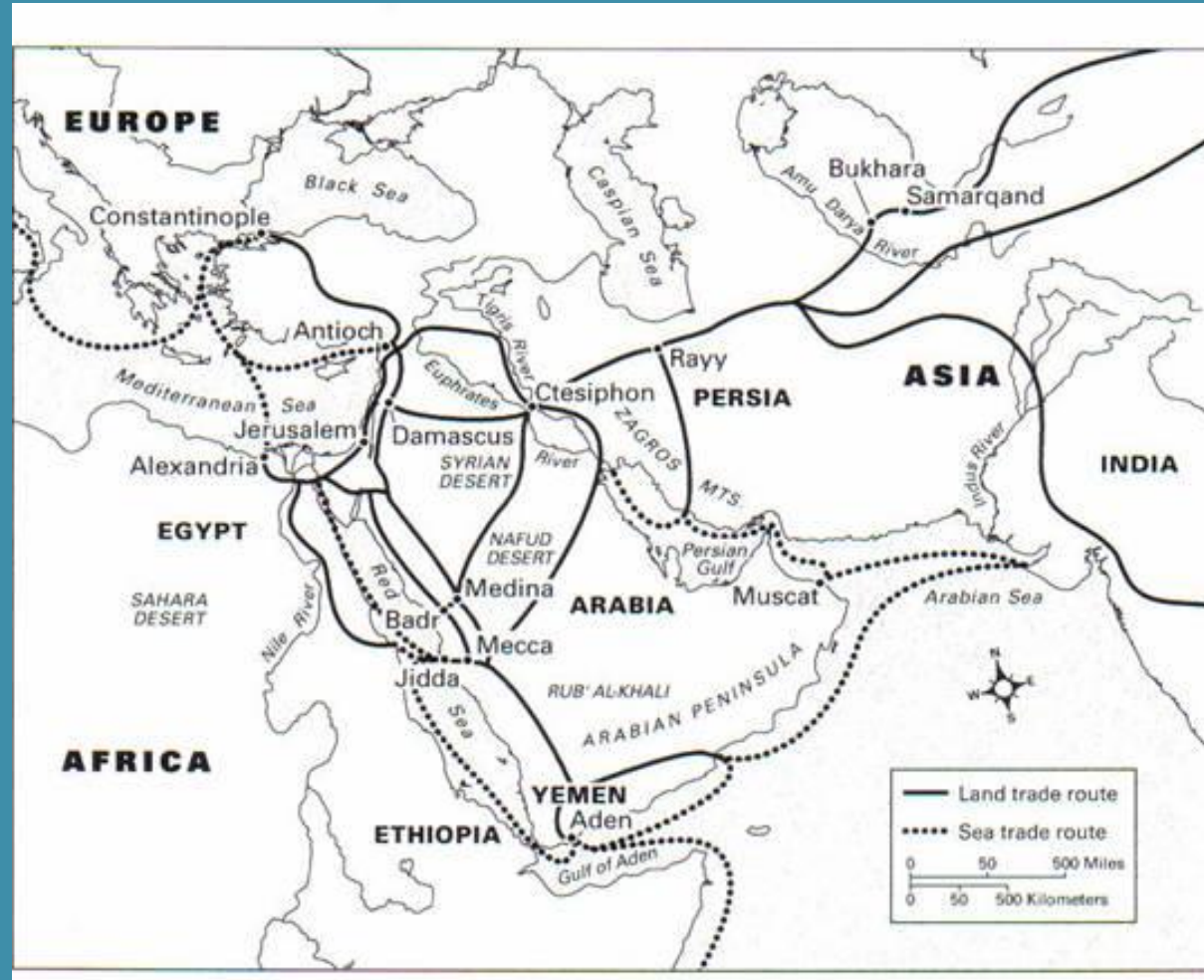
- small tribes
- No firm distinction between settled & nomadic life
- Nomads and cities symbiotic
- Neither economy reliable or predictable.



Tribal Map Pre-Islamic Arabia (source Wikipedia)

Movement and Trade

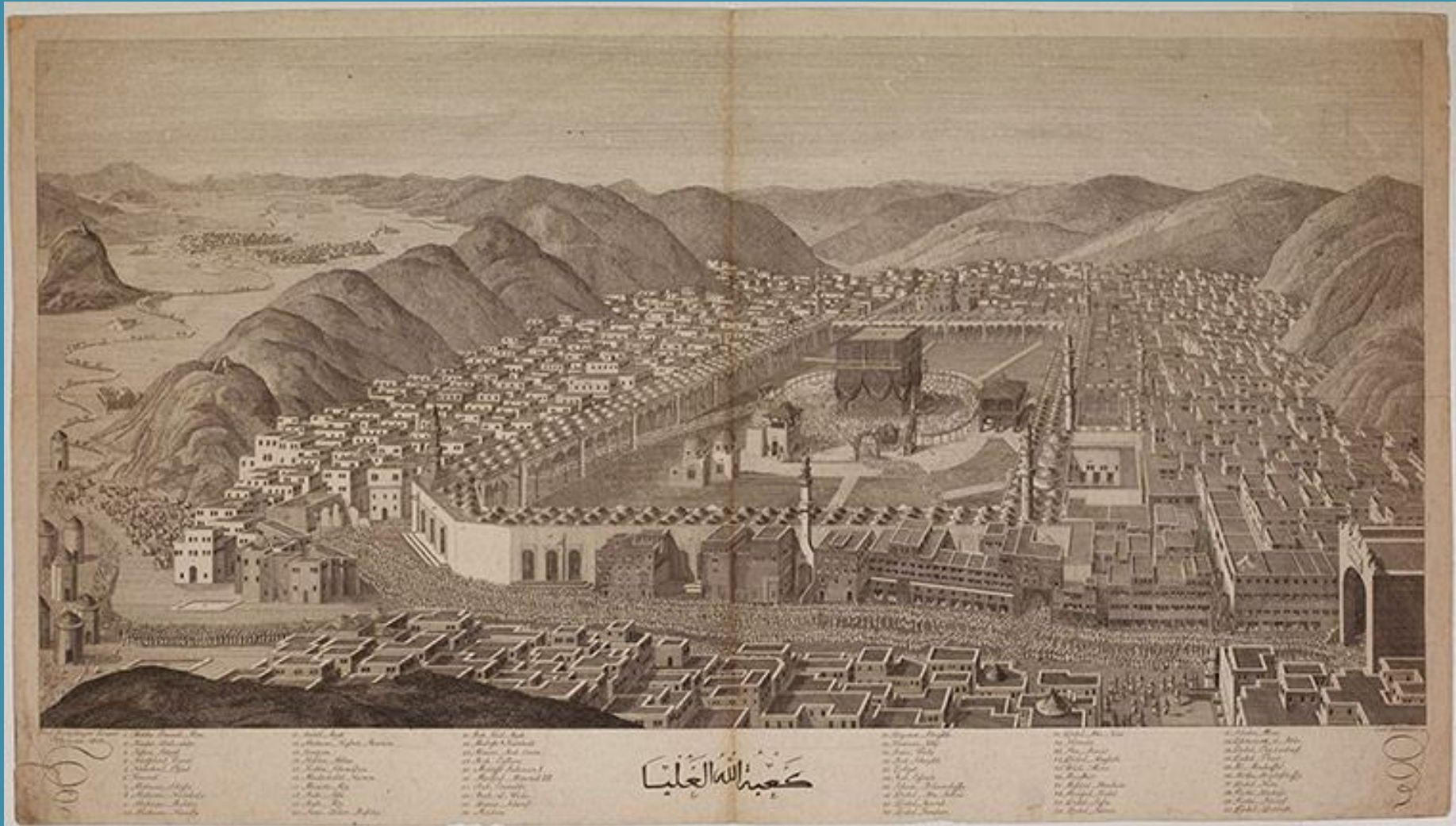
- Bedouin prolific traders
- Nomads contact with settled communities through trade
- Also contact with Roman forts



Jahaliya

- The period of ignorance
- Muslim historians present the Arabs as far removed from religious traditions
- Muhammad only brought monotheistic religion to Arabia

Mecca



The Quraysh

- Mecca an increasingly important trade post
- Bringing increased wealth into city
- Quraysh most successful traders and dominant political force in Mecca
- Lapidus: Quraysh the only integrative political forces in region

Arabia in regional context

- **Increasing imperial breakdown has several consequences in Arabia**
- Migration of Bedouin client tribes back to Arabia
- Increased pressure on limited resources
- Greater conflict, competition and unrest
- Also bring diverse religious and cosmological visions
- Quraysh dominant political force but operating in chaotic environment

Tribal Ethic

- Bedouin culture influenced by marginal existence
- Tribal modes of governance, economy and society ingrained into social structure
- Rules of collective living highly democratic and communitarian
- Food distributed, governance non-hierarchical, collective responsibility.
- Safety in numbers

Quraysh and social breakdown

- Quraysh break from communitarian ethic
- Widows and orphan no longer provided for
- Wealth hoarded rather than dispersed
- Creates growing resentment in Mecca

Religion and the city

- Prosperity of Quraysh draws attention to disparity between rich and poor
- Questions of social justice become relevant
- Islam emerges in market place
- Traditional values overtaken by market values

Religion often emerges in urban commercial contexts



Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple (El Greco)

Take Home 10