



Makkah around 630: an imaginative reconstruction of the early valley settlement; its exact street plan is unknown.

WESTERN ARABIA / A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME

Makkah

The valley that drew the world

Imagine approaching Makkah around the year 630. The morning sun has begun to touch the rugged hills of western Arabia. Between their stony shoulders, houses gather in the valley, and the Kaaba stands in an open space among them. There are no towering minarets or long, domed arcades yet. Those belong to chapters of the city's story still to come.



An imagined lane in Makkah around 630: modest homes beneath the bare hills. The exact buildings are reconstructed.

01 / ARRIVE IN THE VALLEY

This is a place whose importance reaches far beyond its size. For Muslims, the Kaaba is the sacred House towards which they turn in prayer, wherever they live. They worship Allah, not the building itself. Across the centuries, people will cross deserts and seas to reach this valley, carrying the hope of pilgrimage with them.

Our visit will travel through time as well as streets. We will look back to Makkah's beginnings, enter its later homes and markets, and follow the water that helped sustain its people. The city will grow around its sacred centre, shaped both by faith and by the everyday work of welcoming travellers.

A valley, a beginning

Makkah's story reaches back beyond the streets in our opening picture. In Islamic tradition, Hajar came to this valley with her infant son, Ismail. When their water ran out, she searched between the hills of Safa and Marwa. The account tells how Allah provided water at Zamzam, bringing relief to mother and child.

Pilgrims still walk between those two hills in a rite called sa'i. Their footsteps recall Hajar's search. A mother's struggle to find water for her child remains woven into the life of the city.

The Qur'an tells of the Prophet Ibrahim and his son Ismail raising the foundations of the Kaaba and praying that Allah would accept their work. For Muslims, this sacred place is bound to their devotion to one God.

Many centuries later, Makkah was the home of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Around 610, he received the first revelation of the Qur'an in the cave of Hira, in the rocky heights outside the city. His wife, Khadijah, comforted and supported him when he returned home.

His call to worship Allah alone met fierce opposition. In 622, he migrated to the oasis of Yathrib, later known as Madinah. This journey is called the Hijrah, meaning migration. It became the starting point of the Islamic calendar.

In 630, he returned to Makkah, and the idols around the Kaaba were removed. The sanctuary became a centre of Islamic worship. The low houses and bare hills had witnessed a change whose meaning would reach far beyond Arabia.

From this valley, a message travelled far beyond the surrounding hills.



The rocky setting near Hira, evoking the early seventh century. This landscape is an artistic reconstruction.



An imagined Makkan street around 1880: carved wooden windows overlook the everyday work of welcoming visitors.

A doorway for the traveller

Now let the centuries pass until we reach Makkah around 1880. In our imagined walk, a narrow lane opens between tall houses. Wooden window bays project above us, their carved screens catching the light. These screens, known locally as rawashin, help shade the rooms and give the people inside privacy while allowing air to pass.

At street level, picture a traveller pausing beside a basket of bread. A long journey may lie behind him, but arrival brings practical questions: where to sleep, how to find food, and whom to ask for help. A holy city must also be a place where daily life can continue.

Many Makkan families rented rooms, floors or entire houses to pilgrims. The same building could shelter a family's ordinary days and a visitor's extraordinary journey.

Hajj, the pilgrimage to Makkah at its appointed season, is a religious duty for Muslims who are able to undertake it. Its rites bring pilgrims to the Kaaba and to sacred places beyond the city. Reaching Makkah was therefore one part of a larger journey of worship.

Some travellers came in caravans, groups moving together across the land. Others arrived by sea at Jeddah, the nearby Red Sea port, before continuing inland. Their journeys connected Makkah with communities far away, in Africa, Asia and beyond.

Guides, food sellers and transport workers helped visitors find their way and meet their needs. Behind the great gathering of pilgrims lay countless smaller encounters. Imagine a door opening after a tiring day, or the welcome shade beneath a wooden window. Such ordinary comforts helped make a distant city feel less unfamiliar.

The pilgrimage filled the streets; the city's people helped make room for it.

A thread of water through the hills

Before we leave these streets, think of the water in a traveller's cup. In a dry valley, that small gift depends on much more than the vessel holding it. Families need water for drinking, cooking and washing; visiting pilgrims add to the need. Makkah's story is also the story of finding water and keeping it flowing.

Let us step back to the early centuries of Islam. Zubaydah, the wife of Harun al-Rashid, supported major works to supply water to pilgrims. Her husband was an Abbasid caliph: a ruler of the Muslim empire belonging to the Abbasid ruling family.

The waterworks associated with her name became known as Ayn Zubaydah. Channels carried water from sources beyond the city towards Makkah and the pilgrimage sites. Building and maintaining them required skill as well as money.

Imagine looking into a narrow channel where sunlight catches the moving water. Our illustration reconstructs how such a channel could work, rather than showing the exact plan of a particular ancient section. A gentle fall in its course allows gravity to draw water downhill. A smooth lining helps keep it from escaping into the ground.

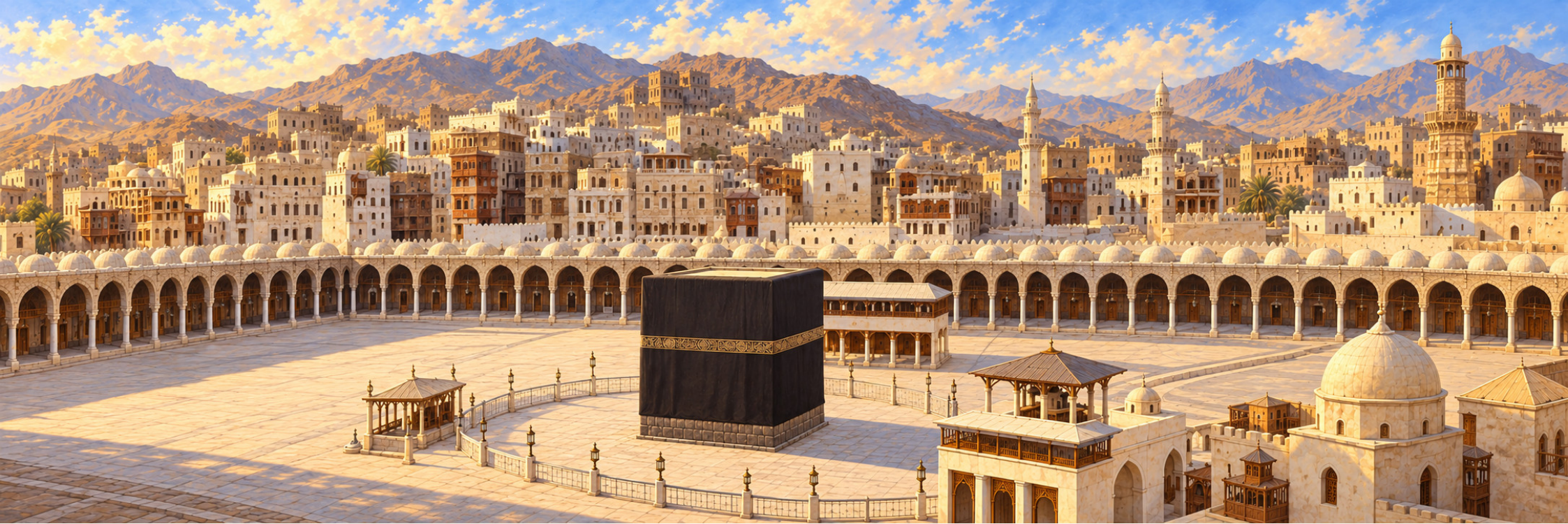
Keeping a supply working was a task for later generations too. Channels could be damaged or blocked, and low rainfall could interrupt the water. Repairs mattered as much as the first act of building. A charitable undertaking could serve people long after the person who supported it had died.

Zamzam, beside the Kaaba, holds its own sacred place in Makkah's history. Ayn Zubaydah was a separate water system. Together, their stories remind us how closely the city's spiritual life and its everyday needs have always been connected.

Sometimes care for a city takes the quiet form of water reaching a cup.



Around 900, imagined: a channel and basin explain the principle of Ayn Zubaydah's waterworks, not an exact surviving layout.



The sanctuary around 1880, interpreted from period photographs. The quiet courtyard is imagined.

05 / A CITY THROUGH CENTURIES

The city grows around its heart

Return now to Makkah around 1880. Compare this sanctuary with the open space in our first picture. Rows of arches surround the courtyard, and tall houses rise beyond them. The Grand Mosque had grown through many building campaigns as rulers and craftspeople made more room for worshippers.

Early Muslim leaders, including Umar and Uthman, enlarged the space around the Kaaba. Later generations added and renewed buildings; under Ottoman rule, domed arcades became part of the sanctuary's appearance. Yet the city was never finished. Each generation inherited both a sacred place and the responsibility of caring for it.



An imagined study of light and shade in an Ottoman-era colonnade around 1880; the precise bay arrangement is reconstructed.

Nineteenth-century photographs preserve glimpses of this older Makkah. Their roofs, windows and arcades help us imagine a city that later building projects would transform. Steamships were already changing the journeys of pilgrims arriving through Jeddah; in the twentieth century, air travel would bring another great change.

Today, the city and mosque are far larger than those pictured here. But the direction of prayer remains the same. As we leave our imagined walk, remember the valley through its small acts of care as well as its sacred centre: a room made ready, a journey shared, a channel repaired, and water offered to someone far from home.

Around a sacred centre, generations built a city of journeys and welcome.