

Reassessing Dan Gibson's Demographic and Commercial Arguments for Petra: A Critical Study of Early Arabic Historical Sources

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Abstract

This article critically examines one of the principal arguments advanced by Dan Gibson in support of his revisionist hypothesis that Petra, rather than Makkah, was the original sacred city of Islam. Gibson argues that the military and commercial activities attributed to the Quraysh in the early Islamic sources presuppose a large urban center with substantial demographic and economic capacity, a description which, in his view, cannot correspond to present-day Makkah. Employing a qualitative historical-analytical methodology, this study re-examines the primary Arabic historical sources upon which Gibson relies, particularly Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī, alongside classical sīrah literature and relevant geographical evidence. The analysis identifies a series of methodological shortcomings in Gibson's treatment of the evidence, including inaccurate citation of primary sources, reliance on selective quotations, misinterpretation of historical reports, and insufficient engagement with the original Arabic texts. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that several historical incidents cited by Gibson, when read in their full textual and geographical context, directly contradict his reconstruction by confirming the traditional trade routes between Makkah, Madinah, and Syria. It also shows that the numerical strength of the armies cited by Gibson largely reflects tribal coalitions rather than the population of Makkah itself, while the value of Quraysh commercial caravans cannot be used as a reliable indicator of urban population size. The article concludes that Gibson's demographic and commercial argument rests upon flawed historical interpretation and does not provide convincing evidence against the traditional identification of Makkah as the original sacred center of Islam. More broadly, the study highlights the necessity of contextual reading, accurate source criticism, and direct engagement with primary Arabic sources in reconstructing early Islamic history.

Keywords: Dan Gibson, Makkah, Petra, Revisionism, Early Islamic History, Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī, Quraysh

Introduction

According to the Islamic tradition, Makkah is the holiest city in Islam. It is the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), where he spent more than fifty years of his life and from where the message of Islam first emerged. The Ka'bah, situated in Makkah, serves as the Qiblah (direction of prayer) for Muslims across the world and symbolizes the religious unity of the

Muslim community. Furthermore, the sacred rituals of Hajj and Umrah are intrinsically associated with this city. Consequently, Makkah has always occupied a central religious, historical, and civilizational position in the Islamic tradition.

However, during the twentieth century, a group of Orientalist scholars associated with the Revisionist school of thought challenged the traditional Muslim narrative regarding the origins of Islam. These scholars argued that the early history of Islam should be reconstructed in light of historical, geographical, archaeological, and epigraphic evidence. According to their perspective, the available evidence does not support the claim that Makkah was the original religious and political center of early Islam. Instead, they contend that Islam originated somewhere in northern Arabia rather than in the Hijaz.

Among the leading proponents of this Revisionist approach is Dan Gibson, who presented this hypothesis in a more systematic and comprehensive manner. Gibson argues that the original sacred city of Islam was not Makkah but Petra. He further claims that several sacred sites traditionally associated with Makkah—such as the Cave of Hira, the Well of Zamzam, and other significant locations—were, in fact, situated in Petra and were only later transferred to Makkah in the Islamic historical tradition. He also maintains that the absence of Makkah from ancient geographical maps and certain historical records suggests that the present-day city of Makkah was established only toward the end of the first Islamic century and, therefore, could not have been the original center of Islam.

Furthermore, Gibson argues that the Qur'anic term Bakkah refers not to present-day Makkah but to Petra. He also asserts that the sacred city described in the early Islamic sources functioned as a major commercial center through which large trading caravans regularly passed. According to him, the geographical location and environmental conditions of present-day Makkah make it highly unlikely that it could have served as such an important commercial hub. On this basis, he concludes that the sacred city mentioned in the Qur'an and early Islamic sources cannot be identified with present-day Makkah.

The present author has previously examined and critically evaluated several of Gibson's arguments—including his claims concerning ancient maps,ⁱ the identification of Bakkah with Petra, and the commercial significance of the sacred city,ⁱⁱ the location of well of Zamzam,ⁱⁱⁱ Cave of Hira^{iv}—in a separate research article. The present study continues that scholarly engagement by critically examining another of Gibson's principal arguments.

Gibson contends that the original sacred city of Islam must have been a large urban center with substantial demographic, military, and economic capacity. He argues that the historical sources describe the city as capable of mobilizing large military forces and organizing extensive commercial caravans. According to him, the limited geographical size, natural resources, and environmental conditions of present-day Makkah render it incapable of supporting such large-scale military and commercial activities. Therefore, he concludes that the sacred city of early Islam could not have been present-day Makkah but was instead located elsewhere, most likely at Petra. The primary objective of this article is to critically analyze this particular argument advanced by Dan Gibson through a careful examination of the historical, geographical, and textual evidence, and to assess whether his conclusions can withstand rigorous academic scrutiny.

Dan Gibson's Argument

Dan Gibson argues that historical sources indicate that Islam's sacred city was a large and populous urban center capable of supplying substantial manpower for various military campaigns. According to him, the city's considerable size is further reflected in the scale of its commercial caravans, as evidenced by the high value of the merchandise they transported. In support of this claim, Gibson presents seven historical incidents in the form of a chart,^v which he considers

indicative of the city's demographic and commercial significance. These incidents are summarized below.

S. No	Event	Year	Size of Meccan Army
1	Ghazva Al Abwa	1st	300 Meccan horsemen
2	Ghazva Buwat	2nd	100 Meccan men & 2500 camels
3	Ghazva Badar	2nd	1000 men soldiers
4	Ghazva Sawiq	2nd	200 Meccan soldiers
5	Ghazva Qardha	3rd	20,000 Dirham
6	Ghazva Uhud	3rd	3000 Meccan soldiers, 200 cavalry
7	Ghazva Ahzab	5th	10,000 Quraysh soldiers

According to Gibson, Makkah's ability to mobilize such large military contingents during these campaigns indicates that it must have possessed a substantial population, since a small settlement could not have furnished armies of this magnitude. Likewise, the considerable value of the merchandise carried by the Makkan trade caravans further suggests that Makkah was a large and economically significant urban center.

However, Gibson contends that the archaeological evidence from present-day Makkah points to a much smaller settlement, one that could not have supported or mobilized military forces numbering in the thousands. On this basis, he argues that the ancient sacred city described in the early historical and sirah literature cannot be identified with present-day Makkah; rather, it must have been located elsewhere.

Gibson writes:

When one considers the number of soldiers and camels that the Meccans could raise despite their losses in battles year after year, one would expect the holy city to be a large city. However, archeological evidence points to Mecca being a small place in a harsh environment. How then could it have produced such armies?^{vi}

A Critical Evaluation of Dan Gibson's Argument

Before presenting a critical evaluation of Dan Gibson's argument, it is necessary to clarify two preliminary issues. First, attention must be given to Gibson's methodology of citation, specifically the manner in which he extracts and reproduces passages or individual statements from historical sources. Second, it is essential to provide a concise overview of the historical incidents upon which he bases his argument in order to determine whether they genuinely support his conclusions or, conversely, constitute clear and compelling evidence against his revisionist thesis.

Dan Gibson's Quotation Methodology: A Critical Assessment

The errors that Dan Gibson commits in quoting and citing historical sources are of such a nature that one would not expect them even from a novice researcher. If readers were to consult the original sources alongside Gibson's work and become aware of the numerous inaccuracies in his citations and representations of the primary texts, they would likely lose confidence in the reliability of his scholarship altogether. These are not isolated mistakes confined to one or two instances; rather, they recur throughout his work. The following example illustrates the nature of these errors.

The seven historical incidents presented by Gibson in the form of a chart are taken from Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī, a fact that Gibson himself explicitly acknowledges. Referring to Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī, he states that during the Battle of al-Abwā' the Makkan army consisted of three hundred men. However, this claim is factually incorrect. Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī does not mention the strength of the Makkan force during the Battle of al-Abwā' at all.

Rather, the figure of three hundred refers to the Makkan force encountered during the expedition of Sariyyat Sayf al-Baḥr, also known as the expedition of Ḥamzah ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib.^{vii} Before narrating the events of Sariyyat Sayf al-Baḥr, al-Ṭabarī first concludes his account of the Battle of al-Abwā’ and then begins an entirely separate narrative of the subsequent expedition.^{viii} Gibson appears to have failed to recognize this transition and mistakenly assumed that the account of Sariyyat Sayf al-Baḥr was still part of the narrative concerning the Battle of al-Abwā’. Consequently, he attributed the figure of three hundred men to the wrong event and cited the Battle of al-Abwā’ instead of Sariyyat Sayf al-Baḥr.

This example provides a revealing indication of Gibson's limited command of the very sources upon which he bases his arguments and raises serious questions regarding the reliability of his handling of historical evidence. More strikingly, Gibson does not appear to engage directly with the original Arabic text of Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī; instead, his discussion relies primarily on its English translation, a practice that further increases the likelihood of misinterpretation and inaccurate citation.

Do Dan Gibson's Own Arguments Undermine His Thesis?

A recurring feature of Dan Gibson's methodology is his selective use of historical sources. When citing historical texts, he frequently reproduces only portions of the original passages or presents them in a manner that facilitates the interpretation he wishes to advance. This approach suggests an awareness that a complete and contextual presentation of the relevant passages would often weaken, rather than strengthen, his own conclusions. The same pattern is evident in the present argument. It is therefore necessary to examine the historical incidents cited by Gibson in order to determine whether they genuinely support his thesis or, instead, provide compelling evidence against it.

Among the incidents cited by Gibson are Sariyyat Sayf al-Baḥr, the Battle of al-Abwā’, the Battle of Buwāt, the Battle of Badr, and the Expedition of Qaradah. According to the early historical sources, the common factor underlying these expeditions was the Prophet's attempt to intercept the commercial caravans of the Quraysh that were travelling between Makkah and Syria.

While describing the circumstances leading to the Battle of Badr, al-Ṭabarī writes:

كان من شأنه ان ابا سفيان بن حرب اقبل من الشام فى قريب من سبعين راكبا من قبائل قريش كلها، كانوا تجارا بالشام، فاقبلوا جميعا معهم اموالهم وتجاراتهم، فذكروا لرسول الله ﷺ واصحابه، وقد كانت الحرب بينهم قبل ذلك،^{ix}

"The origin of the event was that Abū Sufyān ibn Ḥarb was returning from Syria with approximately seventy mounted men from the various clans of Quraysh. They had all been engaged in trade in Syria and were carrying their wealth and commercial goods. News of their return reached the Messenger of Allah ﷺ and his Companions, while hostilities already existed between the two sides."

Likewise, al-Ṭabarī identifies the interception of the Quraysh's trade caravans travelling between Makkah and Syria as the principal reason behind Sariyya Sayf al-Baḥr,^x the Battle of al-Abwā’,^{xi} the Battle of Buwāt,^{xii} and the Expedition of Qaradah.^{xiii}

This historical evidence presents a serious challenge to Gibson's reconstruction. Syria lies to the north of Madinah, and Petra—the city that Gibson identifies as Islam's original sacred center—is likewise situated to the north of Madinah. Indeed, during the early Islamic period, Petra formed part of the broader Syrian region. If the Quraysh had actually been based in Petra, as Gibson argues, then their caravans travelling between Petra and Syria would not have passed through or near Madinah, since Madinah lies to the south of both Petra and Syria. Consequently, there would have been no strategic reason for the Prophet ﷺ to intercept such caravans in the vicinity of Madinah.

This geographical inconsistency raises a fundamental question for Gibson's hypothesis: if Petra was the home of the Quraysh and the original sacred city of Islam, how could caravans travelling

between Petra and Syria have followed a route that brought them within reach of Madinah? The historical and geographical evidence preserved in the early sources appears incompatible with this assumption and therefore constitutes a significant challenge to Gibson's reconstruction of early Islamic sacred geography.

Response to Dan Gibson's Argument

We now turn to Dan Gibson's argument. Gibson contends that the historical and *sīrah* literature portrays Islam's sacred city as a large urban center capable of providing substantial manpower for military campaigns. He further argues that the city's commercial caravans must also have been exceptionally large, as reflected in the considerable value of the merchandise they carried. To support this claim, he presents a chart listing the numerical strength of the Makkan forces in various military engagements alongside the estimated value of several Quraysh trading caravans. We shall first examine his argument concerning the size of the Makkan armies. According to Gibson's chart, the Quraysh fielded approximately two hundred men during the Expedition of al-Sawīq, three hundred at al-Abwā', one thousand at the Battle of Badr, three thousand at the Battle of Uḥud, and ten thousand during the Battle of al-Aḥzāb (the Confederates). The figures of two hundred, three hundred, and one thousand require little discussion, for such numbers could easily have been drawn from a single neighbourhood of an urban settlement, let alone from Makkah, which was already an established town. Consequently, these figures cannot reasonably be regarded as evidence that Makkah was an exceptionally large city.

The larger figures of three thousand and ten thousand likewise fail to support Gibson's conclusion when examined in their proper historical context. The force that confronted the Muslims at the Battle of Uḥud was not composed exclusively of the inhabitants of Makkah. In addition to the Quraysh, it included contingents from the people of Tihāmah and several clans of Banū Kinānah.^{xiv} The size of the army, therefore, reflected the participation of multiple tribes rather than the population of Makkah alone.

The same observation applies to the Battle of al-Aḥzāb. The confederate force of approximately ten thousand men did not consist solely of the people of Makkah. Rather, it represented a coalition of numerous Arab tribes, including the Aḥābīsh of Quraysh, the tribes of Tihāmah, Banū Kinānah, Banū Ghatafān and its sub-tribes, Banū Murrah, Banū Fazārah, Banū Ashja', Banū Sulaym, Banū Asad, Banū Sa'd, and several other tribes, some of which resided hundreds of kilometres from Makkah.^{xv} Accordingly, the size of the confederate army cannot legitimately be used as evidence for the population of Makkah itself. Indeed, the very title of the battle—al-Aḥzāb ("the Confederates")—indicates that it involved an alliance of numerous groups rather than the inhabitants of a single city. Had Gibson paid closer attention to the historical significance of the battle's name, this misunderstanding would likely have been avoided.

We now turn to Gibson's second argument concerning the value of the Makkan trade caravans. He claims that the caravan intercepted during the Battle of Buwāṭ consisted of approximately 2,500 camels and that the caravan associated with the Expedition of Qaradah carried merchandise worth twenty thousand dirhams. From this he infers that such valuable commercial goods must have belonged to a very large number of people and that present-day Makkah could not have accommodated such a population.

Before addressing this claim, however, it is necessary to correct another error in Gibson's citation of *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī*. Al-Ṭabarī does not state that the caravan involved in the Expedition of Qaradah was worth twenty thousand dirhams. Rather, he records that its total value amounted to one hundred thousand dirhams. Following the Muslims' capture of the caravan, eighty thousand dirhams were distributed among the participants in the expedition, while one-fifth (khums), amounting to twenty thousand dirhams, was allocated to the public treasury (Bayt al-Māl).^{xvi}

Gibson has evidently mistaken the amount of the khums for the total value of the caravan. For the sake of historical accuracy, this error should be corrected in future editions of his work. Ironically, the correct figure would appear to strengthen, rather than weaken, the argument he seeks to advance. Nevertheless, his repeated misreading of *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī* raises further concerns regarding the reliability of his engagement with the primary sources.

Even if Gibson's figures were accepted for the sake of argument, his conclusion would still not follow. The ownership of commercial wealth is not necessarily proportional to the number of its owners. A small number of wealthy merchants may possess assets of enormous value. The commercial history of early Islam provides numerous examples of this reality.

One of the clearest examples is that of 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān (may Allah be pleased with him). Although his financial circumstances changed after his migration from Makkah to Madinah, he nevertheless purchased the Well of Rūmah for thirty-five thousand dirhams and dedicated it as a charitable endowment. He also acquired land for the expansion of the Prophet's Mosque for twenty-five thousand dirhams. During the Expedition of Tabūk, he donated one thousand camels, seventy horses, and one thousand dinars to the Prophet ﷺ, in addition to many other generous contributions amounting to hundreds of thousands of dirhams throughout his lifetime.^{xvii} If a single Makkan merchant could possess wealth of such magnitude, there is nothing extraordinary about a commercial caravan having a total value of twenty thousand or even one hundred thousand dirhams. Consequently, the monetary value of a caravan cannot, by itself, serve as reliable evidence for estimating the population size of Makkah.

Conclusion

This study critically re-examined one of the principal arguments advanced by Dan Gibson in support of his Petra hypothesis, namely that the military strength and commercial activity attributed to the Quraysh in the early Islamic sources demonstrate that the original sacred city of Islam must have been a large urban center inconsistent with present-day Makkah. Through a close analysis of the primary Arabic historical sources, particularly *Tārīkh al-Ṭabarī*, together with the classical *sīrah* literature and relevant geographical evidence, the study has shown that Gibson's argument is not supported by the historical record.

The analysis demonstrates, first, that Gibson's use of the primary sources suffers from significant methodological weaknesses. These include inaccurate citation of historical reports, confusion between separate historical events, selective quotation of textual evidence, and insufficient engagement with the original Arabic sources. Such shortcomings undermine the reliability of the historical foundation upon which his demographic and commercial argument is constructed.

Second, the study has shown that the historical reports concerning the Prophet's expeditions against the Quraysh caravans consistently describe commercial routes linking Makkah with Syria through the vicinity of Madinah. When considered alongside the geographical location of Petra, these reports present a serious geographical inconsistency for Gibson's reconstruction. If Petra had been the original home of the Quraysh, the caravan routes described in the early sources would not have passed through areas accessible from Madinah. Consequently, the historical and geographical evidence preserved in the early Arabic sources is more consistent with the traditional location of Makkah than with Gibson's proposed reconstruction.

Third, the numerical strength of the armies cited by Gibson cannot legitimately be regarded as evidence for the population of Makkah. The larger forces that participated in battles such as Uḥud and al-Aḥzāb consisted of tribal coalitions drawn from numerous Arab tribes rather than from the inhabitants of Makkah alone. Similarly, the military contingents reported in other expeditions do not require the existence of an exceptionally large urban population and therefore cannot sustain Gibson's demographic conclusions.

Finally, the study has demonstrated that the commercial value of Quraysh caravans cannot serve as a reliable indicator of urban population size. Commercial wealth may be concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of merchants, as illustrated by well-documented examples from early Islamic history. Consequently, the economic evidence cited by Gibson does not justify the conclusion that the sacred city of early Islam must have possessed a substantially larger population than that traditionally attributed to Makkah.

In light of these findings, the present study concludes that Dan Gibson's demographic and commercial argument for locating Islam's original sacred city at Petra rests upon methodological weaknesses and historically unsupported assumptions. Rather than undermining the traditional Islamic narrative, the primary Arabic historical sources, when examined in their textual, historical, and geographical context, provide stronger support for identifying Makkah as the original religious and commercial center associated with the emergence of Islam.

More broadly, this study underscores the importance of rigorous source criticism, contextual interpretation, and direct engagement with primary Arabic sources in the reconstruction of early Islamic history. It also demonstrates that revisionist hypotheses can only contribute meaningfully to scholarly discourse when they are grounded in accurate textual analysis, sound historical methodology, and comprehensive consideration of the available evidence.

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