Was Petra the Sacred City of Early Islam? A Critical Geographical Analysis of Dan Gibson's Argument from the Battle of the Trench

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Abstract

Dan Gibson is a proponent of the revisionist theory of Hagarism, according to which Petra, an ancient city in northern Arabia (present-day Jordan), rather than Makkah, was the original sacred city of Islam. He has presented various arguments to support this theory, one of which is based on the construction of a trench on the northern side of Madinah during the Battle of the Trench (5 AH/627 CE). Gibson argues that the northern location of the trench indicates that the Quraysh approached Madinah from Petra rather than Makkah, which lies to its south. This study critically examines his argument in the light of the geographical features of Madinah, its natural defensive barriers, and the historical circumstances of the battle. It explains that the eastern, western, and southern sides of

Madinah were protected by rocky lava fields and gardens, while the northern side was relatively open and vulnerable to enemy attacks. Therefore, the trench was constructed on the northern side for military and defensive reasons, not because the enemy had come from Petra. The study also examines the participation of different Arabian tribes in the battle and the Qur'anic account of the Confederate forces, which confirms that the enemy approached Madinah from different directions. Furthermore, the Battle of Badr challenges Gibson's claim that the Quraysh always attacked Madinah from the north. The study concludes that the location of the trench does not provide reliable historical or geographical evidence for identifying Petra, rather than Makkah, as the original sacred city of Islam.

Keywords: Dan Gibson; Hagarism; Petra; Makkah; Battle of the Trench.

Introduction

Dan Gibson is a modern researcher who has presented a controversial theory about the original location of Islam's sacred city. According to his argument, the original sacred city

was not Makkah but Petra, an ancient city located in present-day Jordan. He supports this theory through his interpretation of early Islamic history, geographical locations, the direction of early mosques, and historical events.

One of Gibson's arguments is based on the Battle of the Trench (5 AH/627 CE). He argues that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ ordered a trench to be dug on the northern side of Madinah to protect the city from the Quraysh. Since Petra is located north of Madinah, while Makkah is situated to its south, Gibson considers this geographical fact evidence in favour of Petra. He further claims that whenever the Quraysh attacked Madinah, they always approached it from the north, which he considers unusual if Makkah was their homeland.

However, this argument raises important historical and geographical questions. The geographical features of Madinah, including its rocky lava fields, gardens, and natural barriers, must be considered to understand why the trench was constructed on its northern side. Furthermore, the participation of different Arabian tribes in the Battle of the Trench and the

directions from which they approached Madinah are important factors in evaluating Gibson's claim.

This study critically examines Gibson's argument by analysing the geography of Madinah, the historical circumstances of the Battle of the Trench, and the Qur'anic account of the Confederate forces. It aims to determine whether the location of the trench provides any reliable evidence for identifying Petra, rather than Makkah, as the original sacred city of Islam.

Statement of the Problem

Dan Gibson argues that the construction of a trench on the northern side of Madinah during the Battle of the Trench indicates that the original sacred city of Islam was Petra rather than Makkah. He also claims that the Quraysh always attacked Madinah from the north, despite Makkah being located to its south. However, this argument does not adequately consider the geographical features of Madinah, its natural defensive barriers, or the different directions from which the allied tribes approached the city during the battle. Therefore, the main problem addressed in this study is whether Gibson's geographical argument is based on reliable historical and

geographical evidence or results from an incomplete understanding of the geography of Madinah and the events of the Battle of the Trench.

Research Questions

1. Why did the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ order the construction of a trench on the northern side of Madinah during the Battle of the Trench?
2. How did the geographical features and natural barriers of Madinah influence the Muslim strategy of defence?
3. Did all the Quraysh and allied forces approach Madinah from the north, or did they come from different directions?
4. Does the northern location of the trench provide reliable evidence that Petra, rather than Makkah, was the original sacred city of Islam?
5. To what extent is Dan Gibson's argument supported by historical, geographical, and Qur'anic evidence?

Dan Gibson's Argument

Petra lies to the north of Madinah, whereas Makkah is situated to its south. Dan Gibson argues that when the Quraysh of Makkah launched an attack on Madinah in 5 AH (627 CE), the

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ ordered a trench to be dug along the northern outskirts of the city in order to protect it from the advancing enemy. Upon reaching Madinah, the Quraysh forces likewise encamped to the north of the city, on the opposite side of the trench. Gibson therefore contends that this geographical orientation indicates that the original sacred city of Islam must have been situated to the north of Madinah—that is, Petra—rather than to its south, where Makkah is located.[1]

Gibson advances a further objection in support of this argument, maintaining that whenever the Quraysh launched an attack against Madinah, they invariably approached it from the north. He considers this particularly puzzling, given that Makkah, the homeland of the Quraysh, lies to the south of Madinah.

Dan Gibson writes: *It is noteworthy that whenever the Quraysh tribe attacked Medina it was always from the north. This is very*

[1] : Quranic Geography: 311

peculiar because Mecca where the Quraysh lived is south of Madina.[2]

A Critical Analysis of Dan Gibson's Argument

Dan Gibson's argument is very weak and superficial. This misunderstanding arises mainly from a lack of knowledge about the geography of Madinah. If a reader is familiar with the geographical features of Madinah while studying the events of the Battle of the Trench, this question is unlikely to arise in the first place.

Madinah was naturally protected by volcanic rocky areas on its eastern and western sides. The eastern rocky area was known as *Ḥarrat Wāqim,* while the western one was called *Ḥarrat Wabrah.* These areas consisted of rough, rocky, and difficult terrain. Moving through them with camels and large groups of soldiers was extremely difficult. Carrying out a military attack through these areas was also very difficult, if not impossible.

Similarly, the southern part of Madinah was covered with a large number of gardens and orchards. Therefore, launching a

[2] : Ibid

military attack from the southern side was also very difficult. Even today, many gardens can still be found in the southern part of Madinah. In this way, natural geographical barriers made it difficult for an enemy to enter Madinah from its eastern, western, and southern sides. The northern side, however, was an open area without such major natural barriers. For this reason, an attack from the north was much easier than an attack from any other direction.

The army that came to fight the Muslims in the Battle of the Trench consisted of approximately ten thousand or even more soldiers. For such a large army, the northern side was the most suitable route for launching an attack on Madinah. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was a wise military commander and had excellent knowledge of military strategy. He understood the geographical situation of Madinah and knew that the enemy could most easily attack the city from its northern side, regardless of the direction from which the enemy had originally travelled.

Therefore, on the advice of Salmān al-Fārisī (may Allah be pleased with him), the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ decided to dig a

trench along the northern side of Madinah to protect the city from an enemy attack. The construction of this trench was completed in six days. It extended from *Ajm al-Shaykhayn* in the northeast to *Madhād* in the northwest. Its total length was 5,544 metres, its average width was 4.62 metres, and its average depth was 3.234 metres.[3]

A study of the geography of Madinah makes it clear that the trench was dug on the northern side not because the Quraysh were coming from the north, that is, from Petra. Rather, it was dug there because the northern side was the most open and vulnerable part of the city. In other words, the purpose of digging the trench was to protect Madinah from the direction through which an enemy could enter most easily.

When the Quraysh army left Makkah and reached the area of Madinah, it did not enter the city from the southern side. Instead, it travelled along the western side of Madinah, passing through *Ḥarrat Wabrah,* and then reached the northern outskirts of the city. This was the very area where the Muslims had dug

3 : Abū Khalīl, Shawqī. Aṭlas al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah. Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1423 AH, p. 136.

the trench. When the Quraysh soldiers saw the trench, they were greatly surprised because they had not expected such a defensive arrangement. Consequently, they set up their camps at *Majmaʿ al-Asyāl,* to the northwest of Madinah.

The Battle of the Trench is also known as the Battle of *al-Aḥzāb*. The word *Aḥzāb* is the plural of *Ḥizb*, which means a group or a party. This battle was given this name because the Quraysh of Makkah were not alone in fighting the Muslims. Several other Arabian tribes joined them and formed a united military alliance against the Muslim community. Their main purpose was to defeat the Muslims and put an end to their presence in Madinah. These tribes came from different directions to fight against the Muslims. For this reason, the battle is also known as the Battle of the Confederates.

If we accept Dan Gibson's argument that the Quraysh did not come from Makkah in the south but from Petra in the north, and that this was the reason the Muslims dug a trench on the northern side of Madinah, then Gibson must also explain why no trench was dug on the eastern side of Madinah. This

question is important because approximately one-third of the Confederate army came from the eastern direction.

The tribes that came from this direction included *Banū Ghatafān,* its different branches, and their allied tribes, such as *Banū Ashjaʿ, Banū Murrah, Banū Fazārah, Banū Sulaym, Banū Asad,* and *Banū Saʿd.* These tribes lived to the east of Madinah and came to fight against the Muslims during the Battle of the Trench.

Similarly, Gibson would also have to explain why no trench was dug on the southern side of Madinah. *Banū Kinānah,* the people of *Tihāmah,* and the *Aḥābīsh*, who lived to the south of Madinah, also joined the enemy forces and came to fight against the Muslims.

Furthermore, according to Gibson's argument, trenches should also have been constructed in the northeastern and southeastern parts of Madinah. In fact, he would have to establish that a trench existed around the entire city. The reason is that, except for the forces of *Banū Naḍīr* and *Banū Qaynuqāʿ*, which are described in this argument as approaching from the northern direction, particularly from Khaybar and Wādī al-Qurā, the

other tribes participating in the battle came from different directions. However, the Muslims did not dig trenches around all these sides of Madinah.

This clearly shows the weakness in Gibson's argument. If the direction from which an enemy approached the city was the reason for digging a trench, then defensive trenches should have been constructed on all the sides from which the different tribes were approaching. However, this was not the case. The Muslims constructed the trench only on the northern side because that was the most open and vulnerable direction of Madinah.

The Holy Qur'an itself provides clear evidence that the enemies approached Madinah from different directions during the Battle of the Trench. While describing the difficult situation faced by the Muslims during this battle, Allah Almighty says:

إِذْ جَاءُوكُمْ مِنْ فَوْقِكُمْ وَمِنْ أَسْفَلَ مِنْكُمْ وَإِذْ زَاغَتِ الْأَبْصَارُ وَبَلَغَتِ الْقُلُوبُ الْحَنَاجِرَ وَتَظُنُّونَ بِاللَّهِ الظُّنُونَا[4]

4 : Al-Quran, 33:10.

"Remember when they came upon you from above you and from below you, when your eyes became fixed in terror, your hearts reached your throats, and you began to entertain different thoughts about Allah."

According to Imām Mujāhid, the people who came from above were *Banū Ghatafān,* their different branches, and their allied tribes. Those who came from below were the Quraysh and their allied tribes.[5]

Therefore, the Qur'an itself confirms that the enemy forces approached Madinah from different directions. This further weakens Gibson's argument that the northern direction was the only direction from which the enemy approached Madinah.

Gibson also raises another objection. He claims that whenever the Quraysh attacked Madinah, they always came from the northern side. According to him, this indicates that the original sacred city of Islam was Petra, which lies to the north of Madinah, rather than Makkah, which lies to its south.

5 : Mujāhid ibn Jabr al-Makhzūmī, Abū al-Ḥajjāj. Tafsīr Mujāhid. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1st ed., 2005, p. 214.

However, the geographical facts discussed above provide a clear answer to this objection as well. In military strategy, an attacking army normally chooses the route that has fewer natural or artificial obstacles and offers the greatest possibility of success. Since the eastern, western, and southern sides of Madinah were protected by natural geographical barriers, attacking the city from these directions was extremely difficult. The northern side was comparatively open and offered an easier route for military operations. Therefore, the Quraysh and other enemy forces generally preferred this direction when launching an attack on Madinah.

This does not mean that the original sacred city of Islam was located to the north of Madinah. Rather, it simply shows that the northern side was the most suitable direction for military attacks because of the geographical conditions of the city.

On the other hand, Gibson's claim that the Quraysh always attacked Madinah from the north is also historically incorrect. The Battle of Badr provides an important example. The battlefield of Badr was not situated to the north of Madinah. Nevertheless, it was the location where the first major battle

between the people of Makkah and the Muslims took place. Therefore, it is not historically correct to claim that every military confrontation between the Quraysh and the Muslims took place on the northern side of Madinah.

Furthermore, if we carefully examine the causes and historical circumstances of the battles between the Quraysh of Makkah and the Muslims, we can clearly understand that the Quraysh were based in Makkah, which is situated to the south of Madinah. Their military movements and campaigns should therefore be understood in the light of their actual historical circumstances and geographical location.

In conclusion, the construction of the trench on the northern side of Madinah was a military decision based on the geographical conditions of the city. It was not evidence that the Quraysh had come from Petra or that Petra was the original sacred city of Islam. The northern side was selected because it was the most open and vulnerable part of Madinah, while the other sides were naturally protected by rocky lava fields and gardens. Moreover, the Qur'an confirms that the Confederate forces approached Madinah from different directions. Thus,

Gibson's attempt to connect the northern location of the trench with the geographical position of Petra is not supported by the actual geographical and historical evidence.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Dan Gibson's argument linking the northern location of the trench in Madinah to Petra is not supported by convincing historical and geographical evidence. The trench was constructed on the northern side because it was the most open and vulnerable part of Madinah, while the eastern, western, and southern sides were protected by natural barriers, including rocky lava fields and gardens. Therefore, the location of the trench was a military decision based on the geographical conditions of Madinah, not evidence that the Quraysh came from Petra.

Furthermore, the participation of different Arabian tribes in the Battle of the Trench and the Qur'anic account of their movements show that the enemy forces approached Madinah from different directions. The example of the Battle of Badr also challenges Gibson's claim that the Quraysh always attacked Madinah from the north. Thus, his argument is based

on an incomplete understanding of Madinah's geography and the historical events of the early Islamic period. The northern location of the trench cannot, therefore, be used as reliable evidence to identify Petra, rather than Makkah, as the original sacred city of Islam.

Recommendations:

1. Dan Gibson's claims about the original location of Islam's sacred city should be examined through reliable historical sources and geographical evidence rather than isolated historical events.

2. Researchers should carefully study the geographical features of Madinah, particularly its natural barriers, rocky lava fields, and gardens, when analysing the military events of the early Islamic period.

3. The Battle of the Trench should be studied in its wider historical and military context, including the participation and movements of all the Arabian tribes involved in the battle.

4. Further research should compare early Islamic historical accounts, Qur'anic references, and geographical studies to evaluate revisionist theories about the early history of Islam.

5. Researchers should avoid drawing major historical conclusions from the direction of military movements without considering the geographical conditions and military strategies of the time.

6. Gibson's other arguments about Petra and the early history of Islam should also be critically examined through original Arabic sources, archaeological evidence, and reliable historical research.


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