

# HAJJ: A HISTORY

## Guardians of the Hajj

According to Ibn Ishaq (8<sup>th</sup> Century biographer of Muhammad), Muhammad solved a dispute in 605CE, 5 years before his first revelation. Four tribal elders couldn't decide who would have the honour of placing the Black Stone into the Ka'aba after repairs. Muhammad suggested they carry the stone to the Ka'ba together in a cloth. He himself placed the stone in the Ka'ba.

Muhammad's family, the Quraysh of Mecca, controlled the annual pilgrimage as guardians of the Ka'aba. The pilgrimage was an important trade fair and meeting place as well as a spiritual journey (Brown, 2009, 27-28).

Circling the Ka'aba, walking to Mount Arafat and an animal sacrifice were pre-Islamic elements.

The Ka'ba held 360 statues of Meccan gods before Muhammad had them destroyed. A common Semitic tradition was to mark places of worship with rare stones. The Jewish scriptures warn against making these stones into idols.

Revering stones in the Ancient Middle East was not worship as such, but marking a point where the mundane world was believed to connect with the sacred world. A red stone and a white stone were linked to other pre-Islamic Arab deities in Southern Arabian shrines. Such stones represented a connection point between the sacred and profane.

## Hajj Tradition

In 632 CE Muhammad completed a full pilgrimage for the first and only time. Many followers accompanied him and observed his actions closely. For example Muhammad wore Ihram (unsewn cloth), which all pilgrims wear to this day. Muhammad's actions and prayers have replicated on Hajj ever since.

Wearing Ihram reminds pilgrims of their equality before God, as well as their eventual judgment before God. When they die Muslims will be buried in the white robes of hajj. The pilgrimage is a time for restraint and self-renewal. Pilgrims of all ethnicities, nationalities and social classes mingle together in an atmosphere of brotherhood.

## Hajj Logistics

Tens of thousands of pilgrims travelled to Hajj together from cities in Syria, Egypt and Iraq in medieval times. They travelled in colossal caravans. Muslim rulers would support that Hajj caravans, including building a 900-mile long road from Iraq to Mecca and Medina. This road featured water tanks and places to eat and rest along the way. Pilgrims would journey for around three months in total. State-appointed guards protected the caravans along the route and were sometimes in charge of securing provisions.

Many local rulers along the caravan routes charged a tax on pilgrims causing anger and resentment. Some Sultans, such as Saladin, attempted to prevent such tax-gathering, with various degrees of success.

Nomadic desert tribespeople, the Bedouin, periodically raided Hajj caravans. They were often paid off by the guards protecting the Hajj, but casualties were not always avoided. The infamous 1757 raid on a caravan returning to Damascus from Mecca caused the death of up to 20,000 pilgrims, either from attack or after the raid from hunger and thirst.