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Arab deities

Arab deities and their worship were essential characteristics of the Arabian Peninsula before the advent of Islam. The uneven coverage of the Peninsula in the literary sources leaves most of it in the dark, and archaeology has not yet closed the gap. The claim that idol worship was declining is, however, refuted by many details about idols and their worshippers in a variety of contexts. The pre-Islamic idols of Islam's holy cities Mecca and Medina are better known than those of other parts of the Peninsula, but idols were everywhere.

The scarcity and fragmentary nature of the literary evidence about pre-Islamic idol worship is similar to that of other aspects of pre-Islamic and early Islamic history. The emphasis in what follows is on Mecca and Medina. The Qur'anic evidence has not been considered, because it requires specialist analysis.

Mediaeval scholars studying religious sciences such as *ḥadīth* and Qur'ān exegesis were probably interested in the idols mentioned in the Qur'ān (G. R. Hawting, *Idols and images*, *EQ*) but not in those

that appear only in literary sources. Philologists such as Ibn al-Kalbī (d. c.204/819; W. Atallah, *al-Kalbī*, *EI2*), however, recorded whatever they had learnt from their informants, whoever they were. The philologists' approach is demonstrated by Ibn al-Kalbī's comment concerning the seven divination arrows (arrows with labels that were tossed by the idol's custodian) of the idol Hubal in the Ka'ba: he says that he could find no details about three of them (Ibn al-Kalbī, 28; cf. T. Fahd, *Istiḡsām*, *EI2*). Scholars of this mindset were always on the lookout for new evidence from every possible source. *Ḥadīth* scholars, by contrast, were selective in their choice of informants and faithfully transmitted to their disciples exact copies of what they had learned from their teachers.

Certain idols are known to us only through their mention in poetry, because verse stands a better chance of being remembered and recorded than does prose. Some reports concerning idols go back to those who destroyed them. Many idols are known through (semi-)autobiographical conversion reports, some of which go back to their custodians. These