

## THE PLACE

One major problem archaeology faces is that Saudi Arabia forbids excavation in Mecca and Medina. Our evidence for the cities' role in the rise of Islam is based on literary sources alone – and is therefore open to challenge by sceptics. The most controversial argument Tom Holland made in his documentary was that Mecca might not have been the place where Muhammad began his mission. To many viewers (Muslim and non-Muslim) the idea was too fanciful to credit. Mecca, the city towards which Muslims pray, appropriated by the English language as a metaphorical haven, is at the heart of Islam's story. Casting doubt on something so certain might seem wilfully provocative; but Holland had his reasons.

His argument originates mainly from Crone's *Meccan Trade and Rise of Islam* (1987), in which she took on contemporary academic orthodoxy about why Muhammad's religion flourished. Historians such as Montgomery Watt and Maxime Rodinson argued that Mecca's great trading riches created extreme inequalities of wealth. According to this narrative the Prophet's egalitarian message attracted followers excluded from the Meccan feast. But what exactly, Crone asked, was the commodity that made the city so rich? Roman historians do not mention Mecca and neither is it directly placed on the spice route from Yemen to Syria. 'What commodity was available in Arabia that could be