

Book Review

Simon O'Meara. *The Ka'ba Orientations: Readings in Islam's Ancient House* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). ISBN 978-0748699308. 253 pp. £ 95.00 cloth.

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P*rima facie*, one may wonder what new information a book on the Ka'ba adds to the current bibliography on the topic. Cubic in shape and covered with a black silk cloth (*kiswa*), the Ka'ba is perhaps the most famous building of Islam. Most students in Middle Eastern studies or curious readers are generally familiar with the Ka'ba's minimalist aesthetic. This singular characteristic, however, has generally received little attention in architectural scholarship and has in fact been met with a certain disinterest. Distinguished scholars such as Richard Ettinghausen and Oleg Grabar concluded in their groundbreaking book on Islamic art and architecture that the Ka'ba "was not too impressive as an architectural creation."¹ In their revised edition from 2001, they

bluntly stated that the Ka'ba "lacked in architecture quality."² By shedding new light on the topic and bringing fresh ways of thinking about it, Simon O'Meara reassesses Ettinghausen and Grabar's view of the Ka'ba and more broadly redefines the way to conceptualize the building.

The Ka'ba should not be reduced to its architectural aspect. Such is the author's initial premise. The disinterested aesthetic view of the Ka'ba, in O'Meara's words, is the outcome of divorcing aesthetic experience from religious experience (p. 159). In other words, the aesthetic value of the Ka'ba depends on what purposes it serves and what symbols it represents. To address these issues, the author pursues an original approach that consists first and foremost in looking at the literature

1. Oleg Grabar and Richard Ettinghausen, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650–1250* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 18.

2. Oleg Grabar, Richard Ettinghausen and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650–1250* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 3.

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generated by the Ka‘ba, as an object of thought, in order to comprehend the meanings and functions assigned to the building. This abundant and varied literature, both in Arabic and Persian, constitutes a large chunk of the forty-one pages of O’Meara’s bibliography, which is quite remarkable. Covering a broad range of written and visual sources, the author carefully examines historical and geographical material, as well as mystical and cosmological sources, among others. From this literature, O’Meara lays out six key themes that are the core framework of his book.

The six chapters touch on four aspects of the Ka‘ba. These include the ritual aspects of the building (chapter one), the symbolic ones (chapters two, three and four), the structure’s interior and its significance (chapter five), and finally the function of the Ka‘ba’s covering (chapter six). O’Meara synthesizes the deep classical thought of authors such as al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), notably in chapter four, which partly revolves around the notion of circumambulation (*al-ṭawāf*). Thematically, the author covers artistic, historical, and religious issues and gives all three of them equal weight. This eclecticism certainly enriches the book, but also gives somehow the impression that the reasoning remains incomplete. Indeed, the most compelling findings have more to do with religious aspects than historical ones.

Regarding the religious aspects, it may be useful to examine two of the most salient points of the book. In the first chapter, O’Meara deals with the notion of *qibla* and its implications. The author points out that if mosques are generally aligned with the *qibla* because

of the requirement to pray towards the Ka‘ba, there is no justification in the Islamic tradition for urban settlements to be similarly oriented. Several studies on early Islamic urban settlements have nonetheless shown networks of streets built on an orthogonal plan and sometimes even aligned with the *qibla* (pp. 30–38). While these elements were often viewed as coincidences, O’Meara notes that similar phenomena were observed in later Islamic urban foundations such as al-Rāfiqa (Syria), al-Iṣṭablāt (Iraq), Fatimid Cairo (Egypt), Taza (Morocco), Touba (Senegal), and Khiva (Uzbekistan). Though it is difficult at this stage to assess the spread of this practice, its antiquity obviously implies an early cultic importance of Mecca expressed not only in mosque orientation, but also in the foundation of the first cities of Islam.

The second salient point of the book emerges from the third chapter, entitled “The Ka‘ba as Substructure,” which is probably the most innovative of the book. The author sheds light on an apparent paradox of the Ka‘ba in which episodes of destruction and profanation are recorded in primary sources without appearing to provoke any sort of grief and trauma among the chroniclers who reported them. To that, one must add the few *ḥadīths* attributed to the Prophet that predict the apocalypse commencing with the Ka‘ba’s destruction. How then, the author asks, did such events not provoke similar reactions to those of the Jews to the two destructions of the Temple? O’Meara presents evidence that runs contrary to a common idea, namely that the Ka‘ba’s sacrality (*ḥurma*) is not located in its shape or walls, but rather in its unearthly form, which is said in a couple of *ḥadīths* to have preceded its earthly form and never to have changed

(pp. 69–72). Elaborating upon the common heritage of this idea among Muslims, Sufi scholars developed a conceptual framework in which the material Ka'ba in Mecca is primarily perceived as the physical manifestation of the immaterial Ka'ba in human hearts, both of which are viewed as receptacles of God's presence. This dichotomy between the material and immaterial is merely the reformulation of the duality *zāhir-bāṭin* (apparent-hidden), which is particularly important in Shi'ism.

Turning now to the history of the Ka'ba, the author explores in the introduction whether early Islamic sources are reliable or not when it comes to describing the origins of Islam in general and the Ka'ba in particular. This raises a few problems. Without explicitly taking a stand on these debates, O'Meara argues that the Persian traveler Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. ca. 481/1088) composed the first incontestably eyewitness account of the Ka'ba (pp. 8–11). The author is quite right to remind readers of the problem of sources for the study of early Islam. Many chroniclers who wrote on the first centuries of Islam lived well outside of Arabia, mostly in Iraq, which raises questions about their firsthand knowledge of the Ka'ba. Nonetheless, a reasonable number of accounts on the Ka'ba before the fifth/eleventh century provide a relatively good picture of the building. Indeed, while the author seems familiar with the Meccan chronicler Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh

al-Azraqī (d. 250/864), it is surprising that he does not rely upon him for the history of the building. Al-Azraqī belonged to a long-time Meccan family whose ancestors had secured marriage alliances with the Umayyads since the conversion of their eponymous ancestor, al-Azraq b. 'Uqba, at the battle of Ṭā'if in the year 8/630.³ In addition to relying upon earlier Meccan sources such as his grand-father Aḥmad (d. 223/837), al-Azraqī actually acts as a firsthand witness of what he recounts.

Consider two examples to illustrate this point. In a chapter entitled "Report on what the interior and exterior measures of the Ka'ba were [before] they became what they are today (*mā huwā 'alayhi l-yawm*)," al-Azraqī records the changes that occurred inside and outside the building. The Meccan chronicler provides the dimensions of the Ka'ba during the eras of Abraham, the Quraysh shortly before Islam, 'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr (r. 64–73/683–692), and 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 66–86/685–705).⁴ When al-Azraqī wrote his chronicle, the building size had supposedly not changed since 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān rebuilt the Ka'ba. These measurements are given in detail as well as descriptions of the exterior and interior decorations. Although there are legitimate grounds for questioning the value of historical information dating back to a century or more before al-Azraqī lived, one can hardly dismiss out of hand his testimony on the measurements of the Ka'ba during

3. Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *al-Iṣāba fī tamyīz al-ṣaḥāba*, ed. ʿĀdil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd & 'Alī Muḥammad Mu'awwaḍ (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1995), 1:199, no. 80 (al-Azraq b. 'Uqba). See also in the same volume, the notice of al-Azraq's master: *ibid.*, 687–88, no. 1480 (al-Ḥārith b. Kalada).

4. The measurements listed by al-Azraqī are the followings (Length x Width x Height): Abraham (30x22x9 cubits), Quraysh (24x22x18), 'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr (30x22x27 cubits), 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (24x22x27 cubits). See Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, ed. 'Abd al-Malik b. Duḥaysh (Mecca: Maktabat al-Asadī, 2012), 1:403.

his lifetime. Therefore, one can reasonably look at al-Azraqī's description of the Ka'ba in the third century of Islam as reliable.

In the same vein, the Meccan chronicler also reports that the first caliph who adorned the building was al-Walīd b. 'Abd al-Malik (r. 86–96/705–715). A century later, the gold on the two doors of the Ka'ba plated by al-Walīd got thin and cracked (*raqqā wa-tafarraqa*). During the short reign of Muḥammad b. Hārūn, nicknamed al-Amīn (r. 193–198/809–813), the Abbasid caliph undertook a full renovation of the doors and sent 18,000 dīnārs to Sālim b. al-Jarrāḥ, the one in charge of Meccan *ṣawāfi*, or crown land, to add to the plated gold already on the doors. Again, it would be problematic to endorse al-Azraqī's claim about al-Walīd b. 'Abd al-Malik without additional research. However, al-Azraqī was a contemporary of the caliph al-Amīn and thus of the renovation he describes. His observation that the two doors were

still in the same condition (*wa-humā 'alā ḥālihima*) was presumably accurate when he wrote his chronicle.⁵

To conclude, Simon O'Meara's book is innovative in its approach. The artistic value of the Ka'ba lies in its function, which is to be understood in the intellectual output generated throughout the centuries. In this regard, the work undertaken by the author is to be welcomed. By contrast, the historical survey of the building produces a mixed bag of results, which tend to reinforce the idea that it is impossible to write a history of the Ka'ba in the first centuries of Islam. However, our knowledge of the Ka'ba is certainly strengthened and developed by the present study, particularly in terms of the religious meanings of the building. Lying at the intersection of several fields, O'Meara's book will also enrich further discussions on the relationship between art, history, and religion.

5. Ibid., 307.