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Ka'ba or Kaaba
Medieval Islamic Civilization, An Encyclopedia
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The Ka'ba

The structure and its immediate precincts in Mecca that also house a large mosque are referred to in the Qur'an and subsequently in Muslim tradition as the House of God (*bayt Allah*) and the sacred Mosque (*masjid al haram*). The Ka'ba is the point of orientation for Muslims when they pray, and it is also the focal point of the Pilgrimage (*Hajj*) as well as the *umra* (minor pilgrimage). The *Hajj* takes place over a fixed period in the prescribed month, whereas the *umra* may be undertaken at any other time.

During pre-Islamic times, the Ka'ba served as a shrine and a sacred space (*haram*). Arab tribes and others made annual pilgrimages to the site and visited it to honor tribal and ancestral deities that included several gods and goddesses. Representatives of these deities were kept in the Ka'ba, and the ritual visits were often accompanied by music, dance, and the recitation of poetry.

The Prophet Muhammad was forced to leave Mecca as a result of the opposition he encountered because of his preaching, his activities against many tribal practices and values, and his claim to be the messenger of a new revelation. He migrated to Medina in 622 CE, but he subsequently negotiated to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca with his followers. In 629 CE, Mecca submitted to him, and he was able to enter the town peacefully and purge the Ka'ba of its idols, restoring it to its original role as the symbol of a monotheistic faith and affirming its place as the site of the *Hajj*, which became established as a major pilgrimage practice of the new faith of Islam. He also linked the Ka'ba to Prophet Abraham, who, with his wife Hagar and son Ismail (Ishmael), is also believed to have established a place of worship there. According to Muslim tradition, it is also the location of the first ever place of worship. The formalised practices for the *Hajj* were also instituted by the Prophet, thereby linking the Ka'ba to other nearby centres to constitute the totality of pilgrimage rituals. An irregular cube-like structure, the Ka'ba itself measures approximately fifteen meters in height, ten meters in length and twelve meters in width. Its four corners are generally aligned with the four points of the compass. On one of the corners, set in a silver bezel, is the Black Stone (*al hajar al aswad*), which is believed to be of miraculous and ancient origin. Pilgrims customarily kiss or touch it, and they also begin the circling (*tawaf*) of the Ka'ba during the pilgrimage from this point.

The Ka'ba is generally covered with a black silk covering embroidered with Qur'anic verses, called a *kiswa*, which is replaced annually, a practice that originated during medieval Muslim history. It has one entrance and the interior is empty, but it is customarily cleansed and swept in a ritual that precedes the *Hajj*.

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The *maqam* (station) of Abraham is located just outside of the Ka'ba. Muslim tradition records that God instructed Abraham to establish the Ka'ba as a place of worship. In the vicinity, just east of the Ka'ba, is also found the Well of Zamzam, which carries forward the linkage with the Abrahamic traditions in which the well sprang forth by God's grace in response to the fervent prayers of Hagar. Its water is now circulated through a modern system of pipes and made available to pilgrims as is ancient Muslim custom.

The symbolism and significance of the Ka'ba are evoked in Muslim mystical tradition in which it plays a cosmic role as the center of the earth. Although the Ka'ba serves as the *qibla* (direction for prayer), Muslims also traditionally bury the dead facing the Ka'ba.

Further Reading

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Crone, Patricia. *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Kamal, Ahmad. *The Sacred Journey: The Pilgrimage to Mecca*. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1961.