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MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

Ka'ba

The **Ka'ba** is a cuboid structure in the centre of Mecca and is the most prominent sacred structure in the Islamic world. Also known as God's house (*bayt Allāh*), it is the direction of prayer (*qibla*) for Muslims across the world and the focal point of several rituals performed by pilgrims undertaking the *hajj* and the *umra* (the lesser pilgrimage). It is approximately fifteen metres tall at its highest point, and its four sides are between approximately ten and thirteen metres long. Inside the Ka'ba, the roof is supported by three pillars. The façade wall, which contains the doorway (suspended a little more than two metres above the ground), faces northeast; the eastern corner of the building contains the famous Black Stone (*al-hajar al-aswad*). The façade wall also faces two other important nearby features, the well of Zamzam and the so-called Maqām Ibrāhīm (station of Abraham). The structure is covered by a garment known as a *kiswa*. A water spout (the *mizāb*) extends from the building in the northwest wall. The precise *qibla* is the section of the northwest wall between this *mizāb* and the western corner. This

wall faces a much shorter semicircular wall known as the *ḥaṭīm*, which encloses an area known as *al-hijr*, said to contain the graves of Ishmael and Hagar (for more information about many of these features, see von Grunebaum, 22–4; Rubin, Ka'ba; Wensinck and Jomier).

1. PRE-ISLAMIC TIMES

There are no explicit references to the Ka'ba extant from the pre-Islamic period, and, although Islamic-era narratives provide a great deal of information about the structure's pre-Islamic history, much of this is clearly salvation-history material. The history of the Ka'ba's origins is further confused by the fact that, although the Qur'ān refers twice to a structure known as the Ka'ba (Q 5:95, 97), it elsewhere speaks more commonly of a "house" (*bayt*), and, although later commentaries understood this house as the Ka'ba, that link is only hinted at in the Qur'ān (Q 5:97). Perhaps the most common understanding in Islamic sources is that Abraham, with his son Ishmael, built the Ka'ba at Mecca, although this is presented in many sources as a re-foundation of a structure first built by Adam and