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# Chapter I

## *Prologue: The Kaʿba*

We shall begin our investigations into the art of Islam with a description of the Kaʿba and its liturgical role, the literally central importance of which for Islamic art, and above all for its architecture, is quite clear. As is well known, every Muslim faces the Kaʿba to recite the canonical prayers, and every mosque is accordingly orientated in this direction; in the subsequent chapters we shall demonstrate everything that follows from this.

There is a further reason for speaking about the Kaʿba at the beginning of this book. It is the only worked object that plays an obligatory part in Muslim worship. If it is not a work of art in the proper sense of the term—being no more than a simple cube of masonry—it belongs rather to what might be termed "proto-art", whose spiritual dimension corresponds to myth or revelation, depending on the point of view. This means that the inherent symbolism of the Kaʿba, in its shape and the rites associated with it, contains in embryo everything expressed by the sacred art of Islam.

The Kaʿba's role as the liturgical center of the Muslim world is bound up with the fact that it demonstrates Islam's link with the Abrahamic tradition and thereby with the origin of all the monotheist religions. According to the Koran, the Kaʿba was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael, and it was Abraham who established the yearly pilgrimage to this sanctuary. Center and origin: here are the two aspects of one and the same spiritual reality, or again, one could say, the two fundamental options of every spirituality.[1]

For the generality of Muslims, to pray facing the Kaʿba—or facing Mecca, which comes to the same thing—expresses *a priori* a choice: by this gesture, the Muslim is distinguished both from the Jews, who pray facing Jerusalem, and the Christians who "orientate" themselves literally by facing the sunrise; he elects to join the "religion of the center", which is like the tree from which the other religions stem. "Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian", says the Koran, "but detached (*ḥanīf*) and submitting (*muslim*)…" (3:67). The impact of these words is that the faith of Abraham—who is here the very typification of a Muslim—is free from the specializations and limitations represented, in Muslim eyes, by the Jewish concept of a people chosen to the exclusion of all others, and by the Christian dogma of a unique savior, the Son of God.

Let us note that the Koranic account of the building of the Kaʿba by Abraham does not stress his role as ancestor of the Arabs—his descendants through Ishmael and Hagar—but his function as the apostle of the pure and universal monotheism that Islam purposes to renew. Whatever the historical basis[2] of this account, it is inconceivable that the Prophet should have invented it for more or less political motives, apart from questions of sincerity. The pre-Islamic Arabs were obsessed with genealogy—which is, in any case, a characteristic of nomads—and would never have accepted the "interpolation" of a hitherto unknown ancestor.[3] If the Bible makes no reference to a sanctuary founded by Abraham and Ishmael in Arabia, this is because it had no cause to refer to a sanctuary placed outside the land and destiny of Israel. It nevertheless recognized the spiritual destiny of the Ishmaelites by including them in God's promise to Abraham. Let us note finally—without straying too far from our subject—that it is typical of a divine "geometry", which is both strict and unforeseeable, to

make use of an Abrahamic sanctuary lost in the desert and forgotten by the great religious communities of the time, in order to have a starting point for renewing monotheism of a Semitic complexion.[4] The question so many students of Islam ask themselves: "What happened at Mecca to bring about a new religion?", could well be put the other way round: "For what reasons did the new, nascent religion first manifest itself in this spot?"

The eminently archaic form of the Mecca sanctuary accords well with the Abrahamic origin attributed to it. It has, indeed, been frequently destroyed and rebuilt, but the very name Kaʿba, which means "cube", is a warrant that its shape has not been essentially modified; it is slightly irregular, being twelve meters long, ten meters broad and about sixteen meters high.

The building is traditionally covered with a "vesture" (*kiswaḥ*) which is changed yearly and which has, since the Abbasid period, been made of black cloth embroidered with gold lettering, which bespeaks in striking fashion the both abstract and mysterious aspect of the edifice. The custom of "clothing" the sanctuary was apparently introduced by an ancient Himyarite king, and seems to be part of an extremely venerable Semitic tradition which is, in any case, alien in style to the Greco-Roman world: to "clothe" a house is, in a way, to treat it as a living body or as an ark bearing a spiritual influence, and that is how the Arabs understood it. As for the celebrated black stone, it is enclosed not in the center of the Kaʿba but in an outer wall close to its meridian angle. It is a meteorite, and therefore a stone fallen from heaven, and the Prophet did no more than confirm its sacred character.[5] Finally, let us mention the outer precinct, roughly circular, of the *ḥaram*, which forms part of the sanctuary.

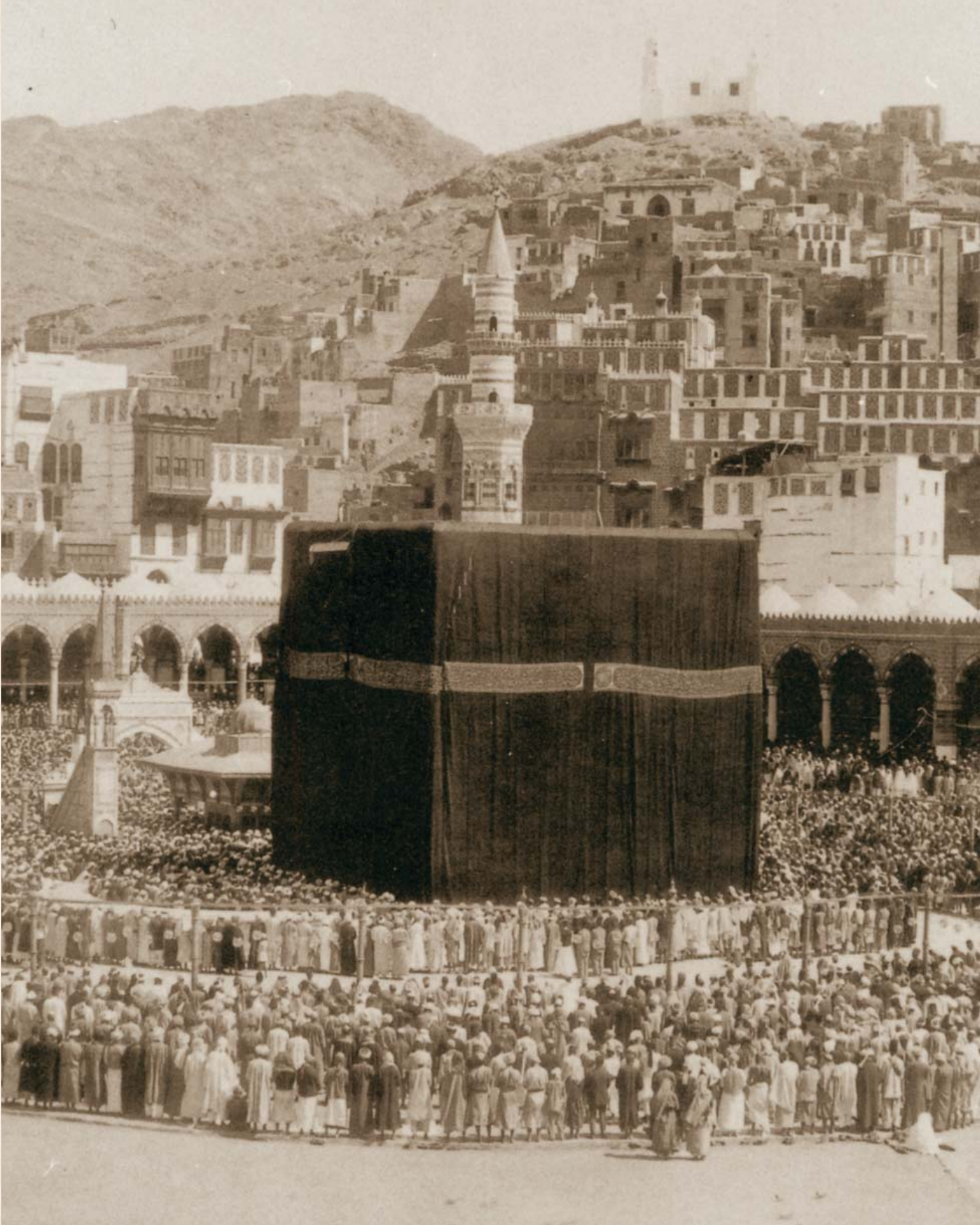
The Kaʿba is the only Islamic sanctuary which can be compared to a temple. It is commonly called the "house of God" (*baytu ʾLlāḥ*), and it has in fact the character of a "divine dwelling", paradoxical as this may seem in a Muslim climate, where the idea of divine transcendence outweighs everything. But God "dwells", as it were, in the ungraspable center of the world, as he "dwells" in the innermost center of man. It will be recalled that the Holy of Holies in the Temple at Jerusalem which was likewise a divine "habitation", had the shape of a cube, like the Kaʿba. The Holy of Holies, or *debir*, contained the Ark of the Covenant, whereas the interior of the Kaʿba is empty;[6] it contains only a curtain, which oral tradition calls the "curtain of Divine Mercy (*Raḥmaḥ*)".

The cube is linked to the idea of the center, since it is a crystalline synthesis of the whole of space, each face of the cube corresponding to one of the primary directions, namely the zenith, the nadir, and the four cardinal points. Let us remember, even so, that the positioning of the Kaʿba does not entirely correspond to this scheme, because it is the four corners, and not the sides of the Kaʿba, which face the cardinal points, doubtless because the cardinal points mean, in the Arab concept, the four "corner pillars" (*arkān*) of the universe.[7]

The center of the terrestrial world is the point intersected by the "axis" of heaven: the rite of circumambulation (*ṭawāf*), around the Kaʿba, which is to be found in one form or other in the majority of ancient sanctuaries,[8] is then seen to reproduce the rotation of heaven around its polar axis. Naturally, these are not the interpretations attributed by Islam to these ritual elements, but are inherent *a priori* in a view of things shared by all the religions of antiquity.

The "axial" character of the Kaʿba is, however, affirmed by a well-known Muslim legend, according to which the "ancient house", first built by Adam, then destroyed by the flood and rebuilt by Abraham, is situated at the lower extremity of an axis which traverses all the heavens; at the level of each heavenly world, another sanctuary, frequented by angels, marks this same axis, the supreme prototype of each of these sanctuaries being God's throne, around which circulates the chorus of the heavenly

*Opposite*: **2.** The Kaʿba at Mecca



spirits; but it would be more exact to say that they circulate within it, since the divine throne encloses all creation.

This legend bears clear witness to the relationship which exists between ritual "orientation" and Islam as submission or abandonment (*islām*) to the Divine Purpose. The fact of turning in prayer to a single point, ungraspable as such but situated on earth and analogous, in its singleness, to the center of every world, is eloquent of the integration of human will in the Universal Will: "and to God are all things returned" (Koran 3:109). At the same time, it will be seen that there is a difference between this symbolism and that of Christian worship, where the point of orientation is that part of the sky where the sun, the image of Christ reborn, rises at Easter. This means that all orientated churches have parallel axes, whereas the axes of all the mosques in the world converge.

The convergence of all the gestures of adoration upon a single point becomes apparent, however, only in the proximity of the Kaʿba, when the host of believers bows down in common prayer from all sides towards a single center; there is perhaps no more immediate and tangible expression of Islam.[9]

It will have been gathered that the liturgy of Islam is linked to the Kaʿba in two different but complementary modes, one static and the other dynamic: the first mode means that every place on earth is directly attached to the Meccan center, and it is in this sense that the Prophet said, "God has blessed my community by giving them the face of the whole world as a sanctuary". The center of this unique sanctuary is the Kaʿba, and the believer, who prays in the universal sanctuary, finds that all distance is momentarily abolished. The second mode, which is dynamic in nature, is made manifest in the pilgrimage, which every Muslim must make at least once in his lifetime, if he is able. There is an aspect of divestment in the pilgrimage, and this ordinarily transmits itself to the entire Islamic ambience; at the same time, its impact on the believer is that of a dramatic recapitulation of his *islām*: arriving at the threshold of the sacred area surrounding Mecca, the pilgrim divests himself of all his clothing, purifies himself with water from head to toe, and garbs himself in two pieces of seamless cloth, one around his waist and the other over one shoulder. It is in this "consecrated" state (*iḥrām*) that he approaches the Kaʿba to accomplish the rite of circumambulation (*ṭawāf*), ceaselessly invoking God. Only after this visit to the "house of God" does he set out for the various places associated with sacred history, and completes his peregrination by sacrificing a ram in memory of Abraham's sacrifice.[10]

We shall see later how these two modes of adoration, the one static and the other dynamic, are reflected at different levels in the world of Islam. In the present context we wish to show only one thing, namely, that the Muslim soul and, thereby, Muslim art are grounded in a world that is closer to that of the Old Testament Patriarchs than to the Greco-Roman universe, to which Islam had to turn for the first elements of its art. Let us not forget that Islam was born in a "no man's land" between two great civilizations, the Byzantine and the Persian, which were at the same time empires disputing Arabia, and which Islam had to fight and overcome for its own survival. Compared with these two worlds, both of which had an artistic heritage[11] tending towards naturalism and rationalism, the Kaʿba and its associated rites are like an anchor cast in a timeless deep.

When the Prophet had conquered Mecca, he went first to the sacred enclosure and performed the circumambulation of the Kaʿba on camelback. The pagan Arabs had surrounded this area with a girdle of 360 idols, one for each day of the lunar year. Touching these idols with his riding stick, the Prophet overturned them one after the other, while reciting the verse from the Koran, "Truth has come; vanity has vanished; in truth vanity is evanescent" (17:81).

**3.** Detail of embroidery with lettering from a *kiswah* (vesture of the Kaʿba)

He was then handed the key of the Kaʿba and went in. The inner walls were adorned with paintings executed by a Byzantine artist on the orders of the Kaʿba's pagan masters; they portrayed scenes from the life of Abraham and certain idolatrous customs. There was also a representation of the Holy Virgin and Child. Protecting this icon of the Holy Virgin with both hands, the Prophet ordered that all the others be effaced. The icon of the Virgin was later destroyed by a fire.[12] This traditional story demonstrates the meaning and the scale of what is erroneously called "Muslim iconoclasm", and which we would rather call "aniconism": if the Kaʿba is the heart of man, the idols, which inhabited it, represent the passions which invest the heart and impede the remembrance of God. Therefore, the destruction of idols—and, by extension, the putting aside of every image likely to become an idol—is the clearest possible parable for Islam of the "one thing necessary", which is the purification of the heart for the sake of *tawḥīd*, the bearing of witness or the awareness that "there is no divinity save God".

To create a new Muslim iconography would be superfluous after such an example and would deprive the parable of its meaning. In Islam, icons are replaced by sacred writing which is, as it were, the visible embodiment of the Divine Word.

## Notes to Chapter I

1. "The whole existence of the peoples of antiquity, and of traditional peoples in general, is dominated by two presiding ideas, the idea of Center and the idea of Origin" (Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* [London: Perennial Books, 1965], p. 7).

2. It is possible for a sacred story to be more true—in the sense of having a greater reality—than a purely empirical or historical account of the events.

3. See Y. Moubarac, *Abraham in the Quran*, coll. Ètudes musulmanes (Paris: Vrin, 1958).

4. There are forms of monotheism which lie outside Semitic or Abrahamic lineage.

5. For all the peoples of antiquity, a stone fallen from the sky could not be other than sacred, and necessarily so, for things are what they mean.

6. This is true also of the "cell" of certain Hindu temples, and this "cell" or matrix (*gharbagriha*) has also the shape of a cube.

7. St. John's Apocalypse describes the Heavenly Jerusalem as an imperishable synthesis of the world in the shape of a cube.

8. Notably in Hinduism and Buddhism, but also in medieval Christianity, in the form of processions around a saint's tomb.

9. Inside the Kaʿba there is no more ritual "orientation"; the difference between each convergent direction is annulled, and the custom of the Prophet requires that four brief prayers be made, facing each side of the sanctuary in turn. Thus it is that in the world's spiritual center, the contrasts or oppositions which typify the world are no longer dominating but dominated.

According to a Sufi interpretation, the Kaʿba corresponds to the heart as the seat of the Divine "Presence", and the encircling movement of the pilgrims around the Kaʿba recalls the movement of thoughts or meditations turning perpetually around the soul's ungraspable center.

10. The great pilgrimage moves across the Islamic world as the circulation of the blood moves through man's body, the Kaʿba being the heart.

11. This heritage cropped up occasionally in Europe and, with the Renaissance, finished by engulfing the fundamentally Christian civilization of the Middle Ages.

12. According to al-Azraqī, the author of the oldest history of Mecca. The icon portrayed the Holy Virgin with the Infant on her knees.

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*Features in*

*Art of Islam, Language and Meaning: Commemorative Edition*
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