THE EARLIEST KNOWN SCHEMES OF ISLAMIC SACRED GEOGRAPHY

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The Ka’ba is the qibla for people in the Sacred Mosque. The Sacred Mosque is the qibla for people in the sacred area around it. The sacred area is the qibla for people in all regions of the world.

Ibn Rahiq (Yemen, eleventh century) 1

1. Introduction

Following injunctions in the Qur’an and much discussed in the sunna, the qibla, or sacred direction of Islam, is highly significant in daily Muslim life. 2 Not only the five daily ritual prayers have to be performed towards the Ka’ba in Mecca, but also other religious duties such as the recitation of the Qur’an, announcing the call to prayer, ritual slaughter of animals, and the burial of the dead. Islamic sacred geography is the notion of the world being centred on the Ka’ba, and those who followed it proposed facing the qibla by means of simple

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3 For a general introduction to the qibla, see A.J. Wensinck, 'Kibla i. Ritual and Legal Aspects,' in EI 2.
folk astronomical methods, independent of mathematical geography. Islamic sacred geography involves three main principles:

• The axes of the rectangular base of the Ka'ba are astronomically oriented while the four corners of the building point roughly to the four cardinal directions. The major axis is oriented towards the rising point of Canopus and the setting points of the Handle of the Plough; the minor axis is aligned to the rising point of the sun at the summer solstice and its setting point at the winter solstice. In early Islamic folklore, the walls are also associated with the winds, their limits being defined by similar astronomical phenomena.

• The world around the Ka'ba is divided into sectors, each one being associated with a segment of the perimeter of the building.

• Qibla directions are intended to face the segment of the perimeter of the Ka'ba that is associated with one's locality, as if one were standing directly in front of that part of the building and facing at the same astronomical indicators or qibla stars.