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UPON READING AL-AZRAQI

It is altogether curious that so little scholarship has been devoted to the physical features of Mecca in early Islamic times. Except for the informative and detailed entries in the two editions of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* most writing on Mecca has been concerned either with its socioeconomic and religious-cultural setting at the time of the Revelation to Muhammad or, even more often, with the pilgrimage, its complex liturgical practices, its concomitant economic and other practical problems, and, especially in more recent times, the powerfully moving emotional and spiritual experiences of the faithful on this holiest of journeys.

Yet, however fascinating and emotionally charged the practices and symbolic associations of the pilgrimage might be, they are only one part of the impact the holy city has on the pilgrim. The Ka'ba, the Masjid al-Haram, or Sacred Mosque, surrounding it, and the whole city of Mecca are today, as they were in the past, part of a common visual memory of the Muslim community, even if colored by the emotional make-up and sensitivities of each particular individual. Every Muslim has in common an awareness of its forms and spatial compositions.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, photographs and films have been available to serve as reminders of the holy city and of the events taking place in it. In earlier centuries people relied on printed, stenciled, drawn, and painted pictures rendered on paper, cloth, tile, stone, or any other available material for the images of Mecca that became the souvenirs or mementos that were the permanent signs of a believer’s association with the city of the qibla. These representations are, however, for the most part very conventional and stereotyped and, pending detailed investigation, contribute very little to an understanding of the holy city’s physical character and evolution. They are pious images, not historical documents, and reflect a standard, toponymically accurate but visually simplified vision of a rectangle with the places of commemorative or liturgical importance clearly marked. The contrast between them and the complicated and frequently difficult to interpret sixth-century Byzantine phials from Jerusalem is striking. Furthermore, the Muslim images all belong to a time when the sanctuary had acquired more or less the shape it would keep until the momentous and irreversible transformations of recent decades, a shape fixed in its major features by the end of the ninth century. Even the principal monuments punctuating the holy place had been built by the fifteenth century, and such stylistic variations as occurred during reconstructions were rarely, if ever, recorded on images. They were not meant to be descriptions of places, but evocations of holiness, and they do not provide any sense of the range of emotion or reaction the faithful experienced as they reached the sanctuary, nor do they express the complex memories carried away by pilgrims afterward. There is nothing in these depictions that is comparable in range to Ibn Jubayr’s rapturous but very precise description studded with Koranic quotations, Ibn Battuta’s chatty but equally concrete account full of stories and minor human events, Ibn Khaldun’s perfunctory statement with a long reference to the letters he received and the important people he met in Mecca, or Ibn al-Arabi’s transformation of the holy place and of the pilgrimage into a stunning cosmological vision. But even these literary examples are relatively late (the earliest author, Ibn Jubayr, was born in 1145); they belong to essentially post-Fatimid centuries, when the Muslim world had fully developed a material culture of piety around Mecca and probably other religious sanctuaries as well.

What happened to the Meccan sanctuary between the Prophet’s glorious and official return to it in 631 and the, properly speaking, medieval restructuring of the Muslim world from the eleventh century onward? Is it possible to imagine the attitudes of people during the formative centuries of Islam toward the shape, the physical form, of their holiest sanctuary? The investigation I am proposing, of which this essay is only a very preliminary step, has as its long-range objective an understanding of the interplay between specific building activities—the erection of a colonnade or of a
portico, the repaving of a court, the addition of some decoration—which can easily be documented through an inscription or a chronicle’s reference, and the practical, ideological, pietistic, and symbolic motivations and explanations attached to these activities. This type of investigation may allow us little by little to develop a profile of the synchronic and diachronic mental attitudes of Muslims and of the relationship between those attitudes and architecture. Because of its overwhelming importance to Muslims, the Haram in Mecca can serve as an exemplar for this sort of investigation, and whatever hypotheses or conclusions can be reached for Mecca should apply to other holy buildings and places as well.

There is no available archaeological record for the Haram, and none is likely to be forthcoming. We are therefore restricted to incidental references in chronicles, to the factual but, with a partial exception in the case of Maqdisi, remarkably sober descriptions in tenth-century geographies,\(^\text{10}\) and to the lengthy volume Kitâb Akhbâr Makka ("Book of Information on Mecca") by Abu al-Walid Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlî al-Aẓrâqî.\(^\text{11}\) The book was put together before 865 by a native of Mecca claiming descent from a Byzantine soldier who was taken prisoner during the Persian wars of the seventh century. It is primarily a text completed by a member of his family before 837, but, as preserved and edited, also includes references from as late as 922-23. It was probably revised by a pupil of al-Aẓrâqî called al-Khuza‘î.\(^\text{12}\) Although there is some evidence that works on Mecca and on the Ka’ba were written earlier, including one by Wâḥb ibn Munabbîh in the early eighth century,\(^\text{13}\) none has survived. Aẓrâqî’s mid-ninth-century work is therefore not only the earliest extant book on Mecca, but the earliest preserved example of a book devoted to a single city. An added peculiarity is that it does not deal at all with the city’s notables, as most Arabic literature on cities does, but with its buildings and their history. By its very nature, therefore, it establishes that Mecca’s physical character and evolution had primacy over the people who lived in it.

Several recent studies on early Muslim writers have begun to formulate methods for investigating written sources that will define the attitudes of their authors and explain the experiences and thoughts that lie behind a book’s content and structure.\(^\text{14}\) Such investigations can be of great value to the historian and interpreter of visual forms, but they also require complex and painstaking philological, linguistic, critical, and historical inquiries that are far removed from the art historian’s or archaeologist’s concerns and competence.

A brief description of al-Aẓrâqî’s work will suggest the type of information that could be extracted from a literary and structural analysis of this kind. Structurally the book can be divided into four unequal parts: the first covers the Ka’ba from the Creation to the Yemenis’ attempt to destroy the Ka’ba late in the sixth century (pp. 1-84); the second, the “historical” Ka’ba and the immediately surrounding holy spots (Maqam Ibrahim, Zemzem well) from the time of their reconstruction by the Quraythah before the Revelation to al-Aẓrâqî’s time, with sections on the chronology, characteristics, and liturgical or daily uses of the holy places (pp. 84-301); the third, the Masjid al-Haram, i.e., the open space which surrounds the Ka’ba and which is entirely a Muslim creation (pp. 301-445); and the fourth, the living quarters of the city and a few miscellaneous items (pp. 445-505).

Except for the last section, which is fairly straightforward and enumerative, each part consists of a large number of chapters, some as long as ten or fifteen pages, some as short as a paragraph or a few lines. Some are purely descriptive, either of a building or of a fragment of a building (e.g., the nails and the gutter of the Ka’ba); some deal with an event (e.g., the Yemeni invasion) or with a sequence of events (e.g., the various pieces of cloth put on the Ka’ba and the scents sprayed on it over several centuries), or with good or bad practices and obligations (e.g., on p. 316, the virtue of circumambulating the Ka’ba in the rain). In other words, the book is neither an account in chronological sequence nor is it an orderly description of space. There is a constant interplay between specific moments, usually established quite precisely with names and dates when known, and equally specific places in the sanctuary. It is as though the understanding of something seen requires its connection with a historical or a mythical event, often drawn from the lives of Abraham or Hagar, which were connected with so many places in Mecca.

The same events are repeated several times, and while a coherent chronology can be derived from al-Aẓrâqî’s account, establishing a sequence of events does not seem to be its main point. Only a careful structural analysis of many passages\(^\text{15}\) in al-Aẓrâqî’s book and their collation with other historical or religious sources would reveal whether he was using events to explain anomalous as well as regular features and practices, or whether he was seeking to connect sacred and, later,