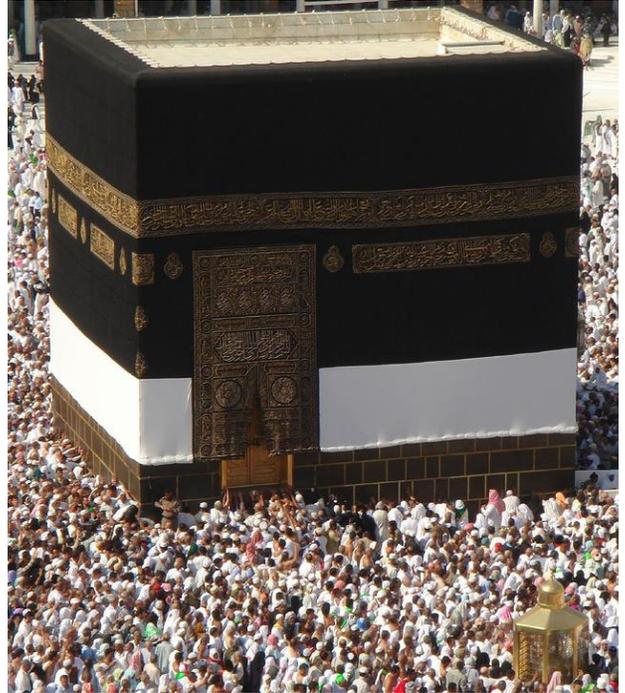


The Kaaba: Islam's Holiest Monument

In pre-Islamic times, the structure that is the Kaaba was a sanctuary. Muslims believe that Abraham—known as Ibrahim in the Islamic tradition—and his son, Ismail, built it. Tradition holds that it was originally a simple unroofed rectangular structure. The Quraysh tribe, who ruled Mecca, rebuilt the pre-Islamic Kaaba around the year 608 with wood and masonry. A door was raised above ground level to protect the shrine from intruders and flood waters.

Muhammad was driven out of Mecca in 620 to Yathrib, which is now known as Medina. Upon his return to Mecca in 629, the shrine became the focal point for Muslim worship and pilgrimage. The pre-Islamic Kaaba housed the Black Stone and statues of pagan gods. Muhammad reportedly cleansed the Kaaba of idols upon his victorious return to Mecca, returning the shrine to the monotheism of Ibrahim. The Black Stone is believed to have been given to Ibrahim by the angel Gabriel and is revered by Muslims. Muhammad made a final pilgrimage in 632, the year of his death, and thereby established the rites of pilgrimage.



Changes Over Time

The Kaaba has been modified extensively throughout its history. The area around the Kaaba was expanded to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims by the second caliph. The Caliph Uthman, who ruled 644-56, built the colonnades around the open plaza where the Kaaba stands and incorporated other important monuments into the sanctuary.

During the civil war between the caliph Abd al-Malik and Ibn Zubayr, who controlled Mecca, the Kaaba was set on fire in 683 CE. Reportedly, the Black Stone broke into three pieces and Ibn Zubayr reassembled it with silver. He rebuilt the Kaaba in wood and stone, following Ibrahim's original dimensions and paved the space around it. After regaining control of Mecca, Abd al-Malik restored the part that Muhammad is thought to have designed.

Under the Umayyad Dynasty, the mosque that encloses the Kaaba was decorated with mosaics like those of the Dome of the Rock and the Great Mosque of Damascus. By the seventh century, the Kaaba was covered with kiswah, a black cloth that is replaced annually during the hajj.

Under the early Abbasid Caliphs, the mosque around the Kaaba was expanded and modified several times and the Ottoman sultan, Süleyman I later renovated much of the complex. In 1631, the Kaaba and the surrounding mosque were entirely rebuilt after floods demolished them in the previous year. This mosque, which is what exists today, is composed of a large open space with colonnades on four sides and seven minarets, the most of any mosque in the world. At the center of this large plaza sits the Kaaba.

The Kaaba Today

Today the mosque covers almost 40 acres. The Kaaba is a cubical structure - almost 50 feet tall and meters tall and 35 feet on each side; its corners roughly align with the cardinal directions. The door of the Kaaba is made of solid gold. The kiswah—the large cloth that covers the Kaaba—used to be sent from Egypt with the hajj caravan but today is made in Saudi Arabia.

All Muslims aspire to undertake the hajj, or the annual pilgrimage, to the Kaaba once in their lives if they are able. Praying five times a day and the hajj are two of the five pillars of Islam, the most fundamental principles of the faith. Until the advent of modern transportation, all pilgrims undertook the often-dangerous hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca in a large caravan across the desert, leaving from Damascus, Cairo, and other major cities in Arabia, Yemen, or Iraq. Only Muslims may visit the holy cities of Mecca and Medina today.

Name _____

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Directions: After reading about the Kaaba, answer the following questions by circling your answer or writing the answer in complete sentences.

1. Based on the reading, what would someone most likely use the Kaaba for in pre-Islamic times?
 - a. To worship pagan gods.
 - b. As a place of refuge or safety.
 - c. As a defensive fortress.
 - d. As a market to buy goods.
2. How did the Kaaba come to be a holy site for Muslims?
3. Why did the 2nd caliph need to expand the area around the Kaaba?
4. What effect did the civil war between Abd al-Malik and Ibn Zubayr have on the Kaaba?
5. Which of the following damages has the Kaaba not endured?
 - a. Set on fire.
 - b. Flooded.
 - c. Exploded.
 - d. Broken into pieces.
6. How would Muslims make the hajj in the 1700's?
7. Compare the Kaaba to a different religious site around the world. In what ways are they similar and in what ways are they different?