Simon O'Meara, *The Ka’ba Orientations. Readings in Islam’s Ancient House*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. 264 pp., ISBN 978-0-7486-9930-8.

With his work *The Kaʿba Orientations*, Simon O'Meara has presented a monograph on the most important building in the history of Islamic culture and religion, which, despite this fact, has received surprisingly little scholarly attention to date. In doing so, the author, a prolific Islamic architecture historian, employs a transdisciplinary approach: under the creative design of chapter headings in the form of “The Kaʿba as” or “The House as,” he brings together materials from the fields of architectural history, art history, mathematical as well as folk astronomy, travel literature, and mystical and theological texts to treat the Kaʿba in the pre-modern period in a comprehensive manner. In doing so, he does not, in my view, proceed in a “multidisciplinary” way (pp. 4-5) but, by directly relating the partial analyses to one another, even with a transdisciplinary attitude and with a fine sense for terminological issues (e.g., for the designation of the Kaʿba as temple, betyl, house, or palladium, pp. 6-7). In a systematic approach, the author focuses on the spatial dimension of this Islamic sanctuary and conceives of its main religious function according to Charles Long as orientation (p. 1).

O'Meara’s book is structured along a zoom-in (“furthest to nearest,” pp. 3-4): First, the *qibla* function of the Kaʿba is discussed, including whether the Kaʿba or Mecca indicated the direction of the *qibla*, the metaphorical transfer of its function to rulers, and the extent to which profane buildings were also oriented toward the Kaʿba. This is followed by a discussion of the Kaʿba in its own orientation (according to David King’s findings astronomically, not cardinally; pp. 40ff), its function as the bearer of the world, and its possible role in naming places. The third chapter addresses the fact that, although the Kaʿba has been destroyed and rebuilt several times in Islamic history, this has not led to apocalyptic expectations. O'Meara then discusses the direct ritual acts at the Kaʿba, identifies the fact that attempts at their rational explanation were rare among Islamic scholars (and thus have also led to disregard in Orientalist research), and explores the motif of the Kaʿba as a bride. The fifth chapter addresses the question of what the house actually houses and concludes that it is precisely its relative emptiness that is an important religious component of this sacred building. Finally, O'Meara analyzes the function of the *kiswa* in veiling or animating the Kaʿba in her dwelling of a divine presence and presents as the most innovative chapter of this book an impressive compilation of Persian miniature paintings under this question.

By compiling and analyzing the material, O'Meara pursues four goals: As already indicated above, the author wants to give the Kaʿba the attention it deserves – as becomes clear in view of the rich abundance of material. From the importance of the Kaʿba, which can be demonstrated early on (for example, as a landmark for the orientation of cities, pp. 30ff), he further develops counterarguments against revisionist claims that consider early Islamic history at least in the dark, if not even for invention, and thus substantiates the character of the Kaʿba as an Islamic building (p. 159). Third, his aforementioned transdisciplinary approach is accompanied by the conviction that the physicality of the Kaʿba itself, as well as the physical properties attributed to it, are not merely to be perceived metaphorical but quite literal. Fourth, the author’s attitude of regarding objects such as the Kaʿba not only as an object but also as a subject becomes clear in some passages of this monograph and is thus elaborated from the sources: The Kaʿba as a “working of art” (p. 2). This fruitful approach corresponds to current considerations in the field of *visual culture studie*s, but goes far beyond the iconological approach of an Erwin Panofksy (sic!) who is referred to by the author himself (p. 5-6).

Despite the great strengths of this work, which lie in the detailed research, sharp analysis, and innovative presentation of the material, I should nevertheless be allowed a few points of criticism at this point. While it is to be welcomed that O'Meara reflects considerations of the history of philosophy on the individual dimensions of the Kaʿba, in some places (and here he partly admits himself that these may not be entirely convincing, cf. pp. 76-77) these connections seem too far-fetched and one would have wished for a closer engagement with the primary sources. For instance, there is nothing wrong with the inclusion of Kant’s thesis that the body determines one’s orientation in the world. However, to conclude from this that the Kaʿba created orientation for the Islamic faith community, but that the time of the *shirk* stood in contrast to this (pp. 61-62, here p. 62: “We argued that referring to disorientation as idolatry was a good way of understanding why orientation was so important to Islam, for it spoke of the absolute antithesis of Islam’s absolute monotheism, shirk.”) is an untenable thesis, considering that the Kaʿba and other betyle were already directional places of worship in pre-Islamic times. Furthermore, it is debatable whether the conceptual pair of *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir*, so prominent in Islamic intellectual history, actually lies, as is claimed, in the spatial structure of the Kaʿba in belly (*baṭn*) and back (*ẓahr*) (p. 76: “Regardless of what physical Kaʿba structure stands or lies in ruin at Mecca, the bodily projected Kaʿba structure lives in the structure of Islamic thought”). Rather, is not Semitic semantics older than the designation of the parts of the Kaʿba (cf. Martin Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qurʾānic Arabic*, Leiden: Brill 2002, p. 96 on the root *bṭn* and p. 277 on the root *ẓhr*) or of such general importance that there must be semantic overlap here? After all, the author himself provides a counter-evidence against this thesis on p. 78-79 by giving an example according to which *baṭn* has a negative connotation. His conclusion from this, however, is that the Kaʿba is immune (!) to this negative attribution.

A more abstract treatment of the results could have found its place in the conclusions of the individual subchapters or in the general concluding remarks, which, however, are conceived merely as summaries. The reason that the temporal dimension surrounding the developments around the Kaʿba falls somewhat behind and thus texts and illustrations stand side by side without contextualization is related to the systematic conception of this book. To take a thinker such as Ibn ʿArabī, who had a significant impact on his posterity but was exceptional in every respect, as the main source for an argument (here: the bodily transformation *taḥawwul* at the *ṭawāf*, p. 97) indicates a certain daring on the part of the author. Although O'Meara admits to not being an expert in all of the areas covered (p. 4-5), there are hardly any shortcomings to be noted. What plays only a marginal role, however, although it has great spatial significance, are the rites that belong to the Hajj but are localized outside the Kaʿba. If the author had dwelt on this a bit more, he would not have missed the fact that the plain of ʿArafāt played an almost more decisive role in the pre-Islamic period and in early Islam than the Kaʿba itself, which probably only constituted itself as the pilgrimage destination of Islam after the battles over the Kaʿba between ʿAbdullāh b. al-Zubayr and the Umayyads (cf. G. R. Hawting, “The Ḥajj in the Second Civil War,” in Ian Richard Netton, *Golden Roads. Migration, Pilgrimage and Travel in Mediaeval and Modern Islam*, Richmond: Curzon Press 1993, pp. 31-42). Since the work sees the Kaʿba as a point of orientation for the most diverse cultural processes in the realm of Islam – also due to the subject matter, of course – the plain of ʿArafāt would have been at least a counterpoint worth discussing. Although the author concedes at one point or another that other factors could also influence the respective orientation or that there were deviations from this norm (e.g., Baghdad was not oriented toward the Kaʿba, p. 39), a stronger examination of competing concepts of orientation (e.g., ʿArafāt; Jerusalem is mentioned from time to time) could have saved this monograph from becoming too “Kaʿabized.”

Nevertheless, anyone who wants to know how the Kaʿba may have named Yemen (pp. 49ff), why the most important thing about the Kaʿba is its foundations (pp. 69ff), why the ritual acts at the Kaʿba even involve merging with it (pp. 98ff), why the Kaʿba can be interpreted as “visual zero” (pp. 123ff), and how the Kaʿba itself temporarily enters *iḥrām* in a human-like manner (pp. 136ff), may take this Kaʿba Almanac in hand with great insight. For all others, I recommend this work as a must-read due to the impact of the Kaʿba in the most diverse areas of Islamic cultural history.

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