Description of the Kaʿba and its names

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Description of the Kaʿba and its names

This chapter is divided into two sections:

Section I: Description of the Kaʿba.

Section II: The names of the Kaʿba.
Section I

Description of the Kaʿba

Definition:

The Kaʿba is the House of Allah Most High; it is located in the centre of the Sacred Mosque (al-Masjid al-Ḥarām). It is a cuboid-shaped house with a roof and asymmetrical walls: the width of the wall of its door is 11.68 metres, the wall on the side of the Ḥijr measures 9.9 metres, the wall between the Levantine Corner and the Yemeni Corner 12.04 metres and the wall between the Black Stone Corner and the Yemeni Corner 10.18 metres. The Kaʿba is 14 metres high and at its base covers an area of 145 square metres.\(^1\)
The Ka‘ba is quoted in the Noble Qur‘ān twice:

The first time: His word Most High: “Allah has made the Ka‘ba, the Sacred House, standing for the people” (Surat al-Mā‘īda – The Table Spread: verse 97).

﴾جَعَلَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلۡكَعۡبَةَ ٱلَۡيۡتَ ٱلَۡرَامَ قِيَـٰمً۬ا لِّلنَّاسِ﴿

The second time: “as an offering (to Allah) delivered to the Ka‘ba” (Surat al-Mā‘īda – The Table Spread: verse 95).

﴾هَدۡيَۢا بَـٰلِغَ ٱلۡكَعۡبَةِ﴿

Origin of the name:

There are two opinions concerning the origin of the name:

The first derives from the height of the Ka‘ba, its relief and prominence. It was said about the breast of a woman ku‘iba when it appears or soars upward; this is the opinion of the majority. Furthermore, every prominence in Arabic is ka‘b may it be round or not,
for instance the heel of the foot *ka`b al-qadam*.(2)

The second derives from the cuboid shape of its construction, in other words it is squared, and this is the opinion of Mujāhid. To the Arabs, every quadrilateral is called *ka`ba*. *Takīb* in Arabic means giving a cuboid shape, like *tarbīʿ*: making square. Most houses in Arabia were round not squared.(3)

The first opinion is more correct for two reasons:
1. From a linguistic perspective, *kaʿb* is the prominent bone at the crossing of the leg and the foot.\(^{(4)}\)

2. For the geometrical section of the architecture of the Kaʿba. As underlined by modern studies, it has a trapezoid shape of different sides. It is a rarely used form of architecture in construction. **Therefore,** the cause of the denomination of the Honourable Kaʿba goes back to its embossed prominence, not its cuboid shape.\(^{(5)}\)

**The corners of the Kaʿba:**

The great Kaʿba has **four famous corners;** all of them originally oriented towards the four points of the compass with a slight deviation on the right:

**On the North:** the Iraqi Corner. **On the South:** the Yemeni Corner. **On the East:** the Black Stone Corner. **On the West:** the Levantine Corner.

An-Nawawī (m) said: Know that the House has four corners: the Black Stone Corner and the Yemeni Corner. Both of them are called the two Yemeni corners. The
two other corners are called the two Levantine corners. **The Black Stone Corner** has two virtues: it is built on the foundations laid by Ibrāhīm (p) and it is endowed with the Black Stone.

**The Yemeni Corner** itself has one virtue: it is built on the foundations laid by Ibrāhīm (p).

**The two other corners** have no virtues linked with the two quoted above. For this, the Black Stone is singling itself out regarding two points; the touching and the kissing, for its two virtues. The Yemeni Corner is only touched, not kissed, as it has only one virtue. And for the two other corners, they are neither touched nor kissed.
Section II
The names of the Kaʿba

The Honourable Kaʿba has plenty of names. Many of its names underline its nobility.

Among its names are the following:

First: The House (al-Bayt):

This term appears in the Holy Qurʾān 15 times\(^7\), sometimes alone, sometimes with a pronoun that designates Allah Most High\(^8\) and sometimes with a qualifying adjective (sacred, holy, old)\(^9\); for instance:

a. The House:

The term “House” designating the Kaʿba appears in the words of Allah Most High as in the verse:

وَّلَ بَيۡتٍ۬ وُضِعَ لِلنَّاسِ لَلَِّى بِبَكَّةَ مُبَارَكً۬ا

إنَّ أَوَّلَ بَيۡتٍ۬ وُضِعَ لِلنَّاسِ لَلَّذِى لَيْدَى بِبَكَّةَ مُبَارَكَةً

وهَذَّنَى لِلْعَالَمِينَ
“Indeed, the first House (of worship) established for mankind was that at Bakka - blessed and a guidance for the worlds.” Surat ‘Āli ‘Imrān – The Family of Imran: 96.

It has been named “House” for it has a roof and walls, the attributes of a house, even if there is no resident inside.\(^{(10)}\)

b. A House with a pronoun:

The term “House” used with a pronoun designating Allah Most High appears 3 times in the Qur’ān:


\(\text{طَهِّرَ بَيۡتَِ} \)\n

\(\text{وَطَهِّرَ بَيۡتَِ} \)

Ibn ʿAṭiya (m) disclosed the secret of this addition of a pronoun saying: Allah linked the House to Himself, glorifying henceforth the House, and it is the link of something created to the Creator, or the bond between a possession and its owner.\(^{11}\)

c. The Sacred House (al-Bayt al-Ḥarām):

The House has been described as sacred (ḥarām) in two verses of the noble Qur’ān:

1. “those coming to the Sacred House” Surat al-Māʿīda – The Table Spread, verse 2.
2. “Allah has made the Ka’ba, the Sacred House” Surat al-Mā’ida – The Table Spread, verse 97.

\[\text{جَعَلَ آللَّهُ أَلْكَعَبَةَ أَلْبَيْتَ آلْحَرَّامِ}\]

\[\text{Haunted} \text{ is a noun meaning \textit{muḥarram}: forbidden, inviolable. As-Sinjārī (m) said: The Ka’ba has many names, among them: the Sacred House; because Allah Most High made it sacred and glorified it, and the purpose of praising it is to exalt the whole Sanctuary (ḥaram).}^{(12)}\]

d. The Sacred House (al-Bayt al-Muḥarram):

Ibrāhīm (p) said in the Holy Qur’ān:

\[\text{عِندَ بَيۡتِكَ ٱلۡمُحَرَّمِ}\]

“O! Our Lord, I have settled some
of my descendants in an uncultivated valley near Your sacred House” Surat Ibrāhīm verse 37.

The House is described as *muḥarram* a past participle bearing the same semantic meaning of the word *al-ḥarām* i.e. sacred.

**The difference between the two descriptions:**

1. The House described as *muḥarram*, past participle, means that it has been made sacred, or it acquired sacredness, it became sacred, it was not all the time sacred.

2. The use of the word *al-ḥarām* means that the House has become sanctified, it is established as a matter of fact and it continues to be sacred, without taking notice of the time
it became sacred. The stress is put on the constancy and continuity.\(^{(13)}\)

**The reason for the use of the word** *muḥarram* **is** because Allah Most High forbade the disrespect or neglect of the Ka‘ba, and He made its surroundings sacred as a place; **or because** it has always been respected with awe by the powerful as a sacred place, requiring them to stay away from it; **or because** it is respected for its great sanctity which cannot be violated; **or because** it has been protected and preserved from the Deluge, this is the reason it is has been named ʿ*atīq*, it has been saved from it, the Flood did not overcome it.\(^{(14)}\)

e. **The Ancient House (al-Bayt al-ʿatīq):**

The House is described as ancient in two verses of the Holy Qur‘ān:

2. “Then their place of sacrifice is at the Ancient House.” Surat al-Ḥajj – The Pilgrimage verse 33.

Why is it described as ancient (ʿatīq)?

The ulama have advanced many hypotheses concerning the reason for describing the House as ancient, as follows:

1. It has been named ancient for its antiquity; ancient (ʿatīq) in the language means older; we say an ancient sword, an ancient
dinar, which means old\(^{(16)}\). This is underlined by the words of Allah:

\[
\text{» إنَّ أَوَّلَ بَيْتٍ فُضُّعَ لِلنَّاسِ لِلَّذِينَ يُبَيَّنُونَ لَهُمُ الْكَابِثَةَ}
\]

2. “Indeed, the first House (of worship) established for mankind” Surat ʿĀli ʿImrān (Family of Imran) verse 96.

It is the oldest place of worship.\(^{(17)}\)

The name was given because Allah Most High saved it (aʿtaqa) from destruction by the mighty; therefore no one was ever able either to dominate it or to approach it except with respect and for glorifying it.\(^{(18)}\)

3. The word ʿatīq (with the idea of being preserved) was given
because **it has never been owned by anyone**. Ibn Ṣāhīra (m) said: It is said that it is noble for Allah, as **it had never been dominated by any kingdom of Allah's creatures**. It has never been said “the House of so-and-so” rather we used to say “the House of Allah”.(19)

4. The name ʿatīq was given because in its Mosque, Allah Most High is preserving the sinners from punishment and hellfire(20). The word *al-ʿatīq* also means the one who releases the sinners. The release is metaphorical: the Kaʿba itself, by its nature, is releasing the sinners who visit it and circumambulate it.(21)

This is stressed by the following ḥadīth narrated by ‘Āʾisha (rh): Abū Bakr (r) came to Allah’s Messenger (s) who said: **You are**
saved by Allah from the hellfire. That day Abū Bakr received the name ʿatīq.\(^{(22)}\)

5. The name was given for its eminence and excellence, as in the language, one of the meanings of ʿatīq is noble and wonderful. It is said “the most beautiful quality in someone’s face” which means nobility. A woman called ʿatīqa means she is beautiful and noble.\(^{(23)}\)

All of the denominations mentioned above are correct, but the closer to the truth is the very first one: the Kaʿba was described as ancient for its age.

Ash-Shanqīṭī (m) preferred this meaning.\(^{(24)}\)
Secondly: The one who purifies (Qādis):

Among the names of the Ka‘ba: Ḍādis, the one who purifies, coming from ṣanctification or purification), from there came the name of Allah al-Quddūs: the Pure One. And from there came the word muqaddas: the purified. Al-Qādis is the pure or the one who purifies, as the Ka‘ba purifies from sins.

Thirdly: The Consecrated to Allah (Nādhir):

Among the names of the Ka‘ba is Nādhir, “the Consecrated” to Allah, because sacrificial animals and other things are consecrated to Allah in the Sanctuary.
Fourthly: Rare, Precious (Nādir):

Another name of the Kaʿba is Nādir which comes from an-nadra. Al-Azharī (m) said: an-nadra is the fragment of gold or silver in an ore.\(^{(28)}\)

The Kaʿba was called “rare” as the Arabs used to visit it rarely, not often\(^{(29)}\) and also because its shape and construction are singular or particular. Moreover it is rare thanks to its eminence and virtues.\(^{(30)}\)

Five: The Structure (al-Baniya):

Among the names of the Kaʿba is “the Structure” (al-Baniya). Ibn Manẓūr (m) said: The name “the Structure”, i.e. the Kaʿba, was given for its honour as the most honourable construction\(^{(31)}\).

In the ḥadīth of al-Barāʾ Ibn Maʿrūr (r): “I had not to turn my back
to this structure and to pray towards it”\(^{(51)}\).

Ibn al-Athīr \((m)\) said: The Ka‘ba was called the Structure \((al-Baniya)\) of Ibrāhīm \((p)\), as he built it; and it was very common for the Arabs to take oath by the Lord of this structure.\(^{(33)}\)

**Six: ad-Douwār/ad-Dawwār:**

The reason for the denomination: the name refers to the circumambulation \((ṭawāf)\) around the Ka‘ba. In Arabic, *ad-douwār* is the plural of *dā‘ir* which means
circulating; and *dawwār* means circulating a lot. Therefore both words are very similar, referring to the abundance of rotations or circles accomplished around the Ka‘ba by the pilgrims\(^{34}\).

**Seven: The Direction (al-Qibla):**

Allah Most High said:

> وَمَا جَعَلْنَا الْقِبْلَةَ الَّتِي كُنتَ عَلَیشَا

“And We did not make the qibla which you used to face” Surat Al-Baqara – The Cow, verse 143. The words “which you used to face” are standing for the Ka‘ba. And His word:
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“You are the best community” Surat ‘Āli ‘Imrān—Family of Imran, verse 110.(35)

The qibla or direction is the Ka‘ba(36).
Endnotes

(1) See: *al-Ḥaram al-makkī ash-sharīf wa al-a’lām al-muḥīṭa bihi dirāsa tārīkhiya wa may-daniya*, Dr. ʿAbd al-Malik Ibn Dahīsh, p. 98; *Makka al-mukarrama, tārīkh wa maʿālim*, Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ḥamū, p. 40.

(2) See: *Tafsīr al-Māwardī* (69/2); *Tafsīr aţ-Ţabarī* (76/7).


(4) See: *Lisān al-ʿArab* (718/1); *Fath al-Bāri’*, Ibn Ḥajar (211/2).

(5) See: *al-Ka̱ba al-musharrafa dirāsa ta̱ḻil li-l-khaṣāʾiš at-tašmīmiya*, Dr. Muḥammad Yaḥia Wazīrī, p. 18.

(6) *Sharḥ an-Nawawī ʿalā saḥiḥ Muslim* (14/9).


(9) Examine examples of this in the following verses: Surat al-Māʾida – The Table Spread: 97; Surat al-Ḥajj – The Pilgrimage: 29, 33; Surat at-Tūr: 4.

(10) See: *Fath al-Qadīr*, 79/2, Muḥammad ash-Shawkānī.

(11) *Al-muḥarrar al-wajīz fi Tafsīr al-kitāb al-ʿazīz* (208/1).

(12) *Manāʾiḥ al-karam fi Akhbār makka wa-l-bayt wa walāt al-ḥaram*, as-Sinjārī (257/1).


(14) *Al-Kashshāf* (524/2).


(17) See: *Aḍwā’ al-bayān*, ash-Shanqīṭī (253/5).


(20) See: *Al-muḥarrar al-wajīz*, Ibn ʿAṭiya (119/4); *Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī* (53/12).


(22) Reported by at-Tirmidhī, (616/5), H. 3679. Al-Albānī authenticated it in *Şahīh sunan at-Tirmidhī* (508/3), H. 3679.


(24) *Aḍwā’ al-bayān*, ash-Shanqīṭī (253/5).


(26) *Mu’jam mā ista’jam*, al-Bakrī (290/1).


(29) *Al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, p.618.

(31) *Lisān al-ʿArab*, p.95, 14.

(32) Reported by Aḥmad in his musnad (461/3), H 15836, Ibn Khuzayma in his Ṣaḥīḥ (223/1), H 429, the investigators of the musnad said (95/25), H 15798: ḥadīth qawī (strong), chain ḥassan (good).

(33) *An-Nihāya fi gharīb al-ḥadīth wa-l-‘āthār*, (158/1).

(34) *Asmāʾ al-Kaʿba al-musharrafa fi ad-dars al-lughawi*, p.28.

(35) *Tafsīr al-Baghawī* (123/1).

(36) See: *al-Kashshāf* (225/1).
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