institutions and networks. In this vein, Porter insists on the book and the collection being resources and starting points, and as such, they are precious projects to establish connections between the British Museum, academia and society, and to think of them not as separate entities, but as converging communities.

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SIMON O'MEARA:
The Kaʿba Orientations: Readings in Islam's Ancient House.
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Each of the three Abrahamic faiths has at its physical centre a structure – the Wailing Wall, the Tomb of Christ, the Kaʿba – whose nature and appearance have not attracted conventional historians of architecture. Paradoxically but not by chance, Jerusalem, where the first two are located, is dominated by an Islamic sacred structure of unrivalled grandeur and beauty and possessed of voluminous bibliography: the Dome of the Rock. Yet it is still the Kaʿba – a plain, stone box wrapped in a textile, its blank walls pierced by a single door – that focuses Muslim devotion. Simon O'Meara here disowns the "parochially" (p. 86) dismissive, primarily aesthetic attitudes of Richard Ettinghausen or Oleg Grabar; summarily describes a building he cannot visit (Introduction); and concentrates instead, with favourable reference notably to Samer Akach and Shahab Ahmed, on the perceptions of its "work" to be found in the writings of believers, starting with the first definitely autoptic account by Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. *c.* 481/1088), and allowing due weight to Sufi responses, above all Ibn 'Arabī's.

The Kaʿba Orientations starts (chs 1–2) by noting the Islamic world's privileging of the Kaʿba in its cartography and even sense of directionality. As early as the foundation of Kufa in 638, the Kaʿba, or Mecca generally, began to provide the prayer direction (*qibla*) and thereby, given the centrality of the mosque and the attached governor's residence, to organize urban space – a point against revisionist scholarship's questioning of Mecca's early importance. Furthermore, the Kaʿba was conceptualized anthropomorphically and assumed some of the body's primordial functions. According to the ninth-century *ḥadīth*-collector al-Bukhārī, "Yemen was so called because it is situated at the right hand (*yamīn*) of the Kaʿba, and Syria was called so because it is situated at the left hand (*yasār*) of the Kaʿba". In the dimension of time, the Kaʿba was where creation started. Given this cosmic role, it is unsurprising that the world's – or at least Mecca's – stability was thought to depend on the Kaʿba's mysterious foundations laid by Abraham "like intertwined fingers or the necks of camels joined one to another" (al-Azraqī). Yet although the superstructure has been destroyed and rebuilt on several occasions, its transcendent symbolism and destiny has apparently remained immune to mere external mutation (ch. 3) – including the recent overbearing redevelopment of its immediate built environment, which some Muslims even appear to regard as an enhancement.

O'Meara's book is strictly focused on the Kaʿba itself, although the rich visual documentation that is provided often recalls the structure's intimate relation to both its physical environment deep in a wadi-bed, to other religious sites nearby,

and to the extended rituals of the *hajj*. Furthermore, it is the Kaʿba's pre-modern Muslim phase that is in question: the pre-Islamic and modern Kaʿbas are touched on only lightly. Nor are non-Muslim interpretations attended to. In his *De haeresibus* the Christian theologian John of Damascus, who died in the 740s, asserted that Abraham had intercourse with Hagar, mother of the Arabs' ancestor Ishmael, on the Kaʿba's Black Stone. Behind this scoptic remark, may there not lurk a more positive ethnogenetic aetiology?

With deep erudition, yet sensitively and elegantly, *The Kaʿba Orientations* effects a subtle reorientation of the reader away from the diachronic, material-historical account that might have been expected, towards a more inward, psychological viewpoint that turns inside out the physical Kaʿba's refusal of access to its interior to all but a select few (ch. 4). This is primarily a study of spirituality, or at least religious mentality, rather than architecture or art history. Its most poignant and arresting moment is perhaps its account of the mystics who have believed, and taught, that the Kaʿba circumambulated them. As early as the ninth century it was assumed in some quarters that if one did not "see the immaterial beauty of God" at the Kaʿba, one's *hajj* was invalidated (pp. 91–3).

Starting from his distant view of the Kaʿba as the *qibla* of worldwide Islam, then gradually drawing closer, O'Meara concludes by examining its covering or clothing, the *kiswa* whose undulation in the wind betrayed the motion of its guardian angels' wings. Then he penetrates its interior (chs 5–6). Here, thanks to his pre-modern literary sources, he conveys a more detailed physical sense of the building, though there has been little to see since the Prophet and Ali cleansed it of most of the images stored there in pre-Islamic times. What particularly strikes O'Meara is the strong binary the "concept-facilitating" Kaʿba conveys between outside and inside. For him it evokes, perhaps even inspires, the literal/*ẓāhir* v. symbolic/*bāṭin* tension of Quranic hermeneutics. One may also recall the Holy of Holies of the Jews' temple. At the focus of so much intense spiritual desire lies an apparent void that no human sense can compass. Perhaps, materially presented, this is Islam's profoundest theological message. "Place-holding the symbolic order of Islam, is the ultimate work of the Kaʿba" (p. 129). Whether that work is more, or less, accessible to Muslims than to others is a question to which this eloquent book by a non-Muslim offers a tentative, modest and implicit answer, while conceding that actually beholding the Kaʿba may trigger a quite unexpectedly intense emotional and spiritual response in the open-hearted pilgrim.

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DANIELLE ROSS:
Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia.
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In this excellent study, Danielle Ross explores the history of a "rural gentry" of Tatar pious ʿulama' and merchant families in the Volga-Kama area whose sons combined business and piety with diplomacy and other services for the empire, thereby