

## THE PAINTINGS OF THE PRE-ISLAMIC KA'BA

In ca. 608, the holiest shrine of Mecca, the Ka'ba, the *Bayt Allāh*, was burned down in a fire caused by a careless worshipper with an incense burner, and the ruling Quraysh were compelled to rebuild it.<sup>1</sup> It was this rebuilt Ka'ba of ca. 608 that was to become the direction of Islamic communal prayer after the revelation of *Sūrat al-Baqara*<sup>2</sup> in ca. 624, and it was the same Ka'ba that was cleansed of all trace of pagan practice when the Prophet Muhammad victoriously entered Mecca in 630.<sup>3</sup>

This eradication of sculptures and paintings inside the Ka'ba at the time of the conquest affected all that the Prophet regarded as unacceptable. A statue of Hubal, the principal male deity of Mecca, was taken out of the *Bayt* and destroyed, as were the other pagan deities in and around the Ka'ba.<sup>4</sup> Apart from these statues, there were also paintings, undefined decorations (*hilya*), money, and a pair of ram's horns inside the Ka'ba, the last said to have belonged to the ram sacrificed by the Prophet Ibrahim in place of his son, the Prophet Isma'il.<sup>5</sup> Most of these paintings were erased. The ram's horns survived until 683.

With the pictures and statues of the *jāhiliyya* removed, the Ka'ba continued in its role as the direction of Islamic prayer but now also became a central part of the rituals of the Islamic pilgrimage, the hajj. The Ka'ba remained in the form it had acquired under the Quraysh until it was rebuilt by 'Abd Allah b. al-Zubayr after the Umayyads had bombarded it with catapults, demolishing its walls and setting it on fire as they besieged Ibn al-Zubayr in the Holy City in 64 (683). This latter date marks the final destruction of any paintings that survived the coming of Islam in 630. If 630 is the *terminus ante quem* for the Ka'ba paintings, the fact that the Quraysh work entailed a total reconstruction of the building also makes it clear that none of the paintings could predate ca. 608.

Al-Azraqi records in some detail the events surrounding the rebuilding of the Ka'ba by the Quraysh. Baqum al-Rumi, a foreigner present at Mecca, was a carpen-

ter and an architect commissioned by the Quraysh to rebuild the Ka'ba for them. He is sometimes said to have been the master of the sunken Byzantine boat whose wood was used to rebuild the Ka'ba, and he has been described as a Copt or an Ethiopian.<sup>6</sup> While the designation of him as a *Rūmī* indicates that he was from somewhere in the Byzantine Empire, he could have been a resident of a place outside the Empire, perhaps on the Red Sea coast, that had contacts with the Byzantine world.<sup>7</sup>

K. A. C. Creswell, citing E. Littmann's opinion, identified the etymology of the name "Baqum" with "Habakkuk" in an Amharic form, and they both took the view that Baqum was probably Ethiopian.<sup>8</sup> There is also an Ethiopian tradition that an architect from Ethiopia went to assist in rebuilding the Ka'ba.<sup>9</sup> Al-Azraqi records the following:

Baqum al-Rumi said to [the Quraysh]: "Do you want the roof [of the Ka'ba] pitched or flat?" "Rather build the house of our Lord (*rabb*) flat." He [apparently al-Azraqi's grandfather, Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Azraqi] said: "So they built it flat and they put in it six columns (*da'ā'im*) in two rows: in each row were three columns from the northeast (*shāmī*) corner (*shaqq*) where is the [Black] Stone, to the southwest (*yamānī*) corner, and they made its external height from the ground to its summit eighteen cubits (*dhirā'*) high, and previously [the pre-Quraysh Ka'ba] had been nine *dhirā'* high. The Quraysh added another nine *dhirā'* to the upper part,<sup>10</sup> and they built it from the top to the bottom with courses (*madamāk*) of stone and courses of wood, and fifteen courses were of wood and sixteen courses were of stone, and they fixed its water-spout (*mūzāb*) that pours forth [water] in stone, and they placed wooden steps inside it at the *shāmī* corner to ascend by them to its rear (*zahrāhā*), and they decorated its ceiling and its internal wall surfaces and its columns, and they put on its columns pictures of the Prophets (*al-anbiyā'*), pictures of trees, and pictures of the angels (*al-malā'ika*), and there was a picture of the Prophet Ibrahim Khalil al-Rahman with divining arrows, and a picture of 'Isa b. Maryam and his mother [i.e., Jesus and Mary], and a

picture of the angels (*al-malā'ika*), upon them be peace, all of them. And when it was the day of the conquest of Mecca, the Prophet (peace be upon him) entered, and he sent off al-Fadl b. al-'Abbas b. 'Abd al-Muttalib (his cousin) to come with water from [the well of] Zamzam. Then he called for a cloth, and he ordered [them] to rub off these pictures, and they were obliterated.<sup>11</sup>

The manner of construction with alternating courses of wood and stone has long since been discussed by K. A. C. Creswell, and while the origin of the building technique remains open to discussion, the character of the construction does not (see Appendix below). Al-Azraqi makes it clear that a system of alternating courses was used, sixteen of stone and fifteen of wood. The method of building involved locking the rounded ends of the wooden tie beams into each other at the corners, the rounded tie beam ends being termed "monkey-heads" in Ethiopia.<sup>12</sup> Inside the Ka'ba were two rows of columns ranked in groups of three—six in all—serving to support the flat roof. As to the wood, no mention is made of its type, but given that it was from a boat, it was possibly teak, the normal wood used for traditional boats around the coasts of Arabia. Teak was used subsequently at Mecca and Medina in the early Islamic period when the roofing of the Haram Mosque and the Mosque of the Prophet was renewed by the third Caliph, 'Uthman b. 'Affan.

The walls and columns would have to have been coated with plaster, since they carried paintings that hardly could have been applied directly to the stone and wood. We still encounter the use of thick plaster on the coral buildings of old Jidda and elsewhere on the Red Sea coast, and in some cases on the stone-built architecture of the highlands of Saudi Arabia and Yemen.<sup>13</sup>

While the painted decoration of the Ka'ba covered much or all of the interior of the building, the exterior was without paintings, adorned instead with the *kiswa*, a cloth cover. Its origins are said to be Yemeni, the first *kiswa* brought to Mecca by the Yemeni Tubba' Asad Abu Karib Himyari some time before the advent of Islam.

As we have seen, al-Azraqi states that on the day of the Islamic conquest of Mecca, the Prophet ordered that the pictures in the Ka'ba should be destroyed, but several sources also cited by al-Azraqi record that the painting showing 'Isa b. Maryam and his mother was spared on the Prophet's instructions:<sup>14</sup>

Sulayman [b. Musa al-Shami] said to ['Ata' b. Abi Rabah]: "The pictures of the representations (*tamāthil ṣuwar*) of devils (*'afārīt*, sc. idols) that were in the House [i.e., the Ka'ba], who obliterated them?" He said: "I do not know, other than that they were obliterated, with the exception of those two pictures ['Isa b. Maryam and Maryam]. I saw them [i.e., the rest] and their obliteration." Ibn Jurayj said: "Then 'Atā' returned to the sketch of the six columns that he had drawn in plan. Then he said: 'The representation of 'Isa and his mother, upon them be peace, was in the middle of the row that was in front of the door that we came through when we entered [the Ka'ba].'" My grandfather [Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Azraqi] said: "Da'ud b. 'Abd al-Rahman told me that 'Amr b. Dinar said: 'A [picture] of 'Isa b. Maryam and his mother was set in the interior of the Ka'ba before the destruction of the idols.'"

Further on, al-Azraqi says on the authority of his grandfather that Da'ud b. 'Abd al-Rahman had it from Ibn Jurayj from Sulayman b. Musa from Jabir b. 'Abd Allah, that the Prophet suppressed the pictures, i.e., those in the Ka'ba, and that he ordered 'Umar b. al-Khattab at the time of the conquest of Mecca to enter the *Bayt Allāh* (the Ka'ba) to obliterate the pictures.<sup>15</sup> There is also an account that says the Prophet refused to enter the Ka'ba until the evidence of pre-Islamic worship had been removed. This could be taken to contradict the story of his protecting the picture of 'Isa b. Maryam and his mother. However, it may be that he refused to enter the Ka'ba until the removal of the portable idols inside it: the paintings,<sup>16</sup> being murals rather than portable works, could not be removed in the same way, as they were on the columns and walls. The episode involving Fadl b. al-'Abbas collecting water from Zamzam for use by the Prophet's Companions to wipe off the pictures implies this. It was around the column with the picture of 'Isa b. Maryam and his mother that the Prophet put his arms to protect it while letting his Companions erase everything else.<sup>17</sup> This account suggests that the Prophet indeed entered the Ka'ba despite the presence of the pictures.

#### THE PAINTING MATERIALS AT THE KA'BA

Al-Bukhari uses the phrase "so they took out [the two] pictures of..." (*fa-akhrajū ṣūratay*), which implies that the paintings were portable, but al-Azraqi's Meccan sources consistently indicate that the Ka'ba paintings were on the columns or the walls of the building, and that they were erased by rubbing them off, as we have seen, rather than carrying them out for breaking or

burning. It is possible that al-Bukhari conflates the removal of sculptures from the Ka'ba with the destruction of the paintings.

As explained above, the likelihood is that the interior walls of the Ka'ba were coated with plaster and that this plaster would have carried the paintings. The Prophet is said to have ordered that the paintings in the Ka'ba should be wiped out with a cloth soaked in water drawn from the well of Zamzam.<sup>18</sup> That water was sufficient to wipe off the pictures strongly suggests that the medium of the paintings was water-based.

The practice of painting interiors of houses still persists in the southern Hijaz highlands and in the *'ush-āsh*, or huts, that were still found all along the Red Sea coast of Arabia in the 1970s. The information that we have about the painting of the interior of the pre-Islamic Ka'ba suggests that this decorative tradition in the southwest of Arabia is one of great antiquity.<sup>19</sup> However, the paintings done today use industrial oil-based paint on plaster and are far more impermeable than were those in the seventh-century Ka'ba.

#### THE TREES

Nothing is said by al-Azraqi of the trees that decorated the interior of the Ka'ba, other than that they existed. Pictures of trees (*shūra al-shajara*) formed part of the mosaic decoration on the walls of the cathedral of al-Qalis in Sanaa.<sup>20</sup> Subsequently, they were to appear as a principal subject in the Umayyad mosaics in the Dome of the Rock, the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, and the Great Mosque of Damascus. The accounts recorded by al-Azraqi imply that the tree pictures were wiped out along with the other pictures that he deemed unsuitable for the Islamicized Ka'ba.

#### 'ISA B. MARYAM AND HIS MOTHER

Of the picture of 'Isa b. Maryam and his mother, al-Azraqi gives the following information on the authority of his grandfather, whose own source was Da'ud b. 'Abd al-Rahman, who said that Ibn Jurayj had said that Sulayman b. Musa al-Shami asked 'Ata' b. Abi Rabah the following:

I have heard that there was set up in *al-Bayt* (the Ka'ba) a picture (*timthāl*) of Maryam and 'Isa. ['Ata'] said: "Yes, there was set in it a picture of Maryam adorned (*muḥaw-waqan*); in her lap, her son 'Isa sat adorned."<sup>21</sup>

This text indicates quite explicitly that Maryam was

shown with 'Isa in her lap, suggesting that he was a child. The term "in her lap" (*fī hijrihā*) is very specific and strongly implies that she was seated. This iconography of the seated Virgin with Jesus in her lap, which was to become universal in Christian art in later times, was already widespread in Christian lands by the seventh century, although the depredations of Byzantine iconoclasm and the repainting of older pictures have greatly reduced the number of extant images. At Saqqara in Egypt, a painting of the Virgin holding the Child appears in an apse,<sup>22</sup> while there is a fourth-century seated Virgin from Madinat al-Fayyum in Egypt now in Berlin, in the Staatliche Museen.<sup>23</sup> A Virgin and Child appears on a fragmentary papyrus leaf from the Alexandrian Chronicle in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, dated to ca. the fifth or sixth century.<sup>24</sup> A sixth-century *ampulla* from Palestine, now at Monza in the Treasury of the Collegiale, also shows the Virgin and Child in the same posture,<sup>25</sup> as does a Syro-Palestinian ivory panel now in the British Museum, also dated to the sixth century, which depicts the Adoration of the Magi with the seated Virgin and Child.<sup>26</sup> In the wider Christian world, the same iconography occurs in a mosaic of the Virgin and Child in the chapel of San Zeno in Santa Prassede in Rome, of 817–24 (fig. 1). It is to this family of images that the adorned Maryam with 'Isa in her lap in the Ka'ba seems to have belonged.

From a much earlier date there is a south Arabian prototype of the seated Maryam hinted at in a votive alabaster panel (fig. 2), dated to the first century AD and now in the British Museum, of the lady Ghalilat with a *musnad* inscription stating: "Image of Ghalilat, daughter of Mafaddat, and may Attar destroy him who breaks it."<sup>27</sup> Ghalilat is playing an instrument like an oud, but her posture and the way she holds the instrument strongly suggest the later Christian motif of the seated Virgin with the Child in her lap. The Ghalilat panel may indicate Yemeni awareness of an Egyptian tradition of portraying Isis as the mother of Osiris, itself an antecedent of the Virgin and Child image.

An interesting additional point of information is derived from al-Azraqi. As we have seen, the pictures in the Ka'ba also included prophets (*al-ʿanbiyā'*) and angels (*al-malā'ika*), the latter mentioned twice by al-Azraqi. It is possible that the prophet paintings were really either of the apostles of 'Isa/Jesus or of other figures associated with him and with Maryam. An early seventh-century icon of the Virgin and Child at St. Catherine's on Mt. Sinai shows Mary seated with Jesus on her lap and angels and saints surrounding her,<sup>28</sup> and an

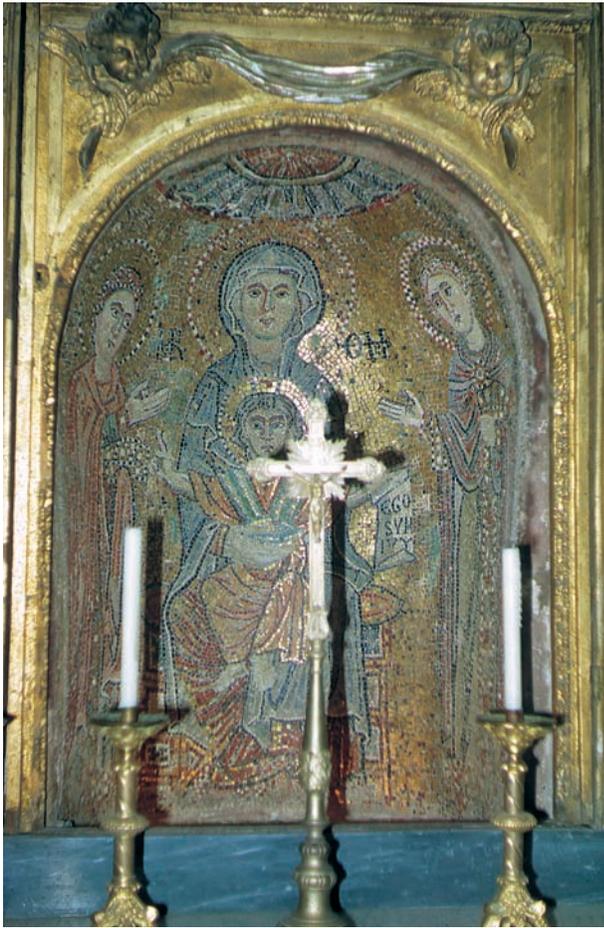


Fig. 1. Virgin and Child. Mosaic, 817–24. Santa Prassede, Rome. (Photo: G. King)



Fig. 2. Ghalilat, daughter of Mafaddat, first century. British Museum. (Photo: G. King)

apse painting at Bawit in Egypt shows the Virgin and Child enthroned with apostles; it dates to the seventh century, although it may have been repainted in later times.<sup>29</sup> Further south, in Nubian Christian churches from an early date, pictures (mainly found in apses) show Jesus accompanied by other figures. Thus in eighth-to-tenth-century apse paintings at Nobatia and Dongola are found representations of Christ, sometimes with Mary and always attended by his disciples. These paintings may give us some guidance as to the nature of the lost paintings of sixth-century Aksum, one of the closest Christian centers to Mecca and a plausible source of the iconography—and perhaps the style—of the painting of ‘Isa b. Maryam and Maryam in the Ka’ba.

Was the Prophet able to identify the picture because he was familiar with it before he left for Medina in 622?

If so, this would locate the execution of this particular Ka’ba painting between ca. 608 and 622. Alternatively, he may have seen such a painting in the north during his youth when he visited Bostra, or, less likely, in 630, when he visited Tabuk, apparently a former Byzantine garrison, where he also received a Christian leader from Ayla.<sup>30</sup>

He certainly knew people who had seen Christian paintings. Some of his wives and Companions became familiar with Christian art during their sojourn as the first Muslim *muhājirūn* in *Ḥabasha* (Ethiopia), having departed from Mecca in 615. When the Prophet was on his deathbed, his wife Umm Habiba described to him the paintings that she had seen in the Church of St. Mary Zion at Aksum.<sup>31</sup>

An interesting statement from that rarity, a female

authority for a pre-Islamic episode, Asma' bint Shiqr, is preserved by al-Azraqi; it suggests that the 'Isa b. Maryam and Maryam painting in the Quraysh Ka'ba was readily recognizable as such to early-seventh-century Christians as well as to the Prophet Muhammad. It appears that the following episode took place in the context of the pre-Islamic hajj, presumably after ca. 608 and before 630. Al-Azraqi reports, according to Ibn Shihab:

Asma' bint Shiqr said: "A woman from Ghassan made the pilgrimage during the [pagan] pilgrimage of the Arabs (*hijjata fi hajj al-'arab*), and when she saw the picture of Maryam in the Ka'ba she said: 'By my father and my mother, you belong to the Arabs.'"<sup>32</sup>

This appears to be independent confirmation of the identity of the figures in the picture that the Prophet spared. Whether the figure of Maryam looked Arab, stimulating the Ghassan woman's response, or whether the woman was surprised that the Arabs of the Hijaz had a respected picture of Mary/Maryam in Mecca's holiest shrine is unclear. The Ghassanid woman certainly might be expected to recognize a painting of the Virgin, given the depth of Christian influence among the Ghassan Arabs, whose churches and shrines were scattered across Syria.<sup>33</sup>

On another level, one cannot but wonder what a woman of the Ghassan was doing visiting a pagan shrine in the Hijaz so late as ca. 608 to 630, when the Ghassan had long been officially Christian. Yet she was not alone among the Ghassan in respecting pagan faith. The treasury at the pagan goddess Manat's shrine of al-Mushallal at Qudayd in the Hijaz owned two swords that the Ghassanid prince al-Harith b. Abi Shamir al-Ghassani had dedicated to the idol. Al-Harith led an expedition to Khaybar in 567, and he apparently was very involved in Hijaz matters.<sup>34</sup> Despite being a Christian, he had no compunction about presenting gifts to Manat: presumably old pagan habits died hard, although al-Harith's action may have had a diplomatic element to it. The Ghassan retained a trading presence at Mecca under the Quraysh, and they may have felt it worthwhile to pay their respects to the Meccan shrine.

#### THE PROPHETS IBRAHIM AND ISMA'IL

Al-Azraqi says that among the paintings in the Ka'ba was another that showed the Prophets Ibrahim and Isma'il. Ibrahim was shown as an old man (*shaykhan*). In other versions preserved by al-Azraqi, both Ibrahim

and Isma'il are said to have been represented holding arrows.

The Qur'an specifically rejects arrow divining, and, given the rejection of idolatry that characterizes Ibrahim's faith as portrayed by the Qur'an, it was entirely inappropriate in the Prophet Muhammad's view that either Ibrahim or his son should have been associated in a painting with this forbidden practice. The rejection of arrow divination in *Sūrat al-Mā'ida* is specific:

O ye who believe!  
Intoxicants and gambling,  
(Dedication of) stones,  
And (divination by) arrows [*al-azlām*]  
Are an abomination—  
Of Satan's handiwork:  
Eschew such (abomination),  
That ye may prosper.<sup>35</sup>

The same sura also lists divining with many other practices that are forbidden:<sup>36</sup>

(Forbidden) also is the division  
(Of meat) by raffling<sup>37</sup>  
With arrows [*tastaqsimū bi 'l-azlām*]: that is impiety."

According to al-Azraqi:<sup>38</sup>

...Shihab (said) that the Prophet (peace be upon him) entered the Ka'ba the day of the conquest, and in it was a picture of the angels (*malā'ika*) and others, and he saw a picture of Ibrahim and he said: "May Allah kill those representing him as a venerable old man casting arrows in divination (*shaykhan yastaqsim bi 'l-azlām*)." Then he saw the picture of Maryam, so he put his hands on it and he said: "Erase what is in it [the Ka'ba] in the way of pictures except the picture of Maryam."<sup>39</sup>

Al-Bukhari (d. 256/870) records the episode as follows:

It was related that Ibn 'Abbas said: "When the Prophet came to Mecca he refused to go into the Ka'ba as idols (*al-ālihatu*) were still inside it. He ordered them removed and so they were removed. The people took out the pictures of Ibrahim and Isma'il holding arrows (*fa-amara bi-hā fa-ukhrijat, fa-akhrajū sūratay Ibrāhīm wa-Isma'il fi aydī-himā al-azlām*) and the Messenger of God said: 'May God obliterate these people. By God! They knew well that neither Ibrahim nor Ismail ever divined with arrows.' Then he entered the Ka'ba and said 'God is Great' at its corners, but he did not pray in it."<sup>40</sup>

Al-Azraqi reports the Prophet as saying something similar and declaring in anger, "Allah will kill them [who

portrayed Ibrahim and Isma‘il thus], for they never cast arrows (*lam yastaqamā bi ‘l-azlām*).<sup>41</sup>

It has been suggested by T. Fahd that in pre-Islamic Mecca Ibrahim was subsumed in some way into Hubal.<sup>42</sup> Since arrow divination constituted a central aspect of Hubal’s cult, and Hubal’s statue stood inside the Ka‘ba, it seems plausible that one of the arrow-bearing figures inside the Ka‘ba was in fact Hubal rather than Ibrahim. If the figure of the venerable old man with arrows was indeed Hubal, then the second figure no longer needs to be identified as Isma‘il, but it is unclear whom it would have represented.

This point about the identity of the figures in the paintings and the Prophet’s understanding of them is important and may contribute to a more complex interpretation of the question of the dating of the painting cycle. Why should the Prophet have taken the figure with arrows in the Ka‘ba to be Ibrahim if it was really Hubal, Mecca’s greatest male deity and one we know to have been associated with arrow divination? As a Meccan, the Prophet might be expected to have been aware of the identity of the painting of Mecca’s principal pagan god in the Ka‘ba, and he would have been familiar with the deities with which the Quraysh had filled the Haram of Mecca in the period when he was powerless to oppose them, before he departed on his hijra in 622. Although he was the Prophet of the Muslim community, as a theologically knowledgeable Meccan he presumably had detailed experience of the beliefs of the pagan Quraysh, even if he resoundingly rejected their whole belief system. The accounts of his suppression of the shrines of paganism throughout western Arabia in his Medinan years show his knowledge of the Hijaz *jāhiliyya* shrines and their cults, and if he knew of more distant shrines and their practices, he certainly must have known a great deal more about those of Mecca, where he had lived for so long.

One could argue that the painting said to be of Ibrahim was executed after the Prophet had left Mecca in 622. If this were the case, then he would have seen it for the first time in 630 and interpreted a picture that actually represented Hubal with arrows as representing Ibrahim. We are unlikely ever to ascertain the answer to any of this, and we will always be trapped in the realm of speculation. But if the figure of the old man with arrows was indeed painted between 622 and 630, then this would constitute evidence that the Ka‘ba paintings gradually accumulated after the Ka‘ba was rebuilt, rather than being the product of a single campaign of decoration in ca. 608, as al-Azraqi implies.

## THE SOURCES OF THE KA‘BA PAINTINGS

While we have lost the Ka‘ba paintings themselves, we know enough of the ‘Isa b. Maryam and Maryam picture to attempt, in a very general sense, to put it in context of contemporary paintings of the Virgin and Child in the Christian world. For the pictures of Ibrahim and Isma‘il the case is far harder.

We know that Ibrahim (or Hubal) was portrayed as an old man and that he had arrows for divination. Pictures of old or bearded men abound in Byzantine-related art, but pictures of arrow diviners do not. The figures of St. John the Baptist in the Baptistery of the Orthodox (440–520) and the Arian Baptistery (ca. 520), both in Ravenna, the sixth-century figures of Abraham in San Vitale at Ravenna and of the prophets in the apse of St. Catherine’s at Sinai, and the conventional representations of apostles and church elders that appear ubiquitously in Byzantine-related art all could be called *shaykhan*. *Shaykhan* figures also appear in an entirely different context in the Umayyad secular paintings at Qusayr ‘Amra; they apparently stem from an older Syrian tradition of which we are ignorant. But while all such figures in Byzantine and Umayyad art are venerable and old and could be described as being *shaykhan*, there is absolutely nothing to link any of them to the Ibrahim/Hubal painting, not least because none are associated with arrows and divination, the only visual attribute we know of these particular Ka‘ba representations.

We know too little of any of the pictures in the Ka‘ba—whether of ‘Isa b. Maryam and Maryam, of Ibrahim and Isma‘il, or of the trees—to make any estimate of their specific style. Thus, discussion of the likely inspiration or source of the Ka‘ba paintings can only be a matter of reciting the possible contemporary parallels, with no firm conclusion as to the origin of the artist (or artists) who painted them. Furthermore, the Ka‘ba paintings coincide with a period for which there is a paucity of extant paintings from Arabia and the Near East as a whole.

Within Arabia, our knowledge of the Christian mosaics and paintings of Najran and Sanaa in Yemen is entirely dependent on literary sources, although the paintings excavated at Qaryat al-Faw and Shabwa give us some idea of motifs circulating in southern Arabia in the early first millennium AD. Of Christian painting in eastern Arabia and the Gulf we know nothing.

The Sasanian world presents a total loss of painting, Nestorian or otherwise, while in the Byzantine Empire,

the carnage of iconoclasm has deprived us of icons and most other work dating to before 726, and we have to look to Italy for the survival of murals of any sort in this period. In Syria and Palestine, between the Dura Europos paintings of the third century and the Umayyad paintings and wall mosaics of the eighth, there are no great murals extant, while later repainting has contributed to the loss of many early Christian murals in Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia.<sup>43</sup> St. Catherine's at Mt. Sinai is unique in terms of the preservation and quality of its mosaics and icons from this period.

The range of motifs circulating in the Near East in the early seventh century is emphasized by the diversity of subject matter preserved at the deeply eclectic Qusayr 'Amra (after 712). But the very wealth of motifs also serves to remind us of the extent of our ignorance of late antique secular painting in Syria. For all we know the arrow-divining old man represented in the Ka'ba could have been a common motif in the region, but with such loss of immediately pre-Islamic painting in the Near East we have no means of ever demonstrating the point.

A source of the iconography used in the Ka'ba that cannot be excluded is the illuminated codex, for there is shadowy evidence that books circulated in some contexts in Arabia before Islam. Most telling in this respect are references to books that appear as imagery in pre-Islamic poetry. For these poems to have significance to an Arabian audience, that audience must have been able to conjure up something meaningful when the term "book" was used by a poet. The Qur'an also reflects a knowledge of books, in the sense of texts written on sheets (*suhūf*), in the early suras revealed to the Prophet when he was still at Mecca.<sup>44</sup> From this, one may infer that those hearing these Meccan suras had some idea of what *suhūf* were. The question of where such putative books at Mecca may have originated leaves us with the same range of possibilities as do our attempts to seek antecedents for the Ka'ba paintings in murals or mosaics beyond Mecca: given the commercial contacts of the Quraysh, it is Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, and Ethiopia that suggest themselves once again.

Whatever art was circulating in Mecca and western Arabia, it must also be considered that the trading connection of the Quraysh took them regularly to lands where paintings, mosaics, and illuminated books were common, and that any of these places could have provided the inspiration and perhaps the models for the Quraysh paintings in the Ka'ba. The winter and summer caravans of the Quraysh—the one to Yemen, the other

to Syria—and their trading connections with Ethiopia since the time of 'Abd al-Muttalib, the Prophet's grandfather, all provided any number of opportunities for the Meccans to have encountered paintings including the Virgin and Child image. Evidence of visits to Palestine is provided by the death at Gaza of Hashim b. 'Abd al-Manaf in the pre-Islamic period, while the Prophet as a child is said to have visited Bostra in southern Syria, and 'Amr b. al-'As visited Egypt before Islam. In these circumstances, many possibilities offer themselves for the Meccans to have seen pictures that could have influenced their choice of paintings in the Ka'ba.

The fact that the architect of the Ka'ba, Baqum, has been associated with Ethiopia or Egypt favors the possible impact of the painting tradition of either place on the Meccan paintings. While the accounts of Baqum's skills only refer to him as an architect and carpenter and never suggest that he was a painter, his involvement provides the circumstances that would have favored the influence of painting from his own place of origin. The case for this would be weaker, however, if at least some of the Ka'ba paintings accumulated over time, rather than being produced immediately after the completion of the building.

While Ethiopia and Egypt are candidates for the source of the Ka'ba paintings, a barely understood channel of influence that could have affected Mecca is the internal Arabian tradition of painting. Early Muslims encountered paintings in the churches of Najran, a point made clear by a report from al-Hasan b. Salih preserved by al-Baladhuri, who records the Prophet's treaty with the Christians of Najran, in which security was promised for their images (*anthila*): "The state they previously held shall not be changed, nor shall any of their religious services or images be changed."<sup>45</sup> However, one cannot assess what the Quraysh knew of Najran and its Christian pictures before Islam, although since it was a major caravan town of Southwest Arabia they would possibly have visited it. They certainly knew of the great church of al-Qalis at Sanaa, which was decorated with mosaics.

We know nothing of what, if anything, the Meccans knew of the very few examples of southern Arabian painting that have survived or the traditions to which they belonged. All of these that have been published, as far as I am aware, are from excavations at Shabwa in Hadramut and from Qaryat al-Faw on the western edge of the Empty Quarter in Saudi Arabia. The Shabwa painting, which was in the National Museum at Aden,<sup>46</sup> is dated to the third century and is from the royal pal-

ace. It shows the large-eyed face of a figure with a quite well-defined robe that has echoes of classicism, or at least of the late antique. The far more varied group excavated at Qaryat al-Faw is dated to before the early fourth century;<sup>47</sup> it is now in the archaeology museum in King Saud University in Riyadh. Since the first publication of the Qaryat al-Faw paintings by A. R. al-Ansary, yet more have been found at the same site.

Between them, Shabwa and Qaryat al-Faw provide the only extant evidence for the existence of a pre-Islamic Arabian painting tradition and, while incompletely published, furnish a unique body of information about the nature of painting in Arabia in the centuries that precede the execution of the murals in the Ka'ba.

The wall paintings at Qaryat al-Faw vary stylistically, indicating different hands and probably different periods. The finest of the published paintings from Qaryat al-Faw is fragmentary, and it shows the face of a man accompanied by two small figures to either side, perhaps further back spatially but more likely of lesser status.<sup>48</sup> A cluster of grapes and a vine branch forms part of the background. The painting is insufficient in extent to allow estimation of the subject, but the name "Zky" is inscribed in *musnad* (epigraphic South Arabian) to the right of the smaller figure. The face of the youthful Zky has a strongly reddish tone, curly hair, large and emphatic eyes, an emphatic straight nose, and full lips framed by a finely defined moustache. A short beard runs around his chin.

Unfortunately, we know too little to assume that painting circulating at Qaryat al-Faw and Shabwa was matched at Mecca or elsewhere in western Arabia. Furthermore, the *terminus ante quem* for Shabwa and Qaryat al-Faw (respectively the third century and no later than the early fourth century) leaves a considerable time gap before the rise of Mecca as a relatively prosperous town, apparently some time in the sixth century. This puts us at present on very insecure ground in trying to demonstrate any connection of Qaryat al-Faw and Shabwa with the lost Ka'ba paintings.<sup>49</sup>

#### THE KA'BA AND THE ARABIAN CONTEXT

If the Ka'ba really was a pan-Arab shrine under the Quraysh in the way the Islamic tradition insists, it should at least have compared in wealth with other neighboring pagan shrines. We have seen that it had its own treasury (*māl*), and that those seeking divination with Hubal's arrows in the Ka'ba paid a donation of 100 dirhams to the *ṣāhib* of the arrows of Hubal: it thus had some level

of income. The pious expenditure of the Quraysh on the Ka'ba and its deities is reflected in the gold that was used to repair the lost hand of the Hubal statue, in the donation of the *kiswa*, and, indeed, in the whole project of rebuilding the shrine in ca. 608.

We cannot assess how typical the painted decoration of the Ka'ba may have been, as we have no detailed knowledge of the decoration of the other pagan shrines of early-seventh-century Arabia, such as the apparently major *ḥaram* of al-Lat, Manat, and Hubal at al-Ta'if, or that of Dhu'l-Khalasa at Tabala, or the rest. Furthermore, while the relative wealth of some shrines is implied in accounts of their destruction on the orders of the Prophet, it is difficult to assess what constituted great wealth in pre-Islamic western Arabia.

Certainly, the nature of the work of the Quraysh on the Ka'ba does not suggest great expenditure in absolute terms, and indeed, for all their trade, the Quraysh seem to have had limited resources for the embellishment of the shrine in their custody. One is left with the impression that the rebuilt Ka'ba of ca. 608 was a modest affair, built with the best of the means available to the Quraysh. The limit of these means is reflected in the use of recycled wood from the fortuitously wrecked Byzantine boat that foundered on the Red Sea shore at Shu'ayba. The use of the cheap medium of paint for the decoration of the interior of the Ka'ba suggests a similarly economic approach, and even their principal deity, Hubal, was represented by a damaged sculpture in need of repair. It is not until the Islamic period that sumptuous gifts accrued to the Ka'ba, from the riches won by Islam with the *fath*.

On the other hand, the Quraysh seem to have done their best to build the Ka'ba in as solid a manner as they could, using a foreign *Rūmī* specialist, Baqum. In Aksum, the system of alternating courses of stone and wooden tie beams seems to have been used especially for the aristocratic and ecclesiastical architecture of the sixth century, and the building of the Ka'ba in such a manner may of itself have made a statement about the *Bayt*'s high status. But nevertheless, the wood was recycled, rather than specially imported. The use of painting in Arabian buildings of high status has parallels in the murals of the royal palaces at Shabwa and the Umayyad paintings at Qusayr 'Amra, Khirbat al-Mafjar, and Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi.

The resources were simply not present at Mecca in ca. 608 to produce anything of the scale of Abraha's great cathedral at San'a, al-Qalis, which in the early sixth century had set a standard of lavish shrine embel-

ishment that outmatched all other holy places of its time in Arabia. The decoration and paintings of the new Ka'ba seem to have been the result of the desire of the Quraysh to ensure that the Ka'ba was possessed of as great a degree of sumptuousness as they could provide, but lacking access to the mosaics that Abraha had been able to extract from the Byzantine emperor for al-Qalis, the Quraysh did what the less well-funded did in many other parts of the late antique world and resorted to the cheap and rapid medium of paint to decorate the walls of the Ka'ba. Ibn al-Zubayr, isolated in the Hijaz while his Umayyad enemies held everything to the north, was still aware of the luxury of al-Qalis some seventy years later, when he scraped the mosaics off the walls of the Sanaa cathedral to reuse in the Haram mosque at Mecca after the Umayyad bombardment and destruction of the Ka'ba in 683. But this was the first time that Mecca aspired to the luxury of mosaics: in ca. 608 they had been beyond the capacities of the Quraysh, however much they may have resented the pretensions of the ornate al-Qalis as their great competitor in the Yemen. Restricted to Mecca, Ibn al-Zubayr was only able to recycle the al-Qalis mosaics: Mecca's resources were still deeply limited, with access to the broader Islamic world cut off by the Umayyads.

The painting tradition at Mecca dies with the advent of Islam. Oleg Grabar has argued that murals at Mecca may have been associated with a wealthy social elite, and for this reason paintings may not have found favor with the lower economic group that formed part of the Muslim *muhājirūn* who accompanied the Prophet from Mecca to Medina. That Islam disapproved of sumptuary expenditure is made clear by the Qur'an, and the Prophet himself disliked lavish expenditure on buildings. In such circumstances it is not difficult to see that the early years of Islam offered little opportunity for the continuation or revival of painting in Mecca. However, the Quraysh taste for murals was to reemerge on a far greater scale under their Umayyad descendants in Bilad al-Sham. Whatever the changes in style that a greater landscape of reference gave to the Umayyad caliphs in Syria and Palestine, it could be argued that their desire for mural paintings had its roots in the works of their aristocratic Quraysh ancestors, known to us as little more than shadows through our meager knowledge of the decorative schema of the Ka'ba of ca. 608.

## APPENDIX

The technique of building the Ka'ba in alternating stone and wood courses is still preserved skeuomorphically at Aksum on two sixth-century steles (nos. 1 and 3) in the Central Stelae Park, and on the Aksum stele (no. 2) in Rome (fig. 3). It seems also to have been the method of building at other early Ethiopian sites,<sup>50</sup> including the Palace of Dungur, known as Sheba's Palace (sixth century), Enda Semon (ca. fourth century), Enda Mikáel (ca. fourth century), and Taaka Maryam (possibly sixth century).<sup>51</sup> A hypothetical reconstruction of the Cathedral at Aksum has been made in an attempt to show how it would have appeared before its destruction by Ahmad Gran b. Ibrahim, a Somali from Harar who conquered much of Ethiopia for Islam in the sixteenth century. This reconstruction suggests again a building



Fig. 3. Stele from Aksum, Rome. (Photo: G. King)

that incorporated alternate stone and wood coursing. Extant examples of the technique survive at Debra Damo (founded in the sixth century with subsequent rebuilding), and in the skeuomorphic monolithic Giorgis Church at Lalibela (rebuilt in the thirteenth century, but probably older).

The same technique of alternating masonry and wood courses is also encountered in western Arabia down to the twentieth century at Jidda, Mecca, and elsewhere. It is difficult in our present state of knowledge to know whether the Arabian or the African coast of the Red Sea takes precedence in the development and use of this technique, but there is no doubt that it is a system occurring on both sides of the Red Sea.<sup>52</sup> To this extent, the Ka'ba of ca. 608 was a building deriving in its construction from the mutually interpenetrated milieu of the Red Sea coastal lands.

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#### NOTES

1. The justification for this dating derives from the traditional chronology constructed by the Islamic sources. The early traditionalist al-Zuhri (d. 124/742) dates the building of the Ka'ba to fifteen years before the hijra to the Prophet to Medina. See M. J. Kister, "The Campaign of Hulubān: A New Light on the Expedition of Abraha," *Le Muséon* 78 (1965): 427, for a translation of al-Zuhri's text. On the problems of the chronology of events in western Arabia in the century before the Prophet departed from Mecca, see L. I. Conrad, "Abraha and Muhammad: Some Observations Apropos of Chronology and Literary Topoi in the Early Arabic Historical Tradition," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 50, 2 (1987): 225–40.
2. Qur'an 2:142–44, 149–50.
3. For a discussion of the rituals at pre-Islamic Mecca and the Ka'ba, see U. Rubin, "The Ka'ba: Aspects of Its Ritual Functions and Position in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Times," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 8 (1986): 97–131.
4. Ibn al-Kalbī, *The Book of Idols (Kitāb al-asnām)*, trans. into English from the Arabic by N. A. Faris (Princeton: University Microfilms International, 1952), p. 23.
5. Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka wa mā jā'a fihā min al-āthār*, ed. R. S. Malhas, 4th printing (Mecca 1983/1403), vol. 1, p. 166. Serjeant records the use of ibex horns as trophies that are set on the doors of houses and on the tombs of holy men in southern Arabia (R. B. Serjeant, *South Arabian Hunt* [London, 1976], pls. 4, 7). The present writer has seen in Yemen the custom of placing unusual bones at a tomb. At the shrine of Muhammad 'Alī Abu Sa'd at Mawzi' on the Yemen Tihama near Mocha, the saw of a sawfish and other large fish bones were laid on the tomb of the holy man. Nor did this seem unique to this particular tomb. It is probably in the context of retaining striking, respected, or trophy horns and bones in shrines that the ram's horns of the Ka'ba should be seen.
6. A. J. Wensinck, J. Jomier, "Ka'ba," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed. (hereafter *EP*).
7. A. F. L. Beeston points out that the ruler of Yemen, Abraha, had been a slave of a Byzantine merchant resident at Adulis, the port of Aksum in Habasha (Ethiopia): s.v. "Abraha," *EP*. People defined as Byzantines or *Rūmī* frequently could have lived as expatriates, especially in trading towns like Adulis.
8. K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture* (Oxford, 1969), vol. 1, pt. 1, pp. 1–5.
9. I am indebted to Dr. Niall Finneran of the Department of Art and Archaeology at SOAS, who drew my attention to this point and also to recent research on Ethiopia cited elsewhere in this paper.
10. Estimating a *dhirā'* at about 50 cm, the building in ca. 608 was therefore about 9 m high.
11. Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, vol. 1, p. 165. Other less precise versions preserved by al-Azraqī repeat the reference to the wiping or rubbing out of the pictures, without referring to the use of water from Zamzam.
12. Something very similar appears in the coral and wood houses of Jidda and other places on the Red Sea coast. See S. Munro-Kay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh, 1991), p. 140.
13. G. R. D. King, *The Architectural Tradition of Saudi Arabia and Its Neighbours* (London, 1998), pp. 32–51. See also pp. 10–12, 17–32, 51–55, 111–12.
14. Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, vol. 1, p. 167.
15. *Ibid.*
16. G. R. D. King, "The Sculptures of the Pre-Islamic Haram at Makka," in *Cairo to Kabul: Afghan Studies Presented to Ralph Pinder-Wilson*, ed. W. Ball and L. Harrow (London, 2002), pp. 144–50.
17. Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, vol. 1, p. 165.
18. *Ibid.*
19. King, *Architectural Tradition*, pp. 60–64, 111.
20. R. Serjeant and R. Lewcock, *San'ā': An Arabian Islamic City* (London, 1983), p. 45; and G. R. D. King, "Some Christian Wall-Mosaics in Pre-Islamic Arabia," *Proceedings of the 12th Seminar for Arabian Studies* 10 (1980): 37–43, p. 38.
21. Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, vol. 1, p. 167.
22. A. Grabar, *Martyrium: Recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1946), vol. 2, pl. lvii.2.
23. P. du Bourguet, *L'Art copte* (Paris, 1967), p. 92, fig. 25.
24. A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins* (London, 1980), pl. 64 and p. 321.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 320; *idem*, *Martyrium*, vol. 2, p. liv.1.
26. D. Talbot Rice, *Byzantine Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin [Pelican series], 1968), p. 51.
27. BM WA S.O.C. 125041.
28. E. Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making: Mainlines of Development in Mediterranean Art, 3rd–7th Century* (London, 1977), fig. 210.
29. Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, p. 134, pl. 324.
30. At Medina the Prophet also received Christian delegations of monks coming from Najran, and the Christian prince Ukaydir of Dumat al-Jandal also came before him, but these episodes gave no scope for him to have seen more than the crosses that these delegates wore. The same is true of the leader of the Ayla delegates who came to him at Tabuk.
31. Imām Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, trans. A. Zidan and D. Zidan (Cairo, n. d.), vol. 1, p. 268. One of the *muhājirūn* to Habasha, 'Ubayd

- Allah b. Jahsh, even converted to Christianity while he was at Aksum.
32. Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, vol. 1, p. 169.
  33. There appear to have been sufficient Christians or Christian visitors at Mecca to justify a cemetery (J. S. Trimmingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* [London and New York, 1979], p. 260). What impact their beliefs had on the pagan Quraysh leadership and their art is impossible to estimate.
  34. Ibn al-Kalbī, *Book of Idols*, p. 13.
  35. Qur'an 5:93.
  36. Qur'an 5:4.
  37. "Casting lots with arrows" would be a better translation than that offered by A. Y. Ali. The Arberry translation has "partition by the divining arrows."
  38. Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, vol. 1, pp. 168–69.
  39. *Ibid.*, pp. 165–66; 169.
  40. Al-Bukhārī, *Mukhtaṣar Ṣaḥīḥ*, English trans. A. Zidan and D. Zidan (Cairo, n.d.), p. 406.
  41. Al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makka*, vol. 1, p. 166.
  42. T. Fahd, s.v. "Hubal," *EP<sup>2</sup>*.
  43. Early Christian Ethiopian painting is lost. The pagan queen Godwit raided Tigre in about 1000, and this appears to have had a devastating effect on the monuments. What was not destroyed by her suffered from the sixteenth-century deprivations of Ahmad Gran b. Ibrahim, who conquered Ethiopia and completed the damage begun six centuries earlier. Furthermore, such wall paintings as did escape seem to have been replaced by later works that obliterated them. Further north, Nubia may provide some idea of the lost paintings of Ethiopia, but even there the earliest extant examples in Nobata, at Fares and Qasr Brim and at Old Dongola, are dated to ca. eighth to tenth century and thus are somewhat later than the vanished Ethiopian works that could have influenced the Ka'ba paintings.
  44. Qur'an 53:36–37; 87:18–19, referring to the *ṣuḥūf* (sheets, written texts) of Musa and Ibrahim.
  45. Al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb futūḥ al-buldān*, trans. P. K. Hitti as *The Origins of the Islamic State* (New York and London, 1916), p. 100.
  46. W. Daum, ed., *Yemen: 3000 Years of Art and Civilization in Arabia Felix* (Innsbruck and Frankfurt/Main, 1988) p. 94. I do not know their subsequent fate, as the Aden Museum was ransacked by northern Yemeni forces after the civil war of 1994.
  47. Initially the site was dated to the second to fifth century AD, but subsequent research by the Saudi team concluded that settlement at Qaryat al-Faw did not extend beyond the early fourth century (communication from Dr. Asem Bargouthi).
  48. A. R. al-Ansary, *Qaryat al-Faw: A Portrait of Pre-Islamic Civilization in Saudi Arabia* (London: 1982), pp. 27, 136–37.
  49. The Arabian painting tradition persisted, as the excavations at al-Rabadha to the east of Medina have shown. Paintings with fine inscriptions and "Sasanian" beads were excavated by this writer in the mid-1980s. They were in a context that seemed to be early Abbasid or possibly—but less likely—late Umayyad. Other simple figurative paintings around what may have been a shop were of Abbasid date, probably dating to the ninth to tenth century. They remain unpublished.
  50. See D. R. Buxton and D. Matthews, "The Reconstruction of Vanished Aksumite Buildings," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 25 (1974): 53–76; also E. Littmann et al., *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition* (henceforth *DAE*) (Berlin, 1913).
  51. E. Littmann, *DAE*, vol. 2, pp. 107–21. *DAE* describes Enda Semon, Enda Mikāel, and Taaka Maryam. The excavations of Dungur are unpublished, while Taaka Maryam was largely destroyed in the 1930s during the Italian occupation. See D. Phillipson, *Ancient Ethiopia* (London, 1998), p. 31.
  52. G. R. D. King, "Creswell's Appreciation of Arabian Architecture," in *K. A. C. Creswell and His Legacy*, ed. O. Grabar, *Muqarnas* 8 (1992): 94–102.