

Supplement: Practices, Pilgrimage to Makka

The Black Stone of the *ka'ba*

In the eastern corner of the *ka'ba*, a black stone is embedded in the wall that is the subject of reverence by Muslims who visit the Sacred Mosque. This is the Black Stone (*al-Hajar al-Aswad*). The visible part is oval in shape measuring approximately 20cms by 16cms. It is surrounded by a silver band, which is attached by silver nails. When Muslims make the Hajj or minor pilgrimage (*umra*) to the *ka'ba*, they reverence it with a kiss or touch, or if the crowds are too great to permit this, by saluting it by raising their hand towards it.

Muslim tradition contains various elements concerning the Black Stone. Some traditions relate that it was sent from Paradise by God to Adam and Eve as an indication of where they should build a centre for the worship of God on earth. Tradition goes on to relate that it was lost in the Flood of Noah until its location was revealed to Abraham by the Angel Gabriel, who instructed that it should be built into the wall of the *ka'ba* when they re-built it. There is a generally accepted tradition that it was originally white but turned black over the centuries in which the *ka'ba* was used by pre-Islamic Arabs as a centre of idol-worship; other Muslim traditions refute this account and hold that it was always black. There has been much speculation over the centuries as to the composition of the stone. Various views have been expressed that it was a meteorite, a piece of agate, or a piece of glass forged through an incident involving great heat and energy in the desert.

In the year 605, an incident is recorded in which the Makkans of that time had removed the Black Stone whilst repair work was done on the *ka'ba*. It is recorded that Muhammad himself placed it in its current location. Over the centuries, the stone has been damaged and repaired so that today it consists of fragments cemented together and bound by the silver band. It is reported to have been broken by a stone hurled from a siege catapult in 683 and from 930 to 952, it was taken away to modern Bahrain by the Qarmations, a sub-set of the Isma'ili Shi'a branch of Islam, who demanded a huge ransom from the Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad for its return.