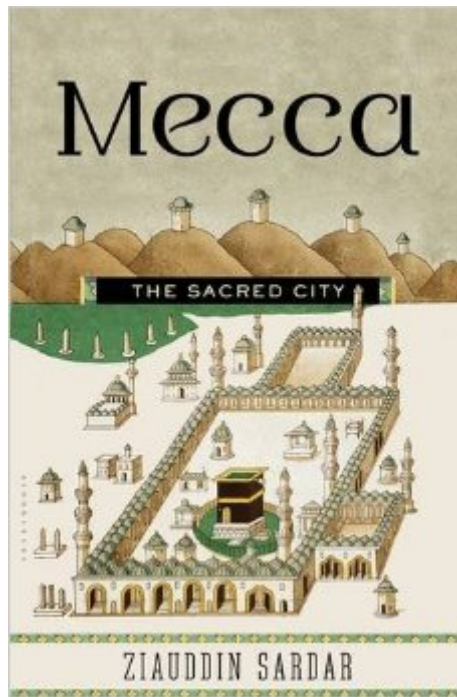


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Mecca: The Sacred City



Synopsis

Mecca is, for many, the heart of Islam. It is the birthplace of Muhammad, the direction to which Muslims turn when they pray, and the site of pilgrimage that annually draws some three million Muslims from all corners of the world. Yet the significance of Mecca is more than purely religious. What happens in Mecca and how Muslims think about the political and cultural history of Mecca has had and continues to have a profound influence on world events to this day. In this insightful book, Ziauddin Sardar unravels the meaning and significance of Mecca. Tracing its history, from its origins as a barren valley in the desert to its evolution as a trading town and sudden emergence as the religious center of a world empire, Sardar examines the religious struggles and rebellions in Mecca that have significantly shaped Muslim culture. An illuminative, lyrical, and witty blend of history, reportage, and memoir, Mecca reflects all that is profound and enlightening, curious and amusing about Mecca and takes us behind the closed doors to one of the most important places in the world today.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ziauddin Sardar grew up in Pakistan, and the one bit of decoration in his home was a calendar with a gaudy picture of the Sacred Mosque in Mecca, with the cuboid Kaaba within it. It sounds sort of like the first depiction I ever saw of the same scene, which happened to be painted on black velvet and was for sale in a thrift store. I had no idea what that cube was, but Sardar grew up knowing from the picture that in some special sense the divine power is focused in this one place. He has been intimately involved in Mecca, not just on his own pilgrimages but in administration, and he

is dismayed by the current state of the city. Before understanding why, it is important to understand what has gone before, and Sardar, who has written many books on science and on Islam, has now given us *Mecca: The Sacred City* (Bloomsbury), a full history of the city. This is a rarity; most books available on Mecca are written about the experience of the Hajj or are picture books illustrating the pilgrimage. They are especially scant in comparison to all the histories available on, say, Jerusalem. This is a vivid history, with plenty of dramatic, funny, or grisly anecdotes, about a place most readers are banned from ever going. The beginning of the city stretches back to the time of legends, with the Kaaba installed by Adam and Abraham. It was a center for polytheism, and people were making pagan pilgrimages to it before Muhammad received his revelations emphasizing but one god. This did not endear him to those in power, who profited from the pilgrimages. The middle portion of Sardar's book is mostly a long account of conflict between rich and poor, between families, tribes, religions, splinter sects, nations, and empires.

This well-researched, clearly written, and detailed book covers the history of Mecca, its place at the center and periphery of the Islamic world and Islam, and its inhabitants. He writes about the numerous visitors to Islam's holiest pilgrimage site, including Western non-Muslim explorer-spies and converts. The author does express some strong personal opinions; e.g., around the Saudi modernization of the city and the holy sites to the detriment of historic buildings, architecture and neighborhoods, not to mention the surrounding of the Sacred Mosque by ugly concrete buildings and skyscrapers. To his credit, Sardar does discuss slavery in Mecca, an Islamic institution that lasted there for more than 13 centuries from the first days of Islam until 1962, when Saudi Arabia banned the practice. (He does not mention that this was done in response to pressure from President John F. Kennedy in exchange for continued security guarantees.) The city had its own slave market. Most slaves came from black Africa: Abyssinia and Nubia. The author does, however, make two false claims: (1) He states that the Hajj is "the greatest gathering of humanity anywhere on earth" (xvi), but the Hindu Kumbh Mela can easily exceed Mecca's three million carrying capacity by a factor of 10 or more. (2) On page 105, he claims that "the original community founded by Muhammad in Medina had been a multi-religious community comprising Muslims, Jews and Christians and pagans. This kind of heterodoxy helped to maintain Islam's great cities."

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