general adoption of this direction for the qibla. This explains why many early mosques from Andalusia to Central Asia face south.

Other authorities held that the Koran required one to stand precisely so that one faced the Kaaba. Now the Muslims of Meccan origin knew that when they were standing in front of the walls or corners of the Kaaba they were facing directions specifically associated with the risings and settings of the sun and certain fixed stars. The major axis of the rectangular base of the edifice is said to point towards the rising point of Canopus, and the minor axis is said to point towards summer sunrise and winter sunset (see figure 6). These assertions about the Kaaba’s astronomical alignments, found in newly-discovered medieval sources, have been confirmed by modern measurements. In addition, Arabic folklore associates the sides of the Kaaba with the winds and rain. These features and associations cast new light on the origin of the edifice, and in a sense confirm the Muslim legend that the Kaaba was built in the style of a celestial counterpart called al-bayt al-ma’mur. Indeed it seems to have been an architectural model of a pre-Islamic Arab cosmology in which astronomical and meteorological phenomena are represented. The religious association was achieved first by a number of statues of the gods of the pagan Arabs which were housed inside it. With the advent of Islam these were removed, and the edifice has for close on 1400 years served for Muslims as a physical pointer to the presence of God.

The corners of the Kaaba were associated even in pre-Islamic times with the four main regions of the surrounding world, Syria, Iraq, the Yemen, and ‘the West’. Some Muslim authorities said that to face the Kaaba from Iraq, for example, one should stand in the same direction as if one were standing right in front of the north-eastern wall of the Kaaba. Thus the first Muslims in Iraq built their mosques with the prayer-walls towards winter sunset because they wanted the mosques to face the north-eastern

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**Figure 6.**

The orientation of the rectangular base of the Kaaba towards the rising of Canopus and summer solstice, as recorded in various medieval sources. The ‘cardinal’ winds are shown, each one striking a wall of the Kaaba head-on.