

**Part 5**

THE EARLY ISLAMIC  
AND  
MEDIEVAL PERIOD



# *From Hagia Polis to Al-Quds: The Byzantine–Islamic Transition in Jerusalem*

Gideon Avni  
Israel Antiquities Authority

## *Preface*

Early Islamic Jerusalem is traditionally identified with the monumental construction of the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque by the Umayyad caliphs ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan (685–705) and his son al-Walid (705–715). It was believed that these magnificent monuments, dominating the skyline of the Holy City, transferred the focus of religious orientation in Jerusalem back from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to the Temple Mount, which was known from this period as “the noble sanctuary”—al-Haram al-Sharif.

The Haram area attracted the attention of scholars from the 19th century onward. Many studies saw the reshaping of the ancient sanctuary and its adaptation to the new Islamic regime as a landmark in the transition of Jerusalem from a Christian city to a major Islamic center. Several studies have been specifically devoted to the construction of the Early Islamic monuments (e.g., Creswell 1969; Grabar 1959, 1996; Rosen-Ayalon 1989), and various interpretations have been suggested for the political and religious background that led to the establishment of a major Islamic center in Jerusalem (see Elad 1995: 147–62 for a summary of previous research).

Archaeology contributes the lion’s share to the study of the early Islamic presence in this area. Large-scale excavations to the south and southwest of the Haram have revealed the hitherto unknown remains of four monumental buildings established during the Umayyad rule in Jerusalem and identified as palaces or administrative centers (Mazar 1975; Ben-Dov 1982: 271–321; Reich and Billig 2000; Baruch and Reich 2000; Rosen-Ayalon 1989: 8–11; Grabar 1996: 128–30). The massive Early Islamic construction on the Haram and its surroundings represents a dramatic change in the shape and urban role of this area of Jerusalem. As a result, archaeological and architectural studies devoted to other parts of the city were overshadowed by the majestic appearance of the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque.

The emergence of Islam and the conquest of Jerusalem have been portrayed in traditional historical research as a dramatic event that within a short period of time transformed the religious orientation of the Holy City. Although the historical sources emphasize the fact that Jerusalem was not stormed in a violent invasion but rather surrendered peacefully to the Islamic forces (Gil 1996a: 6–9), they give the impression that the Christian communities of Jerusalem were doomed. Sophronius, the last Patriarch of Jerusalem before the Islamic conquest, associated the

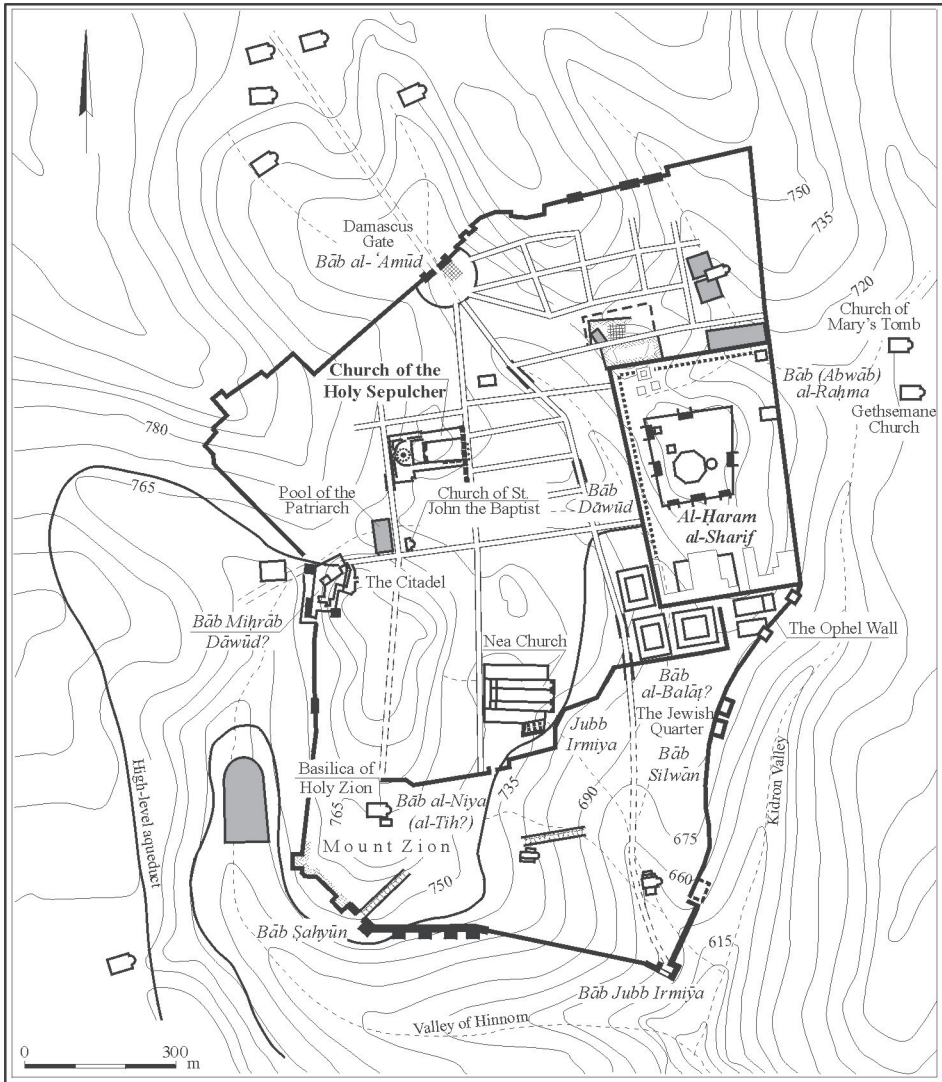


Fig. 1. Map of Jerusalem in the 8th century.

calamities that Christians in the Holy Land suffered from with the coming of the Muslim army (Schick 1995: 69–72; Kaegi 1992: 100–102; Gil 1996a: 5; Levy-Rubin 2006: 53–55).

Historical evaluations based on these descriptions present a picture of violent conquest and a rapid collapse of the Christian presence in Palestine. For example, M. Gil in his monumental book, *The History of Palestine, 634–1099* (1992) describes the sufferings of the local population:

One can assume that the local population suffered immensely in the course of the war and it is very likely that many villages were destroyed and uprooted in the frontier re-

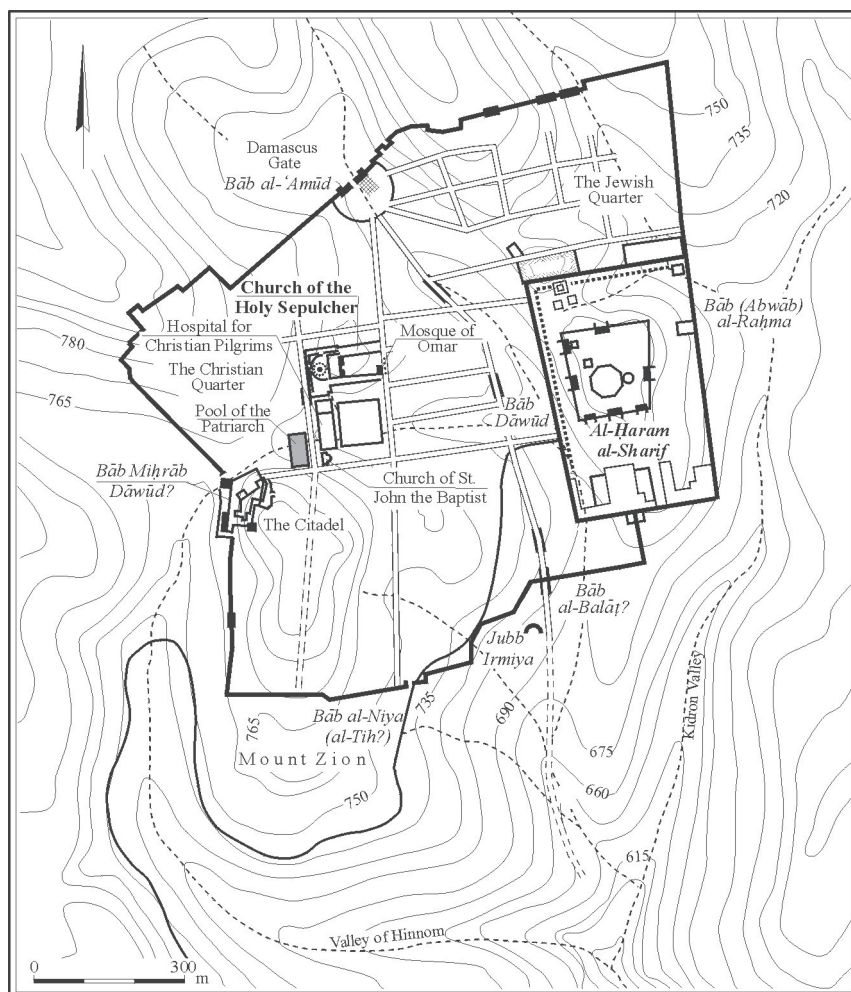


Fig. 2. Map of Jerusalem in the 11th century.

gions and that the lot of these local populations was very bitter indeed. It appears that the period of the Arab conquest was also that of the destruction of the synagogues and churches of the Byzantine era, remnants of which have been unearthed in our own time and are still being discovered (Gil 1992: 75).

However, the accumulating archaeological evidence from Jerusalem and its surroundings presents a strikingly different picture, showing that the Byzantine–Islamic transformation of the Holy City was a long and complicated process. The traditional view, that the Islamic conquest triggered a rapid change in the urban landscape and its population, is countered by the results of recent archaeological excavations. The finds from these excavations indicate a period of stability and slow change both in the urban area and in its agricultural hinterland, except for the area of the Haram and its immediate surroundings. It seems that the transition

from Christian to Islamic Jerusalem was a long process that took more than 400 years; Christian communities remained active in the city throughout the Early Islamic period. A vivid expression of this massive Christian presence is apparent in the observations of the Muslim historian, the Jerusalemite al-Muqaddasi, who by the middle of the 10th century complained that most of the population of Jerusalem was still Christian (Collins 2001: 144).

While the Temple Mount /al-Haram al-Sharif area is the only part of the city in which the archaeological record indicates a significant change in the urban layout, other areas of Jerusalem suggest that the Byzantine period urban fabric was maintained. Archaeological evidence for continuity of both religious Christian institutions and private dwellings has been found in several excavations in and around Jerusalem. Furthermore, no remains of destruction layers dated to the first half of the 7th century can be identified in any of the numerous excavations carried out in the Jerusalem area. This leads to the conclusion that neither the Persian invasion of 614 C.E. nor the Islamic conquest in 638 C.E. caused visible damage or destruction to the urban fabric of Jerusalem. Instead, many of the Byzantine urban features remained the same throughout the Early Islamic period.

### *The Archaeological Evidence*

Byzantine Jerusalem is fairly well-known from historical descriptions and archaeological finds (see Vincent and Abel 1914–26; Geva 1994; Tsafirir 1999, for comprehensive summaries). The famous Madaba Map depicts the city's urban layout and its major monuments around the second half of the 6th century, emphasizing the central position of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre within the urban landscape (Avi-Yonah 1954; Donner 1992 ; Tsafirir 1999: 342–51). Archaeological evidence points toward an ongoing urban expansion in and around Jerusalem between the 4th and 7th centuries (Tsafirir 1999: 285–95, 330–42). Urban construction expanded far beyond the city walls, especially to the north and east (Kloner 2003: 47\*–58\*).

The distinction between the urban area and its hinterland became blurred with the massive expansion of Jerusalem beyond its walls during the Byzantine and Early Islamic period (Avni 2005). This expansion is particularly evident to the north of Damascus Gate. Several excavations were conducted there in conjunction with large-scale modern construction, first at the end of the 19th century and again in the 1990s, revealing an extensive network of monasteries that were established during the Byzantine period and that continued to flourish in Early Islamic times (Lagrange 1894; Vincent and Abel 1914–26: 743–801; Amit and Wolff 2000; Tzaferis et al. 2000; Tsafirir 1999: 336–42). In some of these compounds, considerable construction was undertaken during the 7th and 8th centuries, when additional wings were built and new mosaic floors with inscriptions commemorating the donors were laid. In addition to inscriptions in Greek found in several complexes, a definitive Armenian presence was established in one of the monasteries, as indicated by inscriptions in ancient Armenian script (Stone and Amit 1996). The finds show that Christian religious institutions continued to function uninterruptedly during the Early Islamic period and until the 9th or 10th century C.E.

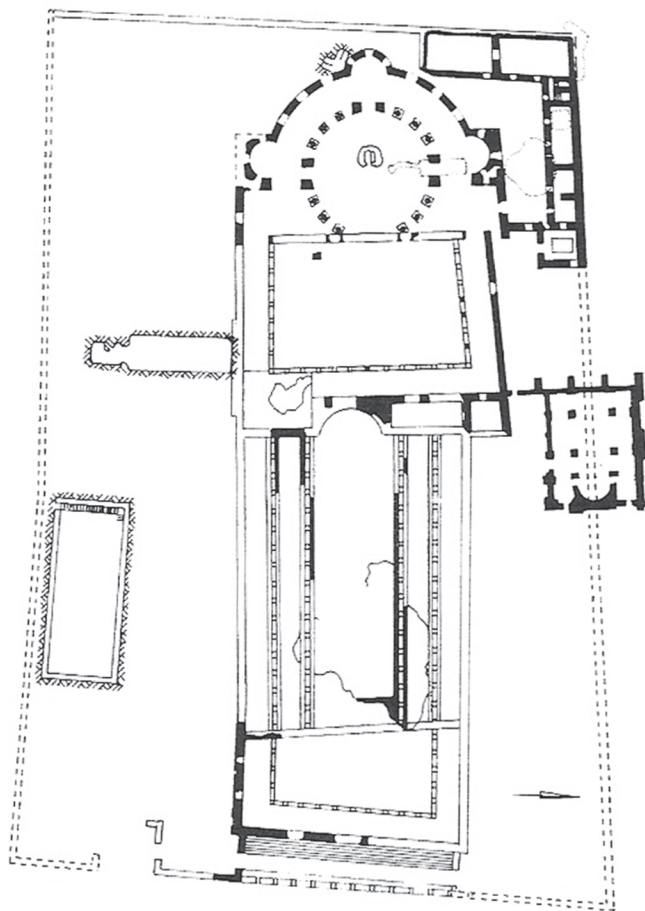


Fig. 3. Plan of the Holy Sepulchre and the adjacent church.

Additional evidence for massive Christian presence during Early Islamic times was found in several monasteries and churches located outside the city's limits. A large monastery was recently excavated on the eastern slopes of Mount Scopus, revealing a clear chronological sequence. Dedicated to Theodorus and Cyriacus, it was founded in the fifth century and continued to function at least until the 9th century (Amit, Seligman, and Zilberbod 2003).

Extra-mural monastic compounds that continued to be used in early Islamic times were also found to the east of the walled city, mainly on the slopes of the Mount of Olives (Bagatti 1956: 240–70; Bagatti and Millik 1958), as well as to the west, southwest, and south of the city's boundaries (Barkay 2000; Illife 1935; Usishkin 1993: 346–59). Several agricultural complexes into which monasteries or churches were incorporated were excavated northeast and northwest of Jerusalem, indicating the same pattern of continuity (Arav, Di Segni, and Kloner 1990; Gibson 1985–86; Avner 2000). A similar settlement pattern was revealed farther to the south and southeast of Jerusalem, with a number of monastic complexes excavated in the area between Jerusalem and Bethlehem (Corbo 1955).

The monumental church of the Kathisma located near the ancient Jerusalem-Bethlehem road constitutes one of the most significant finds supporting the continuity of the Christian presence in the Jerusalem area (Avner 2003). This church, octagonal in plan, was originally constructed in the 5th century and went through several stages of reconstruction. During the 8th century, the church was once again refurbished, including a repaving with mosaics. A small semicircular niche, possibly a *mihrab*, was installed in the southern wall of the inner octagon, blocking one of the passages and suggesting that the space was used as a mosque. A new mosaic floor was laid adjacent to the niche, decorated with a most impressive depiction of palm trees. The stratigraphic sequence indicates that this change occurred sometime in the first half of the 8th century (Avner 2003: 180–81; 2007). If the semicircular niche was indeed a *mihrab*, it should be viewed as one of the most interesting and earliest examples of a Byzantine church incorporating a mosque. It appears that the two cultic installations were in use simultaneously, with both Christians and Muslims praying in the same building.

The accumulating evidence from a number of excavated sites shows that churches and monasteries in the Jerusalem area continued to function throughout the Early Islamic period, some of them surviving until the 10th or 11th century (Schick 1995: 325–59; Bahat 1996: 87–95). Thus, it seems that the Christian presence in Jerusalem and its surroundings was far more significant than suggested by the historical sources.

Excavations conducted along the city walls and within the Old City present a similar pattern of continuity. The city walls of Jerusalem, reconstructed at the end of the 3rd or the beginning of the 4th century, continued to delimit the core of the urban area up to the second half of the 10th century (Vincent and Abel 1914–26: 942; Tsafirir 1977), the beginning of the 11th century (Bahat 1996: 37–41), or even as late as the second half of that century (Ben-Dov 2002: 187–92). No evidence for destruction of the city walls has been found in excavations conducted in a number of places along the Byzantine walls (e.g., Hamilton 1944; Weksler-Bdolah 2007 and in this volume). During the Early Islamic period, the city wall went through several stages of alteration. Its northern section was probably renovated and partly rebuilt in the 8th century (Hamilton 1944; Magness 1991). During the same period, large-scale renovations were carried out in the Haram walls and at the southern city wall (Ben-Dov 2002: 174–82). In spite of these changes, the archaeological evidence shows that the city limits of the Byzantine period were maintained throughout most of the Early Islamic period (figs. 1–2).

Continuity with regard to other aspects of the urban fabric is evident throughout the walled city. The Late Roman street-grid of Jerusalem, maintained during the Byzantine period, did not change in Early Islamic times. Although the colonnaded *Cardo* and *Decumanus* became narrower and more crowded as a result of the construction of new shops along the streets (Bahat 1996: 49–52; Barbé and Deàdle 2006: 24\*; 2007), as common in other cities of the Near East (e.g., Kennedy 1986: 11–13; Tsafirir and Foerster 1997: 138–40; Kraeling 1938: 116–17; Al-Asàd and Stepinowski 1989), the major streets and alleys were continuously used during the Early Islamic and later medieval times (Wilkinson 1975: 118–36; Bahat 1996:



49–52). A number of small-scale excavations were conducted in the main alleys of the Old City, in which the large stone pavements of the Late Roman and Byzantine streets were unearthed underneath the present-day streets, providing further evidence for this continuity (Tsafrir 1999: 142–56; 295–300; Kloner and Bar-Nathan 2007). Unfortunately, these excavations have not yet been fully published and it is impossible to determine the exact date of construction and renovations of the ancient pavements.

The division of the walled city into quarters was already established in Byzantine times (Tsafrir 1999). During the Early Islamic period, the city quarters were rearranged according to the religious and ethnic affiliations of the population (Bahat 1996: 53–65). A Jewish quarter was established in the southern part of the city and later moved into the northeastern area of the Old City, where it was located on the eve of the Crusader conquest (Bahat 1996: 53–54; Prawer 1947–48; 1991; for a different opinion, see Gil 1996c: 171–74).

The Christian quarter of Early Islamic Jerusalem was located approximately in the same area as the present-day Christian quarter, in the northwestern part of the Old City centering around the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Bahat 1996: 58–65; Linder 1996). Significant changes took place there in the 9th century, as part of the initiative of Charlemagne (Bahat 1996: 52–64), and again in the 11th century, when several public buildings were constructed and renovated in the Muristan area, to the south of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Bahat 1996: 60–65; Patrich 1984; Boaz 2001: 85–88).

The prominent location of the Christian quarter and the additional construction of ecclesiastic institutions in this part of Jerusalem during Early Islamic times indicate that the local Christian communities maintained their leading position in the city. The most explicit example is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre itself, which remained physically unchanged in the Early Islamic period.

The archaeological evidence for a Christian presence in the church and its surroundings is supported by a recent survey and excavation (Avni and Seligman 2003). It appears that the church did not suffer significant damage during the Persian invasion of 614 C.E. and the Muslim conquest in 638 C.E. Instead, the archaeological, architectural, and epigraphic evidence indicates that considerable construction and renovation took place both in the church and in the adjacent compounds throughout Byzantine and Early Islamic times (Avni and Seligman 2003, forthcoming; Di Segni, in this volume).

Evidence for the construction of a church adjacent to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was found in an excavation carried out on the grounds of the Coptic Patriarchate, north of the Church (Avni and Seligman 2003: 156–58). The new church, built in the Early Islamic period, consisted of two aisles and a central nave and was probably covered by a central dome supported by four massive columns (fig. 3). The scant ceramic evidence found underneath small patches of the original stone floor show that the church was in use during the 9th and 10th centuries, and was probably demolished in 1009 C.E., together with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, by the Muslim caliph al-Hākīm.

If Avni and Seligman forthcoming has now appeared, please update information.

The archaeological finds show that large sections of the northwestern part of the Old City (in the area of today's Christian Quarter) belonged to the Christian communities of Jerusalem throughout the Early Islamic period. The only Muslim presence in this area is indicated by a large inscription in Arabic found in the Russian Hospice east of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre: it forbids non-Muslims from entering a certain mosque. This mosque is probably the Mosque of 'Umar, established near the church in the 10th century (Clermont-Ganneau 1898: 302–62; Van Berchem 1922: 59–61; Bahat 1996: 59–61).

Although many historical sources claim that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was completely demolished in 1009 by order of al-Hākim (Canard 1965), recent archaeological investigations indicate that significant parts of the original Byzantine church were left intact (Biddle 1999; Avni and Seligman forthcoming). It appears that the damage to the church was repaired in a relatively short time, that the Christian liturgical practices and ceremonies were renewed within a few years, and that the church once again functioned as the major Christian shrine in Jerusalem (Biddle 1999: 72–73).

The southern area of Early Islamic Jerusalem, including the City of David spur, the Tyropoeon valley, and the slopes of Mt. Zion, was inhabited throughout the Early Islamic period (fig. 1). Evidence for the continuity of residential areas was found in several excavations. During the excavations carried out in the 1920s in the upper part of the City of David, the remains were uncovered of several houses that were then dated to the Byzantine period (Crowfoot and Fitzgerald 1929: 58–60; Macalister and Duncan 1926: 137–45). However, a reevaluation of the finds supports uninterrupted use between the Byzantine and the Early Islamic period, with no evidence of destruction (Magness 1992). Some of the houses seem to have been used for a long period of time, and it seems that an uninterrupted phase of occupation lasted into the Crusader and Mamluk periods (Magness 1992: 71). Although private houses in this area follow the Byzantine construction tradition, the urban layout was more spread out. Open spaces were identified between the dwellings, and it seems that these were used as small agricultural plots. Industrial installations were constructed within and between the houses (Bahat 1996: 68–70).

### *Conclusion: The Definition of Urban Change*

The accumulating archaeological evidence from Jerusalem and its hinterland evince a clear pattern of continuity from the Byzantine to the Early Islamic period, with a very slow and gradual process of change; it does not support the claim of an Islamic sovereignty and a constant decline of the Christian population in Jerusalem (e.g., Linder 1996: 122–22; Gil 1996b: 109–11). The Christian presence in Jerusalem by no means ended with the Muslim conquest; religious services continued, and evidence for expansion and new construction of churches and monasteries has been found in many excavations in the Jerusalem area. The recent archaeological evidence suggests that between the 5th and the 9th centuries Jerusalem expanded considerably to the north and beyond its 4th-century walls. An extensive network of monasteries, villas, and farms was constructed around the walled city, creating a vast suburban area.

If Avni and Seligman forthcoming has now appeared, please update information.

Although Early Islamic Jerusalem was identified with the monumental Muslim religious buildings on the Haram, this was the only urban area in which a dramatic change occurred. In most other areas, the slow and gradual religious and cultural transformation supported by the archaeological discoveries does not represent a monolithic Islamic domination of the city. Several urban components indicate continuity in form and function. The city walls retained their former layout at least until the 10th century; domestic structures were only gradually altered following the Byzantine period; and Christian religious institutions continued to flourish for at least three centuries after the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem. The major features of the Byzantine city were preserved, demonstrating a gradual and long process of transformation between the 7th and the 11th centuries. During most of this period, Christian institutions still dominated the urban landscape. This process is evident at many excavated sites, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the heart of Jerusalem, as well as the large network of monasteries, churches, and farms on the outskirts of the city.

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