

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE HOLY LAND

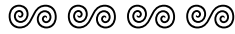
FROM THE DESTRUCTION OF SOLOMON'S TEMPLE TO  
THE MUSLIM CONQUEST

JODI MAGNESS

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## SEVENTEEN

# EPILOGUE

## EARLY ISLAMIC JERUSALEM (638–750 C.E.)

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the early seventh century, a charismatic, prophetic figure named Muhammed began to attract a following in the Arabian Peninsula. In 622, warned of an assassination plot, Muhammed fled from Mecca to Medina. His flight, called in Arabic the **Hegira** (or **Hejira**), marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar (which dates events after 622 as A.H. or After [the] Hegira). After Muhammed died in 632, four elected caliphs succeeded him as leaders of the new religion of Islam. Almost immediately after Muhammed's death, his followers began to spread Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula through a series of military campaigns. Beginning in 634, Muslim tribes began to take over parts of Palestine. Jerusalem apparently surrendered peacefully in 638. Caesarea, the last major city in Palestine to fall to the Muslims, capitulated after a seven-month siege, after the Byzantine emperor withdrew support by way of the sea. Palestine was taken by the Muslims during the reign of the caliph **Omar** (634–644). Although for a long time scholars believed that the Muslim conquest of Palestine was accompanied by widespread destructions followed by a rapid decline in prosperity, recent research indicates that Palestine continued to flourish under early Islamic rule.

Islam spread quickly as the Muslims extended their control over most of the Near East (except for Asia Minor, which remained under Byzantine rule), Egypt, North Africa, and eventually Spain. After the death of the fourth caliph, the **Umayyad dynasty** was established, whose members ruled over the vast, newly created empire from 661 to 750. The Umayyads chose Damascus, Syria, as their capital. The Umayyads sponsored many building projects around Palestine, including a series of desert palaces such as **Khirbat al-Mafjar** near Jericho, and a large congregational mosque in Damascus. Jerusalem benefited especially



17.1 The Dome of the Rock.

from Umayyad patronage. The Umayyad dynasty was overthrown in 750 by the **Abbasids**, who moved the capital of the Muslim empire to Baghdad.

## JERUSALEM

### The Temple Mount: The Dome of the Rock

The most conspicuous monument in Jerusalem today is the Dome of the Rock, a golden-domed structure in the middle of the Temple Mount. In Arabic the Temple Mount is called *al-Haram al-Sharif*, which means “the noble enclosure,” and Jerusalem’s sacred status in Islam is reflected by its Arabic name, *al-Quds*: the holy [city]. The Dome of the Rock is one of the earliest surviving Muslim monuments anywhere. It was built in the last decade of the seventh century by an Umayyad caliph named **Abd al-Malik** (ruled 685–705). The Dome of the Rock almost certainly occupies the site of the earlier Jewish temples, although it was constructed centuries after the second temple was destroyed. During the Byzantine period there were no buildings on the Temple Mount, which ancient sources suggest was lying in ruins and used as a garbage dump.

Abd al-Malik cleared the debris and enshrined a rocky outcrop in a domed, octagonal building. This rocky outcrop (a natural high point in the center of the Temple Mount) is venerated by Muslims as the place where Abraham offered his son for sacrifice (Muslim tradition identifies the son as Ishmael instead of Isaac). Later Muslim tradition came to identify this as the spot from which



17.2 Interior of the Dome of the Rock. National Geographic Image ID 1002978, by Ira Block/National Geographic Stock.

Muhammed was transported by a magical horselike creature to heaven, where he met with the Old Testament prophets. According to the Quran, Muhammed's night journey took him from "the farthest mosque" (Arabic *al-masjid al-aqsa*) to heaven. Eventually Muslim tradition located the site of the farthest mosque on Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

The rocky outcrop in the center of the Dome of the Rock is encircled by two concentric rows of columns enclosed within octagonal walls (the outer circle of columns follows the octagonal layout of the walls). The inner circle of columns supports a clerestory with a dome above. Although some elements have been



replaced since the seventh century (including the dome and the exterior tiles), the structure has survived intact and still retains much of its original interior decoration. The colorful marble columns and Corinthian capitals are *spolia* – reused architectural pieces taken from Byzantine churches in Jerusalem, some of which may have been lying in ruins at the time of the Muslim conquest. The flat surfaces (lower parts of the walls) of the interior are covered with marble revetment (vener), with the slabs cut to display the patterns of the veins. The curved surfaces (upper parts of the walls, undersides of arches, and the clerestory of the dome) are covered with colored mosaics. There is extensive use of gold leaf in the mosaic cubes, which glitters in the dimly lit interior. Many of the mosaics are geometric and floral patterns, but there are also depictions of jeweled crowns and other pieces of jewelry. Myriam Rosen-Ayalon, an Israeli art historian and archaeologist, has suggested that these represent the Byzantine crown jewels, symbolizing the Muslim victory over the Byzantines.

Although the Temple Mount was desolate when Jerusalem came under Muslim rule, its history and significance were well known. Abd al-Malik clearly chose this site because of its biblical associations. However, when Jerusalem surrendered to the Muslims it was a Christian city. In fact, Jerusalem was a jewel in the crown of the Byzantine Empire, the seat of a Patriarch and the place where Jesus spent his final days. Byzantine Jerusalem was filled with dozens of monumental churches and monasteries, among them the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The new religion of Islam had to define its relationship to Christianity and compete for converts with the wealthy and firmly established religion. Abd al-Malik chose the most conspicuous spot in Jerusalem to make his statement.

Many years ago a prominent French-born scholar of Islamic art, Oleg Grabar, who spent most of his life in the United States, made an important observation. He noted that the Dome of the Rock and the Rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher are similar in dimensions and are both centralized buildings (*martyria*). Furthermore, the architectural elements and decoration of the Dome of the Rock, including the marble columns and capitals, marble revetment, and gold and colored mosaics are characteristic of Byzantine churches (and ultimately derive from Roman art and architecture). Grabar speculated that Abd al-Malik modeled the Dome of the Rock after the Rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, in an attempt to surpass Christianity's most famous shrine. Indeed, the interior of the Dome of the Rock gives a much better impression of the original appearance of the Rotunda, which has suffered greatly and no longer has its original decoration. The mosaic above the inner face of the outer circle of columns in the Dome of the Rock contains a long inscription from the time of Abd al-Malik, consisting of verses from the Quran (a later caliph replaced Abd al-Malik's name with his own). The passages cited include several dealing with the death and resurrection of Jesus and the nature of the virgin birth – that is,

questions of dogma on which Islam had to clarify its position versus Christianity. For example, Jesus is recognized as a prophet but not as the son of God.

The Dome of the Rock is much more complex than simply an Islamic imitation of the Rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Scholars have pointed to different sources of influence, including Sasanid Persia (the jewelry depicted in the mosaics) and Arabia (the circumambulation of a sacred monument such as the Kaaba in Mecca). Nevertheless, Grabar put it best when he said, "The Dome of the Rock appears as a monument constructed in order to make a statement for the whole city of Jerusalem and for its surroundings. . . . It became the visual rival of the Holy Sepulchre and the Nea church. It is seen immediately as one leaves the Holy Sepulchre, signaling the rebirth, under a new Muslim guise, of the old Jewish Temple area" (*The Shape of the Holy*, p. 104).

### The Al-Aqsa Mosque

The al-Aqsa mosque apparently was constructed by Abd al-Malik or his son, al-Walid (ruled 705–715). It sits at the southern end of the Temple Mount, in the area of Herod's Royal Stoa. Unlike the Dome of the Rock, the al-Aqsa mosque has been modified through repeated repairs and reconstructions. Much of the current mosque, including the façade, is the result of later modifications. The original building is thought to have been a broad hall consisting of a central nave flanked on each side by seven rows of columns, which created seven aisles (a hypostyle plan typical of early Islamic mosques). A niche called a *qibla* in the south wall at the end of the nave marks the direction of prayer (toward Mecca). The ceiling of the nave immediately in front of the *qibla* had a dome, but the rest of the building was covered with a flat ceiling carried on wooden beams.

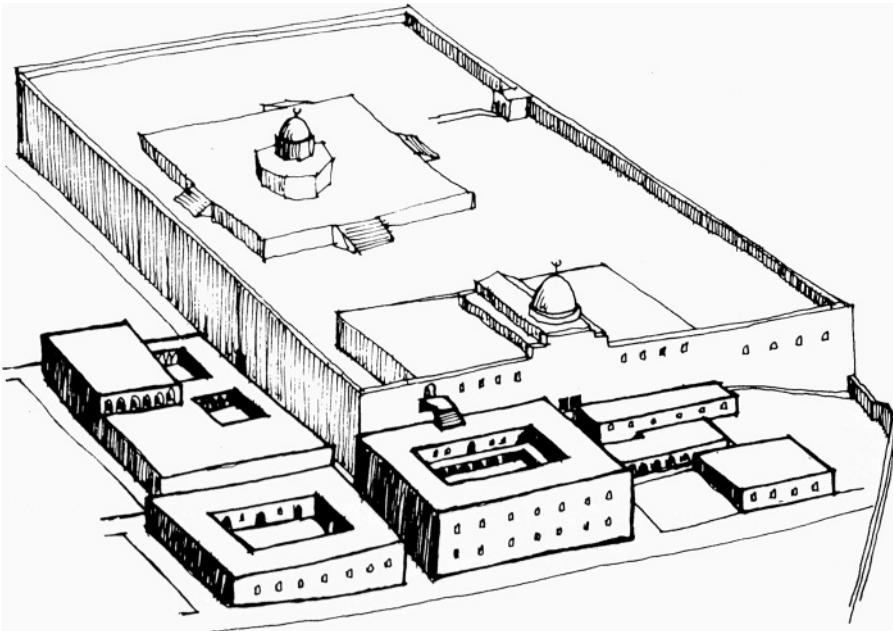
The Dome of the Rock is a monument enshrining a central focal point that was designed to facilitate the circumambulation of multitudes of pilgrims. In contrast, the al-Aqsa mosque is a hall for congregational prayer and worship, analogous to synagogues and churches. For example, when Anwar Sadat visited Jerusalem in 1977, he prayed in the al-Aqsa mosque, not in the Dome of the Rock. Although in plan the al-Aqsa mosque is a broad house because of the extra aisles, it is similar to a basilica in having a focal point at the end of the nave.

### THE AREA TO THE SOUTH AND WEST OF THE TEMPLE MOUNT

After the Six-Day War in 1967, the Israeli archaeologist Benjamin Mazar conducted large-scale excavations around the southern and western sides of the Temple Mount (the British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon had carried out limited excavations in this area in the 1960s). Mazar's excavations brought to light



17.3 The al-Aqsa mosque.



17.4 Reconstruction of the Umayyad palatial or administrative buildings around the Temple Mount. From *The Mountain of the Lord* by Benjamin Mazar, assisted by Gaalyah Cornfield, copyright © 1975 by Hamikra Baolam, Ltd. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.

**Sidebar: Where Are the Remains of the First and Second Temples?**

Most scholars believe that the Dome of the Rock occupies the spot where the first and second temples once stood. This makes sense because the Dome of the Rock sits on a natural high point in the center of the Temple Mount. However, no identifiable remains survive of the temples, and probably none will ever be found. The reason is simple. The second temple was destroyed some 600 years before the Dome of the Rock was constructed. In the intervening centuries, much of the stone was carried off for reuse, and under the Byzantines the Temple Mount became a garbage dump. When Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock, he presumably cleared away the refuse to expose the rocky outcrop. In other words, the Dome of the Rock was founded on bedrock (which lies at a high level at this spot), rather than having been built on top of the remains of the second temple building. Even if excavations could be conducted under the Dome of the Rock (which is impossible), they probably would reveal little of the second temple aside from cuttings in the bedrock. The fact that the Dome of the Rock sits on bedrock provides a stability that has helped the building survive earthquakes. In contrast, the al-Aqsa mosque has suffered damage because it sits on the southern end of the platform, which is supported by Solomon's Stables (the underground arches built by Herod).

Nearly all archaeological work relating to the Temple Mount generates controversy. In the 1970s, Mazar's excavations were widely condemned because of the misperception that they were being conducted underneath the Temple Mount. In recent years, the Waqf (the Muslim religious authority that has custody of the Temple Mount) has cleared the area under the al-Aqsa mosque (Solomon's Stables) in order to install another mosque. The dirt and debris cleared out of this area was dumped in the Kidron Valley. A group led by Israeli archaeologists has been collecting the dumped material and sifting it for finds. Both the Waqf and the archaeologists have been criticized for these activities.

important remains from various periods, including the late Iron Age, Herodian period, and Byzantine period. Perhaps the most important and surprising remains date to the early Islamic period. Under the Umayyads, a series of huge buildings were erected surrounding the southern and western sides of the Temple Mount. These buildings consisted of two stories of rooms surrounding large open courtyards paved with stone. The rooms were decorated with mosaic floors and colorful wall paintings.

Although scholars debate whether these buildings functioned as royal palaces or administrative centers, there is no doubt they were constructed by the Umayyad caliphs. The building immediately to the south of the al-Aqsa mosque was connected to the Temple Mount by a bridge, providing direct access to the



mosque. The size and richness of these buildings reflect a substantial investment by the Umayyads in the development of Jerusalem, and attest to the importance of the holy city for Islam.

#### Recommended Reading

- Meir Ben-Dov, *In the Shadow of the Temple: The Discovery of Ancient Jerusalem* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).
- Oleg Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1996).
- Oleg Grabar and Benjamin Z. Kedar (eds.), *Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Jerusalem's Sacred Esplanade* (Austin: University of Texas, 2009).
- Joshua Prawer and Haggai Ben-Shammai (eds.), *The History of Jerusalem: The Early Muslim Period, 638–1099* (New York: New York University, 1996).
- Robert Schick, "Palestine in the Early Islamic Period: Luxuriant Legacy," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 61.2 (June 1998): 74–108.
- Alan Walmsley, *Early Islamic Syria: An Archaeological Assessment* (London: Duckworth, 2007).