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THE DOME OF THE ROCK REVISITED:
SOME REMARKS ON AL-WASITI’S ACCOUNTS

Oleg Grabar was one of the first scholars to have recognized the importance of studying and interpreting Islamic art and architecture in Islamic terms. He started his investigations with the formative period of the Umayyads, at a time when other scholars regarded monuments and artifacts belonging to that period as Byzantine or, even more absurdly, post-Sasanian. His work on the Dome of the Rock and his later book, The Formation of Islamic Art, defined the parameters of early Islamic art and established its distinct identity, while acknowledging its debt to preceding cultures. As a token of recognition to Professor Grabar for instilling in me, as in many of his students, an interest in reconstructing a context for the study of Islamic art from within, I present him with this article. It attempts to address some of the contextual issues relating to his favorite monument, the Dome of the Rock.

INTRODUCTION

Every scholar who has studied the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem has noted that the understanding of its early Islamic context is hindered by the lack of contemporary texts. The Umayyads, who were the first Muslim builders of what later became known as the Haram al-Sharif on Mount Moriah, did not leave any records of their work in Jerusalem. Early Muslim historians, who lived and compiled their books after the fall of the Umayyads and were sponsored by their enemies the Abbasids, deliberately underplay the Umayyad achievements to the degree that many of them do not mention the building of the Dome of the Rock by ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwan. Early geographers all report ʿAbd al-Malik’s building of the Dome, but the nature and scope of their field preclude the discussion of architectural patronage and the historical context of buildings. The only one who proposes an explanation for it is the Jerusalemite geographer al-Muqaddasi (ca. 985). He tells of a conversation with his uncle in which the latter connects the motivation behind the Dome’s construction to that of al-Walid’s in building his mosque in Damascus and justifies both of them as responses to the seductive splendor of Christian churches in the context of the Arab-Byzantine struggle.

Another group of early Islamic sources that offer valuable information on the history of Jerusalem are the “merits” (fadaʾil) books. As a distinct literary genre, the fadaʾil appeared in the early Abbasid period, in the middle of the second century hégira (eighth century). It grew out of the need to collect the large number of prophetic hadiths, historical anecdotes, and folktales concerning the major cities of the Islamic world. But, although Jerusalem is definitely one of the most venerated cities of Islam, it was not until the beginning of the fifth century hégira (eleventh century) that its first known books of fadaʾil were compiled. This does not mean, however, that the accounts in these books belong to the eleventh century, for their origins in the oral tradition would push their dating back to earlier periods. Such oral reports on the lore of the city of Jerusalem were recited in scholarly circles, especially in Jerusalem itself and in Damascus, from as early as the second century hégira.

Modern scholars were well aware of the importance of the fadaʾil books in the study of the history of Jerusalem. Many repeatedly used them in tracing the development of the sanctity of the city and its importance in Islamic eschatology and hagiology. Yet, few were those who consulted them for the reconstruction of the architectural and urban history of the city, although these books contain elaborate accounts of the original building of the Dome of the Rock and the modifications introduced by the Umayyads and Abbasids, and other building activities at later times.

The earliest known book of merits specific to the city of Jerusalem, entitled Fadaʾil al-Bayt al-Muqaddas and compiled by the Jerusalemite preacher Abu Bakr al-Wasiti before 1019, contains two accounts on the building and ornamentation of the Dome of the Rock. The first records ʿAbd al-Malik’s patronage of, and his involvement in, the construction of the Dome, his further instruction regarding its adornment after its completion, and the practices developed under the Dome and
around the venerated Rock. The second is a list of the objects that hung inside the Dome during the Umayyad period. These accounts provide proof for some of the details about the Dome’s construction that were thus far based on speculation or on indirect inferences, and dispel some of the misconceptions that were perpetuated by later sources. Their analysis offers new venues for further inquiry into such important questions as the degree of ʿAbd al-Malik’s involvement in the architecture, the methods of architectural representation that were practiced in early Islamic times, and the iconography of Umayyad mosaics, in addition to the central question of the significance of the Dome of the Rock, and Jerusalem, for the Umayyads, whose construction, I would maintain, was politically motivated.

Identical, abridged, or distorted versions of both accounts appear in later books of merits and other adab and geographical treatises as well, but al-Wasiti was seemingly the first to transcribe what was until his time transmitted only orally. As a means of authentication, he preceded every account with the complete chain of transmission (isnād), using the method developed by hadith scholars. Later copyists and compilers of ḥadīth books dropped these lists, which indicates that their sources were written. Indeed, most of them appear to have relied heavily on al-Wasiti’s book.2

THE FIRST ACCOUNT

The first report describes ʿAbd al-Malik’s involvement in the planning and building of the Dome of the Rock. Al-Wasiti wrote:

When ʿAbd al-Malik wanted to build the Dome of the Rock, he came from Damascus to Jerusalem. He then sent to all his deputies in all his dominions. He wrote, “ʿAbd al-Malik plans to build a dome (qubba) over the Rock to shelter the Muslims from cold and heat, and to construct the masjid. But before he starts he wants to know his subjects’ opinion.” With their approval, the deputies wrote back, “May God permit the completion of this enterprise, and may He count the building of the dome and the masjid a good deed for ʿAbd al-Malik and his predecessors.” He then gathered craftsmen from all his dominions and asked them to provide him with the description (ṣifāt) and form (ṣanāt) of the planned dome before he engaged in its construction. So, it was marked (kawrisat) for him in the sahn of the masjid. He then ordered the building of the treasury (ḥayt al-mālī) to the east of the Rock, which is on the edge of the Rock, and filled it with money. He then appointed Raja’in Hayweh and Yazid ibn Salam as supervisors, and ordered them to spend generously on its construction. He then returned to Damascus. When the two men satisfactorily completed the building, they wrote to ʿAbd al-Malik to inform him that they had completed the construction of his Dome and the Aga Mosque. They ended their letter with the expression, “There is nothing in the building that leaves room for criticism.” They informed him that the sum of a hundred thousand dinars was left from the money he allocated. He offered it to them as a reward, but they declined, indicating that they had already been generously compensated. ʿAbd al-Malik then ordered that the gold coins be melted and cast on the exterior of the Dome, which then so glittered that no one could look straight into it.3

Unlike many accounts in al-Wasiti’s book, which deal with questions of holiness and eschatology, this one is a straightforward narration of ʿAbd al-Malik’s building of the Dome of the Rock. It could stand the test of text criticism as a coherent report, and even an impartial one.9 The redactor, al-Wasiti, does not seem to advance through it any polemical or ideological arguments concerning either his position vis-à-vis the Umayyads, or his views on the sanctity of Jerusalem. The historical and factual points raised in it could be corroborated by other historical sources or archaeological evidence found in the original structure and decoration of the Dome and the date of its inscriptions.10 Thus the report is plausible, and its veracity rests mainly on checking its chain of transmission before it was written down by al-Wasiti.

The report is recorded on the authority of two men, Raja’in Hayweh and Yazid ibn Salam, who were in a position to provide this type of information since ʿAbd al-Malik entrusted them with the supervision of the Dome’s construction. The second and third links in the chain of transmission (isnād) of this account are the same that appear in the other accounts pertaining to the Dome during the caliphate of ʿAbd al-Malik. They are a man and his grandson, Thabet ibn Estiniadi (@) and Muhammad ibn Mansur ibn Thabet. Both are totally unknown except that Thabet is further identified in a different account in al-Wasiti’s book as a Persian and a khawmi,11 a term derived from khwām (fifth), which indicates that he was among the slaves owned by the caliph as part of the fifth sent to him from the conquest’s spoils, or bought with funds paid from that fifth. ʿAbd al-Malik is reported to have assigned a number of these slaves to the maintenance of the Dome and the services around it, and stipulated that they and their progeny should be attached to this function in perpetuity.12 This identification lends the two men credibility as eyewitnesses to what they are reporting, for they obviously were among the earliest servants (khudām) of the Dome.

The last three names in the chain of authority are al-Walid ibn Hammad al-Ramlī, Hafs ibn al-Muhajir, and
his son ʿUmar. Both al-Walid and al-Fadl ibn al-Muhajir are little-known hadith transmitters (muhaddith) who appear linked to one another in Ibn ʿAsakir’s compendium, Tarikh Madinat Dimashq. Al-Fadl is further identified as al-Maqdisi (the Jerusalemite) and both are reported to have attended hadith circles in Damascus and Jerusalem. Al-Wasiti copied the text down from ʿUmar, the son of al-Fadl, in the Aqsa Mosque where the former had taken part in the latter’s teaching circle. Thus, as far as the available information permits, the chain of transmission is a plausible one, and the first authorities are reliable people who appear to have direct access to what they are reporting.

The reason given in al-Wasiti’s narrative for the building of the Dome of the Rock is a functional one: to shelter the Muslims (takunnu al-muslimin) from the elements. This simple explanation implies that the reader already knows the significance of the Rock for the Muslims who used to gather around it before the construction of the Dome. The Rock was the focal point and the object of some communal activity which is not explained in the text and which remains unclear today even after the many modern inquiries. By building his dome, ʿAbd al-Malik was honoring the Rock for whatever reason the early Muslims had to consider it as a venerated and possibly sacred object. But his structure did more than honor this particular spot. It claimed a royal presence. The story makes it clear that ʿAbd al-Malik’s deputies recognized this additional dimension of the building when they gave it a dynastic association by invoking God to make the Dome a glory to ʿAbd al-Malik and those of his family who predeceased him (man modda min salefih).

ʿAbd al-Malik’s letter and the answers of the deputies allude to the distinction between the Dome proper and the masjid around it. Moreover, in the letter that the supervisors sent to the caliph after the Dome was completed, the masjid is identified as the Aqsa Mosque. Yet, in all these references the word masjid does not seem to refer to a building, but rather to a space, and more precisely a space for prostration (sujud), which, in this context, should have been the entire platform surrounding the Dome, including the covered area on the qibla side, which was later rebuilt under al-Walid as the Aqsa Mosque. This interpretation is in line with the early Islamic conception of a mosque which consisted of a large open court with a small roofed portion on the qibla side. Contrary to what has been assumed about al-Walid’s being the patron of the covered Aqsa Mosque after ʿUmar ibn al-Khattab and Muʿawiya, this report corroborates the assertions that ʿAbd al-Malik indeed added to the old building, and probably enlarged the platform as well. This is pertinent to the argument that the Dome may have been conceived from the beginning as a part of an Umayyad plan to create a dynastic center in Jerusalem which comprises the extended Haram al-Sharif that includes the Dome, the Aqsa Mosque and the platform upon which both structures were erected, in addition to the palatial and administrative structures whose remains have been uncovered in the 1960’s along the southern and western edges of the platform. This plan was dropped for unknown reasons by Sulayman ibn ʿAbd al-Malik after 715, although he had started his rule by receiving the oath of allegiance (bay’a) in Jerusalem, and by declaring his intention to move the center of the caliphate to it.

Al-Wasiti’s account provides a clue to the identity of the builders engaged by ʿAbd al-Malik to construct the Dome. They were craftsmen gathered from his dominion (min jamīʿ ʿamāliḥ), which at that time comprised only Egypt and Bilad al-Sham. They were not Byzantines, as the story attached to the decoration of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus led some scholars to assert. But the account demonstrates that these builders were not given free rein. ʿAbd al-Malik was directly involved in deciding the exact location of the Dome on the platform, its plan, and perhaps more than that. The crucial sentence to this effect is difficult to interpret, as the word kurrṣat, used in it to convey the way the Dome was described to ʿAbd al-Malik does not denote any usual act of representation, such as drawing or model-making. The key verb, k-r-s, has several meanings, two of which could be construed as acts related to building. The first is “to stack the components of the foundation of a building,” and the second is “to enclose by marking.” This may mean that the builders gathered by ʿAbd al-Malik either delineated the plan of the dome on the floor of the platform, or that they built the foundation of the building for him. In any case, the account implies that ʿAbd al-Malik verified the location, the plan, and possibly the shape of the Dome in situ before he went back to Damascus. Moreover, he ordered the building of some structure to the east of the Rock which is identified as the treasury (bayt al-mal) before leaving Jerusalem.

Al-Wasiti’s account seems to be the ultimate source for almost all later fadā’il books, including those of Ibn al-Marja, al-Suyuti al-Minhaji (d. 1475), and the often quoted al-Ḥalawi (d. 1520). Ibn al-Marja’s and al-Suyuti’s texts are copied verbatim from al-Wasiti’s, whereas al-Ḥalawi’s account, though it reproduces entire sen-
tences from al-Wasiti, adds a few details from other, unidentified sources, and brings the topographic information up to his time. A sentence that al-Ülaymi inserts in the text he copied from al-Wasiti says that the Dome of the Chain (Qubbat al-Silsila) was built for ʿAbd al-Malik as a model for the Dome of the Rock. By claiming that, he confused the modern scholars who could not discern the alleged formal similarities between the two domes. Al-Wasiti himself does not suggest any formal kinship between them, though, in another account, he credits the Dome of the Chain to ʿAbd al-Malik as well. In this second account, he locates the Dome of the Chain to the east of the Rock, exactly the site where he placed the treasury in his main account. Al-Ülaymi also states that the dome to the east of the Rock, which he too attributes to ʿAbd al-Malik, was made into the treasury. Although neither al-Wasiti nor al-Ülaymi says so explicitly, both their texts suggest that the ḥayt al-māl and the original Dome of the Chain were one and the same, built by ʿAbd al-Malik before his departure.

The sentence with which Rajaʾ and Yazid ended their joint letter to ʿAbd al-Malik informing him of the completion of the Dome’s construction, that “there is nothing in the building that leaves room for criticism” (lam yahqa li mutakallim fīhi kalām), may be indicative of the mood of the period and the intention behind the building. The preparedness for anticipated criticism implied in this sentence may be a repercussion of the Umayyad’s evolving attitude toward architecture. This was first illustrated by the story attributed to Muʿawiyah when he had his palace, known as the Qubba al-Khadrā, rebuilt in Damascus after a Vandalish envoy had mocked it by commenting that “its upper part is suitable for birds, it lower one for rats.”

Although this anecdote may not be true, its theme, which appears in various contexts, must have been real. The Umayyads endowed magnificent buildings in Bilad al-Sham to counter the effect of the splendid local Byzantine monuments. Their striving to rival and surpass the Byzantines is evident not only in the Qubba al-Khadrā and the Dome of the Rock, but also in their masterpiece in Damascus, the Great Mosque. In the last two structures the rivalry had the additional purpose of prevailing in their ideological struggle with the Christian Byzantines. The Umayyads’ lavish spending on memorial buildings demonstrates their understanding of the psychological role that the magnificence of architecture plays in winning over believers and awing opponents. Al-Muqaddisi’s report on his conversation with his uncle and a number of stories about the reaction of Byzantine visitors to the splendors of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus show that the patrons’ intentions expressed in their architecture were well understood by both audiences, Muslim and Christian. Al-Wasiti’s account and all other consequent reports on the Dome in faḍāʾil books completely ignore the inscription and mosaic representations inside and outside the Dome. Seen from the perspective of ideological rivalry, the inscriptions inside the Dome, which comprise the polemic Qur’anic verses against the divinity of Christ, complement the message of the entire structure. They may have been meant to provide a second level of argument against Christianity, after the Dome’s monumentality and wealth have presented the answer to the attraction of Christian churches and the statement about Islam’s ascendance. The choice of these verses must have been the work of a man who was at the same time an official of the Umayyad court informed of its policies and aims and well versed in the Qur’ān and its interpretation. Al-Wasiti’s account records the most likely candidate for this role: Rajaʾ ibn Hayweh, one of the two supervisors ʿAbd al-Malik appointed. Rajaʾ ibn Hayweh and Yazid ibn Salam reportedly supervised the construction of the Dome to its completion while ʿAbd al-Malik was in Damascus. They must therefore have had control of every detail, and not only financial control, if they were to see to it that ʿAbd al-Malik’s instructions concerning the general scheme were respected. About Yazid ibn Salam we only know that he was a client (nasila) of ʿAbd al-Malik and a Jerusalemite. He may have served as a liaison between the caliph and the city’s people. But Rajaʾ is a personage of a totally different caliber. He was a scholar, a theologian, and a muhaddith who was judged to be among the most trustworthy of his generation. He exerted considerable influence in the Umayyad court during the time of ʿAbd al-Malik when he was sent as the envoy of the caliph on more than one occasion. He ensured the caliphate of ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-Azīz (717–20) when he plotted and executed what amounted to a real coup d’état that temporarily transferred the power from ʿAbd al-Malik’s branch to ʿAbd al-Azīz’s branch of the Marwanid family. His political standing, his appearance at unexpected junctures in Umayyad affairs, and his scholarly reputation have induced several modern scholars to consider him as the primary religious adviser to the caliph, a sort of éminence grise.

Rajaʾ had a special relationship with Palestine. He lived in Bayṣan, in the Jordan district (jumāḥ), which comprised the northern sectors of Jordan and Palestine and
the area of the Hawran in today's Syria, whence his titles al-Urduni and al-Filastini. He was also a client (mawla) of Kinda, an important Arabic tribe that controlled the area between Jordan and Palestine. His affiliation with the land and its people undoubtedly affected the ways in which he was perceived by his contemporaries. He was apparently considered an expert on the sacred sites in Jerusalem, for he is reported to have accompanied a number of Umayyad caliphs on their visits there as a guide. He also played a decisive role in developing the nascent Islamic tradition about the holiness of Jerusalem. He transmitted a number of traditions on the sanctity of Jerusalem, of which two are recorded in al-Wasiti's book. This role, combined with his prominent position in the Umayyad court and his links with Palestine, must have qualified Raja to be more than the caliph's financial controller in the building of the Dome in Jerusalem. He may have been the caliph's adviser in the choice of the site for the first Islamic monument and the designer of the messages that the Dome was meant to convey, especially that of the Qur'anic inscriptions, given his scholarship and knowledge of the Qur'an.

THE SECOND ACCOUNT

Al-Wasiti's second account sheds light on the meaning both of the Dome and of the mosaic representations inside it. It is recorded on the authority of the same Thabet ibn Estinibiadh, who, as we have seen, was one of the slave-servants (khuddam) responsible for the upkeep of the Dome under the Umayyads, and thus a plausible informant. Al-Wasiti states, "During the time of 'Abd al-Malik, there was hanging on the chain above the Rock under the Dome the Yatima pearl, the horns of Abraham's ram, and the crown of Kisra [Khosrow]. When the Banu Hashim [the Abbasids] took over the caliphate, they sent them to the Ka'ba."

This account, unlike the first one, raises many questions of verification, interpretation, and implication. First, it cannot be corroborated through other, independent sources. Nor can it, for that matter, be rejected outright, unless it is taken literally, and the legendary origin of some of the objects it lists used as the basis of refutation. But, if the nature of the hanging objects is set aside, it could be argued that the account as a whole is plausible in the Umayyad context. It establishes the presence of valuable objects hanging inside the Dome during 'Abd al-Malik's reign, which is in line with a practice known and habitually undertaken by the Arabs before and after Islam. Several references show that precious objects were hung or displayed inside the Ka'ba either to emphasize its sanctity and preeminence or to demonstrate the devotion or greatness of the donor. We have a list of the votive objects reported to have been in the Ka'ba before Islam, and another extensive one of the gifts regularly sent to Mecca by Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs. Both list precious jewels and vessels; the second mentions, in addition, gilded swords, thrones, and crowns. Moreover, the Ka'ba was not the only memorial building to receive donations of precious objects. Other major mosques, such as the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, had their offerings as well. Al-Walid I is reported to have decorated the mihrab of his mosque and the area around it with large sapphires and agates, and he used a large jewel as a diacritical mark in the last word of a Qur'anic verse inscribed in gold on the qibla wall of the mosque. One of the gems in the mihrab was so famous that it had a proper name, al-Qylla, and was allegedly taken by an Abbasid prince.

Second, improbable as it may seem, the list of objects is too precise to be dismissed as a later invention. Instead, it should be treated as a clue to the significance of the Dome for its contemporaries, and the kind of messages they ascribed to it. Confirming the authenticity of the two objects identified as the horns of Abraham's ram and the crown of Kisra is an impossible task: the first because of the improbability of their existence in the first place, as the entire episode of Abraham's sacrifice is regarded as a myth; the second because of its incomplete identification, since Kisra was the generic name given by the Arabs to any pre-Islamic Persian ruler. But this is secondary for our purpose. What is important is the presence of two objects inside the Dome that contemporaries thought to be authentic, and therefore meaningful. The third object, the pearl called the Yatima, a proper name that means the orphaned or the unequalled, poses another riddle. Because it had a name, this pearl must have been very famous, and thus one would expect it to be mentioned in other sources. On establishing its existence and whereabouts in Umayyad and Abbasid times hinges the plausibility of the entire list of the Dome's treasures.

The Yatima was indeed a known pearl. Abu al-Rihan al-Biruni (d. 1038), who compiled a book on famous gems, states that "al-Durra al-Yatima is the most famous pearl in the dominion of Islam." He does not say that it was hanging inside the Dome of the Rock, but he attests to its having been in the possession of the Umayyad caliph Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik (723–42) who might have taken it from the Dome and who presented it to his wife.
The pearl passed to the Abbasids after their revolution when their agent confiscated it from Hisham's wife. Al-Biruni ends his report by stating that he did not know its whereabouts, but that he was told it was in the possession of the Qarmatians in the Ihisa. This remark validates the last part of al-Wasiti's account concerning the removal of the Dome of the Rock above the Ka'ba; it is otherwise reported only by historians who copied him. The Qarmatians occupied Mecca in the first half of the tenth century (929-55), and transported the venerated Black Stone back to their base in al-Ihsa. They also looted the Ka'ba and carted off its treasures. If the Yatima had been in their possession, this would suggest that it had indeed been hanging in the Ka'ba from where they seized it. Al-Azraqi, who was the first to write a book on the history of Mecca (ca. 865) and who listed the objects hung in it, does not mention the Yatima among them. But al-Fakih, who wrote a book on Mecca a little later (ca. 883), alludes to the Yatima and compares it to another famous jewel that was sent to the Ka'ba in 873, after the date of al-Azraqi's writing. Al-Wasiti's account is further substantiated by a later author who visited the Ka'ba ca. 1191 and reported that the Yatima once hung on one of the columns inside, together with the horns of Abraham's ram, and an object identified as the pendant of Maria. The sentence refers to the past, which is what interests us, however; the author does not report where the objects were in his own time.

The existence of a pearl called the Yatima is beyond doubt, despite the lack of references to it after the twelfth century. Its spotty history corresponds in general to al-Wasiti's description of its itinerary from Jerusalem to Mecca. It was in the possession of the Umayyads and then passed to the Abbasids who lost it to the Qarmatians, probably after the latter raided Mecca and deploited it of all its precious offerings. There is no reason, either historical or circumstantial, to reject the possibility that it hung in the Dome of the Rock along with two other objects that were believed by contemporaries to be the crown of Kisra and the horns of Abraham's ram. But if these objects were suspended from a chain above the Rock, what could they have signified?

Both the crown of Kisra and the Yatima pearl corrobore one part of the interpretation proposed by Oleg Grabar for the mosaic representations in the Dome and provide the evidence he was searching for when he advanced his hypothesis. Grabar had suggested that the mosaic representations of jewels and crowns above the arcades of the ambulatory around the central dome conveyed two kinds of messages. The first one was similar to that carried by votive objects hung in Byzantine and other Christian sanctuaries, that is they emphasized the sanctity of the place. The second, derived from the Islamic context of the Ka'ba, was more triumphantly. The representations at the Dome of the Rock, much like the hanging objects in the Ka'ba, proclaimed the victory of the true religion. Islam, over its opponents, whether they were the Sasanians, as the crowns depicted on the mosaics of the Dome indicate, or Tibetan and Afghani as the offerings from the two newly converted kings of these two countries to the Ka'ba in Abbasid times imply.

For contemporary viewers, both the crown of Kisra and the Yatima pearl presented the material proof of Islam's ascendency. They may even have provided the original models for the depictions of crowns and jewels in the mosaic representations. This would reinforce the reading of the mosaic representations as commemorative trophies. Both objects also commuted wealth and preciousness, qualities that reverberated throughout the entire structure, and referred to the religion celebrated and the patron's dynasty.

This would leave the horns of Abraham's ram unexplained. At first glance, they even appear inexplicable in an Islamic context. If we assume that the horns were hung there to emphasize the Dome's religious aura as the place of Abraham's sacrifice, it would be a highly controversial and unfounded celebration in terms of the sanctity of the Rock for the Muslims. The Qur'anic story of Abraham's sacrifice was a subject of debate among early exegetes. They were divided into two groups: the first considered Isaac as the son intended to be sacrificed and the location to be in Palestine; the second favored Ishmael and Mecca. But the Rock on Mount Moriah was never given as the place of Abraham's sacrifice, even when the episode was reported to have taken place in Palestine.

To account for the presence of the horns of Abraham's ram we have either to postulate a different explanation or to use a different approach. Three possibilities present themselves. The first is to subject al-Wasiti's account to rational, empirical corroboration which would lead to rejecting the horns of Abraham's ram as folkloric embellishment, even while accepting the two other objects. This approach, in addition to being cruelly positivistic, is selective in applying rigorous verification, and thus unacceptable methodologically. The second is to admit the horns as indeed commemorating the sacrifice of Abraham on the grounds that we do not absolutely know what the early Muslims believed. The basis of the argument would be that the earliest written Islamic
sources were compiled at least fifty years after the Dome’s building and thus do not necessarily represent the understanding of the early Muslims. This would lead to adopting the view that the Rock was initially venerated primarily for its Jewish significance, and to explaining the building of the Dome accordingly as a religious act of proto-Islamic import. Clearly, this approach would involve the dismissal of all Islamic accounts as later fabrications, since they fail to mention Abraham in connection with the Rock. But, besides imposing the rejection of an entire historical tradition, this theory would have to go to great lengths to reconcile the evidence of the Qur’anic inscriptions inside the Dome, which do not mention Abraham either, with any proposed Abrahamic association.

The third approach would view the building of the Dome of the Rock and its ornamentation as political in intent. It would still accept the validity of the Islamic sources to explain the presence of the horns in Jerusalem, but would shift the attention from their purported religious meaning to their possible political significance. This would change the focus of the search in the Islamic sources and yield different evidence. And in fact, if the accounts of both al-Wasiti and al-Azraqi are accepted as authentic but incomplete, they could be reconciled by recalling the chronology of ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign.

The horns could have been in the Ka‘ba when ‘Abd al-Malik ordered the construction of the Dome of the Rock around 687. Independent of the stories about Abraham’s sacrifice, al-Azraqi reports their presence inside the Ka‘ba from as far back as the time of the Prophet, who ordered the guardian to veil them so that they would not distract the worshipers. Al-Azraqi also relates that Ibn al-Zubayr discovered the horns inside when he rebuilt the Ka‘ba around the same time as the Dome was constructed and that they crumbled in his hands when he reached out to touch them. The Dome of the Rock was completed in 692, a date confirmed by inscription, in the same year as Ibn al-Zubayr’s final defeat and the recapturing of Mecca by ‘Abd al-Malik’s forces. Whether ‘Abd al-Malik knew about the story of the horns crumbling in Ibn al-Zubayr’s hands or whether it was a story invented later to account for their disappearance from the Ka‘ba, he, or his returning victorious deputy al-Hajjaj, could have produced a set of horns to hang inside his Dome, and claimed they were the horns of Abraham’s ram. The motive would be political rather than religious: ‘Abd al-Malik had defeated his major enemy, asserted his rule over the whole dominion of Islam, and brought back a symbol of this victory to his monument. The horns may have been added to the other trophies, the Yatima and the Crown of Kisra, somewhat later, which would explain why they are not represented in the mosaics along with the other two objects, even though they are equally illustrative of the patron’s intentions.

EPILOGUE

Al-Wasiti’s book was compiled at the beginning of the eleventh century, but it is clear from his method of recording that the accounts belong to an earlier date, presumably that of the initial oral reports. The chains of transmission for these accounts attribute them to people who were contemporary with the Dome’s building under ‘Abd al-Malik, that is around the late seventh–early eighth century. But while this method could verify the sequence of reporters, it could not guarantee the authenticity of the texts nor their immunity from distortion through error or intention. The surest way to ascribe a plausible date to them still is to analyze their content.

The analysis of the texts of al-Wasiti’s two accounts agree nicely with regarding the Dome’s building as a political act; one does not have to reject some details and accept others. Based on this concordance, I would posit the two accounts at the earliest possible date, that is the late seventh–early eighth century, because, as I have argued elsewhere, the Dome’s political meaning was superseded by its underlying religious relevance after the reestablishment of firm Umayyad control over the entire Islamic empire in the second part of ‘Abd al-Malik’s reign. The Umayyads no longer viewed the Dome as a propaganda tool, and this permitted its reshuffling in significance. This was reinforced by the incorporation of the Dome into the rebuilt Aqsa Mosque by al-Walid, and the creation of a huge masjid whose qibla axis crossed the Dome. From that time, even the plan of the Haram and the position of the Dome as its center precluded any possible reading of it as politically induced. Thus, the traces of the original political meaning of the Dome found in both al-Wasiti’s accounts point to their belonging to that confused period between the reigns of ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Walid when the religious significance of the Dome that pervades later Islamic sources was not yet firmly developed. Al-Wasiti simply copied these reports as they were transmitted to him and thus preserved for us, perhaps inadvertently, an echo of the original reason for the Dome’s building.

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NOTES


6. Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Wasiti, Fadaʾil al-Bayt al-Muqaddas (Jerusalem, 1979). I have noted the book’s importance in the past, but my interest then was focused on his reports on the sanctity of Jerusalem which provide a religious and eschatological building for the dome of the Dome of the Rock; see Nasser Rabat, “The Meaning of the Umayyad Dome of the Rock,” Maqarren 6 (1990): 19–21.


9. Even since the earliest Western inquiries into hadith literature using textual criticism, the truthfulness and authenticity of Islamic historical texts concerning both events and legal practices of early Islam have been subjects of doubt and even total rejection. For a review of the different attitudes concerning early Islamic historical materials, see the introduction written by F. M. Donner to ʿAbd al-ʿAziz al-Duri, The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs, pp. vi–viii, also F. E. Peters, “The Quest of the Historical Muhammad,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 23 (1991): 291–315.


11. Al-Wasiti, Fadaʾil, p. 73, account no. 119.


17. The same conclusion was advanced by Myriam Rosen-Ayalon, The Early Islamic Monuments of al-Haram al-Sharif: An Iconographic Study (Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 9–10. Oleg Grabar, “The Meaning of the Dome of the Rock,” in D. Hopwood, Studies in Arab History (London, 1990), pp. 151–63, suggests that the Dome of the Rock may have been planned by Muʿawiyah, while ʿAbd al-Malik only completed its construction and decoration. All Arabic sources, including al-Wasiti, do not even hint at this possibility.

18. Al-ʿUmarī, Uns, 1: 281–82. Another clue appears in a poem by al-Farazdaq, the Umayyad court poet, in which he praises Sulayman and says, “In the Mosque al-ʿAsqa residing the Imam [Sulayman]” see Dinwān al-Farazdaq, 2 vols. (Beirut, 1960), 2:72.

19. The verb’s origin has to do with the practice of demarcating the settlement of the Bedouin with stacks of dried dung. A new meaning of the verb, to consecrate [a church], as attractive as it may be to explain the act of ʿAbd al-Malik, could not have been known at his time. See Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311), Liṣān ʿArab, (Beirut, 1956), 26:194–95; Ibn Sidāh (d. 1666), al-Mukhassas, vol. 5, pt. 1, pp. 120–21. Neither lexicographer gives the meaning “to consecrate” for the verb.


22. Ibn-ʿAsakir, Tārīkh, 1: 345; also Nikita Eliščěff, La description de Domains d’Ibn ʿAsakir (Damasco, 1959), p. 228. Eliščeff noted that the same story appears in the context of al-Mansur’s building of Bagdad, and termed the theme “folkloric”.


27. Ibid., p.37, attributes Rājāʾ to Maysan in Iraq and goes into a lengthy discussion of the movement of parts of Kinda, his tribe by clientage, to Jordan and Palestine to explain his titles. All Arabic sources, though, are clear in their attribution of Rājāʾ to Baysan, in Palestine.

28. J. W. Hirschberg, “The Sources of Moslem Traditions concern-

29. Al-Wasiti, *Fudā'il* p.17, account no. 19, and p.60, account no. 96. Other traditions traced to Rajāʾ are in al-Suyūṭī, *Iḥāf*, 2: 22, 39. This last report is important in that it shows that Rajāʾ considered himself a Jerusalemite.


34. Al-Fāsī, *Shīfāʾ al-Gharaʿīm*, 1: 118. He compares al-ʿAzraqī’s and al-Fāsī’s texts and notices the difference between the two jewels.


37. The crown of Kīrā connoted wealth in the Islamic lore along with other objects, which are mostly legendary, such as the throne of Balqis and the treasures of Qārūn; see ʿAbd al-Malik al-Nisābūrī al-Thaʿalibī, *Thimār al-Qušāb fī-l-Mudāḥf wa-l-Mansūb* (Cairo, 1985), p.83.


39. Al-Wasiti does not mention the sacrifice at all, and Abraham is cited only in connection with the Prophet Muhammad’s Night Journey (*Isrāʾ*).

40. Mahmoud Ibrahim, *Fudāʾil Bayt al-Maqdis*, pp.60–61. He does not notice the inherent contradiction in accepting the story of the sacrifice and the divine intervention, while rejecting the survival of the horns of the ram as scientifically impossible.

