

Chapter III

Al-Haram al-Sharif*

Al-Haram al-Sharif, “the Noble Sanctuary”, [174] after Mecca and Medina the acknowledged third holiest Muslim sanctuary, is located in the southeastern part of the present Old (i.e., walled) City of Jerusalem. An understanding of the history and significance of the Haram has been complicated by two factors: first, the contrast between an extreme paucity of early sources (written or archaeological) and a systematized explanation of the Haram’s significance in the *fada’il* or holy guide-books of the late Mamluk period; and, second, the lack of any complete archaeological survey of the area (with the single exception of *al-Masjid al-Aqsa*) coupled with centuries of reconstructions and repairs which have often obliterated the original character and purpose of many buildings. In addition, as we shall try to show, the very concept of the Haram al-Sharif developed slowly over the centuries, as the character of the city of Jerusalem changed. Because of these limitations, a full account of the history and of the problems of the Haram as a whole can best be given in connection with the development of the whole city (al-Quds). We limit ourselves here to a brief description of its more salient features and to a definition of the problems which are peculiar to it alone.

As it is visible today, the Haram is a large trapezoidal platform (southern end: 281 meters; northern end: 310 meters; eastern end: 462 meters; western end: 491 meters), whose eastern border and parts of the southern one coincide with the walls of the present city. Its size remained constant throughout the Muslim Middle Ages, since an inscription to that effect (Max van Berchem, no. 163, with important commentaries) still exists and was seen as early as the fourth/tenth century. This platform is totally artificial; its northern side was cut out of the natural rock, while its southern end was raised over rocks and valleys, including, in the southeastern corner, the Tyropaeon valley, now 28.50 meters below the surface. The underground parts of the Haram include 37 cisterns and, at the southern end, a vast complex known as Solomon’s Stables consisting of vaults on thick piers and the so-called Double Gate just under the Aqsa Mosque. Although much

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I The Haram
from the south



repaired and restored by the Romans, throughout the Middle Ages and in the modern period, this platform can be assumed to have been a Herodian creation for the Jewish Temple. While this seems clear for the size of the platform, it is less so for its present level above the ground. The ruined state of the Temple area at the time of the Muslim conquest is attested by the more or less legendary accounts of 'Umar's visit, by Christian sources, and by the character of the outer masonry of the walls. It would follow that the existing pavements and in general the surface planning of the Haram were for the most part Muslim creations.

The Haram is today surrounded with walls on its southern and eastern ends. These are Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman. From the evidence of Nasir-i Khosro and of Eutychius it appears that sizeable walls were erected in Fatimid times. Earlier walls existed, as we know from inscriptions and from al-Maqdisi, but they do not seem to have been as spectacular. Walls existed also on the western side, but the growth of the city over the Tyropaeon valley after the Crusades has all but obliterated their traces (one exception being the Herodian Wailing Wall) and replaced them with façades of various religious and secular buildings.

A series of gates led from the Haram to the outside. Today there are 15 of them: East: Golden Gate (now blocked); South: Single, Double and Triple Gates; West: *bab* al-Mughariba (on top of an older gate known as *bab* al-Nabi), *bab* al-Silsila, *bab* al-Mutawadda, *bab* al-Qattanin, *bab* al-Hadid, *bab* al-Nazir, *bab* al-Saray, *bab* al-Ghawanima; North: *bab* al-'Atm, *bab* Hitta, *bab* Asbat. With the exception of *bab* al-Saray, this list is already found in Mujir al-Din in the ninth/fifteenth century and can be assumed to represent the last stage of major developments on the Haram, i.e., the Mamluk

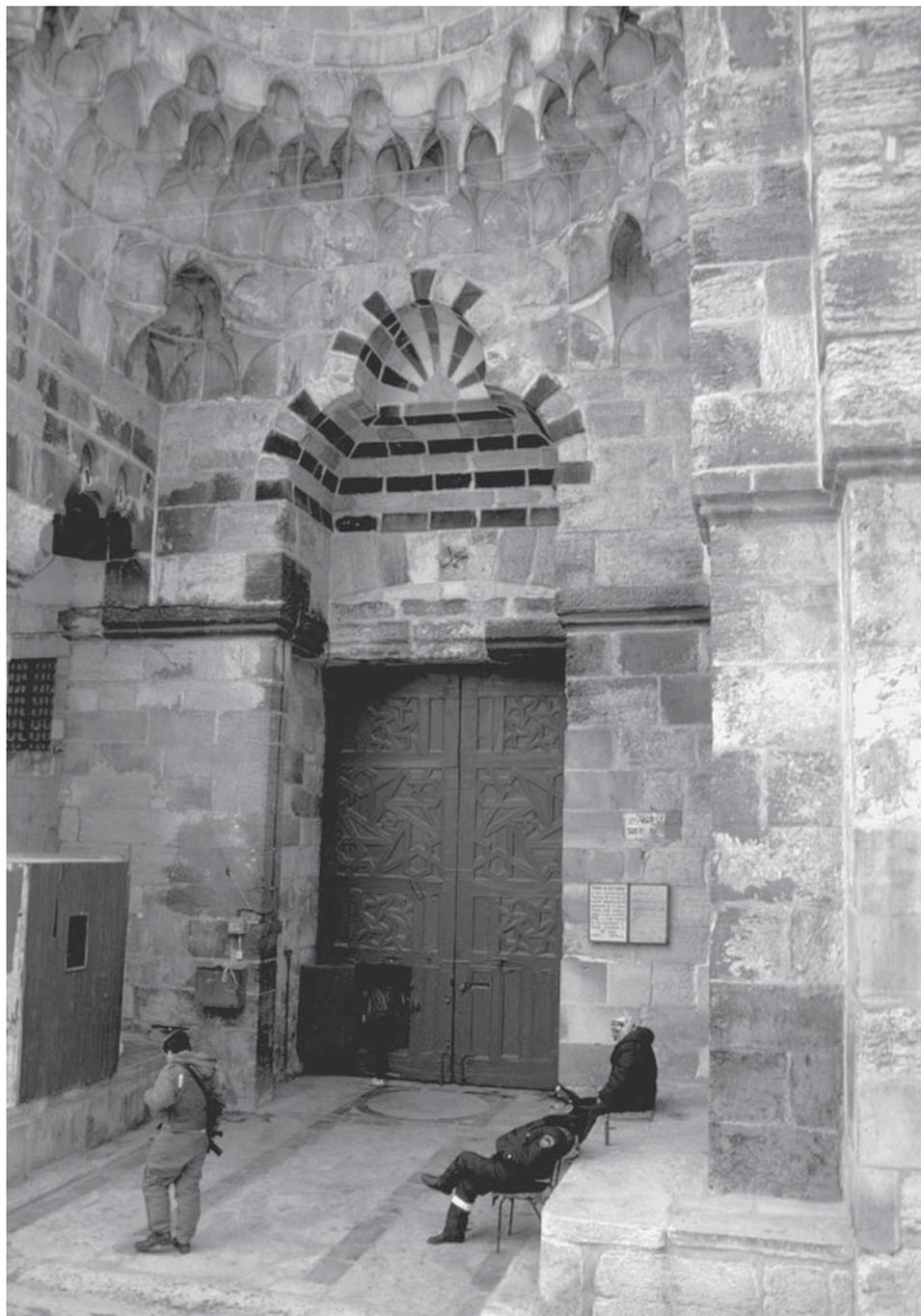


2 The Haram,
toward the east
and Golden Gate

period. For earlier times, especially before the Crusades, the question of the gates is far more complex and has been the subject of numerous controversies (summary and bibliography in O. Grabar, "A new inscription from the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem," in *Studies ... in Honour of Professor K. A. C. Creswell*, London, 1965, reproduced in this volume as Chapter II). All problems concerning the gates have not yet been solved but the following points can be justified. First, from the Mamluk period onwards, only northern and western gates were open, but in Fatimid times southern ones were still used and both these and the Golden Gate to the East were built in their present shape in Umayyad times, although based on Herodian plans. Second, as the character and shape of the city changed, emphases on more or less significant gates shifted as well, but certain names of gates (Hitta, Nabi, Asbat, etc.) had acquired a permanent religious value and shifted from one place to the other. Third, while all early gates were entrances to the Haram, some of the later ones (*bab* al-Qattanin, for instance) were entrances from the Haram to institutions which bordered it.

Approximately in its center the Haram is provided with a smaller platform reached by eight sets of stairs; on it are found the Qubbat al-Sakhra and a number of smaller sanctuaries. This second platform was almost certainly a Muslim creation, but its peculiarly asymmetrical character suggests that older buildings or ruins influenced the size and location of the Muslim work.

A large number of sanctuaries is found on the Haram. The most important ones are the Qubbat al-Sakhra and the Aqsa Mosque, whose architectural history and religious significance have been fairly well established. Other sanctuaries still await proper study and it may suffice to mention their



3 The Haram,
Mamluk gate
toward the west
and the city



4 The Haram,
west side

purposes. A first group comprises monuments attached to the events surrounding the Ascension of the Prophet: dome of the Ascension (*mi'raj*), place of Burak, etc. A second group commemorates prophets whose lives were associated with Jerusalem: Abraham, Joseph, Jacob, Jesus. Finally there is a number of *minbars*, *mihhrabs*, *dikkas* for prayer, and fountains, most of which illustrate the characteristically Mamluk concern for small constructions dedicated to precise religious functions. Many of these are now disused, but some, like the fountain of Qaytbay, are exquisite works of art.

There is no doubt that all these sanctuaries did not appear at one time. If we are better informed on the later ones, the reason is that so many memories and monuments were obliterated during the Crusades. For earlier times we possess only lists (Ibn al-Fakih, al-Maqdisi, Ibn 'Abd Rabbih) of monuments. It seems, however, that the growth of individual small sanctuaries on the Haram took several centuries and that it was not until the Fatimid period that the whole area had acquired its full complement of religious associations and of monumental expressions of these associations. The reasons for this are to be found primarily in the peculiarities of the history of Muslim Jerusalem. The former Temple area became first of all the site of the Muslim congregational [175] mosque in the city, then that of the monumental Dome of the Rock expressing Umayyad power and ambitions, and only later a complete ensemble with precise religious meanings and with an attempt at architectural organization. It is the accidental inheritance by the Muslims of such a vast area and precise developments in the history of the Muslim faith that made it a unique sanctuary; it was not, as in Mecca, a pre-established body of beliefs and practices which so transformed it, nor, as in Medina, the desire to commemorate the earliest years of the faith. Medieval Muslims themselves seem to have been conscious of the anomalous position of the Haram. In early centuries it was called *al-masjid al-haram*, "the sacred mosque," or *al-masjid al-aqsa*, "the farthest mosque," the first term being canonical for Mecca only, the second one being more precisely the name of the congregational mosque of Jerusalem. Still in the eighth/fourteenth century the term *al-haram al-sharif* was not considered proper and it would seem to have been imposed in Ottoman times by popular usage rather than by full agreement on the unified holiness of the area. Still today a confusion exists between the Haram area as merely the "mosque" of the city of Jerusalem and the Haram as the unique place of a number of holy events. In spite of these confusions and of the complicated history of the area, the depth of its religious and symbolic significance is proved by the vast literature which grew around it and by the facts that it contains the first masterpiece of Islamic architecture and that princes and laymen over many centuries lavished money and efforts on its beautification.