

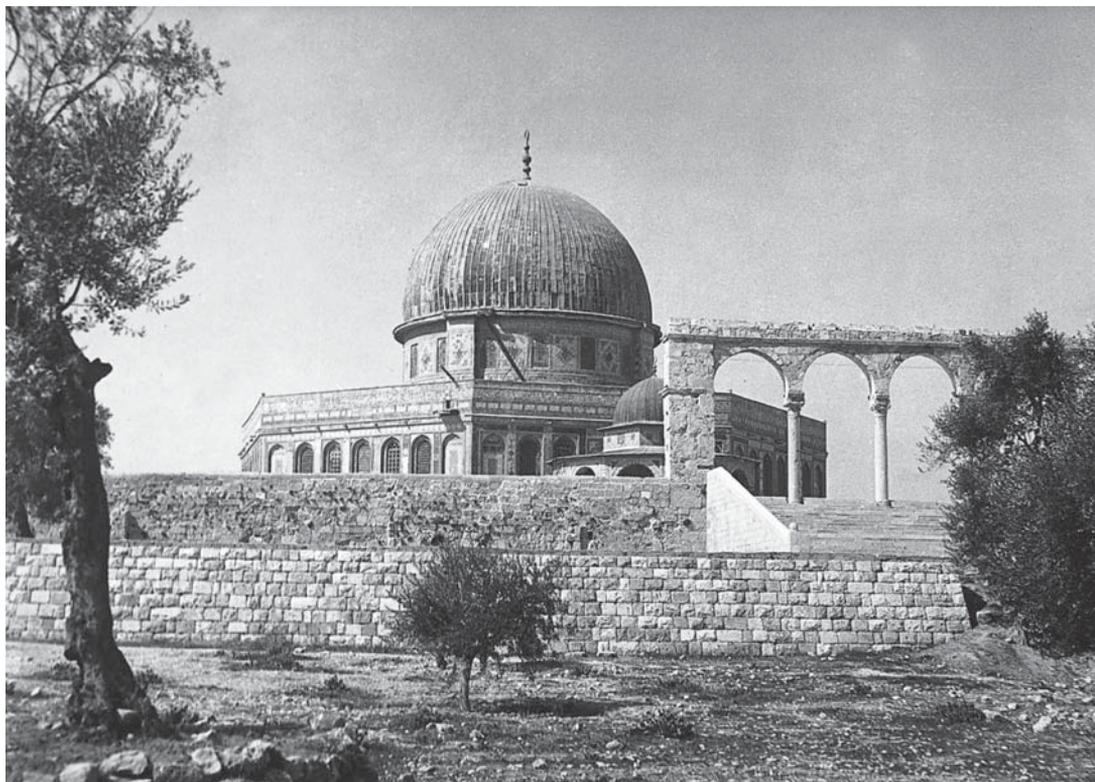
Chapter IX

The Meaning of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem*

Together with the Alhambra and the Taj Mahal, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is without a doubt the best-known monument of Islamic architecture (Figure 1). Thousands of tourists visit the Dome every year, it appears on posters and stamps, and the strikingly simple profile of a gilt cupola on a high drum rising from an octagon covered with glittering tiles has been copied in recent years on nearly all possible materials – from textiles to prints – as the Dome of the Rock also has become a symbol of Palestinian nostalgias and aspirations as well as of fundamentalist – and not so fundamentalist – Islamic ambitions and piety. This mixture of national, ethnic and religious associations around a monument or a place on earth is, of course, not unusual and, in our days of ideological conflicts, it is intensified whenever sacred places or national monuments are *in partibus infidelium*. Curiously, this situation occurs with the Alhambra and with the Taj Mahal as well as with the Dome of the Rock, so that three of the most famous monuments of Islamic architecture are not in territories under the immediate [2] control of Muslims. Accidents of history perhaps, but, as I shall try to show in the case of the Dome of the Rock, the complexity of contemporary meanings associated with it, whatever modern reasons led to the complexity, is more than matched by those of the past.

This is not, of course, true in a simple and literal sense, the sense of the tourist guides, who provide for it a traditional explanation fully established by early Mamluk times, let us say by about 1300. The Dome of the Rock, according to this tradition, was built over the rock whence the Prophet ascended into heaven on his night journey, the *isra'*, from Medina to Jerusalem, alluded to in the first verse of the 17th *surah* of the Qur'an. The event itself, barely intimated in the Qur'an and the subject of some exegetical debate in

* First published in *Medieval Studies at Minnesota*, 3 (1988), pp. 1–10. This paper was first given as the Antonius Lecture at St Anthony's College, Oxford University, in 1985. A few modifications were made for delivery at Georgetown University and later at the Universities of Toronto and of Minnesota. For publication a basic complement of notes was added.



1 Jerusalem,
Dome of the
Rock

early Islamic times, was embellished over the centuries by folk as well as mystical piety. Eventually it became fully accredited by the orthodox *sunnah*, or tradition, and incorporated with a great wealth of details in the account of the Prophet's Ascension, or *mi'raj*. Various components of the event found their place in a number of specific spots around the Dome of the Rock, where Buraq, the Prophet's steed, knelt and waited, where it was tied, where the Prophet prayed, and so on. In addition, although less frequently mentioned, at least by tourist guides, a series of eschatological themes was woven around the Dome of the Rock, the most dramatically powerful one being that the Ka'ba in Mecca will join the Rock in Jerusalem at the end of time. Finally, in ways that still seek their full investigation, the sacred history of Jerusalem from Adam to Jesus, and obviously with particular emphasis on Abraham, also finds its way to the Dome of the Rock and its surrounding areas in the *fada'il*, which, since the twelfth (and perhaps already eleventh) century, served as guidebooks and as spiritual helpers to the Faithful.¹

¹ The earliest of these is Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Wasiti, *F al-Bayt al-Muqaddas*, ed. Isaac Hasson (Jerusalem, 1979). The most celebrated is Mujir al-Din, *al-Uns al-Jalil bitarikh al-Quds wa al-Khalil* (Cairo, 1283 fl.), partial trans. by Henri Sauvaire, *Histoire de Jérusalem* (Paris, 1876).

A specific Muslim meaning (the Ascension of the Prophet); an old and peculiarly Jerusalemite association with the Resurrection, the judgment, and the end of time; and an intimate relationship to the monotheistic prophetic succession as seen through the Muslim faith – these three themes combined to create around the Dome of the Rock, on the platform of the Haram, to its north and to its west, that extraordinary Mamluk Jerusalem which Suleyman the Magnificent, the new Solomon, enclosed in a stunningly powerful curtain wall. This monument has very recently been made available to the learned and general public thanks to the tremendous work carried out by the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem.²

Mamluk Jerusalem is well provided with monuments, inscriptions, texts, descriptions, *waqfiyahs*, and now even the fascinating archive discovered in the Aqsa Museum and slowly being published by Prof. Donald Little and his colleagues.³ Matters are much more complicated when we go back to the three and a half centuries of Islamic Jerusalem before the Crusades. How many of the associations demonstrable for the later Middle Ages can be carried back to the early centuries? Is it justified to do so? Although less systematic than in Mamluk times, information is plentiful. There are inscriptions;⁴ an important group of geographical texts, one of which, Nasiri Khosro's, is an account that almost can be followed on the terrain;⁵ archaeological studies like Robert Hamilton's masterful unraveling of the Aqsa Mosque's complicated history; or the largely unpublished and, at first glance, less carefully controlled Israeli excavations to the south and southwest of the Haram;⁶ and then there is the Dome of the Rock itself.⁷

It is a remarkably well-documented building, with an inscription dated in 691–2 during the reign of 'Abd al-Malik. Except for minor details, the basic shape of the building has not been altered: a high cylindrical dome, gilt initially, over the mysterious Rock; two octagonal ambulatories; and four identical entrances preceded by a porch on slender columns. The building was lavishly decorated with marble plaques and with mosaics that sheathed it almost entirely, both inside and outside. The interior mosaics have been

² M. H. Burgoyne, *Mamluk Jerusalem* (London, 1986).

³ Among other places, D. H. Little, "The Significance of the Haram Documents," *Der Islam*, 52 (1980).

⁴ Max van Berchem, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum: Jérusalem Haram* (Cairo, 1925–7). Christel Kessler, "Abd al-Malik's Inscription," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 3 (1970).

⁵ All these texts are conveniently summarized in G. Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems* (Boston, 1890), one of several such books.

⁶ Robert Hamilton, *The Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque* (Jerusalem, 1942); his results can be interpreted in other ways than he has proposed but the book is a model of its kind. Considerable information can also be obtained from the records kept at the so-called Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem. For the Israeli excavations, see M. Ben-Dov, *In the Shadow of the Temple* (New York, 1985), a popular account.

⁷ Nothing has superseded the chapters in K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, rev. edn (Oxford, 1969).

reasonably well preserved, but only minute fragments remain of the original external decoration. The history of repairs and modifications, such as they were, in the building are unusually well recorded, for the most part through inscriptions, and, leaving aside a number of technical problems that are bound to remain unsolved for lack of adequate documentation, it is only around the mosaics of the drum that feasible additional investigations are needed to determine the extent and date of restorations. Once again it is Suleyman the Magnificent who sponsored the last major overhaul of the building and who provided it with its beautiful exterior tile decoration, which, in a sixteenth-century technique, recreated the colorful brilliance of earlier mosaics. Some twenty years ago a major reconstruction of the Dome of the Rock was completed that was superbly documented during the work itself. To my knowledge, however, this documentation has not been made available.

I have summarized the history of the building, probably well known to most scholars and visitors to Jerusalem, to make two points. First, whatever [3] changes occurred, it is relatively easy to imagine and visualize the building apparently completed in 691–2. Second, the building contains an unusual number of inscriptions from its early period. There is the 240-meters-long inscription with qur’anic fragments from 691–2. In an unusual but, as we shall see, highly significant gesture, the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun replaced ‘Abd al-Malik’s name with his own, without, however, changing the date. Several ‘Abbasid caliphs and members of their families, especially women, recorded their repairs in nearly inaccessible parts of the building, and major Fatimid work was recorded in more formal and more visible inscriptions. What this means is that the Dome of the Rock was from the very beginning what may be called a “talking” building, or perhaps better a “recording” building that incorporated its history within its own fabric, but not necessarily in a form or in places visible to all. Its history was, so to speak, given to the building.

I shall return shortly to some further lessons to be drawn from this practice of providing inaccessible information, but it is important to note that it appears from the very beginning, as the long Umayyad inscription is only decipherable from below when properly lit by sunlight, which means that it can never be easily read in its entirety.

Over a quarter century ago I proposed an interpretation of the Dome of the Rock that has been accepted, at least in its broad implications, by most non-Muslim scholars, ignored by some, rejected by one or two, but, to my knowledge, refuted by none.⁸ Since I will propose some major modification to it, I am taking the liberty of summarizing it briefly. On the basis of the inscription that contains the whole Christology of the Qur’an; of the presence

⁸ O. Grabar, “The Umayyad Dome of the Rock,” *Ars Orientalis*, 3 (1959).

of Byzantine and Sasanian royal insignia in the mosaics facing the rock; of its location on the abandoned and desecrated Herodian space of the Second Jewish Temple, by then replete with popular associations with nearly every major personage of biblical history; and of a number of other arguments that need not be repeated here, I interpreted the Dome of the Rock as a monument celebrating the victorious presence of Islam in the Christian city of Jerusalem by resacralizing with the new and final revelation a space made holy by Judaism.

Like everybody else I attributed the building of the Dome of the Rock to 'Abd al-Malik and saw it – together with the reform in coinage, the change of the administrative language from Greek to Arabic, the forceful if not at times brutal activities of al-Hajjaj in the Arabian peninsula, the truce with Byzantium, and the successful stemming of disorders in Iraq – as another sign, a specifically visual one, of the middle Umayyad conscious assumption of discrete imperial rule, that is, the full awareness on the part of the Marwanids that theirs was a new empire continuing old Mediterranean and even Iranian ones but under the aegis of a new and final Revelation.⁹

I agreed with the prevailing formal explanation of the Dome of the Rock as a minor modification of a type of centrally planned martyria or churches illustrated by the Holy Sepulcher and the Church of the Ascension in Jerusalem, the cathedral of Bosra in southern Syria, San Vitale in Ravenna, eventually Charlemagne's palace church in Aachen.¹⁰ The style and vocabulary of its mosaics seemed to me as correctly derived from the prevailing high styles of Late Antique and early Christian art, all probably executed by Christian mosaicists. Finally, I argued that this immanent and immediate message to the Christian world soon lost its point, but the monument that was the message became the visual and eventually semantic center of a religious and pietistic transformation. The Haram first became a mosque, as al-Walid constructed the Aqsa, then a unique mixture of mosque and shrine, with all sorts of associations leading up to, after the Crusades, the reasonably coherent, both visually and functionally, entity sketched out at the beginning of this paper.

Much in this explanation is still, in my view at least, entirely valid. But in two areas, curiously enough the areas where I fully agreed with everybody else's views of the Dome of the Rock, I do believe it to be based on erroneous or at least incomplete analyses of available data. These areas are: the involvement of 'Abd al-Malik in the building of the Dome of the Rock and the relationship of the Dome's forms to Mediterranean Christian or Late Antique art.

⁹ Much novel cultural history has been written recently on this period. As examples, see H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986) and various works by Patricia Crone, like (with M. Cook) *Hagarism* (Cambridge, 1977).

¹⁰ All these examples are in Creswell. For a more imaginative but also more debatable view of the same monuments, see M. Ecochard, *Filiations de Monuments* (Paris, 1977).

The date of the inscription, AM 72 (AD 691–2), is clear, and it has been demonstrated that the date was preceded by the phrase “built (*bana*) this cupola (*qubbat*) the servant of God ‘Abd al-Malik (changed later into the *imam al-Ma‘mun*), Commander of the Faithful” and followed with a eulogy: “may God accept (this work) from him and be satisfied with him; *amin*” and then a few damaged words. By a curious habit derived from the practice of painters and of manufacturers of objects, historians of art and by extension other historians, therefore, have tended to associate the building with events around 691–2 and to formulate through these events the psychological and ideological setting in which the Dome of the Rock was built, or rather created, [4] for its completion may well have taken many years. In reality, however, as anyone involved with building anything, even in our times of computer-controlled technology, knows, it takes years to build and decorate a building of any magnitude. In the case of the Dome of the Rock, the following has to have taken place before ‘Abd al-Malik’s inscription could be put up: mosaics and marble had to have been set on the walls; tesserae and plaques of marble had to have been gathered from wherever they were manufactured and some designing of patterns should have taken place (a technical job for which actually a lot of information exists in the technique and composition of the mosaics themselves); building materials had to be assembled and put together, some of them taken from destroyed or abandoned ancient or Christian buildings, others cut or otherwise prepared.

So far I have mentioned only obvious building needs. In Jerusalem at this time, yet another requirement existed: the clearing of the space for the building. This clearing required the presence of the high platform on which the Dome stands, of a number of accesses (without the arcades that crown the stairs known today, most of which are dated to a later time), of the large esplanade in some sort of usable form, meaning in turn that the Double Gate, perhaps the Golden Gate, and possibly some access to the north all had to have been at least roughly cleared and flattened. I say “roughly” on purpose, for several later inscriptions indicate that work on the outer walls continued for several centuries and, as recent Israeli excavations have confirmed, the presence of a major (I suspect *the* major) early Islamic settlement south of the Haram, the southern and southwestern sections of the walls, precisely the ones that required most work, had to have been if not entirely rebuilt, at least made accessible and usable for movement. Recently it has even been suggested that the whole northern third of the Haram may well have been cut out of the natural rock under the Umayyads, and almost certainly before the Dome of the Rock was built.¹¹ I am not entirely convinced by the argument because, even though it solves a number of very important issues hitherto unresolved, it also creates new problems. How much really had to be done is difficult to say; the only

¹¹ F. E. Peters, “Who Built the Dome of the Rock?” *Graeco-Arabica*, 2 (1983).

visible documentation we possess, short of technically difficult and politically impossible excavations, consists in masonry analyses, a tediously difficult task with so many uncertainties that only general approximations can be expected from it. But, if we recall that Jerusalem was not a major center for what would nowadays be called a construction industry and that it was not a capital city bound to attract artisans seeking employment, the effort of creating a logical space for building the Dome of the Rock was enormous, requiring not only huge financial investments and sizable logistic support, but an organization in charge of the project. Even before much work had been done, someone had to have decided that it needed to be done. Even if one grants that our own progression from concept to brief, financing, design, blueprints and execution is hardly a valid procedure for the seventh century, it is invalid only in the concreteness and specificity of the forms it takes, for the process itself is unavoidable, especially, as I shall show shortly, in a building with the peculiar visual characteristics of the Dome of the Rock. How long such a process would have taken is impossible to guess, but we are certainly talking about several years. And this is where the problem begins, for the ten years that preceded the alleged completion of the Dome of the Rock, in fact the twelve years that followed Mu'awiyah's death in 680 were years of almost unceasing internecine strife between various Arab factions, and it is not until the defeat of Ibn al-Zubayr by al-Hajjaj late in 692 that peace was restored within the half-urbanized factions of Iraqi cities. By then the Dome of the Rock already had been completed.

What this rather simplified sketch suggests is that the conceptual matrix in which the idea of the Dome of the Rock, its purpose, its location and its shape were conceived is not from 'Abd al-Malik's time, but from Mu'awiyah's, an idea already proposed in a passing remark without substantiating evidence of the late Professor Goitein.¹² There is a world of difference between 'Abd al-Malik, fully conscious through his reforms of the "Islamic" character of the Umayyad empire, and Mu'awiyah, the brilliant and wily opportunist ready to acquire and consolidate power through any means. The further point, however, is that a demonstrable connection exists between Mu'awiyah and Jerusalem. According to a Syriac source "in 971 (i.e., AD 661) many Arabs gathered in Jerusalem and made Mu'awiyah king, he went up to Golgotha, sat down there and prayed, then proceeded to Gethsemane, and then went down to the grave of St. Mary, where he prayed again."¹³ An Arab Muslim source quoted by Tabari confirms a Syrian homage to Mu'awiyah in Jerusalem.¹⁴ This is where he was offered the crown of king of the Arabs, says a third, this time Greek, source.¹⁵ To my knowledge, no event or association

¹² In the article "Kuds" for the new edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*.

¹³ T. Nöldeke, "Zur Geschichte der Araber," *Zeit D. Morgenlandgesellschaft*, 29 (1875).

¹⁴ Tabari, *Tarikh*, ed. M. de Goeje et al. (Leiden, 1890 f.), 2, pp. 4 ff.

¹⁵ J. Wellhausen, *The Arab Kingdom* (reprint Beirut, 1963), pp. 100-107.

of comparable importance connects 'Abd al-Malik to Jerusalem; such references as do exist are strictly [5] within his caliphal prerogatives as ruler of an empire, for instance the milestones recording the distances of various places to Jerusalem and a couple of other references to which I shall return. Mu'awiyah's relationship to Jerusalem is clearly that of a prince in the tradition of the pre-Islamic kings of the Arabian world. A verse from the *Mufaddaliyat*, identified and discussed by Professor Caskel, helps in providing a more specific explanation to the Syriac text: "I swear by Him, to whose holy places the Quraysh go on pilgrimage, and by that which is surrounded by the Hira mountains for sacrifice; by the month of the Banu Umayya and by the consecrated sacrificial animals, whose blood covers them."¹⁶

A parallelism is here indicated between a sanctuary of the Umayyads and one of Ibn al-Zubayr, the Qurayshite upholder of an old Meccan tradition, who had recently destroyed the Ka'ba built with the Prophet's help and restored it to its earlier *jahiliyah* stage, the one, according to traditional lore and belief, which had been created by Abraham. In both cases the implication is downright pagan and tribal, not Islamic and imperial, reflecting a traditional Arabian perception of power struggles and power symbols, not a new one. It is in fact only within this Arabian context, still infected by paganism, that one can explain why a sanctuary would have been built around a natural rock whose only demonstrable (or at least preserved today) connotations at that time were with the Jewish Temple, if it is indeed the *lapis pertusus* of a western pilgrim's text, or with Abraham's sacrifice through the ancient confusion between Mount Moriah and the land of Moriah.

Within this context, I propose to see the planning, foundation and design of the Dome of the Rock as the expression of Mu'awiyah's rule, independent of a Hijaz to which, all texts say, he did not want to return. It was set around a rock with whatever Jewish associations this rock had because there also he was establishing an Abrahamic relationship and certainly with the memory of pagan lithocracy in pre-Islamic Arabia. It was also meant to be a message of power to the Christians, whose defeated rulers had their crowns hanging in the sanctuary, as similar trophies had been hanging in the Ka'ba, and it proclaimed the acquisition or appropriation by Mu'awiyah of *mulk*, that imperial power that had ruled the Christian world since Constantine, or possibly the kingship of the pre-Islamic rulers of the northern Arabian steppes and deserts. To Mu'awiyah, in short, what was meant to be created in Jerusalem was a dynastic or tribal shrine, and Jerusalem alone made sense in the world conquered by the Arabs as the location of the shrine, because Jerusalem alone was endowed with the kinds of associations both with God and with kings that made an event there or a building reverberate throughout the world of Christians and of Jews as well as among the new Muslims. To

¹⁶ W. Caskel, *Der Felsendom und die Wallfahrt nach Jerusalem* (Cologne, 1963).

try in a single monument to juggle messages to Arabs, Muslim or not, to the new leadership of a fledgling empire, to Christians and to Jews seems, to me at least, to fit beautifully with the striking and imaginative personality of the first Umayyad caliph.

One alternative to this scheme or scenario could be proposed. It is possible that the mosaic decoration and, more specifically, the inscription were chosen by 'Abd al-Malik and his pious entourage, and thus that, as the building was being built, parts of its program were being modified because of altered circumstances or additional meanings were given to it. The practice is not unknown in the history of mostly contemporary architecture and I know of one possible parallel in the Muslim world of the Middle Ages.¹⁷ This hypothesis would explain Maqdisi's celebrated text about the Dome of the Rock which mentions exclusively the caliph's intent to compete with Christian monuments.¹⁸ It may also explain another more obscure statement in a late medieval text that 'Abd al-Malik incorporated the Dome of the Rock in the Aqsa Mosque, which would mean then that it is 'Abd al-Malik who first sought to give it an Islamic meaning.¹⁹ And al-Ma'mun's substitution of his name in the inscription can easily be explained as a last recognition of secular and imperial values in a building that by then had been transformed into a purely religious one. Solomonian lore, which has been proposed to explain certain motifs in the mosaic decoration,²⁰ would have influenced either Umayyad patron.

Before returning in conclusion to some additional remarks about the religious meaning of the Dome of the Rock, let me turn to the second part of my argument, the visual one. For, so far, the main justifications for my explanation of the building have been, first, that the process of designing a building of this magnitude in the peculiar conditions of the city of Jerusalem compels us to propose for the conception of the building an earlier date than the usually accepted one, and, second, that the contents of an inscription in Arabic, hardly yet the common language of the Christians and Jews to whom it was destined, but especially an inscription invisible to them and to nearly everyone else, makes this explanation most plausible.

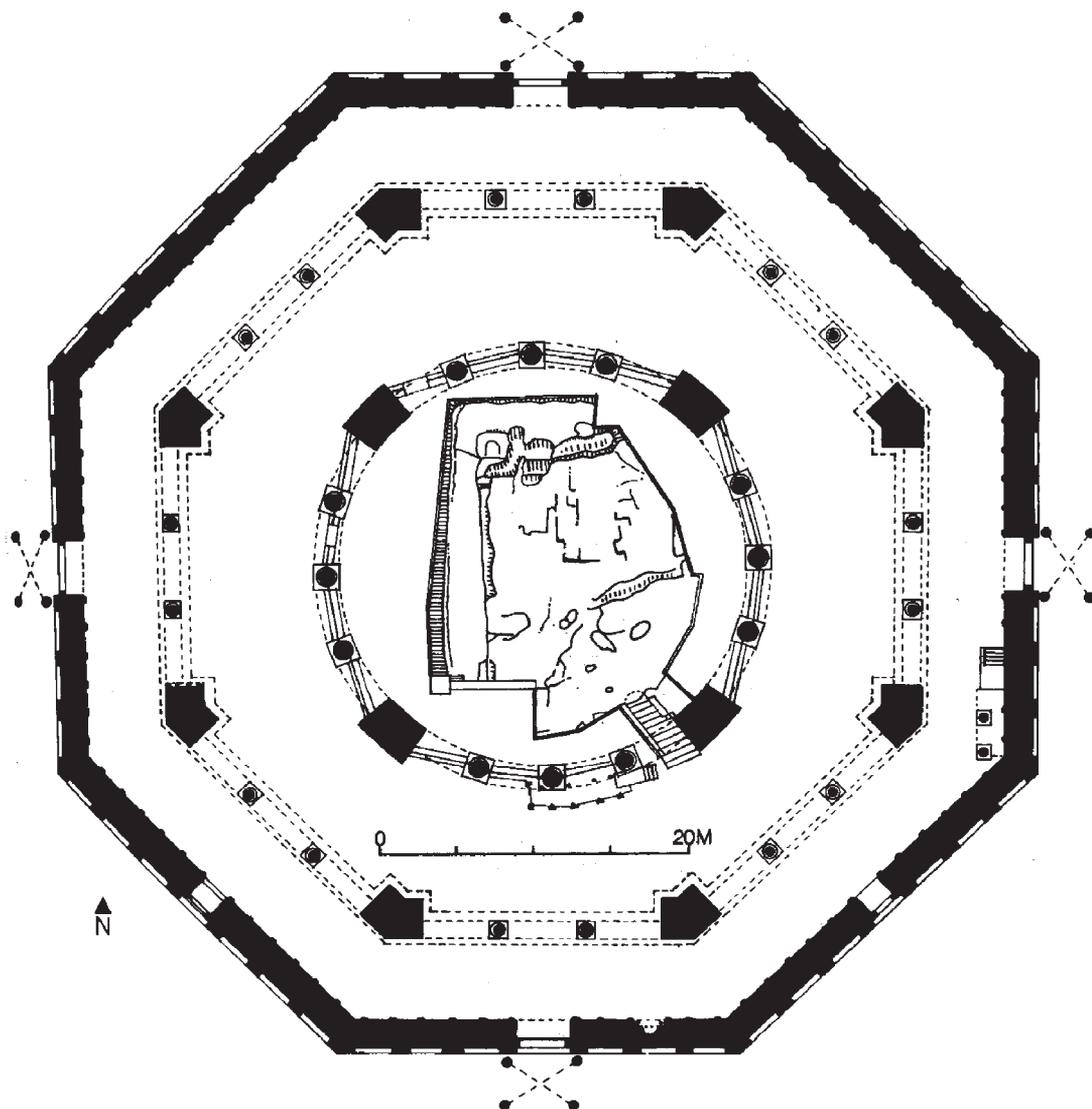
The art-historical argument about the Dome [6] of the Rock has centered almost exclusively on the question of the origins of its plan (Figure 2), and scholars agree about the set of Mediterranean Christian monuments with which it is to be connected. It is difficult to disagree with series of plans that are indeed strikingly alike except on one point. Only the Dome of the Rock

¹⁷ I mean the early fourteenth-century mausoleum of Oljaytu in Iran, whose study is yet to be made.

¹⁸ Maqdisi's text is in Le Strange's book quoted in note 5, pp. 117-18.

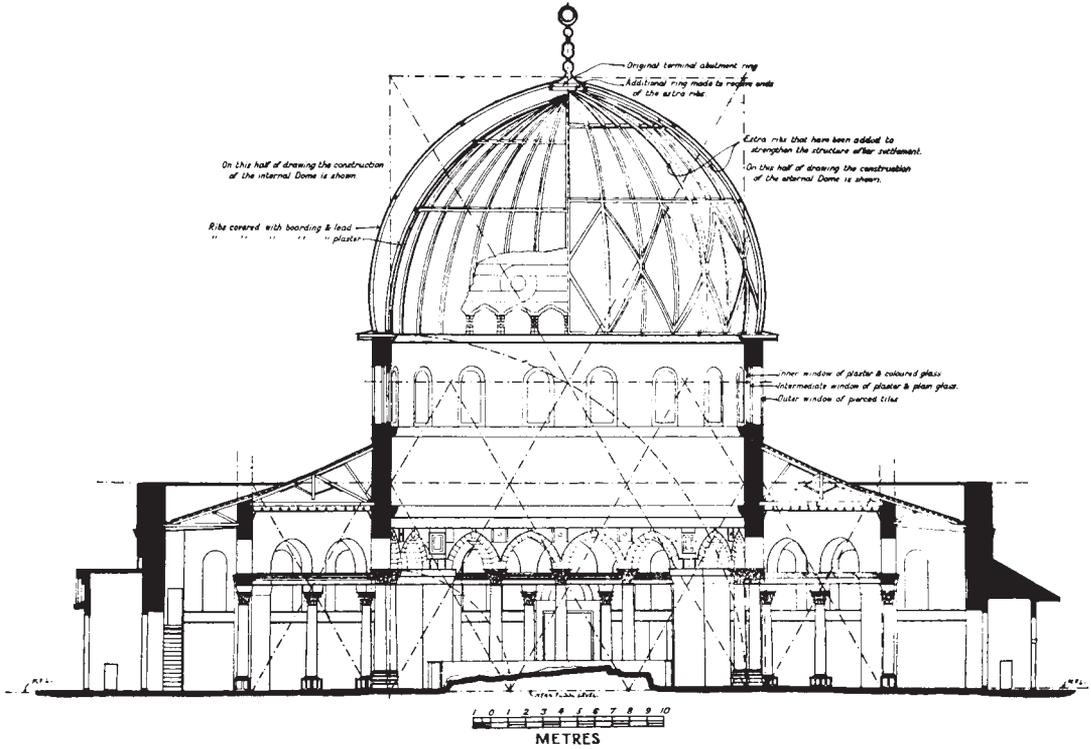
¹⁹ Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems*, pp. 144ff., among several places.

²⁰ Priscilla Soucek, "The Temple of Solomon in Islamic Legend and Art," in Joseph Gutmann, ed., *The Temple of Solomon* (Missoula, 1976); Heribert Busse, "The Sanctity of Jerusalem in Islam," *Judaism*, 17 (1968).



2 Dome of the Rock, plan

is perfectly symmetrical on any one of its axes and does not provide a particular preeminence of one side over the others; even the doorways are exactly alike. All the comparable Christian monuments are provided with a façade, if for no other purpose than to put a single entry into the building. Where the Dome of the Rock is even more different from any of its alleged models is in its elevation. Admittedly, most of the latter are known only as ruins, but in the Holy Sepulcher, Ravenna, or Aachen, the point of the building is always to compel entrance into it and, once in, to be overwhelmed by the central cupola. Things work out quite differently in the Dome of the Rock. Entry is difficult because of the narrowness of the doors and because not one of them has beckoning or inviting [7] signs (Figure 3); the dome,



JERUSALEM: The Dome of the Rock, section on east and west axis. (From a drawing by Mr. Ernest Richmond.)

twice as high as the ambulatory around it, has as its diameter the smallest circle that would encompass the rock and is therefore nearly invisible from the inside; in fact, slight alterations in the dimensions of intercolumniations always lead the eye across the whole building and over the rock rather than upward. These alterations are, however, minimal, and, on the whole, as many observers have noted, the Dome of the Rock is characterized by the precision of its geometric composition, both in plan and in elevation. As Ecohard and others have shown, the geometric principles involved are neither unique nor original. What is unique is that almost nothing breaks their harmony and proportions. The building is not only conceived in geometry; it is a geometric object.

In short, while the technical, phonetic and, to a large extent, compositional structure of the building does indeed belong to the language of forms prevailing in the early Christian Mediterranean, the effect it produces is quite different from what is found in parallel buildings: separation between exterior and interior impacts; emphasis on the dome for the outside viewer, on a unified space with multiple supports from the inside; absolute equality of all sides. To these architectonic attributes must be added the mosaic decoration. Once again, the technique and most of the motifs belong to the Mediterranean tradition. The suggestion of an iconographic meaning for

3 Dome of the Rock, section



4 The Haram
al-Sharif, air view

the crowns and possibly also for the trees in the spandrels and on the upper part of piers is legitimate to the extent that mosaics and paintings were used for visual messages in Christian and Classic art. The absence of living beings, certainly a willed decision, makes the means for the transmission unusual and raises some questions as to whether the messages were understood, but a number of formal components like relationship of motifs to each other, highlighting of some motifs over others, and so on, make an iconographic reading of the mosaics not only legitimate but likely. So far, however, only the crowns and jewels on the one hand and the large trees on the other have been given some attention.²¹

In two areas, however, the Dome of the Rock is entirely original. One is the nearly total sheathing of the building with colorful decoration, in this instance marble and mosaics. In ways that have never yet been fully analyzed and of which I shall provide only one example, this sheathing does much more than strengthen key architectural parts; it actually modifies them, as in the intrados of arches, where the continuity of the surface design alters

²¹ See articles by Grabar and Soucek.



and softens the sharp edge of a stone arch and provides continuity to what is normally seen as contrast. The second originality of the decoration is that it also occurred on the outside. Exterior decoration is very rare in the prevailing Mediterranean *koiné* and, when it occurs there or in Iran, it tends to be limited to a specific message on the façade.

How can one explain these characteristics: differences between exterior and interior messages, perfect geometry, mosaics both inside and outside? (See Figure 4.) Let me also add that no evidence exists before the Dome of the Rock for Muslim patronage of esthetically significant buildings. The earlier mosque in Jerusalem was described as “rude” by a western traveler and whatever can be reconstructed in Kufa and Basra does not compare in sophistication with the Dome of the Rock.

The explanation I am putting forward is that the Umayyad patrons were in fact affected or inspired by the one “monument” in their tradition, the Ka’ba in Mecca (Figure 5). It was a simple building with the function of a shrine—treasury inside and of a magnet for a ritual then in the process of formulation on the outside. Few were allowed inside, but all knew its contents. And it was covered with regularly renewed textiles that, according to al-Azraqi, were more frequently changed in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times than became the practice later on and especially whose colors varied

5 Mecca, the Ka’ba, air view

considerably.²² All of this means that the visual impression of the Ka'ba was that of a colorful textile fluttering under the impact of winds and covering a clearly delineated geometric shape.

It is perhaps reasonable to explain the outside mosaic decoration of the Dome of the Rock as seeking to give the colorful impression of textiles, but the building in Jerusalem hardly looks like its Meccan counterpart. And yet, if we are mindful of the procedures of medieval architects outlined by Krautheimer many decades ago²³ and in line with my earlier suggestions about a historical context for the Dome of the Rock, a scenario for its construction can be proposed. Mu'awiyah in my hypothesis – but the process could apply to any comparable patron – decides to build in Jerusalem a shrine (understood here in a generic architectural and not religious sense as a unique monument for a singular purpose) to associate himself and perhaps his lineage with one of the holiest places in the Judeo-Christian and now newly Islamic world. He sees it primarily as a place competing in semantic value with Mecca controlled by 'Ibn al-Zubayr, a representation of local pride; at least he does so with the eyes of a traditional Arab ruler. But with his eyes as the ruler of a fledgling world empire, he sees it [8] also as a message to the People of the Book who form the majority of the population and, at least in the case of Christians, who had developed an elaborate and expensive art for their faith. Mu'awiyah turns to the building establishment of Syria and Palestine, perhaps even calls for artisans from more important centers like Constantinople, because he has extensive funds at his disposal and because, for at least one of his purposes, he has to use the language of the conquered world. Yet he also wanted to preserve something of the Meccan world. Since no artisan was going to travel to Mecca to look at the Ka'ba and since no appropriate architectural manuals or drawings were available, a brief was produced orally. The Ka'ba, someone would have said, is a geometrically clear building, it creates a colorful impression, it dominates its surroundings, it possesses treasures inside and serves as a visual magnet in the city and the surrounding valley. The Dome of the Rock then would have been the translation by Mediterranean artisans into *their* language of an orally transmitted description of the Meccan sanctuary.

Two additional documents strengthen the possibility of this scenario. One is that several later writers did accuse the Umayyads of having tried to move the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They understood the connection between the two buildings, but, because the Ka'ba had by then become exclusively the center of the *hajj*, they had to explain the connection in terms of the pilgrimage; the complex psychological and emotional components of generations with a foot still in *jahiliyah* times no longer made much sense to

²² Al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makkah* (repr. edn Beirut, n.d.), pp. 175 ff.

²³ R. Krautheimer, "The Iconography of Medieval Architecture," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 5 (1942).

ninth-century Muslim writers. The other argument is that a reliance on geometric precision and geometric imagination is often the natural instinct of architects faced with a purpose with which they are not familiar. On a different level, neither the Dome of the Rock nor the Ka'ba were copied in later Islamic architecture, nor did they significantly affect the development of that architecture, some exceptions notwithstanding. By providing the Dome of the Rock with a unique and singular meaning at the time of its creation, its lack of impact may be explained as well, something which the traditional explanation was [9] unable to do.

My argument tries to weave together two kinds of arguments: the analysis of a building as a perceived object and not, as is so often done in art-historical research, as a bundle of influences; and, second, the elements of a process of building in which purpose, ambition, assets, surrounding events, people, ideas and technological potential all intermingle. I have left out (or barely alluded to) a third component, which is the specificity of Jerusalem as a place and as a set of memories in the second half of the seventh century; the study of Jerusalem at that time could form a whole lecture in its own right.²⁴ What has emerged from this piecing together of a standing building and of processes issued from visual and written sources as well as from more general assumptions about the nature of building?

First of all, the uniqueness of the Dome of the Rock as a work of architecture can be explained by the unique circumstances of its creation. And the uniqueness of the circumstances explains in turn why, as traditional Islam was developing and codifying its piety and its sacred places, the Dome of the Rock, with a largely different agenda behind it, was difficult to fit into anything. It was a work of state, but of a type of state that was going to be radically changed by 'Abd al-Malik's reforms. It was also a work of art, but it was not a work of faith, whereas the whole history of the Haram from the moment of the building of the Aqsa Mosque by al-Walid becomes the history of Muslim religious and pious beliefs and practices overtaking an ancient sacred space and eventually the Dome of the Rock itself. This transformation was, I believe, finally achieved in a visually coherent form only under the Fatimids in the early eleventh century and the whole process is a fascinating one to which I hope to devote myself one of these years.

Second, even though the Umayyad period has been better studied than any other one in medieval Islamic history, insufficient attention has been given to what may be called its aesthetic culture as different from its archaeology. Much too easily, we have all assumed that Arabia was forgotten once the visual riches of the conquered lands became available. What these riches provided was one or more new languages of forms, but they did not, at least not immediately, eradicate memories, visual impressions and aesthetic

²⁴ See the suggestive recent books by F. E. Peters, *Jerusalem* (Princeton, 1985) and *Jerusalem and Mecca* (New York, 1986).

needs from the world of Arabian oases and probably tribes. Within these memories, the Ka'ba played a far greater role than has been imagined and a continuous one because of the Pilgrimage. On a more specific level, a very fascinating Mecca–Jerusalem dialogue and competition seems to have existed, both in *hadith* literature and in eschatology.²⁵ Yet on another [10] level, a pattern emerges of relationships between memory of things seen, ambitions for things to be seen, satisfying one's own sense of identity, and fascinating or seducing others. This pattern allows us to delve far more deeply than is usually the case into the web of motivations surrounding any work of art and, more specifically, this pattern has fascinating parallels with the architecture being developed today in the Arab world.

Finally, any interpretation of the Dome of the Rock raises issues that range from reconstructing the motives of patrons long gone to understanding how form and belief act with and react to each other. All these approaches help in explaining the Dome of the Rock, but none is the final truth about it, for like any work of art the Dome of the Rock will always remain something of a mystery. It is a fascinating and yet, to me, by now no longer a surprising fact that, at the other end of the grand tradition of Islamic architecture, the Taj Mahal, like the Dome of the Rock, is remarkably documented and yet equally elusive. Or perhaps the more one studies something the less one understands it. A depressing thought for an academic to expound, but a convenient way to end a paper or a lecture.

²⁵ J. M. Kister, "A Study of an Early Tradition," *Le Muséon*, 32 (1969).