

Chapter XII

The Making of the Haram al-Sharif: The First Steps*

Every visitor to Jerusalem is struck forever by the visual power of the Haram al-Sharif, the huge artificial platform rising above deep valleys to the east and the southwest, embedded into the city to the north and the northwest, with the Dome of the Rock shining in its center in its dazzling colors so unusual in the stone fabric of Palestinian architecture, with smaller domes all over the place; and with the large congregational hall known as the Aqsa Mosque at its southern end. To all visitors it is a striking experience to behold and to Muslims everywhere it is a holy place, the third holiest sanctuary in Islam, just after Mecca and Medina.

Very little, however, is known about how the sanctuary came into being. There are, to be sure, many stories retelling its history, but it is not easy to distinguish legend from probable truth, as medieval times transformed whatever had actually happened into one or more scenarios which justified ideological, emotional, or pious attitudes of different moments in history rather than reflected actual events. The account which follows is also a reconstruction in which some fancy peculiar to the author's preferences in the late twentieth century is probably mixed with a small number of assured facts. I trust that it includes most of the latter and that it corresponds to a certain logic of the history of Palestine and of Jerusalem as well as of the more complicated phenomenon of the transformation of Late Antique lands and forms into Muslim ones.

In 638, the most likely of three possible dates, Jerusalem, a Christian city for three centuries, accepted Muslim rule through a treaty with Arab Muslim leaders and without any military action. Whether or not the caliph 'Umar came for the occasion is not entirely clear, although the various events which are said by later legends to have occurred as he arrived and as he visited the city are fascinating exercises in the formation of highly creative and imaginative historical myths. Whether or not the caliph was present does not really bear directly on one certain fact. It is that the vast artificial

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platform covered with ruins of older buildings which was then in the middle of the eastern third of the city (at that time, a curtain wall known as Eudocia's wall, whose remains are still visible today, extended the walled city of Jerusalem to the south) became a space reserved for Muslims. It had been the place where Herod the Great (71–4 BCE) and his successors built the spectacular Jewish Temple with full use of Hellenistic architectural technology and design. The Temple had been destroyed by the Romans after the Jewish wars of 70 and 134; Roman generals then transformed the old Jerusalem into *Aelia Capitolina*, a Roman military city. On the ruined platform of the Temple a pagan temple and a few monumental statues were put up to show imperial presence. After the establishment of Christianity as the imperial religion in the first third of the fourth century and the building of the Holy Sepulcher to be followed by several other churches and commemorative buildings, the western ridges of the city from Golgotha to Mount Sion as well as the Mount of Olives to the east of the city became *the* centers of Christian worship and the area of the former Jewish Temple was totally abandoned and left to decay as a symbol of Christianity's victory over paganism and Judaism. At best, it was used as a quarry for the new buildings sponsored by Christian emperors.

It is not known whether the first Muslims simply took over a space which was available and whose occupation would not betray a treaty preserving Christian holy places in Christian hands or whether they had already made clear and specific associations between this particular area of Jerusalem and concrete features from the Muslim revelation or from early Islamic history and beliefs, such as the first *qiblah*, the *mihrab Da'ud*, accounts of Abraham, Moses, or Solomon, the *isra'* (Night-Journey) or *mi'raj* (Ascension) of the Prophet, even the *masjid al-Aqsa*, the "farthest mosque," of Qur'an 17:1 which was to play such an important role in the eventual holiness of the Haram. All that is certain is that large Muslim settlements revealed by recent Israeli excavations were constructed just south of the ruined walls of the Herodian buildings and that a congregational mosque was built in the southern part of the platform, probably somewhere in the area of the present Aqsa Mosque. According to a western pilgrim who saw the mosque around 670, it was a simply constructed building which could shelter some three thousand people. It is reasonable to assume from the existence of what must have been a large space that the surface of the [3] present Haram platform had been established by then and that the large underground entryway known today as the Double Gate was completed as one of the major accesses from the city to the platform. The unusual decoration of its domes may date from these early decades of Muslim rule or may have been reused from earlier monuments.

We leave the realm of hypotheses, but not of problems, when we move to the next stage: the building of the Dome of the Rock. In 72 AH (691–2 CE), as we know from an inscription still in its original place, a most extraordinary and still unique monument was built (or, according to some, completed) by

the caliph 'Abd al-Malik. It is a tall cylinder topped by a gilt dome and surrounded by two octagonal ambulatories or rings. The building is lavishly decorated inside with marble and bronze plaques, woodwork and magnificent wall mosaics. The last are used to represent a rich vocabulary of floral designs, tall trees which can be either recognizable products of nature or creations of artistic imagination, hundreds of crowns and jewels which can be identified as the jewelry and the signs of power associated with Byzantine and, in a few cases, Sasanian emperors and empresses, some highly original geometric designs, realistic representations of primarily local fruits and vegetables, and a celebrated 240-meter-long inscription which contains historical information, one of the earliest known examples of what will become common Muslim professions of faith, and a large number of qur'anic fragments, almost two hundred years before the earliest remaining dated texts of the Revelation. There were also above the doors of the building four large bronze plaques with additional inscriptions, two of which have been preserved. And, finally, as a last example of the building's uniqueness, it was decorated with mosaics on the outside. We do not know whether the walls were entirely covered above a row of marble plaques, as they will be in the sixteenth-century restoration of tiles which is visible today, but the use of color on the outside of a building is practically unknown in Late Antique art.

While the unique character of the Dome of the Rock has been recognized by all, the reasons for its construction have led to debates and disagreements as early as in the ninth century among Muslim writers and these debates have continued until now. This is not the place to engage in polemical or even scholarly arguments. Let me simply list the main explanations which exist and for all of which there are valid arguments: an attempt to divert the pilgrimage from Mecca to Jerusalem by building an equivalent to the Ka'ba; a commemoration of the *isra'* and of the *mi'raj*, the two mystical events which had acquired some popular elaboration in early Islamic times; commemoration of older prophets or of a king-prophet like Suleyman who had built the Temple and his palace in Jerusalem; commemoration of the presence of God on earth at the end of creation and preparation for His return on the Day of Judgment, as is indicated by an early *hadith* eventually rejected by official Islam; glorification of the Umayyad dynasty, several of whose princes were crowned in Jerusalem and of the victorious presence of Islam in the city hallowed by Jews and ruled by Christians for three centuries, as the Dome of the Rock was clearly visible from nearly all parts of the city and especially from its western hills with their Christian holy places. A stunning reversal with strong ideological implications had occurred in the organization of the city's space.

Some of these explanations can be combined, some are incompatible with each other, but all of them together illustrate the extraordinary wealth and power of what was in fact the earliest monument sponsored by a Muslim

prince meant from the very beginning to be a work of art, in the sense that its aesthetic qualities were an essential part of its message. The continuous importance of this message is demonstrated by the subsequent fate of the building. The 'Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun replaced 'Abd al-Malik's name in the inscription with his own, without, however, altering the Umayyad date. And all successive rulers of Jerusalem, even the Crusaders, maintained it in reasonably good shape and developed their own explanation for its presence in Jerusalem. This was possible for two reasons. One is the architectural and decorative language of the Dome of the Rock. Its geometric structure, its systems of construction, the techniques of its decoration all belong to the artistic traditions of Late Antiquity as they were being transformed into medieval art. The Dome of the Rock was built in a language that could be understood by Christians as well as Muslims, but what it said was new, for it argued that the last and most recent Revelation of the same Abrahamic tradition dominates now the city of Jerusalem and appears as a new mediator between the areas where Christ lived, [4] died, and was resurrected (the western hills of the city) and the area (the Mount of Olives) from which He ascended into heaven and where eternal life will begin at the end of time. The new Haram was thus at the junction between life on earth and eternal life and, somewhat later, its eastern Double Gate, always closed and known to Christians as the Golden Gate, became the Gate of Repentance (*tawbah*) and the Gate of Mercy (*rahmah*).

This new Haram was not yet called by that name; it was known as the *masjid al-Aqsa* or, far more frequently, as *masjid bayt al-maqdis*, the mosque of the Holy City. But the first steps had been taken in the formation of one of the great spaces in the history of architecture.