
The subject of the architecture of the Islamic Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem has a long pedigree in scholarly literature. In a recent article, Muhammed Anwarul Islam and Fauzi Zaid al-Hamad concluded that the Dome of the Rock did not have much in common with either of the two monuments in Jerusalem [i.e., the Anastasis (Resurrection) Rotunda in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Church of the Ascension] as they existed at the time...Yet, there is no record of any other important building built with an octagonal shape anywhere in the Islamic world during this period of a thousand years. This confirms the view presented in this article that the Dome of the Rock needed to be octagonal to reflect the unique religious scenario that was believed to be happening only in the location where it was being built and will not be repeated anywhere else.

The first part of my article is a response to this conclusion and the second part is a by-product of my ongoing research on the beginning of the cult of Mary Theotokos (God Bearer) in Jerusalem, in which the Church of the Kathisma (Seat of Mary) played a major and influential role in connection with Marian feasts in Jerusalem and abroad, as well as of my encounter with the studies of Mary Cunningham on eighth-century Marian homilies. Inspired by the workshop on the Theotokos that was organized by Cunningham and Leslie Brubaker at Oxford University in 2006, I undertook an adventurous methodological experiment regarding the architectural iconography of the Dome of the Rock, the results of which, as detailed in the latter part of this article, complement and support my argument in the first part.

A prelude to the present article was unintentionally provided by Amikam Elad when he pointed out that Islam and al-Hamad were incorrect in asserting that “there is no record of any other important building built with an octagonal shape anywhere in the Islamic world during this period of a thousand years.” Indeed, Elad’s observation that the architecture of Qubbat al-Sulaybiyya at Samarra (dated to the ninth century) shares typological similarities with the architectural plan of the Dome of the Rock had already been proposed in 1911 by Friedrich Sarre and Ernst Herzfeld.

About twenty years ago, in her seminal monograph on the early Islamic complex on top of the Temple Mount, Miriam Rosen-Ayalon described the presumed uniqueness of the architecture of the Dome of the Rock when she wrote:

The Dome of the Rock is undoubtedly one of the most extensively studied of medieval buildings...The construction of a complete picture of this unique monument is further hindered by the fact that no contemporary building in any of the neighboring cultures offers a comparison with the Dome of the Rock. Various buildings have been cited as possible sources of inspiration or forerunners, but these parallels have always been only partial at best.

More recently Oleg Grabar agreed with Rosen-Ayalon, as well as Islam and al-Hamad, when he noted that there is “no immediate model for the Dome of the Rock.” Grabar is renowned for placing the Dome of the Rock in the forefront of the studies of Islamic art, promoting discussion of the structure’s meaning. His seminal paper, “The Umayyad Dome of the Rock,” published in 1959, is an important milestone that remains relevant today, in spite of alternative interpretive proposals that have accumulated in abundance in the years since. Even today, this study continues to buttress relevant and
valid conclusions. However, the discussions in his two books on the architectural origins of the Dome of the Rock are less cautious—sometimes the information is inaccurate and certain observations are imprecise. Thus, his conclusions remain too general. For example, in The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem, published in 1996, Grabar wrote that

there is little doubt that the model for the Dome of the Rock was a fairly common type in Late Antique and Early Christian or early Byzantine architecture. Originating in the mostly funerary architecture of the late Roman empire…it became a common form for baptisteries all over the Christian world….12

However, in Malka Ben-Pechat’s inventory of baptisteries, and according to my own up-to-date knowledge of the recently excavated baptisteries in Israel, none of those in the Holy Land are octagonal, or in fact polygonal, in shape.13

Grabar further states that “the plan of the Dome of the Rock is distinguishable from the plans of most comparable buildings by its inordinate size….14 This statement, however, contradicts the data on the measurements of the rotunda of the Anastasis provided by Richard Krautheimer15 and also published in two geometrical analyses by the architect Doron Chen.16 Previously, in his doctoral dissertation, Chen had compared the Dome of the Rock with the rotunda of the Anastasis and the octagonal Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives.17 This latter church, however, is dated to the Crusader period18 and therefore could not have been an architectural source for the Dome of the Rock.

According to Grabar,

[i]n terms of size, the churches of San Vitale and Aachen, the possible martyrrium [a memorial monument; in the Christian context, it is a place of witnessing commemorating an occurrence of theophany] in Caesarea, and the two sanctuaries of Jerusalem are the only ones that are close to the Dome of the Rock, and in both the Church of the Ascension and San Vitale, the circle circumscribing the building has the same diameter as the Dome of the Rock.19

Indeed, a comparison of the sizes of these five monuments (i.e., the churches of San Vitale, Aachen, Caesarea, and the Ascension, and the Dome of the Rock) does demonstrate the technical capability of the architects and engineers of these buildings, but does not necessarily relate to their architectural models. Moreover, Grabar is inaccurate in his assertion that “only the Church of the Ascension and the church at Caesarea are symmetrical on several axes and appear to lack an apse for an altar.”20 Each one of these churches did have marked altars in the east, although, admittedly, they did not protrude beyond the exterior contours of the buildings.21

In The Dome of the Rock, published in 2006, Grabar’s mishandling of the geometrical data led him to some imprecise conclusions. He confines his architectural parallels to four concentric churches in the Holy Land, reports on all of which have been published by their respective excavators. The remains of a round, early Byzantine church were uncovered below the octagonal Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives,22 and an octagonal church was revealed in Capernaum.23 In addition to various preliminary reports and articles, a final paper on the excavations of the octagonal church in Caesarea Maritima was recently published, in which the structure was identified as St. Cornelius’s martyrrium. I myself have proposed an alternative identification of the monument as the martyrrium of Philip.24

The last of Grabar’s church plans is his drawing of the Church of the Kathisma on the Jerusalem–Bethlehem road, which I excavated on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority.25

Three of Grabar’s church plans are inaccurate and sometimes completely wrong. Firstly, his “schematic reconstructed plan of the church of the Ascension”26 depicts two concentric octagons, but we know from the architectural finds revealed in Virgilio Corbo’s excavation that the early Byzantine Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives was round.27 In addition, Corbo’s archaeological finds are in accordance with the description of this church provided by the pilgrim Arculf, who visited the Holy Land between 679 and 688.28

Secondly, Grabar’s “schematic plan of the octagonal building in Caesarea”29 depicts a thick exterior octagonal wall surrounding an intermediate, colonnaded circle, at the center of which is an unclear element that is round on its exterior face and octagonal towards the center of the building. However, according to the plan
published by the excavator, Ken Holm, the exterior of this church was square. It had a square unit framing two concentric octagons, which were separated from one another by octagonal corner piers (the horizontal section of each pier forming one of the 135-degree angles of an octagon). Thus, the piers defined both the octagonal shape of the inner space of the church and the inner face of the octagonal ambulatory. The ambulatory in Grabar’s plan has a round contour facing the center of the building—not an octagonal one, as the archaeological finds convincingly prove. In addition, Grabar’s plan disregards the apse, which Holm excavated and published in his reports.

Thirdly, the plan that Grabar provides for the Kathisma Church is problematic. It incorporates and amalgamates archaeological architectural features from several different strata with modern ones. The proportions are inaccurate in that Grabar miscalculated the diameter of the inner octagon in the Kathisma and also reached incorrect conclusions concerning the size relationship of the Kathisma in comparison with the other concentric martyria in Jerusalem.30

Evidently, in antiquity buildings that were intended to be copies of existing monuments did not always resemble their models precisely. This was demonstrated by Richard Krautheimer, who discussed a group of churches dating to the Middle Ages, based on historical documents that indicated that the designers and constructors intended to copy the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.31 However, their typological divergence was clear and none of them has a similar plan, nor do any of those church plans look like that of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This diversity is so great that modern scholarship has not been able to deduce from the architectural plans whether these churches are all copies of one and the same church model. In spite of Krautheimer’s somewhat discouraging observation that we cannot identify which buildings are copies except when historical documents refer to them as such, it is, in fact, sometimes possible to determine by observation the architectural model on which a building was based. First, though, it is imperative to clarify what an architectural model is.

An architectural model should be defined as a structure’s primary and basic geometrical scheme, that is, a composition of a few large-scale major geometrical shapes that comprise the plan from which architects design the details and final plan of the projected building. With this definition at hand, it will be possible to analyze the architectural plans of the buildings under study, recognize the model of each building, and draw comparisons among them. Because he did not search for the major shapes that comprised the plans of the Holy Land’s martyria, Oleg Grabar was unable to recognize any architectural model; his comparisons between the churches of the Holy Land and San Vitale or Aachen relate to the size of the buildings rather than to their architectural model.

Typology was only one of several criteria adopted by André Grabar to investigate the many churches and monuments analyzed in his seminal work, Martyrium: Recherches sur le culte des reliques et l’art chrétien antique, of which vol. 1, L’architecture, was published in Paris in 1946. He also examined each monument in its broader contexts, such as provenance, chronology, culture, and function—especially liturgical function and iconography. This deep and broad investigation enabled him to identify models and copies of martyria and regular churches. In an observation relevant to this article, he noted that the uniqueness of the martyria in the Holy Land was due to the special status of Palestine in Christianity and that the architecture developed to meet the multifunctional roles these buildings were expected to fill:

Il n’y avait que la Palestine—pays des martyria théophaniques—pour pouvoir prendre l’initiative de transférer ainsi sur des églises de culte normal dédiées au Christ et à la Vierge les caractéristiques des monuments commémoratifs. Mais l’exemple était tentant, et la pratique des sanctuaires de Terre Sainte a dû contribuer à répandre cet usage.32

Twenty years after the publication of André Grabar’s book, in the face of the criticism leveled by John Bryan Ward-Perkins,33 who gave primacy to the typological comparisons while discarding the other criteria that Grabar had relied upon, André Grabar defended his methodology and conclusions, as well as his multifaceted methodological approach.34

John Wilkinson’s work on the architectural procedures followed in the planning of octagonal churches
in the Holy Land paved the way for a comparative architectural study of the Kathisma Church, which became a chapter of my doctoral dissertation. Wilkinson’s analysis helped me to recognize a local typological architectural model for the concentric martyria in Jerusalem, as well as to trace the development of this model in order to observe how it was implemented in the various architectural plans of the martyria under examination. This cumulative data facilitated the expansion of my research for this article, enabling me to pinpoint direct and specific architectural sources for the Dome of the Rock. Tracing these sources raised some questions that led to the second part of this essay, dealing with the iconographical interpretation of the architectural design and exterior shape of the Dome of the Rock.

An archaeological and architectural survey of the buildings in the Holy Land, from the prehistoric period to the early Byzantine, shows that the first concentric buildings constructed in the Holy Land, excluding Gaza with the round Roman temple dedicated to Maranas, were the commemoration churches initiated by the emperor Constantine the Great (r. 306–37). It has been established that the Dome of the Rock is a commemorative monument. Oleg Grabar referred to it as “a sort of a martyrium” and a “place of commemoration.” Therefore, it seems that the Dome of the Rock deserves to be studied according to a methodology similar to the one André Grabar used in his book on the martyria. The scheme of the second part of this article, dealing with iconography, is inspired by that of Richard Ettinghausen, who, in trying to decipher the meaning of the Dome of the Rock, wrote that it appealed to the new converts who understood it in its pre-Islamic setting and who tried to place it in its new context. But the decorative repertory, restricted though it was, was also sure to conjure up certain associations. In particular, its most unusual feature within an otherwise formal display must have evoked connotations that such designs had in a Christian environment.

The same methodology was successfully used by Ettinghausen in a study on the hall in Khirbat al-Mafjar, as well as by Rosen-Ayalon in her analysis of the wall mosaics of the Dome of the Rock.

Ettinghausen’s observations about the meaning of the mosaics in the Dome of the Rock and the big hall in Khirbat al-Mafjar generated the following questions: Where can one find a church in Jerusalem that has an exterior shape similar to the Dome of the Rock—and what would Christians make of that association? Where can one find a church whose interior space is divided in a manner similar to that of the Dome of the Rock—and what possible association would that have in Christian eyes? What church had a dome that is similar to the Dome of the Rock—and what message could that association convey to Christian visitors? Finally, in relation to Oleg Grabar’s work, but with the insights of Ettinghausen’s iconographical scholarship, I have tried to decipher the “visual words” of the architecture of the Dome of the Rock, which might have been “read” by the Christians in Jerusalem during the seventh century, in the context of their meaning in their original (Christian) environment. In other words, how did the designer of the Dome of the Rock use Christian “visual words and modes of expression” in a new “syntax” in order to convey his message?

But first it is necessary to present the material evidence and to gather and analyze the historical information embedded in the material finds. Our discourse begins with a typological comparative study of the Dome of the Rock with the other early Byzantine concentric martyria in Jerusalem, with respect to the modifications made to the plans of the martyria due to liturgical developments and changes over time.

The methodological approach proposed here is primarily intended to contextualize the Dome of the Rock in terms of the history of architecture in Jerusalem and its environs, in order to see whether, in light of new data, it fits into the development of the concentric buildings that preceded it. Furthermore, a survey of related monuments needs to be more scrupulously conducted vis-à-vis the chronology of the changes introduced in them. I will argue that the architectural plan of the Dome of the Rock is not an Umayyad invention, but rather organically belongs to a local family of early Byzantine concentric memorial shrines. Similar to the other buildings of this group, the Dome of the Rock reflects local Jerusalemite architectural features, in some manner adjusted to meet the functional demands of its Umayyad patrons, just as the model was previously adapted in church building plans, as required by the
growing number of pilgrims, the increase of relics and icons, and the development of secondary cults within the monumental memorial churches.

The survey is supplemented by a cultural and historical review of Umayyad Jerusalem, with special attention to Muslim–Christian cultural relations between the seventh and the ninth centuries, including the dispute between the two communities over the ownership of existing holy places, specifically the Church of the Kathisma, and the theological wrangling over the role of the Virgin Mary as the “God Bearer.” This broader historical approach provides a key to a better understanding of, and a new perspective on, the decisions made by those who planned the Dome of the Rock on the deserted site of the Jewish Temple, while selecting features of the rotunda of the Anastasis as well as of the Church of the Kathisma as immediate and direct sources for the new structure’s architecture.

AN ARCHITECTURAL SURVEY

I begin by surveying the octagonal architectural unit built over the cave of the Nativity in Bethlehem in the time of Constantine the Great and dated to ca. 333.43 The eastern octagon was accessed through the basilica, which terminated in the east with stairs leading into the octagon (fig. 1). In this early phase of the monument of the Nativity, the basilica and octagon formed a tight conglomerate, comprising one building.

The next monument to be considered is the Rotunda of the Anastasis, built over the Tomb of Christ, within the city walls (fig. 2). Here, the rotunda is part of the larger architectural complex of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In light of Erik Wistrand’s studies44 and Corbo’s archaeological excavations,45 as well as the architectural analysis by Charles Coüasnon,46 it is now commonly accepted that the Rotunda of the Anastasis dates to around 348, during the rule of the emperor Constantius (r. 337–61), son of Constantine the Great.47

![Fig. 1. Plan of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. (After John Wilkinson, Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades [Jerusalem, 1977], 152, fig. 1)](image1)

![Fig. 2. Plan of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. (After Virgilio C. Corbo, Il Santo Sepolcro di Gerusalemme: Aspetti archeologici dalle origini al periodo crociato, 3 vols., Studium Biblicum Franciscanum: Collectio Maior 29 [Jerusalem, 1981–82], vol. 2, pl. 3)](image2)
The entire complex of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher consisted basically, from east to west, of an atrium, a basilica, and an inner courtyard around the rotunda. It should be noted that, apart from the area between the rotunda and the basilica, to this day the rotunda itself has never been able to accommodate the mass of worshippers and pilgrims visiting the Holy Sepulcher during feast days.

With due consideration to the problems posed by the increasing numbers of pilgrims, a third monument to be reviewed here is the large, concentric, early Byzantine Church of Christ’s Ascension on the Mount of Olives. Its vast interior could accommodate large numbers of visitors. As noted earlier, Corbo’s archaeological excavations proved that Arculf’s description of this church as a round structure was correct (figs. 3 and 4). Corbo thereby refuted Abel and Vincent’s proposal to restore the form of the Byzantine Church of the Ascension, located underneath the later octagonal structure built on the site by the Crusaders, as an octagonal building. Unfortunately, other scholars have reached erroneous conclusions based on Abel and Vincent’s idea. See, for instance, Creswell’s discussions concerning the potential architectural origins of the Dome of the Rock.

The Byzantine Church of the Ascension originally had two concentric ambulatories that circumscribed a central round space. This locus sanctus, from which Christ allegedly ascended to heaven, was located in the center of the building. It was surrounded and protected by a metal screen. The church had no apse but in its stead an altar was located to the east of the locus sanctus. Architecturally, the Church of the Ascension was an independent concentric structure, unattached to a basilica, although André Grabar claimed that in the performance of the liturgy, the Church of the Ascension remained connected to the adjacent basilica of the Eleona. It is commonly held that the Church of the Ascension was consecrated in 384 and should be associated with a Roman lady named Poemenia. An earlier date was argued for by André Grabar, who attributed the building to Constantine the Great.

It should, then, be stressed that the architectural feature of two concentric ambulatories was introduced in Jerusalem as early as the fourth century (in the Ascension Church on the Mount of Olives) and later modified...
in the fifth century (in the Kathisma); it was not a unique invention of the architects of the Dome of the Rock. This was no doubt an architectural solution that enabled a large number of worshippers to visit the shrine and circumambulate the *locus sanctus*. Moreover, it should be noted that the Ascension is very close to the site of the Dome of the Rock; in fact, the two monuments are mutually visible. Hence, the feature of double, concentric ambulatories was certainly known to the planners of the Dome of the Rock.

Furthermore, we need to recall that in the fifth century the Ascension went through a phase of architectural change, when around 438 Melania the Younger installed a shrine in it, “a place of prayer” (*euktêrion*) for St. Stephanos. In her biography, we are told that the *euktêrion* was built inside the church in the outer portico. Corbo’s excavation in this church revealed an apse below the walls dated to the Crusader period and above and between two concentric, round Byzantine walls (fig. 4). The parallel round walls were identified as the remains of the Poemenian church, while the apse between the rounded walls was identified by Corbo as the remains of the Byzantine *euktêrion* of St. Stephanos built by Melania the Younger. It is possible to date the installment of the *euktêrion* quite accurately, since its inauguration ceremony was held during the first imperial visit to the Holy Land, circa 438, of Eudocia, wife of Theodosius II (ca. 408–50).

The shrine located within the Church of the Ascension, defined by Milik as a chapel with an apse between the walls of the external ambulatory (fig. 5), was basically the architectural forerunner of the plan developed and incorporated eighteen years later in the Church of the Kathisma.

On behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, I undertook the excavation of the site of the Kathisma (fig. 6), on the outskirts of Jerusalem, along the Jerusalem–Bethlehem road. The church was built circa 456, when Saint Theodosius joined the monastery of the Kathisma. It was constructed over and around a hallowed rock traditionally identified as the alleged seat upon which the pregnant Virgin sat to rest on her journey to Bethlehem, as related in the Protoevangelium of St. James 17:2–3. The octagonal plan of the church uncovered appears to have been inspired by the shape of the Constantinian octagonal structure raised over the cave of the Nativity of Christ in Bethlehem. This architectural unit was still standing at the time of the construction of the Church of the Kathisma. Indeed, in my opinion, the octagon was chosen as the basic shape for the Kathisma because of its continuous connection with the sequence of events leading to the birth of Christ, according to the tradition preserved in the Protoevangelium. Namely, on the road to Bethlehem, Mary felt the baby Jesus pressing to be born and had a vision of two people, one wailing and the other rejoicing at the event of Christ’s birth. Hence, it seems logical that since the place of Christ’s birth, the cave of the Nativity, was marked by an octagonal structure, the form of the church built above the rock where the Virgin sat during the throes of childbirth and when having her vision was associated with and inspired by a similar form, the octagon.

The discovery of the Church of the Kathisma as a large, independent concentric building, with an octagonal plan and double ambulatories, including side chapels installed within the outer ambulatory, suggests the influence of the Church of the Ascension, since both buildings were designed to satisfy pilgrimage requirements or, rather, expectations. The need to provide a large pilgrimage church over and around the rock of
the Virgin’s seat, together with the growing demand for secondary shrines within the church (possibly containing relics or icons of the Virgin), yielded the complex plan of the Kathisma, with its “built-in” chapels. This feature was purposely planned and executed in the first phase of the building.

The architectural similarities between the Church of the Kathisma and the Dome of the Rock appear in the following features (figs. 6 and 7): both are octagonal in their exteriors, their plans each consist of a central space with a hallowed rock, and both have two octagonal concentric belts around that central space.

As can be expected, some changes were introduced in the plans in order to meet the specific functional needs of worshippers in the Kathisma Church (e.g., the chapels and main apse) as well as in the Dome of the Rock (where there was no need for an apse or chapels). Taking into account that the architectural concept of the interior of the Kathisma Church had its origin in the Ascension Church on the Mount of Olives, this indicates that the exterior octagon should be perceived as an exterior ambulatory, divided by partition walls. The exterior ambulatory in the Church of the Ascension underwent a minor change with the installment of the shrine of St. Stephen, which, according to Corbo’s finds, was similar in plan and location to each of the chapels in the Kathisma. Because of the growth in demand for these secondary shrines within the big monumental martyria, the exterior ambulatory was divided into chapels and entrance rooms, which were connected by small corner rooms. These enabled worshippers to pass from each entrance room to an adjacent chapel. From this we must conclude that the exterior octagonal unit in the Kathisma is actually an ambulatorium, at least in its architectural origins and shape, even though it was divided into rooms and thus ceased to function as an ambulatory in the strictest sense. This development may not have been noticed in the past and may still be overlooked by scholars who are unaware of the architectural procedures of the designers of both ground plans, as well as by those not familiar with the architectural sources of the Kathisma. When the Dome of the Rock
When the Dome of the Rock was built, the partition walls were omitted from the plan and thus the exterior octagon was restored to its original shape and function.

In accordance with André Grabar’s observation (cited above) that the Holy Land martyria operated as multifunctional churches, similarly the Church of the Kathisma both served as a regular house of worship dedicated to Christ and also functioned as a “place of witnessing” commemorating an event that had occurred at the site, to be visited and revered by pilgrims as well as by the monks of the attached monastery. The Kathisma was built in the middle of the fifth century, at which time a developed sanctuary, one with a presbyterium and an apse, was already a dominant architectural feature of the plan of a concentric memorial church, occupying the eastern zone of the building. Hence, the Kathisma had no entrance room on its eastern side connecting the exterior with the interior of the church. Instead, a main apse projected eastward, beyond the imaginary exterior outline of the octagonal building. There was obviously no need for an apse or a presbyterium in the Dome of the Rock, so the geometrical octagonal outline of the building was restored, with an entrance in the middle of the eastern external wall. The Kathisma, like the Dome of the Rock, had entrances that permitted access to the building from the exterior through the middle of the northern, southern, and western walls.

The main difference between the two monuments lies in the shape of their inner spaces and roofs. Furthermore, in the Kathisma the central space was octagonal and the diameter measured between the southeastern and the northeastern corner piers is 18.3 meters, whereas the innermost diameter of the central space of the Dome of the Rock is slightly longer than 20 meters and is covered by a round dome. Scholars have noted this similarity in diameter in the past, and have also compared the Dome of the Rock’s round cupola with the round dome of the nearby Rotunda of the Anastasis.

To conclude, the Dome of the Rock belongs to the “three-shell” type of concentric martyrrium. This model is unique to the Holy Land and the majority of examples are found in Jerusalem. Of course, each church building is a variant of this model, influenced by its architectural forerunners. Adaptations were made in each martyrium in order to “update” the architectural model to meet the specific functional requirements of the newer monument. Thus, their ground plans were created from the common model over a period of time. But the composition of the “three-shell” type is easily detectable in the plan of each memorial building, including the Dome of the Rock.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

A comparison of the two round domes that decorate the skyline of the Old City of Jerusalem had already been made in 985, by the uncle of the geographer al-Muqaddasi, who argued that the Dome of the Rock was built to prevent Muslims from being dazzled by and marveling at the churches of Jerusalem. According to this source, the Dome of the Rock was meant to compete with and surpass the churches of Jerusalem in beauty, especially with respect to the overwhelming size of the dome of the Anastasis. It is difficult to say whether al-Muqaddasi’s uncle’s words referred to the dome that he saw for himself over the Anastasis, which was renovated by Thomas, the patriarch of Jerusalem between 969 and 978, or to the seventh-century dome built by Modestus, the patriarch between 634 and 638. But anyone familiar with the topography of Jerusalem is aware of the inferiority of the location of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in comparison with the Temple Mount. Even if the dome renovated by Thomas was higher than that of Modestus, this would not have affected the ultimate superiority of the Dome of the Rock in the skyline of the Old City of Jerusalem.

In the seventh century, at the time the Dome of the Rock was being built, circa 691–92, the only octagonal structure in the environs of Jerusalem was the Church of the Kathisma, situated just three miles away. The Constantinian octagon erected over the cave of the Nativity had already been replaced, during the reign of Justinian (r. 525–65), by a trilobed, apsidal construction, and the Crusader octagonal church at the site of the Ascension had yet to be built. Furthermore, as mentioned above, to this day the domes of the Anastasis and the Dome of the Rock stand out in the skyline of the Old City. By contrast, the Kathisma and the Dome of the Rock were not visible to each other, since the three-
mile distance between them and the hilly nature of the terrain excluded any possibility of direct visual comparison.

By the eleventh century, the Kathisma had been dismantled and razed to the ground by Muslim villagers living in its vicinity. Thus its very presence sank into oblivion. Until the recent archaeological excavation of the site, therefore, historians of architecture were oblivious to the similarities between the Dome of the Rock and the ancient Church of the Kathisma.

Even so, to understand more fully the meaning underlying the connection between the two structures, we first need to consider the importance and significance of the Church of the Kathisma and its cult for the general population of Jerusalem up to the seventh century. We might thus gain a better and deeper understanding of the possible associations that the Church’s octagonal plan—which was also reflected in the shape of the Dome of the Rock—may have evoked in the minds and hearts of visitors to, and inhabitants of, Jerusalem in the seventh and eighth centuries. Somewhat speculative, this methodological approach is based upon Oleg Grabar’s advice “to locate the building [i.e., the Dome of the Rock] within a visual language and then try to understand what that language is trying to say in this particular case.”

An interpretation of the other mosaics is less certain, primarily because they are abstract and their specific meaning is thus ambiguous. Special pains have therefore been taken to understand their iconographic function apart from that as mere decoration and to consider them as far as possible within the conceptual context of the structure and of Umayyad and Sasanian art in general. In this way we hope to avoid the projection of notions that would have been foreign to the period.

It seems worthwhile to remember that architecture deals with forms of buildings, and as such, they are bearers of human spiritual meaning and content. In an effort to understand more meaningfully the borrowing and sharing of certain formal architectural features, I propose to examine the historical background of the period and the environment in which the Dome of the Rock was built.

Going back in time, it is useful to note that the Kathisma was the earliest church in Jerusalem dedicated to Mary Theotokos. In fact, it was the earliest Marian church in the Holy Land and one of the first dedicated to the Theotokos in the Byzantine empire. This assertion is supported by the studies of Jugie, Honigmann, Johnson, and other scholars, who all agreed that the sources relating to a fifth-century Marian church in Gethsemane were fabricated after the third quarter of the sixth century.

The Armenian Lectionary, reflecting the liturgy of Jerusalem and dated by Renoux to between 417 and 438, does not mention a feast for Mary’s Assumption, but it does refer to a “feast of the Theotokos” celebrated in the Kathisma on the fifteenth of August. This, then, was the earliest strictly Marian feast that was described as distinct from and not shared with the figure of Christ, unlike the Hypapante, the feast of Christ’s Presentation in the Temple, which was already celebrated in the fourth century, in honor of Christ and Mary. According to the Georgian calendar, which reflects the liturgy in Jerusalem from the end of the fifth century up to the seventh or eighth century, the date of the Theotokos feast was fixed two days earlier and celebrated on the thirteenth of August, while the Feast of the Assumption of Mary was celebrated on the fifteenth of that month.

As mentioned above, according to Theodorus of Petra and Cyril of Scythopolis, the Kathisma Church was constructed when Saint Theodosius joined the monastery of the Kathisma. Both church and monastery were erected in the days of Juvenal, the bishop of Jerusalem officiating during the Ecumenical Councils held in Ephesus in 431 and in Chalcedon in 451, at which the title of Mary as “Theotokos” was, respectively, approved and reapproved.

The readings for the “Theotokos feast” included Psalm 132, Isaiah 7 and 10, and the Epistle to the Galatians 3:29, terminating with the narrative of the Nativity according to the second chapter of Luke. These selections from the Holy Scriptures were followed by interpretive homilies.

Two fifth-century homilies composed for the Theotokos feast by two Jerusalemite churchmen are known to us. The earlier work, which was written by the renowned preacher Hesychius of Jerusalem (d. after
89 Aubineau and Capelle concluded that the purpose of these two homilies was to praise Mary and her virginal motherhood and elaborate on her virtues as the “Mother of God.” Neither Hesychius nor Chrysippus refers to the story of Mary’s rest on the journey to Bethlehem and its relation to the legend that sanctified and hallowed the site of the Kathisma, but they did include images of the Virgin that connect her with the Jewish Temple: for example, the motif of Mary as the Throne of God and Temple, a cathedra that is not inferior to the cathedra of the Cherubim in the Holy of Holies. These images appear at the beginning and end of Hesychius’s homily.90 Chrysippus draws a parallel between the Virgin Mary and the mountain from which the stone, untouched by man, was quarried for building the foundations of the Temple.91

Mary Cunningham has described how images connecting Mary with the Jewish Temple multiplied and changed from the fifth to the eighth century.92 Some of these were embedded in earlier Jewish traditions relating to the Old Testament and were accepted and appropriated as Christian scripture.93 The dependence of Muslim traditions on Jewish sources concerning the Temple Mount, including the holy rock in the Dome of the Rock, called in Hebrew Even ha-Shetiyya (the Foundation Rock, upon which, according to Jewish tradition, the world was founded)94 has also been studied by Hirschberg and Livneh-Kafri, as well as by Elad and others.95

In view of the fact that the majority of the population in seventh-century Jerusalem was Christian, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of the traditions and legends connected with Mary and the Temple Mount that appear in the Muslim sources were transmitted by Christian mediation, including stories related to Mary’s childhood in the Temple. For example, both Muslim and Christian sources say that she received her food through divine intervention—directly from God, according to the Koran 3:32,96 and by the hand of an angel, according to the Protoevangelium of St. James 8:1.97

Some of these stories might have been drawn from the images attached to Mary as the Temple Mount or the Temple, the Holy of Holies, and other legends regarding the holy rock of the Shetiyya. Furthermore, images of Mary derived from the Jewish Temple continued to appear in Christian exegeses that circulated in Jerusalem as early as the fifth century and up to the eighth century and later.

Returning to the material aspect of the Kathisma, during the archaeological excavations three phases were distinguished and dated to, respectively, the fifth, sixth, and the first half of the eighth century. In the last phase, a niche was installed in the southern part of the ambulatory (fig. 8). Its southern orientation and date enable us to interpret this as a Muslim prayer niche, or a mihrab.98 Nevertheless, a Christian inscription in a mosaic floor, decorated with a cross, was found in one of the annexes. The inscription, deciphered and dated to the
nineth century by Leah Di Segni,99 is in accordance with the date of the pottery retrieved from within the plaster foundation of this mosaic floor. This indicates that the Christian presence in the Kathisma continued between the seventh and ninth centuries, even after the installation of a mosque inside the church. On this account, we may infer either that Christians and Muslims prayed side by side in the same building or that these were Christian converts to Islam who were apparently reluctant to abandon previous beliefs and attachments.

Chronologically, the third phase in the building of the Kathisma coincides with the period in which Muslims are known to have adopted sacred places of the Christian and Jewish communities in the Holy Land. Ibn al-Murajja (ca. 1030–40),100 who is renowned for having preserved and transmitted various traditions dated to the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods (the seventh to ninth centuries),101 located the birthplace of Jesus in three different sites: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and the “Valley of Bethlehem.”102 Another tradition, transmitted by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (d. 940), locates the nativity of Jesus three miles from the mosque (of Jerusalem).103 The latter tradition, as well as the one about the Valley of Bethlehem, could refer to the Kathisma for two reasons: firstly, the Kathisma is located at a junction on the main ancient road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and was probably chosen for topographical convenience; secondly, the story of the Nativity in the Koran merges the birth of Christ with the labor pains Mary experienced before childbirth, since, according to the Koran, the two events happened in one and the same place. The relevant text appears in the Sura of Mary (Koran 19:23–26):

> And throes [of childbirth] compelled her to betake herself to the trunk of a palm-tree. She said: Oh, would that I had died before this, and had been a thing quite forgotten. Then [a voice] called out to her from beneath her: Grieve not, surely your Lord has made a stream to flow beneath you: And shake towards you the trunk of the palm-tree, it will drop on you ripe dates: So eat and drink and refresh the eye...104

Around 913,105 Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih indicated the distance between Jerusalem and the birthplace of Jesus as “three miles away from the mosque [of Jerusalem].”106 This is the exact distance between Jerusalem and the Kathisma given by most Christian sources.107 As a result, Abbot Daniel, who visited the Holy Land around 1007–8, identified the site of the Kathisma, at the third mile on the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, as the site of Mary’s vision, in accordance with the account in the Protoevangelium.108

Furthermore, a beautiful floor mosaic featuring three palm trees, laid out in the Umayyad phase of the church, was uncovered in the southeastern corner room, next to the inserted niche (fig. 9). Interpreted iconographically, the palm trees may obliquely refer to Mary’s birth pangs as described in the Koran and to her salvation by God, who provided the miraculous palm tree. The non-figurative manner in which the story is artistically presented coheres with the policy in early Islamic religious works of art of avoiding depictions of human figures. In a similar vein, Ibn ʿArabi of Seville (d. 1148), who visited the Holy Land shortly before the victory of the Crusaders, we learn that the palm tree from which Mary ate was in a cave in Bethlehem and that by December 1098116 the tree had rotted and collapsed. According to Ibn ʿArabi, no relic of it had survived, due to the pilgrims’ custom of picking little pieces from it to take with them as souvenirs, in the belief that those pieces bestowed blessings (eulogia).117

These historical details indicate that the Muslim and Christian communities were well aware of and informed
about local hallowing practices, and shared legends and beliefs that developed in and around the Christian holy places, including those relating to the sites of the Kathisma and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, three miles apart. On the whole, one can deduce that the two communities shared not only aspects of material culture but also religious lore and experiences, as well as attachments to holy places that they were reluctant to abandon.

In fact, Wensinck and Johnstone have already commented that “[t]he undoubted parallels between the Kur’anic account and the material found in the apocryphal gospels do not, however, indicate direct dependence, but are more indicative of folklore aspects of religion.” Oleg Grabar recently remarked that parallels in decorative designs may relate the Kathisma and the Dome of the Rock, due to the particular importance of Mary in the Koranic message cited in the inscription on the wall mosaic of the Dome of the Rock.

This has already been pointed out in the preliminary archaeological report on the Kathisma. Detailed analyses of the Jewish origins of this motif were published by Kister, and the Judeo-Christo-Islamic manifestations of the motif and tradition of a prostrating tree, especially a palm tree, have been discussed in depth by Shoemaker and myself.

According to some sources, two men supervised the construction of the Dome of the Rock. One of them was Raja’ ibn Haywa from Beth-Shean, a renowned Muslim theologian and scholar, who also served as a political consultant to the Umayyad caliphs, from the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705) to that of his son Hisham (r. 724–47). Raja’ was an acknowledged authority on the loci sancti in the Holy Land. The other appointed supervisor was Yazid ibn Salim, who was a mawlâ (a Christian slave belonging to the caliph) and lived in Jerusalem while carrying out the task of building the Dome of the Rock. As residents of Jerusalem, both men...
were familiar with the major churches of the city, particularly the concentric martyria. It is therefore not surprising that the plan they chose for the Dome of the Rock derives from the architecture of two accessible major churches in the area, viz., the Anastasis within the city and the Kathisma only three miles away. Evidently, they were not inhibited by any reluctance to borrow and adapt local architectural ideas from Christian sources for the new Muslim edifice they erected on the ruined site of the Jewish Temple, an act surely repugnant to the Christian Church in Jerusalem, and therefore a statement promoting Islam.

CONCLUSIONS

The architectural sources of the Dome of the Rock are to be found in the locally accessible innovations of Christian shrines at the time, specifically derived from the two most ancient and holiest churches, dedicated, on the one hand, to Christ and, on the other, to Mary as the Theotokos (“God Bearer,” surely a title not accepted in Islam)—the figure that in Christian exegeses was often envisaged in images drawn from the actual site on which the Dome of the Rock was being built, namely, the ancient Jewish Temple and the Holy of Holies.\(^{127}\)

This study of the historic and cultural background of Jerusalem and the cult of Mary in the Byzantine and Umayyad periods elucidates the intentions of the builders of the Dome of the Rock, who drew from local Christian material sources and spiritual means to construct a monument that transmitted an anti-Christian statement. For the Dome of the Rock was designed to surpass in beauty the shrines from which both its plan and architecture derives. Furthermore, it was meant to express the emergence of a new faith that rejects a basic tenet of Christian belief—the divinity of Christ—as well as the veneration of his mother, Mary, as the “God Bearer.”\(^{128}\) Indeed, it has been pointed out before\(^ {129}\) that this message is expressed in the original inscription of the wall mosaic inside the Dome of the Rock and in the inscriptions on the bronze plaques that were taken down in the 1960s from above its north, east, and west entrances.\(^ {130}\) The dispute over the divinity of Christ and the rejection of Mary as the Theotokos were, after all, two of the main areas of discord that separated Christianity from Islam as the new faith first reached the Holy Land. This was a time when Christian holy places could still be shared and their lore and beliefs carried over into Islam.

Israel Antiquities Authority
Jerusalem, Israel

NOTES

3. Ibid., 126.
6. I would like to thank Hilel Geva for the reference to the article by Islam and al-Hamad, and Mattia Guidetti for encouraging me to submit my paper to Muqarnas.
7. Personal communication, April 2007. I thank Prof. Elad for sharing his thoughts with me.
10. O. Grabar, Dome of the Rock, 97.


25. O. Grabar, *Dome of the Rock*, 101, fig. 34 (Church of the Ascension); 101, fig. 35 (Capernaum Church); 103, fig. 36 (Caesarea Maritima); 105, fig. 37 (Church of the Kathisma).

26. O. Grabar, *Dome of the Rock*, 101, fig. 34.


29. O. Grabar, *Dome of the Rock*, 103, fig. 36.


37. *Vita Porphyrii* 75:14, as cited in Marc le Diacre, *Vie de Porphyre, évêque de Gaza*, ed. Henri Grégoire and Marc-Antoine Kugener (Paris, 1930), 60. Notice that this temple had two concentric porticoes around a central round space,
which was roofed by a dome. Perhaps this was the prototype of the Christian concentric martyria of the Holy Land?


42. O. Grabar, *Dome of the Rock*, 97.


49. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 166, with references in footnotes.


58. Corbo, *“Scavo archeologico,”* 211–16, 244; Corbo, *Ricerche archeologiche al Monte degli Ulivi*, 105–7, 106, fig. 77.


64. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, 70, fig. 21.
68. Ibid.
69. The name of the type derives from Krautheimer’s dubbing—the “two-shell” church-type. Richard Krautheimer, Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture, 2nd ed. (New York, 1965), 53.
74. Wilkinson, Jerusalem Pilgrims, 152, fig. 2; Ernest Tatham Richmond, “The Church of the Nativity, the Plan of the Constantinian Building,” Quarterly of the Department of Archaeology of Palestine 6 (1938): 72, fig. 1; William Harvey, Structural Survey of the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem (Oxford, 1935), plan B.
75. O. Grabar, Dome of the Rock, 97.
76. Ettinghausen, From Byzantium to Sasanian Iran and the Islamic World, 36.
83. Garitte, Le calendrier, 301.


93. Ibid., 54, 57–60.

94. Gerald Y. Bildstein, Encyclopaedia Judaica, 2nd ed. (Detroit, 2007), s.v. “Even Shetiyyah.” The Hebrew word even means “stone,” while the root of the word shetiyyah (ṣ-t-ṭ) means “foundation.” According to Jewish tradition, the world was created from the rock at the Dome of the Rock, which was situated at the center of the world and in the Holy of Holies of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The Ark was placed on this rock, and it was there that Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac.


98. For descriptions of the archaeological evidence, see n. 30 above.


100. Elad, Medieval Jerusalem, 14, 16, 36.

101. Ibid.


103. Ibid., 671 n. 9.


113. Kaplony, Haram of Jerusalem, 672 and n. 5.


117. Ibid., 108.

118. Wensinck–[Johnstone], EI2, s.v. “Maryam.”


123. Ibid., 19.


125. P. Crone, EI2, s.v. “Mawla.”


127. Building the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount was to be understood as a contradiction of Christ’s prophecy in

