

The prayer niche inside the cave of the Sacred Rock

Constructing the Shape of the ‘Holy’: The Umayyad Conception of *Al-Masjid Al-Aqṣā*’s Identity

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Abstract

The al-Aqsa Mosque, the holiest site of the Holy Land, underwent a major architectural transformation initiated by the Muslim Umayyad Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 66-86 AH/ 685-705 CE). Through his comprehensive construction program, ‘Abd al-Malik established the architectural importance of the Sacred Rock and elevated it as one of the fundamental Islamic religious foci. The vision behind the mosque’s design is filled with religious enthusiasm and serves as a powerful architectural manifestation of ‘Abd al-Malik’s political manifesto rooted in religious expression. This study provides an analysis of the process of creating the general shape of the ‘Holy’ within the sacred architecture of the al-Aqsa Mosque and its reflection in the general image of Bayt al-Maqdis’ skyline. The research employs an interdisciplinary approach, re-examining and re-evaluating the historical literature and connecting it to archaeological observations and architectural coordination relevant to the subject of the study. The findings of this research shed light on the design concept of the al-Aqsa Mosque and make a significant contribution to clarifying our understanding of the early Islamic architecture of the site.

Keywords: Al-Aqsa Mosque, Sacred architecture, Shape of the ‘Holy’, Islamic image, Bayt al-Maqdis, Architectural identity, Dome of the Rock

Introduction and Literature Review

In the year 637 CE, less than six years after the passing of the Prophet Muhammad, Bayt al-Maqdis¹ came under Muslim rule. Despite the historical significance of this event, there is still a scarcity of information regarding Islamic architectural activities during this period.² One of the few structures identified from this era is located in the al-Aqsa Mosque.³ However, a large-scale building project was initiated by the Umayyad Caliphate (661-749 CE) in the al-Aqsa Mosque, to make it the religious

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¹ *Bayt al-Maqdis* is an early Islamic terminology used in this academic scholarly article, referring to the ancient Islamic city of Jerusalem. It was known as the city of Aelia (مدينة ألياء/إلياء) before the Muslim period. The terminology and definition of *Bayt al-Maqdis* or IslamicJerusalem has many connotations in Islamic sources, as argued by El-Awaisi; one of which goes beyond the old city walls to cover the region of the Holy Land. See Khalid El-Awaisi (2008), “Rediscovering the Boundaries of IslamicJerusalem,” in Khalid El-Awaisi (ed.), *Geographical dimension of IslamicJerusalem*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. The use of Bayt al-Maqdis as a prophetic terminology for the region and its equivalent in English “IslamicJerusalem” will be used throughout this paper. See Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi (2021), “Grounding the Concept of the Prophetic Terminology ‘Bayt al-Maqdis: The Need for Reviving this Islamic Terminology,’” *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 163-179.

² Several attempts have already been made to study the architecture of the al-Aqsa Mosque, some of which have been mentioned in this article. The originality of this article is related to the holistic approach in which the disciplines (interdisciplinary) interact to provide a better understanding of the concept of the sacred architecture of al-Aqsa mosque, tackled from different points of view. The article’s investigation dealt with the overall layout of the al-Aqsa mosque, its topographical relation, its coordination, Islamic religious beliefs, architectural symbols, historical and archaeological commentary on its architectural development, etc., without undermining any aspect of it.

³ The name *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā* (المسجد الأقصى) is the Arabic name for the al-Aqsa Mosque. It is one of the oldest Islamic terminology that refers to the entire area of the al-Aqsa Mosque. Ancient historical walls built on the Roman bases remain to demarcate the religious site. In Ottoman times, Muslims used the name *al-Haram al-Sharīf* with the aim of giving it further religious status. The al-Aqsa Mosque consists of several memorial buildings, including the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa congregational building.

centrepiece of Bayt al-Maqdis. While scholars have questioned the Umayyads' motivations for their architectural achievements, it is widely recognised that their primary goal was to establish the city as a major religious hub.⁴

The Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwān (r. 66-86 AH/ 685-705 CE) played a particularly prominent role in shaping the sacred architecture of the al-Aqsa Mosque. Under his leadership, a large-scale architectural project was initiated for the mosque, consisting of several interconnected buildings, including the *al-Jami' al-Aqsā* (الجامع الأقصى al-Aqsa congregational Mosque)⁵ and the iconic *Qubbat al-Sakhrah* (قبعة الصخرة Dome of the Rock) [Figure 1]. The architectural design of the al-Aqsa Mosque reflects 'Abd al-Malik's religious and cultural philosophies, particularly his deep reverence for the mosque's Sacred Rock.

While the Umayyads' architectural achievements have been the subject of controversy, their lasting impact on the Islamic identity of Bayt al-Maqdis and the al-Aqsa Mosque is undeniable. By drawing upon literary sources and cultural and religious thought, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the Umayyads' architectural legacy, particularly their role in creating the Islamic shape of the 'Holy' at the al-Aqsa Mosque. The architectural activities undertaken by the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān had a profound impact on the revitalisation of the Islamic spiritual character of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Sacred Rock. The edifices surrounding the Sacred Rock not only served as the architectural centrepiece of the al-Aqsa Mosque but also became the intellectual focal point of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān's vision.

Figure 1: Al-Aqsa Mosque as It Looks Today with al-Jami' al-Aqsa to the Left and the Dome of the Rock to the Right



Source: Courtesy of pixabay.com.

The sacred architecture of the early Islamic buildings of the al-Aqsa Mosque is a highly qualified and innovative representation of architectural theory. It portrays the form and function of the mosque as an expression of Islam's ultimate divine religion, established in the holiest of places. The integration of large religious memorabilia into the sacred architecture of the al-Aqsa Mosque complex makes a reference to other religions, namely Judaism and Christianity, which contributes to the creation of a space for dialogue and encounters through various historical and religious memories. Moreover, the sacred architecture of the al-Aqsa Mosque laid the foundation for the later architectural development of the mosque, making it of utmost importance to understand the initial design process. However, the process of creating the shape of the 'Holy' of al-Aqsa Mosque has not received due attention in modern academic research, and it remains unclear, inviting further arguments.⁶

⁴ Goitein indicated that the Umayyads intended to make Jerusalem their political capital. However, Armstrong argued that "holy cities in the Islamic world are seldom capitals". See S. D. Goitein (1986) "Al-Kuds (Jerusalem)," in *the Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. 5, New Edition, Leiden: Brill, pp. 322-339; Karen Armstrong (1997), "Sacred Space: The Holiness of Islamic Jerusalem," *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies*, Vol.1, No. 1, p. 15.

⁵ The term *al-Jami' al-Aqsā* (الجامع الأقصى al-Aqsa congregational mosque) refers to the prayer building located on the southern end of the al-Aqsa Mosque enclave. It has been mentioned historically by different names such as al-Jami, al-Mughatta, al-Masquf, Masjid al-Jumu'ah and today al-Qibli. However, later historical sources started to confuse the name; Ibn al-Athīr (630 AH/ 1232 CE) used the term *al-Masjid al-Aqsā* to refer to both this structure and the whole of the mosque's compound. See A. Ibn al-Athīr (1966), *Al-Kāmil fi al-Tārīkh*, Vol. 2, Beirut: Dār al-Sādir, p. 20. With the Introduction of the name al-Haram for the whole site of al-Aqsa in the Mamluk and Ottoman period, this prevailed and restricted the name al-Aqsa to this singular building. See Halid Üveysi (2022), "Ömer Mescidi," *İslam Düşünce Atlası*, Vol. 1, Istanbul and Konya: İlem Etüdler Derneği, pp. 298-300.

⁶ Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (1989), *The Early Islamic Monuments of al-Haram al-Sharīf: An Iconographic Study*, (Qedem, 28), Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem Institute of Archaeology, p. VII.

Previous studies by researchers such as Clermont-Ganneau (1899),⁷ Richmond (1924),⁸ Creswell (1969),⁹ primarily focused on studying early Islamic monuments for their individual history, archaeology, and architecture,¹⁰ rather than the entirety of the al-Aqsa Mosque. Rosen-Ayalon's study in 1987 focused on some historical, archaeological, and iconographic aspects of the early Islamic monuments of the al-Aqsa Mosque, but further investigation is required regarding the fabrication process of the mosque's architecture. This includes the architectural interpretations of the al-Aqsa Mosque's master plan design, site selection, layout, and coordination of the components of the constructed memorial buildings that constitute its sacred architecture.

Subsequent research continued with an emphasis on the individual components of the al-Aqsa Mosque, particularly the Dome of the Rock. Islamic art historian Oleg Grabar embarked on a novel research path to interpret the spiritual and political significance of the Dome of the Rock, paving the way for further study of the building in the general context of the al-Aqsa Mosque.¹¹ Gülru Necipoğlu's research in 2008 made historical arguments about the grand narrations on 'Abd al-Malik and the Umayyad ambition towards the al-Aqsa Mosque,¹² but the mechanism of formulating the architectural image of this religious site remains unclear. Additionally, the role of the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān in developing the design of the al-Aqsa Mosque, which underpinned his architectural approach to this sacred site by initiating a large-scale construction plan, is subject to controversy. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of the design process of the sacred architecture of the al-Aqsa Mosque is essential to shed light on the historical significance and legacy of this remarkable site.

The scholarship of Bacharach (1996),¹³ Najm (2001),¹⁴ al-Ratrout (2004),¹⁵ Mintz (2010),¹⁶ Zula (2015),¹⁷ and others has unquestionably contributed to our understanding of the architecture of the al-Aqsa Mosque. Despite these valuable contributions, a comprehensive understanding of the mosque's holistic concept remains elusive and unsatisfactory. These studies have largely focused on individual structures, technical investigations, architectural origins, and historical narratives. Consequently, this article argues for a more comprehensive approach to the sacred concept of the al-Aqsa Mosque, one that transcends the narrow confines of these earlier investigations.

To attain the objective, the current research utilises an interdisciplinary approach that stresses the amalgamation of art and architecture, archaeology, history, and religion, all associated with the al-Aqsa Mosque. By analysing the themes and ideas that overlap with historical, archaeological, architectural, and religious data that coincide with the construction of the al-Aqsa Mosque, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mosque's overall sacred concept. In particular, this research endeavours to clarify the process of developing the Islamic configuration of the 'Holy' space within the al-Aqsa Mosque and uncover its true function in the early Islamic development of the 'Holy' space within the al-Aqsa Mosque.

⁷ Charles Clermont-Ganneau (1899), *Archaeological Researches in Palestine during the Years 1873-1874*, 2 Vol., London: Palestine Exploration Fund.

⁸ E. T. Richmond (1924), *The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press.

⁹ K. A. C. Creswell (1969), *Early Muslim Architecture*, 2 Vol., Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Other scholars, both in the past and present, have conducted important research on the al-Aqsa Mosque, examining it from diverse perspectives and utilising similar methodologies. However, despite their findings, further research is still needed to deepen our understanding of this complex and significant site. See, for example, Melchior De Vogue (1864), *Le Temple De Jerusalem. Monographie Du Haram-Ech-Chérif Suivi D'un Essai Sur La Topographie De La Ville Sainte*, Paris: Noblet & Baudry; Charles Warren and Claude Reignier Conder (1884), *The Survey of Western Palestine-Jerusalem*, London: Palestine Exploration Fund.

¹¹ Oleg Grabar (1959), "The Umayyad Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem," *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 3, pp. 33-62; Oleg Grabar (1969), *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Oleg Grabar and Said Nuseibeh (1996), *The Dome of the Rock*, New York: Rizzoli; Oleg Grabar (2005), "Notes on the Dome of the Rock," in *Jerusalem: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art*, Vol.4, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited; Oleg Grabar (2006), *The Dome of the Rock*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, pp. vi-viii.

¹² Gülru Necipoğlu (2008), "The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest: 'Abd Al-Malik's Grand Narratives and Sultan Süleyman's Glosses," *Muqarnas*, Vol. 25, pp.17-105.

¹³ Jere L. Bacharach (1996), "Marwanid Umayyad Building Activities: Speculations on Patronage," *Muqarnas*, Vol. 13, pp. 27-44.

¹⁴ Ra'ef Najm (2001), "Islamic Architectural Character of Jerusalem: With Special Description of the al-Aqṣā and the Dome of the Rock," *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3/4, pp. 721-734.

¹⁵ Haithem Al-Ratrout (2004), *The Architectural Development of al-Aqsa Mosque in the early Islamic Period: Sacred Architecture in the Shape of the 'Holy'*, UK: Al-Maktoum Institute Academic Press.

¹⁶ Jesse Mintz (2010), "The Umayyad Dome of the Rock: A Historical Narrative through Architecture," Academic Thesis, California State University, pp. 1-85.

¹⁷ Armadhani Zula (2015), "Structures and Constructions Analysis: Masjid Al Aqsa, Jerusalem, Palestine," Online Published Academic work.

Islamic Shape of *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā* and its Early Developments

The Islamic veneration of *al-Masjid al-Aqṣā* (known in English as the al-Aqsa Mosque), and its Sacred Rock were established in an early period due to its immense significance in Islam. It is believed to have been the location of the second mosque on earth after al-Masjid al-Haram in Makkah. It was also the first *Qiblah* (*Direction of prayer*) for Muslims, and the destination of Prophet Muhammad during his Night Journey (*al-Isrāʾ*), where he led the prophets in prayer. The Qurʾān's reference to "And listen the Day when the Caller will call out from a place quite near" (Qurʾān, 50:41) has been identified by Muslim exegetists as the nearby location from which the angel *Isrāfīl* will blow his trumpet, as the Sacred Rock of Bayt al-Maqdis, the first *Qiblah* for Muslims [Figure 2]. Accordingly, in this land, the people will be gathered for the Day of Judgment in the Islamic belief.¹⁸

This prestigious and sacred status of the al-Aqsa Mosque prompted the second Muslim Caliph ʿUmar ibn al-Kattāb to visit Bayt al-Maqdis and give an assurance of safety to its residents (of *Iliyāʾ* إيلياء) for themselves, their churches and property.¹⁹ Upon entering the city, Caliph ʿUmar proceeded to the site of the al-Aqsa Mosque and expressed the Muslims' connection to this place by purifying mosque and its Sacred Rock and delineating a niche (*mihrāb*) for Muslim prayers.²⁰ His modest construction within the al-Aqsa Mosque, known as the Mosque of ʿUmar (*masjid ʿUmar*), was described by the French pilgrim Arculf (c.670) as a "square house of prayer...that it will hold three thousand men."²¹ The site of the al-Aqsa Mosque became the most important Muslim religious destination in Historical Syria (*Bilad al-Shām*), attracting early companions of the Prophet, such as ʿUbadah ibn al-Samit (d. 655), Shaddad ibn ʿAws (d. 677), ʿAbdullah ibn ʿUmar (d. ca. 692-94),²² and others who were drawn to its religious dignity and sought God's forgiveness.²³

With the rise of Umayyad rule over Historical Syria, the religious status of the al-Aqsa Mosque and Islamic Jerusalem was given further attention. The Umayyads took a great interest in the holy city of Bayt al-Maqdis. They saw the importance of the al-Aqsa Mosque as a centre of religious and political power. Therefore, Caliph Muʿawiyah (r.41-60 AH/ 661-80 CE) and his successors took the Muslim oath of allegiance in the al-Aqsa Mosque.²⁴ Muʿawiyah also attempted to extend the sanctity of Bayt al-Maqdis to the entire province of Syria-Palestine (*al-Shām*), the location of his political capital, Damascus. He told his envoys from Iraq to his court that they had arrived at the "seat of the best caliphs" and in the "Holy Land, the land of the gathering and resurrection, and the land of the tombs of the prophets."²⁵ His identification of the religious sanctity of Bayt al-Maqdis and the al-Aqsa Mosque was intended to express the legitimacy of his authority as Caliph. Muʿawiyah's construction activities at the al-Aqsa Mosque have been reported by non-Muslim sources, including the clearing and restoration work.²⁶

¹⁸ I. Ibn Kathīr (1994), *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAthīm*, Riyadh: Maktabat Dār al-Kitāb, Vol.4, p.294; Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi (1997), *Jerusalem in Islamic History and Spirituality*, London: The Book Factory, p. 20; Khalid El-Awaisi (2014), "Selected Qurʾanic Verses on Islamic Jerusalem and their Exegesis," *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 21-22.

¹⁹ M. Al-Wāqidi (n.d.), *Futūh al-Shām*, Alexandria: Dār Ibn Khaldūn; Abū ʿUbad Ibn Sallām (1986), *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah; A. Al-Balādhurī (1983), *Futūh al-Buldān* فتوح البلدان, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah; M. J. Al-Tabarī (1960), *Tarīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk* تاريخ الرسل والملوك, Cairo. See also, Othman Ismael Al-Tel and Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor (2017), "Umar Ibn Al-Khattab's Visits to Bayt al-Maqdis: A Study on its Reasons and Objectives," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 80; Maher Y. Abu-Munshar (2021), "In the Shadow of Muslim-Christian Relations: A Critical Analytical Study to the Narration of the Pact of ʿUmar," *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qurʾan and Hadith Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 21.

²⁰ Al-Wāqidi (n.d.), *Futūh al-Shām*, p.1.

²¹ Thomas Arculf et al. (2008) "The Travels of Bishop Arculf in the Holy Land, towards A.D 700," in Thomas Wright (ed.), *Early Travels in Palestine*, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, p. 24.

²² Shams al-Dīn A. Al-Dhahabī (2006), *Biography of Heraldry*, Vol. 3, Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, p. 341; Vol.4, p. 85 & 303.

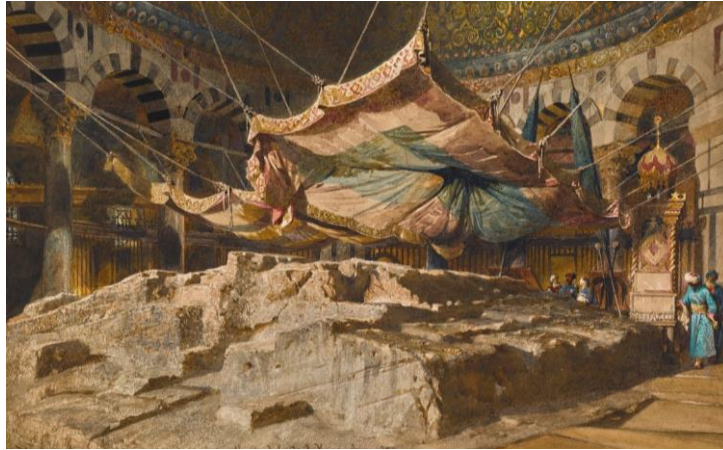
²³ Abdul Aziz Duri (1989), "Jerusalem in the Early Islamic Period: 7th -11th Centuries AD," in K. J. Asali (ed.), *Jerusalem in History*, Essex: Scorpion Publishing Ltd, p. 108.

²⁴ Andreas Kaplony (2002), *The Haram of Jerusalem 324-1099: Temple, Friday Mosque, Area of Spiritual Power*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, pp. 390-91; Duri (1989), "Jerusalem in the Early Islamic Period," p. 108.

²⁵ Necipoğlu (2008), "The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest," p. 33.

²⁶ Bernard Flusin (1992), "L'Esplanade du Temple A l'arrivée des Arabes, d'après deux récits byzantins," in Julian Raby and Jeremy Johns (ed), *Bayt al-Maqdis, Part One: ʿAbd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 19-31.

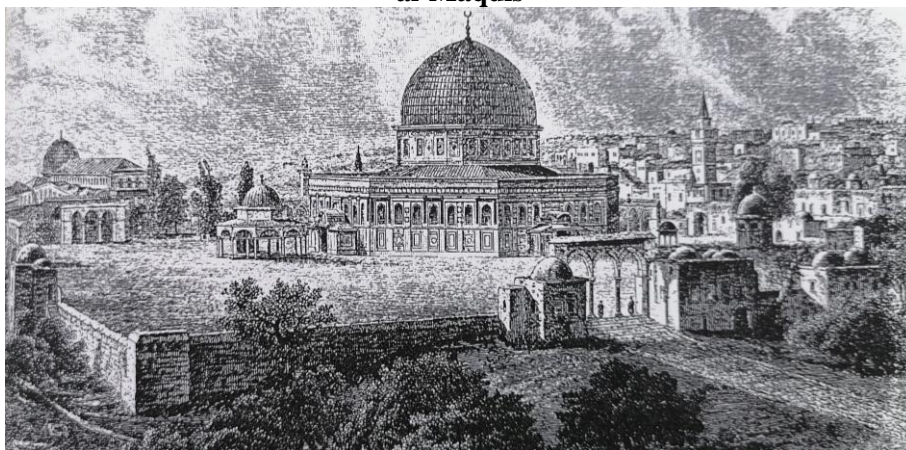
Figure 2: A painting of the Sacred Rock inside the Dome of the Rock (1859, Bayt al-Maqdis)



Source: Carl Haag (German, 1820 – 1915)

The al-Aqsa Mosque underwent a significant transformation under the patronage of ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 66-86 AH/ 685-705 CE), evolving into a vast architectural complex. The complex’s expansive construction scheme paralleled the proliferation of religious narratives and stories that explicated the site’s sacredness, mapping onto Qur’ānic references. This development resulted in a cluster of memorial buildings, adorned with religious memorabilia, which emphasised the redemptive power emanating from the site. Muslims view this sacred place as extending from the beginning of creation until the end of time. According to Ibn Habīb (d. 853), an Andalusian scholar, al-Sha’bi (d. 721-22), a transmitter of Kufan traditions, maintained that ‘Abd al-Malik erected the mosque of Bayt al-Maqdis; the Dome of the Rock, and two smaller domes adjacent to it.²⁷ The architectural complex, erected under ‘Abd al-Malik’s patronage, encompasses the entire al-Aqsa compound. It comprises the construction of *al-Jami’ al-Aqsa* (al-Aqsa congregational mosque), *Qubbat al-Sakhrah* (Dome of the Rock), the commemorative buildings on the central elevated platform *Qubbat al-Silsilah* (Dome of the Chain) and *Qubbat al-Mi’rāj* (The Dome of the Ascension²⁸ [of the Prophet]) [Figure 3], the renovation of its walls, and the construction of monumental gates. This grand architectural project continued throughout the Caliphate period and was completed under the auspices of ‘Abd al-Malik’s successor and son, al-Walid (r. 86-96 AH / 705-715 CE), who put the finishing touches on the complex.

Figure 3: A painting of the Dome of the Rock and its adjoining memorial buildings (1859), Bayt al-Maqdis



Source: W. Thomson ‘The Land and the Book’ (1859; 1880)

²⁷ Ibn Habīb mentioned the three domes side by side as “*thalātha qibāb mutajāwirāt*”. See Abd al-Malik Ibn Habīb (1991), *Kitāb al-Ta’rikh: La Historia*, Jorge Aguadé (ed. and trans.), Madrid, pp. 132-33; Rosen-Ayalon (1989), *The Early Islamic Monuments of al-Haram al-Sharīf*, p. 27; Amikam Elad (1999), *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, p. 49-50; Abu ‘Abdullah Ibn al-Faḥīh Al-Hamadhanī (1996), *Kitāb al-Buldān*, Beirut: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, p. 151.

²⁸ The Dome of the Ascension was rebuilt in 597 AH (1200 CE) in the Ayyūbid period. See Ra’if Y. Najm et al. (1983), *Kunūz al-Quds*, Amman: Mu’asasat Aal al-Bayt.

The early architectural development of the al-Aqsa Mosque is intrinsically linked to the rising traditions that extol the virtues of Bayt al-Maqdis and its mosque (*fadā'il*). This phenomenon is traced back to the crucial role played by some official Umayyad preachers and storytellers (*qussās*) in disseminating the “*legends embedded in Islamic beliefs from the Torah and the Hebrew Bible (Isra'iliyat)*,” as Necipoğlu posits. The Jewish convert to Islam, Ka'b al-Ahbār (d. 650 CE),²⁹ and Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 728 or 732 CE),³⁰ were said to be the primary figures who transmitted these legends. The oldest surviving commentary on the Qur'ān by the Khurasan traditionalist Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767-68 CE), who held lectures at the site of al-Aqsa Mosque following the building activities of 'Abd al-Malik, attests to this fact. One of his early accounts associates the Sacred Rock with paradise. Various versions of the Qur'ānic exegesis, references to anthropomorphism, and reliance on biblical texts about the al-Aqsa Mosque and its Sacred Rock were subsequently reinstated.

These stories, which were initially narrated by the early *Qusās* of the Umayyad era,³¹ are part of a broader tradition of highlighting the virtues of Bayt al-Maqdis to foster reverence for the sanctity of the al-Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis. Such traditions have been handed down from early Islamic sources, as evidenced by the works of Ibn al-Faqīh, Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, and al-Maqdisī, who specifically cited such narrations. Their references were later confirmed by the writings of al-Wasīfī³² (ca. 1019 CE), a preacher at the al-Aqsa Mosque, and Ibn al-Murajjā³³ (ca. 1130–40 CE), a native of Bayt al-Maqdis, who added further details. Muqātil's commentary, which situates past and future episodes in the al-Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis, encompasses a chronological arc spanning from the beginning of creation to the Day of Judgment.

The scattered events referenced in the Qur'ān concerning the al-Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis mentioned by early Islamic sources retell the story of the Umayyad-driven sanctity of the al-Aqsa Mosque and served as the central architectural concept and iconography of the al-Aqsa complex. 'Abd al-Malik collaborated with his architects to translate these Islamic beliefs into a scheme of architectural and artistic structures.³⁴ According to Ibn Habīb (d. 853 CE), 'Abd al-Malik built the mosque of Bayt al-Maqdis in 689-90 CE and collected Egyptian taxes for seven years for its construction.³⁵ The Islamic sanctity of the al-Aqsa Mosque was exalted through the names of memorial buildings, inscriptions on Islamic buildings, architectural archetypes and iconography, Islamic traditions, and religious functions. All of these elements embodied the Islamic events, mentioned in the Qur'ān and Prophetic traditions, that have taken place or will occur in the future.

As will be demonstrated in this article, the eschatological and cosmological symbolism in the art and architecture of the al-Aqsa Mosque³⁶ gives it a perception of ultimate sacred splendour,³⁷ despite acknowledging previous religions. In brief, the early architectural development of the al-Aqsa Mosque is intrinsically linked to the propagation of the tradition that extols the virtues of Bayt al-Maqdis and its mosque. This tradition was disseminated by a group of official Umayyad preachers and storytellers and subsequently perpetuated through various Islamic sources.

²⁹ Israel Ben Zeev (Abu Zuaib) (1976), *Ka'b al-Ahbār*, Jerusalem: Matba'at al-Sharq al-Ta'awniyyah.

³⁰ Wahb ibn Munabbih was one of the first figures who collect material on biblical history, especially the history of prophets, most of which has been lost. He has strong ties to the Umayyad Caliphs; Mu'awiya, al-Walid I, and Sulayman. See Raif Georges Khoury (1972), *Wahb b. Munabbih*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

³¹ Necipoğlu (2008), “The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest,” pp. 136-170.

³² Abu Bakr Muhammad b. Ahmad Al-Wasīfī, (1979), *Fada'il Bayt al-Maqdis*, A. Hasson (trans.), Jerusalem: Dar Magnis Publication.

³³ Abū al-Ma'ālī al-Musharrāf b. al-Murajjā b. Ibrāhīm Ibn al-Murajjā Al-Maqdisī (1995), *Fada'il Bayt al-Maqdis wal-Khālil wa-Fada'il al-Shām*, Ofer Livne-Kfri (ed.), Shafa'amr: Dār al-Mashreq Ltd.

³⁴ Angelika Neuwirth claims that these belief traditions existed before 'Abd al-Malik's building activities were very popular among Syrian Palestinian, while Moshe Gil, in contrast to Angelika Neuwirth, argued that the merits of Jerusalem were the direct result of 'Abd al-Malik's building plan. See Angelika Neuwirth (1996), “The Spiritual Meaning of Jerusalem in Islam,” in Nitza Rosovsky (ed.), *City of the Great King: Jerusalem from David to the Present*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, p. 109; Moshe Gil (1997), *A History of Palestine 634-1099*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 65-74.

³⁵ 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Habib (1991), *Kitāb al-Ta'rīkh = Kitāb al-Ta'rīj : La Historia*, Jorge Aguadé (ed. and trans.), Madrid: Edición y estudio, pp. 132-33; Rosen-Ayalon (1989), *The Early Islamic Monuments of al-Haram al-Sharīf*, p. 27; Mujīr al-Dīn Al-'Ulaimī al-Hanbalī (1995), *Al-'Uns al-Jalīl bi-Tarīkh al-Quds w-al-Khalīl*, Baghdad: *Maktabat al-Nahdah*, Vol. 1, p. 272.

³⁶ Many scholars believe in the cosmological and eschatological symbolism that exists in the al-Aqsa Mosque. See for example Rosen-Ayalon (1989), *The Early Islamic Monuments of al-Haram al-Sharīf*, pp. 46-69; Shmuel Tamari (1996), *Contextual Studies in Muslims Ideology of Umayyad architecture and Urbanism*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, p. 7.

³⁷ A. Al-Maqdisī (1987), *Ahsan al-Taqāsīm fi ma'rīfat al-Aqālim*, Beirut: Dār Ihya' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, pp. 143-147.

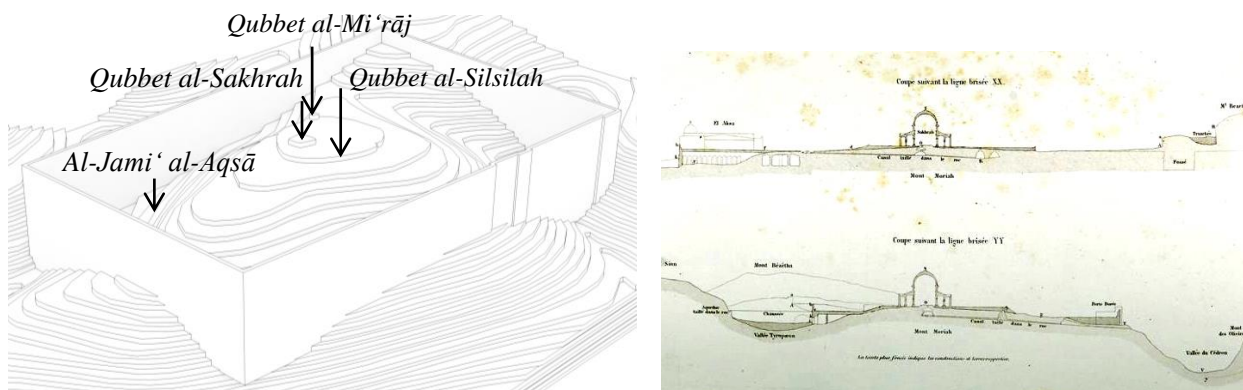
Geometry, Symbolism, and Faith: Decoding the Design of the 'Holy' at al-Aqsa Mosque

The initial development of the construction of the al-Aqsa Mosque religious site in Islamic Jerusalem was guided by an architectural concept that was imbued with various themes rooted in the sacredness of the site and its central Sacred Rock. The project aimed to evoke memories associated with specific places and to reflect the overarching theological concept that characterises the Sacred Mosque of Makkah. The symbolic themes that were incorporated into the design of the al-Aqsa Mosque were meticulously integrated through three core architectural foundations: **form**, **function**, and **religious symbolism**. These three elements formed the major components of the overall framework that was employed to elaborate the sacred architecture of the al-Aqsa Mosque. The resulting architectural masterpiece thus embodies a multi-layered and deeply meaningful expression of religious beliefs and values.

Site Topography

The topography of the site of al-Aqsa Mosque is defined by the southeast hill of the holy city. The rock level within the enclave descends from north to south and from the centre to the eastern and western walls of the enclosure. The northeast corner of the al-Aqsa Mosque reaches an elevation of 710 m above sea level, while the southeast corner stands at 692.5 m and the southwest corner at 700 m. Beneath the Dome of the Rock, the height of the rock reaches 744 m. Notably, the rock in the northwest corner of the al-Aqsa Mosque is relatively higher and was thus removed through being scrapped away to level the area. Overall, the steep decline of the rock's formations on the site necessitated the use of a basement to level the terrain [Figure 4].

Figure 4: The topography of the site of al-Aqsa Mosque and the location of its early main building components



Source: [Right] After Melchior De Vogue (1864), *Le Temple De Jerusalem*, p 1.20

In his plan for the site of al-Aqsa Mosque, 'Abd al-Malik employed an irregularly shaped rectangular or slightly trapezoidal layout that incorporated diverse structures, including commemorative buildings, religious edifices, gates, and underground passageways, situated on multiple levels. While many of these structures have since vanished or undergone significant alterations, they were originally interconnected and intentionally arranged to form a cohesive al-Aqsa Mosque. Drawing upon Islamic religious mythology of the revered rock, 'Abd al-Malik translated it into architectural iconography, with numerous contributors influencing the development of al-Aqsa Mosque.

A topographical examination of the Sacred Rock of the al-Aqsa Mosque exposes that the placement of 'Abd al-Malik's monuments on the raised platform was a deliberate decision rather than a mere coincidence, and was meticulously designed in relation to the site's topography and the surrounding walls of the entire mosque's enclave, many of which were constructed over ancient pre-Umayyad foundations. The architect behind 'Abd al-Malik's plan would have taken into account three key factors that influenced the location of these monuments:

- The top of the Sacred Rock.
- The epicentre of the rock within the al-Aqsa Mosque,
- The relative centre of the Sacred Rock [Figures 4, 5].

General Layout and Buildings Coordination

The design of ‘Abd al-Malik’s al-Aqsa Mosque and the coordination of its buildings embody the concepts of axuality, centrality, and the saturation of the site’s divine sanctity. The central axis of the *Qiblah* is occupied by the Dome of the Rock and the al-Jami’ al-Aqsa, which is located in the *mihrah* (the niche for the direction of prayer) of al-Jami’ and the Sacred Rock,³⁸ as described by al-Maqdisi, a 10th century Arab geographer. This axial arrangement reinforces the relationship between the al-Aqsa Mosque in Bayt al-Maqdis and the Sacred Mosque and Ka’bah in Makkah mentioned in the Qur’ān (17:1).

Remarkably, this axial arrangement between the Dome of the Rock and al-Jami’ al-Aqsa on the southern wall of the al-Aqsa Mosque changed to a centralised arrangement on the top of the rock of the al-Aqsa Mosque [Figure 5]. Parallel to the *Qiblah* wall, another axis runs through the middle of the building and divides what is now the western wall of al-Aqsa Mosque into two equal parts. The intersection of these two axes is the site of the saturation of the sanctity of the al-Aqsa Mosque, which the Umayyad emphasised by building a dazzling dome over the Sacred Rock in 72 AH/ 691 CE.³⁹ The location of the Dome of the Rock and the associative relationship of the building to the various elements of the al-Aqsa Mosque were not determined by chance but were a deliberate attempt to place the Dome of the Rock in the relative centre of the mosque’s compound to refer to the Sacred Rock⁴⁰ and make it visible from all sides.

The Sacred Rock plays a pivotal and salient role in the comprehensive architectural scheme of al-Aqsa Mosque, and is explicitly represented in the semantic nomenclature of the Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat al-Sakhrah*). In addition, the architects made a conscious decision to reveal the summit of the rock within the interior of the building, even though this could have been easily concealed by elevating the ground level. This deliberate choice highlights the architect’s intention to create a visual and spiritual connection between the Dome of the Rock and the whole of al-Aqsa Mosque, and underscores the significance of the Sacred Rock as a focal point of veneration within the religious complex. To establish these planning and coordination relationships between the various building components of the al-Aqsa Mosque site, the architects had to reconsider the design of the pre-Islamic site⁴¹ due to the topographical nature of the site. ‘Abd al-Malik extended the site of al-Aqsa Mosque to the north by beginning a mega rock cutting job,⁴² which was not described in any historical reference [Figure 5].

³⁸ Al-Maqdisi (1987), *Ahsan al-Taqaṣīm fi ma’rifat al-Aqālīm*, p. 146.

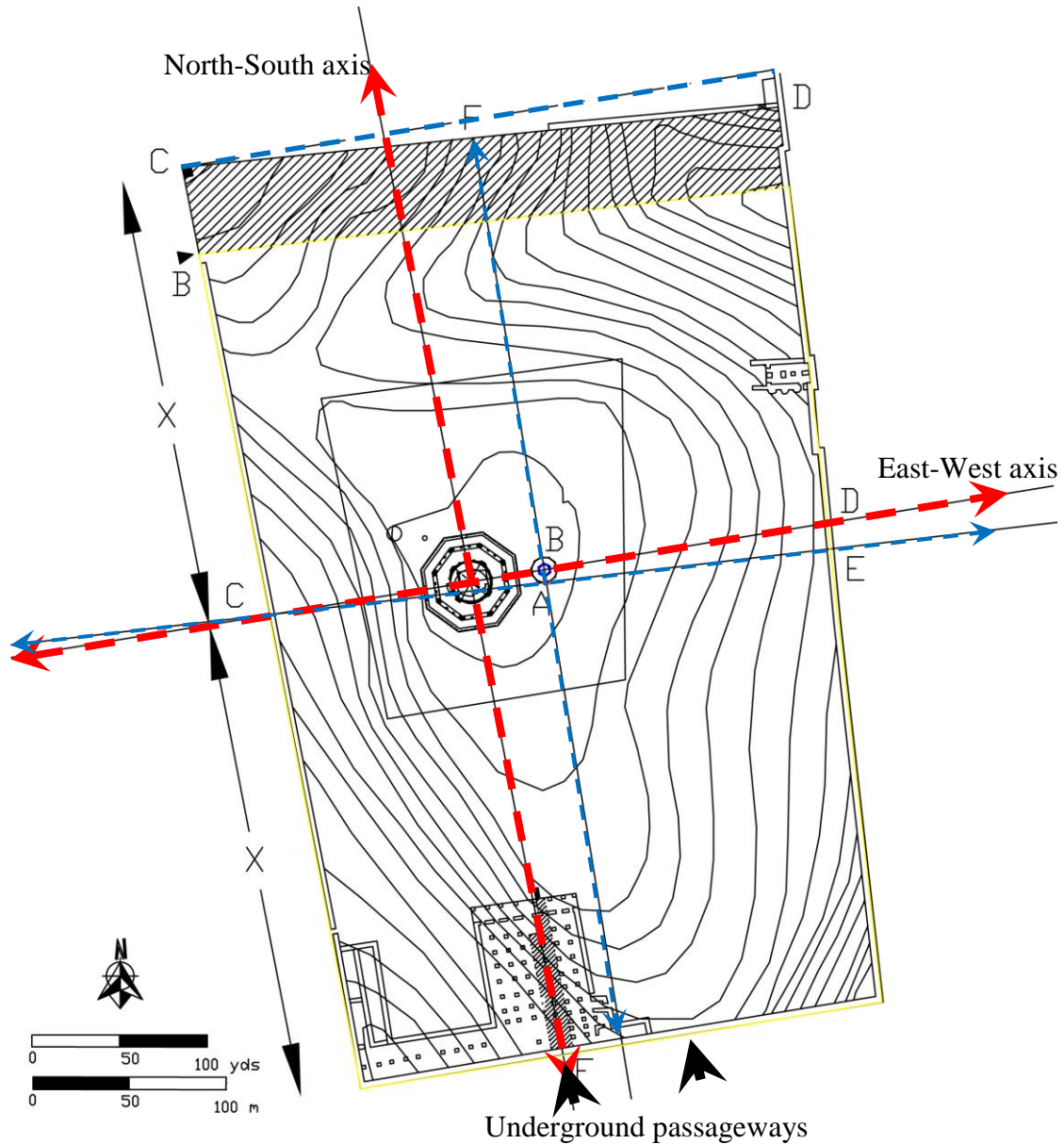
³⁹ The dating of the construction of the Dome of the Rock has been confirmed by a *Kufic* inscription on its mosaic that runs under the roof around the outside of the building’s intermediate octagonal enclosure.

⁴⁰ Al-Ratrouf (2004), *The Architectural Development of al-Aqsa Mosque*, p. 445.

⁴¹ The construction of the current enclosing walls of the al-Aqsa Mosque by the Umayyads followed the foundations of the pre-Islamic Roman walls that existed on the site of the al-Aqsa Mosque, whilst the Umayyads themselves built the northern wall. See, Kathleen Kenyon (1974), *Digging up Jerusalem*, London: Ernest Ben Limited, pp. 205-236; Warren and Conder (1884), *The Survey of Western Palestine-Jerusalem*, pp. 123, 128 & 188; B. Mazar (1969), *The Excavations in the Old City of Jerusalem*, Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, p. 8; Claude Reignier Conder (1909), *The City of Jerusalem*, London: J. Murray, p. 119.

⁴² Haithem Al-Ratrouf (2005), “Al-Masjid al-Aqsa fi al-Athār al-Qur’āniyyah,” *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies*, Vol.6, No. 1, pp. 1-36.

Figure 5: The relationship between the general layout coordination of al-Aqsa Mosque and early Islamic monuments. The intention is to create centralisation and dominance in planning.



Source: After Haithem al-Ratrouf (2004), *The Architectural Development of al-Aqsa Mosque*, p. 445

Charles Warren examined the al-Aqsa Mosque enclave in 1867 CE. He noted that the stones in the foundation of the current north wall of the al-Aqsa Mosque do not resemble the huge stones found in the other foundations.⁴³ Warren's observation of the north wall was followed by further evidence from Conder, who argues that the water cisterns built along and near the northern wall of the al-Aqsa Mosque were built later. It was later concluded that 1/6 of the original area of the al-Aqsa Mosque built in the 1st century CE was added later in the time of 'Abd al-Malik.⁴⁴

The centrality and centralisation of the al-Aqsa Mosque is emphasised in the writings of al-Kala'i (d. 770 CE) and the Persian traveller Nāsir Khusrū (1047 CE). The former states that: "the holiest part of the earth is Syria, the holiest part of Palestine is Bayt al-Maqdis, the most sacred part of Bayt al-Maqdis is the mountain [of al-Aqsa Mosque], the holiest part of the mountain is the mosque, and the

⁴³ Warren and Conder (1884), *The Survey of Western Palestine-Jerusalem*, pp. 123 & 128.

⁴⁴ Conder (1909), *The City of Jerusalem*, p. 119.

most sacred part of the mosque is the dome.”⁴⁵ The latter identifies a version of the relevant traditions on the concept of the central arrangement of the al-Aqsa Mosque after two centuries, stating that “the mosque was built in such a way that the platform was in the middle of the esplanade, the Dome of the Rock was in the middle of the platform, and the rock was in the middle of the dome.”⁴⁶

Architecture: Form and Function

In the overall planning of al-Aqsa Mosque, it is plausible that **the highest point situated on the north-west side of the Sacred Rock** was the first topographical element to be considered by the architects of ‘Abd al-Malik. This position was deemed to be the closest to the heavens,⁴⁷ as evidenced by the commemorative construction of a small dome for the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad [Figure 6]. The dome was implicitly referred to as part of ‘Abd al-Malik’s architectural scheme of al-Aqsa Mosque by al-Sha’bī (d. 721-22 CE), as cited by Ibn Habīb (d. 853 CE).⁴⁸ In 902-3 CE, Ibn al-Faqīh identified the structure as *Qubbet al-Mi’rāj*⁴⁹ (The Dome of the Ascension). ‘Izz al-Din ‘Uthmān ibn Ali Al-Zanjilī, the ruler of Bayt al-Maqdis during the Ayyūbid rule, reconstructed the present-day building in 597 AH (1200 CE), incorporating the original Umayyad architectural plan and reusing salvaged building materials.

Figure 6: The Dome of the Ascension, Bayt al-Maqdis. Left: Looking west (1864 CE). Middle: looking north (today); Right: Looking south (today).



Source: [Left] After Melchior De Vogue (1864), *Le Temple De Jerusalem*, p. 105

The current structure of *Qubbet al-Mi’rāj* is composed of a small dome that shelters an octagonal enclosure buttressed by 30 grand marble columns. The interstitial spaces between the columns were subsequently closed off with marble slabs, presumably to fortify the structural integrity of the dome. Notably, the entrance to the dome is situated on the northern side of the edifice, while the southern side houses a *mihrab*, or recessed area indicating the direction of prayer (*Qiblah*).

The planning of the religious space at al-Aqsa Mosque was centred on the second element, which represents **the epicentre of the site**. This element was aligned axially with the ‘Umar’s *mihrab* of the original Umayyad congregational mosque (al-Jami’ al-Aqsa) and with the underground passageway, known as the Double Gate, leading to the al-Aqsa Mosque. Ibn al-Faqīh described⁵⁰ *Qubbet al-Silsilah*, or the Dome of the Chain, as a medium-sized dome located precisely at the centre of the mosque and was erected to commemorate this location [see Figures 5 and 7].

⁴⁵ Cited in Josef van Ess (1992), “‘Abd al-Malik and the Dome of the Rock: An Analysis of Some Texts,” in Julian Raby and Jeremy Johns (eds.), *Bayt al-Maqdis, Part One: ‘Abd al-Malik’s Jerusalem*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 89; Kaplony (2002), *The Haram of Jerusalem 324-1099*, p. 242.

⁴⁶ Nāsir Khusrū Alawī (1983), *Sifnamah*, Yahyah al-Khashāb (trans.), Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, p. 66; R. W. Hamilton (1949), *The Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 65.

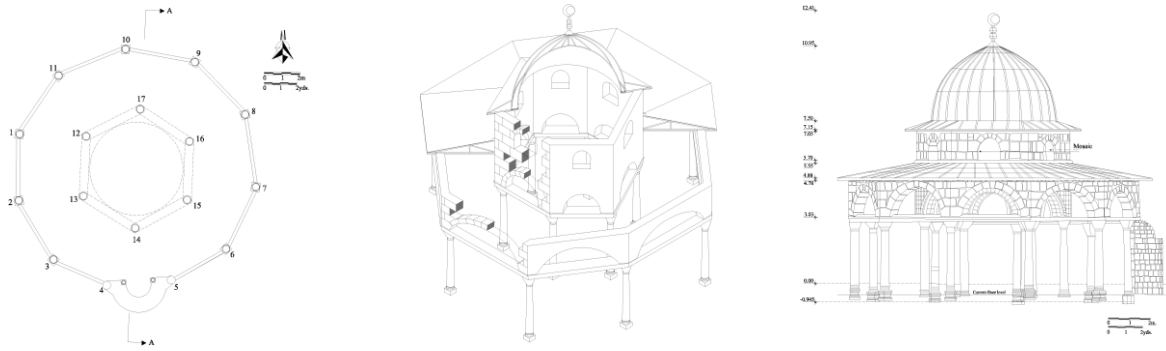
⁴⁷ See the commentary of the Qur’ānic verse: “And listen for the Day when the Caller calls from a nearby place.” (وَاسْتَمِعْ يَوْمَ يُنَادِ الْمُنَادِ مِنْ مَكَانٍ ﴿50:41﴾); Ibn al-Murajjā (1995), *Fada’il Bayt al-Maqdis*, p. 111.

⁴⁸ Ibn Habīb (1991), *Kitāb al-Ta’rīkh*, pp. 132-133.

⁴⁹ Ibn al-Faqīh (1996), *Kitāb al-Buldān*, p. 151.

⁵⁰ Ibid; Al-Maqdisī (1987), *Ahsan al-Taqāsīm*, p. 151.

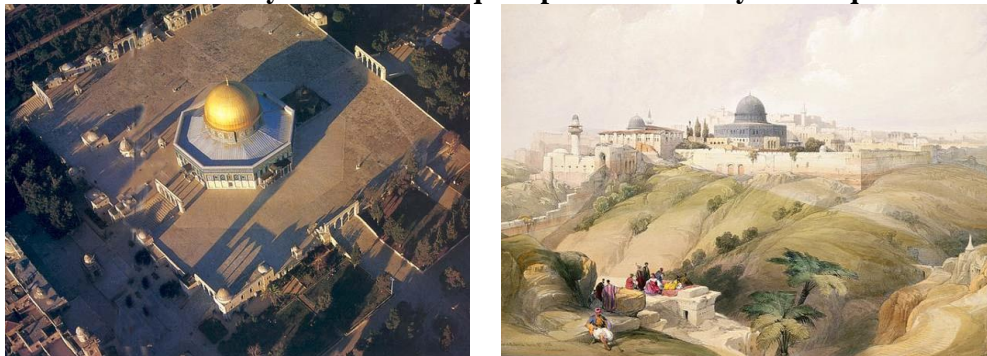
Figure 7: The Dome of the Chain (Qubbet al-Silsilah), plan, section-isometric, and elevation



The dome originally consisted of an inner and outer annular arcade covered with mosaics.⁵¹ The inner arcade is hexagonal, while the outer has 11 sides.⁵² This structure was used as a sitting porch for the Caliphs, where they could preside over matters of state, such as taking the oath and administering justice. Despite conflicting historical accounts, it is unlikely that this dome served as a treasury building or a model for the Dome of the Rock,⁵³ as its open structure does not support these proposals. Instead, according to Necipoğlu, the dome's location at the centre of the al-Aqsa Mosque, where the Umayyad Caliphs once sat, was likely intended to express the authority of the Umayyad dynasty. Necipoğlu's argument draws on the grand historical narrative of the Umayyads and their association of the name and location of the building with the divinely-guided justice of Prophet David (Qur'ān 21:78), giving 'Abd al-Malik the title "God's caliph" (*Khalifat Allāh*).⁵⁴

The consideration of **the relative centre of the Sacred Rock**, as the third crucial element in the overall design, serves as the primary focal point for the commemoration of the Islamic traditions and eschatological episodes associated with it. The sacredness of this centre is heightened by the construction of the imposing and emblematic *Qubbet al-Sakhrah*, famously known as the Dome of the Rock [Figures 5, 8]. As expounded by Rosen-Ayalon, the iconographic symbolism embodied in the Dome of the Rock is indicative of the underlying Quranic principles, thus reinforcing their essential tenets, and ultimately culminating in a profound spiritual encounter for the beholder.⁵⁵

Figure 8: The Dome of the Rock in the al-Aqsa Mosque, Bayt al-Maqdis. Left: the building located at the relative centre of the al-Aqsa Mosque. Right: the building is the focal point and dominates the skyline of the al-Aqsa esplanade and Bayt al-Maqdis.



Source: [Right] David Roberts, 1839 CE

⁵¹ Ibn Fadlullah Al-'Umarī (1924), *Masalik al-Absār fi mamalik al-Amsār*, Vol. 1, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Misriyyah, p. 148.

⁵² Rosen-Ayalon argues that the current building and its form must be dated to the Umayyad period. See Rosen-Ayalon (1989), *The Early Islamic Monuments of al-Haram al-Sharīf*, p. 27. However, Ibn al-Faqīh mentioned that the building "was erected on twenty marble pillars," including those for the prayer recess. Al-Maqdisī, Khusrū and al-'Umarī echoed Ibn al-Faqīh from which it is understood that *Qubbet al-Silsilah* has an even number of sides and has 12 pillars in the outer enclosure, not 11 as seen today. See Ibn al-Faqīh (1996), *Kitāb al-Buldān*, p. 151; Al-Maqdisī (1987), *Ahsan al-Taqaṣīm*, p.145; Khusrū (1983), *Sifnamah*, p. 67; Al-'Umarī (1924), *Masalik al Absār*, Vol. 1, p. 147.

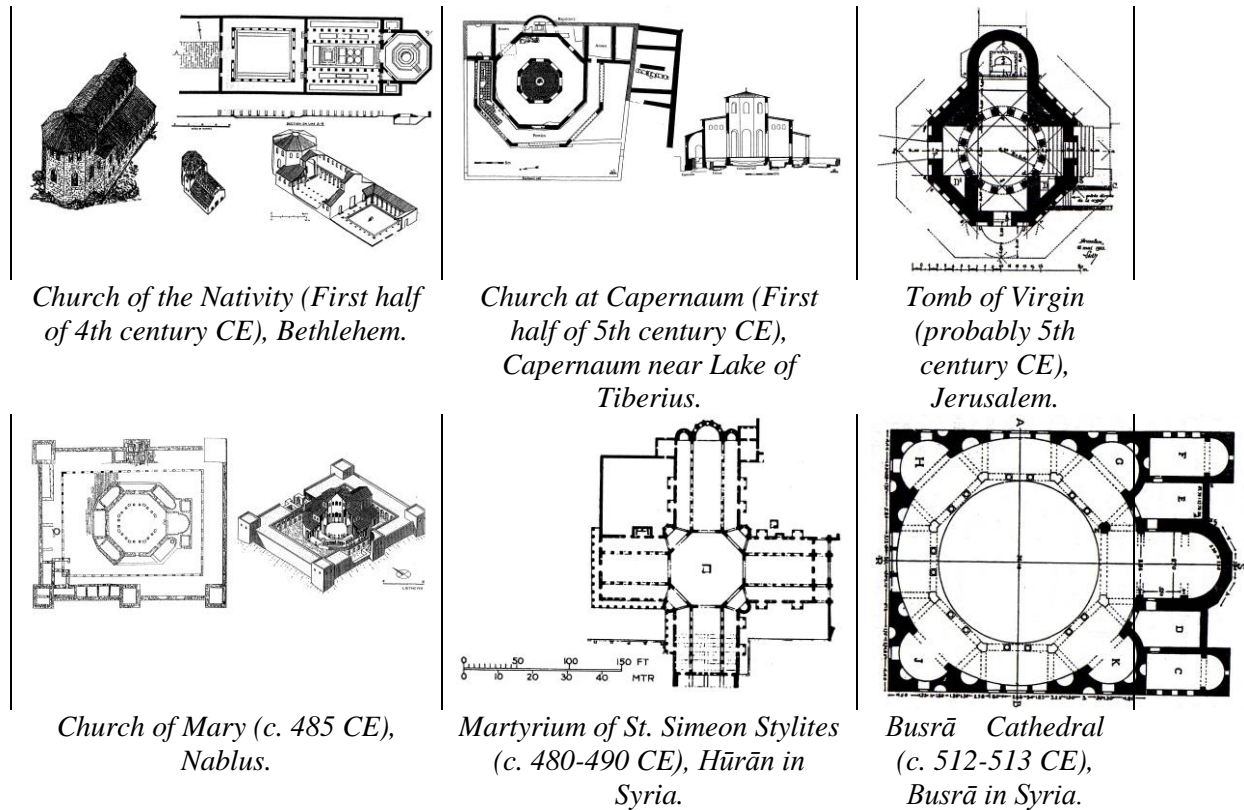
⁵³ Mujīr al-Dīn Al-'Ulaimī (1995), *al-'Uns al-Jalīl*, Vol. 1, pp. 272-273.

⁵⁴ Patricia Crone (2004), *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 7 & 40-44; Chase F. Robinson (2012), *Makers of the Muslim World: 'Abd al-Malik*, London: Oneworld Academic, pp. 94 & 49-57; Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds (2003), *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 54.

⁵⁵ Rosen-Ayalon (1989), *The Early Islamic Monuments of al-Haram al-Sharīf*, p. 49.

The raised platform of the al-Aqsa Mosque's site is dominated by the illustrious Dome of the Rock. Its architectural design embodies an octagonal annular configuration and comprises of three concentric enclosures; the innermost being circular, while the other two are octagonal in shape [Figures 10, 11]. The architectural concept of *Qubbet al-Sakhrah* is intricately linked with the overarching planning theme of the site of al-Aqsa Mosque. Its octagonal shape serves as a symbolic representation of the throne of God,⁵⁶ as described in the Qur'ān and Islamic traditions, whereby eight angels will “*uphold the Throne of their Lord*”; with a host of angels flanking its sides in the manner of an imperial court (Qur'ān 69:17). The throne, according to these beliefs, will be situated on the Sacred Rock.⁵⁷

Figure 9: The octagonal buildings of pre-8th-century historical Syria before the 8th century, are often compared to the Dome of the Rock in the al-Aqsa Mosque



Church of the Nativity (First half of 4th century CE), Bethlehem.

Church at Capernaum (First half of 5th century CE), Capernaum near Lake of Tiberius.

Tomb of Virgin (probably 5th century CE), Jerusalem.

Church of Mary (c. 485 CE), Nablus.

Martyrium of St. Simeon Stylites (c. 480-490 CE), Hūrān in Syria.

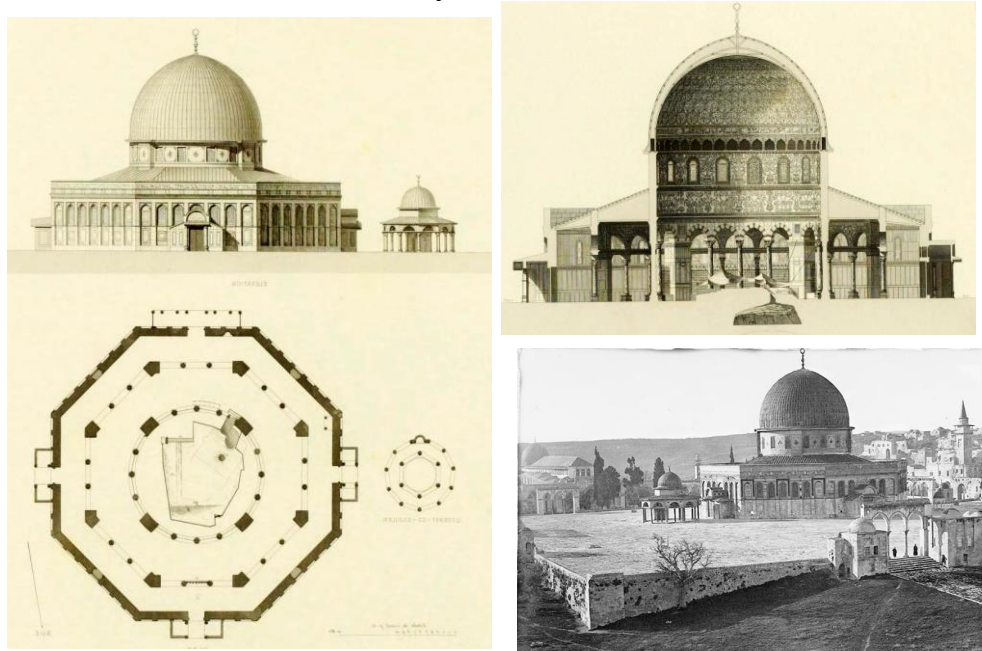
Busrā Cathedral (c. 512-513 CE), Busrā in Syria.

Fletcher (1987), pp. 256-402 and pp. 210-386; Magen (1993), pp. 86-87; Clermont-Ganneau (1899), v.1, p. 154.

⁵⁶ See the commentary of the Qur'ānic verse: “*And eight angels will, that Day, bear the Throne of your Lord above them*” (وقوله وَيَحْمِلُ عَرْشَ رَبِّكَ فَوْقَهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ ثَمَانِيَةٌ) (69:17); Shams al-Dīn Yusuf ibn Kizoghlu (Sibt ibn al-Jawzī) (1985), *Mir'āt al-Zamān fī Tarīkh al-A'yān*, Vol. 1, Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, p. 169.

⁵⁷ Tamari (1996), *Icontextual Studies in Muslims Ideology*, p. 7.

Figure 10: The Dome of the Rock in the al-Aqsa Mosque. Left: Plan and elevation of the building. Upper Left: Cross-section of the building. Bottom Right: The Dome of the Rock dominates the platform of the al-Aqsa Mosque in a photograph taken by the British Ordnance Survey of Jerusalem in 1864.



Source: [Left] After Melchior De Vogue (1864), *Le Temple De Jerusalem*, pl. XVIII; [Upper right] Palestine Exploration Fund

Although octagons were commonly used in Christian memorial churches to symbolise the resurrection of the dead,⁵⁸ the Islamic architectural expression of the horizontal and vertical components in *Qubbat al-Sakhrah* is a simple yet profound manifestation of the vision of the eschatological Islamic reference to the Sacred Rock. This vision is derived from the inspiration of the site and not merely copied from preceding Christian architecture [Figure 9].

The Dome of the Rock, as noted by Grabar, commands the composition's axes and engenders an indelible visual impression⁵⁹ [Figure 12]. Paradoxically, 'Abd al-Malik's architectural masterpiece enthral the viewer with two distinct movements that evoke deep spiritual and religious sentiments while paying the utmost reverence to the sacred site.

- Firstly, the Dome of the Rock captivates and draws the viewer towards it,⁶⁰ especially when the sun illuminates its radiant golden mosaic, creating an irresistible attraction.
- Secondly, as the viewer approaches the building, they unconsciously orbit it, entranced by its exquisite artistic compositions adorning the golden mosaic.

These movements, profoundly symbolic of the viewer's veneration for the site and its traditions, inspire a sense of awe and wonder. The Dome of the Rock remains an enduring testament to Islamic art and architecture, and its capacity to inspire and captivate people worldwide.⁶¹

⁵⁸ John Wilkinson (1981), "Architectural Procedures in Byzantine Palestine," *Levant*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 156-172.

⁵⁹ Grabar, (2005), "Notes on the Dome of the Rock," p. 225.

⁶⁰ Al-Maḡdisī (1987), *Ahsan al-Taḡāsīm*, p. 139.

⁶¹ Grabar and Nuseibeh (1996), *The Dome of the Rock*, pp. 22-30; Haithem Al-Ratrou (2002), *Nazariyyah Jadīdah li Tafṣīr al-Tasmīm wa al-Takhtī al-Handasī li-Qubbat al-Sakhrah*, London: Islamic Research Academy (ISRA), p. 178; Andreas Kaplony (2009), "The Mosque of Jerusalem (Masjid Bayt al-Maḡdis)," in Oleg Grabar and Benjamin Z. Kedar (eds.), *Where Heaven and Earth Meet: Jerusalem's Sacred Esplanade*, Jerusalem; Austin: the University of Texas Press, pp. 100-131 & 396-98.

Figure 11: Courtesy of Haithem al-Ratrout, 3D modelling for the architectural configuration of the Dome of the Rock's annular enclosures

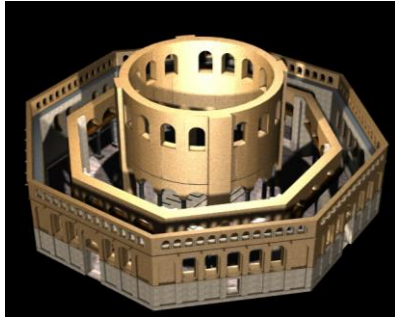


Figure 12: A drawing showing the two distinct movements suggested by the architectural configuration of the Dome of the Rock; Drag and rotate motions⁶²

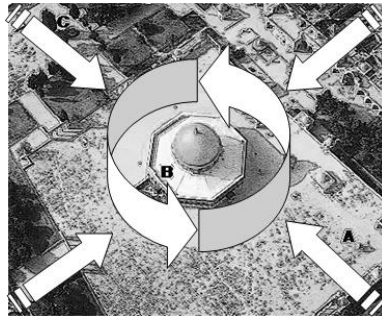
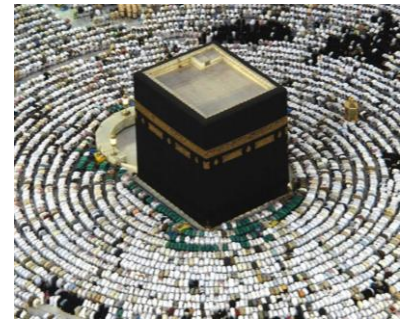


Figure 13: The Ka'bah in Makkah where Muslims circumambulate around it

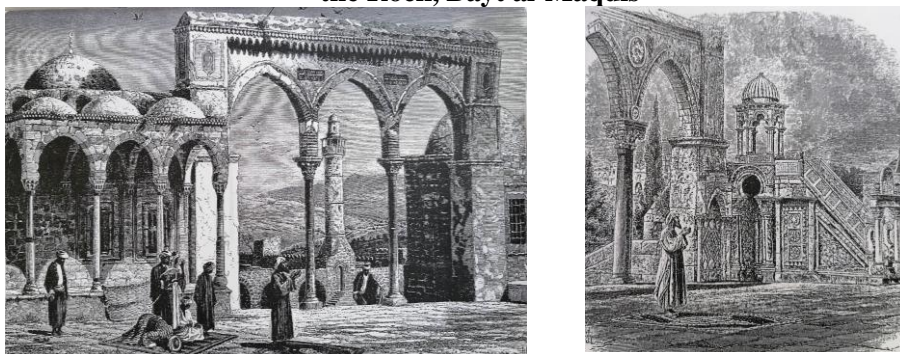


The Dome of the Rock is an archetype that embodies the Islamic concept of *tawhid* or the oneness of God, and reflects the symbolism of Makkah as the primal sacred space [Figure 13]. It replicates the architectural style of the square Ka'bah, which represents the earth, and the sacred centre inspires the practice of circumambulation (*tawāf*). Devotees perform this ritualistic practice by walking around the sanctuary,⁶³ which parallels the *Makkan* scenario, where worshippers subconsciously engage in *tawāf* around the Sacred Rock and the underlying cave, seen as a symbol of the earth.

The art and architecture of the Dome of the Rock convey a timeless message through the use of the circle, which symbolises eternity and wholeness, and holds significance across cultures. The Dome's distinct structure, which comprises a circle within two octagons, engages in a complex and meaningful dialogue with Christianity and Judaism inherited now by Islam. The inscriptions on the buildings of the al-Aqsa Mosque affirm Islam as the "religion of truth,"⁶⁴ further reinforcing the sanctity and spiritual significance of this site. Thus, the Dome of the Rock stands as a remarkable testament to Islamic art and architecture, and continues to inspire people worldwide.

The elevated platform of the Sacred Rock, constructed by 'Abd al-Malik, comprises building elements such as stairs and arcades that lead to the raised platform [Figure 14]. The existence of these arcades has been recorded in Islamic sources dating back to the 10th century CE, including Ibn al-Faqīh and al-Maqdisī.⁶⁵ The arcades, commonly referred to as Scales (*al-Mawāzīn*), carry a symbolic significance that aligns with the broader symbolism of the al-Aqsa Mosque.

Figure 14: Paintings for the arcades (known as al-Mawāzīn [scales]) of the elevated platform of the Rock, Bayt al-Maqdis



Source: [Left] Charles W. Wilson 'Picturesque Plestine' (1880-4); [Right] W. Thomson 'The Land and the Book' (1859; 1880)

⁶² "The Temple Mount of Jerusalem," <http://www.templemount.org/aerial.jpg>.

⁶³ Armstrong (1997), "Sacred Space," p. 16.

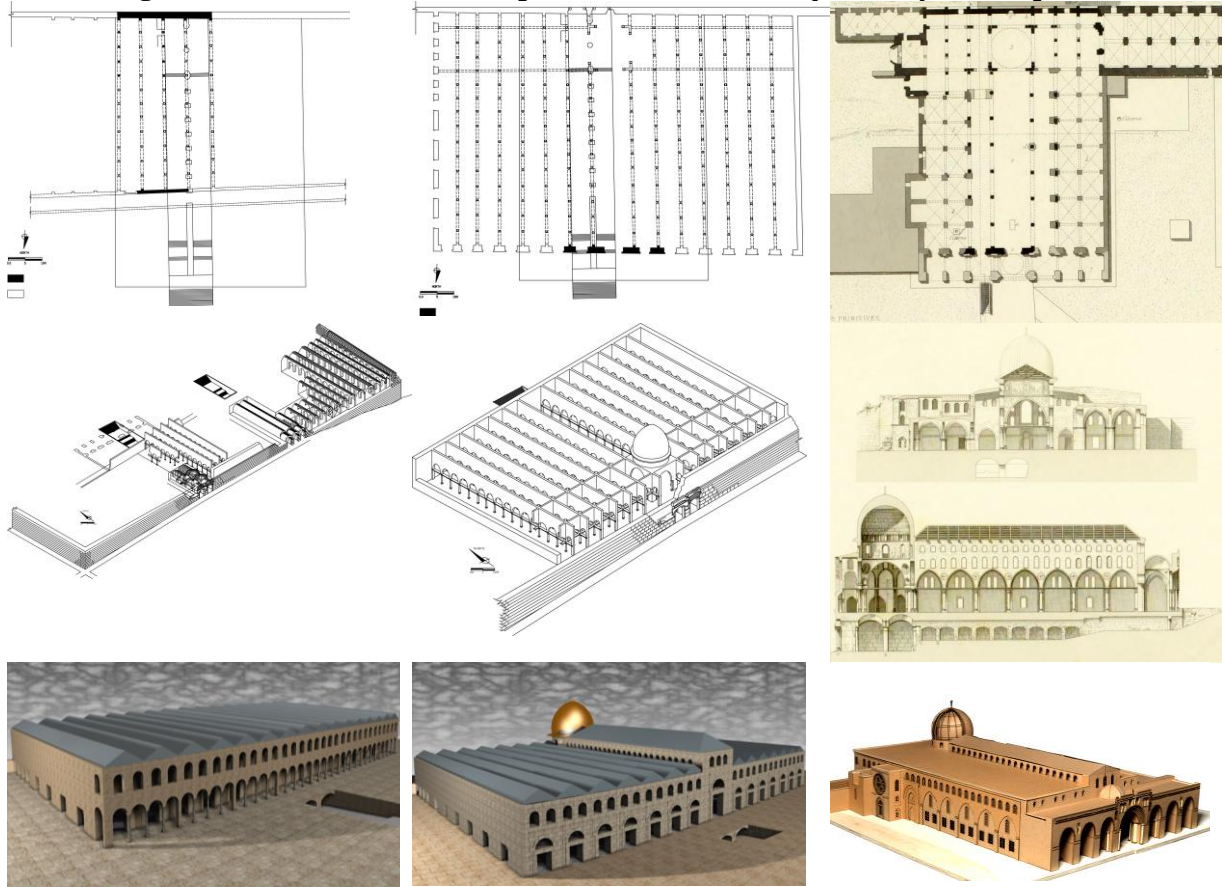
⁶⁴ Robert G. Hoyland (1997), *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, Princeton: The Darwin Press, pp. 48-49; Robinson (2012), 'Abd al-Malik, pp. 4-6; Jeremy Johns (2003), "Archaeology and the History of Early Islam: The First Seventy Years," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 46, No. 4, pp. 424-427.

⁶⁵ Ibn al-Faqīh (1996), *Kitāb al-Buldān*, p.151; Al-Maqdisī (1987), *Ahsan al-Taqāsīm*, p. 145.

The name *al-Mawāzīn*, associated with the arcades, is similar to the names of the gates⁶⁶ of the Dome of the Rock and signifies the Day of Judgment,⁶⁷ an eschatological theme that runs through the symbolism of the entire complex. According to Rosen-Ayalon, the upper platform is perceived as a perimeter defined by arcaded doorways, which imbues the entrance to the main buildings with a distinct quality.⁶⁸ This architectural approach clarifies the volumetric space of the elevated environment and accentuates its eminence. From an architectural perspective, the elevated position and surrounding structures create a space that reveres and celebrates the site while offering another layer of intellectual symbolism.

The *al-Jami' al-Aqṣā*, a monumental congregational structure and a central feature of 'Abd al-Malik's revered architecture, is situated on the southern wall of the al-Aqsa Mosque, acting as the *Qiblah* wall of the religious site [Figure 15]. Significantly larger and more extravagant than its modest predecessor, *masjid 'Umar*, the original architecture and development of the *al-Jami' al-Aqṣā* during the Umayyad period remain unrecorded in early historical sources. Nonetheless, the architecture of the mosque was described by the authors of *Muthīr al-Gharām* and Khusrū, as well as al-Maqdisī, with these accounts associated with major changes in the structure's layout and its reconstruction following devastating earthquakes in the Umayyad period (c. 130 AH/ 746 CE) and the Fatimid period (c. 425 AH/ 1033 CE).⁶⁹

Figure 15: The structural development of al-Jami' al-Aqṣā in Bayt al-Maqdis



'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 66-86 AH/ 685-705 CE).

Al-Mahdī (c. 164 AH/ 780 CE).

Al-Dhahir (411-427 AH/ 1020- 1035 CE).

⁶⁶ Tamari (1996), *Contextual Studies*, p. 5.

⁶⁷ See the commentary of the Qur'ānic verse: "And We place the scales of justice for the Day of Resurrection, so no soul will be treated unjustly at all. And if there is [even] the weight of a mustard seed, We will bring it forth. And sufficient are We as accountant." (21:47) (وَنُزِّنُ الْمَوَازِينَ الْقِسْطَ لِيَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ فَلَا تُظْلَمُ نَفْسٌ شَيْئًا وَإِنْ كَانَ مِثْقَالَ حَبَّةٍ مِنْ خَزْدَلٍ أَتَيْنَا بِهَا وَكَفَى بِنَا حَاسِبِينَ).

⁶⁸ Rosen-Ayalon (1989), *The Early Islamic Monuments of al-Haram al-Sharīf*, pp. 31-32.

⁶⁹ Al-Maqdisī (1987), *Ahsan al-Taqāsīm*, p. 145; Cited in Guy Le Strange (1890) (ed. and trans.), *Palestine under the Moslems: A Description of Syria and the Holy Land from A.D. 650 to 1500*, Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, p. 102; Khusrū (1983), *Sifnamah*, pp. 56-65; Hamilton (1949), *The Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque*, p. 56-65.

Source: [Right] After Melchior De Vogue (1864), *Le Temple De Jerusalem*, pl. XXX-I
Through the restoration work carried out on the building between 1938 and 1942 CE, Hamilton's archaeological observations provide a wealth of information about the early phase of this building.⁷⁰ Notably, Hamilton discovered that the early Umayyad building of *al-Jami' al-Aqsā* was extended northward, covering a distance of 19 meters less than the present structure. The initial structure of 'Abd al-Malik features aisles separated by arcades that run from north to south, without a dome or a nave, and had a portico on its north side that ran parallel to the main entrance facade. The building's main axis, width, and number of doors, however, remain to be determined.

As a consequence of the southern wall topography of the al-Aqsa Mosque, the creation of a basement and underground passageways was necessary to grant access to the mosque's inner esplanade and to create the foundation that enables the construction of 'Abd al-Malik's congregational mosque. The broad-house shape of the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah inspired the first phase of the mosque's construction, indicating the influence of existing precedents on Islamic architectural expression. The original spatial organisation of al-Jami' al-Aqsā differed significantly from the later modifications it underwent.⁷¹ This distinctive architectural form was created in response to the functional requirements of the mosque, where worshippers stand in long parallel rows perpendicular to the direction of Makkah during prayer.

The reconstruction of *al-Jami' al-Aqsā* under the aegis of the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī (c. 164 AH/ 780 CE) represents a significant milestone in the development of Islamic sacred architecture. The addition of a dome and the creation of a wide central nave,⁷² resulting in a total of fifteen aisles with twenty-six doors and an extension to the present northern wall, marks a clear departure from the early Umayyad building. The last and most extensive phase of construction took place during the reign of the Fatimid Caliph al-Dhahir (411-427 AH/ 1020-1035 CE) in 425 AH/ 1033 CE. This period witnessed the reduction of the number of aisles to seven and the introduction of new columns, supports, and foundations to address the growing dimensions of the arches, leading to a significant alteration of the building's internal spatial organisation.⁷³ The evolution of *al-Jami' al-Aqsā* over time highlights the importance of historical context and the influence of patronage, structural innovation, and aesthetic considerations on the development of Islamic architecture.

Unravelling the Purpose of the al-Aqsa Mosque: A Historical and Architectural Analysis

The construction of the al-Aqsa Mosque, an imposing example of Islamic sacred architecture, poses a significant question about its intention in Bayt al-Maqdis. Although various sources, such as Ibn al-Faqīh, Ibn 'Abd Rabihi, and al-Maqdisi, have described the al-Aqsa Mosque and its elements, the purpose behind its creation remains elusive. Historical records predominantly focus on 'Abd al-Malik's motive to build the Dome of the Rock, rather than the al-Aqsa Mosque in its entirety. While 9th century extreme *Shi'i* historian al-Ya'qubī proposed a political reason for its construction, claiming 'Abd al-Malik aimed to thwart the pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to the Sacred Mosque in Makkah during his conflict with 'Abdullah ibn al-Zubair in 685 CE,⁷⁴ this assertion is improbable, given that it would entail destroying one of Islam's five pillars.

Al-Maqdisi's account, from his paternal uncle, offers an alternative perspective, stating that 'Abd al-Malik aimed to rival the Church of the Holy Sepulchre's splendid dome with his own architectural masterpiece, intending to emphasise Islamic architecture and reaffirm Islam's preeminent position in Historical Syria's sanctity.⁷⁵ This testimony also demonstrates that art and architecture were thought to have a considerable impact on the viewer. Therefore, the construction of the al-Aqsa Mosque appears to have been a conscious effort to promote Islam's cultural and political status in the region, beyond serving merely as a place of worship. This historical and architectural analysis provides a

⁷⁰ Hamilton (1949), *The Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque*, pp. 53-64.

⁷¹ M. Frishman (1994), "Islam and the Form of the Mosque," in M. Frishman and H. Khan (eds.) *the Mosque*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., p. 30.

⁷² Hamilton (1949), *The Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque*, p. 60; John Wilkinson (1987), *Columns and Capitals in al-Haram al-Sharif*, Jerusalem: The Islamic industrial Orphanage, p. 22.

⁷³ Khusrū (1983), *Sifmamah*, pp. 56-65; Hamilton (1949), *The Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque*, p. 73.

⁷⁴ Ahmad b. Ishāq b. Ja'far b. Wahab B. Wadeh al-Ya'qubī (1999), *Tārīkh al-Ya'qubī*, Vol. 2, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, p. 182.

⁷⁵ Al-Maqdisi (1987), *Ahsan al-Taqāsīm*, p. 139.

critical examination of the motivations behind the creation of the al-Aqsa Mosque and sheds light on the complex interplay between politics, religion, and art in the Islamic world.

The architectural analysis of the vertical axis and the cross-section of the al-Aqsa Mosque serves as a strong testament to 'Abd al-Malik's aspirations for the Sacred Rock. The magnificent golden Dome of the Rock, with its regal exterior adorned with golden mosaics (which, regrettably, are no longer extant), conspicuously protrudes from the Sacred Rock, lending a striking visual impact that pervades both the Bayt al-Maqdis skyline and the al-Aqsa Mosque. This is consistent with 'Abd al-Malik's other construction endeavours, both within and outside of the al-Aqsa Mosque, to create a three-dimensional representation of Umayyad Bayt al-Maqdis. This conclusion is further corroborated by Grabar's assertion that the Dome of the Rock, as an Umayyad structure, exerted significant influence on the pre-Islamic Bayt al-Maqdis, thereby rendering it Islamic.⁷⁶ Similarly, Sharon opines that Bayt al-Maqdis was a pre-Islamic town that reached the pinnacle of its glory exclusively within the ambit of Islamic religious praxis and ideology. Thus, the site was chosen specifically for large-scale imperial construction schemes, with the aim of transforming the pre-Islamic Bayt al-Maqdis from a mere town into an Islamic city of great religious significance.⁷⁷

Notwithstanding the perspectives of these scholars, it is incontrovertible that Umayyad building activities were motivated by a desire to sanctify the al-Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis, as well as to extol the virtues of Islam and Islamic dominion. This Islamic sanctity constitutes the predominant theme that informs the entire architectural design project of this sacred site, and it shaped the portrayal of the 'Holy' within the architecture of the al-Aqsa Mosque and Islamic Jerusalem.

In light of the foregoing, it would be remiss to overlook the significance of the aforementioned allusions as they pertain to the primary impetus behind the construction of the al-Aqsa Mosque. This impetus extends beyond the construction of the Dome of the Rock, encompassing the entire religious framework of the al-Aqsa Mosque and Bayt al-Maqdis. 'Abd al-Malik's architectural vision for the al-Aqsa Mosque was predicated on the commemoration of the Sacred Rock, which serves as the original *Qiblah* of Muslims. The symbolic resonance of this preeminent Muslim *Qiblah* informed 'Abd al-Malik's decision to construct the Dome of the Rock as an integral component of the al-Aqsa Mosque's architectural enterprise, which echoes the functional circulation of the Ka'bah [Figures 11, 12]. The aesthetic qualities of the resultant towering structure, perched on an elevated platform, possess a distinctly sacred architectural exterior, replete with symbolism and endowed with high visibility [Figure 16]. These features led al-Ya'qubī and al-Maqdisī's uncle to misconstrue the true reason for the construction of the al-Aqsa Mosque, substituting their own subjective interpretations.

Figure 16: A Panoramic photo of the Dome of the Rock, the al-Aqsa Mosque, Bayt al-Maqdis



Source: Capt. Arthur Rhodes, 1917 (PEF-P-RHODES-111)

Decoration and Iconography of the Religious Scheme of the al-Aqsa Mosque

The sole surviving early Islamic structure within the al-Aqsa Mosque that has retained most of its original architectural and artistic qualities is the Dome of the Rock. The Dome's architectural archetype presents a unique iconography. Its centralised form and the distribution of its various architectural elements are linked to its sacred core, emphasising its importance as a centre of sanctity.

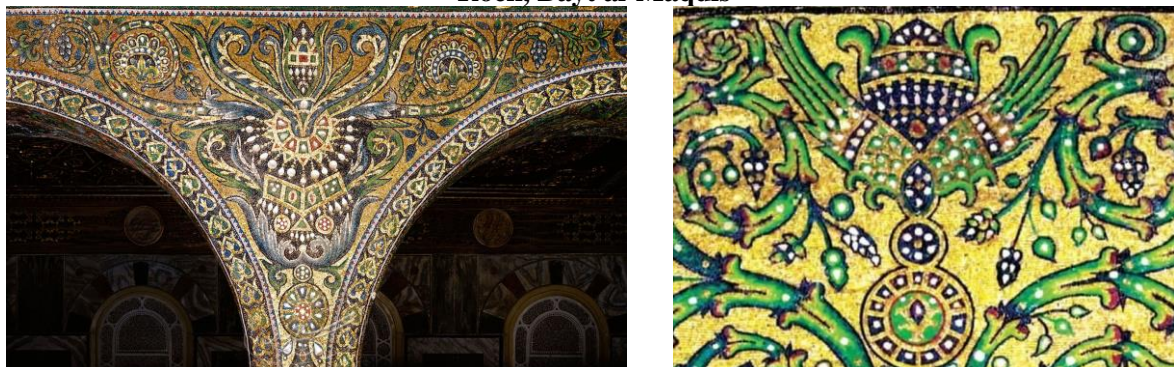
⁷⁶ Grabar (1959), "The Umayyad Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem," p. 33.

⁷⁷ Moshe Sharon (2009), "Shape of the Holy," *Studia Orientalia Electronica*, Vol. 107, p. 285.

It is from this central point that the journey to the circle and the dome begins, representing the best examples of creation⁷⁸ and the symbol of the soul surrounded by various forms of life.⁷⁹ It also expresses the idea of heaven.⁸⁰ The symbolism of the dome's hemispherical shape is based on the four supports, which signify the connecting points between heaven and earth, a point through which the soul connects to the afterlife, while the interior represents various aspects of life.

The symbolism of the octagonal shape corresponds to interpretations by Islamic scholars, particularly Ibn al-Jawzī, who further expounded on the idea of the throne of God, with the doth (*El-Kursī*) of the throne contained within it and carried by four Angels standing on the Sacred Rock.⁸¹ Marble fragments inscribed with a *Kufic* text of the Qur'ānic verse of *El-Kursī* (2: 255)⁸² were discovered inside the Dome of the Rock during restoration work carried out by Clermont-Ganneau in 1873-4 CE, reflecting the building's iconographic significance. 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbās, the transmitter of the narration of Prophet Muhammad, held that "on the Day of Resurrection (*Yawm al-Qiyamah*) the enthroned angels will become eight."⁸³ This Islamic belief about the Throne Bearers and their relation to the Sacred Rock corresponds to the repeating abstract winged-shaped motifs (figures of Cherubim)⁸⁴ in mosaics placed outside and inside the Dome of the Rock. Felix Fabri described this shape in 1483 CE as "figures of Cherubim." Thus, the artisans embodied this belief in an artistic theme for the believers who visit the al-Aqsa Mosque [see Figure 17]. This Islamic belief in the Day of Resurrection coincides with the symbolic meaning of the Dome of the Rock's four standing piers, which is also integrated into the building through the mosaic depiction of angels in the form of wings on the inside and outside. Religious symbolism, recounting the story of the Islamic faith and memories associated with the Sacred Rock, formed the conceptual basis for the building's configuration.

Figure 17: Examples of winged-shaped motifs (Cherubim) from the inside of the Dome of the Rock, Bayt al-Maqdis



Source: After Oleg Grabar (1996), *The Dome of the Rock*

During the reign of Sultan Süleyman (r. 926–73 AH/ 1520–66 CE), the Ottomans exchanged the outer mosaic cladding of the Dome of the Rock for ceramic tiles.⁸⁵ However, the majority of the structure's decorative scheme has remained unchanged since its original construction. This raises the question of why the exterior decoration of the building has been extensively documented throughout history, given the enduring nature of the original decorative plan. The writings of numerous historical figures, including al-Maqdisī (c. 985 CE), Abbot Daniel (c. 1106 CE), John of Wurzburg (c. 1165 CE), Theodoric (c. 1172 CE), John Phokas (c. 1177 CE), William of Tyre (c. 1184 CE), al-Qazwīnī (c. 1275 CE), Sanuto (c. 1310 CE), Ibn Battuta (c. 1326 CE),⁸⁶ attest to the building's exterior decoration.

⁷⁸ Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar (1999), *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, Chicago: ABC International Group, p. 74.

⁷⁹ Al-Ratrouf (2002), *Nazariyyah Jadīdah*, p. 179.

⁸⁰ Keith Critchlow (1976), *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical Cosmological Approach*, London: Themes and Hudson, p. 24.

⁸¹ Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī (1985), *Mir'āt al-Zamān*, Vol. 1, p. 169.

⁸² The Muslim traveler, al-Harawī mentions that the Qur'ānic verse of *el-Kursī* is written on the dome ceiling of the Dome of the Rock. See Abu al-Hasan Ali b. Abi Bakr Ali al-Harawī (1953), *Al-Ishārāt fi Ma'rifat al-Ziyārāt*, Janin Surdeil (env.), Damascus: French scientific Institute, p. 50.

⁸³ Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī (1985), *Mir'āt al-Zamān*, Vol. 1, p. 170.

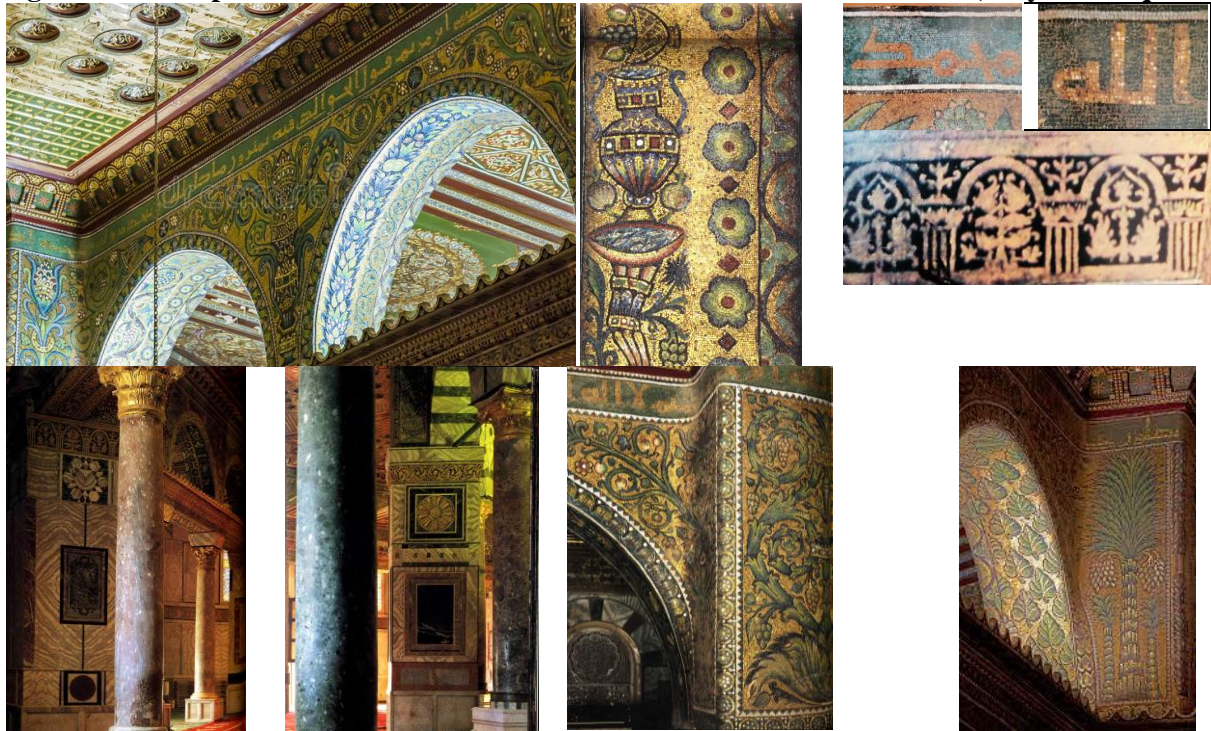
⁸⁴ Felix Fabri (1843), *Frater Felicitatis Fabri Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Aegypti peregrinationem*, Vol. 2, Stuttgartiae: Sumptibus Societatis Litterariae, p. 395.

⁸⁵ Creswell (1969), *Early Muslim Architecture*, Vol. 1, p. 98.

⁸⁶ Creswell (1969), *Early Muslim Architecture*, Vol. 1, p. 98.

The original decoration scheme has been authenticated through the writings of al-'Umarī (700–49 AH/ 1301–49 CE), who notes that “*the building's outer surfaces were covered in white marble up to seven cubits high. Above seven cubits, the gutters were covered with various golden mosaics. Each face of the building had seven windows, two of which were blind, while the remaining five contained glass and were protected by iron bars on the outside. Above the gutters was a four-cubit wall, and each side was covered in a mosaic with characteristics similar to the one described above, with thirteen niches.*”⁸⁷ Felix Fabri, a German Dominican from Ulm, who visited Bayt al-Maḳdis in 1480 and again in 1483 CE, expounded on the building's external visibility and artistic motifs, describing “*a gold background with the shapes of trees, palms, olive trees, and figures of Cherubim.*”⁸⁸ The Qur'ānic references of the various abstract vegetable and artistic motifs of the building⁸⁹ in multiple verses,⁹⁰ while the dominant gold colour in its colour scheme holds great significance and can elevate the viewer to the heavens⁹¹ [Figure 18].

Figure 18: Examples of artistic motifs from the inside of the Dome of the Rock, Bayt al-Maḳdis



Source: After Oleg Grabar (1996), *The Dome of the Rock*

The tessellated exterior of the Dome of the Rock represents a unique and intriguing facet of Umayyad architecture. Its complete coverage in mosaics, a feature not found in Islamic architectural precedents,⁹² serves to reinforce the concept of the Ka'bah's outer textile covering, through the application of local artistic techniques.⁹³ This approach to achieving exceptional visibility involved the consecration of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the transmission of a powerful symbolic message through the Sacred Rock. The skilled craftsmen who were employed to adorn the building with mosaics bear witness to the Umayyad's commitment to aesthetics, and the account of Ibn Sabala (d. c. late 8th century CE), as quoted by al-Samhūdī (1440-1506 CE), reveals that the decorative artistic motifs implemented in Umayyad religious architecture were inspired by the “*pictures of the trees of paradise and its palaces*”⁹⁴ mentioned in the Qur'ān. The accuracy and reliability of Ibn Sabala's account are

⁸⁷ Al-'Umarī (1924), *Masalik al Absār*, Vol. 1, p. 140.

⁸⁸ Fabri (1843), *Fratris Felicis Fabri*, Vol. 2, p. 219.

⁸⁹ According to Gautier-Van Berchem, many of the motifs found in the Dome of the Rock are prevalent in Historical Syria and share similarities with Sasanian and Christian motifs. See Marguerite Gautier-Van Berchem (1969), “The Mosaic of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Great Mosque in Damascus;” in K.A.C. Creswell (ed.), *Early Muslim Architecture*, Gaston A. Vetch (trans.), Vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 215-322.

⁹⁰ See for example; *Qur'ān*, 2:266; 55:68; 17:91; 95:1.

⁹¹ Abu Sleh Al-Alfī (n. d.), *The Islamic Art*, Lebanon: Dār al-Ma'ārif, p. 106.

⁹² Titus Burckhardt (1976), *Art of Islam*, London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd, p. 4.

⁹³ Gautier-Van Berchem (1969), “The Mosaic of the Dome of the Rock,” Vol. 1, p. 230.

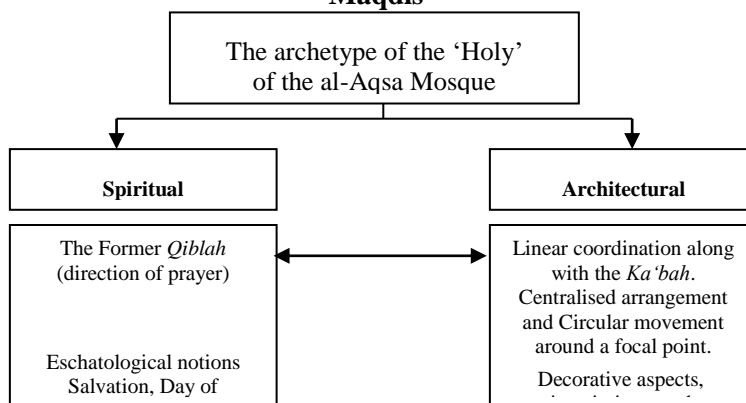
⁹⁴ Alfī b. 'Abdallāh Al-Samhūdī (1326/1908), *Wafā' al-Wafā'* وفاء الوفاء, Cairo, Vol. 1, p. 368, 1.9.

illuminated by a comparison between the vegetable motifs and shapes depicted on the Dome of the Rock with the tree species and images mentioned in the Qur’ān. The various tree species, such as palms, olives, vine leaves, grapes, and the winged-shaped figures of Cherubim that are depicted in the mosaic decoration of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock are explicitly mentioned in the Qur’ān. Finally, Rosen-Ayalon’s examination of the textual meaning of the decoration and inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock reveals that all the decorative motifs and inscriptions on the building reinforce similar symbolic themes of the eschatological significance of the Sacred Rock as described in the Qur’ān.⁹⁵ Together, these findings demonstrate the Umayyad’s mastery of architectural techniques and the depth of their understanding of the sacred symbolism associated with the Dome of the Rock.

In her scholarly article, Necipoğlu presents a persuasive argument for the existence of an additional iconographic theme at the al-Aqsa Mosque, one that relates to the eschatological notion of the salvation of believers through their acceptance of Islam.⁹⁶ The religious symbolism of the al-Aqsa Mosque, as seen in its early architectural components such as the Gate of Mercy (*Bāb al-Rahmah*) and the Gate of Repentance (*Bāb al-Tawbah*), provides evidence for the presence of the Iconography of Salvation as a fundamental part of the mosque’s underlying religious theme. Various inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock also support the Iconography of Salvation, which references the Day of Reckoning and Judgment, as well as the absolute unity and sovereignty of God (*al-Mulk*) as the sole authority. Such references are a crucial element in eschatology, especially in the context of God’s Enthronement on the Sacred Rock, as described in the Qur’ān (6:73, 22:56, and 69:17).⁹⁷

It is noteworthy that the mosaics adorning the memorial buildings of the al-Aqsa Mosque bear a striking resemblance to those found in the most eminent Umayyad structures in the political capital of Damascus, including the Great Mosque and its treasury.⁹⁸ As depicted in Figure 18, the concept of the archetype was employed in the design of the al-Aqsa Mosque to create an Islamic representation of the ‘Holy’. The depth of religious fervour and iconography embodied in the overarching concept of the ‘Holy’ at the al-Aqsa Mosque is intended not only to inspire prayer among the faithful but also to guide them on a spiritual pilgrimage through a sequence of symbolic sites (*al-Mawadi’*). These sites serve as encouragement for Muslims to engage in prayer,⁹⁹ as exemplified by the emblematic structures on the Sacred Rock. The spiritual journey commences with the creation of sanctity in the past, from the second mosque on earth to the present day, culminating with the promise of forgiveness on the Last Day. This message thus urges believers to remain steadfast in their faith and obedient to God, serving as a constant reminder of their religious obligations.

Figure 19: The al-Aqsa Mosque: The archetype of the ‘Holy’ of the al-Aqsa Mosque in Bayt al-Maqdis



⁹⁵ Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (1975), “The Islamic Architecture of Jerusalem,” in *Jerusalem Revealed*, I.E.S, Jerusalem: Shikmona Publishing Company, pp. 46-62.

⁹⁶ Necipoğlu (2008), “The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest,” pp. 17-105.

⁹⁷ Bustami Khir (2006), “Sovereignty,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Vol. 5, Leiden-Boston: Brill, pp. 102-104; Carolanne Mekeel-Matteson (1999), “The Meaning of the Dome of the Rock,” *The Islamic Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 3, p. 164.

⁹⁸ Gautier-Van Berchem (1969), “The Mosaic of the Dome of the Rock,” Vol. 1, pp. 215-322; Rosen-Ayalon (1975), “The Islamic Architecture of Jerusalem,” pp. 97-100; Rosen-Ayalon (1989), *The Early Islamic Monuments of al-Haram al-Sharif*, pp. 46-62.

⁹⁹ *Al-Mawdi’* (places) of significations were mentioned in the merits of Jerusalem by quoted from *Ka’b al-Ahbār*. See al-Wasitī (1979), *Fada’il Bayt al-Maqdis*, p. 75 no. 120, p. 23 no. 29; Ibn al-Murajjā (1995), *Fada’il Bayt al-Maqdis*, p. 113 no. 131.

Innumerable alterations have been made to the al-Aqsa Mosque over the centuries by a range of political and religious authorities, including the 'Abbasids, Fatimids, Crusaders, Ayyūbids, and Mamluks, who undertook extensive building, rebuilding, and renovation works. Yet, despite these interventions, the original concept and theme of the religious structure have remained remarkably unscathed, as the extended structures and architectural alterations of the mosque seamlessly integrate and harmonise with the original design.¹⁰⁰ Most notably, the Umayyad Islamic representation of the 'Holy' has persevered and is still evident in the al-Aqsa Mosque's skyline in Bayt al-Maqdis, bearing witness to the mosque's remarkable resilience and continued significance in both architectural and religious terms.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

The al-Aqsa Mosque is a place of great religious significance for Muslims, and its architecture reflects the intersection of religious beliefs and political motives.¹⁰² The early Muslim connection to the holy site is exemplified by the actions of Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb and the architects of 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān. The materiality of the architecture is linked to the irregular topography of the site and the sanctity of memories, rather than the buildings themselves. The various buildings of the al-Aqsa Mosque reflect the semantic designations of their components, and their architectural splendour draws the Signs of the Hour (*al-Sā'ah*) onto the architectural scheme by depicting real versions of things that have happened and those to come. Umayyad architecture of al-Aqsa Mosque has challenged civilisations throughout history and had a very powerful impact on viewers. The eschatological symbolism of these buildings' heralds God's deep peace and forgiveness of in eternal life.¹⁰³ The holiness of the Rock, with its elegant architecture, declares itself with a global Islamic message and a majestic position that is a visual magnet in the urban landscape of Bayt al-Maqdis. While the architecture of the al-Aqsa Mosque is based on a set of Islamic stories and beliefs, some of which are intertwined with non-Muslim notions, the general intellectual framework is represented in the continuity of the sacredness of the place. However, it is important to treat accounts, narratives, and traditions mentioned in literary sources with caution, given the inconsistency of the narrative and the absence of uncertainties in its sources.

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¹⁰⁰ Al-Maqdisī (1987), *Ahsan al-Taqaṣīm*, pp. 143-148; Khusrū (1983), *Sifnamah*, pp. 56-65; Hamilton (1949), *The Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque*, pp. 53-74.

¹⁰¹ Necipoğlu (2008), "The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest," p. 62.

¹⁰² Milka Levy-Rubin (2017), "Why was the Dome of the Rock Built? A New Perspective on a Long-Discussed Question," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 80, No. 3, p. 464.

¹⁰³ Al-Maqdisī (1987), *Ahsan al-Taqaṣīm*, p. 139.

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