

The Temple Mount of Jerusalem from the destruction by Titus to the Rise of the Umayyads

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Jerusalem is a central city of three major monotheistic religions of today, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It was also sacred for the ancient Roman State Religion from the Hadrianic period into the Byzantine period. Shrines and cult places, central to all of the above mentioned religions, were placed on the Temple Mount, and studied by archaeologists and art historians. Historically Jerusalem has been torn apart by various conquerors and then rebuilt as: Aelia Capitolina, Hierosolyma, Al Qouds, Jerusalem. Such situation demonstrates that a holy place often will keep its status after a change of religion. Various Roman emperors such as Vespasian, Titus, Trajan, Hadrian, have left their marks here. The Israeli archaeologists, Benjamin Mazar together with his daughter Eilat Mazar, and scholars connected with the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, have excavated parts of the surroundings of the Temple Mount finding not only rich movable material, but quality buildings demonstrating usage of the area lying at the foot of the Temple Mount for some civil official purposes in the early Islamic period, may be as a governor palace.

Key words: *The Temple Mount, Aelia Capitolina, Hierosolyma, Al Qouds, Jerusalem, Titus, Umayyads*

Plinius the Elder describes Jerusalem of early first century A.D. as “Evidently the most famous town, not only in Judea, but in the entire East” (NH 70.), Strabon, born in Amasea in Pontus, slightly earlier tells more facts about the holy city and the countryside of Judea (Strabon XVI), Josephus Flavius presents the story of Jerusalem in details and from the Jewish point of view (Josephus Flavius). For the later periods information is fairly scarce.

“The Temple Mount” (Fig. 1), bound with religion and administration, rises proudly over Jerusalem today as it did for thousands of years. It is considered as one of the most holy places in the world, originally bound to Judaism, but also central to Christianity and Islam. As for the last, despite of the fact that officially since the year 661, the capital and the centre of religious life of Islam was moved to Damascus and subsequently to Bagdad.¹ Historically the Temple Mount gave its space to the First Temple, built by King Solomon and after its destruction for the Second Temple, built by Herod the Great, which in its turn was destroyed by fire by Roman soldiers during the Jewish War. This event was described in detail by Josephus Flavius². Hadrian, the founder of the pagan town named Aelia Capitolina may have placed here the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, and at the end this very spot became the holy place of worship for the Muslims.

¹ From the year 634 Palestine was infiltrated by the Arabs. Jerusalem surrendered peacefully in AD 638. Palestine was taken under Arab rule under kalif Omar (634 – 750). Under Ummayyad dynasty (661 – 750) the administrative and religious capital was placed in Damascus, to be moved by Abbasids in 750 to Bagdad.

² The story starts with history of Judea from the reign of Antiochos Epiphanes (175 – 164 BCE), deals in detail with siege of Jerusalem and ends with taking over of Masada and subduing revolt on Cyrenaika.



Fig. 1. "The Temple Mount" with "The Dome on the Rock". General view (author's photo).

As we see it today The Temple Mount constitutes the central religious point of Islam, expressed by the presence of al-Haram al Sharif which means "the noble enclosure" and the al-Aqsa Mosque. City of Jerusalem is in Arabic called al-Quds, meaning "the holy" and al-Haram al Sharif is the oldest surviving sacral monument of al-Quds. The research agrees that the mosque is situated on the place where earlier stood the Jewish Second Temple. Sultan Abd al-Malik removed the debris from Roman and mostly Byzantine periods, assembled on the Temple Mount and he discovered the natural rock sticking from the ground. This rock on the hill called Moria was through the centuries identified as the one on which according to the common beliefs the prophet Abraham offered his son to God. According to Muslim beliefs the boy's name was Ishmael, according to the Old Testament his name was Izaak.³

"The Dome on the Rock" (Fig. 2) is planned as a central building. "The Holy Rock" is encircled by a row of columns and together with the outer row of columns, being placed in a pattern of an octagon, form the limits for the pilgrim passage. The octagonal layout of the outer chain of columns follows the line of the outer walls of the building. In this way the ambulatory, facilitating for the visitors the viewing the holy rock, forms also the limits between the outer and inner space of this holy place.

Above the rock and the ambulatory stands a decorated cupola. It is copied from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, from the so-called Rotunda, as documented by Oleg Grabar⁴. The decoration is partially taken from this very place and transplanted to "The Dome on the Rocks".

The mosque is almost entirely built of spolia. Columns are of coloured marble, taken from various Roman buildings, as they were used on a large scale in official architecture of the Roman Empire since Trajan. Coloured marble plates are used as veneers for the covering of the lower portion of the walls of the Dome; they are taken from various Byzantine public buildings. Mosaics decorating the upper portions of the walls, arches, soffits, domes have golden leaves used extensively, they all are taken from various buildings representing Byzantine sacral architecture.

³ Gen. 22.1-18; 22.2 (Abraham shall go to the territory called Moria); 22.6-18 (the offer of Izaak).

⁴ Grabar 1996: passim. The discussion concerns both the shape of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (especially the dome) as well as its decoration as the source of inspiration for the Umayyad architecture. Note that the Rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre does not carry today its original decoration.



Fig. 2. *The Dome on the Rock, Schematic drawing illustrating the inner room of the temple (Courtesy Prof. Wolfgang Zwickel, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz).*

Grabar stresses, in connection with the usage of expensive materials coming from spolia, the aspect of state propaganda. Sultan Abd al-Malik in producing the picture of triumphant Islam wanted to surpass in splendor the most famous Byzantine churches, and such was the Church of the Holy Sepulchre⁵.

Standing on the southern edge of the Temple Mount, in the early Roman period occupied by the Herodian Royal Stoa, the “Al-Aqsa Mosque” was built during the reign of sultan Abd al-Malik or his son, al-Walid. It has the plan of the type “broad house”. Such a plan is typical for the early Islamic mosques and also leans on the Byzantine solutions. In the Byzantine period it was used for the planning of buildings where greater number of people gathered for common activities such as worship. Churches and synagogues were built for such purposes and therefore show as a rule an inner space divided by rows of columns in aisles, facilitating organization of space during ceremonies and consequently the orientation of prayers (Fig. 3). By having a broader central nave and for example three side aisles on each side of it, and subsidiarily by the marking of the direction of prayer by the placement of a niche in the end of the central nave and distinguishing it by providing a cupola⁶, - the Al Aqsa mosque shows until today a typical basilical form (Fig. 4).

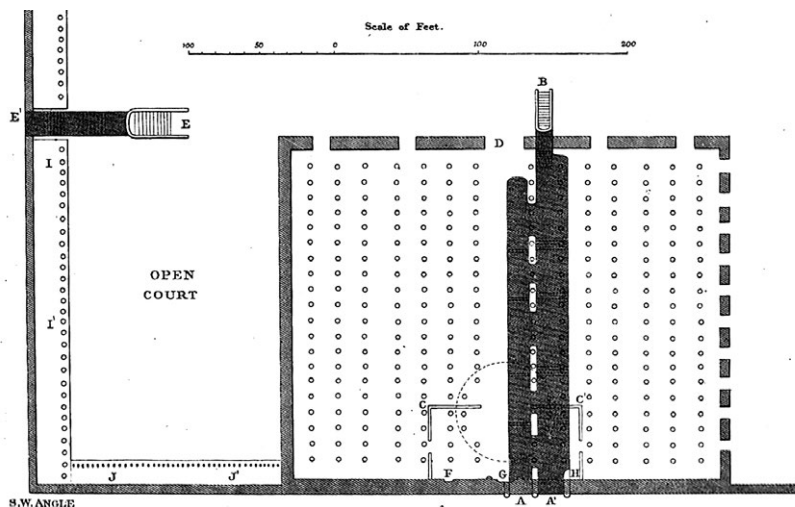


Fig. 3. *Al-Aqsa Mosque. Multiple naves solution. Plan of the mosque from AD 1047 (published by Le Strange 1890: p. 126).*

⁵ This aspect was also discussed by Grabar 1996: 104.

⁶ Called “gibla”. The gibla was placed on the south marking the direction towards Islam’s Holy Place – Mecca.



Fig. 4. Al Aqsa Mosque today. View towards the entrance (author's photo).

Thus the two most sacred buildings of early Islam continued the Byzantine tradition as to architectural shape of their space of worship and borrowed a general idea on how to divide and decorate their interior in order to provide functionality. In decoration, however, human figures were excluded in Islam, – instead script and symbols have been richly employed. Coloured mosaics and gold – symbols of richness and glory, – accentuated the greatness of architectural form.

The Umayyad sacral architecture as seen on the Temple Mount has nothing in common with the architecture of the Jewish Second Temple, which was burned and demolished during the Roman siege. The Temple was never rebuilt, the fragments of its architecture were – as archaeological sources document – used in the construction of the Roman town of Aelia Capitolina⁷. During the Roman period the dominant building on the Temple Mount was the Temple of Jupiter Heliopolitanus, constructed on the order of emperor Hadrian⁸.

The Jupiter Temple was demolished with the legalization of Christianity, further, the archaeological sources suggest that the entire area of the Temple Mount lost its importance as a religious central point and in effect its importance in the city. The area was apparently left in ruins to demonstrate the fall of both Judaism, building on the Old Testament, and of the Roman State religion. In literature often the saying by Jesus as expressed in Mark 13.1–4 is supplied as a prophetic reference to such complete destruction. According to this prediction the Temple will be demolished and Christianity will stay triumphant.

Hadrian also built a second forum in Aelia Capitolina. This forum was situated in the western part of the city. The temple on it was in the Byzantine period partially included in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre⁹ and remnants of Hadrianic construction are today partially seen in situ in the “White Russian Convent”. This spot was, however, situated outside the limits of Aelia Capitolina and must thus be excluded as a candidate to bear the name of the “Jupiter Temple”.

⁷ Excavations in the Roman Aelia Capitolina were conducted by The Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University, the results are being published in the Qedem series. Volume Five (in preparation) will deal with the Herodian period, volume Four describes the post 70 AD (Roman) period, The second volume, which appeared in 2003 presents Byzantine period.

⁸ No remains of this temple are known, therefore some researchers believe that Hadrian only erected a colossal statue of Jupiter Capitolinus. Recent large scale excavations by the Western Wall conducted by Benjamin Mazar, partially published, revealed large scale constructions facilitating the access to the Temple platform. They have been interpreted as fragments of a bridge leading from Tyropeon valley to the Temple Mount. Such construction is meaningful only in case of the monumentalisation of the former Temple Area. (B. Mazar conducted excavation also on southern side of the Temple Mount, where remnants after the Umayyad official architecture were recorded (to be discussed below).

⁹ It was also proposed that the western forum should be considered the Capitolium and the temple standing on it was proposed to be identified as the Hadrianic Temple of Jupiter. This suggestion is now abandoned.



Fig. 5. Madaba map. Floor mosaic in the Madaba Church, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, dated ca. A.D. 600 (author's photo).

Some information about the layout of Aelia Capitolina supplies the “Madaba map” (Fig. 5) a floor mosaic dated to ca. A.D. 600¹⁰. The plan is oriented with the east on the top, as usual for that period. One may see there the **cardo maximus**, the second **cardo** and **decumanus maximus**, some squares such as the one near today's Damascus gate, bearing the characteristic column may be easily recognized. Many large, roofed constructions, certainly churches, may also be spotted – but our knowledge is insufficient to recognize all public places. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre with the Rotunda of the Grave of Christ is dominating in the west. It was the largest and the most famous church of Jerusalem in the Byzantine period. The building was as well the largest and most splendid of its time, and is often reproduced as for instance on the rainbow arch of the Santa Maria Maggiore church in Rome¹¹, but also is to be found as a motif on Christian sarcophagi and on devotionalia and similar objects of minor art.

The excavations under the leadership of Benjamin Mazar and his daughter Eilat Mazar conducted on a large scale (total area of 8 acres) at the south-western corner of the Temple Mount enclosure in Jerusalem (years 1968 – 78).¹² At the southern and southwestern foot of the Temple Mount, mentioned above, after the removal of earth and all movable archaeological remains dated to various periods, a large building complex belonging to the time of reign of the Umayyad dynasty has been disclosed. The buildings are in the archaeological literature called “the Umayyad palace complex” and dated to the 8th century A.D. The buildings were one and two storied, flat roofed, rectangular in shape, the larger of them had a rectangular inner courtyard. Several rooms discovered under excavations, still carried interior decoration such as wall-paintings and floor-mosaics. The technical features and the choice of motifs decorating walls indicated that the paintings were produced in the Umayyad period. The size of the buildings, their careful planning and construction, the choice of the materials used, all indicated their representative, official function, probably also administrative, as proposed by excavators. Possibly also some religious functions were involved, as one of the buildings was directly connected with the Al-Aqsa Mosque through steps leading from the roof of the building below to the openings in the encircling wall and further to the yard of the Temple Area.¹³ The size and quality of the buildings were impressive for this early period in the history of Islam (Fig. 6). After

¹⁰ The map is still in situ in the church of Madaba, lying on the left side of the river Jordan, in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

¹¹ Dated to the 5th century A.D.

¹² B. Mazar *et al.* (first volume has already appeared).

¹³ Cf. Mazar 1975, where the reconstruction of the Umayyad buildings and the proposition of reconstruction of the connecting passage is proposed.

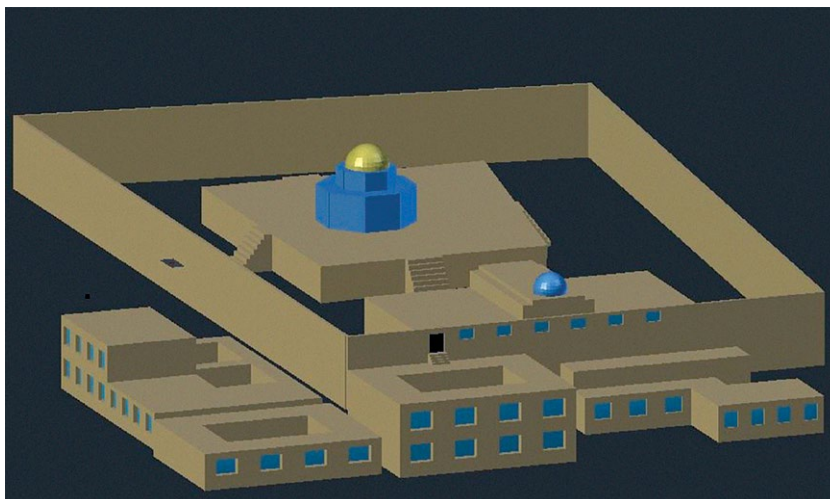


Fig. 6. The Temple Area during the reign of the Umayyads. Digital reconstruction leaning on materials discovered and published during the Benjamin Mazar and Eilat Mazar excavations executed by Kamil Sobczak, University of Lodz, Poland.

the death of Benjamin Mazar in 1995, Eilat Mazar became leader of the excavations, the results of which are being published in the Qedem series¹⁴.

The excavations close to the Temple Mount point to the constant architectural development not only on the top of the hill as was thought before, but also on the area lying close to it. The apparent placement of the official architecture close to the Temple Mount underline its importance during the Umayyad period, and at the same time signalizes the stability of the state. Today, the buildings lying on the top of the Temple Mount function as holy to Islam. The importance of the Temple Mount for Judaism, the Roman State Religion and Islam is, however, an acknowledged fact. This spot by the placement of the Roman temple of Jupiter was -although for short time- holy to the Roman world. The usage of the Temple Mount by three important religions: Judaism, the Roman State religion and Islam demonstrate in reality the theory of “continuity and change” – telling that a holy place often will keep its status also after the change of religion or a period of discontinuity. In the above discussed case politics was tightly bound to religion, what is the common feature when we speak about a state religion.

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¹⁴ The first volume of publication was signed by Benjamin and Eilat Mazar (1989), after the death of her father in 1995 Eilat Mazar directs the publication of the finds appearing as the Qedem Monograph Series.

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