

THE URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF THE AQSA MOSQUE AREA DURING THE UMAYYAD PERIOD.

BY MARWAN ABU KHALAF ABU KHALAF
THE INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC ARCHEOLOGY
ALQUDS AL-QUDS UNIVERSITY



Abstract:

This paper deals with Jerusalem as one of the holiest cities for Muslims after Mecca and Medina. Its holiness is attributed from being the first Qibla (Prayer direction) and from the famous Night Journey of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) between Mecca and Jerusalem.

The city received a special attention since it became an Islamic City mainly from the Second Orthodox Caliph Umar ibn al –Khattab, who came personally to capitulate the city, and from the First Umayyad Caliph Mu’awiyya Ibn Abi Sufian, who transferred the political centralization to the Holy City. The paper also focuses on the urban development of the Aqsa Mosque Area, which forms the eastern part of the pre-Islamic city, through rehabilitating the area to be convenient for the Muslims’ use. This is clearly apparent by the structure of the Aqsa Mosque’s building, done by Umar and Mu’awiya, and by the structure of the most prominent project in the history of Islamic Architecture which includes, The Dome of the Rock, The Aqsa Mosque, The Amir Palace (Dar Al-Imara), and the construction and reconstruction of walls and gates around the whole Area.



Figure (1): the Arial view of the Aqsa Mosque Area.

Jerusalem is one of the Holiest three cities for Muslims, following Mecca and

Madina. Its Holiness is attributed to two principal reasons: The first stems from its being the first Qibla before Muslims were directed towards the Ka'ba (Sura II.144), and the second from the famous Night Journey of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) between Mecca and Jerusalem. The description of this Journey is clearly recorded in the Qur'an verse on Isra' to al-Masjid al-Aqsa (Sura,17:1). In addition to these two events, many of the Prophet's Hadiths (Traditions) indicate the Holiness and the importance of this city for Muslims. The following Hadiths attest to this fact (You shall journey to but three Masjids (Mosques), Al-Masjid al-Haram(at Mecca),al-Masjid al-Aqsa(at Jerusalem) and my Masjid (at Madina) (al-Hanbali,1973,vol.1:231), and (Whoever wants to see a part of the Paradise, let him look to Bayt al-Maqdis). Another Traditional saying told by the Fourth Rashidi (Orthodox) Caliph "Ali Ibn abi Taleb is (The most exalted spot is Bayt al-Maqdis, and the most exalted Rock is the Rock of Bayt al-Maqdis) (Dabbagh,1988,vol.3:82-83).

Moreover, the Holy City is of many virtues, which are well recorded in historical sources. Most important of which are al-Wasiti, 1979; al-Suyuti, 1984; al-Hanbali, 1973 and al-Maqdisi 1994.

Jerusalem became an Islamic City in the first half of the seventh century A.D. when Muslims entered the Holy City in 16 A.H./A.D.638 during the reign of the Second Rashidi (Orthodox) Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab. According to the historical sources, the Caliph 'Umar came personally and especially to take over the City from its Patriarch, at that time, Sophronius who refused to capitulate the city to anyone except 'Umar. The sources also indicate that the Caliph declared a special Covenant (Sulh,'Ahd) to the Christians living in the city with its text developed in time to be known as the Covenant of 'Umar. In this Covenant the Caliph guaranteed further religious freedoms, safety of churches and secured lives, fortunes and properties of the people living in the city (al-Hanbali.1973,vol.1:254), al-Waqidi, 1966, vol. I:PP 168-169).

Despite the above mentioned secured Covenant, many of them left the city and were replaced by Muslim inhabitants who, according to the Encyclopedia of Islam mostly, were from Madina (Encyc.of Islam, 1980. Vol,V:324).

It is believed that Jerusalem was influenced by the Islamic System as soon as Muslims settled in the city, and there is no doubt that life was built basically

on religious and political basis. This can be seen from the attention which the Caliphs paid to Jerusalem starting from the time of the Second Muslim Rashidi (orthodox) Caliph”Umar ibn al-Khattab. He came personally to Jerusalem not as a religious leader but as the Prince of Believers “Amir al-Mu’mineen”, a title which carries a very clear political meaning. Also, his coming in person manifested the political dimension of the city since he was the Governor , the head of the army, the decision-maker, and the highest authority in the Islamic State.

Jerusalem had been singled out in this visit from other cities that were conquered in the reign of this Caliph. Umar did not enter Jerusalem to sign the peace treaty in accordance with his religious status only, but entered it as a Commander of the Faithful, including all clear political implications of the post. His visit to the Holy City expresses the religious and political importance of the city which represents the highest strategy of the State. The Caliph Umar ibn al Khattab became the Guarantor and Defender of the Holy Places after his entry to the city since authority had been taken away from the Byzantine rulers (Athamneh, 1996:386-388). As a result, Umar’s connection with Jerusalem continued after his first visit to the Holy City.

According to historians, Umar paid his second visit to the city in the year 643/644 where he ordered a mosque to be built, which is believed to be the first Aqsa Mosque (The ophans, 1982:42). He also worked during this visit on the administrative arrangements of the region. Historical sources indicate in this course that Jerusalem became the Capital of the Greater Syria and was also privileged by the independence of Justice, where the Caliph appointed Ubadah ibn Assamet Al-Samit Al Ansary as the first Judge in the Holy City (al-Maqdisi,1994:315, al-Hanbali,1973, vol.1:261.

Jerusalem came later under the Umayyads Ummayyads’ command who ruled the Islamic world from 660-750. Mu’awiya became the first First Umayyad caliph Caliph. He provided the centralization essential for the survival, continuing the expansion of the Arab State.

The Umayyds lent significant importance to Jerusalem to strengthen their political and religious relationship with the Holy City. The first is clear with the Umayyad Caliph Mu’awiya ibn abi Sufian who took his oath of allegiance (Bay’a) in Jerusalem(al-Maqdisi, 1994:312), and was then known as the Prince of the Holy

Land (Amir al-Ard al-Muqaddasa). This event from Mu'awiya gave the Holy City a further political importance; it became not only the central part of the Great Syria but for all the Islamic State . The historical sources, recorded several indications that Mu'awiya used to spent most of his time in Jerusalem. He used to meet with people in its quarters and often delivered the Friday Sermon in the Aqsa Mosque (Ibn al-Murajja, 1995:148). As for the political practice, the political capacity of Jerusalem during Mu'awiya's reign has exceeded the capacity of any regional Capital of the Syrian districts or other Islamic countries. Jerusalem was not only a center of region but it was the Capital of all the Greater Syria under Mu'awiya's power (Athamneh,1996:404).

Comparing Damascus with Jerusalem in the Umayyad period, it appears that Jerusalem's role as a theatre for political events far exceeded Damascus' role; especially at the Caliph's level. It was not a coincidence that Mu'awiya's oath of allegiance took place in Jerusalem as a matter of non-reversible attitude, regarding this matter, the other Umayyad Caliphs followed Mu'awiya's tradition and took their oath of allegiance in Jerusalem. 'Abed al-malik Ibn Marwan, the Second founder of the Ummayyad rule, took his oath of allegiance in Jerusalem in 65A.H.684A.D (Ahtamneh, 1996:410). This connection with the Holy City was also strongly developed as he had resided for a long time in Syria and was the Governor of the Province of Palestine during the Caliphate of Mu'awiya, which ended in 680A.D.

Moreover, with Suleiman Ibn Abed Al-Malik the city reached its centralization peak during his rule. When he came to Jerusalem, after the death of al-Walid, he received the delegation in the Aqsa Mosque courtyard, the area between the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa Mosque's buildings. He also resided in the city and moved the official documents (Dawawins) and the income tax document (Diwan al-Kharaj) to Jerusalem during his reign (al-Hanbali,1973,vol.281-282). The accounts indicate that there can be no doubt that Suleiman took the final decision to make Jerusalem the Capital of the Islamic Caliphate. To prove the previous point, he was not there only to receive delegations, but also for dealing with people's needs and problems that were supported by the documents (dawawins) which he moved to the city (Ibn al-Murajja,1995:226;Athamneh,1996:413). Though the assumption of him constructing the al- Ramla has weakened the

centrality of Jerusalem appears with no evidence. Though Suleiman planned the city of Ramla and built parts of it, such as the Palace and the dye house, but he the mosque he wanted to built wasn't completed during his reign but by his successor 'Umar Ibn Abed al-Aziz. Therefore, having the mosque not being completed during Suleiman's reign clarifies the incorrect opinion which connects both matters (Athamneh 1996:401). Jerusalem continued to be the same during the rule of his successors, mainly during 'Umar Ibn Abed al-Aziz, who gathered the high ranking employees of the Islamic State to discuss its affairs in Jerusalem. This, as a matter of fact, confirms that all the official documents continued to be available in the city during his reign.

The Layout of the City:

This importance by the Umayyads was manifested by the development of the Holy City. The layout and planning of the city during this period continued to be the same as the Byzantine one but with significant change concentrated mainly on the eastern part within and around the enclosure of the Aqsa Mosque Area. This can be taken from Madaba map which is considered as the earliest evidence to tell us about the plan of Jerusalem, before the Umayyad period.



Figure (2): The Madaba map showing the plan of Jerusalem

The map was found in Madaba, in Jordan, decorating the floor of a church. It was discovered in 1896 and it dates back to the 6th century during the reign

of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian. The layout of Jerusalem in Madaba map is important not for the shape of the city, but for its components. The map shows the city walls with its towers and gates of which the main northern one is the gate of the column (in Arabic Bab al- A'mud) which is characterized by its open space plot (plaza) with a column in the centre of the plot. The Jaffa Gate is on the south western part, which today is occupied by the Citadel and the Jaffa Gate. Also the major streets, the Cardo, with its two arcades straight from Damascus Gate to the Zoin Gate , and the eastern colonnaded street with only one row of columns, following the low road into the (bab al –Wad) Tyropean Valley and the Dung Gate of today. The Decumanus Street connects the two north–south roads to the western Gate and the administrative or political Center of the city. It also shows the three major sanctuaries, the complex of the Holy Sepulcher, the New Church, and the church of mount Zion (Grabar 1996:31; Avi-Yonah 1954; Avigad 1980:211-212).

This development in the Holy City is proved by the architectural buildings constructed by the Umayyads on the Aqsa Mosque Area. They introduced to the city a distinguished style of architecture characterized by employing diverse building techniques, workmen of several different nationalities and a combination of eastern and western elements which produced characteristic Islamic monuments. These monuments were built according to a well arranged and harmonious plan, started at the beginning of their rule, and it consisted of: the walls and gates of the city, the Dome of the Rock, the Aqsa Mosque, and the Caliph's Palace . The earliest indication of structure on the Aqsa Mosque area is reported by the Christian traveler Arculf who visited Jerusalem in 670 A.D. and lived in the city for about nine months. He reported nothing about the Islamic City of Jerusalem except for his short description of a square prayer house “on the spot where the Temple once stood near the eastern wall, the Saracens have now erected a square house of prayer in rough manner by raising beams and planks upon some remains of old ruins; this is their place of worship and it is said that it will hold about three thousand men” (wright 1948:1-2).

The period during which Arculf visited Jerusalem coincided with the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Mu'awiya, who ruled from 40-60A.H. 660-680A.D. Therefore, the Mosque which was reported by Arculf is either that built by Umar and restored

by Mu'awiya or the Mosque which was built by Mu, awiya..

The Walls and Gates:

To achieve this great and harmonious project on the eastern and southern sides of the Holy City it is important for the walls around the area to be repaired and protected so as to hatch the structural arrangements of these monuments. According to research work and analytical studies on the gates surrounding the Aqsa Mosque area, it appears that they are all of Umayyad date construction. In his article (Bayt al-Maqdis part I), Burgoyne dated several gateways to the Umayyad period. Some of them are the present Triple Gate, al-Hitta, al-'Atm, al-Silsila, the Double Gate and the Golden Gate. However according to him the three other Gates: al-Ghawanmeh, al-Nazir, and al-Asbat are more likely to be part of the major Umayyad renovation of the Aqsa Mosque area Area (Burgoyne1999:215), (Eliad 1985: 20-21). Another indication regarding this matter, as a result of research by Seligman, confirms the Umayyad structure of the Double Gate and the Triple Gate located on the southern wall of the Aqsa Mosque. Seligman also agreed with other Scholars upon the Umayyad date of structure for the Solomon's Stables, which were built by the Umayyad rulers in the seventh century as part of the extensive work to re-establish the esplanade of the Aqsa Mosque Area, and also included the external walls (Seligman2007:37).

Inside these walls the area was adorned by the two monumental buildings, the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa Mosque, which are among the earliest achievements of Muslim Architecture.

Monumental architecture means power, in more specificity, political power. It reveals not only the aesthetic and formal preferences but also the aspirations, power struggles and material culture for society. This can be declared by the forceful presence of the Dome of the Rock as was the first monument sponsored by a Muslim ruler that was conceived as a work of art, a monument deliberately transcending its function by the quality of its forms and expression.





Figure (3): The Aqsa Mosque Area looking East-West.

A monument constructed to make a statement for the whole city of Jerusalem and for its surroundings that it is the first landmark in the city. Even in the contemporary setting of a modern city with its tall massive buildings over the hilly landscape, the Dome of the Rock, with its unique external shape and shining Dome, still dominates much of the old city of Jerusalem (Grabar 1996:54,104). The Dome was built by ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan between 66 and 72 A.H. 685-691 A.D. and covers the Holy Rock.



Figure (4): General view of the Dome of the Rock

It is octagonal in shape and is composed of an outer octagon shape, forming the structure of the building, and an inner octagon shape made up of arcades carrying

the ceiling, extended from the outer octagon and the dome's drum. There is also a circular arcade whose piers are separated by three columns which carry the circular masonry drum bearing wooden –doubled domed structure (Creswell, 1989: 19-40).

The reason for building this monument, according to Jerusalem native Geographer al-Maqdisi, is to compete in splendor with the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (al-Maqdisi 1906:173). However, al-Ya'qubi, the ninth century Historian , in the contrast believed that it was built to draw the pilgrim traffic away from Mecca and Medina to Jerusalem (Al-Ya,qubi 1883,II:311). The first account by al Maqdisi appears to be convincing, however, the one by al Ya'qubi was refuted by Scholars, as he bore allegiance to the Shite faction of Islam, whereas the Umayyads were adherents to the rival Sunni Sect. It appears to me that the construction of this monument is attributed to a political reason probably indicating the Islam triumph over the other religions, and also shows the power and control of the Umayyad rulers.

The second monument inside the walls is the Aqsa Mosque building. It is the largest building on the Aqsa area, located on the southern side of it. Unlike all mosques of this kind, it does not have clearly delineated courtyard of its own, unless one considers the whole Aqsa Mosque Area as the “sahn” court for this prayer hall (Grabar 1996:117).





Figure (5): General view showing the present Aqsa Mosque.

The Umayyad Aqsa Mosque was built between 90-96A.H. 709-715A.D., by the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik and his son al-Walid. The plan of the mosque comprises of central and lateral naves. The central nave is wider and higher than the laterals, all covered with wooden roof with lead sheets and ended with a dome on the southern side, and it is surrounded by three lateral naves on its east and west sides . The mosque's seven gates are open to the north. The tenth century Geographer al-Maqdisi, however, indicated that the Aqsa Mosque had fifteen gates open to the north side (al-Maqdisi 1906:169), and supporting his description, The Persian traveler Nasiri Khisru Khusrau who visited the city in 1045, gave the same description for the plan of the Mosque (Nasir-I Khusrau 1970:25).

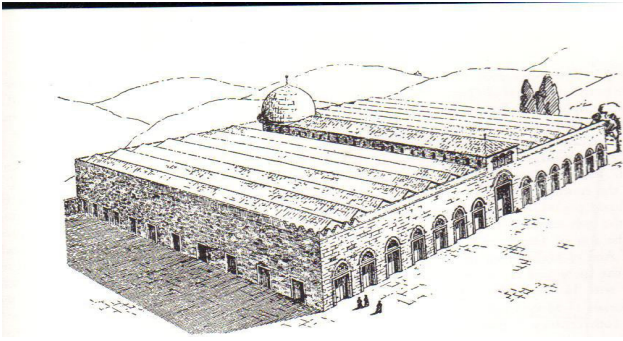


Figure (6): Reconstruction of the original Aqsa Mosque, 8th century A.D. after Rosen Ayalon (Jerusalem Revealed).

The question which has to be asked is, if that was the ‘Abd al-Malik and al-Walid Mosque, then where is the mosque of Umar and Mu’awiyau’a which was indicated by Arculf. To clarify that a historical account by al-Mutahar Ibn Taher al-Maqdisi indicates that Bayt al-Maqdis continued to be ruined until the coming of Islam, and it was built up by Umar and then by Mu’awiyya ibn Abi Sufian (Athamneh 1996:400).



Figure (7): Solomon's Stables. The discovered arches after restoration.

After the renovation of the Solomon's Stables, an emergency gate was required for the safety of people praying inside. The work by the Waqf succeeded to uncover seven arches on the northern wall of the hall.

These arches are semicircular in shape, built of well dressed stones on strong stone piers. The architectural analysis dated the structure to the Umayyad period, therefore the structure of the Solomon's Stables could probably be identified as the mosque of Umar which was renovated by Mu'awiya, and the one seen by Arculf, though it could be the first Aqsa Mosque. However, regarding the building which was built by Abd al-Malik and his son al-Walid, which part of it still stands is the second Aqsa Mosque (Rosen Ayalon 1989:7), I would believe that the Umayyad modified the available structure by removing the wooden roof, reinforced its piers, and reconstructed the roof using the barrel vaults system, so as to be strong enough to carry the huge structure of the second Aqsa Mosque building.



Figure (8): Solomon’s Stables, barrel vault roof and piers.

The third monument constructed on the area is the Complex of Dar al-Imara. It was discovered behind the southern wall of the Aqsa Mosque on the south west corner.

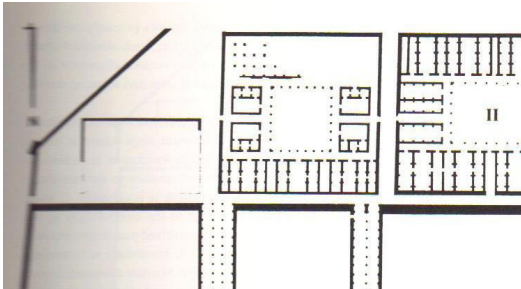


Figure (9): Plan and photo of the Umayyad Palace and its auxiliary buildings.

Six structures were found evidently planned as complex in conjunction with the Aqsa Mosque Area. To make room for this complex of the Palace and the other joined buildings, the Umayyad architects were forced to rezone and replan the

area adjoining the Aqsa Mosque. The most important structure was building II, which the excavator suggested that it was a palace. The palace is rectangular in shape with open courtyard paved with Glastone. The court was surrounded by a covered portico supported by columns, consisted of groups of rectangular halls, the northern and southern sides being similarly arranged and the eastern and the western likewise. The roofs are of vaulting system supported by piers adjoining the long wall. Several of the wider halls had columns along the longer axis. There were two main gateways in the center of the eastern and western sides, however, the main gate was that on the eastern side. On the basis of its plan, size and other particular features, such as the probable existence of a bridge spanning the street from its upper floor to the Aqsa Mosque. (Rosen-Ayalon 1989:9; Creswell 1989:95; Ben-Dove 1985:293).

The number and the size of these building appears to be enough to host the residency of the Caliph and the whole governmental administration of the Islamic State, which confirms the Umayyads' principle to make Jerusalem their administrative centre, which means the capital in the modern sense.

Conclusion:

From what proceeded, we conclude that Jerusalem was influenced by the Islamic system as soon as it became an Islamic City . This can be seen clearly from the time of the Orthodox and Umayyad Caliphs through urbanizing the Aqsa Mosque Area. This urbanization primarily represented by the building of a mosque by the Caliph Umar, and then renovated by Mu'awiya. This mosque is the one which was seen by Arculf in 670 and called today the Solomon's Stables. The Architectural analysis of the building and its location would confirm that representing the first Aqsa Mosque.

The Urbanization on the Aqsa Mosque area continued later by the Umayyad Caliphs, who planned for a big architectural project to be considered as the most prominent project in the history of the Islamic Architecture. This project included the structure of the Dome of the Rock, a remarkable building still stand stands in the city. The Second Aqsa Mosque the largest Mosque of the period, substituted the first Aqsa Mosque. The Amir Palace (Dar al Imara) with its number five

buildings and its sizes were built in fact to host the residency of the Caliph and the administrative institutions of the Islamic State. Also the walls and gates of the area were constructed and repaired so as protect the structural arrangements of these monuments. Therefore, the urbane development of the Aqsa Mosque area through the achievement of this project indicates the will of the Umayyad to show their power, and their intention for the Holy City to be their own capital in the modern sense.

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