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THE FOUNDATION OF THE QUBBAT AS-SAKHRAH SANCTUARY AS AN EXPRESSION OF ABD-AL MALIK IBN MARWAN'S PIETY OR POLITICAL PREMISES

August 636 A.D. saw one of the most momentous battles in the history of the Middle East. In the wake of an Arab victory over Byzantine armies, the road to Syria and Palestine stood wide open for the invading forces of the Hejaz. Several months later, in February 638 A.D. (the exact date remains disputed), with no alternative in sight, Jerusalem surrendered to the Muslim troops. Upon reaching agreement with the invaders, Jerusalem was visited by Caliph Umar I, known for his austere lifestyle. In the course of his visit, the caliph took a tour of the city's sanctuaries, a.o. the Anastasis. He was most interested, however in the Temple Mount and the remainder of the Temple of the Lord. Having overcome a number of problems, Umar found just the place he was looking for at the southernmost tip of the esplanade, where ordered to erect a mosque, which became known as the al-Aqsa during the reign of the Umayyad dynasty. Jerusalem thus saw the foundation of its first mosque, and the Temple Mount acquired a new meaning¹. The end of the 7th century marked the construction of the Qubbat as-Sakhrah (Dome of the Rock) on top of the Temple Mount, which went on to become one of Islam's most primary sanctuaries. The surviving sources suggest two rationales for its construction: some attribute it to Caliph Abd al-Malik's policies, while others see the sanctuary as a manifestation of the caliph's piety. Each of these reasons, however, seems far from plausible. This study attempts to provide a synthetical critique of the caliph's alleged motivations, while also suggesting other reasons behind the construction of the Dome of the Rock.

1. Architecture of the Qubbat as-Sakhrah sanctuary

Situated atop the Temple Mount (Al-Haram ash-Sharif, Noble Sanctuary), the Qubbat as-Sakhrah is the oldest surviving piece of Muslim architecture in Jerusalem. Founded by Caliph Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan (reign: 685-705), in the western section of the Mount² [fig. 1.]. The sanctuary was erected as an octagonal structure, likely inspired by the preexisting Byzantine

¹ For more on the capture of Jerusalem by the Arabs, and the subsequent visit of Caliph Umar I to Jerusalem, see P. Nowogórski, *Od „Madinat Bajt al-Maqdis” do „al-Quds”. Jerozolima w cywilizacji wczesnego islamu (VII–VIII w.)*, in: *Hereditatem Cognoscere. Studia i szkice dedykowane profesor Marii Miśkiewicz*, ed. Z. Kobyliński, Warszawa 2004, p. 30-32.

² It should be stressed that the Qubbat as-Sakhrah is not strictly a mosque, but rather a memorial, and a sanctuary.



Fig. 1

architecture³. Bounded by 20.4m long walls, the inside is divided into three sections (known in Arabic as the *mawazin*) [fig. 2.]. The first two are separated by a colonnade supporting the arcades, which run parallel to the outer walls. The third, central section is delineated with an oval colonnade, which surrounds the rock identified as the place from which the Prophet began his *al-miraj*. Towering over the building is a 25m tall dome with a diameter of 20m. The dome is made of two wooden bowls, mounted on a tall, two-part base. The interior layout

seems to suggest that the inner space of the building was fitted to the ritual circling of the rock situated inside. This, in turn, is suggestive of the *tawaf*, a rite inherently linked to the ritual of the *Hajj*, performed in Mecca. Such an interpretation contributed to the widely accepted hypothesis behind the foundation of the Qubbat as-Sakhrah sanctuary, and its role in Islam.

According to the Muslim historian Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1256 A.D.), the construction of the sanctuary began in 69 A.H. (after the *Hegira*) and concluded in 72 A.H., i.e. before the end of the second *fitna*. While it is difficult to determine the exact date of its completion, a number of scholars contend that the Qubbat as-Sakhrah was finished at the turn of 690 and 691 A.D. (i.e. 72 A.H.)⁴.

2. The political rationale for the foundation of the Qubbat as-Sakhrah

The main topic of this study concerns the reasons behind the foundation of the Qubbat as-Sakhrah, as well as the functions performed by the sanctuary. Answering these two questions in a straightforward and comprehensive fashion is rather impossible. Written records on the subject date back only to the 9th century A.D., i.e. almost two hundred years after the foundation of the memorial, and list two motives for its construction. The first one may have been of political nature, as the caliph sought to make Jerusalem the new destination of the *hajj* in place of Mecca, which had been occupied by his political adversaries. The second rationale for the erection of the Qubbat as-Sakhrah was religious and involved the commemoration of Prophet Muhammad's *night journey from Mecca to the al-Aqsa Mosque*. However, according to the aforementioned sources, these two alleged reasons were likely brought up post factum, upon completion of the Temple Mount sanctuary. It is also possible that the authors of these written sources simply rewrote earlier accounts (which have not survived to this day) or recorded the existing pieces of oral tradition.

³ While scholars keep arguing about the direct inspirations behind the Qubbat as-Sakhra, it is commonly assumed the building was influenced by Byzantine architecture, see A.M. Islam, A. Al-Hamad, *The Dome of the Rock: Origin of its Octagonal Plan*, "Palestine Exploration Quarterly", 139/2007, no. 2, p. 109-128. There are also other, isolated hypotheses, such as the one put forward by F.E. Peters, who suggests that the building was erected on the foundations of an orthogonal Byzantine church, whose construction began in the 630s, see F.E. Peters, *Who built the Dome of the Rock*, "Graeco-Arabica" 2/1983, p. 7.

⁴ See Sh. Blair, *What Is The Date Of The Dome Of The Rock?*, in: *Bayt Al-Maqdis: `Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, ed. J. Raby i J. Johns, vol. 1, Oxford 1992, p. 59-87.

In his *History (Ta'arikh)*, al-Ya'qubi (d. 897-898 A.D. / 284 A.H.) writes that as Mecca fell into the hands of Anti-caliph Abd Allah Ibn az-Zuhri, Caliph Abd al-Malik prohibited Syrian Muslims from performing the *Hajj* to the al-Haram mosque, having learned that the rebel leader forced the arriving pilgrims into swearing an oath of allegiance to him. Abd al-Malik's pious subjects were indignant with the ban, unable to honor the vital obligation imposed by the Prophet himself. In response to the public outcry, the jurist Ibn Shihab az-Zuhri explicated the meaning of Prophet's final words to the people. Interpreting the hadith of the three holy mosques (one in Mecca, one in Jasrib/Medina, and one in Jerusalem), az-Zuhri asserted that the Prophet designated the third mosque to be the sacred place for Syrian Muslims, adding that,

since the mosque stood where the Prophet had last stepped foot on Earth before his heavenly journey, the rock was to be considered as the Kaaba. Pursuant to az-Zuhri interpretation of the hadith, the caliph erected the Dome of the Rock, and draped it with silk curtains⁵.

Al-Ya'qubi's account perfectly corresponds with the political situation in the early years of Abd al-Malik's reign. The Muslim world was torn by the second *fitna*. The war broke out 683 A.D., but it was a consequence of the earlier events, i.e. the killing of Husayn ibn-Ali and his family in the Battle of Karbala in 680 A.D.. The Shiites and the Kharijites intensified their anti-Umayyad operations. In Mecca, Abd Allah Ibn az-Zubayr, son of az-Zubayr ibn al-Awwam (commander in the first *fitna*), launched a rebellion and proclaimed himself caliph. Iraq, too, rose against the Umayyad Caliphate. First ruled by its own caliphs, it was subjugated by the Anti-caliph of Hejaz (since 687). Uprisings in Syria were quickly stifled by Marwan Ibn al-Hakam, who was proclaimed caliph⁶. It was only in 692 A.D. that Marwan I's successor, Caliph Abd al-Malik, overcame the rebellion. One of his commanders, al-Hajjaj (ca. 661-714 A.D.) took Mecca, killed Ibn az-Zubayr in a duel, and restored unity across the Caliphate. As a result of the military operations in the area, the al-Kaaba sanctuary was severely damaged⁷.

Given the above state of affairs, political factors may have seemed as the most probable cause for redirecting the *Hajj* from Mecca to Jerusalem. The reasons for the foundation of the Dome of the Rock detailed by al-Ya'qubi were accepted without reservations by Ignaz Goldziher in his seminal late-19th century *Muhammedanische Studien*.⁸ Goldziher's arguments were largely reiterated by a number of scholars, including K.A.C. Creswell, A. Rippin, J.

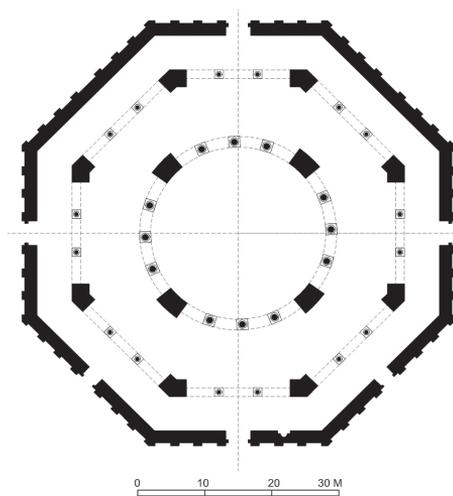


Fig. 2

⁵ Ahmad b. Abu Ya'qub Ibn Wadiah al-Ya'qubi, *Tarikh*, ed. M.T. Houtsma, vol. 2, Leiden 1883, p. 311.

⁶ Before he was proclaimed caliph, Marwan Ibn al-Hakam from a side branch of the Umayyad family defeated Ibn al-Zubayr's allies in the Battle of Marj Rahit (684 A.D.), but failed to drive al-Zubayr out of Mecca.

⁷ It was precisely those events that tainted the Umayyad family in the Muslim tradition of the following centuries.

⁸ I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies (Muhammedanische Studien)*, ed. S.M. Stern, vol. 2, New York and Chicago 1971, pp. 44-45.

von Ess, or A. Elad⁹, albeit some of them did put some of its aspects into question. Andrew Rippin accentuated the meaning of the *Hajj* in early Islam, and the significance of Mecca as its destination in times of war and peace. Conversely, Amikan Elad pointed to al-Ya'qubi's lack of credibility. Elad's skepticism was echoed by Oleg Grabar, a vocal critic of al-Ya'qubi's reliability, who claimed that had Caliph Abd al-Malik indeed redirected the Hajj from Mecca to Jerusalem, it would have been tantamount to political suicide¹⁰. In fact, it would be difficult to imagine the caliph fall on the doctrine with regard to one of its fundamental tenets, ordained by the Prophet himself. By doing so, Abd al-Malik would have risked an equivalent of excommunication, becoming a *kafir*, i.e. a denier of the doctrine. Would the caliph truly entertain such a possibility, given the raging revolts in Hejaz and Iraq?

Another problematic factor in al-Ya'qubi's account stems from its uniqueness. His is the earliest surviving Muslim source explaining the caliph's reasons behind the construction of the Dome of the Rock. Echoes of al-Ya'qubi's commentary can be found in the account written by Eutychios of Alexandria. Al-Ya'qubi was an Iranian Muslim geographer, who spent many years in Armenia and Khorasan, before he settled in Egypt for the final dozen-or-so years of his life. As a Shiite, al-Ya'qubi was likely ill-disposed to the Umayyad caliphs, hence his version of the origins of the Dome of the Rock may have resulted from his background. It seems plausible that al-Ya'qubi wanted to cast the Umayyads (especially Abd al-Malik) in a negative light, and hence depicted the caliph's motives in such a way as to suggest he was a *kafir*.

Analogical (or at least similar) explanations are hard to find in the accounts of other esteemed early Muslim historians, such as at-Tabari (839-923 A.D.) and al-Baladhuri (d. 892 A.D.), both of whom were Persian. More striking, however, is the lack of the aforementioned information in the writings of al-Muqaddasi (946-988). This Jerusalem-born Arab traveler and geographer left behind one of the best descriptions of his home city and the entire Palestine. Al-Muqaddasi description is a testament to his in-depth knowledge of Jerusalem and its history, while also revealing him as a poignant commentator of his times¹¹. It seems impossible for a writer of al-Muqaddasi's perceptiveness to completely ignore the fundamentally important decision to redirect the *Hajj* from Mecca to Jerusalem. The fact that al-Muqaddasi makes no mention of it whatsoever diminishes the credibility of al-Ya'qubi's account even further.

One should also point to two bits of information provided by al-Ya'qubi. At one point, he mentions that Abd al-Malik made his *Hajj* to Mecca in 75 A.H., i.e. a year after the Umayyad capture of Jerusalem¹². In another passage, al-Ya'qubi writes that al-Hajjaj commenced

⁹ K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account Of Early Muslim Architecture*, Beirut 1968, pp. 17-18; A. Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs And Practices*, vol. 1: The Formative Period, London i New York 1990, pp. 53-54; J. van Ess, *'Abd al-Malik and The Dome of the Rock: An Analysis of Some Texts*, in: *Bayt Al-Maqdis: 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, op. cit., p. 89-104; A. Elad, *Why Did 'Abd al-Malik Build the Dome of the Rock? A Re-Examination of Muslim Sources*, in: *Bayt Al-Maqdis: 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, op. cit., p. 33-58.

¹⁰ O. Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, New Haven 1987, pp. 47-48.

¹¹ *Ahsan at-takasim fi marifat al-akalim* (The best division of knowledge on the climate) contains descriptions of the respective regions of the Arab world. Al-Maqdisi's brilliant descriptions were first noticed in the West in the late 19th century Guy le Strange; see G. le Strange, *Palestine Under the Moslems. A Description of Syria and the Holy Land from A.D. 650 to 1500*, London 1890, pp. 5-6; for more on Al-Maqdisi's treatise, see B.A. Collins, *Al-Muqaddasi. The Man and His Work*, Ann Arbor 1974.

¹² Al-Ya'qubi, *Tarikh*, op. cit., p. 336.

reconstruction works at al-Kaaba to repair all damages done to the Black Stone in the course of quashing Anti-caliph Ibn za-Zubayr's rebellion¹³. Both mentions clearly suggest the significance of Mecca to the Umayyad ruler.

Furthermore, it is a known fact that at least four groups of Muslims made the *Hajj* to Mecca even in the midst the second *fitna*, i.e. in 687-688 A.D., and that their pilgrimages included the *tawaf*. This may point to a possible armistice between the warring parties, or to a selective suspension of hostilities to enable the pilgrims fulfill their religious obligations. In at-Tabari's account, one may even find mentions of the leaders of each pilgrimage: Abd al-Malik, Ibn za-Zubayr (Anti-caliph), Najj the Kharijite, and Ibn al-Hanafiyah (Shiite). Could it have been at that time that Ibn za-Zubayr claimed allegiance from the other Muslims, as al-Ya'qubi has it? Regardless of this, it appears that all Muslims saw the Hajj exclusively as a pilgrimage to Mecca, and performed it even under difficult circumstances. Hence, Jerusalem cannot have been an acceptable substitute.

According to al-Ya'qubi, the choice of Jerusalem as a destination for the *Hajj* was significantly influenced by Ibn Shihab az-Zuhri, who visited Abd al-Malik (presumably in Damascus), impressing the caliph with his knowledge and piety. The Damascus meeting was the first encounter of the two, with Abd al-Malik provisioning the scholar with money and sending him to Medina to continue his studies. This last piece of information may indicate that Az-Zuhri was still a very young man at the time¹⁴. Az-Zuhri died on the 17th day of Ramadan in 124 A.H., i.e. 742 A.D., however his exact date of birth remains unknown, falling between 50 and 58 A.H. (i.e. 670-678 A.D.)¹⁵. As of the beginning of the construction of the Dome of the Rock, its primary proponent was between fourteen and twenty years of age. One may presume that if az-Zuhri's meeting with Caliph Abd al-Malik did indeed take place, it must have occurred towards the end of the caliph's life, at the turn of the 6th and 7th century A.D. Amikan Elad attempted to explicate the problem by referring to traditional accounts. Elad contended that two facts should be established. Firstly, the caliph *heard of* az-Zuhri's views, not necessarily in person, around 72 A.H. (691 A.D.). Secondly, Abd al-Malik and az-Zuhri's meeting occurred several years later, in 80 or 81 A.H. (ca. 700 A.D.)¹⁶. Subtly differentiating between the caliph *hearing of*, and *meeting with*, az-Zuhri, Elad's explanation seems somewhat doubtful. It is puzzling to think that the caliph heeded the advice of a youngster instead of following an established authority on the subject, in particular with some of the Prophet's contemporaries still alive.

3. The Prophet's Night Journey and the religious rationale for the foundation of the Qubbat as-Sakhra

The foundation of the Qubbat as-Sakhra may also have been driven by the intention to commemorate *Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey* from the al-Haram mosque in Mecca to the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. The earliest notations of the hadiths only date back the 9th century A.D., making it virtually impossible to unequivocally determine whether they were in

¹³ O. Grabar, *The Umayyad Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem*, "Ars Orientalis", 3/1959, p. 46.

¹⁴ A.A. Duri, Al-Zuhri, *A Study on the Beginnings of History Writing In Islam*, „Bulletin Of The School Of Oriental & African Studies”, 19/1957, pp. 10-11.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ A. Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship*, Leiden 1995, p. 155.

existence in the late 7th century. It is beyond any doubt, however, that the tradition of *Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey* weighed heavily on the subsequent status of Jerusalem in Islam.

One night, Muhammad was born from sleep by Archangel Jibril, who cut the Prophet's chest open, took out his heart, and bathed it in the Zamzam Well. He then put the heart back inside, stitched Muhammad's wound and led him to a white horse named al-Burāq. The steed took the Prophet to Jerusalem, stopping by at Mount Sinai, in Bethlehem, and Hebron. All the while, Muhammad was accompanied by Jibril. Having arrived in Jerusalem, the Prophet met Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, with whom he prayed at Solomon's Temple¹⁷. This part of the journey is referred to as *al-isra*.

Following was the second section of the journey, which involved the Prophet's ascension to heaven, known as *al-miraj*. Crossing through the seven stages of heaven, Muhammad met a number of prophets, including Ismail, Adam, Jesus, John son of Zechariah, Joseph son of Jacob, Idris and Moses. In the seventh heaven, Muhammad saw Abraham sitting on the throne. The Prophet subsequently ascended to the *boundary of all boundaries*, and traversed an *infinite space*, preparing for his meeting with God. Having faced the throne of God in a distance of *two bow lengths or nearer*¹⁸, Muhammad was in a state of complete elation, while maintaining rational perception. The Prophet conversed with God, who gave him numerous instructions (a.o. praying directions for fellow Muslims), before the Prophet returned to Mecca. As per Muslim tradition, upon waking up, Muhammad related the event to Umm Hani, who warned him against telling it to others. Oblivious to her advice, Muhammad shared the tale of his ascension with fellow members of the Quraysh tribe, many of whom were in disbelief, noticing it would have been impossible for Muhammad to make a return journey to Jerusalem within a single night, given that it took a caravan from Mecca a month to barely get there¹⁹.

The hadiths refer to the two stages of the *night journey* with two different terms, *al-isra* and *al-miraj*, respectively. While the former appears in the Qur'an (Sura 17, *The Night Journey*), it is difficult to derive *al-isra* from the Qur'an, which merely mentions that God transferred his Servant from the al-Haram mosque in Mecca to the al-Aqsa in Jerusalem. One would struggle to find any clues that the said passage refers to Muhammad's *night journey*. The latter Arabic term, *al-miraj*, may stand for a ladder, rungs in a ladder, or an act of physical or spiritual ascension. In other words, *al-miraj* encapsulates the Prophet's wander through the seven spheres of heaven, while also capturing his spiritual rapture.

The earliest versions of the hadiths referring to *al-isra* and *al-miraj* were compiled by Muhammad al-Bukhari (810-870 A.D.) and Ibn al-Hajjaj Muslim (814-874 A.D.). A still earlier version may have existed, written in the 8th century by the Persian Ibn Abd Rabbih of Damascus. One of the first Muslim authors to have synthesized the two notions was at-Tabari (838-923 A.D.). In *Jami al-bayan Fi Tafsir al-Quran (The Elucidation of the Exegesis of The Qur'an)*, at-Tabari devoted an entire chapter to the exegesis of the *night journey*²⁰. It was also at-Tabari who set the date of the *night journey* on the 27th day of Rajab, 620 A.D. At the time,

¹⁷ The summarized fragment is key to the tale, as it corroborates the recognition of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in the Islamic tradition, which is often negated for political reasons.

¹⁸ A measure of distance (*qāba qawsayn aw adnā*) inspired by the Quran (LIII, 9).

¹⁹ See Ibn Hiszam, *As Sira an-nabawiyyah*, vol. 2, Cairo 1936, p. 39.

²⁰ At-Tabari, *Džami al-bayan fi tafsir al-Kuran*, vol. 15, 5, Cairo 1984 (reprint).

the Prophet was staying at the house of Umm Hani (Abu Talib's daughter), located near the Kaaba. At-Tabari identified the al-Aqsa as a mosque in Jerusalem (on the Temple Mount). In the previous understanding of the term, *al-Aqsa* signified a *remote mosque* with no territorial affiliation. Locating the al-Aqsa in Jerusalem during the reign of the Umayyad dynasty was, in all likelihood, motivated politically (see the aforementioned hadith of the three mosques).

A close analysis of accounts on *al-isra* and *al-miraj* was conducted in the early 20th century by Fr. Miguel Asín Palacios, professor of Arabic Studies at the University of Madrid, in his *La Escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia*, published in 1919 in Madrid. The passage of time has not depreciated the timeliness and academic value of Palacios' study²¹. Palacios demonstrated that the traditional accounts of the stages of Muhammad's *night journey* were shaped gradually over time. It began as the simple *al-isra*, based on the 9th-century hadiths. Later on, the two forms were synthesized into a coherent narrative. Still, the exact moment of their merger cannot be determined beyond any doubt. Presumably, at-Tabari was the first author who combined the two narratives. Similarly, it cannot be unambiguously determined if the *night journey* tradition was known to Muslims during the reign of Caliph Abd al-Malik. It is highly plausible it was not yet known in its *classical* version, and so the foundation of the Qubbat as-Sakhrah cannot have commemorated what had not yet been written. Therefore, the religious grounds for its foundation lose much of their weight, too.

Conclusion: The Qubbat as-Sakhrah as a Monument to the Triumph of Islam

As may be inferred from the above considerations, determining the reasons behind the foundation of one of Islam's principal religious and artistic buildings is not an easy task. To attribute it to the political strategy of Caliph Abd al-Malik, or to his piety, seems unsubstantiated. However, considering the location of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, as well as its architectural form, in particular its gilded dome, leads one to a rather clear interpretation, backed by the rich decorations of the memorial, such as the Byzantine and Sassanid crowns and the jewels interspersing the floral themes. All of these factors render the Qubbat as-Sakhrah a monument to the mighty and triumphant Islam, and a testament to the Umayyad dynasty, specifically Caliph Abd al-Malik. And yet, following the fall of the Caliphate of Damascus, and the spreading negative opinions on the Umayyad family, the Jerusalem sanctuary attained new layers of significance at the expense of its historical meaning. To this day, despite numerous political turbulences, the Dome of the Rock remains the most recognizable Muslim monument.

The Foundation of the Qubbat as-Sakhrah Sanctuary as an expression of Abd-al-Malik Ibn Marwan's piety and/or political premises **Summary**

At the end of the seventh century, Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan built the Qubbat as-Sakhrah sanctuary on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. It is difficult to explain the reasons for the foundation of the sanctuary. The caliph may have wanted to make it an alternative

²¹ See M.A. Palacios, *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, trans. H. Sutherland, Frank Caso & CO LTD, London 1968, II. *First Cycle – Version of the "isra" or nocturnal journey*, pp. 52-58; III. *Second cycle – Version of the "miraj" or ascension*, p. 59-88; IV. *Third cycle – Fusion of the version of the "isra" and the "miraj"*, pp. 89-96.

destination for the *Hajj*, as Mecca was under the occupation of Anti-caliph Ibn al-Zubayr. Another reason may have been tied to the caliph's desire to commemorate Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey. The surviving written records fail to provide an unambiguous explanation of either of these hypotheses. The location, architecture, and decoration of the Dome of the Rock suggest that the Caliph built a magnificent monument for the greater power and glory of Islam.

Keywords: Islam, Jerusalem, caliph, architecture, hajj

Note on the Author: Dr. Przemysław Nowogórski is an archeologist and historian, specializing the archeology and history of ancient Israel (with a focus on the Roman period), and the origins and development of the alphabetic writing system.

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