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Discovering Jerusalem's First Mosque on the Haram al-Sharif and Capitalizing Jerusalem in the Seventh Century

Beatrice St Laurent

In 2013, along with my colleague Isam Awwad (Chief Architect and Conservator of the Haram al-Sharif 1972–2004 for the government of Jordan), I proposed that the first mosque of Jerusalem built between 638 and 660 is the structure known as Solomon's Stables (today the Marwani Musalla) located in the southeast corner of the lower platform of the Haram al-Sharif, known by many as the Temple Mount (Figures 1, 2). This discovery has far-reaching implications beyond the mosque itself, affecting previously held views among scholars

who have suggested that the first mosque does not survive. It has also prompted us to revisit commonly held views on the patronage and dating of other Early Islamic structures on the Haram, including the Dome of the Rock and the multiple entry gates of the sanctuary's northern and western perimeters, as well as the Early Umayyad "palatial" and administrative structures south of the Haram.

The building known in English as Solomon's Stables was, until recently, a much understudied monumental structure that earlier scholars considered an underground building. It obtained the name of Solomon's Stables from European scholars because it did indeed serve the function of a stable during the 11th-century Crusader period. The metal rings inserted into the structure's massive interior piers have long been held to be the rings for tying the horses of Crusaders, who then inhabited the nearby Aqsa Mosque



Figure 1. Haram al-Sharif from the north in the 1930s. Matson Collection, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. The Dome of the Rock is on the upper platform and Solomon's Stables is to the southeast in the corner with al-Aqsa Mosque directly south of the Dome.

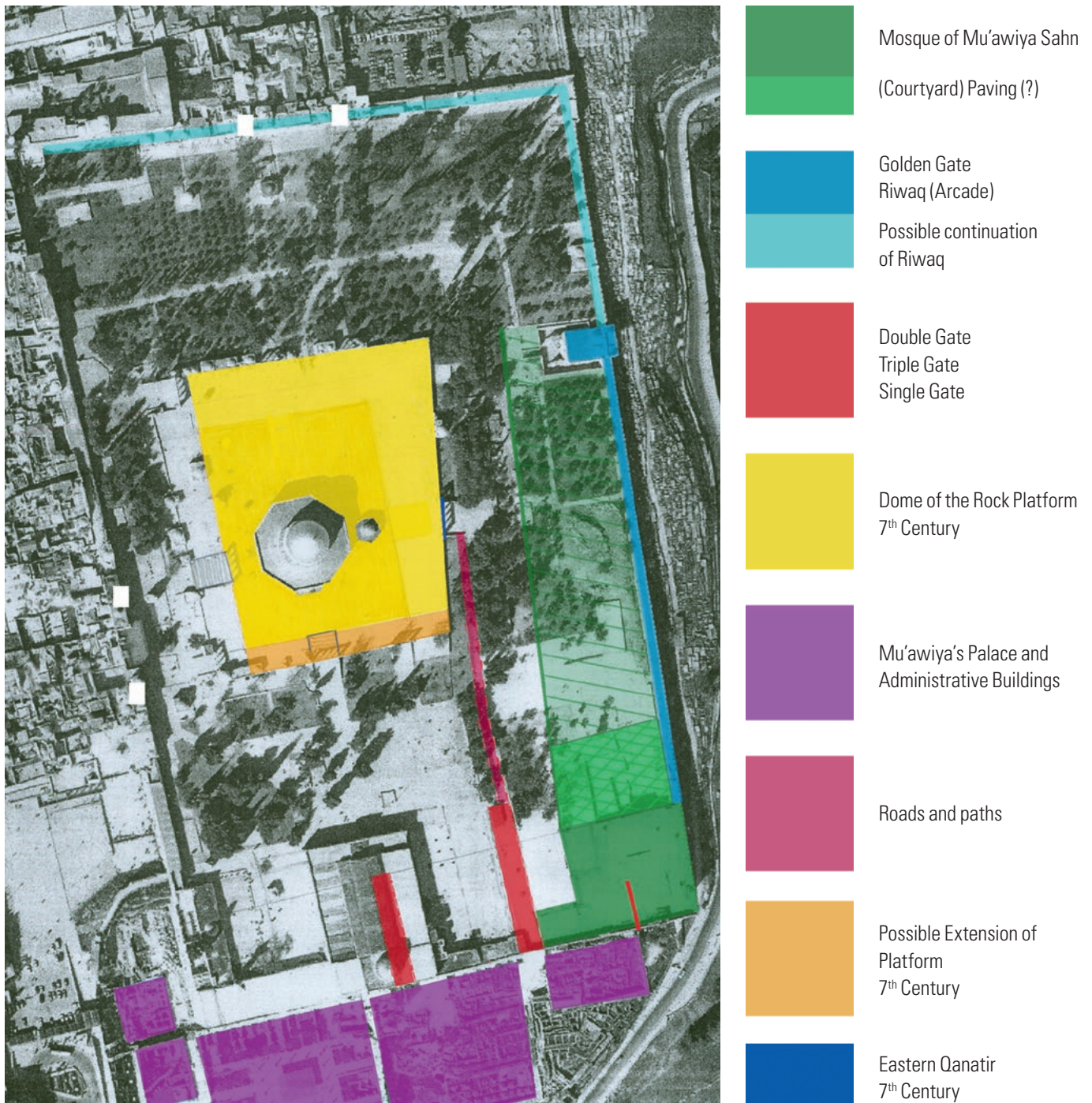


Figure 2. Aerial View of the site with super-imposed plan (Prepared by Alessandra Angeloni 2016).

(to the west on the same south wall), which served as their palace and chapel in the 11th century. Furthermore, in his “Temple Mount Sifting Project,” Dr Gabi Barkay found horseshoes and nails belonging to the Crusaders’ horses in the material from outside the stable.

However, actions taken in the 1990s generated major questions as to the function of this building. The Old City (and the Haram al-Sharif contained

within its boundaries) lies over the 1948 Green Line in what is considered in international law the Occupied Territories and has been a UNESCO World Heritage site protected under its guidelines since 1982. In 1996, in conjunction with discussions for resolution of the control of Jerusalem’s Old City as part of the Oslo Accords, questions arose concerning the official jurisdiction of the Haram al-Sharif.

Bill Clinton, then President of the United States, suggested that Israel assume control of the areas under the platform and the King of Jordan retain control over the Islamic monuments on the platform. This suggestion prompted the officials charged with the responsibility for the site, the Awqaf (or the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in Amman, Jordan), acting in the name of King Abdullah, to authorize the

creation of a library under the current Aqsa Mosque—the congregational Mosque of Jerusalem located midway on the south wall of the sanctuary—and to turn the structure known as Solomon’s Stables into a mosque. That indeed did happen, and the Stables today are called the Marwani Musalla and used as a prayer space for women.

That said, the Marwani is a very large structure that can hold 3000 people or more and access to the structure was limited to one small entrance from the east and indirectly, through a passage on the west wall. This proved to be a security problem, prompting the Awqaf in 1999 to open an additional entrance in the northern wall of the subterranean structure. Digging to expose what was thought to be a retaining wall revealed multiple walled-in arches bearing evidence of early door placements. The ultimate result was the discovery

that the Stables was not an underground structure but a buried building with nine original arched entrances, eight of which are visible today (Figure 3).

The revelation of a main northern entrance to this building prompted a new evaluation of its function. While the European name of the building related to the Christian Crusaders use of the building as a stable, the name in Arabic was consistent through the 19th century in referring to it as the “old mosque”—*masjid qadim* or *aqsa qadim*. It was in this context that my colleague Isam Awwad and I initiated our study of the building’s function as the Early Islamic mosque of Jerusalem constructed by Mu’awiya as Umayyad governor of Bilad al-Sham (or Greater Syria) between 638 and 660. Previous scholarship on the subject of the first mosque of Jerusalem claims that the mosque, built by either the

Rashidun caliph ‘Umar or the Umayyad Mu’awiya, did not survive or was replaced by the Aqsa Mosque in the 8th century.

Here, Mu’awiya was invested in 660 as *amir al-muminin* (Commander of the Faithful) as he chose to be called in dedicatory inscriptions, or as the first Umayyad caliph. That he did not build his mosque in Damascus, previously considered his only capital, and that he became caliph in Jerusalem suggests that his intention was to establish Jerusalem as both his religious and political capital.

The *masjid qadim* or “old mosque” is a nine-aisled vaulted structure built of large Herodian stones in re-use laid on top of earlier ruins (Figure 4). The widest central aisle leads to a rudimentary *mihrab*, or niche, indicating the direction of prayer to



Figure 3. Marwani Musalla (Solomon’s Stables) entrance (Photograph by Isam Awwad, 2012).

Mecca in the south wall; it may be the oldest surviving Early Islamic arch-shaped *mihrab*. The next-widest sixth aisle leads to the Single Gate in the south wall and its subterranean “escape” passage—no doubt to Mu’awiya’s palace, which was located outside the sanctuary and within the city walls at the time. Four shorter aisles fill the space leading to the small western entrance to the mosque from the Triple Gate west of the Single Gate in the sanctuary south wall. This gate affords entrance to the mosque and sanctuary from the neighborhoods to the south. The Triple Gate, rebuilt from an earlier gate, opens to a triple-vaulted structure leading north to the interior of the sanctuary.

The nine-arched northern entrance (Figure 3) to the closed prayer space is the main entrance to the mosque from the interior of the sanctuary. The ceremonial entrance was the refurbished, earlier Golden Gate (*Bab al-Dahhab*), which opened from the south to an arcade running the length of the east wall to the courtyard of the mosque and its arcade (*riwaq*) to the south and, to the east, to the greater sanctuary (Figure 5). The Golden Gate is linked to the north entrance on the same level of the lower platform—distinctly lower than the rest of the precinct. In the 7th century, the southeastern area of the platform was substantially lower than previously believed and, once the old mosque went out of usage, the area was filled in with trash up to the level of the top of the old mosque, factually substantiated by Barkay’s “Sifting Project” (Figure 2).

It is known from a contemporary Christian text that by 639, the central area of the sanctuary was in the process of being cleared. This suggests that, early in his governorship of Syria, Mu’awiya had plans beyond the mosque for the central part of the Haram. For this reason, we propose that Mu’awiya planned and began construction of the Dome of the Rock and the upper

sanctuary platform on which it sits (Figures 1 and 2). The building most assuredly remained incomplete at his death and the Dome was completed by ‘Abd al-Malik in 692 as confirmed by the dated mosaic Kufic inscription.

Additionally, at this time, the largely undecorated eastern *mawazin*, or arcade, was erected on the upper platform’s eastern perimeter utilizing re-used Herodian stone—only used by the Umayyads. Thus, there was a decided focus placed on entrance

from the east of the sanctuary—both the Golden Gate and this additional entrance approach from the east. Also the pre-existent Double Gate (today beneath the Aqsa Mosque) was rebuilt and refurbished and served as the ceremonial and symbolic entrance to the precinct leading to the Dome of the Rock. There was a Triple Gate in the north (today *Bab al-‘Atm*) and another gate just beside it of multiple arched entrances (today *Bab Hitta*) both leading to the upper platform. There is additional archaeological evidence



Figure 4. Marwani Musalla interior, looking south (Author’s photograph, 2007).

for multiple entrances on the precinct's western perimeter, defining the size of the Muslim sanctuary.

The undecorated rebuilt Triple Gate afforded entrance for all to enter the compound from the south. The three-vaulted chamber led directly to the interior of the compound exiting west of the mosque. From there the path was direct to the eastern staircase and its *mawazin* leading up to the Dome of the Rock.

Who was allowed to enter the sanctuary in this period? It is clear that Muslims could enter the mosque through the Golden Gate to the east and from the south through the Triple Gate, making an immediate right turn into the mosque's prayer space. But who was allowed to continue through the vaulted passageway to the interior of the sanctuary and on up to the Dome of the Rock? There was a Christian neighborhood south of the sanctuary and Mu'awiya had allowed the



Figure 5a. Golden Gate from the top of the Dome of the Rock (Author's photograph, 1993).

Mu'awiya's control of the city, where Muslims entered a Triple Gate and Muslims turned to the right to pray facing the new *mihrab*, and where Christians went to the left to pray in the Church of St John the Baptist. This was a much more benevolent period in the city's Early Islamic history.

city walls was the first to be constructed and completed. That so many grand structures were begun suggests that the city certainly would have been prepared to serve as an imperial capital.

There is a scholarly debate concerning the age of these buildings. A recent archaeological excavation has revealed material evidence of an earlier foundation below the 8th-century strata. The lower foundation utilizes construction methods and materials very different from the 8th-century layer. In January 2017, I visited this Israel Antiquities Authority excavation and my current research explores the origins and implications of the type of stone construction found in this area of the site.

There are many reasons to state that Mu'awiya intended Jerusalem as his capital. Though Damascus has been considered by scholars in the past to have been his sole capital, it is unusual that he did not build a mosque there but in Jerusalem and, more tellingly, that he was invested with caliphal power in his mosque in Jerusalem. Recent scholarship is moving away from a single-capital model for a mobile population and exploring the existence of multiple capitals. We know that Mu'awiya had already established multiple capitals to the north of Jerusalem in Greater Syria

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resettlement of Jews from Tiberias in an area just southwest of the precinct. We propose that Jews and Christians were allowed on the site in the seventh century. From recent scholarship, there is emerging clarity that Mu'awiya as *amir al-muminin* (Commander of the Faithful) saw "the faithful" as the *ahl al-kitab* or The People of the Book, which included Christians and Jews. There is a parallel in Damascus, during

Just outside the confines of Jerusalem's sacred precinct are large, multiple administrative and palatial structures excavated in the 1960s and 70s by Meir Ben Dov and Benjamin Mazar. They have previously been attributed to a later Umayyad time, but we propose that Mu'awiya initiated construction of these monuments prior to his death in 680. His smaller palace just outside his mosque in the eastern corner near the

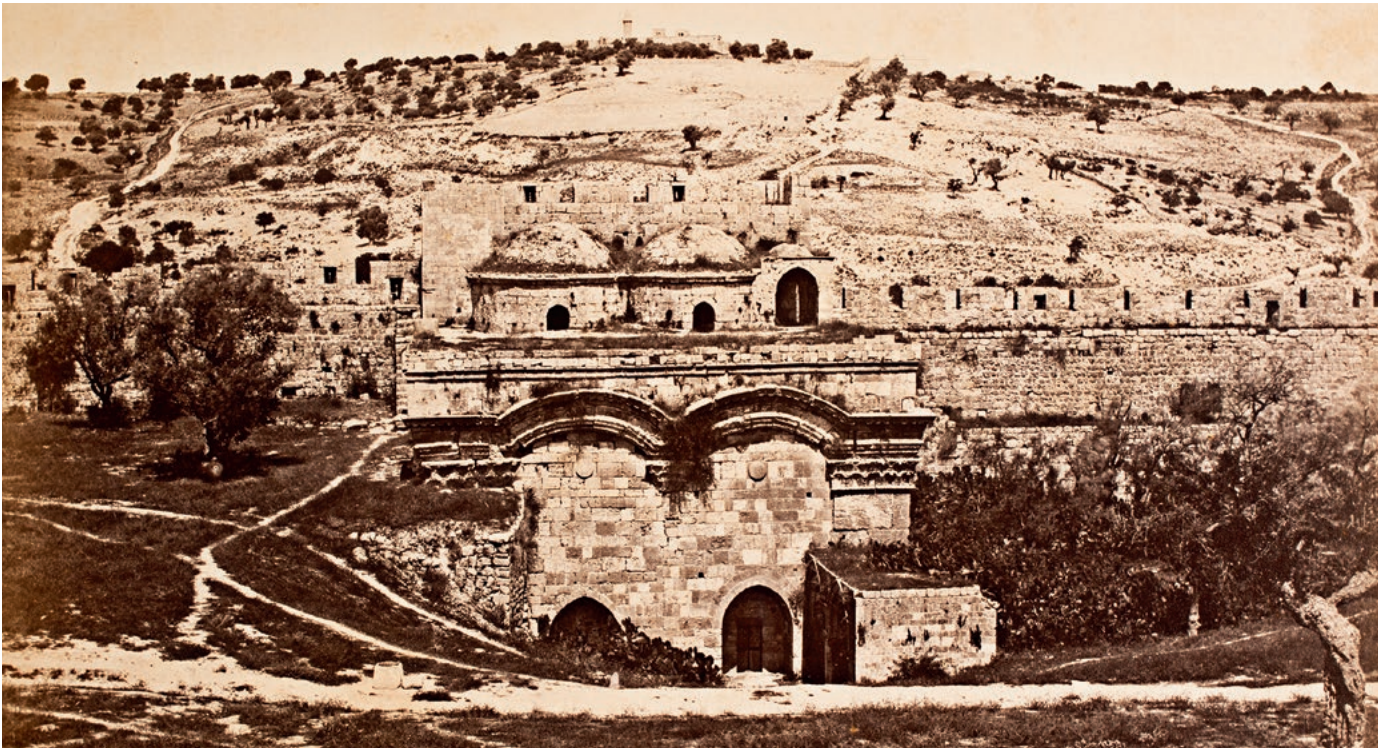


Figure 5b. Golden Gate, from the west inside the precinct (Photo Credit: Harvard University, Fine Arts Library Collection).

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Bilad al-Sham. These include Damascus, the winter capital at the Palace of Sennabra on the lower western side of the Sea of Galilee, and possibly al-Jabiya in the Syrian Golan—all the while maintaining his agricultural properties in the area south of Mecca in Arabia.

What we witness with Mu'awiya (formerly a scribe of the Prophet Muhammad) is a ruler, a deft military

and political strategist, wielding the authority of the Early Islamic Empire as it established itself in Greater Syria. His family already had landholdings in northern Jordan prior to Islam, so Mu'awiya was coming to a region already known by the family and probably with established trade and political connections. Family and tribal ties to the region provided him with a strong

base of operation to further the interests of the newly established Early Islamic Umayyad dynasty and empire.

This brief article presents the core of our current thesis concerning Early Islamic Jerusalem. Our initial findings appear in "The Marwani Musalla in Jerusalem: New Findings," in *Jerusalem Quarterly* (Summer 2013) and "Archaeology and Preservation of Early Islamic Jerusalem: The 7th Century Mosque on the Haram al-Sharif," *Proceedings, 9th ICAANE, Basel 2014* (2016). Our full argument will appear in a forthcoming book we are writing called *Capitalizing Jerusalem: Mu'awiya's Urban Vision 638-680*.



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