

Some Observations on the Origins of the Dome of the Rock

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges an old belief that the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem was built between 65/684 and 72/691 by the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part briefly examines the significance of the Rock (*sakhrāh*). Therein it is shown that the Rock (*Sakhrāh*) has no special religious significance whatsoever. The second part tries to answer who exactly built the Dome of the Rock and when. The paper concludes that the likely truth is that the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan was able to commence building the edifice only after crushing the insurgency of ‘Abdullah b. al-Zubayr in 73/692. Such were the socio-political conditions in the Muslim state during the insurgency that the caliph’s actions could not transcend the planning and basic preparatory stages, at most. Whether the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan was capable of completing the structure during his lifetime or not, remained a debatable point as well. The task of building one of the first and at the same time greatest masterpieces in Islamic architecture might have been completed by his son and successor, al-Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik. What follows is shedding more light on these aspects of the topic.

Keywords: The Dome of the Rock, al-Aqsa Mosque, the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan, the caliph al-Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik

Introduction

One of the topics shrouded in several mysteries and misunderstandings is the topic of building the Dome of the Rock and what its real purpose and functions were. This is because the al-Aqsa Mosque, wherein the Dome of the Rock is placed, enjoys some remarkable religious significance inferior only to al-Masjid al-Haram in Makkah and the Prophet’s Mosque in Madinah. Hence, many people, especially some members of the Muslim political leadership and those who blindly supported them, vied for control over it and for leaving some notable legacies associated with it. This paper identifies the issue of who exactly and when built the Dome of the Rock, as one of the contentious points and tries not necessarily to solve it, but to offer a new perspective for studying it.

The Significance of the Rock (*Sakhrāh*)

Much has been written and said about the Rock (*Sakhrāh*) within the al-Aqsa Mosque proper (*al-Haram al-Sharif* or Noble Sanctuary).¹ Yet, scholars throughout history considerably differed - and still do - in their verdict as to what the real status and function of the Rock is. By and large, this phenomenon can be attributed partly to the fact that some aspects of the Rock phenomenon remained shrouded in several and hitherto unresolved mysteries, and partly to the contrasting religious, political, cultural and social inclinations of those who safeguarded, administered, studied, wrote or narrated about the al-Aqsa Mosque.

¹ By the al-Aqsa Mosque we mean the whole area of the Noble Sanctuary, i.e. *al-Haram al-Sharif*, accounting for the second mosque on earth instituted 40 years after the Ka’bah. The present-day al-Aqsa Mosque covers only a section of the Sanctuary.

The truth, however, is that the Rock bears no special importance whatsoever. It is significant inasmuch as it constitutes a part of the al-Aqsa Mosque, the second mosque on earth set up forty years after the construction of the Ka'bah. (*Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith No. 3172*) In no way can the Rock be held more important and, as such, more revered than the other parts of the al-Aqsa Mosque. Everything that the Holy Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) have said about the al-Aqsa Mosque applied as much to the Rock as to the rest of the sections of the Mosque. (*Sahih Mulsim, Hadith No. 234*)

Extraordinary reverence attached to the Rock by many people is rooted in little truth. In the main, such reverence is based on copious groundless legends and myths that are either work of some Muslims who have been contriving and propagating them in different ages, under different circumstances and for different purposes, or are no more than the recreation, or even retelling, of the same as found in the Jewish tradition.

The Rock, which the domed edifice apparently shelters, is the highest point in the *al-Haram al-Sharif*, i.e. in the al-Aqsa Mosque. It is located approximately in the center. It is a bluish rock. It stands about one and a half meters above the floor – or about the height of an average man - at its highest part and is approximately eighteen by thirteen meters in area. Beneath it is a cave about four and a half meters square, in the roof of which there is a hole about a meter in diameter. (Duncan, 1972)

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem built, as commonly perceived, between 65/684 and 72/691 (about these dates we shall in a while raise some serious concerns) is the earliest existing monument of Islamic architecture. Its significance lies in its geographical, historical and religious contexts, as well as in its status as the first genuine representation of the then rising phenomenon of Islamic art. The structure's form, details and its choice of constitutive elements manifested that the evolution of the identity of Islamic art has finally after a steady progression approached its final stage. The new art was expanding very rapidly and on a broad front, bringing everyday more and more different peoples, cultures and civilizations to its fold. As a result, such subsequent works of art as the Great Mosque of Damascus, started in 88/706 and finished in 96/715, the Great Mosque of Cordova, founded in 169/785, and that of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, finished in 266/879 – in addition to a number of other structures executed at a smaller scale during the same period - no longer represented phases in the evolution, but were, in their quality as art, unsurpassable masterpieces. (Burckhardt, 1976) They articulated a new matured art language hitherto unknown, which has been generated by the Islamic view of reality, of man, of life, of the world, of space, and of God, and at the hands of those who in their deeds, actions and thoughts epitomized such a worldview.

The Dome of the Rock is located on an artificial platform, approximately in the center of the *al-Haram al-Sharif*, i.e. in the centre of the al-Aqsa Mosque. According to Creswell (1989), it is “an annular building and consists in its ultimate analysis of a wooden dome 20.44 m. in diameter, set on a high drum, pierced with sixteen windows and resting on four piers and twelve columns, placed in a circle just large enough to surround the Rock, and so arranged that three columns alternate with each pier. A central cylinder is thus formed, of height about equal to its diameter. This circle of supports is placed in the centre of a large octagon averaging about 20.59 m. a side, formed by eight walls 9.50 in height (excluding the parapet, which measures 2.60 m.). Externally there are seven bays in each side, but those next the corners – that is to say the bay at each end of each side, or sixteen in all – are treated as blind panels. The remainders are each pierced in their upper part by a window.”



A replica of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Courtesy of the Islamic Civilization Park (Taman Tamadun Islam) in Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia.

Who Built the Dome of the Rock and When?

It is generally accepted that the Dome of the Rock was built by the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan. The epic undertaking started somewhere in 65/684 and was completed seven years later in 72/691. (Blair, 1992) However, this view stands no chance to hold out against a thorough and earnest scientific inquiry into the facts that the same is anchored in.

So confounding, at least, and misleading, at most, are the existing accounts about the subject at hand that Muhammad Shurrab (1994), the author of the Book *Bayt al-Maqdis wa al-Masjid al-Aqsa (Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa Mosque)*, even inferred that it was not the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik, but rather his son al-Walid, who succeeded his father as a caliph, who was responsible for constructing the edifice. Some even ended up believing that the preparation of the site, and even some construction work, took place during the reign of Mu’awiyah, the first Umayyad caliph who died in 60/679. (Blair, 1992)

However, the likely truth about the subject is as follows. Such were the circumstances surrounding the planning and construction of the Dome of the Rock that both caliphs, firstly ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan and then his son al-Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik, had to put in their contributions, which nevertheless varied in nature and magnitude, so that the unparalleled architectural masterpiece could be realized. ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan is likely to have kicked off the mammoth project of erecting the structure somewhere in 73/692 – some planning and preparation activities may have taken place much earlier, though - when he became the *de facto* ruler of the entire Muslim state, but he may have fell short of completing it during his lifetime. Not only building the Dome of the Rock, but also constructing what is known today as the al-Aqsa Mosque - habitually ascribed to al-Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik - may have constituted, in part, the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik’s development scheme.

Or the original completion of the Dome of the Rock might have taken place after all during the reign of the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan, but the caliph al-Walid b.

‘Abd al-Malik had to make several significant additions and even alterations, especially in terms of the building’s decoration, ornamentation and utility, so that the edifice could go well with the incredible architectural plans and ambitions of his own, which were never matched before and hardly ever matched afterwards. The caliph al-Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik is reputed to have been the first in Islamic civilization who introduced mosque ornamentation. (Al-‘Asqalani, 1978) A segment of his awesome enterprises was the construction of what is called today the al-Aqsa Mosque too, on the site where the caliph ‘Umar’s Mosque had formerly stood. Hence, that there might have existed an effort on the caliph al-Walid’s part towards making the two buildings - which in fact share the same identity in that they both lie within the *al-Haram al-Sharif*, the boundaries of the original al-Aqsa Mosque - appear consistent with each other in terms of form and adornment, sounds very much plausible and likely.

Our assertion rests on the following three arguments:

First: Inconsistencies of Muslim Historical Sources

Too few sources reveal the date of when the construction of the Dome of the Rock either started or was completed. And when they do, their accounts are by and large contradictory and even misleading. (Blair, 1992) One of the best examples of how delicate is the issue at hand is Ibn Kathir and his work *al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah (the Beginning and the End)*. At one place, as one of the events that occurred in 66/685, Ibn Kathir (1985) speaks about how the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock as part of his plans aimed at the development of Jerusalem (*Bayt al-Maqdis*). He went so far as to portray not only the building in its final form, but also the immediate as well as subsequent impact it had made on the lives of the people. Thereafter, however, Ibn Kathir made no reference to the Dome of the Rock until he spoke briefly about the biography of the caliph al-Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik, under the events of the year in which he died, i.e. 96/714, citing his death as one of the major events of the year. (Ibn Kathir, 1985) While dwelling on the achievements of the caliph al-Walid, Ibn Kathir mentioned - quite surprisingly - the Dome of the Rock, rather than the al-Aqsa Mosque, as one of them. That said, as if Ibn Kathir wanted to relate that both caliphs in their own ways played a part in making the edifice emerge as it was in his days and as it is today. As if he, furthermore, meant by the Dome of the Rock both the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome which shelters the Rock.

Besides, while a number of the most prominent Muslim historians, such as al-Tabari, Ibn ‘Asakir, al-Baladhuri, al-Dinawari, al-Mas’udi and al-Maqdisi remained completely silent on the subject of building either the Dome of the Rock or the al-Aqsa Mosque, a few others, such as Ibn al-Athir (1987) and Ibn Khaldun (1957), merely observed that the caliph al-Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik had built the al-Aqsa Mosque. What did they exactly mean by their declaration: either the Mosque normally attributed to al-Walid, or the Dome of the Rock, or both, is as good as impossible to ascertain, as they left no clues about it.

Second: The Significance of an Inscription on the Edifice

That the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan accomplished the building of the Dome of the Rock in 72/691 almost all people shore up by an inscription which runs around the outer face of the structure’s octagonal arcade. The inscription, however, now reads: “The servant of God, al-Ma’mun, commander of the believers, built this dome, may God accept

it from him and be pleased with him, in the year 72 (that is 691). Amen.” (Blair, 1992) It is believed that originally the inscription contained the name of the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik, but the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun had his own name inserted in place of the latter, probably in 216/831, leaving the date as it initially stood. (Creswell, 1989)

However, more than a few scholars questioned the authenticity of the said inscription. Sheila Blair (1992) concluded that the year 72/691 mentioned in the inscription actually refers to the time of the Dome of the Rock’s inception rather than its completion. Her line of reasoning rests on quite a few sound premises the two of which are relevant here. Firstly, too few Umayyad inscriptions survive to permit the establishment of any hard-and-fast rules about their meaning during this formative period. Nonetheless, even though sometimes it is impossible to tell whether the date refers to conception or completion, most of the few that do survive from this period rather give the date that the patron ordered the construction of a building. Secondly, the mosaic decoration on the interior of the Dome of the Rock must have been executed in the years following 72/691 by craftsmen who might have worked on the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in the previous decade.

Whereas some other scholars, like Muhammad Shurrab (1994), considers the inscription as a sheer forgery, produced maybe during one of the building’s subsequent restorations, as its style of writing does not correspond with the style of the age when the building was erected. As it has been shown, furthermore, that the practice of the caliph al-Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik was to write nothing on his masterpieces so as to document who, when and how constructed them.

In the same vein, reflecting on the peculiarity of the content of the inscription enhances the postulation that something is genuinely wrong with it. Certainly, it is absolutely irrational and impractical that after the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik had built the Dome of the Rock documenting it on an inscription, the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun, about one hundred and fifty years later, simply attempted, defying in the process religious precepts, history and the public opinion, to strip ‘Abd al-Malik of the credit and appropriate the same for himself. As unreasonable and unworkable - if not even more - is the contention that while doing that which he is alleged to have done, the caliph al-Ma’mun had his own name inserted in place of his Umayyad counterpart’s, but simply ‘forgot’ to change the date on the inscription. (Duncan, 1972) If it is true that he simply forgot to change the date, why did nobody notify him of the slip-up? What kind of strategy did al-Ma’mun have in mind, and how serious and meticulous was he in the first place? What was the role of his numerous advisers? And last but not least, where was the voice of the public and thousands of pilgrims who used to frequent the site, reveling in its splendor and magnificence? In any event, it goes without saying that so great, shrewd and intelligent was the caliph al-Ma’mun that what some people imputed to him in relation to the Dome of the Rock, is simply unacceptable.

In actual fact, the aforementioned inscription has nothing to do with either ‘Abd al-Malik or al-Ma’mun. It must have been created during an unknown period of time and by an individual or a group who appear to have been genuinely ignorant, misinformed or possessed some clandestine agendas against someone, and was able to manipulate certain rulers of the day, as well as some quarters of the commoners, for the fulfillment of the set goals. This assertion seems quite probable given that the historian al-Waqidi, for instance, with no hesitation charges only ‘one of the ignorant people’ for stripping off the name of ‘Abd al-Malik and writing the name of al-Ma’mun instead. (Elad, 1992) In addition, al-Waqidi’s account utterly vindicates the caliph al-Ma’mun of tampering with the content of the inscription, as al-Waqidi was al-Ma’mun’s contemporary and was even one of his

leading judges in Baghdad. He reportedly died in 207/822, roughly nine years before the alleged act of al-Ma'mun took place.

What's more, Ibn Kathir (1985) reported that the 'Abbasid caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur in 140/757 restored the al-Aqsa Mosque, including the Dome of the Rock, after he had found much of it in ruins as a result of an earthquake. Having finished the job, the caliph wrote on the Dome, on the side facing the *qiblah* gateway: "Commander of the believers, 'Abd al-Malik, ordered its construction after it has been taken apart (*ba'da tash'ithi*) in 62²/681" If this somewhat confusing account proves anything, then it proves that as early as during the earliest days of the Abbasid rule the original inscription on the Dome of the Rock, authenticating its maker and the date of its commencement or completion – provided it really ever existed – began to be exposed to the factors that were able to render it either lost or replaced on purpose. Quite often afterwards, much restoration and improvement work has been done to the structure, the first occasion coming to pass as quickly as after the caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur had gone and was succeeded by his son al-Mahdi when yet another earthquake struck the region. As far as the inscription is concerned, however, it should have been repeatedly retained, but for sure every time in accordance with the builders' and patrons' version of the historical episodes closely associated with the building of the Dome of the Rock - as well as the al-Aqsa Mosque - and in accordance with the overall conditions that surrounded it. After all, the existing confusion in modern scholarship pertaining to the exact history of the Dome of the Rock is anything but a doing of modern scholars; it is part of the befuddled legacy bequeathed by the classical Muslim scholarship.

Lastly, it is quite an astonishment why the celebrated traveler Naser Khosraw in the mid-11th century failed to refer to the controversial inscription while giving quite a comprehensive description of the Dome of the Rock, whereas a number of less relevant and apparently smaller in size inscriptions scattered all over the complex could not escape his attention. (Khosraw, 1986) On no account could he overlook the thing. He must have seen it, but perhaps its content did not appeal to him. Still, he would have had no reason to omit mentioning it completely.

Thus, one of the theories that could be advanced as a likely answer to the puzzle is that there was no then any inscription whatsoever to the effect of the building's history or its originator. Who scrapped the original inscription – if it was ever there – and why, and when the one we see today was produced and by whom, would be just too much to ask, bearing in mind all the complications in connection with the subject matter.

Third: A Political Turmoil and the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik's Enthronement

It was rather unfeasible for the caliph 'Abd al-Malik to start building the Dome of the Rock in 65/684, completing it some seven years later in 72/691. It ought to be borne in mind that when 'Abd al-Malik succeeded his father Marwan in 65/684, the Umayyads controlled only Syria, with Palestine, and Egypt. Even that was not always out of harm's way. On the eve of 'Abd al-Malik's succession, control over Egypt was for the interim lost, as was over Palestine, and even Syria was occasionally threatened. (Ibn Kathir, 1985) The Muslim world was virtually controlled by 'Abdullah b. al-Zubayr, who revolted against the Umayyad establishment in 61/680 with his headquarters in Makkah. The threat of 'Abdullah b. al-Zubayr did not end until 73/692 when he was killed.

So precarious the situation during this trying period was that the Byzantines, buoyed by the consuming discord among the Muslims, arose in 70/689 and gathered an army intending to attack the Muslims in Syria, the epicenter of the Umayyad

establishment. Knowing how weak he was, 'Abd al-Malik, fearing for himself and others, made peace with the Byzantine Emperor on somewhat humiliating terms that every Friday he would deliver a thousand *dinars* to the Emperor. (Al-Tabari, 1990)

This was not all though. 'Abd al-Malik and his shaky authority were constantly threatened by the undying upheavals of the *Kharijites*, as well as by the increasing and intensifying activities of the militant wings of the *Shi'ites*. As there were some instances of internal disputes among the members of the Umayyad family. One of such disputes – dubbed by al-Tabari (1990) as an old feud - led to the revolt of 'Amr b. Sa'id b. al-'As, 'Abd al-Malik's cousin, either in 69/688 or 70/689. On leaving temporarily Damascus, most probably for Iraq to wrest it from 'Abdullah b. al-Zubayr's brother and governor, Mus'ab b. al-Zubayr, 'Abd al-Malik made 'Amr b. Sa'id his deputy over the city. However, the latter rebelled, taking control of Damascus, the symbol and pivot of the Umayyad existence as a ruling dynasty, and its treasures. At this, 'Abd al-Malik had to return as swiftly as he could to Damascus and put down the insurrection, which he after sometime did, eventually killing the rebel. (Al-Tabari, 1990)

What could be deduced from the above is that so massive was the assignment of planning and building the Dome of the Rock that no more than some planning and preparation moves could be executed between 65/684 and 73/692. The construction of that which was not critical by any means, and which could only dissipate the government's inadequate resources, was definitely placed somewhere at the bottom of the hierarchy of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik's pressing priorities. Additionally, in financial terms, 'Abd al-Malik was an exceptionally prudent and tightfisted person, so much so that he was nicknamed 'the Stone Oozing' (*rashh al-hajar*). (Al-Baladhuri, 1996) 'Abd al-Malik is reported to have exhausted seven years' revenue from Egypt on building the Dome of the Rock alone, (Duncan, 1972) instructing the men in charge to spend money lavishly. (Elad, 1992)

This is maybe correct, but to embark on doing something like that under the circumstances described above was totally unfeasible and imprudent a thing to do. 'Abd al-Malik must have sought out to build the Dome of the Rock at some other time, under more favorable conditions. Besides, the latter probability appeared to be more consistent with 'Abd al-Malik's character, mentality and his ways of doing things, rather than the former one, i.e. building the Dome of the Rock in extremely difficult and trying times.

If 'Abd al-Malik's building of the Dome of the Rock was seen as an attempt towards consolidating his grip on power, then such an act is expected to have started to materialize only when securing power was already achieved in 73/692, or at least when the same was in sight in 72/691 in the wake of the fall of Iraq. We are told that 'Abd al-Malik had written to all provincial governors as regards his intention to build the Dome of the Rock, seeking their approval as well as support in terms of finances and workforce without which the project at the end of the day wouldn't have materialized. But 'Abd al-Malik was able to do this only after the entire Muslim state came under his administration in 73/692. Heretofore, he *de facto* controlled only Syria, with Jordan and Palestine, and Egypt.

It stands to reason, therefore, that the caliph 'Abd al-Malik, was actually incapable of starting off the task of building the Dome of the Rock until the year 73/692 when he became quite confident about his prowess and position, as well as when the overall climate became conducive to laying a foundation for some notable long-term objectives. Not only to building activities did this *modus operandi* apply, but also to lots of other projects and schemes with no less civilizational bearing than the Dome of the Rock. For example, turning from the defensive to the offensive, 'Abd al-Malik managed around the same time to turn the tables on his external and internal foes by intensifying warfare

activates against them. Also, he upgraded the roads around Damascus and Jerusalem. (Blair, 1992) He furthermore improved the effectiveness and competency of the state apparatus by changing the registers (*dawawin*) from Persian (Ibn Tabataba, 1990) and Latin (Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, 1983) to Arabic, as well as by rendering the public accounts for the first time in Arab style. From then on, in Syria there existed many a mint in which Muslim coins were minted. (Blair, 1992)

Conclusion

The Rock (*Sakhrah*), which the domed structure in the center of the al-Aqsa Mosque proper (Noble Sanctuary) shelters, has no special religious significance whatsoever. The conventional view that the Dome of the Rock was built by the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan from 65/684 to 72/691 stands no chance to hold out against a thorough and earnest scientific inquiry into the facts that the same is rooted in. The likely truth, however, is that the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik could not embark on building such an extraordinary and pricey edifice before crushing the insurgence of ‘Abdullah b. al-Zubayr in Hijaz in 73/692, even though some planning and preparation activities might have taken place sometime earlier.

Such were the conditions hanging over the heretofore unequaled architectural masterpiece in the Muslim world that the beleaguered caliph ‘Abd al-Malik appeared to be unable to accomplish it during his lifetime. Or the original completion of the Dome of the Rock might have taken place after all during the reign of the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan, however, the caliph al-Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik made several significant additions and even alterations so that the edifice could go well with the incredible architectural plans and ambitions of his own. Three issues have been discussed as proofs for our viewpoint, namely, 1) Inconsistencies of Muslim historical sources; 2) The significance of an inscription on the edifice (the Dome of the Rock); and 3) A political turmoil and the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik’s enthronement.

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