THE DOME OF THE ROCK IN LIGHT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONCENTRIC MARTYRIA IN JERUSALEM: ARCHITECTURE AND ARCHITECTURAL ICONOGRAPHY

The subject of the architecture of the Islamic Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem has a long pedigree in scholarly literature. In a recent article, Muhammed Anwarul Islam and Fauzi Zaid al-Hamad concluded that the Dome of the Rock...did not have much in common with either of the two monuments in Jerusalem [i.e., the Anastasis (Resurrection) Rotunda in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Church of the Ascension] as they existed at the time...Yet, there is no record of any other important building built with an octagonal shape anywhere in the Islamic world during this period of a thousand years. This confirms the view presented in this article that the Dome of the Rock needed to be octagonal to reflect the unique religious scenario that was believed to be happening only in the location where it was being built and will [sic] not be repeated anywhere else.

The first part of my article is a response to this conclusion and the second part is a by-product of my ongoing research on the beginning of the cult of Mary Theotokos (God Bearer) in Jerusalem, in which the Church of the Kathisma (Seat of Mary) played a major and influential role in connection with Marian feasts in Jerusalem and abroad, as well as of my encounter with the studies of Mary Cunningham on eighth-century Marian homilies. Inspired by the workshop on the Theotokos that was organized by Cunningham and Leslie Brubaker at Oxford University in 2006, I undertook an adventurous methodological experiment regarding the architectural iconography of the Dome of the Rock, the results of which, as detailed in the latter part of this article, complement and support my argument in the first part.

A prelude to the present article was unintentionally provided by Amikam Elad when he pointed out that Islam and al-Hamad were incorrect in asserting that “there is no record of any other important building built with an octagonal shape anywhere in the Islamic world during this period of a thousand years.” Indeed, Elad’s observation that the architecture of Qubbat al-Sulaybiyya at Samarra (dated to the ninth century) shares typological similarities with the architectural plan of the Dome of the Rock had already been proposed in 1911 by Friedrich Sarre and Ernst Herzfeld.

About twenty years ago, in her seminal monograph on the early Islamic complex on top of the Temple Mount, Miriam Rosen-Ayalon described the presumed uniqueness of the architecture of the Dome of the Rock when she wrote:

The Dome of the Rock is undoubtedly one of the most extensively studied of medieval buildings...The construction of a complete picture of this unique monument is further hindered by the fact that no contemporary building in any of the neighboring cultures offers a comparison with the Dome of the Rock. Various buildings have been cited as possible sources of inspiration or forerunners, but these parallels have always been only partial at best.

More recently Oleg Grabar agreed with Rosen-Ayalon, as well as Islam and al-Hamad, when he noted that there is “no immediate model for the Dome of the Rock.” Grabar is renowned for placing the Dome of the Rock in the forefront of the studies of Islamic art, promoting discussion of the structure’s meaning. His seminal paper, “The Umayyad Dome of the Rock,” published in 1959, is an important milestone that remains relevant today, in spite of alternative interpretive proposals that have accumulated in abundance in the years since. Even today, this study continues to buttress relevant and
valid conclusions. However, the discussions in his two books on the architectural origins of the Dome of the Rock are less cautious—sometimes the information is inaccurate and certain observations are imprecise. Thus, his conclusions remain too general. For example, in *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem*, published in 1996, Grabar wrote that

> there is little doubt that the model for the Dome of the Rock was a fairly common type in Late Antique and Early Christian or early Byzantine architecture. Originating in the mostly funerary architecture of the late Roman empire...it became a common form for baptisteries all over the Christian world....

However, in Malka Ben-Pechat’s inventory of baptisteries, and according to my own up-to-date knowledge of the recently excavated baptisteries in Israel, none of those in the Holy Land are octagonal, or in fact polygonal, in shape.

Grabar further states that “the plan of the Dome of the Rock is distinguishable from the plans of most comparable buildings by its inordinate size....” This statement, however, contradicts the data on the measurements of the rotunda of the Anastasis provided by Richard Krautheimer and also published in two geometrical analyses by the architect Doron Chen. Previously, in his doctoral dissertation, Chen had compared the Dome of the Rock with the rotunda of the Anastasis and the octagonal Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. This latter church, however, is dated to the Crusader period and therefore could not have been an architectural source for the Dome of the Rock.

According to Grabar,

> [i]n terms of size, the churches of San Vitale and Aachen, the possible martyrrium [a memorial monument; in the Christian context, it is a place of witnessing commemorating an occurrence of theophany] in Caesarea, and the two sanctuaries of Jerusalem are the only ones that are close to the Dome of the Rock, and in both the Church of the Ascension and San Vitale, the circle circumscribing the building has the same diameter as the Dome of the Rock.

Indeed, a comparison of the sizes of these five monuments (i.e., the churches of San Vitale, Aachen, Caesarea, and the Ascension, and the Dome of the Rock) does demonstrate the technical capability of the architects and engineers of these buildings, but does not necessarily relate to their architectural models. Moreover, Grabar is inaccurate in his assertion that “only the Church of the Ascension and the church at Caesarea are symmetrical on several axes and appear to lack an apse for an altar.” Each one of these churches did have marked altars in the east, although, admittedly, they did not protrude beyond the exterior contours of the buildings.

In *The Dome of the Rock*, published in 2006, Grabar’s mishandling of the geometrical data led him to some imprecise conclusions. He confines his architectural parallels to four concentric churches in the Holy Land, reports on all of which have been published by their respective excavators. The remains of a round, early Byzantine church were uncovered below the octagonal Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives, and an octagonal church was revealed in Capernaum. In addition to various preliminary reports and articles, a final paper on the excavations of the octagonal church in Caesarea Maritima was recently published, in which the structure was identified as St. Cornelius’s martyrrium. I myself have proposed an alternative identification of the monument as the martyrium of Philip.

The last of Grabar’s church plans is his drawing of the Church of the Kathisma on the Jerusalem–Bethlehem road, which I excavated on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority. Three of Grabar’s church plans are inaccurate and sometimes completely wrong. Firstly, his “schematic reconstructed plan of the church of the Ascension” depicts two concentric octagons, but we know from the architectural finds revealed in Virgilio Corbo’s excavation that the early Byzantine Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives was round. In addition, Corbo’s archaeological finds are in accordance with the description of this church provided by the pilgrim Arculf, who visited the Holy Land between 679 and 688.

Secondly, Grabar’s “schematic plan of the octagonal building in Caesarea” depicts a thick exterior octagonal wall surrounding an intermediate, colonnaded circle, at the center of which is an unclear element that is round on its exterior face and octagonal towards the center of the building. However, according to the plan...