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The First Islamic Monument Kubbet'üs-Sahra (Dome of the Rock): A New Proposition

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ABSTRACT

Holy places have an important part in people's lives as areas in which belief in a way becomes visualized. Jerusalem appears as the holiest common area for Judaism, Christianity and Islam which are referred to as Abrahamic religions. In Grabar's words, the city which has become the symbol of Palestine nationalism embodies significant places, structures and stories for all three religions.

For Muslims, the city is important since it is the first kiblah and due to the belief that the event of Isra referred to in Qur'an/night journey and Ascension (of the prophet Mohammed) have taken place in Jerusalem. As a result of the effect of this belief, the structure which was to be named Kubbet'üs-Sahra (Dome of the Rock) was built in the holiest point of Jerusalem in 692. Researchers who have analyzed the period and the structure suggest three different views as to why the structure was built. These can be expressed as follows: 1- It was built in the memory of Prophet Mohammed's ascension; 2-Caliph Abd al-Malik got very excited upon seeing the Church of Ascension when he came to Jerusalem which was built by the order of Justinian and wished to have a similar structure built on a rock to prevent Muslims from being affected by the church; 3- The wish to have a structure built in Jerusalem which could compete with the Ka'bah and pilgrimage journey.

The most researched point by the researchers along with why the structure was built is the origin of the plan of the structure. Noting that it was impossible for Muslims who did not have an art tradition to have built such a structure, it is suggested that the source of the plan was obtained from the Roman-Byzantium repertoire. What is more, the ornamentation technique and compositions are used to support this view. A new view on the origin argues in the favor of the legendary mausoleums of the ancient Arab kings which were built in Yemen area. The lack of a historical document indicates that this issue will be discussed for a long time to come.

In this abstract titled The first Islamic Monument Kubbet'üs-Sahra (Dome of the Rock): A New Proposition, current discussions and views on the structure will briefly be presented and the subject will be dealt in terms of the cultural environment of the period and Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik. A new evaluation will be presented on Kubbet'üs-Sahra which can without doubt be defined as the most controversial structure not only in Islamic art, but also in terms of the cultural history of the world.

Introduction

The structure which has been underlined and has been made subject of discussion since the first days of the beginning of researches on Islamic Art, is without doubt Dome of the Rock (Figure 1). The said discussions have begun on the construction purpose of the structure and still continue in a wide range of subjects which go back to its roots. For instance, starting with the claim that it was a church which Constantine has had built, to its being a mosque which Calip Omar has had built, or being an imitation work, numerous suggestions have been made. The structure is regarded as the third holiest place for

Muslims after the Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) mosque in Medina and Ka'bah (Petersen, 1999: 68; Blair and Bloom, 2014: 183). However, the main idea which forms the foundation of the scientific studies on the structure is that, *It is impossible for Muslim Arabs who have no architectural identity and history to have had this structure built* (Browne, 1912: 50-55; Goitein, 1950; Creswell, 1958: 17-40; Petersen, 1999: 69; Gül, 2005: 289-298; Mintz, 2010).

When the plan of the structure is analyzed, it can be seen that it surrounds a circular unit at the center of two octagonal shaped corridors which are intertwined (Figure 2). This circular unit at the center, which is formed by three columns each between four bearings, a two-story dome with a high frame and the corridors are covered with a sloped and flat ceiling. Underneath the rock floor, which the circular unit surrounds, there is a cave and a shrine in the southern point. There is a door on each of the axes.

The researchers who analyzed the ornaments put the focus on the Byzantium influence in the structure (Grabar, 1964: 70; Blair and Bloom, 2004: 184; Goitein and Grabar, 2007: 249). However, the existence of compositions and motifs from the Sassanian circles are also emphasized (Petersen, 1999: 69). The lack of live beings on the ornaments is explained by the ban on imagery. When the motifs are analyzed, it can be seen the extensive use of cornucopia, crown and pearl forms (Figure 3).

1. The Purpose of Construction

Historical sources and modern researches suggest the following about the purpose of construction for the structure:

- (i) The fear that Muslims would be influenced by previously built structures: Geographer Makdisi says: *When Abdulmelik entered Jerusalem, he got excited by the ascension church which was built by the orders of Justinian and wished to erect a similar structure on the rocks to prevent Muslims from being influenced by the ascension church* (Gibb, 1958: 224-225; İslam and Al-Hamad, 2007: 112).¹
- (ii) The Need to create a new pilgrimage center: Narrated from Yaqubi: *Khalifa Abdulmelik during his struggles with Khalifa Ibn el-Zubeyr in Mecca decided to have a structure built which would compete with the Ka'bah and the Pilgrimage journey in Jerusalem* (Goitein, 1950: 104; İslam and Al-Hamad, 2007: 111).
- (iii) The structure having been built in the memory of Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) Miraj (Ascension) Journey (Grabar, 2006: 7; Gül, 2005: 292; Goitein and Grabar, 2007: 250): The issue of the Prophet's ascension is still being discussed by the Muslim scholars. There are different views and thoughts about this being a spiritual journey rather than a physical one (Harman, 2002: 327).
- (iv) The view that it is the portrayal of Islam being the dominant religion and power: Some researchers who think that the purpose of the construction is not clear claim that, none of the above-mentioned views are valid; on the contrary, they suggest in terms of the nature of Islam that it is the refutation of the teachings of Christianity. They claim that the inscriptions on Dome of the Rock clearly aim at promoting Islam and symbolize Islam as the just successor of Judaism and Christianity (Goitein, 1950: 107; Grabar, 1988: 39-40; Blair and Bloom, 2004: 184; Goitein and Grabar, 2007: 250).

2. The Early Period Cultural Environment

In terms of the development of Islamic art, the years following the death of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) are the most problematic ones. The period of prophecy which consisted throughout of the declaration of

¹ As pointed out by Gül (2007: 292), the westerners' view towards the Dome of the Rock is based on the statement in the Muqaddasi (1906: 156), to build more beautiful buildings than churches and synagogues in Syria, Egypt and Palestine.

the religion and conquests; the fact that the concept of palace culture was not present in his time and his simple life led his successors to find themselves experiencing a paradox.

The cultural practices in the early years were similar to the actions of the Prophet. The archaic form of the Medina mosque has been imitated in cities such as Kûfe, Basra and Vasis (Rabbat, 1989: 12; Humpreys, 1991; İslam and Al-Hamad, 2007: 109). Where in the world of the first 60 years these similar and repeated forms, the exchange of one of the sides of the subject brings about the change of other things as well: In this process, people, or here in this context Arabs also changed. Meeting other cultures and changing environments means that a different understanding of life was learned.² One of the first things learned was the palace culture. The Arab-Islam state gradually escaped from the models shaped by the Arab peninsula and began to adopt a Mediterranean culture contrary to common belief. The only heir of Rome in the East was not solely Byzantium Empire anymore.

However, we should accept that going through a change and realizing its necessity are two different things and strong characters are required to realize this. The first two important figures which emerged in terms of the changing of the culture are Caliph Muaviye I (r.661-680) and his grandson Abdülmelik (r.685-705) (Zetterstéén, 1997: 95-97; Yıldız, 1988: 266-270).

Muaviye, (r.661-680) under the influence of the Byzantium ambassador who belittled him, demolishes his palace in Damascus and builds a new one (Rabbat, 1993: 70). The ambassador's belittling of the palace becomes an intense trauma for the Arab administrators with high egos, and they wasted no time in giving a reply. From that moment on, nothing would be the same. Surely, the person who most got affected from his grandfather's ambition was the 5th Umayyad Caliph Abdülmelik. Taking that as the starting point, we can assume that his only inheritance was not the Islamic state.

3.Jerusalem

At this point, we need to take a look at Jerusalem before going back to Abdülmelik. Jerusalem is the most important center for monotheistic religions. A prophets list starting with Prophet Ibrahim and continuing until Jesus has led the city to assume a heavy mystical role. However, its name is not mentioned in the Qur'an (Harman, 2002: 323-324; Livne-Kafri, 2006: 382).

The interest of Muslims in Jerusalem comes from the sources which were written 50 years after the construction of Kubbet'üs Sahra (Grabar, 1988: 39). According to these sources, the Isra (night journey) and Miraj (ascension journey) had begun from the rock on which Kubbet'üs Sahra was built. If that is true, what kind of a situation and process is it that the first Islamic monumental structure was built here?

The seeds of the situation seem to have been sown with the conquest of Jerusalem by the Muslims. An event experienced in those days is interesting and it also lays the foundations of Muslims' relationship with Jerusalem. A Jewish rabbi named Kaab el-Ahbar suggests Caliph Omar the north of the holy rock for the construction. The Caliph who thought that building the Mosque there would mean repeating the Jewish kiblah refuses this suggestion and has the mosque built on the south of the rock (Goitein, 1950: 107; Buhl, 1999: 956).³

Although the events up to this point are perceived as a simple situation, the belief in the holiness of the rock and the area was given as a gift to the Muslim repertoire. The previous rabbi who seems to have spent great effort about it becomes a Muslim and it is indeed a great coincidence that he later becomes one of the most reliable traditionists!

² "the second generation of Muslim governors paid more attention to appearance" Rabbat (1989: 12).

³ Caliph Omar built a large rectangular wooden building in the middle of the hill, it was almost for 3000 people. This building was visited by the French chancellor Arculf who holds the first traveler's record about the visiting Muslim Jerusalem in 680, and expressed its environment as "rough structure" (Goldhill, 2011: 20).

4.Period of Gathering Information

The area coming to the fore once again after the period of Caliph Omar (636 A.D.) takes place during the reign of Abdumelik. But what happens in those 60 years of so?

We can assume this period as the time of gathering information.⁴ As I have stated just now, there is a need to get used to the new life order in a land which has just completed its urbanization. However, it seems that regardless of the fact that they have accepted Islam or not, the Jewish people have been the loyal followers of an issue: The rebuilding of the temple (Sporty, 1991: 34).

5.Abdumelik's Fear

What did the Emevid's administration think about the rebuilding of the temple? What we know is the existence of a group which wanted the temple to be rebuilt and inflicted the holiness of the area to the Muslim repertoire. What was important for these people who were testing the intellectual pulse of Jerusalem was the rebuilding of the temple and keeping the Christians away from the area. It seems that they have been successful in at least one of these.

Removal of the Christians from the temple areas after the conquest of the Muslims has led to more importance to be given to the religious structures in the city. At this point, Abdumelik's fear should be remembered: What if the Muslims see these structures and are affected by their grandeur?

In fact, what is ignored or misunderstood here is the reason behind his fear. Abdumelik must have been afraid that the stories these structures represented would be influential, and not because Muslims would get affected by the monumentality or grandeur of the structures. It seems possible to explain further the danger Abdumelik has realized. What was Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) place at a period in which people cared about nothing but the stories of prophets? Of course, Mohammad (PBUH) was important as a prophet but he did not have a common story to be narrated. I believe that what Abdumelik realized was the absence of how a prophet could be made monumental.

I have mentioned an Emevid (Umayyad) society which became Mediterranean. Although this statement in its simplest sense expresses being influenced by a dominant cultural environment, its meaning for Abdumelik is different and deep. He was a Caliph who created milestones, had dams built, gold coins made, determined measurement standards and what is more, a Caliph who had roads built. In fact, it is apparent that he had taken the great founders before him as role models. Therefore, we can suggest that he aspired to the last Roman emperors such as Constantine and Justinian. This detail is important in terms of Dome of the Rock, because it points out to the most important address in terms of the endless sentences formed on the roots of this structure. Prior to Dome of the Rock, 25 similar structures had been built with some differences and these were in different parts of the geography of Rome, Anatolia and Syria.⁵

Before I continue, I would like to summarize what I have said so far. An area whose holiness is being talked about by a rabbi named Kaab el-Ahbar who became Muslim and is accepted by the Muslims; a large and ambitious Jewish group whose waited for the day on which the Jerusalem temple would be rebuilt and a Caliph who regarded himself as one of the great Roman developers.

Although it seems all of sudden as if we have all the components, we are still lacking one aspect: The triggering mechanism.

⁴ Unfortunately, we do not have enough historical sources regarding the first two centuries for Islamic era (Hamilton, 1958: 229-30; Humpreys, 1991; Johns, 2003: 411).

⁵ Regarding the structures, there are numerous books and articles written related to it, but in this paper focus is solely on the meaning of Dome of the Rock, the sources for the structures are not given.

6. The Triggering Mechanism

Let us remember that Abdulmelik had an obsession dating back to his grandfather's time. It may seem a normal consequence that he wanted to put the Byzantium in place who was the greatest enemy. However, when we take a look at his implementations, it seems that he was gradually going into the orbit of the Roman-Byzantium culture and was even getting his gold coins done like theirs (Lapidus, 2002: 108). The tensions experienced with the Byzantium Empire primarily about Antioch and existence of the Jews who were insisting on rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. The endless theological discussion environment which we have little information about but whose existence was certain. It seems that the event which answered all these questions and the real triggering mechanism took place before Abdulmelik became the Caliph and attempted to organize his land as little Rome.

In my opinion, this effect mechanism is the decisions taken at the 6th General-3rd Istanbul Council which was held in November 680-September 681 in İstanbul.⁶ In this council, all Monotheists (who do not believe that Jesus has both human and divine wills) including the Pope were condemned, and the Kadikoy Council Faith Formula was completed with the following words: *"We accept two wills and two energies in Jesus which are not divided or separated and intermingle. Two wills follow godly will, like the human will, and are subject to it." The Trinity.*

The Istanbul Council was held in 681, Abdulmelik had become the Caliph in 685 and Kubbet'üs-Sahra was built in 692. If it is taken into consideration that the construction took 4 years to be completed, then what happened in the seven-year period between 685-692? As it can be imagined, it is not possible to know for sure. However, we can make some suggestions. It is possible that the Council decisions, which coincided with his uncle Yezid I's Caliphate days (r.680-683), angered Damascus. It should also be taken into consideration that this might have been a new suppression tool in the hands of the Jews who always created tension against the Christians.

Among those who reacted against the decisions taken at the Istanbul Council was the Antioch bishop as well. Therefore, perhaps there was a new alliance for Muslims in the North. There was another reason why Abdulmelik was against the Council decisions besides being the ruler of the Arab-Islamic state. He is also counted among the Qur'an and hadith experts of his time.

Now, we have a serious theological discussion and a Caliph which can be considered among the Muslim scholars. We can now declare the existence of a concrete fact about the construction purpose of Dome of the Rock. The warning which is contained in 248-meter-long construction epitaph also supports this.

7. Roots

Then, why are the researchers still not satisfied? Naturally, this does not give any information about the source of the form of the structure. Besides, it causes the approaches of historians, art historians and culture historians who tend to regard and read every action of the Islamic state as a competition with the Byzantium to produce a specific perception. However, when we at least look at what Abdulmelik has done as a founder and statesman, we cannot see a detail implying that he was better or different than his East Roman rivals. On the contrary, it can be seen that he followed them and tried to do similar things; I believe that he even admired them. He was a man of higher ideals and I think he had a very good reason.

Now, we can deal with the form. Certain suggestions which add up to the same idea have been suggested as to why such a form was chosen in the construction of Dome of the Rock. The form is not Arabic or Islamic, and although the designs are different, there are previous examples. The said examples were built in the period for at least 2-6 centuries regardless of the environment.

⁶ For the further information about Council see Dvornik (1990).

It is impossible to find a chronological parallel and there is no need for this. However, counter proposals have been put forward in this respect as well. According to these, the roots of the structure are the old Arab dynasty shrines such as Maharib Suleyman and Maharib Ghumdan which have not survived until the present time (Khoury, 1993: 57-65). The person who has made the alleged connection between early Arab culture and the Emevids is a name we are familiar with: The Yemeni rabbi Kaab el-Ahbar (Khoury, 1993: 59).

Regardless of whether they are Western or Eastern, all researchers are using all the resources possible to prove that the originator of the structure could not have been from the Arabs, because the Arabs do not have an architectural history and are playing into the hands of researchers during the period referred to as the Pre-Islamic age of ignorance. Perhaps many were ignorant, but as gradually understood from the information given in the text that at least Abdumelik was not ignorant. My evaluation as to the roots of the structure's plan type is a bit different and beyond the limits of structural influence/similarity: *The Changing City and the Palace Concept*.

Abdumelik somehow knew Roman culture well. It is a fact that he was aware of the changing character of settlement during the Roman period. The change in question has begun with the implementations of the Diocletian period in the 3rd A.D. and has influenced since then onwards (Ćurčić, 1993: 67-90). This new design which has been influential throughout the Roman geography is located outside the city or right next to it and involves the mausoleum of the ruler which is planned at the center. In the later periods, the mausoleums were replaced by churches. In this respect, the closest example to Damascus and Abdumelik was the large scale, octagonal plan church which Constantine had built in Antioch (Ćurčić, 1993: 68).

Was it possible that selecting such a form is considered to be minor and a subject of ridicule? Or were they hiding behind changing the form here and there? What is even more interesting is that, the Abbasid historiography which disrespected and discredited the Emevid's rule on all occasions never said that the structure is an imitation. However, that could have been a good opportunity for further vilification. There are no evaluations at all on this issue during the construction days or afterwards. This tells us something: It is the information that circular or octagonal planned and domed structures are always on top of a grave or an important and holy place, and this information has become universal. It is about the receiver/viewer understanding the function of the form of the structure (It is the same as bell towers signifying churches and minarets signifying mosques). Therefore, the form of the structure was not chosen because it was suitable for *circumambulation* (walking around) of the Ka'bah, but because it could be understood by people of all religions and cultures as soon as they set their eyes on it.

Now that we have formed a judgment about the selection of the form, we can take a look at the ornaments.

8.Ornamentation (Figure 4-5)

It can be seen that cornucopia (horn of plenty), crown and pearl forms have been used densely in the ornamentation. With the motifs taken from different surroundings, an eclectic composition has been created and these have been evaluated as a symbol of heaven based on the construction purpose and location of the structure.

In terms of the motifs, what Vasiti narrates is significant. Vasiti states that, *During the reign of Abdumelik, there was a Yatima pearl on a chain underneath the dome and on top of the rock, Ibrahim's ram's horn and Kisra's crown* (Le Strange, 1887: 284-285; Rabbat, 1993: 71, 73).⁷

⁷ For further information about Yatima pearl see Shalem (1997).

Even if what Vasiti narrates is half reality and half legend, it contains certain details which cannot be overlooked. Perhaps the most important one among these is the habit of showing and exhibiting important loots as an indication of Arab's understanding of life. As far as it is understood, these were the most important loots exhibited in Ka'bah (Rabbat, 1993: 71-73). These loots having been brought to Kubbet'üs Sahra from Ka'bah at different times may be perceived as the emphasis of the new center, however this is the center of the worldly power rather than the religious center and its owner is without doubt Abdulmelik.⁸

Although the objects in question have changed place by time, they have been immortalized by being repeated with ornamentations. The purpose here is to portray richness and loots through famous and known elements.

It is a structure which symbolizes Ibrahim with its ornamentations and decorated with pearls and crowns which can be visualized as richness by anyone who sees these and understands what they are regardless of his/her religion. What we have now is a small-scale model of the Muslim heaven.

9.Reply

What about the reply given to the 681 Council? The 248-meter construction epitaph is noteworthy as the first Islamic theological discussion (Figure 6).⁹ For many researchers, this means dogmatizing, an impatient call to convert to Islam or competing with Christianity with a victorious Muslim point of view.

The main message given in the long epitaph is as follows:¹⁰

“In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. There is no god but Allah. He is one and He has no partners. Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, both declare the Praises and Glory of Allah: to Him belongs dominion, and to Him belongs praise: and He has power over all things Muhammad is the Messiah and Messenger of Allah.

“O People of the Book! Exceed not the limits in your religion, and say not to ALLAH anything but the truth. Truly, the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was only a Messenger of ALLAH, and a fulfillment of HIS word which HE has sent down to Mary, and a mercy from HIM. So, believe in ALLAH and HIS Messengers, and say not, 'They are three.' Cease, it will be better for you. Truly, ALLAH is the only One God. Holy is HE, far above having a son. To HIM belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. And sufficient is ALLAH as a guardian.”

As seen from the epitaph, it contains texts from the Qur'an. It is not man who says, 'Say not 'They are three,' but God and this is in fact a very clear and monumental invitation.¹¹

The striking detail in the first part of the text is that Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) name has been mentioned only once in the epitaph. Without doubt, the reason for the mention of His name is the Muslims' wish to show their prophet. However, another point of view is also possible. It is what Jerusalem and perhaps what other Syrian cities have taught Muslims. The meaning behind this sentence is not the learning of protocol or the rules of inscription. Syria and Jerusalem must have taught Muslims how a prophet is to be commemorated and monumentalized. The Church of the Nativity, The Ascension Church, the footprints of Christ and other possible holy remains and objects shown to the pilgrims have shown how a prophet can be mythicized.

⁸ The same thought was also emphasized by Rabbat (1993: 69).

⁹ For the inscription text see Kessler (1970: 4-9); Whelan (1998: 4-5) and Milwright (2016).

¹⁰ Arabic text translated in Turkish by Ömer Faruk Türkoğlu. I would like to thank him.

¹¹ For another evaluation on this see Blair and Bloom (2004: 184)

10. What did Abdumelik try to do?

Which other people's names are seen on the epitaph? Christ, Virgin Mary and founder Abdumelik. Now, we can analyze what Abdumelik tried to do and how he saw himself.

The plan chart and the ornamentation are apparently a result of a detailed, very careful and precise selection. This success of the Arabs who have no architectural history in their first monumental try is surprising. In terms of selection and application, unknown artists and Raca b. Hayva and Yezid b. Salam who supervised the construction are mentioned (Le Strange, 1887; Chen, 1981; Bloom, 1993; Rabbat, 1993). However, the design of the structure is not the type whose start of construction would depend on someone else's liking.

A hadith narrated by Al-Baladuri is noteworthy: *"Each prophet has made some place untouchable. Therefore, just like Ibrahim's making Mecca untouchable, I made Medina untouchable"* (Hitti, 1916: 21). Without a doubt, the greatest builders should be the prophets, due to the system and order they brought. Another hadith says: *"The mountains are decorated with three mosques. The holy mosque of Mecca, my mosque and the Al-Aksa Mosque"* (Najm, 2001: 723). It is in fact like a border which should be reached or overcome for the founder which came after Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). I believe that Abdumelik was able to realize that.

Abdumelik, who had a big ego perhaps due to his military successes, tried to shape his country like a Roman emperor. Besides his expertise in the Qur'an and the Hadiths, his most important characteristic was that he was among the poets of the time (Aycan, and Sariçam, 1993: 42).¹² This is probably his most important quality, because as an artist of words, he had the ability to think in abstract terms.

A structure which could be immediately recognized by everyone, which could symbolize the Muslim idea of heaven with its ornamentations, refresh the message of Islam with its epitaph and monumentalize Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) could have been the creation of only such a talent. Caliph Abdumelik who has done great deeds made, in fact, Jerusalem untouchable with Kubbet'üs-Sahra. Even though hundreds of years have passed and numerous invasions have taken place, the city still belongs to Abdumelik.

Epilogue

In this point, I would like to ask the question I have posed earlier again by changing it a little. Who then are the people mentioned in the epitaph and the ornamentations? Prophet Ibrahim, Christ, Virgin Mary, Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and Founder Abdumelik.

Abdumelik has both made Jerusalem untouchable with the structure he had built and renewed the basic message of Islam with a manner of a prophet. He has made sure to add the names of all the great prophets and religious characters' names next to his own name and tried to let us know in which position he saw himself.

Figures

¹² For his life and works see Donner (1988); Yıldız (1998); Sirma (1991); Schick (1998).



Figure 1. The Dome of the Rock, General view from the West (Taken by E. ESER)

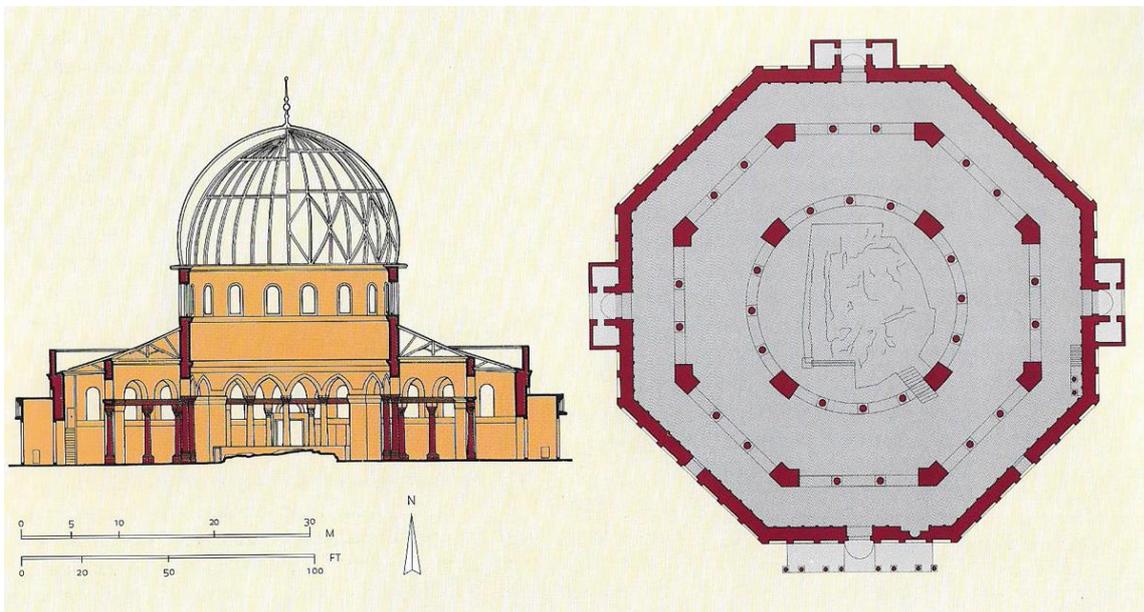


Figure 2. Plan and intersection (Stierlin, 1996: 34)

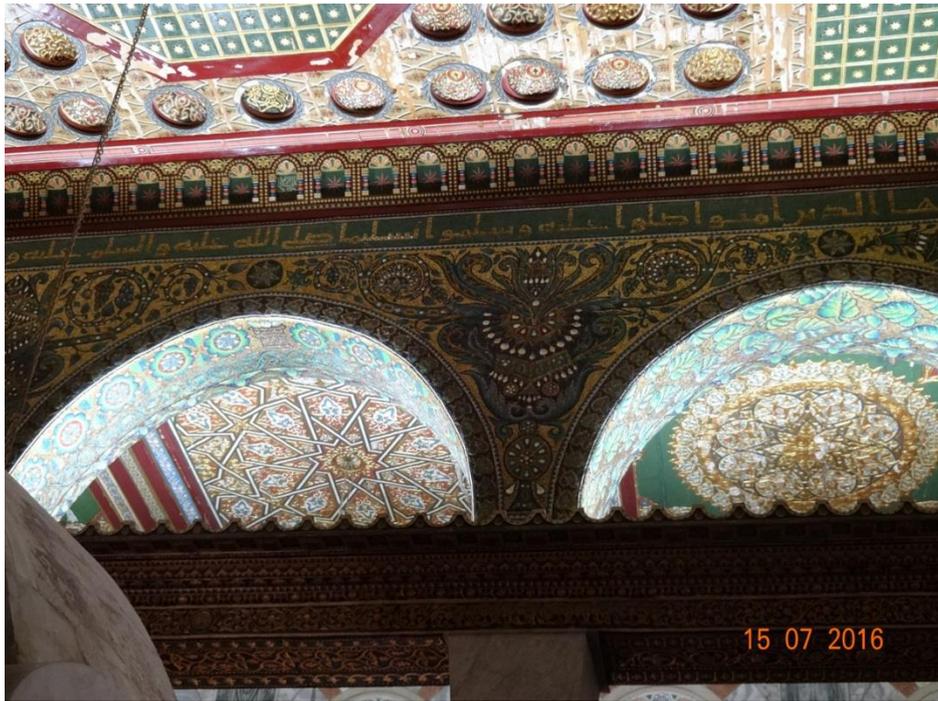


Figure 3. Interior, Mosaic Ornamentation (Taken by E. ESER)

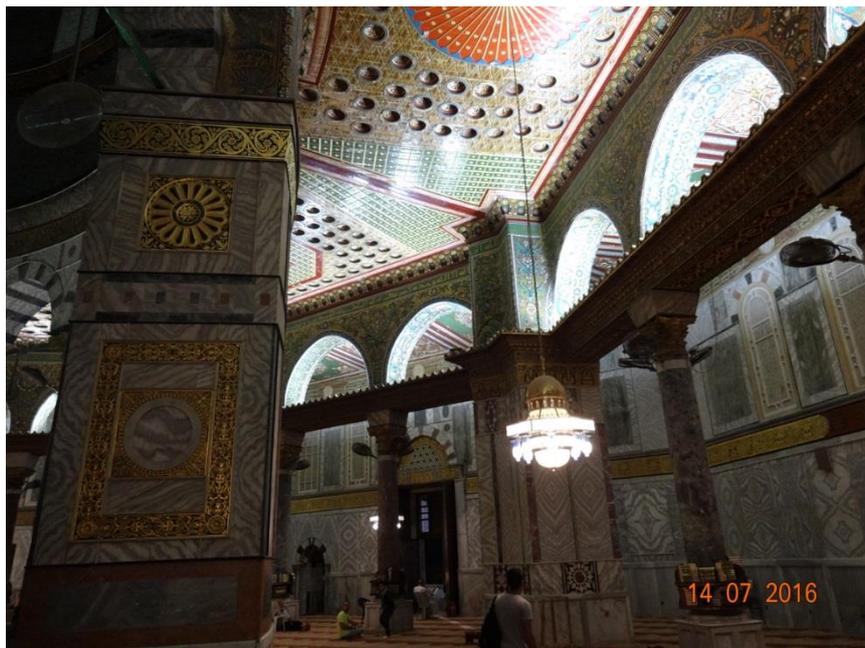


Figure 4. Interior, Marble and Mosaic Ornaments (Taken by E.ESER)

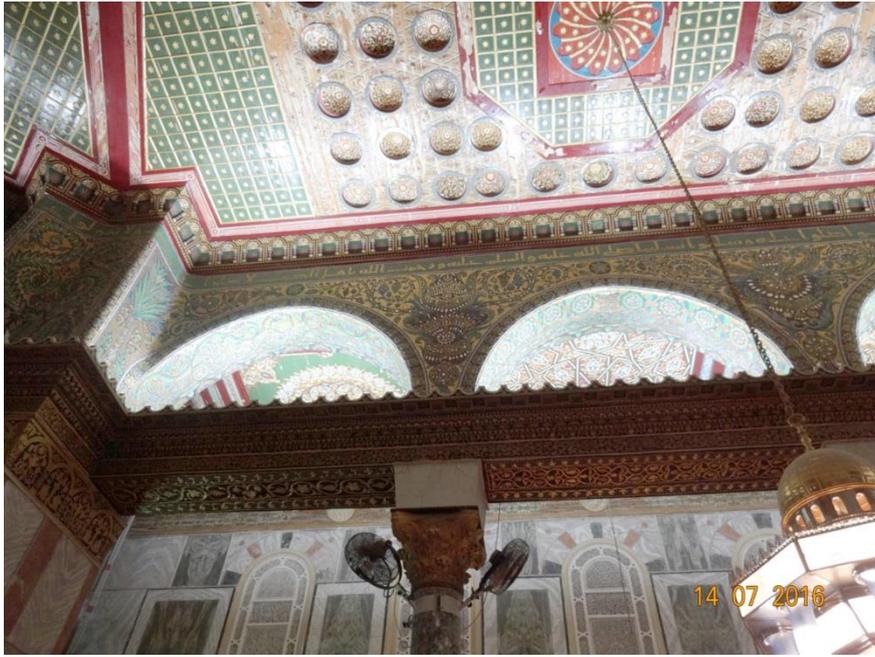


Figure 5. Interior, Mosaic Ornaments and Ceiling (Taken by E. ESER)



Figure 6. Interior, Inscription detail (Taken by E. ESER)

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