

Tara Lynne Grant
ID# 3318138
Ed 4621
Prof. T. Christou
February 25, 2010.

Islam in Byzantine Jerusalem

Thesis

Research on the Byzantine period brings forth a plethora of documentation investigating the enormous impact of Christianity on the peoples of Byzantium and the historic councils that would shape the traditions of Christianity upheld today. Every Christian honours the belief in the Trinity; however, few know that the Trinity was decided amongst councilors under Emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE (Common Era, secular form of AD – Anno Domini). Christians and Jews have long held the Holy land as the geographical centre of their belief systems and Jerusalem was at the heart of these monotheistic religions. Conversely another religion claimed Jerusalem as a sacred and integral part of their beliefs, Islam. In this paper I will investigate why Muslims esteem Jerusalem so highly which brings the focus on to the holy land area of Mount Moriah and in particular the building Dome of the Rock.



Map of Byzantine Empire 565 A.D. (source Byzantium.seashell.net.nz)

Sources/ Limitations of Study

- Cameron, Averil. The Byzantines. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

Cameron's book is a well-reputed secondary source. Winner of the 2006 John D. Criticos Prize. "Averil Cameron's *The Byzantines* marks a welcome departure from most previous attempts to portray and characterize Byzantine civilization. The book focuses squarely on the people of the Byzantine Empire, their views of themselves and their culture, and how these changed over time. The result is a remarkably clear view of who the Byzantines were, and the book will contribute significantly to a restoration of Byzantium to its rightful place at the center of the historical tradition of Europe."

—**Timothy Gregory**, Ohio State University

- Hawting, G. R. The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661-750. Illinois: University Press, 1987.

Hawting's book is a secondary source. It proved extremely helpful in understanding the political hierarchy within Islam. Hawting's book is recognized as a standard for survey courses in Islam. Limitations to this source would be the book is part of a large volume of texts that would have been difficult to read all in order to glean a more complete understanding.

- Landy, Jerry. Dome of the Rock. Newsweek Book Division. Italy: Arnold Mondadori Editore, 1972.

Landy's large coffee table book of prose and pictures is a secondary source. Language and bias sometimes evident as this book's reference base is over 35 years ago. However, many of the pictures of the architecture are historically accurate today and could conversely be viewed as a primary source.

- Tadgell, Christopher. Islam: From Medina to the Magreb and from the Indes to Istanbul. Architecture in Context III. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Tadgell's book is a secondary source. Referenced solely for its pictorial content. Tadgell lacked concrete information for this thesis.

- Vasiliev, A.A. History of the Byzantine Empire. E-book via UNB Blackboard Learning Site. <https://learning.unb.ca/webct/urw/lc5116001.tp0/cobaltMainFrame.dowebct>

This comprehensive e-book is also a secondary source. Detailed information provided by Vasiliev in a timeless syntax does not belie this book's age is over 50 years. However, due to its publishing date it must be noted that some of the information could have altered due to more recent investigations.

- Wells, Colin. Sailing From Byzantium : How a Lost Empire Shaped the World. New York: Bantam Dell, 2006.

Wells book is a secondary source set in an accessible prose style imbued with colourful anecdotes of historical figures grounded in many sources both primary and secondary.

Discussion

To understand the significance of Jerusalem and the Dome of the Rock requires a brief look into the formation of Islam and its greatest prophet Mohammed. Long before the Christian era, a Semitic nomadic people occupied the Arabian Peninsula and the Syrian Desert. The vast Roman Empire used limes to fortify and protect its lands from the Arabs. The rock walls were erected along border lines where the Romans felt the largest threat from the Arab population. The Syrian limes, also known as the Arabian limes, are three separate but lengthy walls interspersed with Roman forts to protect the Empire's hold on the Mediterranean shores (Vasiliev 150). (Limes were used in many different areas of the Roman Empire and ruins exist today. For example: Hadrian's Wall in Scotland.) These nomadic people did not follow Islam they worshipped their own gods and sacred objects. They believed in the *Djinn* (demons) and Allah was a vague conception of something friendly to ward off the demons. Prayer was unknown to them. Mohammed would change this primitive religion into Islam (Vasiliev, 151).



Hadrian's wall at Greenhead Lough (Source Wikimedia Commons)

Mohammed was born in 570 and rose from a modest preacher of a new monotheistic religion to the chief of a political and religious community. Mohammed's desire to create Islam stemmed from visions he was sent by Allah to save his people who had followed the wrong path. *Islam* is an Arabic word that translates "submission to God" and followers were called *Muslims* that translates to "one who submits". Distinctive to Mohammed's teachings was blind submission and complete dependence on the will of Allah. The teaching of one God- Allah and one apostle- Mohammed is a fundamental principal of Islam. Moses and Jesus Christ are recognized as prophets but not greater than Mohammed. Mohammed's creation of Islam was an attempt to restore what he believed to be the religion of Abraham before it was corrupted by Jews and Christians (Vasiliev 155). Mohammed claims he is a direct descendent of Abraham. Mohammed's teachings were not original creations, rather Islam developed under the influence of Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism (Vasiliev, 154). Interesting to note the first direction of prayer for Muslims was not Mecca but Jerusalem.

Mohammed conquered Mecca in 630 destroying its idols and all surviving evidence of polytheism. Islam was the new religion. Mohammed turned his Bedouin troops to conquer more Byzantine cities and save them from believing the wrong monotheistic or polytheistic religion. Since 634 the Byzantine Empire fought the "Sword of Allah", an army the Romans of Byzantine had never seen who zealously embraced death to fight in the name of Allah. Cities began to fall to the Muslims: Bosra, Damascus, Baalbek, Homs and Aleppo (Landy 15). Mohammed set his sights on conquering the Holy land and Jerusalem. It was in Jerusalem that Mohammed claimed to been transported to heaven by the archangel Gabriel to witness the glory of Allah. Jerusalem also housed the rock altar

on the Temple Mount that Mohammed's ancestor Abraham attempted to sacrifice his son Isaac to Allah. Mohammed died before he could see the Holy land returned to his people.



Turkish Miniature: Gabriel Reveals Himself to Mohammed



Gaspard Rem : *Abraham and Isaac* Oil on copper,

The ruler or *Caliph* of Islam during the time of the Heraclius, the great Byzantine Emperor, was Omar ibn al-Kattib. Omar led the Islamic army to victory as Heraclius abandoned Jerusalem under the imminent defeat of his army. Following his establishment of his people's right to freely practice their religion in the city Omar turned to the Temple Mount or Mount Moriah to erect a mosque in honour of Allah. Omar was acting on Mohammed's spiritual claim that Allah ordered Mohammed to go to the furthest mosque and pray for blessings and glory from Allah (Landy 19). This simple mosque would later be transformed by *Caliph* al-Malik in 687 to the Dome of the Rock.

Kubbat as-Sakhra, the Dome of the Rock was built over the Foundation Stone, the rock altar of Abraham lore, as a shrine for pilgrims not a mosque but a *mashhad*. The purpose of the Dome of the Rock has been the subject of considerable speculation. It has

been said the building was designed to flaunt Islamic presence in the Holy land, or as a beacon to beckon other Muslims, or as homage to Mohammed and Abraham. No matter the reasoning behind its construction the Dome of the Rock stands today almost completely intact as it first appeared thirteen hundred years ago (Hawting 60).



Rock of Moriah (source www.lifeintheholylnd.com)

The Dome of the Rock symbolizes Byzantium influence on the emerging presence of Islam. The construction of the *mashhad* was based on Christian building traditions and it is speculated that the measurements for the dome were borrowed from the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (Wells 118). The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was supposedly built on the holy land of Golgotha, the place of Christ's crucifixion and was/is regarded as a sacred and important place in Christian theology. The Dome of the Rock was larger, more impressively ornate its mere presence attempts to dwarf Christianity physically and metaphorically.



Church of the Holy Sepulchre



The Dome of the Rock (Source sacreddestinations.com)



The Dome of the Rock (Source Photobucket)

Inside the Dome elaborate Byzantine mosaics ring the interior colonnade with recognizable byzantine patterns of power: crowns, bracelets, earrings, necklaces, and breast plates. Wells interprets this puzzling design as Islamic flouting of its older enemies (119). Koranic inscriptions directed at Christians and less so at Jews, are found on the interior walls. The inscriptions point out that in worshipping the Trinity and Jesus Christ Christians have corrupted the monotheistic message of Allah (Wells 120). Other inscriptions contain passages from the Koran and refer to Islam as the religion of truth.

These inscriptions provide the first recorded evidence of Islam as the name of this new monotheistic Arab religion.



The inscription inside the Dome: There is no God but God; Muhammad is his Prophet; Jesus is also his Prophet, but God has no Son: He neither Begets nor is Begotten (Source faculty.maxwell.syr.edu)



Interior Dome of the Rock (Source jersusalem.110mb.com)

Significance to Contemporary Education/Society

What is the importance of this discovery of Byzantium? Why would students learn about Islam in Byzantium today? Considering the unfortunate events of 9/11 and the subsequent ubiquitous “War on Terror” and the deluge of anti-Islamic rhetoric, it is important for students today to see the overlapping historical and religious base between Christianity and Islam. Furthermore, it is important to see that religion and politics have long been married and should be separated in all contexts as society evolves.

Conclusions

This paper has clarified the connection between Jerusalem and the Muslims and pointed to the evidence that leads back to the will of one man, Mohammed, and his visions from God/Allah. The subsequent events, from vision to Dome, are tenuously wrapped in a legend or as some would say a matter of faith.

Allah Akbar. Shalom. Amen.