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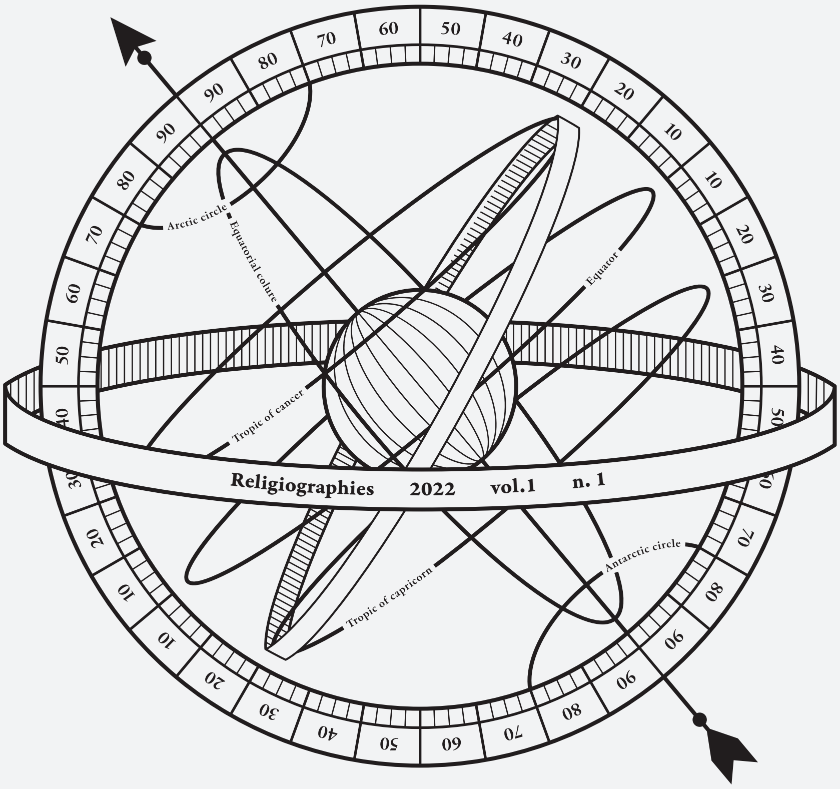
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Column Transfers, New Buildings, and Textual Strategies: Christians and Muslims in Early Medieval Lydda and Jerusalem

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Abstract

In the Syro-Palestinian region, Muslims approached the Christian sacred landscape in apparently contradictory modalities. On the one hand, they paid reverence to the great sanctuaries that had attracted pilgrims since late antiquity. On the other hand, they began to strive to create a new hierarchy in the sacred landscape, a new order with separate Muslim sites as the main focus of attraction. This reconfiguration was a long process that involved different strategies, which included the tentative transfer of marble columns, the foundation of new sacred buildings, and the circulation of textual traditions praising Muslim sacred history. This article focuses on the case studies of the Sanctuary of St. George in Lydda and the complex of Christian buildings located east of the city walls of Jerusalem.

Introduction

The sacred landscape inherited and inhabited by Muslims in the Syro-Palestinian region was dominated by Christian places of worship, consisting of both sanctuaries that attracted pilgrims and churches that served the local communities. Most ecclesiastical structures were built during late antiquity, in some cases at the direction of imperial authorities and in some other cases thanks to local donors. They were the focus of communities’ life and the expression of the magnificence of both local and more distant authorities, offering the best building techniques and the most precious decoration possible. This material aspect, something that was visible and could be experienced by Muslims as well, is a key factor in a full understanding of religious life under the Islamic rule of the early medieval period. Sanctuaries were often built around a chamber containing relics of Christian saints, who, even after having died, maintained their presence, shedding their aura on the sacred place and on pilgrims who paid a visit to them. Peter of Bayt Rās, a ninth-century Melkite churchman from Capitolias (Bayt Rās) in the Transjordan,[1] counts in the Syrian region forty holy places devoted to the memory of Christ (“places of His sanctification”) and the commemoration of the prophets. In his text, these are presented as being “in the hands of those who believe in Christ” and they served as pilgrimage destinations in his day.[2] To this list we can add, on the evidence of archaeological remains and written sources, dozens of sanctuaries commemorating saints and martyrs.[3] Furthermore, both in towns and outside towns there were monasteries active during the early medieval period, as attested by both material and written evidence.[4]

The early Islamic landscape, however, was also dotted with living Christian holy persons. There was the case, for instance, of the presence of a monk confined in one room within the premises of the church destroyed in 705/6 by al-Walīd I in Damascus. The destruction made room for the largest and most lavishly decorated mosque of the time in the capital of the caliphate.[5] Several charismatic Christian figures are attested elsewhere in early Islamic Syria. In the life of St. Stephen Sabaita (725–794), the Melkite saint is said to have received Muslim pilgrims as well, and the experience of his healing power to have converted a Muslim to Christianity.[6] Other places in which stylites isolated themselves from the mundane world attracted Muslim believers as well as Christian ones.[7]

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[1] Mark N. Swanson, “Peter of Bayt Ra’s,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History (600-900)*, ed. David Richard Thomas, Barbara Roggema, Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 902-906.

[2] Eutychius of Alexandria, *The Book of Demonstration*, 2 vols, trans. W. Montgomery Watt (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1960), vol. 1, 134-62; vol. 2, 166-207.

[3] Basema Hamarneh, *Topografia cristiana ed insediamenti rurali nel territorio dell’odierna Giordania nelle epoche bizantina ed omayyade V-IX sec.* (Città del Vaticano: Pontificio istituto di archeologia cristiana, 2003); Pierre-Louis Gatier, “Inscriptions grecques, mosaiques et églises des debuts de l’époque islamique au Proche-Orient (VIIe-VIIIe siècles),” in *Le Proche-Orient de Justinien aux Abbassides: peuplement et dynamiques spatiales*, ed. Antoine Borrut, Muriel Debié, Arietta Papaconstantinou, Dominique Pieri, and Jean-Pierre Sodini, Jean-Pierre (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 7-28; regarding the city of Damascus and its environs only, see Joseph Nasrallah, “Damas et la Damascène: leur églises à l’époque byzantine,” *Proche Orient Chrétien* 34-35 (1984-85): 37-58; 264-76.

[4] Gérard Troupeau, “Les couvents chrétiens dans la littérature arabe,” *La nouvelle revue du Caire* 1 (1975): 265-79.

Lydda

It is within this context that the importance of the sanctuary of Lydda (Ludd) devoted to St. George should be appreciated. The church of St. George in Lydda may have existed since the fourth century, but from the sixth century it appears with increasing frequency in the itineraries of pilgrims. It marked the grave of St. George, who was a soldier-saint, a native of Lydda, martyred under Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century. If the involvement of Emperor Justinian I (525–565) in its reconstruction or embellishment is not mentioned in any primary source, "what is certain is that by the time that Lydda fell to the Muslim Arabs under ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ in 636, an impressive basilica stood over the martyr's grave."[8] The sanctuary remained the focus of a yearly festival, which consisted of religious celebrations for the calendar day dedicated to St. George and a market. Market festivities going on during religious celebrations should not be overlooked. The calendar year and the rotation of the seasons were punctuated by a series of religious festivities related to Christian saints' days. Many of them survived the Arab-Islamic conquest to be eventually paired with Muslim ones over time.[9] The market organized at the sanctuary of St. George in Lydda was attended by Muslims too. Arabic-Islamic sources even report that the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī paid a visit to the church, and praised the beauty of the building.[10] This should not be surprising, as the duties of caliphs included constant interaction with Christian communities and with minorities in general. However, in the case of Lydda, there was more than a ruler's routine management of communal relations.

The sanctuary was a place where several miracles were said to have occurred, and some of them involved material culture and affected the relations with Muslims. Among the miracles attributed to St. George was the wondrous transportation of a column from the quarry to the church. The column was a beautiful artefact donated for the construction of the sanctuary by a devotee. A collection of miracles attributed to saints reports that an inscription was miraculously engraved on the column by St. George himself.[11] Another column gained popularity because it was tied to a wheel, the instrument of the saint's martyrdom, and thus evoked the body of the saint himself. The materiality of the column was concerned in some miracles: the column bled for three hours on the saint's feast day, while a crack in the shaft reportedly gave signs to pilgrims entering the church by testing their faith.[12] The eighth-century remarks by the monk Epiphanius emphasize the fact that the column stood for the saint. It is probably this very same column that Adomnán describes in the seventh century in his *Loca sancta*.[13] The column, according to Adomnán, had a portrait of St. George engraved on it and an impression in the shape of ten fingers related to a miracle performed by the saint.

It is also worth recalling that among the wonders attributed to St. George, and, more specifically, related to the Palestinian sanctuary of St.

[5] Nancy Khalek, *Damascus After the Islamic Conquest. Text and Image in Early Islam* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47-50.

[6] Leontius of Damascus, *The Life of Stephen of Mar Sabas*, ed. and transl. J.C. Lamoreaux (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 81-3.

[7] *Anonymous Chronicle of 1234*, trans. in Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 145. On the fortunes and demise of stylite practices after the Islamic conquest, see Simon Pierre, "Le stylite (esṭ sūnōrō) et sa ṣawmaʿa face aux milieux cléricaux islamiques et miaphysites (ier–iie/viie–viiie siècles)," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 28 (2020): 174-226 and more specifically on the tower of Umm al-Rasas: Basema Hamerneh: "On the Edge of Heaven: The Stylite Tower of Umm er-Rasas in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Period" (forthcoming).

[8] Denys Pringle, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: A Corpus: Volume 2, L-Z* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 10.

[9] al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī ma'rifat al-aqālīm*, ed. M.J. De Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 182-83. Trading fairs organized at religious sanctuaries before and after the Islamic conquest were studied by André Binggeli: "Foires et pèlerinages sur la route du Hajj. À propos se quelques sanctuaires chrétiens et musulmans dans le sud du Bilad al-Šam d'après le Kitab al-azmina d'Ibn Masawayh (9e s.)," *ARAM*, 18-19 (2006-2007): 559-82; "Annual fairs, regional networks, and trade routes in Syria, sixth-tenth centuries," in *Trade and Markets in Byzantium*, ed. Cécile Morrisson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 281-96. Regarding the persistence of pre-Islamic rites related to the cycle of the solar year into the Mamluk period, see Yehoshua Frenkel, "Popular Culture (Islam, Early and Middle Periods)," *Religion Compass* 2.2 (2008): 195-225.

[10] al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*, 176; Yāqūt al-Hamawī, *Kitāb mu'jam al-buldān*, 6 vols, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Leipzig: In Commission bei F.A. Brockhaus, 1866-73), v. "Ludd."

[11] *Saint Thècle, Saints Côme et Damien, Saints Cyr et Jean, Saint Georges*, transl. A.-J. Festugière (Paris: Éd. Picard, 1971), 273-75.

[12] In the same column there is a crack in the marble which gives signs; if you tell the truth you can go through without hindrance, and without difficulty, but if you do not tell the truth you cannot go through. Cf. Epiphanius, *The Holy City and the Holy Places*, trans. in J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades* (Oxford, UK: Oxbow Books, 2002), 210.

[13] Adomnán, *The Holy Places*, trans. in Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 203.

George in Lydda, there were stories of Muslims being converted by the divine powers of the place and the saint's icon.[14] Textual sources reporting early medieval polemics between Christians and Muslims highlight that, while the former praised the miraculous nature of icons, the latter challenged or denied it.[15] The existence of traditions denying the power of icons might suggest that their worship was not limited to Christians and represented a threat to the dogma of the Islamic faith, which was then in the early stage of its formation. The evidence from Lydda and Jerusalem discussed in this chapter shows how columns exemplified another aspect of the ubiquitous veneration of saints during late antiquity and the early medieval period.

The praise of the building articulated by the caliph al-Mahdī was later echoed by al-Muqaddasī. The latter explained the architectural achievements of the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (646–705) and his son al-Walīd (668–715), in Jerusalem and Damascus respectively, in the light of the outstanding architectural context, consisting of monumental churches such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the Church of Saint Sophia in Edessa, and the Church of St. George in Lydda.[16] Al-Muqaddasī applies the "competitive discourse" in order to elucidate the reasons for the extraordinary sums expended by the two Umayyad caliphs in erecting buildings worthy of representing the newly established Islamic regime.[17] The church was therefore replete with miraculous signs embedded in the materiality of its columns, and was widely appreciated by Muslims, who visited it and praised it as an architectural achievement.

It is within this context that a further step in the interaction of Muslims and Christians over the holy locale of the sanctuary of St. George can be fully grasped. Sulaymān ibn ʿAbd al-Malik (674–717), ʿAbd al-Malik's son, was the governor of the province of Palestine before he ascended to the caliph's throne in 715 upon the death of his brother al-Walīd. According to written sources, the decision to make al-Ramla the seat of the governorship followed the failure to obtain a plot of land in the town of Lydda. Sulayman is said to have entrusted his Christian secretary, Ibn Batrik, with the negotiations to obtain a mansion, possibly the bishop's seat, located near the Sanctuary of St. George.[18] The alleged rejection of his request by the local Christian community incited Sulaymān to threaten to raze the church, but a member of his court advised him to model his behaviour instead on the patronage shown by his father and brother. The final decision by Sulaymān was to plan the building of al-Ramla near Lydda and to locate the seat of governorship there.[19]

When it was time to build the great mosque in the provincial capital a similar story occurred again. According to al-Jahshiyārī, the governor tried to transfer some columns from the Christian sanctuary to the mosque. "When Sulaymān ibn ʿAbd al-Malik decided to build the mosque of al-Ramla, he expressed the desire to have some columns from the Church of St. George [of Lydda] transferred there. He asked the bishop for them and the latter wrote to Byzantium [Bilād al-Rūm]. The answer he received indicated a cave near al-Darwam, where there were still columns of the same type used in the building of the church. The caliph took them, and he built the mosque: so the Church of St. George was saved."[20] Al-Muqaddasī includes in his work a similar anecdote, though with some significant differences. According to the Jerusalemite geographer, it was the caliph Hishām ibn ʿAbd al-Malik (691–743) who requested the columns at the time he decided to add a minaret to the great mosque of al-Ramla. The

[14] *Saint Thècle, Saints Côme et Damien, Saints Cyr et Jean, Saint Georges*, 267-272; 275-276; 294-310.

[15] Sidney Griffith, "Jews and Muslims in Christian Syriac and Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century," *Jewish History* 3, n. 1 (1988): 76-80; Sidney Griffith "Crosses, Icons and the Image of Christ in Edessa: The Place of Iconophobia in the Christian-Muslim Controversies of Early Islamic Times," in *Transformations of Late Antiquity: Essays for Peter Brown*, ed. Philip Rousseau (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 63-84.

[16] al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*, 159.

[17] Gülru Necipoğlu, "Challenging the Past: Sinan and the Competitive Discourse of Early Modern Islamic Architecture," *Muqarnas* 10 (1993): 169.

[18] Al-Jahshiyarī, *Kitāb al-wuzarā' wa-l-kuttāb*, ed. Mustafa al-Saqqa, Ibrahim al-Ibyari and ʿAbd al-Hafiz Shalabi (Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1980), 48; Yāqūt al-Hamawī, *Kitāb muʿjab al-buldān*, v. "al-Ramla."

[19] For the foundation of the city of al-Ramla according to the evidence of architectural remains, archaeological finds and written sources, see: Dominique Sourdel, "La fondation Umayyade d'al-Ramla en Palestine," in *Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des vorderen Orients, Festschrift für Bertold Spuler*, ed. Hans R. Roemer and Albrecht Noth (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 385-397.

[20] al-Jahshiyārī, *Kitāb al-wuzarā' wa-l-kuttāb*, 48-49.

site where the columns were allegedly hidden is named al-Baliyya and the columns are described as "thick, tall, and beautiful."[21]

Though not explicitly stated, it is hard not to connect such an interest in the columns in the church of St. George in Lydda to the traditions circulating among Christians linking some of them to the saint himself. This aspect will be explored further in relation to Jerusalem. For the moment, it is worth noticing how the written evidence reveals the appreciation expressed by Muslims for the church of Lydda. Such appreciation was the result of both the practice of attending the church on the occasion of the festival organized for the genethliac of St. George and the attraction that the charisma of St. George's sanctuary exerted on all strata of the population. What emerges from a scrutiny of the sources is the continuity of the church from late antiquity into the early medieval period (namely, from Byzantine rule to Islamic) and the fact that the monumental sanctuary remained a powerful architectural and religious landmark. The two aspects cannot be separated: the religious importance of the church explains the architectural renown and the architectural features helped to strengthen devotional notions.

In the light of the early medieval fortune of the Church, it is worth relating its demise during the medieval period. The building was among those sacked and partially destroyed by the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim (985–1021).[22] Rebuilt under the Crusaders (1099–1187), the sanctuary was eventually looted and destroyed by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (1138–1193). The site was not converted to the Islamic faith but left in ruins. Its construction material – no longer associated with any shared sense of sacredness – was reused for civil engineering projects such as the bridge of Jindas, built by the Mamluk Sultan Baybars (1223–1277) north of Lydda.[23]

Jesus and early Islamic Jerusalem

The text of the Qurʾān includes a specific Christology, to the extent that, starting in the early Islamic period, the profile of a "Muslim Jesus" emerged.[24] The inscription on the interior of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem highlights Jesus as the Word of God and testifies to his centrality for early Islam.[25] It is therefore not surprising that the attendance of Christian churches by Muslims reached its apogee in the Christian sanctuaries commemorating the life of Jesus. The abovementioned Peter of Bayt Rās lists dozens of places related to the sanctification of Christ, stressing their pilgrimage functions. Several were churches in Jerusalem, and some of them attracted Muslims as well. A famous example is the case of the Holy Sepulchre, said to have been visited by the caliph ʿUmar (584–644) shortly after the conquest of Jerusalem (638). Anecdotal as ʿUmar's visit may be, Muslims certainly paid homage to the place commemorating the death of Jesus, and a tiny place of prayer was built in the courtyard of the sanctuary complex.[26] The earliest material evidence for the existence of a Muslim place of prayer there is an inscription dated to the period of Fatimid rule of the city (969–1099). The text refers to a mosque already in existence, ordering that it should be safeguarded and forbidding any person of al-Dhimma (non-Muslim monotheist communities) to enter it.[27]

In Bethlehem material evidence is even scantier than in Jerusalem, but the place commemorating the birth of Jesus was a site that attracted Muslims as well as Christian pilgrims. In Bethlehem, Muslims erected a place of prayer in the vicinity of the Church of the Nativity, as they did in Jerusalem with the Holy Sepulchre. On the one hand, Muslims used to visit and pay homage to the holy site enshrined in the Christian sanctuary. On the other hand, they set up a small place of prayer of their own, probably converting to Muslim worship a minor Christian site located close to the Church of the Nativity. The latter remained in Christian hands.[28]

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[21] al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*, 165.

[22] Pringle, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem*, vol. 2, 9-25; Jennifer Pruitt, "Method in Madness: Recontextualizing the Destruction of Churches in the Fatimid Era," *Muqarnas* 30 (2013): 119-140.

[23] *Thesaurus d'Épigraphie Islamique*, microfiches 2297, 2298 (RCEA, n. 4660, 4661); Charles Clermont-Ganneau, "Notes d'épigraphie et d'histoire arabes. VI. Le pont de Lydda," *Journal Asiatique*, series 8, n. 12 (1888): 305-310; Yehoshua Frenkel, "Baybars and the Sacred Geography of Bilad al-Sham: A Chapter in the Islamization of Syria's Landscape," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 25 (2001): 165.

[24] Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Carlos Andrés Segovia, *The Qurʾānic Jesus. A New Interpretation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).

[25] Oleg Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 90-96.

[26] Heribert Busse, "The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Church of the Agony, and the Temple. The Reflection of a Christian Belief in Islamic Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 279-89; Heribert Busse, "Die 'Umar-Moschee im östlichen Atrium der Grabeskirche," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 109 (1993): 73-82.

[27] Charles Clermont-Ganneau, *Recueil d'archéologire orientale* (Paris: Éditeur Ernest Leroux, 1896) vol. 2, 308; Max Van Berchem, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum. Deuxième partie. Syrie du sud. Tome premier. Jerusalem–ville* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1922), 54.

Back in Jerusalem, the early Muslim development of a nucleus of sanctity with the erection of the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque of al-Aqsa did not preclude Muslims paying homage to Christian complexes.[29] Besides the Holy Sepulchre, the second area of interest was located east of the esplanade built over the remains of the Jewish temple. The area includes locales such as the Garden of Gethsemane, the Valley of Gehenna, and the Mount of Olives, on top of which was the Church of the Ascension (Fig. 1).

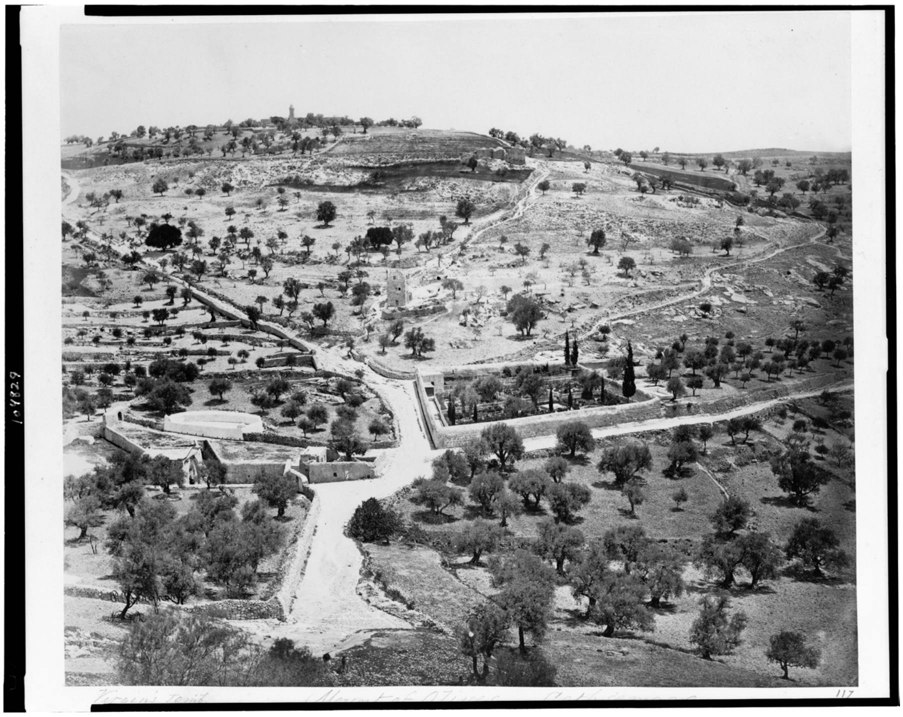

Fig. 1. Virgin's tomb, Mount of Olives, Gethsemane. Photograph © P. Bergheim, between 1860 and 1880. Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, https://www.loc.gov/item/92500668/.

Early Muslim Figures and Jerusalem

Before mentioning the attraction of Muslims to the Christian sanctuaries located between the eastern wall of the "noble esplanade" (*al-ḥaram al-sharīf*) and the Mount of Olives, it is worth highlighting the Muslim layer of meaning attached to this area. According to the early Islamic eschatological beliefs, the Last Judgment was supposed to take place in Jerusalem. More precisely, *aṣ-ṣirāṭ*, the bridge that, according to the Qurʾān, leads to *as-sāḥira* (the place where humanity will gather on the Last Day), connected the esplanade to the Mount of Olives.[30] In Arabic, these two locales were named Sakhrat Bayt al-Maqdis and the Ṭūr Zaytā, respectively. The works devoted to "the virtues of Jerusalem" (*faḍāʾil al-bayt al-Muqaddas*) collect Muslim traditions on this area of Jerusalem. The *faḍāʾil* were a literary genre that emerged in the early medieval period and became popular in the aftermath of the Crusader period.[31]

Faḍāʾil traditions connect different Muslim figures to this Jerusalemite space: the aforementioned caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb encamped at the Mount of Olives before conquering Jerusalem, while Muḥammad's wife Ṣafiyya bint Ḥuyayy (ca. 610–672), a descendant of a Jewish tribe of Medina, allegedly visited and prayed on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, leaving a physical trace (*athar*) of her presence. Traditions also refer to two companions of the Prophet, Shaddād ibn Aws and ʿUbāda ibn al-Ṣāmit (586–655), who were among the first to offer a prayer on the "noble esplanade" (*al-ḥaram al-sharīf*) and were buried in the Bāb al-Raḥma cemetery, a burial ground located along the eastern side of the city walls.[32] The association of early Islamic figures with the area of the Mount of Olives was part of the strategy to Islamize a place that, by then, had acquired strong Christian connotations through the persons of Jesus and Mary. The Muslim figures were, however, an addition to the Christian ones. The Islamic narrative accepted and absorbed the Christian traditions about the Mount of Olives. The *faḍāʾil* text by Ibn Murajjā praises the Mount of Olives first and foremost because it was the place from where Jesus ascended to Heaven and, as such, the best possible site to offer prayer to him.[33]

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[28] Mattia Guidetti, "The Muslim Place of Worship in Bethlehem during the Early Medieval Period," in *Encompassing the Sacred in Islamic Art*, ed. Lorenz Korn and Çiğdem İvren (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2020), 63-77.

[29] Suleiman A. Mourad, "Jerusalem in Early Islam. The Making of Muslims' Holy City," in *Routledge Handbook on Jerusalem*, ed. Suleiman A Mourad, Naomi Koltun-Fromm, and Bedross Der Matossian (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 77-89.

[30] Amikam Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem Islamic Worship. Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 141-144; Ofer Livne-Kafri, "Jerusalem in Early Islam: The Eschatological Aspect," *Arabica* 53, n. 3 (2006), 382-403; Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 236-40. The identification of the Valley of Jehoshaphat with the place of the Last Judgement also appears in Jewish and Christian eschatological traditions; see, Ora Limor, "Placing an Idea: The Valley of Jehoshaphat in Religious Imagination," in *Between Jerusalem and Europe: Essays in Honour of Bianca Kühnel*, ed. Renana Bartal and Hanna Vorholt (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 283-88.

[31] Paul Cobb, "Virtual Sacrality*:* Making Muslim Syria Sacred Before the Crusades," *Medieval Encounters* 8, n.1 (2002), 35-55; Mourad, "Jerusalem in Early Islam," 84-87.

The Muslim sanctity of the area located east of the wall of the "noble esplanade" was not only added to the Christian holy places and related narratives but depended on it. During late antiquity, three different locales identify the area: the Valley of Jehoshaphat, Gethsemane, and the Mount of Olives. These sites were adorned with many churches, chapels, and shrines, related to the capture and ascension of Jesus, as well as to the places of commemoration of various events of Mary's life, from her burial to her assumption.[34] In the early sixth century, the Mount of Olives alone counted twenty-four Christian sites.[35] The abovementioned Muslim figures authenticated the sanctity of the area for Islam by visiting the Christian sanctuaries that stood in the area.[36] A later (1351) Muslim text presents the contradictory case of ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who allegedly first performed two prostrations at the Tomb of Mary but later discouraged others from following his example, purportedly because of the church's location in the Valley of Gehenna.[37] (Fig. 2).

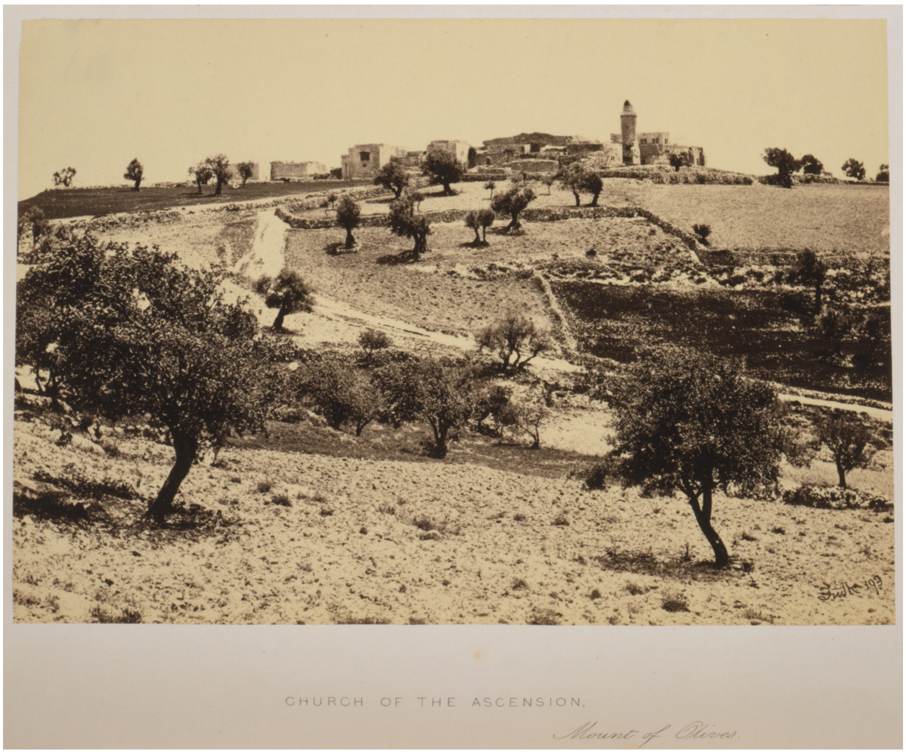

Fig. 2. Church of the Ascension. Photograph © Francis Frith, 1862. Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, https://www.loc.gov/item/00652997/.

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[32] For the emergence of commemorative worship of the Companions of the Prophet, including the veneration of physical sites, see: Nancy Khalek, "Medieval Muslim Martyrs to the Plague: Venerating the Companions of Muḥammad in the Jordan Valley," in *Saints and Sacred Matter, The Cult of Relics in Byzantium and Beyond*, ed. Holger Klein and Cynthis Hahn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 83-97.

[33] Ibn al-Murajjā, *Faḍāʾil Bayt al-Maqdis wa-l-Khalīl wa-Faḍāʾil al-Shām*, ed. Ofer Livne-Kafri (Shfaram: Dar al-Mashriq, 1995), n. 67 and 349.

[34] Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 305-306; 312; 333-336.

[35] Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 335.

[36] Sulayman Bashear, "Qibla Musharriqa and Early Muslim Prayer in Churches," *The Muslim World* 81, n. 3/4 (1991), 267-282.

[37] Guy Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems. A Description of Syria and the Holy Land from A.D. 650 to 1500* (London: Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, 1890), 143-44 (I thank Roberta Senatore for directing me to this passage).

The disapproval attributed to ʿUmar might have served the later emerging aversion towards Muslim attendance at Christian holy places. In the early period, however, veneration practices were probably different, and, as explained in the case of Lydda, Christian *loca sancta* attracted Muslims as well, without any rigid or strict regulation against this practice.

Regarding the early period, a passage of the "Maronite Chronicle," compiled by a Maronite Christian author living in Syria, probably between 664 and 681, confirms this point.[38] Relating the accession to the caliphate of Muʿāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān (603–680) in the year 659/60, the Christian chronicle describes a procession that included a prayer offered at the Holy Sepulchre and another one at the Tomb of Mary. As brilliantly expressed by Andrew Marsham, Muʿāwiya enacted a ritual procession inspired by previous appearances of emperors and rulers in the city of Jerusalem, such as Maurice (539–602) and Heraclius (575–641).[39] The visits of the caliph to the most important Christian holy sites were thus part of the adoption of late antique rituals of accession to power by early Muslim rulers and testify to the shift of imperial rule over Syria and Palestine from Byzantium to Islam.

Sacred Columns in Jerusalem

During the early medieval period, when Muslims started to associate their traditions and venerated figures with this area of Jerusalem, the architectural landscape was largely a Christian one. Writing in the first half of the tenth century, the geographer Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadānī (869–941/951) counts only a *muṣallā* for Muslim prayer on top of the Mount of Olives. The *muṣallā* is a vast esplanade serving for open-air collective prayers on the festivity days.[40] Ibn al-Faqīh names it after ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, linking it with the tradition of locating the encampment of ʿUmar before the conquest of Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives.[41]

Written in 780 by the nun Hugeburc, the *Life of Willibald* includes an account of the pilgrimage carried out by Saint Willibald, leaving England in the year 720 and sailing from the Syrian coast to Constantinople in the year 726. While in the Holy Land, he visited Jerusalem four times. He made pilgrimages to the Valley of Jehoshaphat and the Tomb of Mary, and then moved up the valley in the direction of the Mount of Olives. He passed by the church at Gethsemane and reached the Church of the Ascension. (Fig. 3, next page).

The latter church is described as roofless, and "against the north and south wall stand two columns, to remind people of the two men who said 'Ye men of Galilee, why gaze ye into the sky?' Anyone who can creep between the wall and the column is freed from his sins."[42] The importance and sacrality of columns in late antique and early medieval Syria have already been mentioned in this article. Here again, two columns, which were presumably placed on the perimeter wall of the ecclesiastical structure, are interpreted as a reminder of the two angelic figures who in the New Testament admonish the apostles who stared at the sky after Jesus' ascension.[43]

Christian tradition concerning columns somehow percolated into Muslim perception of the Church of the Ascension and, more broadly, the entire area located east of the city walls. The traditions reprimanding Muslims who enter Christian sanctuaries in this area of Jerusalem group together the Church of the Ascension, the Tomb of Mary, and the Church

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[38] Palmer, *The Seventh Century*, 31.

[39] Andrew Marsham, *Rituals of Islamic Monarchy. Accession and Succession in the First Muslim Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 86-90.

[40] Wensinck, A.J. and Hillenbrand, R., "Muṣallā," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 29 June 2021, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0806.

[41] Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadhani, *Mukhtasar kitab al-buldan*, ed. M.J. De Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1885), 101.

[42] Hugeburc, "Life of St. Willibald – Extracts," transl. in Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 243-244.

[43] Acts, Chapter I: 11.

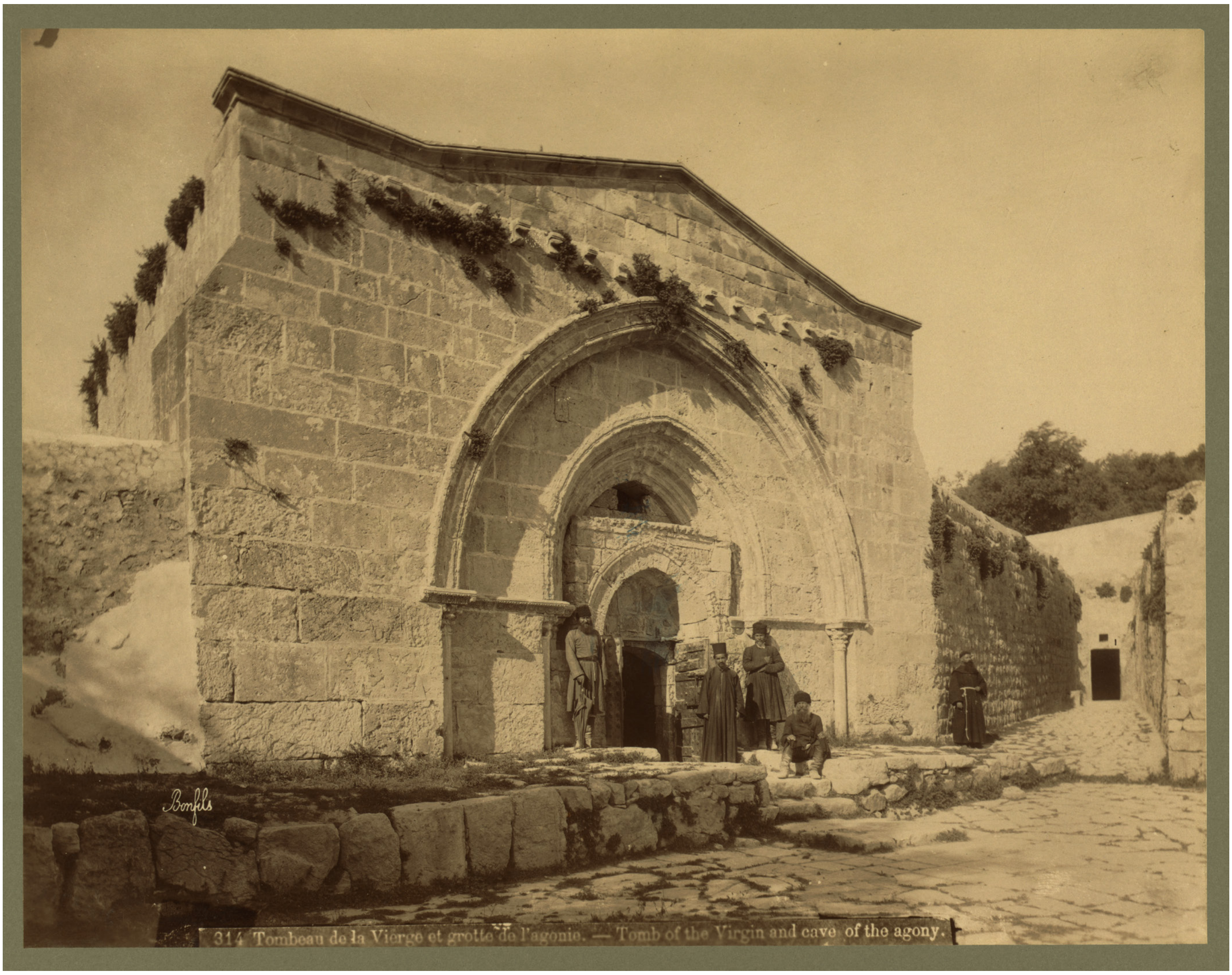
Bonfils
314 Tombeau de la Vierge et grotte de l'agonie. — Tomb of the Virgin and cave of the agony.

Fig. 3. Tomb of the Virgin and cave of the agony. Photograph by Maison Bonfils, Between 1867 and 1899. Jerusalem, https://www.loc.gov/item/2004669849/.

of Gethsemane. The motives for delegitimizing the Christian churches had two aspects. The first is the connection of these churches with the locale called the Valley of Gehenna, because of the belief that the gate to Hell stood east of the Temple Mount.[44] This identification made it inadvisable for Muslim prayer. The second aspect was the presence of two pillars, those that the Christian traditions locate in the Church of the Ascension and describe as having magic properties. Muslim interpretation identifies them as idols and, subverting their virtues according to the Christian lore, states that the two columns/idols can invalidate the spirit of devotion possessed by the believers once they enter the church.

As investigated by Amikam Elad, the *faḍāʾil* traditions collected by al-Wāsiṭī, in the early eleventh century draw upon earlier material. According to this author, in the late eighth century, reservations about entering these churches started to circulate.[45] The tradition transmitted by the Palestinian Thawr ibn Yazīd (d. 770) alerts Muslims: “Do not come to the Church of Mary or approach the two pillars, for they are idols. Whoever goes to them, his prayers will be as naught . . . Cursed be the Christians . . . they could not find a place in which to build a church except the Valley of Jahannam [Gehenna].”[46] Here the Church of the Ascension is not explicitly mentioned but named “ʿ*amūdayn*” (the two columns/pillars),[47] and conflated into the same locale as the Tomb of Mary. A variant of the abovementioned tradition inserts a reference to the Church of Gethsemane and associates the two columns with the church of the Mount of Olives: “Do not come to the Tomb of Mary which is named so after al-Jismaniyya Church, nor go in to the two pillars in the church of the Mount of Olives, for they are both idols and whoever enters there in a spirit of devotion, his act shall be annulled.”[48]

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[44] Nasser Rabbat, “The Meaning of Umayyad Dome of the Rock,” *Muqarnas* 6 (1989), footnote 58.

[45] Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem*, 139.

[46] Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem*, 139-140.

[47] Rabbat, “The Meaning of Umayyad Dome of the Rock,” 16.

It is worth remembering the ambiguous value of marble columns. As already observed in the discussion on Lydda, since late antiquity, columns had sometimes been associated with persons, often saints.[49] Marble had marks and veining patterns that were sometimes identified as signs impressed by “important figures” or even interpreted as figural drawings related to holy figures. It was nature, namely the creative act of God, that produced indentations and veining. Some columns were, therefore, aniconic objects imbued with distinctive properties. These varied from religious associations to magical qualities, to talismanic virtues, to commemorative functions.[50] Their aniconic nature made them acceptable to Muslims. Marble columns represented a successful strategy to incorporate into mosques and religious places objects efficacious in commemorating exceptional persons and marking important spots while avoiding explicitly figural images. Furthermore, the factual and alleged transfer of columns from churches to mosques allowed the connection of the latter to the most sacred churches inherited from late antiquity.

The transfer of columns to mosques created a bridge between Christian holy sites and the new places of worship built by Muslim rulers. The importance of the cluster of Christian holy places in the early Islamic period, for both Christian and Muslim devotion, is somehow reflected in a further tradition involving material culture that paralleled what was discussed above regarding Lydda. The passage deals with a request by the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik to move the “columns of Gethsemane” to the Kaʿba in Mecca: “ʿAbd al-Malik gave instructions for the rebuilding of the temple of Mecca and wanted to remove the columns of Gethsemane. Now Sergius, son of Manṣoūr, a good Christian, who was treasurer and stood on close terms with ʿAbd al-Malik, as well as his peer, Patricius surnamed Klausys, who was prominent among the Christians of Palestine, begged him not to do this, but to persuade Justinian, through their supplication, to send other columns instead of those; which, indeed, was done.”[51]

The passage comes from the Chronicle of Theophilus of Edessa (d. 785), handed down in Greek by Theophanes Confessor (760–818). It is impossible to assess all the information contained in this quotation.[52] It is more productive to note a few aspects reminiscent of the case in Lydda. Muslims targeted some columns attributed to the “Gethsemane.” It is unclear to what building the Chronicle refers, though the passage refers to an area in which renowned churches stood. Within these churches, some columns retained a special status among Christians, a role that did not pass unnoticed among Muslims. The relocation of the columns failed thanks to the negotiation of local Christian authorities, who redirected Muslims elsewhere, saving the precious material and the integrity of the buildings.[53] The failure of the transfer, in both Lydda and Jerusalem, invites a reassessment of the triumphal value of the spoliation of Christian buildings by Muslim rulers. Material spolia were certainly an index of the military overturn of the Byzantine rule in Syria and Palestine, but they also helped to increase the symbolic capital of the new mosques. Through the real and alleged removal of columns from churches to mosques, the latter acquired

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[48] Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem*, 140.

[49] Mattia Guidetti, *In the Shadow of the Church. The Building of Mosques in Early Medieval Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 144-157.

[50] Mattia Guidetti, “Churches and Mosques. Aesthetics and Transfer of Marble in Early Islam,” in *The Aesthetics of Marble from Late Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Dario Gamboni, Gerhard Wolf and Jessica Richardson (Munich: Hirmer Publishers, 2021): 62-75; Finbarr B. Flood, “ ‘God’s Wonder’: Marble as Medium and the Natural Image in Mosques and Modernism,” *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 23, n. 2 (2016): 168-219; Julia Gonnella, “Columns and Hieroglyphs: Magic Spolia in Medieval Islamic Architecture of Northern Syria,” *Muqarnas* 27 (2010), 103-20; Finbarr B. Flood, “Image Against Nature: Spolia as Apotropaia in Byzantium and the Dar al-Islam,” *The Medieval History Journal* 9, n. 1 (2006): 143-66.

[51] Theophilus of Edessa, *Theophilus of Edessa’s Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, trans. R. Hoyland (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 187; Theophanes Confessor, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, transl. C. Mango and R. Scott (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1997), 510 (Greek year 6183).

[52] The traveller Nāṣir-i Khusraw (1004–1072/1088) refers to a similar (perhaps the same) movement of columns from Syria toward Mecca: Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Safarnāma (Books of Travels)*, ed. and trans. W.M. Thackston (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2001), 94.

[53] “Sergius, son of Manṣoūr” is discussed in Ahmad Shboul and Alan Walmsley, “Identity and Self Image in Syria-Palestine in the Transition from Byzantine to Early Islamic Rule: Arabian Christians and Muslims,” *Mediterranean Archaeology* 11 (1998), 269.

(or claimed to do so) the aura of renowned churches piece by piece.[54]

The abovementioned growth of a certain discomfort within Islamic circles with the practice of attending churches complemented the promotion of a network of Islamic religious sites and the circulation of traditions that associated Muslim figures with the area of Jerusalem. The disapproval of praying in churches, for instance, was paralleled by the recommendation to pray at the *miḥrāb Dāwud* (a site commemorating the Prophet David and the Qurʾānic verses III: 21–22).[55] Al-Muqaddasī, writing in the second half of the tenth century, describes a sacred landscape in which Islamic-related sites started to be recognizable and contributed to populating the valley and the hill:

"The Mount of Olives overlooks the Great Mosque from the eastern side of the Valley of Gehenna. On its top, there is a mosque built in commemoration of ʿUmar, who encamped there for a few days before receiving the capitulation of the Holy City. There is also a church on the place from where Christ ascended into heaven and, furthermore, nearby is also a place called *as-sāḥira*, which I have been told on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās will be the site of the resurrection. The ground is white, as blood has never been spilt in this area. The Valley of Gehenna runs from the south-east angle of *al-ḥaram al-sharīf* to the furthest point along the east side. In this valley there are gardens and vineyards, churches, caverns and cells of anchorites, tombs and other remarkable spots, including cultivated fields. In the middle of it there is the church that covers the Tomb of Mary, and just above it, overlooking the Valley, are many tombs, among which are those of Shaddād ibn Aws and ʿUbādah ibn al-Ṣāmit."[56]

The area was replete with Christian structures, but Muslims had succeeded in making themselves visible in the sacred landscape of Jerusalem. Confronted with the majesty of Christian buildings and the attendance of early Muslims (some of them converted from Christianity) at Christian holy sites, Muslim authorities developed different strategies. They built Islamic places of worship as magnificent as late antique buildings and circulated traditions about early Islamic figures that, without negating the validity of Christian narratives, offered a Muslim explanation of the holiness of some sites. At the same time, they discouraged some religious practices that breached Islamic idiosyncrasies and allegedly moved columns from churches to mosques to link the latter to the former. It was a multifaceted process, consisting of both material and rhetorical choices, aimed at establishing the primacy of the new mosques promoted by the new rulers and at redirecting veneration practices to Muslim buildings.

The Medieval Period

Despite being beyond the scope of this chapter, a few lines devoted to the modifications of the abovementioned buildings in the medieval period are useful to demonstrate the profound changes in the area. As elsewhere in the Syro-Palestinian region, for instance in Lydda, the Crusader period and its aftermath reconfigured Jerusalemite sacred landscape. The Tomb of Mary and the Church of the Ascension were heavily reconstructed, to the extent that no trace was left of the early Christian foundations. The *Commemoratorium*, an early ninth-century memorandum of the churches and their personnel in the Holy Land ordered by Charlemagne and made possible by his good diplomatic relations with the Abbasids, states that the upper church of the Tomb of Mary was in ruins because of an earthquake.[57] Under Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (1137–1193), the church fell into ruins again, and the Tomb of Mary became a Muslim property, with at least two mihrabs being added during the Ottoman period. Christians were allowed to visit the holy site, and the interreligious practices related to the figure of Mary scrutinized by Augustine Arce date from the Mamluk period onwards, confirming that the site was accessible to both Christian and Muslim worshippers.[58] On the Mount of Olives, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s intervention included the conversion of a monastery that adjoined the site of the Ascension into a mosque, while the Crusader church fell into ruin in the fifteenth century. During the seventeenth century, under the Ottomans, the building took the configuration still visible today, with a small domed aedicule provided with a mihrab.[59] Within the same area, as remarked by Rostagno in relation to a cave located on the Mount of Olives, different groups of worshippers attended a single locale but associated the site with distinct holy figures.[60]

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[54] Günter Bandmann, *Early Medieval Architecture as a Bearer of Meaning*, trans. K. Wallis, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 146-147 (Mittelaltlicher Architektur als Bedeutungsträger, Berlin: Gebrüder Mann Verlag, 1951).

[55] Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem*, 131-134.

[56] al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqālīm*, 171-72.

[57] Michael McCormick, *Charlemagne's Survey of the Holy Land. Wealth, Personnel, and Buildings of a Mediterranean Church between Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2011), 203; cfr. Bernard the Monk, *A Journey to the Holy Places and Babylon*, trans. in Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 266-267.

Conclusion

The scrutiny of two Christian sites, or more precisely of a site in Lydda and a cluster of places within one specific area of Jerusalem, allows greater understanding of how early Muslims perceived holy places inherited from the late antique period. Such places exerted attraction. They were not used for performing collective Muslim prayers, or, at least, this was not their primary function. On the one hand, the growing network of congregational mosques that was available to Muslims made unnecessary the use of existing churches. There is little evidence for the conversion of churches into mosques in the early Islamic period.[61] Selected places were attended by Muslims probably because of the attraction exerted by the religious practice taking place in these sanctuaries. The power of holy men and the miracle-performing quality attributed to the places of their commemoration were the focus of worshipping activity. Furthermore, the places devoted to the commemoration of Christ, though left in Christian hands, were visited by Muslims as well because of the Islamic veneration of Jesus stressed in the Qurʾān and made explicit in the Dome of the Rock of Jerusalem.

The magnetic power of some of the great Christian sanctuaries extended to their material qualities. Objects, for example marble columns, contributed to the commemorative and miraculous properties of Christian buildings. This factor is a likely explanation for the obsessive search for columns among Muslim circles. The foundation of new places of worship was part of the strategy to create a plausible network of Muslim holy places, alternative to the Christian one. At the same time, however, to redirect Muslim worshippers out of Christian holy places, normative Islamic texts tried to neutralize the latter’s miraculous/magical properties. By inverting their value, the very same features of Christian sites that attracted Muslims received a negative connotation. The gradual reconfiguration of the late antique sacred landscape made room for Islam in the Syrian region. Later, the abrupt changes of the Middle Ages obliterated the efforts to find a delicate balance between different communities that characterized the early Islamic period.

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[58] Augustine Arce, “Culte islamique au Tombeau de la Vierge,” in *Atti del Congresso Assunzionistico Orientale* (Gerusalemme: Tipografia dei Francescani, 1951), 177-193.

[59] Mariëtte Verhoeven, “Jerusalem as Palimpsest. The Architectural Footprint of the Crusaders in the Contemporary City,” in *The Imagined and Real Jerusalem in Art and Architecture*, ed. Jeroen Goudeau, Mariëtte Verhoeven, and Wouter Weijers (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 114-135.

[60] In the same cave on the Mount of Olives Muslim pilgrims venerated the tomb of Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (a female Sufi saint who died in the year 801), Jewish ones the prophetess Huldah, and Christians the place of repentance of Saint Pelagia: see Lucia Rostagno, “Note su una devozione praticata da cristiani e musulmani a Betlemme: il culto della Madonna del latte,” *Rivista degli studi orientali* 71 (1997): 163. Regarding burials in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, see Limor, “Placing an Idea,” 288-290.

[61] Guidetti, *In the Shadow of the Church*, 13-35.