The Manipulation of Sacred Places:
The Role of Jerusalem’s Temple Mount in the Construction of Identity

by

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# CONTENTS

**Introduction**  \hspace{1cm} 1

1. What Is Sacred Space?  \hspace{1cm} 6
   - Terminology
   - Characteristics of Sacred Place: Separation and Fluidity
   - The Production of Sacred Place

2. Sacred Place and Conflict  \hspace{1cm} 17
   - Indivisibility
   - Centrality
   - Vulnerability

3. The Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount  \hspace{1cm} 22
   - Physical Location
   - Architectural Description
   - Sacred Meanings and Associations

4. Visual Competition in Jerusalem  \hspace{1cm} 32
   - The Religious Landscape
   - The Dome of the Rock and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre

5. Narratives of Sacred Place  \hspace{1cm} 41
   - Narrative and Place-Myth
   - The Role of Memory
   - Appropriation and Exchange of Temple Mount Place-Myths

6. Political Manipulation of Jerusalem’s Sacred Places  \hspace{1cm} 53
   - Historical Background
   - Politics of Place

Conclusion  \hspace{1cm} 63

Images  \hspace{1cm} 66

Bibliography  \hspace{1cm} 72
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

1. Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 691–692 CE.
2. Aerial view of the Temple Mount in the Old City, looking east.
3. Illustrated cross section of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 691–692 CE.
5. View of the rock from above, the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 691–692 CE.
9. Plan of the original Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, 325–335 CE.
10. Longitudinal section of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as of 348 CE.
11. Church of the Holy Sepulchre as it looks today, Jerusalem.
13. The Dome of the Rock (in the foreground) visually competes with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (gray dome in the distance).
INTRODUCTION

In ancient and medieval times, religion was the highest authority and pervaded all aspects of society. Religious institutions, and the power they exercised, required a physical presence, and sacred places and religious architecture came to dominate the spatial organization of cities. Early Christian cities, for example, were often planned around a major cathedral or church.

Although religion is still an active and influential force in modern societies, one could argue that the modern world, with the rise of secularism, has “relegated the sacred to the periphery” of life.¹ The supreme authority that spiritual leaders once held has been reassigned to political and cultural leaders. This shift is evident in the built environment: Though the temple, church, and mosque have not vanished, they no longer dominate the urban architectural landscape. Rather, modern cities—such as New York City—are often organized around financial (e.g., Wall Street) and commercial (e.g., Times Square) hubs. I draw attention to this shift from the sacred to the secular in order to emphasize the uniqueness of one city in particular: Jerusalem.

Over the past two centuries, Jerusalem has been developed and commercialized, yet its social and physical landscape is still dominated by sacred places. The Temple Mount, an expansive raised platform in the Old City, visually dominates the surrounding topography and has retained its sacred meaning and religious and cultural functions for millennia. Yet it represents more than Jerusalem’s

spiritual center. The Temple Mount has transcended the realm of the religious and has assumed a social and political significance unrivaled by any other sacred place in the world: This sacred structure is the foundation of Israel, and embodies the heart of Judaism and Islam.

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The analysis of sacred place and architecture is a complex undertaking, one that is difficult to realize in the space of a single essay. To make the task more manageable, I have identified a number of key questions.

- Is sacredness fluid? Does it evolve with a place, or is it a permanent and unchanging feature?
- How does a place “become” sacred? How does it acquire meaning?
- Why are sacred places deemed so valuable, and why are they often surrounded by conflict?

In addressing these questions, I will elucidate some of the primary issues regarding contested sacred places. The volume of scholarly work available on the nature of sacred space is vast, as is work on the religious aspects of conflicts surrounding sacred places. But it is my belief that the secular—meaning the social, political, and economic—aspects of such conflicts are underrepresented. While I draw heavily on the scholarship that explores this topic from a religious and philosophical point of view, and indeed use these perspectives to support many of my claims, this essay attempts to contribute to an understanding of how sacred places are profoundly shaped by secular influences.

Sacred places are often violently contested because they play a central, irreplaceable role in the construction of identity. Indeed, battles are fought over
sacred places to shape and maintain unique group identities—religious, political, or national. As an integral component of sacred place, sacred architecture necessarily occupies a pivotal position in the ideological, symbolic, and sometimes literal war waged over sacred grounds. It is often through sacred architecture that campaigns for a particular identity are enacted; historical sites or monuments become the focal point for disputes between opposing groups. Sacred place and identity politics are therefore inextricably linked by means of sacred architecture.

The Dome of the Rock—a monumental Islamic commemorative structure built in the seventh century by the Islamic conquerors of Jerusalem—will be my primary architectural example (see Figure 1). It is located on the Temple Mount, a raised platform that has undergone a complex evolution since its construction in 19 BCE, in large part because it is sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. This sacred place is the focus of my essay because of its importance in the religious and architectural landscape of Jerusalem.

This sacred site, in its history, evolution, and uniquely controversial topographical position, illuminates the relationship between sacred place and identity. I have identified three methods by which a group may use a sacred place to formulate and understand their identity: visual competition of religious monuments, the creation and exchange of place-myths, and use of sacred sites as political tools. The first method relies on the architectural elements of the structures, including the use of specific geographical locations. For example, how is visual competition activated by the intentional construction and placement of religious monuments? What is the symbolic significance of the Dome of the Rock’s elevated position on the Temple
Mount? To answer these questions, I compare the Dome of the Rock with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a complex built in the fourth century that remains one of the most sacred places in all of Christendom. What kind of dialogue does the Dome of the Rock’s placement on the Temple Mount establish between it and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which sits on Golgotha Hill at a lower elevation across the city?

The second method by which a group may mold its identity is by using the narrative of a sacred place as established through myth and legend. Stories about place will vary depending on the storyteller and the audience, and the subjective retellings of these narratives can be used in the process of building identity. Memory plays a vital role in this process of creating identity through narrative. What is the relationship between sacred memory and sacred architecture? How do memories influence place narratives? Also of interest is the exchange of sacred place narratives between different faiths, and the impact that such exchange has on the dominant narrative attached to a place.

The third way in which sacred place and architecture are employed to construct identity flows through a persuasive and comprehensive politics of possession. Such contestation is often born out of a desire to control, and therefore own, a sacred site. By what means is exclusive ownership over a place sought and maintained? This method demonstrates that power struggles are an inherent component of the management of sacred sites, for control over a place enables the group in power to manipulate that site for their political and cultural benefit.
These three methods for shaping group identity deliberately position sacred place and sacred architecture at the heart of the struggle to create, maintain, and protect a group’s communal presence and influence in the world.
CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS SACRED SPACE?

Terminology

This chapter describes the terms that I use in discussing these sacred sites, the sites’ primary architectural and religious characteristics, and the various ways in which sacred sites are established. This overview of the nature of sacred space is a foundation for the rest of my essay.

Space Versus Place

The first terms that need to be defined are “space” and “place,” for despite their apparent similarities, their differences are of critical importance. Neither space nor place has a single meaning, because each is experienced differently depending on the perception of the participant. According to the historian of religion Philip Sheldrake, space is an abstract analytical concept.\(^2\) I use the term “space” to indicate an unspecified or general location or area. In contrast, “place” is “tangible, physical, specific, and relational,” and is defined by the relationship between humans and the environment.\(^3\) The transformation from space to place occurs when an area that was previously undetermined and unbounded is given boundaries and specific meaning. In fact, place can be considered a “meaningful segment of space,” and is established and


\(^3\) Ibid., pp. 1, 7.
made concrete through the remembrance of its historical meanings. Moreover, it may function as the foundation of, or tool for, establishing personal and communal identities.

The value and meaning of a place, which are both concrete (material) and ideological (mental), are not inherent. Because place is a “human construct,” it must necessarily engage with human identity, relationships, and history—the three characteristics that Sheldrake identifies as essential to place. Therefore, place is the appropriate term to use for the specific religious sites considered in this essay.

Sacred Versus Holy

The terms “holy” and “sacred” are often used synonymously, but a brief analysis of the accepted (if limited) definitions of each term reveals that they are significantly different. Holiness and sacredness are both “an evocative designation of an intuitively felt property of an item.” In other words, they are not perceptible using the senses, but are felt and experienced. To be holy is to have a divine quality, to be of or directly linked to the divine realm. There are two types of holiness: original or primary holiness (God), and derivative holiness (things associated with or in the possession of God, such as holy scripture, holy water, and holy temples).

5 Ibid., pp. 9, 13.
6 Sheldrake, Spaces for the Sacred, p. 15.
The term “sacred,” on the other hand, may be used to describe something that is related to religion, or more specifically to describe something that is entitled to reverence and respect. The term can also be used in a secular context to describe something that is “highly valued and important,” similar to the terms “inviolable” and “unassailable.” Hence, the word “sacred” is a more flexible designation and is applicable to a wider range of subjects than is the word “holy,” which specifically references proximity to God. Throughout this essay, I use the word sacred to describe Jerusalem’s spaces, places, and architecture of religious importance.

The concept of “sacred” is difficult to define because it simultaneously describes an object or place that is linked to the divine sphere (and is therefore beyond human knowledge) and also refers to “an experienced phenomenon.”

However, because it refers to a set of extraordinary sensations and feelings that are unlike any other experience, the sacred cannot be rationally conceived. Yet despite this elusive quality, the sacred can be discerned by the unique and intense psychological responses it evokes in believers. One way to explain this concept is to analyze how sacred places possess a quality of “otherness,” that is, they are separate from objects and places that are not sacred. This distinction is fundamental to understanding the reasons for and planning behind the designation of sacred sites and the construction of religious monuments.

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9 Ibid., p. 29.
10 Ibid., pp. 8, 25.
Characteristics of Sacred Places: Separation and Fluidity

Separation

Separation is the most critical characteristic of sacred place, because as “territory of supreme value, disputed and indivisible,” it demands reverence and requires protection.¹¹ This separation is almost always physical—this is the most easily recognizable form—yet it may also be legal or ideological. But why are sacred places strictly demarcated from the rest of the world?

According to Mircea Eliade, one of the premier scholars of the philosophy of religion in the twentieth century, the religious world is divided into two realms, the sacred and the profane.¹² The sacred, as I have argued, connotes something that should be treated with reverence. In contrast, the profane is similar to the secular in that it refers to the nonreligious, and may be marked by contempt for what is sacred. One aspect of their relationship is that the sacred can be understood to interrupt the profane.¹³ Through built enclosures and natural topography, sacred spaces are kept physically separate from the profane—that is, the rest of the world—so that they may maintain their unique sacredness and be readily distinguishable as places of spiritual significance within the architectural landscape.¹⁴ Of course, in the half century since the publication of The Sacred and the Profane in 1957, Eliade’s seminal dichotomy has been challenged. Recent scholarship employs a broader approach and recognizes that any attempt to divide reality into two discrete realms is futile, for “the sacred is

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 188.
always experienced from within the profane.” Nonetheless, when Eliade’s model is applied judiciously, it can be helpful in understanding the complex nature of sacred space.

Separation of the sacred is also discernible via civil legislation and government policy. Laws and management regarding sacred places, particularly those concerned with access to a site, reveal the underlying ideologies and sentiments of the parties in power. In only allowing Muslims free access to the Temple Mount, for example, the Islamic community effectively removes and protects this sacred place from the surrounding “profanity” of the everyday, and in many cases Jewish, world.

Fluidity

Although the act of demarcating space may effectively place definite boundaries between what is sacred and what is not, the sacredness of a site is actually fluid, or variable. While a site requires attention from a religious community in order to be deemed sacred, a place’s sacredness is not strictly defined by its association with a specific religion or people, because it is not permanently fixed to one or the other. Rather, sacredness is rooted in place. The sacredness of a site is often maintained through the process of appropriation and exchange of sacred property from one religious group to another. In addition, it is partially dependent on social, political, and religious contexts, and is therefore variously interpreted depending on who controls the site. A site’s sacredness is therefore retained, but the nature and

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level of sacredness are always in flux. This fluidity is exemplified by the evolution of the meanings and importance of the Temple Mount throughout its contested history, for the sacredness of this place to all parties involved hinges upon the sociopolitical climate of Jerusalem and its ceaseless power struggles. We will see in Chapter six how, despite the fact that sacredness is not an inherent quality of a given place, it can be modified and relocated to other sacred sites.

The Production of Sacred Place

Sacredness, which is not an inherent attribute of place, is not simply “revealed.” Rather, it is established and strengthened over time through the subjective interpretations of past events, that is, through the cultural meaning-making of human history. Indeed, sites for many religious and commemorative buildings are selected based on the belief that a momentous religious event occurred there. Such an event is often considered a hierophany—a “manifestation of the holy or sacred”—or an irruption of the sacred into the profane world. An example of this is the siting and construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on Golgotha Hill, which was believed to be the site of Jesus’ burial and resurrection. This particular hierophany is considered to be factual by many believing Christians, for these events were recorded and immortalized in ancient texts, and have been reasserted over two millennia. However, the factual certainty of this hierophany can never be determined, because the validity of these texts cannot be proven, and because aspects of history are

subjective, and can be rewritten and reinterpreted. Hence humans are capable of exerting influence over a place by means of their control over the production of history itself. The production of sacred space, therefore, depends on human agency.

Eliade’s theories about sacred space help elucidate this assertion. His theory about what makes a place sacred turns on three points. First, sacred space is set apart from homogeneous, formless profane space. Second, a given place is sacred because a hierophany occurred there. His third point is an extension of the second: A place is made sacred because it is where hierophanies have been witnessed, thus opening communication between the three cosmic zones—heaven, earth, and hell. This intersection of the three worlds renders a site as the *omphalos*, *axis mundi*, or a Center of the World. And since a center is where a hierophany has occurred, this implies that many centers exist in the world. What defines a place as an *omphalos* is not that it is the singular center of the world, but rather that it is a place where communication between the mortal and the divine is possible, and the site is therefore of paramount importance to a religious community. While this was the dominant theory regarding the creation of sacred space for decades, Eliade’s philosophy is misleading because it ignores the role of human agency in the production of these spaces. His characterization of this process makes it seem not only distant and separate from humanity, but entirely immune from human influence.

Human history, which has been written and shaped by man, contributes to the production of sacred place most predominantly through historical narratives. These narratives are repeated through the telling and retelling of stories and myths, as well

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as through repeated religious and community practices and rituals. Such repetition cements the sanctity of a place in history, and by extension in the minds of people. In doing so, it ensures the perpetuation of a site as a sacred place. Thus, historical narratives sustain the sanctity of a place, linking its geographical location, physical structures, and the human activity that occurs within to the perceived significance that defines it as sacred. The cultural and religious meaning generated by this significance is what makes a place important to a community.

The “Power” of Control

Another major aspect of the production of sacred place is control of a given place. Control is necessary before a group can shape the meaning of a place, or have a specific meaning or narrative widely accepted by others. In virtually all cases of highly contested religious sites, power is necessary to exert control. Power is the means to gaining possession of a site, or at least making claims to ownership rights, and is therefore a necessary component of this process. In fact, the production of sacred place is largely governed through power relations, which encompass processes such as domination and subordination, appropriation and dispossession, and the practice of exclusionary politics.¹⁹ Thus, sacred place is usually created by a group that possesses power, and more specifically, by humans repeatedly enforcing and projecting their power.²⁰

One of the motives behind producing sacred places is to locate, strengthen, and protect the sacred. In maintaining and protecting a sacred place, the parties

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involved are in fact seeking to control the purity of a site; that is, they are endeavoring to maintain absolute rule over a place by sealing it off from the influence of ideas and beliefs that are not their own. This pursuit of purity entails both the maintenance of strict standards in the sacred place and the exclusion of the impure (e.g., adherents of other faiths). This battle for possession of sacred places has been referred to as the “politics of property.” Power employed toward this end is asserted through the “institutionalization” of sacred space, which Ronald Hassner defined as the “process by which a religious community gradually assumes control over a sacred site by means of implementing rules and restrictions.” Institutionalization also encompasses the construction of physical structures on a site. Monuments built for religious purposes often act as vessels for the most revered meanings, stories, and beliefs of a religious community. Indeed, an architectural presence grants the site some degree of validity and permanence.

*Appropriation*

A religious community or group’s ability to produce and shape a sacred place depends upon its having sufficient control and desire to maintain the site’s purity. The type of sacred place production that is most relevant to this essay is the refabrication of preexisting sacred places, which usually occurs through the appropriation of a desirable site. Appropriation is the acquisition of an object, monument, or place that was either already established or that belonged to another group or community, and

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22 Ibid., p. 8.
through this incorporation is transformed into a “new” object, monument, or place. This process, therefore, implies the existence of power relations between groups associated with a place, as well as a desire to harness a place’s preexisting authority and meaning for the objectives of the group in power.

Appropriation primarily entails the adoption and reconfiguration of a place’s meaning and, by extension, its sacredness. Because the physical destruction of a monument on a sacred site does not erase the underlying sanctity of the site, a sacred place will almost always retain its sacredness, even though this quality is relative and malleable. Appropriation, which usually involves the manipulation of sacredness, is a “strategy of place domination.” Indeed, rather than establishing an entirely new site, conquerors or aggressors will often adopt a preexisting sacred place and transform it into their own, as these sites are already imbued with sacredness, and therefore recognized as valuable and singular; they are “ready-made focal point(s).” By integrating a site that is renowned and respected as symbolic of the sacred, such conquerors capitalize on a place’s preexisting associations and importance, and effectively displace the local, or previously dominant, religious tradition.

Appropriation is a form of syncretism, which is “the process by which religious movements incorporate the beliefs and practices of other religions into their own traditions.” This concept can be applied to places as well. The outcome of the forced syncretism of sacred sites is a layering of meanings, narratives, and traditions, and can be understood as a palimpsest. Jerusalem is one of the best examples of a

24 Hassner, Halve and Hold, p. 16.
25 Hassner, War on Sacred Grounds.
26 Hassner, Halve and Hold, p. 16.
27 Hassner, War on Sacred Grounds, p. 56.
place palimpsest because it has been occupied and used as a holy center for thousands of years, and has been the site of some of the most heated and violent religious power struggles. Conquest after conquest, Jerusalem has survived devastating destruction and experienced remarkable rebirth. The Temple Mount has played a central role in the evolution of the city, as Jerusalem’s conquerors have recognized the spiritual and political significance of the Mount, and have often succeeded in weaving it into their own religious traditions. At various times in its history, the Temple Mount has been the location of pagan temples, the holiest of Jewish temples, Christian churches, and Islamic mosques and commemorative structures. The history of appropriation at the Temple Mount is among the richest of all sacred sites. The Dome of the Rock, which today presides over the city of Jerusalem as one of the most spectacular commemorative Islamic structures in the world, rests where the hallowed Temple of Solomon once stood. This same building, the Dome of the Rock, was also once used as a church, the Templum Domini, during Jerusalem’s Crusader period in the eleventh century.

The Temple Mount’s extensive history of appropriation has led to competing claims to the site, for each of the three major religious communities present in Jerusalem feel they have a right to its exclusive ownership. The political and religious competition that has ensued reinforces the site’s unrivaled value, increases its sacredness, and pushes the Temple Mount ever deeper into the heart of violent power struggles for dominance and control.

Almost all sacred places of significant importance share a common attribute: They often serve as an ideological battlefield at the heart of an interreligious, political, or national conflict. This situation may arise if the site is at the center of a long-standing dispute, such as a bitterly fought struggle between faiths or cultures.29 Or perhaps the conflict is a result of a controversial event that occurred at a specific site. The nature of these conflicts undoubtedly depends on the nature of the place itself, and to a considerable extent, on its religious and secular value. Such conflicts, which are often worse in areas where there is a concentration of religious, political, and economic resources, are unusually complex because they involve numerous players with diverse agendas, not just the religious communities that are directly associated with the site.30 One common type of conflict over sacred place is interreligious conflict, in which different faiths contend for the use and meaning of the same site. These conflicts are often played out in the political arena because they reflect larger national issues regarding religious, ethnic, and cultural tensions.

In the following I will explore several key questions: Why are many sacred sites so deeply embroiled in violent conflict? Is this conflict a product of the place itself, or is it triggered by external forces? To what extent is a sacred site defined by the conflict engulfing it?

29 Hassner, *Halve and Hold*, p. 5.
30 Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds*, p. 27.
Indivisibility

In general, sacred places are distinct because they are set apart from the rest of the “profane” world by boundaries. Indeed, such boundaries indicate that the sites are valuable and unique. It follows, then, that these sites are irreplaceable as religious and symbolic constructs. This represents one element of what could be considered the most problematic characteristic of sacred space: indivisibility. This attribute is not inherent, but is rather attributed to the place. Ron Hassner offers a three-part definition of indivisibility. The first part—cohesion—stipulates that an object or place cannot be subdivided without diminishing its value. The second part—boundaries—requires the physical demarcation of the object or place to be the same. And the final part—uniqueness—states that the object or place cannot be substituted or exchanged, even if the substitute is of equal value.\(^{31}\) This definition is appropriately based on the object’s or place’s perceived value to the parties involved, is hence highly subjective and, unfortunately, makes dealing with conflicts over indivisible sacred places exceedingly difficult.

Countless sites around the world fit these three conditions, and some of them are not contested at all, for the indivisibility of a sacred place becomes a problem only when there are multiple claims of ownership.\(^ {32}\) In these situations, the actors involved will often fight rather than compromise, refusing to settle for any loss of authority over the contested place. Indivisibility is therefore a significant obstacle to the peaceful resolution of such conflicts.\(^ {33}\)

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 41.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 42.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., pp. 37, 42.
Centrality

Some sacred sites suffer more than others from the problem of indivisibility. This is largely dependent on the site’s centrality, or its perceived importance to a religious community or interest group. The concept of centrality reflects the position of a particular site within the religious landscape. More important sites are considered more “central” to the faith, while smaller and lesser-known sites are deemed more peripheral. The centrality of a sacred site is at least partially based on the site’s religious and historical significance. For example, a place will be considered more central if a historically momentous religious event occurred there, because it is believed that the divine presence is thus more immediate, and that there is a direct path of communication between the earthly and divine realms. Centrality may also be a measure of the site’s physical and political worth, that is, its potential to be used as leverage by the party in power.

Sacred sites that are central to a religious community are easily identified because, as stated earlier, they are usually surrounded by conflict. These sites may be potent symbols of a religious community, both to those involved and to outsiders. This symbolic function is desired by members of the religious community, because a faith’s most important sacred places usually represent a religious movement in its ideal form. For example, the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem possesses perfect symmetry and brilliantly colored mosaics—it embodies a stunning physical and aesthetic presence. Sitting atop the elevated platform, the Dome presides over the city, appearing to soar into the imagined divine realm above. Yet it is more

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34 Ibid., pp. 28–31.
than just a visual symbol representing the power of Islam: It also symbolizes the political and cultural might of the Muslim community, dating from the Islamic conquest in the seventh century to the present. Even though the Israeli government controls Jerusalem today, the Dome of the Rock ensures that an Islamic presence is still felt throughout the city.

**Vulnerability**

How do indivisibility, centrality, and the capacity to symbolically represent an entire religious community play a role in the conflicts that develop around a sacred place? Paradoxically, while these three features demonstrate the power imbued in a sacred place, and are in fact part of the reason they are sacred, they also pose a security threat to that site. Sacred places that are so central, and therefore so valuable, are vulnerable precisely because they are potent symbols of religious communities or movements. These sites, as the physical manifestation of the heart of a religious group, are convenient targets for enemies. As a result, assaults on sacred places not only desecrate a community in terms of lives lost or monuments destroyed, but also undermine the very foundations on which that community or religion rests.

Though plots to desecrate the Dome of the Rock have been uncovered, there have been few physical attacks on the monument and it has never sustained serious damage. In this case it is not the physical well being of the Dome of the Rock that seems to be at risk, but its symbolic potency and power. For example, during the brief period of Christian rule in the eleventh century, the Dome of the Rock was converted

35 Ibid., p. 31.
36 Ibid., p. 63.
into a church, effectively “desecrating” the Islamic rituals, practice, and worship undertaken at the site, as well as altering the relationship between Muslims and their historical traditions. Hence this monument’s centrality within Islam put the Islamic community of Jerusalem in a vulnerable position, and deprived them of the material core on which so much of their identity was based.

Vulnerability is felt most profoundly when a sacred place is threatened, and often the first response to a threat is to take aggressive measures to protect the site. For a religious community to accomplish this, it must necessarily be in control of the site, which itself can be the source of ownership disputes.\textsuperscript{37} However, the politics of possession is a high-stakes game when powerful competing groups are contesting over the same land, and this type of conflict encompasses the religious community directly involved, the “opposing” religious community or communities, other political actors, and even regional or international entities. Furthermore, the conflict may evolve from a territorial dispute between two religions to a full-blown national crisis, as is the case in Israel.

Sacred sites that are central to the identity of a religious community are often enmeshed in conflict because the community and the involved interest groups are willing to fight to defend the integrity of the site: In a battle over indivisible, central, and vulnerable sacred place, the spoils of conflict may be all or nothing. Thus, in the current interreligious conflict surrounding the Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock, the desire to own and protect sacred sites is nearly synonymous with the imperative to uphold and perpetuate the faith.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 2.
CHAPTER THREE

THE DOME OF THE ROCK ON THE TEMPLE MOUNT

The Dome of the Rock is considered to be the most magnificent Islamic building on earth. Perched high above Jerusalem on the Temple Mount (which is known as Haram al-Sharif, The Noble Sanctuary, in Arabic, and as Har Ha-Bayit, Mountain of the House, in Hebrew), its golden dome and brilliant exterior mosaics gleaming in the sun, this building is a testament to the victory, the promise, and the splendor of the Islamic faith. Begun in 691–692 CE by the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik, it is among the earliest monuments sponsored by a Muslim ruler to be of such critical spiritual and political significance, and is widely considered a great work of art. The structure is so visually arresting that its religious function is actually transcended by its physical presence (see Figure 1).³⁸

Although the history and meanings associated with this monument are extraordinarily complex, there are two aspects of its construction that stand out. The first is its location on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which is itself actually built on top of what Jews believe to be Mount Moriah: Jews believe that Mount Moriah is where Abraham’s sacrifice took place, and that it is the center of the world. It is also the presumed site of Solomon’s Temple, which was built in the mid-tenth century BCE under Solomon, king of the Israelites, and stood for approximately four hundred years. Owing to this spatial context, the Dome of the Rock must be studied in terms

of both its relationship with the already existing beliefs associated with this site, and
its appropriation of the site’s sacredness. This reflects a prevailing principle of Islam;
it is not a new faith, but the continuation and culmination of the preceding Abrahamic
faiths, Judaism and Christianity.\footnote{Ibid., p. 60.} Thus, the Dome of the Rock’s significance is
linked to both Jewish and Christian beliefs. The second key physical aspect of the
Dome of the Rock is its beauty and monumentality. When constructed, the Dome was
intended to be the physical manifestation of the superiority and legitimacy of Islam,
and appropriation of the sacred Mount Moriah, the Dome of the Rock represented
Solomon’s Temple rebuilt, and enabled parallels to be drawn between Islam and
Judaism: Indeed, the Koran was to be considered the “true Torah,” and Muslims the

**Physical Location**

The Dome of the Rock derives its elevated status in the religious landscape of
Islam from its location on the Temple Mount, for its sacredness is in turn derived
from the appropriation of this site’s previous history and meaning. Awareness of the
Dome’s physical location in the urban landscape of Jerusalem is therefore crucial to
fully comprehend the magnitude of its spiritual, social, and political implications. In
19 BCE, King Herod built a magnificent architectural platform, known most

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commonly as the Temple Mount, in the eastern portion of the Old City for the rebuilding of the Second Temple. This expansive rectangular platform is approximately 500 by 300 meters and covers an area of almost 37 acres. The Dome of the Rock sits on a smaller trapezoidal platform just west of center on the Temple Mount, and dominates the surrounding topography (see Figure 2). Also located on the Temple Mount are the enormous al-Aqsa mosque and various smaller Islamic structures. Though the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE and replaced by a temple dedicated to Jupiter (which was subsequently destroyed in the mid-fourth century), Herod’s platform survives to this day, where it remains the most remarkable, imposing, and contested part of the city.

Architectural Description

The Dome of the Rock has been given various architectural labels, but it is most accurately referred to as a *ciborium*, a vault above an altar symbolizing the vault of heaven. This is because its primary function is to house the rock—a large slab of bedrock that protrudes from below the Temple Mount up into the Dome of the Rock—from which Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. Its architecture confirms that it is a commemorative structure. The building is an architectural marvel because of its aesthetically pleasing application of geometrical

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42 Grabar and Nuseibeh, *Dome of the Rock*, p. 22.
design and impressive size, and because of the legibility of its construction from the exterior (see Figure 3).\textsuperscript{45}

This centrally planned structure has a diameter of 157 feet, and is octagonal in plan, with two octagonal ambulatories flanking a circular opening in which the asymmetrical rock itself resides.\textsuperscript{46} The outer ambulatory is made up of eight piers and sixteen columns, while the inner ambulatory circling the inset rock has four piers and twelve columns (see Figure 4). The rock projects approximately five feet above the level of the building floor, but it is hardly visible because of the barricades that encircle it.\textsuperscript{47} The dome, which is precisely aligned with the rock on a vertical axis, rests on top of a surprisingly tall cylinder. The central cylindrical space created by the circular arcade around the rock and its extension into the dome dominate the interior, particularly when light streams in from above, illuminating the core of the building (see Figure 5). This structural layout inhibits viewing of the rock and the dome from inside the building, reinforcing the prevailing interpretation that this layout was dictated by the desire to emphasize the building’s exterior—that is, the dome, the symbol of Islam’s strength and authority.\textsuperscript{48}

The Dome of the Rock is recognized throughout the world as a model of architectural beauty not only for its structural clarity and geometrical purity, but for its extensive interior and exterior decoration (e.g., mosaics, tiles, inscriptions, marble, and carved stone). Perhaps most impressive is the 240-meter-long inscription in the mosaic frieze that circles the outer octagonal arcade and part of the

\textsuperscript{45} Grabar, \textit{Shape of the Holy}, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 104.
inner: The majority of this inscription, which should be understood as a single text, praises God and the Prophet and makes frequent use of Koranic quotations. The brilliant mosaics are predominantly blues, greens, and golds, and depict decorative motifs that are reminiscent of the styles of Late Antiquity in the Mediterranean.

The building’s exterior also showcases exquisite decoration. When Jerusalem was under Ottoman rule the surface was almost entirely decorated with mosaics: Today, the lower part is covered with marble plaques and the mosaics of the upper part date from the mid-sixteenth century (see Figure 6). Its magnificently colored exterior sets the Dome of the Rock apart from other monuments, for such use of color was quite rare at the time of its construction in eastern Mediterranean architecture. The dome, however, is the feature that truly gives the monument its commanding, stately appearance. The cupola, which is about 65 feet in diameter, rises to an impressive height of 98 feet over the platform, and is supported by an inner circular arcade of four piers and twelve columns. The wooden frame of the dome is covered with a special gold alloy, but at the time of its construction it was most likely covered in copper. The Dome of the Rock has four doors, one corresponding, more or less, to each of the four cardinal directions, though they do not line up exactly with the axes of the Temple Mount or the smaller platform on which the Dome itself sits. This is one of the Dome’s most puzzling architectural

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49 For the English translation of this inscription, see Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, pp. 59–61. For an explanation and various interpretations of this inscription, see ibid., pp. 61–71.
50 Ibid., p. 72.
features: There is no obvious direction in which to move about the space, and it is still unknown which door represented the main entrance.\footnote{Ibid., p. 106.}

In a broader architectural sense, the Dome of the Rock appears to follow a model that was fairly common in Early Christian and Byzantine architecture, seen primarily in Roman and Early Christian funerary architecture, as well as Early Christian baptisteries. The most striking comparison, however, is to the Rotunda of the Anastasis in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, another of Jerusalem’s illustrious commemorative buildings.\footnote{Ibid., p. 107.} Chapter 4 presents a detailed visual and architectural comparison of these monuments.

**Sacred Meanings and Associations**

Before discussing the reasons for the Dome of the Rock’s placement on the Temple Mount, it is useful to first present a brief history of the area around the time of the Islamic conquest. In 638 CE, after approximately 300 years of Christian rule, Jerusalem was conquered by the Islamic army.\footnote{Ibid., p. 107.} Upon entering the city, the Muslim leader Umar ibn al-Khattab was led on a tour by the Christian patriarch Sophronius, ex-ruler of Jerusalem. Written records provide evidence that even at this earliest phase of the “Islamization” of Jerusalem, Umar was interested in the Temple Mount, despite its decrepit condition as a wasteland of ruins from the destroyed pagan Roman temple. However, it was not until the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik came to power in

685 CE that plans were developed to build on the site, and in 691–692 CE, the Dome of the Rock was constructed.\textsuperscript{56}

There were both religious and secular motivations for building the Dome of the Rock on this site. It is difficult to pinpoint the precise meanings associated with Mount Moriah, the Temple Mount, and the rock itself at the time of construction, because textual sources are limited and confusion has been generated by attempts to project later theories back in time. An explanation of the situation surrounding this area at the time of the conquest should help clarify arguments for specific religious and secular associations.

The Temple Mount embodied different meanings for each of the Abrahamic faiths, as well as for the Roman pagans. For Jews, it was the site of the Jewish Temple and where Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac almost occurred. For them, the Mount was also representative of sacred time—the past, when the Temple stood; and the future, when the Temple will be rebuilt and the Messiah will come.\textsuperscript{57} Under emperor Hadrian, Jerusalem, renamed Aelia Capitolina, symbolized the far-reaching power and influence of Rome and the triumph of paganism over Judaism. For Christians, who left the platform in ruins for centuries and may have used it as a garbage dump in the early fourth century, the Temple Mount was a testament to the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. At the time of the Islamic conquest, Umar ibn al-Khattab showed interest in the Mount most likely because it was an ancient Jewish holy site, and Jewish traditions had a profound influence on the development

\textsuperscript{56} Grabar, \textit{Shape of the Holy}.
\textsuperscript{57} Grabar and Kedar, \textit{Heaven and Earth}, p. 322.
of early Islam. But what role did the rock itself play in these early associations? In the seventh century, the rock appears primarily as the symbol of the Jewish Temple, yet “there was no clear and unequivocal meaning attached to the rock at the time of the [Islamic] conquest.” In fact, there is no mention of the rock in textual sources from that period, and it does not become the central focus on the Temple Mount until 60 years after the conquest, when Abd al-Malik rose to power and ordered the construction of the Dome of the Rock. Why did the rock merit such an extravagant commemorative structure?

Two specific Jewish associations with Mount Moriah and the rock influenced Muslim use of the space. The first is the identification of Mount Moriah as omphalos (navel, or center) of the earth, which is a key component of Jewish legend. The second association is that of the sacrifice of Abraham. Despite the fact that the latter association arose from a first-century mistake—confusing the land of Moriah with Mount Moriah—the rock is still correlated with this narrative. Abd al-Malik may have chosen to showcase the rock precisely because of this connection to Abraham in an attempt to capitalize on a place that was equally sacred to Jews and Muslims, while simultaneously emphasizing Islam’s superiority. Abraham was, for Muslims, a hanif (i.e., a truly devout monotheist, who was pre-Islamic, non-Jewish, and non-Christian) and the first Muslim. The Dome of the Rock, then, is much more than a sanctuary for the rock; it is a “memorial to the Muslim ancestor of the three monotheistic faiths.”

60 Grabar, *Umayyad Dome of the Rock*, p. 45.
In addition to the appropriation of these Jewish traditions, Muslims have accreted their own Islamic associations with the area over time. The two most prominent are the Prophet Muhammad’s Night Journey (ṣa’ra’) and his ascension to Heaven from the Haram (mi’raj). It is believed that Muhammad’s footsteps as he left Earth for Heaven are imprinted in the rock, and that this is where He would return at the end of days for the Last Judgment.61 Thus, understanding the Dome of the Rock as a commemoration of the place of Muhammad’s ascension is essential in explaining the meaning and function of the building.

Yet the association with the Prophet’s Night Journey is not so simply explained. This association existed immediately following the Dome’s construction, and is linked to a belief that the Herodian Temple that once stood on the Haram was the Masjid al-Aqsa. The following statement from the Koran is sometimes used to validate this highly contested claim: “Glorified be He Who carried His servant by night from the masjid al-haram [Mekkah] to the masjid al-aqsa [the farthest place of Islamic worship, which in this case is assumed to be Jerusalem].”62 The controversy exists because Jerusalem is not accepted by all Muslims as the masjid al-aqsa, and it is ambiguous—even among those who do accept it—whether this event is associated with the specific position of the rock or with the Haram, or even Jerusalem.

The secular motivations for the Dome’s construction are as essential—if not more so—as the religious ones, for they have parallels in the management and strategic manipulation of the site today. One theory is that Mu’awiyah, founder of the Umayyad dynasty (and caliph from 661 to 680 CE), needed to express Muslim

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authority in the Christian city, and that his successor Abd al-Malik completed this vision. A later theory is that the Umayyad Abd al-Malik, caught in an ideological battle with the rival Hijazi tradition, built the Dome of the Rock in an effort to replace Mekkah with Jerusalem as the primary Islamic pilgrimage site. However, this theory has been largely disproved, for despite the rivalry, it is unlikely that he would have been so bold as to try to undermine the authority of Mekkah. Furthermore, it is widely believed that the Dome of the Rock was not built to accommodate the extensive liturgical requirements of the tawaf, the procession of pilgrimage ceremonies.

The lengthy, convoluted history of the Dome of the Rock is littered with conflicting theories and narratives of its historical and symbolic significance. The controversies surrounding some of these associations are still relevant today, for they continue to affect how the site is managed and interpreted, some 1300 years after its construction. In the following three chapters, I analyze how the Temple Mount’s meaning and symbolic power are harnessed and often manipulated by religious communities and political leaders to advance their agendas and benefit from the site.

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63 Grabar, Shape of the Holy, p. 115.
64 Grabar, Umayyad Dome of the Rock.
The symbolic value of the Dome of the Rock ranks Jerusalem high in the religious landscape of Islam, behind only Mekkah and Medina. Religious architecture, particularly of such renown, houses powerful meaning and evokes collective memories among the faithful. If the centuries of rebellion, war, and rebirth reveal anything about Jerusalem, it is that this city will always be contested. Consequently, the strongest and most important messages carried by the city’s monuments are wealth, strength, and dominance. Such statements may be conveyed through a building’s physical appearance.

It is impossible not to marvel at the dazzling mosaic exterior and golden dome of the Dome of the Rock. However, the efficacy of architectural statements largely depends on how a building stands in relation to others, and the dialogue created between certain monuments is the key to deciphering their messages. This chapter focuses on the visual competition between the Dome of the Rock and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Their relationship illuminates pivotal moments of Jerusalem’s past, specifically its transformation into a Christian city in the early fourth century, and the subsequent Islamic conquest in the seventh century. That is not to say that the visual competition between these monuments is relevant only to an understanding of the past, for the Dome of the Rock’s position in the architectural landscape of Jerusalem plays a part in today’s Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and ensures its future as an architectural and spiritual icon of both Islam and the city.
The Religious Landscape

An inquiry into the visual power of any monument must begin with an explanation of its surroundings. This is especially true when the monuments under consideration are in Jerusalem, for virtually every square foot of this city is sacred to the people of one religion or another, while forbidden to others.

Jerusalem is located in the approximate center of Israel, on the eastern ridge of the Judean Mountains, among hills and valleys (see Figure 7). The Old City, which contains two of the most important hills in the area—Mount Golgotha and Mount Moriah—occupies the eastern portion of Jerusalem, and is hedged in by the Mount of Olives to the east, the Valley of Kidron to the southeast, and the Valley of Hinnom to the south (see Figure 8). The Old City itself is divided into four quarters: the Muslim quarter in the northeast, the Christian quarter in the northwest, the Armenian quarter in the south, and the Jewish quarter in the center of the city and abutting the Temple Mount in the east. The area of the Temple Mount is about as large as any of the quarters.

At the time of its construction in 19 BCE, the Herodian Temple Mount was a structure unlike any other in the region. To this day its architectural grandeur is unparalleled in the city of Jerusalem. The Temple Mount, nicknamed the “Sacred Esplanade” by Oleg Grabar, dominates the Old City and modern Jerusalem beyond because of its pivotal role in the city’s history and sanctity, but also by means of its height, distinctive architectural style, and the extraordinary monuments located there.

Upon ascending from the overcrowded streets of the Old City and emerging onto the Temple Mount, one must experience a sudden spaciousness. Numerous platforms, staircases, and gardens serve as the backdrop for the colossal al-Aqsa mosque at the south end of the platform, as do the eight modest domed shrines scattered around the magnificent Dome of the Rock. As one approaches from the south, the Dome slowly rises into view, partially obscured by archways, fountains, and steps. The monument towers high above the ground level of the platform, and its impressive size and blue and gold mosaics glistening in the sunlight lend it a dramatic elegance. The Dome of the Rock anchors the physical and spiritual topography of the Temple Mount, and it appears as a beacon, guiding all who enter the holy city of Jerusalem.66

The Dome of the Rock and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre

The visual competition between the Dome of the Rock and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is a “defining tension of the topography of Jerusalem,” mainly because they each reside in the highest echelon of sacred space for their respective faiths.67 Their physical appearances and geographical locations reflect the traditions and influence of Islam and Christianity in Jerusalem, hence these monuments are locked in not only a visual competition waged in the language of architecture and aesthetics, but also a duel of competitive religio-political histories.

67 Ibid., p. 47.
In 324 CE, the Christian emperor Constantine conquered Jerusalem, known as Aelia Capitolina at the time, and united the Roman Empire. One of the first items on his agenda was to commemorate the most important holy places of Jesus’ life, and so he began an extensive building program. A top priority was the commemoration of Golgotha Hill—site of Jesus’ burial and resurrection—in the northwest portion of the Old City, on which stood a pagan temple to Aphrodite. In the process of demolishing the temple and excavating the ground below, Christ’s tomb, or the Holy Sepulchre—as well as the True Cross and the Calvary (the rock outcropping believed to be the exact site of his crucifixion)—were discovered. It is important to point out that these “discoveries” are speculative: There is no definitive evidence, and it is likely that some of the records that do exist are partially fabricated. Nonetheless, Golgotha Hill and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which was completed in 335 CE, remain two of Christianity’s most sacred places to this day.

Unlike the Dome of the Rock, which has retained its original structure and plan, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre looks nothing today like it did when it was built in the fourth century. The Church has survived numerous attacks by non-Christian conquerors, and has undergone countless reconstructions, the most notable occurring in the seventh, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, as well as in 1959. The

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68 For more information on Constantine’s rise to power and the conversion of the Roman Empire from paganism to Christianity, see Armstrong, History of Jerusalem, pp. 174–179. For further details on the excavations at Golgotha, see ibid., pp. 179–184.
Church as it stands today is a fraction of what the original complex once was, but that has not diminished the sacredness of the site.\textsuperscript{69}

Originally, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was a complex of separate structures enclosed by a continuous wall. The complex was arranged from east to west, with the main entrance on the \textit{Cardo Maximus}, the main north–south road of Jerusalem. Upon entering the complex, a visitor would be in a colonnaded court or atrium, before crossing into a high-ceilinged, five-aisled basilica (see Figure 9).\textsuperscript{70} At the far southwest end of the basilica stood the rock outcrop identified as Calvary, the site of Jesus’ crucifixion. Beyond this basilica lay a larger colonnaded courtyard that led directly to the Rotunda of the Anastasis (resurrection), which served as the \textit{martyrium}, or martyr’s shrine, and framed the Holy Sepulchre. The tomb itself had been carved out of solid rock. The rotunda comprised a circular space defined by three apses and a ring of twelve columns and six pilasters, and was crowned by a large dome (see Figure 10).\textsuperscript{71} It is surrounded by an ambulatory off which open three absidial chapels. Although the evidence is not definitive, it is believed that the rotunda was a part of the church’s original design, even though it was completed at a later date. The original church, then, was a creative conglomeration of different architectural components, monumental in scale and befitting the commemoration of the Christian Lord.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., p. 33.
\textsuperscript{71} Goldhill, \textit{City of Longing}, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., p. 31.
Visual Competition Between the Sites

Because their surroundings have been so dramatically altered over the centuries, it is difficult to imagine the earlier visual competition of the Dome of the Rock and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. When the Dome was first built the Old City was less developed and the area immediately surrounding the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was much more open. In contrast, all that can be seen of the Church from a ground view today is the entrance and façade; the present-day Church appears to be wedged between other buildings (see Figure 11).

In the seventh century, construction of the Dome of the Rock signified the rebirth of the Temple Mount and established a rivalry between structures on the hill in the east (Mount Moriah, turned Temple Mount) and those on the hill in the west (Golgotha). Jerusalem, whose spiritual life had revolved around the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for centuries, now had two monumental foci, one Christian and one Islamic.73

The Dome’s placement on the Mount affords it great height: It towers over the surrounding urban environment, ensuring its visual accessibility from virtually every corner of the city. Indeed, it is the first landmark seen in Jerusalem when approaching from the east, and is very easily seen from the older Christian city in the west.74 Because of its disproportionately tall drum, the Dome of the Rock is significantly taller than the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, despite the fact that the summit of Mount Moriah is lower than Golgotha Hill. However, it is the monument’s golden dome, instantly recognizable in the city skyline, which truly sets it apart (see Figure

73 Grabar and Kedar, Heaven and Earth, p. 305.
74 Grabar, Shape of the Holy, p. 104.
12). The dome’s height and brilliance contribute to a sense of buoyancy, as if this colossal monument was capable of rising from its foundations on the Temple Mount and floating into the heavens above. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre off to the west, with its duller, gray domes, is no match for the visual supremacy of this Islamic monument (see Figure 13).

Visual comparisons can also be drawn between the plans of the buildings. As discussed in the last chapter, the Dome of the Rock is a perfectly symmetrical, centrally planned building with an outer ambulatory of twelve columns. This layout reflects its main function, that is, commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad’s Night Journey and Ascension to Heaven, represented by the rock that sits in the monument’s center. There is a good chance that in planning the Dome of the Rock, the architects looked to the Rotunda of the Anastasis as an architectural model. Following its completion in the mid-fourth century, the rotunda became an incredibly popular model for architectural memorials throughout the western world, with its most celebrated offspring being the Santo Stefano church complex in Bologna, Italy.75 Though such cross-cultural and interreligious exchange may seem unusual considering the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem, it is quite likely that the Islamic adoption of a typical Byzantine, Christian architectural form relied on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as a prototype. The religious analogy to be drawn from this architectural comparison is that Christianity, which preceded Islam in the history of

Jerusalem, is inferior to Islam, which is believed (by Muslims) to “answer” the questions and uncertainties of the other monotheistic faiths.

For early Muslim leaders trying to establish their authority in a predominantly Christian city, the primary objective of the Dome of the Rock was to establish the superiority of Islam over Christianity. And the dome—designed to be “visually arresting at a distance”—was a testament to Islamic authority over all of Jerusalem.76

Furthermore, the Dome of the Rock’s mere existence and imposing physicality mattered more than its function: One did not have to enter the building to grasp its significance, for its message was clearly communicated by its triumphant exterior.77

This approach to architectural signification stands in sharp contrast to most Christian buildings, which often require both entrance and ritual participation to fully comprehend their structure and significance. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre may be a minor exception to this rule, however, for it too is a commemorative structure, even though it now doubles as a congregational space. Yet it is indisputable that the Dome of the Rock’s symmetrical, octagonal structure emphasizes its role as strictly commemorative and symbolic. All of the building’s architectural elements are channeled toward the veneration of the rock at its center.

Thus, the Dome of the Rock effectively presented Islam not only as competitor to Christianity, but as conqueror of Jerusalem. The identity that Muslims claimed for themselves was that of victors, as leaders of the Holy City. Christians, by contrast, were subsequently labeled as a defeated and now subjugated people. Hence the Dome of the Rock manifested Islam’s superiority in its size, beauty, and dominant

76 Grabar, Shape of the Holy, p. 104.
77 Ibid., p. 110.
location, and helped spread the message of this supremacy in the visual and
ideological competition for the religious and often political domination of Jerusalem.
Religious communities are often actively involved in the creation and dissemination of narratives about their sacred places, because they recognize the potential of compelling narratives in establishing their unique identity. Narratives about place—or place-myths—are as relevant today as they were at the time of a building’s construction, even if that building was constructed in the seventh century. Place-myths draw the past into the present, may evolve over time, and are susceptible to manipulation. This interaction between narrative and place relies heavily on communal memory, which is key to the production of place-myth. How does the power of memory in shaping narratives relate to the use of these narratives for molding a community’s identity? In the following section I will discuss these components of narrative, and then analyze the dominant place-myths associated with the Dome of the Rock and how they are employed by the Islamic religious community in Jerusalem.

**Narrative and Place-Myth**

“There does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives.”

This statement, by the literary and social critic Roland Barthes, emphasizes the fundamental need for and uninterrupted existence of narrative in the history of human society. Narratives are commonplace because they are a way by which a people

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synthesize and understand their lives; they are essential to the constitution of a community because they help explain a people’s role and importance in the world. In *Architecture and Narrative*, Sophia Psarra defines narration as the “process or activity of selecting, arranging, and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time-bound effects on a perceiver.” This definition suggests that narratives neither naturally arise nor are impervious to human influence. Rather, they are entirely subjective and open to being manipulated. It follows, then, that humans can alter and even craft the impact that narratives have on other people. Thus, narratives are not simply a story linking facts about the past, but rather a constructed web of meanings that bridges the present and the past.

Narratives, particularly those that tell stories about a people’s distant past, are often called myths or legends. Myths are shared by a group of people, who hold them as sacred. Myths were created in the past, and their continued retelling allows them to link historically rooted events to the present. Narratives that are specifically about or associated with places are called “place-myths.” They are used to convey the convergence of history, events, rituals, practices, interpretations, and experiences of specific places. Place-myths are layered, complex stories, and are informed by fluctuating historical, social, political, and cultural contexts. Hence they are not strictly dependent upon the place itself, but are fluid; they may evolve, reflecting and

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79 Ibid., pp. 8–9.
incorporating alterations in the place itself. It is this quality that leaves place-myths vulnerable to manipulation.

**The Role of Memory**

The second, and more important source for place-myth construction is memory, which Rodriguez and Fortier define as the “capacity to remember, to create, and re-create our past.”⁸² Whereas history allows us to contemplate past events from a distance, and is often believed to be factual (though we know that this is not necessarily true), memory works by taking specific events from the past and pulling them forward into the present; that is, memories bridge time, and reactualize events rather than just remind us of them.⁸³ In doing so, the use of memory gives meaning to and enriches the present.

Memory and narrative have a synergistic relationship; they are each capable of influencing the other, and usually do. A narrative, particularly one about a place, will consist of many memories, layered and organized into a somewhat linear structure. Yet memory can be considered the “home of narrative,” because it is in our memories that these narratives reside.⁸⁴ And remembering is key to the survival of specific narratives. For example, for a historical narrative to spread and be accepted by a community it must be believable; and members of that community will adopt and retell a narrative only if they share belief in the historical events it embodies. Furthermore, this belief is rooted in individuals’ memories of these events, or in

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information they know about the events.\textsuperscript{85} Thus, the processes of narrative production and remembering are symbiotic, existing in a self-reinforcing cycle.

Communal memory is the type most likely to be involved in the creation of place-myths. Individuals who harbor memories about a place, which so often involve ancient or historically significant events or situations, have derived the content of these memories from their community, not through direct experience. Similarly, people remember best as a group, for the very act of sharing memories reinforces them and contributes to their continued existence. Communal memories, through their impact on place-myths, also hold a central position in the construction of a community’s identity. Recollection of the past—combined with anticipation of the future—can be transposed into a greater and more compelling story that tells a community who they are, where they came from, and where they belong. This is why narratives are so powerful and elemental; they have the “ability to create, form, refashion, and reclaim identity.”\textsuperscript{86}

Place-myths are commonly bound to monuments because they act as vessels for meaning and have the potential to capture and render memories tangible.\textsuperscript{87} Architecture conveys narratives by means of spatial organization, form, and materials, all of which may be imbued with a sacred quality. Indeed, a patron’s or ruler’s use of a place and its architecture is often determined by a desire to communicate a particular place-myth or sociopolitical meaning. The Temple Mount

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., p. 12.  
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., pp. 7–8.  
\textsuperscript{87} Bastéa, \textit{Memory and Architecture}, p. 6.
in Jerusalem, with its long history of violent conquest and political manipulation, is perhaps one of the best places to study this phenomenon.

**Appropriation and Exchange of Temple Mount Place-Myths**

The Temple Mount has always been at the heart of political and spiritual battles waged in Jerusalem. These battles, as previously discussed, have taken physical form in the desecration and construction of religious monuments. Yet competition over the Temple Mount has also been played out through an ideological war concerning narratives associated with the place. The Temple Mount has played a considerable role in the historical narratives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and to this day it is of overwhelming importance to the Jewish and Muslim communities, both locally and globally. This place has a long history of narrative appropriation, which is a complex process of borrowing, exchange, and the relocation of aspects of the Temple Mount’s place-myths by each of these monotheistic faiths. A most prominent example, and most relevant to this essay, is Muslim appropriation of Jewish history. Using the preexisting historical and sacred associations of the Temple Mount, Muslims adopted parts of the Jewish past as their own in order to legitimize their rule over Jerusalem, but also in an effort to build up their own historical tradition, which was very young at the time of their conquest of Jerusalem in 638 CE. A brief journey through the life of the Temple Mount via its place-myths validates my assertion that narrative, when properly harnessed, has the capacity to shape group identity.

Jewish Narratives About the Temple Mount

The Temple Mount is the holiest place in Judaism because of the presence of the rock (for which the Dome of the Rock is named), which is considered the navel of the world, the center of the universe, and the place where creation began; Jews believe that Adam was made from the earth at this spot, and is buried beneath the rock. As such, it is the one place where all three realms—heaven, earth, and the netherworld—are connected.\(^{89}\) It is also the place where Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac occurred.

The destruction of the Second Temple by the Roman army in 70 CE, which concluded the first Jewish-Roman war, marked the end of almost a thousand years of uninterrupted Jewish presence on the Temple Mount, an absence that continues today.\(^{90}\) Sixty years later the majority of the city and the Temple Mount were still in ruins, and in 135 CE the Roman emperor Hadrian began the process of transforming Jerusalem into a glorified Roman city in his honor, to be named \textit{Aelia Capitolina.} As part of his reconstruction of the city, Hadrian erected a Temple of Jupiter on the Temple Mount, where the Second Temple once stood. This hostile action, as well as a series of edicts which disallowed Jews many of their traditional practices in an effort to force them to assimilate to Roman customs, lead to the third Jewish revolt. Despite great harm inflicted upon the Roman army, the Jews were once again defeated and banished from Jerusalem. Hadrian’s Temple of Jupiter stood until destroyed by the Christian Roman emperor Constantine, who took over the city in 325 CE.

\(^{90}\) Ibid., p. 77.
Out of this devastating fall from an independent nation to a forced diaspora, many Jewish Temple Mount place-myths were born. Surprisingly, the sudden transformation strengthened Jewish ties to the Temple Mount, rather than severing them. With the community unable to practice their faith at the Jewish center of the world, their communal religious identity was preserved through stories, myths, and prayers. The most dominant of these post-destruction narratives focused on the connection between the earthly sanctuary and the true Temple in the divine realm above. This narrative, which emphasizes the terrestrial Temple as a reflection of the celestial one, imbued the Temple Mount with even greater sacredness, and was a comfort to the Jewish community still grieving over their loss of the Second Temple.\(^\text{91}\)

The existence and persistence of such place-myths emphasize Jewish efforts to “endow the destroyed site with transcendental qualities that would preserve its stolen holiness and carry on the hope that one day the earthly sanctuary would be built again.”\(^\text{92}\) Hence narratives are capable not only of maintaining a place’s sacredness, but of increasing it. Memories of their tragic past, immortalized in place-myths, have held the scattered Jewish community together through centuries of oppression.

**Christian Appropriation of Jewish Narratives**

Following the end of Jewish national sovereignty, many Jewish place-myths about the Temple Mount were appropriated by Christianity and Islam and used for

\(^{91}\) Ibid., pp. 115–119.
\(^{92}\) Ibid., p. 115.
their own benefit. Upon their conquest of Jerusalem, the goal of early Christians was to establish a New Jerusalem, which would require the eradication of all traces of the city’s Jewish and pagan past. Of course, Jerusalem and the Temple Mount were laden with Judaic sacred meaning, so this was an impossible task. Instead, in an effort to establish themselves as the new patriarchs of the city, Christians systematically appropriated Jewish place-myths and the preexisting sacredness of the Temple Mount.

This appropriation occurred in a number of distinct ways. The first was the decision to leave the Temple Mount in ruins following the destruction of the Second Temple. The vacant, devastated site, reportedly used as a garbage dump in the Byzantine period (fourth to seventh centuries), served as a testament to the Christian victory over Judaism. The other methods of Christian appropriation of Jewish sacredness and narratives fall into two categories: the refashioning and manipulating of the Temple Mount’s meanings, and the relocating of certain associations to Jerusalem’s holiest Christian site, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Temple Mount maintained some of its sacredness for early Christians because it was believed that Mary had brought baby Jesus there when she was making her new mother’s offering. The New Testament also says that Jesus studied and preached on the Temple Mount as a young man. In promoting these biblical narratives, Christians sought to capitalize on the site’s sacredness and overshadow the preexisting Jewish meanings and traditions associated with the site.³⁴

Over time, Christians also adopted the notion of a holy rock, but because they desired a sharp division between Christianity and Judaism, they could not venerate the holy rock on the Temple Mount that was once commemorated by the Second Temple. Instead, they symbolically transported this sacred rock to the hill of Golgotha, where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre stood in commemoration of the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This relocating of the sacred rock in the popular Christian imagination imbued the Church with additional sacred significance. Furthermore, Christians asserted that Adam was buried under this rock beneath the Church, leading to the symbolic transfer of the act of the creation of the world from the Temple Mount to Golgotha.95 Thus, Jewish place-myths regarding the Temple Mount were highly valuable to the Christian conquerors in their mission to convert Jerusalem into a Christian holy city and prove their legitimacy as its new spiritual and political caretakers.

**Muslim Appropriation of Jewish Narratives**

Jerusalem was a Byzantine Christian city from 332 to 638 CE, when Muslim armies from Arabia, led by Caliph Umar, conquered the city and claimed it as their own. The nature of the Muslim appropriation of the sacredness of this place is manifold. While the early Christians were primarily occupied with adopting and relocating Jewish narratives about the Temple Mount to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on the hill of Golgotha, the early Muslims—who knew of Jerusalem’s unique position in the sacred landscape of both Jews and Christians—were initially

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95 Ibid., p. 123.
interested in capitalizing on the sanctity of the city as a whole, and subsequently co-opting the sacredness of the rock itself. Muslims believe that Muhammad, while in Mekkah, prayed in the direction of Jerusalem, making it the first *kibla*, or direction of prayer.\(^96\) Jerusalem has therefore always been an important Islamic pilgrimage site, second only to Mekkah.

The selective appropriation of Jewish Temple Mount place-myths by Muslims reveal similarities that speak to the profound influence Judaism had on the development of Islamic religious tradition and practice. Muslim adoption of the holiness of the rock is explained in two Muslim place-myths, each of which is closely related to Jewish associations with the rock. The first of these, which is the basis for Muslim reverence of Jerusalem, is Muhammad’s Night Journey and Ascension: It is believed that Muhammad’s footprints are visible on the rock, and are now immortalized.\(^97\) While Jews did not create or proscribe to a rock-ascension story, they certainly revered the rock for the role it played in momentous religious events and for the significance that religious figures have always attributed to it.

Early on, Muslims also embraced the Jewish notion that the rock was the center of the world; one theory is that the Dome of the Rock, in its perfectly symmetrical form, was built to represent this centrality. However, Muslims were also actively relocating aspects of Jewish place-myths, much as the early Christians did. For example, they declared that Abraham—a founding father of Judaism, but also the most revered Muslim ancestor—built the Ka’ba in Mekkah. In addition, Muslims claimed Adam as their own: They asserted that he was not formed from the earth

\(^{96}\) Ibid., p. 84.
\(^{97}\) Ibid., p. 126.
surrounding the rock as Jews believed, but rather from the elements of the earth in and around Mekkah. However, such myth relocation efforts did not render Jerusalem obsolete, but simply altered the role that the rock would play in Islam. Today, devout Muslims believe that on this spot on the Temple Mount, the Day of Judgment will play out at the end of time.98

Using Place-myths in the Construction of Communal Identity

Many of these narratives were established during the Ummayad period (640–750 CE), the earliest period of Islamic rule in Jerusalem. Muslim conquerors, in the process of transforming the holiest Christian and Jewish city into a Muslim stronghold, recognized the need to validate themselves as spiritual and political leaders. In adopting and incorporating Jewish narratives about Jerusalem and the Temple Mount that were already widely disseminated and believed, Muslims aligned themselves with the oldest monotheistic religious tradition on earth. This process of narrative appropriation was employed in the development of a communal identity for the Islamic faithful of Jerusalem, if not for the global Muslim community. Glorification of Jerusalem was at least partially intended to glorify the Muslim dynasty in power.

Place-myths are passed down from generation to generation, intentionally preserved so that future members will understand and appreciate the hallowed places of their faith. As I have shown, place-myths are constructed from historical events, communal memories, and narrative exchange. One would think that the shared

98 Ibid., pp. 128–129.
histories and values that such exchange entails would promote understanding and reconciliation among faiths, yet it often sets the stage for violent and continued competition. The Temple Mount is currently embroiled in conflict precisely because Jews and Muslims hold competing and overlapping narratives about the place, and these narratives are used to make claims of religious and cultural exclusivity over the site. The conflict over the control and use of the Temple Mount continues today, and “has been transformed by the emergence of the modern Jewish State of Israel into an all-out contest for political space.”

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99 Lassner, Middle East Remembered, p. 6.
CHAPTER SIX

POLITICAL MANIPULATION OF JERUSALEM’S SACRED PLACES

Historical Background

No city lends itself to inquiries about the dynamic between politics and place as much as Jerusalem. Throughout its millennia-long existence, Jerusalem has exchanged hands countless times, each defeat yielding to a new leader, a new political structure, and often a new religion. Times of social and political upheaval provide insight into the politics of place, for it is during these turbulent moments that the functional and symbolic significance of sacred places is exposed in its truest form.

From 1517 to 1917—one of the longest periods of continuous rule in the city’s history—Jerusalem was ruled by the Ottoman Turks. This period ended when the British defeated the Ottomans in the Battle of Jerusalem during World War I. For the next thirty years, until 1947, the territory of Jerusalem was known as the British Mandate. Despite an earlier agreement to establish an international administration in the city, the British imposed their own government, essentially turning Jerusalem into a British colony. During this period, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict intensified, and the idea of partitioning the city was introduced into political discourse. Jerusalem remained in political limbo throughout World War II, until the British announced their retreat in 1947 and the United Nations took over. The UN struggled, and

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101 Ibid., p. 108.
eventually failed, to impose their Partition Plan that stipulated the internationalization of Jerusalem under UN administration.\(^\text{102}\)

Following the Israeli–Palestinian war of 1948, Jerusalem was divided into two sovereign territories; the eastern half was controlled by Jordan, and the western half by Israel. This partition defined Jerusalem from 1949 to 1967, during which time these two nations remained in a state of war with each other. Despite this partition, Israel declared Jerusalem its capital, a declaration that went unrecognized by external powers that were still in favor of the internationalization of the city.\(^\text{103}\) This declaration was also ignored by Jordan, who refused to abide by the rules stated in the Armistic Agreement allowing Jews access to their holy places in the Old City.\(^\text{104}\)

The Six Day War—June 5–11, 1967—transformed the state of Israel and the city of Jerusalem virtually overnight, as Israeli forces captured East Jerusalem and part of the West Bank. Suddenly, after thousands of years, Jerusalem was returned to the Jews; the partition walls were knocked down, and residents of West and East Jerusalem were free to move across the former enemy lines. International reactions to Israel’s actions were hostile, however, and the UN refused to recognize Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem.\(^\text{105}\)

The first intifada was indisputable evidence that Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem was never fully accepted by the Palestinian population: Violent protests, beginning in December of 1987, spread from Gaza to the West Bank to Jerusalem, where Arab citizens and the Israeli military clashed on the Temple Mount. The

\(^{102}\) Ibid., p. 132.
\(^{103}\) Ibid., p. 196.
\(^{104}\) Ibid., p. 180.
\(^{105}\) Ibid., pp. 205–208.
disturbances, which continued for months, were the actions not just of a disgruntled minority, but of a national revolt against Israeli occupation. Unfortunately, by the early 1990s, Jerusalem had become even more divided than in the weeks immediately following the Six Day War.

During this decade, the Jewish community began to challenge what was called the “Status Quo”; because the Temple Mount itself was under Islamic control, Jewish access to it was very limited. The objective of the Camp David Summit, held in July of 2000, was to resolve the issue of Jerusalem’s sovereignty and ownership. With Israel having already agreed to a division of the city, the Temple Mount became the final issue standing between an unhappily unified Jerusalem and a (hopefully) peaceful, partitioned Jerusalem. A compromise proposal, put forth by the American government, stated that Palestinians would receive “custodial sovereignty” over the mosques and other structures on the Temple Mount, and Israelis would receive “residual sovereignty” over the area beneath the mosques (e.g., the platform and the ground below it). Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat refused to agree to these conditions.

On September 28, 2000, Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount in an act of political and religious defiance, declaring that it belonged exclusively to Israel. Immediately following his departure from the Mount,

106 Ibid., p. 256.
108 Ibid., p. 142.
109 Following Sharon’s visit, the Temple Mount was closed to all non-Muslims, and did not reopen to tourists, Christians, and Jews until August, 2003. Bennet, James.
violence erupted between Israeli security forces and Palestinians, setting off riots across Jerusalem; this series of protests became known as the *al-Aqsa intifada*.\textsuperscript{110} The battle over the Temple Mount was the primary reason for the failure of the Camp David Summit. Following its breakdown, Jerusalem was plunged into bloody ethnic and religious warfare, and the sacred landscape was transformed, yet again, into a battleground. Resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict will likely only be achieved if the issue of control over this sacred place is separated from the larger political conflict in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{111}

**Politics of Place**

Sacred places enter political discourse because they play an enormous role in the state’s quest for power and legitimacy: “Sacred space is often, if not inevitably, entangled in politics.”\textsuperscript{112} Hence, the conflict over the Temple Mount in Jerusalem can only be understood with respect to the larger Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which is religious, ethnic, political, and national.\textsuperscript{113}

What are the political benefits of controlling sacred places? For one, ownership of physical space is critical, for any political conquest requires an arena in which its power and authority can be displayed, and these displays are much more

\textsuperscript{111} ‘Amirav, *Jerusalem Syndrome*, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{112} Chidester and Linenthal, *American Sacred Space*, p. 15.
influential when enacted in a highly visible sacred place. Throughout Jerusalem’s history, sacred places have been sought for purposes of self-legitimization, be it of a leader, a political regime, or a faith. Possessing such legitimacy grants leaders opportunities to extend their influence beyond the sacred place and its immediate locale.\textsuperscript{114} Moreover, the fluid nature of a place’s sacredness is imperative to these objectives because it allows the degree of sacredness to fluctuate. For instance, a leader may be able to increase a site’s sacredness through its protection and glorification, and in doing so heighten his or her political credibility and power.

In order to use a sacred place for personal or political benefit, one must control the place. Absolute authority over a place may be sought through political tactics that fall primarily into two categories: exclusionary politics, and the politics of possession. The implementation of either of these tactics is useful if a political group intends to proclaim itself the singular “owner” of a sacred site by means of policy or legislation that distinguishes those in power from the “others,” or those they want to exclude.

\textit{Exclusionary Politics}

In the case of sacred place, exclusionary politics entails using political power to decide and enforce who has rights to a specific site, essentially determining and demonstrating ownership of the site. The majority of legislation conceived using the exclusionary politics approach is focused on the rights of access to a site. Indeed,

access laws often represent religious principles and prejudices that have been translated into political action. According to the Status Quo, the Temple Mount is controlled and maintained by Palestinian forces. Non-Muslims are only warily allowed to enter the platform, and they are explicitly forbidden to pray there. The Western Wall is the closest that Jews are allowed to get to the site of the ancient Holy Temple (the Wall was revealed and made a holy site in 1967 following Israel’s victory in the Six Day War). But what is accomplished by allowing free Temple Mount access only to Muslims?

The site’s physical boundaries are reinforced by this line that is drawn between Muslims and everyone else. The exclusion of adherents of other faiths serves as a means for controlling the activity on the Temple Mount, but it also serves a higher purpose—to concentrate what is good and holy (i.e., Muslims and the prayers and rituals of Islam) within the Temple Mount’s physical perimeter: “The sanctity of the inside was certified by maintaining and reinforcing boundaries that kept certain persons outside the sacred place.” In other words, the political maneuver of saying “no” to some and “yes” to others is a way of distinguishing one group of people or religion from another. The exclusivity of sacred place as established through such access rules directly emphasizes otherness, for the act of exclusion itself labels those being excused as “other.” In addition, the exclusion and alienation of everyone else—for example, people of other religions—fosters a more cohesive community of insiders, of people with a shared cause, and overtly defines who is in control of the

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115 Wasserstein, *Divided Jerusalem*, p. 204.
117 Hassner, *Halve and Hold*, p. 5.
sacred place. Of course, a religious or political group cannot enforce laws of access if they are not in possession of the sacred place, thus, the management and manipulation of sacred places necessitates ownership.

Politics of Possession

Exclusionary politics reinforces the authority of those in power by creating a dichotomy between the insider and the outsider. However, this type of control is only possible if those in power are in possession of the site in question. There are three key aspects to the ownership of sacred places: territoriality (the physical delineation of space), possession of a place’s symbolic capital, and negative possession (desecrating a place to harm another group).

Territoriality. Although the sacredness of a place is fluid, the perpetuation of this sacredness requires physical space, and thus physical boundaries. Territoriality—an essential “part of the organization of power and control of resources and people”—is a key element in obtaining possession of spatial entities.\(^{118}\) It is also an indicator that the value of a sacred place is a factor in its desirability and management. Following the partitioning of Jerusalem in the mid-twentieth century, Jordan laid claim to the eastern half of the city, including the Old City and the Temple Mount. Their physical occupation of these places was symbolic of their power over Israel. Similarly, Israel’s reclamation of the Temple Mount during the Six Day War was regarded by Israelis as an ultimate victory: The return of the Temple Mount, the symbolic heart of the Jewish

\(^{118}\) Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, p. 12.
faith, represented their long-awaited liberation, their return to power in Jerusalem, and the renewed dominance of Judaism in the city. The possession and demarcation of sacred land in Jerusalem continues to be of paramount importance in Israel’s ongoing political conflict.

Possession of Symbolic Capital. The physical space of the Temple Mount is tangible, and its value can be owned like any other tangible entity. But the intangibles of a sacred place—its sacredness and significance—can also be owned and exploited as “symbolic capital.” The possession of symbolic capital is invaluable, for it affords its owner the power to shape perceptions of the sacred place.\(^{119}\) The monumental visual presence of the Dome of the Rock—symbol of Islamic triumph and strength—reminds Muslims that an independent Palestine is possible, and that they are the bona fide keepers of the Temple Mount. For Jews, Islamic ownership of this place signifies thousands of years of Jewish exile from the Temple Mount, site of their Holy Temple, as well as an inability to unite Israel. Hence, ownership of the symbolic capital of a sacred place can exert considerable influence on national and political conflicts.

Negative Possession. Using a sacred place to establish an identity and reinforce political authority, often through place-myths and the construction of religious monuments, represents “positive possession.” “Negative possession”—using a place to delegitimize others—is another aspect of the ownership of place. Negative possession is manifested in the processes of desecration, profanation, and erasure,

\(^{119}\) Chidester and Linenthal, *American Sacred Space*, p. 16.
which can be done both rhetorically (symbolically) and materially (physically). One definition of desecration is “the act of turning something holy into something secular.”¹²⁰ This definition is useful, but it does not account for desecration that involves elevating the sanctity of one’s own religion at the expense of another. Such a transformation does not result in the secularization of a place, but rather the simultaneous desecration of the subverted religion and consecration of the victorious, now dominant one. An example of this was the conversion of the Dome of the Rock into a church, the Templum Domini, during Crusader rule in the eleventh century. This represented an aggressive act of positive possession for the triumphant Christians, who associated the Temple Mount with Solomon’s Temple and considered themselves the legitimate successors to Judaism, but one of negative possession for the Muslims, whose sacred monument was defiled by the crucifixes decorating the building and the Christian worship services held there. During this transformation, the Dome of the Rock suffered no physical damage. Nonetheless, this was an act of purposeful desecration aimed at Muslims, and an attempt to diminish their presence in Jerusalem. This example demonstrates the critical role that the Temple Mount assumed in the dynamics between competing faiths, for one group’s symbolic loss was another’s symbolic gain.¹²¹

Other examples of this phenomenon are the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, and the Temple Mount’s subsequent use as a garbage dump by Christians during the Byzantine period in the fourth century. The Romans destroyed the Temple to demonstrate their power and remind their Jerusalem subjects of their

absolute authority. The destruction of this monument, a proud testament of Jewish history and culture in Jerusalem, could be considered an attempt to erase the Jewish presence, part of a strategy to transform Jerusalem into the new Christian holy land.

In summary, possession of sacred places is fundamental in shaping communal and religious identity. While the ownership of a place such as the Temple Mount is used to legitimize Islamic authority and mobilize the Muslim community today, it simultaneously demonstrates the weakness of the “other.” Indeed, claiming and celebrating a sacred place as one’s own profanes the site for people of other faiths who are emotionally and culturally invested in it. When one group takes possession of a sacred site from another, they are essentially eradicating a portion of that faith’s collective memory and narrative history, and therefore their identity. Hence, the political tactics of exclusion and possession can dramatically alter the relationship a religious community has with their sacred places, and may even change the course of a community’s, a city’s, or even a nation’s future.

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122 Scott and Housley, *Sacred Place and Profane Spaces*, p. 56.
CONCLUSION

Battles are often fought over sacred places because they play a crucial role in the formation and maintenance of identity. Indeed, sacred place is a fundamental component of religious belief because it situates people in time and space; it preserves a religion’s sacred history and grounds a religious community by giving it a physical presence. During times of turmoil, sacred places may become the focus of religious, political, or cultural conflicts between groups, each seeking to control the sacred site for its own ideological benefit. Sacred places contribute to the process of shaping and maintaining an identity in the following three ways: through the visual competition between religious monuments, the creation, exchange, and evolution of place-myths, and the manipulation of sacred sites as political tools.

The physical appearance and geographical location of a religious monument reflect the power and wealth of the group who built it. At the time of its construction the Dome of the Rock was physical proof of Islam’s superiority over Christianity. The structure’s visual supremacy—a product of its size, beauty, design, and height—was symbolic of Islam’s victory in the competition for religious and political domination of Jerusalem.

Place-myths—complex narratives that convey the history, rituals, interpretations, and experiences of a particular site—are essential for the founding and continuation of a religious community because they explain a people’s origins, stature, and importance in the world. Like sacredness, place-myths are fluid, and can therefore be rewritten and even exchanged in efforts to create a unique identity. The
Temple Mount is currently embroiled in conflict precisely because Jews, Christians, and Muslims have competing and overlapping narratives about the site.

The political manipulation and management of a sacred place also contribute to the role it plays in the process of creating identity. Exclusionary politics and the politics of possession are the most common forms of political action taken regarding the Temple Mount. These tactics, which include governmental policy and legislation, were designed to create barriers between “insiders” and “outsiders,” and continue to be powerful ideological weapons in ownership contests of the site. The power struggle over the Temple Mount, one of the most contested sacred places in the world, persists because its exclusive ownership enables the group in control to manipulate the site for its political benefit.

The physical and historical aspects of the Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock have been thoroughly studied, analyzed, and documented in art historical scholarship, but I believe that their educational value extends beyond this discipline. The Temple Mount should be studied in terms of its history as a contested sacred place and for its pivotal role in the current Israeli–Palestinian conflict. A broader appreciation of its underlying significance may contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural and religious conflicts, as well as offer a valuable perspective in teaching about the politics of place, religious and ethnic strife, and conflict management and resolution. Beyond its essential role as the ideological battleground of a national conflict, the physical and symbolic heart of Jerusalem, and the spiritual center of Judaism and Islam, the Temple Mount transcends the physical, the functional, and the aesthetic, and embodies a more cooperative political and spiritual potential that will
be critical to the constructive communication and shared respect that our world so
desperately needs as we wend our way through the perilous challenges of the twenty-
first century.
IMAGES

Figure 1. Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 691–692 CE.

Figure 2. Aerial view of the Temple Mount in the Old City, looking east.
Figure 3. Illustrated cross section of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 691–692 CE.

Figure 4. Plan of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 691–692 CE.

Figure 5. View of the rock from above, the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 691–692 CE.
Figure 6. Exterior mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, 691-692 CE.
Figure 7. Map of Israel, 1997.

Figure 8. Map of the Old City, Jerusalem, 1993.
Figure 9. Plan of the original Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, 325–335 CE.

Figure 10. Longitudinal section of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as of 348 CE.

Figure 11. Church of the Holy Sepulchre as it looks today, Jerusalem.
Figure 12. Close-up of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem.

Figure 13. The Dome of the Rock (in the foreground) visually competes with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (gray dome in the distance).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


