

# The Dome of the Rock-past and present

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10.09.2019

## ***Abstract***

The Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is built in an octagon shape. This shape was not a common practice within construction architecture in the early days of Islamic culture and the Umayyad period in particular. However, the author believes the foundations of the octagonal structure are much older. Since it is currently impossible, religiously and politically, to conduct organized archeological excavations on Temple Mount in general and at the Dome of the Rock site, in particular, to verify when the structure's foundations were laid, the Dome of the Rock's octagonal shape raises many questions. The author will present several alternatives arguing that the foundations were laid earlier.

The Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount in Jerusalem was erected at the initiative of the Caliph from the Umayyad Abdel Malk Ben Marwan House in 691 CE<sup>1</sup>. The building is also called Kubat-al-Tzahra. The name of the place refers to the rock in the center of the building. Inside the sacred rock, there is a hall-shaped cave entered by descending a few steps. The structure was erected around the foundation stone on Temple Mount, where the Holy of Holies used to be located. The Holy of Holies was a significant remnant of the Second Jewish Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, which could only be entered by the High Priest once a year: on Yom Kippur. According to Muslim tradition, a nocturnal visit was made by Muhammad, from where he ascended to heaven and met with Moses and Jesus. Since the Muslims have adopted some Jewish traditions, they have consecrated such holy places, including this site, holding on to them as their own subsequent tradition. According to the three monotheistic religions' beliefs, the rock is the place on which the world was founded. Thus, the Muslims erected upon it the Dome of the Rock structure. What is unique about this building is that it is built in an octagonal shape, an architectural style that was neither known nor accepted in Muslim architecture as a building style, especially in the early days of Islam. This would be the topic of this article.



A hall within the foundation stone.

The question is, why did the Muslims adopt this style? Did they imitate an architectural form practiced through the southern Levant during the structure's construction, or because there were already octagonal foundations laid there from an earlier structure built around the foundation stone, upon which they built the current structure. In the author's opinion, the Muslims preferred to maintain the status quo in the place and build on these foundations the magnificent structure, preserved for the most part to this day, in the original octagonal format. They have also used a pre-existing ancient temple's columns and capitals for the Dome of the Rock's inner layout around the foundation stone.

The author visited the Dome of the Rock in the latter part of 1967 and shall review historical data on possible changes at the site after the destruction of the Jewish Temple, and before the Dome of the Rock's construction, later in this article. These refer to the activity at the foundation stone site, including the temples erected and/or their construction began on the section of the site in question. Therefore, the article will describe what happened to this part of the Temple Mount during the period following the Jewish Temple's destruction in 70 to 691 CE, when the current Dome of the Rock structure was erected.

The author believes several possibilities indicate the construction of an earlier, exterior octagonal structure on the foundation stone of the Jewish Temple. Note that it is not possible to conduct an orderly excavation at the site to confirm this argument. This issue will be examined later:

- A. During the Bar Kochba Revolt (132-136 CE), the Roman emperor Hadrian built (130 CE) a colony called *AELIA CAPITOLINA* on the ruins of Jerusalem, and a temple to Jupiter is built on the ruins of the Jewish temple at the site in question. There is an issue that has not yet been resolved, namely: Did the Bar Kochba rebels conquer Jerusalem during the revolt? Researchers disagree on this issue. If indeed the rebels of the Bar Kochba revolt had conquered Jerusalem - they would have

undoubtedly destroyed the Temple of Jupiter since its establishment was the main reason for the revolt in the first place. It is unclear what the exterior structure of the Temple of Jupiter would have looked like at that time. There is numismatic evidence from that period relating to the Temple of Jupiter - a type of coin issued by the city *AELIA CAPITOLINA*. To be discussed further.

- B. During the time of emperor Julian-the-Apostate (361-363), builders have started, under his decree, to rebuild the Jewish temple on the foundation rock. Were these the foundations of the Roman Temple of Jupiter? It is not clear. There is no description from that period of the Jewish temple, which construction has commenced. From written sources dated back to Julian's time, the construction of the Jewish Temple came to a halt and was then wholly abandoned upon the emperor's death by the Persians.

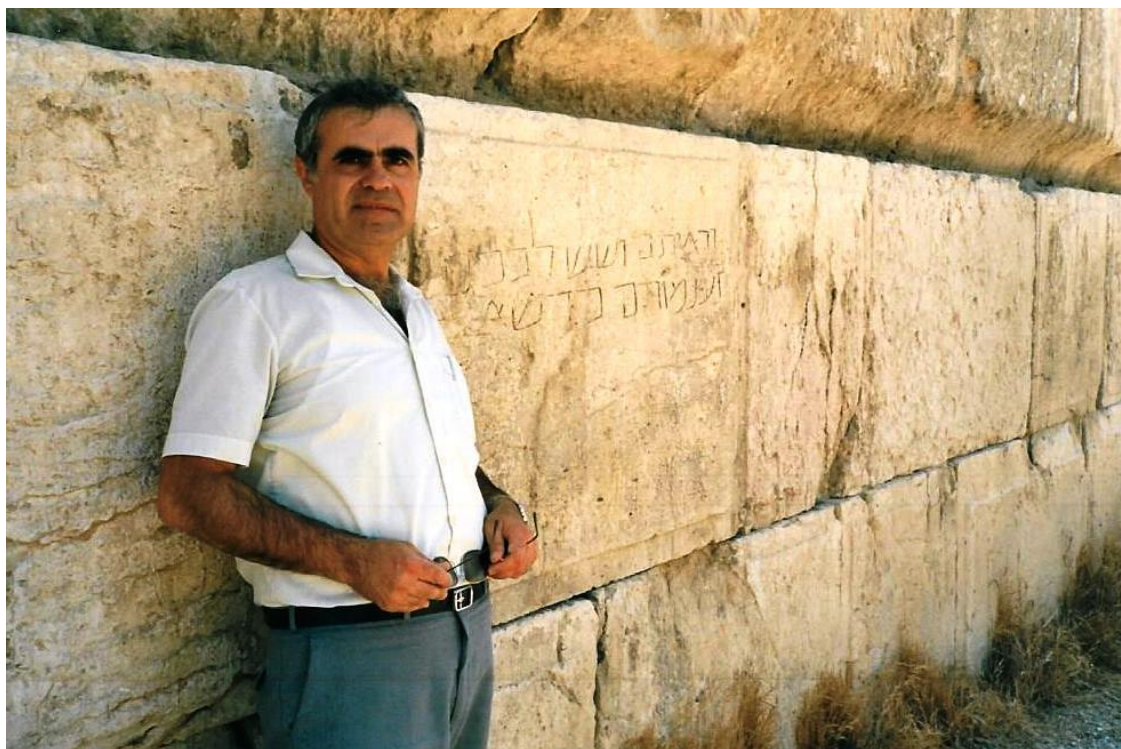


Fig. 1 - An inscription on the Western Wall from the days of Julian-the-Apostate.



Emperor Julian the Apostate

## ***A. Establishment of the colony AELIA CAPITOLINA and the Temple of Jupiter***

In his essay about the Bar Kochba revolt (132-136), the Roman historian Dio Cassius (155-235) wrote that a temple to Jupiter had been built on the ruins of the Jewish temple: "In Jerusalem, Hadrian founded a city in this place that was completely destroyed and called it Aelia Capitolina, and on the site of the Temple of God, he built a new temple for Jupiter..."<sup>2</sup>. Building a Temple for Jupiter on Temple Mount included, first and foremost, the holiest place in the destroyed Jewish temple of 70, namely the foundation stone used in the destroyed Jewish temple, the activity of the Holy of Holies, which according to Jewish tradition the high priest could enter only once a year, on Yom Kippur. However, unfortunately, there is no written indication of what the Temple of Jupiter, mentioned by Dio Cassius and other sources, looked like. However, according to a coin minted by the new Roman city Aelia Capitolina-Jerusalem in 130 (see Fig. 2), the god Jupiter is depicted as sitting in the center of the temple, with Juno and Minerva standing beside him. The coin also shows, above the temple, a gable between two columns. Some questions come to mind about this issue: 1. Does the coin describe the Temple of Jupiter's portico, or the entrance to the body of the temple (I shall dwell on this issue further)? 2. Is it possible that the temple Hadrian built for Jupiter was octagonal? 3. Was there, inside the octagonal building, another internal structure, which could be the sacred part seen on the coin?

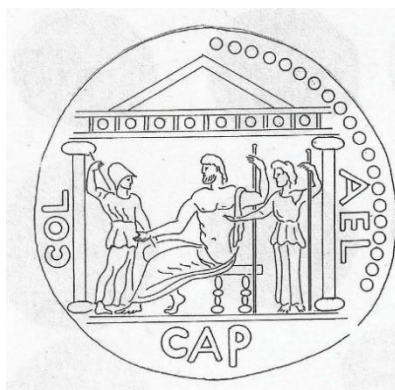
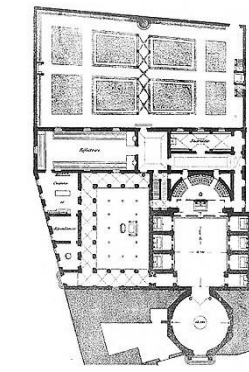


Fig. 2 Aelia Capitolina-Jerusalem coin. The Temple of Jupiter



PLAN DE L'EGLISE SA CONSO L DAMIANO SETTE. AU CASPO ACCESO - L.A. Fig. 3

According to Meshorer<sup>33</sup>, when the emperor Hadrian adopted the worship of Jupiter, he sought to make it the central worship of the Roman Empire, therefore making sure to build temples in honor of Jupiter in ancient places of worship, replacing one sacred structure for another. It should be noted that, according to the Roman architecture of the time, the structure of an octagon-shaped temple was accepted, both in the Roman period and in the periods that followed, as well as the fact that one of Jerusalem's towers - Psephinus Tower (Fig. 4) built by King Agrippa I - was an octagonal structure. Here is what the historian, Flavius Josephus<sup>4</sup> (~37-100), writes about the tower "The tower was built in the shape of an octagon, and its remains could have been the inspiration for the construction of the Temple of Jupiter.



Figure 4. The Psephinus Tower in Jerusalem.

It should be noted that the particularly sacred part of the Roman temple is the temple's inner structure called Cella. The English word "temple" is a derivative of the Latin word 'Templum' which meant "the inner body of the temple" - that

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<sup>3</sup> Meshorer, Aelia Capitolina Coins, 1989, 14

<sup>4</sup> Flavius Josephus, The Jewish War, Vol.5, 4, 3 "Now the third wall was all of it wonderful. Yet was the tower Psephinus elevated above it at the north-west corner: and there Titus pitched his own tent". This is a testimony for a structure in Jerusalem which existed during Josephus' time, accounting for an octagonal shaped building.

sacred space where worship took place inside a temple. It can be compared to the Jewish Holy of Holies, an integral and important part of the Jewish temple. The Roman architect Vitruvius also used the word temple for the inner sanctum rather than the temple's portico. That is to say, the exterior part of Jupiter's temple, or that of the Jewish temple Julian-the-Apostate ordered to re-build, had an octagonal pattern while its inner structure, is depicted as the 'Templum' mentioned above. I have already mentioned the Aelia Capitolina-Jerusalem coin, dated to the same year the city was founded (130), where the Temple of Jupiter appears with two columns and a gable. The author believes the coin illustrates the 'Templum' inside the Temple of Jupiter, while its outer shape and foundations may have been built in an octagonal pattern. Nevertheless, these exterior structures are not depicted on the coin in question, but only the temple's inner sanctum.

It should be noted that the emperor Hadrian has taken a liking to temple construction throughout the Roman Empire. He visited Judea and Jerusalem in 130. Hadrian rebuilt, among other structures, the magnificent Pantheon in Rome.

It is customary to rely on archeological excavations to draw conclusions about changes taking place over the eras in remnants of ancient structures. However, excavating the Temple Mount complex, its buildings, and the Dome of the Rock has been forbidden and is likely to remain so in the future. Hence, verifying the exact shape of the ancient infrastructure and foundations of the aforementioned temples and their outlines would be difficult, if not impossible. This also rules out any possibility, in the foreseeable future, of examining the Dome of the Rock's foundations, authenticating whether its original construction is in an octagonal format.

The question is, did the Bar Kochba rebels conquer Jerusalem during the revolt?<sup>5</sup> Because if they did, they would have undoubtedly destroyed the Temple of Jupiter, which was built on the ruins of the Jewish Second Temple. The construction of this pagan temple had been one of the reasons for the revolt in the first place. The rebels tried to prevent an irreversible situation (and future implications) where the exterior temple's infrastructure around the foundation stone were used as the basis for the new building.

## ***B. Preparations for the reconstruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, during the reign of Julian-the-Apostate***

The Roman emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus is known as "Julian-the-Apostate." He ruled Rome between 363-361, and while Christianity became a state religion, Julian rejected it, trying to re-instate paganism and in so doing, change history.

Emperor Julian-the-Apostate supported Judaism and acted against Christianity. As part of this defiance, he acted upon his idea to re-establish the destroyed Jewish Temple in Jerusalem before going to war with the Persians in 363. It should be noted that one of the declared goals of the Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans (132-136) was to conquer Aelia Capitolina-Jerusalem and rebuild the Jewish Temple. In so doing, the rebels wanted to reverse the deeds of Emperor Hadrian, who had built the Temple of Jupiter on the ruins of the Jewish Temple and established a pagan city for the Roman legions, named Aelia Capitolina. This aspiration was commemorated for posterity. The front of the Temple appears on a silver coin minted by the leader of the revolt, Shimon Bar Kochba. However, as is well known, circumstances did not allow for the Third Jewish Temple to be rebuilt, and it has been an aspiration that never materialized.



The ancient world was well familiar with the glory of the Second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, built by King Herod and destroyed by Titus in 70 CE. Thus, reconstruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem during Julian-the-Apostate's reign could have been seen as a significant project, displaying his abilities.

In the year 362, Julian wrote a letter in Greek to the Jewish Patriarch, Hillel the II - where he had promised that after returning from the war with the Persians, he would rebuild the city of Jerusalem, allow Jews to return to their homeland, and rebuild the Temple on the ruins of the previous one. The emperor immediately began to carry out his plans and mobilized resources to fulfill his promises. Upon receipt of his letter, the Jews started rebuilding the Temple's foundations on the ruins of the Jewish Temple, hoping that the promise would be fulfilled.

In his excitement of the prospect of rebuilding the temple, one of the Jewish builders engraved an inscription on the Western Wall, near Robinson's Arch, which remained to this day (Fig. 1). The words of the prophet Isaiah (66:14) were inscribed onto the stone, reading, "*When you see this, your heart will*

*rejoice and [you will flourish] like grass.*" Figure 1 in this article is a photograph of the author visiting the Western wall after the Six-Day War (1967) and the reunification of Jerusalem. The inscription is under the Robinson Arch near the Western Wall. Excavations by Prof. Mazar have not yet begun at the time. In the photo, the writer of these lines stands next to the ancient Hebrew inscription, written in 2 lines. The inscription, dated to Julian-the-Apostate's era (332-363), cites a verse from the book of Isaiah, describing the unusual events which have almost led to a temporary shift in favor of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Initially, the inscription was located close to ground level during that era. A coin of the Roman emperor Julian-the-Apostate is added for illustration. Nowadays, the inscription is located at a much higher level, a direct result of Mazar's excavations conducted at the site. An additional photo shows the height of the inscription today, hardly legible so far up from ground level.

In another epistle from Emperor Julian-the-Apostate to the Jews, he writes, among other things, "*This you ought to do, in order that, when I have successfully concluded the war with Persia, I may rebuild by my own efforts the sacred city of Jerusalem, which for so many years you have longed to see inhabited, and may bring settlers there, and, together with you, may glorify the Most High God therein*".

Another known composition was written by a Roman soldier named Ammianus Marcellinos (330-391/400), a historian who served in Julian's army. Ammianus wrote, among other things, about Julian-the-Apostate: "*...and eager to extend the memory of his reign by great works, he planned at vast cost to restore the once splendid temple at Jerusalem, which after many mortal combats during the siege by Vespasian and later by Titus, had barely been stormed. He had entrusted the speedy performance of this work to Alypius of Antioch, who had once been vice-prefect of Britain. 3 But, though this Alypius pushed the work on with vigour, aided by the governor of the province, terrifying balls of flame kept bursting forth near the foundations of the temple, and made the place inaccessible to the workmen, some of whom were burned to death; and since in this way the element persistently repelled them, the enterprise halted.*" (*Res Gestae, Book XXIII, 1; 2-3*)

Another account, by Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390), an early Church Father and Archbishop of Constantinople from the time of Emperor Julian, describes the enthusiasm that engulfed the Jews upon hearing his plan to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem: "*...they began to debate about rebuilding the Temple, and in large number and with great zeal set about the work. For the partisans of the other side report that not only did their women strip off all their personal ornaments and contribute it towards the work and operations, but even carried away the rubbish in the laps of their gowns*"... That means women contributed jewelry to enable the project, and the Jews have actively participated in cleaning up the site.

According to Scriptures, Alypius, who was proclaimed in charge of the Temple project, was assisted by the province's governor and organized to build the

temple, an intricate undertaking. The first phase involved clearing the remains of the ruins left at the site and preparing the infrastructure, foundations, and materials for the temple's construction.

But, according to Ammianus' testimony, an intense fire on the temple site disrupted the construction works and brought them to a complete halt. As previously stipulated, there is a chance that the plans and construction work initiated by Julian, were for a structure with octagonal shaped foundations, serving later as the basis for the Dome of the Rock's construction.

After Julian-the-Apostate died in the war against the Persians, work on the construction of the Jewish Temple came to a halt and never resumed. In 363, a new emperor, named Jovian, was appointed. The site of the temple was neglected and left desolate for many years.

### ***C. Construction of an octagonal structure as a Byzantine imitation, initiated by the Umayyad House***

Several octagonal structures were built in Israel during the Byzantine period, mainly as churches, such as the one in Capernaum, following a Roman style. In the author's opinion, it cannot be precluded that the Umayyad ruler incorporated both local workers and Byzantine engineers and builders to construct these magnificent structures. The Muslims, who accepted and adopted the tenets of the Jewish religion, feared that the Jews, who gave them the right to settle in Jerusalem, would rebuild their Temple and incorporate the most sacred foundation stone in it. So, they decided to make the situation irreversible by erecting the structure on the foundation stone in 691, serving as sort of a temple, which exists to this day, in a somewhat unique style. They completed its construction to 'set the status quo in stone', so to speak (which has remained so to this day). On the other hand, as the proteges of the Muslims and being the 'underdogs', the Jews were given special permission to build their quarters south of Temple Mount during that period.

The Jews, on their part, had no choice but to turn to the Western Wall for comfort, turning it into an alternative place of worship and sanctifying it as such, being so close to the sacred foundation stone, which remained inaccessible.

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