

# The Decorations of the Dome of the Rock

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**Abstract:** The article presents the decorations of the Dome of the Rock, which is located in the Haram al-Sharif, one of the most sacred places in the world for the Muslims. First, it gave a brief introduction to the Dome of the Rock. Second, the decorations will be analyzed through the mosaics. Two proposals of the meaning and purpose of this monument has been made. One is that the decorations were merely ornament and the second is that the decorations inside it represent clear and exact items. The calligraphic inscriptions on both outside and inside the Dome of the Rock, and around both the outer octagonal arcade and the inner octagonal arcade also help better understanding the meaning of the monument.

**Keywords:** Dome of the rock; Decorations; Art; Mosaics; Inscriptions

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## 1. Introduction

Jerusalem is considered to be the third holiest place of the faith after Mecca and Medina according to the classical Islamic religious writing. Before Mecca became the qibla that is the direction towards which Muslims face to pray, Muslims were instructed to pray towards Jerusalem. The Haram al- Sharif is one of the most ancient sacred places in the world while the Dome of the Rock (or Qubbat al-Sakhra) and the Aqsa Mosque (or al- Masjid al- Aqsa) which are on the Haram al- Sharif themselves are better known for people.

It is well known that the Dome of the Rock has the intricate complex decoration, which makes it one of the amazing Islamic monuments and also a unique art work in the world. I will present and analyze the decorations of the Dome of the Rock by describing and using pictures taken inside the monument in order to get a better understanding of the meaning and purpose of their construction.

## 2. Decorations of the Dome of the Rock

### 2.1 Introduction of the Dome of the Rock

The Dome of the Rock, Qubbat al- Sakhra in Arabic, is thought to be the most beautiful and perfect achievement of Islamic architecture. Built in 692 A.D. after the Arab conquered Jerusalem in 638, it is the earliest Muslim monument and its original structure has been preserved for more than 1300 years.

It is worth noting that no other contemporary building in any Islamic architecture offers a comparison with the dome of the Rock. As we can see, no existing building displays the particular combination of elements found in the Dome of the Rock. Furthermore, this oldest extant Muslim structure which represents the earliest stages of Islamic identity has never been repeated even within the Muslim world.

The Dome of the Rock is not a mosque; rather, it is a shrine. It is octagonal. The octagonal shape is similar to the Byzantine church architecture and it is not like most of the mosques in other places. It has four doorways on the north, south, east and west walls. The doorway to the south indicates the qibla.

The bottom level of the building is decorated with inlaid marble which has a moderately geometric pattern. The upper levels of this building and the drum are also decorated with the intricate geometric patterns in the colors of blue, white and gold. The calligraphic inscriptions of texts from the Qur'an can be seen on the upper level of the hexagonal base and the upper level of the drum.

On the top of this building is the brilliant and golden dome which is more than 65 feet in diameter. Before the Arab conquest of Jerusalem, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was the religious focus of the city and inside it there was Rotunda which was built over the Tomb of the Lord, to glorify His Resurrection (fig. 1). After the Arab dominated Jerusalem, they built the Dome of the Rock in order to replace the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the dome was designed to take the shine off the dome of the rotunda over the

Tomb of Christ inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The act was believed to be the competition or the confrontation between Christianity and Islam. Even though, the two domes share the same commonality: both of them are a little more than 65 feet.

The dome was originally gray. In 1964 it was turned to golden color. Since it was not watertight, the roof leaked. In 1994, King Hussein of Jordan ordered to repair this dome and make it golden through using copper, nickel and a thin layer of gold, which makes the Dome of the Rock more dazzling.

The inner space of the Dome of the Rock is divided into two concentric ambulatories, in the center of which is the area left for the rock. The first arcade, parallel to the outside walls, is made of eight angular pillars with two marble columns supporting three arches, between each pair of piers. The arches are all a full 180 degrees, as was the custom for arches in the Umayyad period. Inside the middle octagon, the second arcade is made up of four angular pillars, each separated by three columns. This last arcade supports the drum, crowned by the famous golden dome.

The exquisite harmony of this architectural composition stems primarily from the fact that the length of each of the eight sides is identical to the diameter of the dome, or about 20.4 meters. Another key feature is that the dome is perfectly designed: Its diameter is equal to its height. Equally remarkable proportion can be found in a pre-Islamic monument in Jerusalem: The Rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre, which is mentioned above.

## 2.2 Mosaics in the Dome of the Rock

The decorations inside the Dome of the Rock are distinctive and unique. The most important decorations are mosaics. Since Melchior de Vogüé, the first scholar and explorer allowed to work inside the monument, published his work about the Dome of the Rock, the mosaic inside it have been known by the world. It was considered as the largest place of medieval wall mosaics before the construction of the Cathedral of Monreale due to its area of 1280 square meters. The drum and arcades are adorned with mosaics in the colors of gold, red and turquoise. There are six different kinds of interior surfaces are decorated with mosaics.

The first kind is rectangular surfaces on pier. Many of them have crowns, tiaras, necklaces or other jewelry for body. The second one contains narrow elongated spaces. Trees (often palms trees which bear dates) or leaves and stems from a vase are shown on this kind of surface. The third one, which is also the most visible one. Contain triangular places above the column of the arcade. The combinations of stems and leaves can be seen here. Only on the face of the arcade facing the center we can see the plants are embellished by the jewelry, which can never be seen on the outer side.

The fourth kind of surface has simple patterns of plants from the vases and some other artificial plants (fig. 1). The fifth one, which is on the drums, contains delineated rectangular units of plants coming out from the vase which is adorned with jewelry and with the disks and wings. On the drum the inscription can also be seen below the mosaics of plants and vases (figs. 2). The last kind can be found on the soffits of the arches in the octagonal arcade. All of them are unique and different from the other ones. There are



Figure 1. The Surface of the Octagon

three parts in every soffit. The first part is always a variety of plants with some motifs; the second part is scroll of plants or circles; the third part contains adorned circles (figs. 3).

The mosaic work in the Dome of the Rock is lavish and intricate. The beauty of the mosaic may indicate that this place is an image of paradise. Mohammed will return to this place at the Day of Judgement. From the mosaics, we may learn about the original purpose and meaning of this building. Most of the mosaics can be dated back to the time when the building was founded in 691, thus it can be seen as an original document which can show the purpose of the builders---- the caliph 'Abd al- Malik and the other people who were in charge of this construction.

As for the answers to the question about the meaning and purpose of this monument, Grabar said two proposals had been made. One is that the decorations were merely ornament, which can make the building beautiful but does not have deep iconographic meaning. This view corresponds to the important conception of aniconic Islamic culture. This may be connected to the psychology which is to show off by using an expensive decorative technique but does not give any meaning to the design.

The second opinion was first held by Priscilla Soucek and then developed by Miriam Rosen- Ayalon and Raya Shani. The second interpretation is that the decorations inside it represent clear and exact items, thus Raya Shani calls it the "iconography" of the Dome of the Rock. Grabar thinks this interpretation is religious. For example, the trees, vegetal scrolls jewels, crowns which stand for the power and wealth, can be related to Paradise. Also, as we can see, the floral mosaic decorations on the arcades which consist of vases above the columns, with their branches spreading out and being linked with the others of the neighboring vases. Such motifs are connected with the iconography of Paradise. Since Jerusalem was thought to be the place of the Resurrection, the interpretation is especially meaningful in this place.

### 3. Conclusion

A large number of theological, political and architectural interpretations have been proposed to explain about the such architectural perfection of the Dome of the Rock. The intricate decoration of the Dome of the Rock do not make it an amazing Islamic monument which is of highly value aesthetically, but also affirms the religious proclamation of Muslim for the Dome of the Rock on this area and also gives Jerusalem a new identity.

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