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Asserting Political Authority in a Sacred Landscape:
A Comparison of Umayyad and Israeli Jerusalem

In *The Political Landscape*, Adam Smith argues that "The creation and preservation of political authority is a profoundly spatial problem".[1] To analyze a political landscape without placing it in the context of the physical environment is to ignore the fundamental ways in which political authority manifests itself—in space and place. The ways in which political powers make use of (or neglect) the physical landscape is perhaps the strongest indicator of their capacity to exercise political authority. This issue is particularly poignant when it comes to the initial stages of establishing political authority. Maintenance of authority is of course the end goal, but how does political leadership "build" political authority in the first place? In general, the process involves physical construction of government buildings as a means of establishing a political *presence*—but this in and of itself is not sufficient to sustain political power. This paper shall address the establishment of political authority over time in Jerusalem, where the notion of sacred topography adds another level of complexity to the politicization of space. The process of 'constructing sanctity', as pointed out by Josef Meri, is an active process that involves building and performing rituals, but also includes the processes of rediscovery, reclamation, and recreation of sacred space.[2] As a corollary, the process of sanctification of space for political ends involves the re-appropriation of sacred space and the implementation of ritual practice as a means of solidifying political authority.

After coming to power in 685, the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik embarked on an impressive building plan on and around the Temple Mount, using the process of sanctification to

imbue the site with a strong religious (Islamic) and nationalist (Umayyad) fervor. At this point, Jerusalem had been under Muslim control for just over forty years, and so the project must be understood as an attempt to establish both Muslim and Umayyad authority in an otherwise Christian landscape. More than fourteen centuries later, Jerusalem would fall under Israeli control—and like the Umayyads, the Israeli government would establish their authority via the spatial frontier. When East Jerusalem fell into Israeli hands during the June 1967 war, the Israeli government quickly embarked on an urban program of reunification to re-establish a Jewish presence in the Old City. This project, which had both archaeological and colonial urban planning elements, sought to recreate the Jewish quarter and reclaim Jewish holy sites, all in an effort to create a unified, Jewish/Israeli Jerusalem that would (and could) never again be divided. For both the Umayyad dynasty and the Israeli government, the Temple Mount and its environs would become a central locus for contesting/claiming national space and posturing for political power.

When Jerusalem came under Muslim control in 638, the capitulation agreement prohibited the new political leadership from directly expropriating the existing Christian buildings for government purposes.[3] Because the Temple Mount had been largely unused during Byzantine rule, the new Muslim conquerors quickly began to clear the area of the ruined Herodian temple. According to the writings of a the Christian pilgrim Arculf in 680, Muslims constructed a rudimentary mosque on the Temple Mount, making use of wooden planks and existing ruins to accommodate up to three thousand worshippers at once.[4] It was not until the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705), however, that the Temple Mount and its surroundings underwent a massive transformation. The development plan, which included the construction of the Dome of the Rock, the Al-Aqsa mosque, and a large building complex

alongside the Temple Mount, effectively transformed the destroyed Herodian temple into al-Haram al-Sharif. According to Wheatley, this was an ambitious program intended to "exalt the religious, and thereby derivatively the political, status of Jerusalem".[5] The project established a new, central, north-south axis extending from the Dome of the Rock to the main mihrab of the Al-Aqsa mosque, replacing the previous axis between the Dome of the Chain and the mihrab of Umar (the conqueror of Jerusalem).[6] Whatever Abd al-Malik's political intentions may have been, he clearly envisioned them in religious terms; the ornamental and architectural elements adopted in the project have clear associations with Judgment Day, the Tree of Life, Resurrection, and Paradise.[7] A project of such grand scale and religious significance reflects a conscious effort on behalf of Abd al-Malik to establish Umayyad political authority in Jerusalem through Islamisization of sacred space, and through general buildup of the area surrounding the Temple Mount.

The construction of the palatial complex alongside the southern and western walls of the temple mount boldly asserts Umayyad control over the Temple Mount itself and the rest of the city. According to the original excavations of Mazar and Ben-Dov, there existed at the end of the Byzantine period a residential quarter adjacent to the walls of the Temple Mount.[8] As Whitcomb points out, the process of developing such palatine complexes alongside preexisting cities was a common Umayyad practice, and can be considered one of the fundamental ways in which Umayyad political authority manifested itself in the spatial environment. While the exact purposes of the six-structure palatial complex remain unknown, a bridge connecting the complex directly with the Al Aqsa mosque indicates that the complex was planned in conjunction with the Temple Mount.[9] This complex, which wraps around the southwestern corner of the Temple Mount, lays claim not only to al-Haram al-Sharif, but also to the rest of East Jerusalem. The

establishment of such a complex next to an existing Christian residential area is a particularly emphatic proclamation of presence and power. As Smith explains, disputes over political authority are often expressed cartographically,[10] and Abd al-Malik's building plan creates a clear boundary between Christian space (conquered) and Muslim-Umayyad space (conqueror).

The question, then, is what type of political authority was Abd al-Malik seeking to create with this development project? While the complex is not heavily ornamented, all of its component buildings feature water, drainage, and sewage systems, indicating that they were not built shabbily or haphazardly. This evidence supports Elad's contention that the Umayyads intended Jerusalem to be their capital,[11] with this government cantonment as a probable joint administrative-military center. Because Islam spread so quickly in its infancy, the Umma and its leadership quickly became fragmented. When Abd al-Malik began to consolidate his political authority in Jerusalem, his political opponent Ibn al-Zubayr was doing the same in Mecca, and so the development of al-Haram al-Sharif must be understood as a statement not only to Christians in Jerusalem but to Muslims throughout the Arab world as well. The Abbasid historian al-Ya'qubi wrote a polemic against Abd al-Malik accusing him of having tried to divert the pilgrimage from Mecca to Jerusalem, envisioning the Dome of the Rock as a rival to the Ka'ba.[12] The account has been discredited, but its very existence is a testament to the importance of Abd al-Malik's development project. The architectural accomplishments of Abd al-Malik work to synthesize the new Umayyad dynastic rule with a timeless religious narrative. Consequently, the sacred space created on the Temple Mount projects Umayyad political authority not only into the future, but into the past as well, as if the transfer of power from the old caliphate to the Umayyad dynasty had been predestined.

Just as the Abd al-Malik made use of a religious narrative as a way of asserting Umayyad authority in Jerusalem, so too did the Israeli government make use of a biblical Jewish presence as a means of justifying a Jewish national claim to the Old City. The Jewish Quarter of the Old City had been destroyed during the 1948 War of Independence/al-nakba, and so the capture of Jerusalem in 1967 presented the Israeli government with an opportunity to "rebuild" the Jewish Quarter as part of a plan to establish a permanent Jewish and Israeli presence there. As Nadia Abu El-Haj argues in *Fact on the Ground*, this national project was justified in archaeological terms, but in addition to excavating the ruins of The Jewish Quarter, archaeological "ruins" were also re-created in an attempt to integrate the aesthetic of the ancient with a modern urban vision for the new Jewish Quarter.[13] An integral part of this plan was to expropriate the land adjacent to the Western Wall of the Temple Mount, which was at the time a Muslim residential neighborhood (a part of the Magharabia Quarter), and establish there an open space for prayer and worship.[14] While the creation of a new Jewish Quarter did not begin until after the ceasefire, it had clearly been in the planning stages for quite some time; just two days after the war began, Israeli bulldozers began to demolish the Magharabia Quarter, displacing 650 people.[15] By the time the war had ended, an area had already been cleared in front of the Western Wall for Israeli visitors. The area of the Magharabia Quarter, along with pre-1967 Harat al-Sarah and Harat al-Maidan (29 acres in total), would officially be expropriated in April 1968 by the Israeli minister of finance "to develop the area to house Israeli Jewish families and to reestablish a Jewish presence in the Old City".[16] The new Jewish Quarter was to be five times the size of the pre-1948 Jewish Quarter, and as a result of its creation, between five and six thousand Palestinians were to be evicted from their homes in the Old City.[17]

In the case of the new Jewish Quarter, political authority manifests itself in the convergence of national and religious symbols. In one definition of the political landscape, Adam Smith discusses the way in which built features of a landscape can evoke "affective responses", and how the landscape works to "draw together the imagined civil community" by using built forms to "galvanize memories and emotions central to the experience of political belonging".[18] This reasoning offers a succinct explanation of the way in which the new Jewish Quarter in East Jerusalem constitutes a political landscape where political authority is being contested on the cartographic frontier. By establishing a historical claim to space based on an archaeological and historical record, the Israeli government is able to make a spatial claim for the present and future. As a result of this, the new Jewish quarter became what Nadia Abu el-Haj refers to as "living monument" to continued to Jewish presence in the Old City since time immemorial.[19] While the new Jewish Quarter was designed to be a modern residential neighborhood, the presence of "ruins" and ancient architectural quotations serve as the visual-emotional reminders that Smith discusses in *The Political Landscape*. The most potent visual cue is undoubtedly the Western Wall, which lies physically and ideologically at the heart of the newly fashioned Jewish Quarter. This hallowed ground had been inaccessible to Jews from 1948 until 1967, and so its reclamation during the Six Day war had a profound emotional impact on the Israeli psyche.[20] As Meri explains in her chapter on sacred topography, the processes of rediscovery and reclamation are essential components of the sanctification of space.[21] Clearing the rubble of the destroyed Magharabia quarter to create an open prayer space along 80 meters of the Western Wall is akin to Abd Al-Malik's transformation of the ruined Herodian Temple into al-Haram al-Sharif. Both sites are accessible only to Jews or Muslims, respectively, and this spatial restriction is the boldest assertion of politico-religious authority.

While both Umayyad and Israeli leadership assert spatial claims over sacred ground in an effort to establish a political presence, there are fundamental differences between the Umayyad and Israeli political landscapes in Jerusalem. As previously mentioned, the development project of Abd Al-Malik appears to have taken place beside an existing city; when Jerusalem fell under Muslim control, the Temple Mount was unused and in ruins. While Abd al-Malik certainly intended al-Haram al-Sharif as a powerful visual indicator of Umayyad political legitimacy, he did not seek to destroy the existing (Christian) urban fabric of Jerusalem. Like Abd al-Malik, Israeli authorities wanted to establish Jerusalem as a capital city and a center for political authority. The difference between the Israeli refashioning of the Jewish Quarter and Abd al-Malik's transformation of the Temple Mount is that the former relied heavily on the disruption of an existing social-commercial-cultural landscape whereas the latter did not. In this sense, the Israeli case is a primary example of contested space becoming the battleground on which the struggle for political authority is fought.

Umayyad and Israeli Jerusalem share an intriguing archaeological connection that makes the comparison of the two cases even more fascinating. Following the Six-Day war, Israeli archaeologists completed the original excavations of the southern slopes of the Temple Mount, where they discovered the ruins of the Umayyad palatial complex. In other words, the Israeli capture of Jerusalem enabled the production of the scholarship that has formed the backbone of this paper. On the one hand, archaeology has been used to produce invaluable scholarship on the history of Jerusalem, and on the other, has been used to forward a national project with colonial undertones. While archaeology itself is a science and therefore (ideally) apolitical, the information it produces is inevitably used for political purposes. As Adam Smith writes, it is dangerous to "leave the political unmoored from the landscape", and he proposes that an

archaeological approach to the problem is necessary.[22] In the case of Umayyad Jerusalem, archaeological excavations have shown how Abd Al-Malik's development of the Temple Mount was a political maneuver couched in religious terms. During the establishment of the new Jewish Quarter in East Jerusalem after the 1967 war, the act of excavating itself became a political maneuver as the Israeli government sought to reestablish a uniquely Jewish presence in the Old City. Archaeology, then, is something of a double-edged sword—helping us to understand the past, but sometimes used to directly alter the present and future. Whether archaeology is a tool for understanding the political landscape or for refashioning it, the relationship between political power and the landscape remains the same. While the cases of Umayyad and Israeli "development" of Jerusalem differ in terms of historical contexts and political climates, both reveal the importance of the spatial environment as the fundamental locus for the creation of political authority.

Endnotes

[1] Adam Smith, *The Political Landscape: Constellations of Authority in Early Complex Polities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 20.
[2] Josef Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12, 43.
[3] Paul Wheatley, *The places where men pray together: cities in Islamic lands, seventh through the tenth centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 296.
[4] Rafi Grafman and Myriam Rosen-Ayalon, "The Two Great Syrian Umayyad Mosques: Jerusalem and Damascus" in *Muqarnas Volume XVI: An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World* (1999), 1.
[5] Wheatley, 295.
[6] Grafman and Ayalon, 6.
[7] Ibid., 7.
[8] M. Ben-Dov, "The Area South of the Temple Mount in the Early Islamic Period" in *Jerusalem Revealed: Archaeology in the Holy City 1968-1974*, ed. Y. Yadin (Jerusalem: Mercaz Press, 1975), 97.
[9] Ibid., 99.
[10] Smith, 6.
[11] Wheatley, 297.
[12] Nuha Khoury, "The Dome of the Rock, the Ka'ba, and Ghumadan: Arab Myths and Umayyad Monuments" in *Muqarmas*, vol. 10, Essays in Honor of Oleg Grabar (1993), 62.
[13] Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground*: *Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 164.
[14] Ibid., 165.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 166.
[17] Ibid., 167.
[18] Smith, 8.
[19] Abu El-Haj, 181.
[20] Ibid., 229.
[21] Meri, 43.
[22] Smith, 16.