The Church of the Holy Sepulchre

Some Perspectives from History, Geography, Architecture, Archaeology, and the New Testament

by

Tom Powers, in Israel ©2004/5

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The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as one encounters it today, truly bears all the scars of its long and extraordinary history—a history full of the most striking ironies and convoluted changes of fortune imaginable:

• Before a church ever stood on the spot, a Roman emperor, seeking to eradicate forever the memory of this holy site, instead unwittingly preserved it by putting up a monument to one of his pagan deities.

• Of the original, magnificent 4th century Byzantine complex erected here virtually nothing remains, in part because (if the legend is correct) a benign Muslim conqueror, seeking to preserve the church as a church, at the same time guaranteed the building’s nearly total destruction almost four centuries later—by not praying there!

• The vast, catastrophic demolition of the church, carried out in the year 1009, came on the orders of an insanely cruel Fatimid Caliph, an aberrant ruler whose immediate successor, only a few years later, granted permission to completely rebuild it! The diminished resources of the once-burgeoning Byzantine Empire, however, permitted only a limited restoration, thus much of the expansive Constantinian complex—over half its original extent—was simply lost forever.

• The Crusader armies of Christian Europe, from their first invasion of the Holy Land in 1099 until their final ouster in 1291, created a legacy of cruelty and bloodshed that haunts us to the present day. Yet some among them—clerics, engineers, artisans—possessed enough piety and vision to leave another legacy—in stone: the Holy Sepulchre church which we still marvel at today, nearly a thousand years later.
For almost 1700 years, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre—through all its dramatic permutations—has represented the central shrine of all Christendom, believed to encompass within its walls the site of Jesus’ crucifixion and the tomb of His resurrection. But is this belief well-founded? Is the place indeed what it has purported to be down through the ages? Our best answer, based on all the available evidence, is: very probably, yes. As we will see, the traditions on which the church is founded—viewed objectively and stripped as much as possible of pious legend—are well documented and traceable back to the very earliest of Christian times. Moreover, after the passage of twenty centuries, there has simply never been another serious contender for the localization of these climactic events of Jesus’ earthly life.

Damaged repeatedly over the centuries by fire and earthquake and subjected to inept repairs and renovations, the church structures today, unfortunately, lack any kind of architectural harmony. For this reason alone, the place can be visually confusing to the visitor. And, because the church is shared by six competing Christian communities under an arcane Status Quo arrangement, its disparate adornments create in some a jarring sense of eclectic clutter: As someone has quipped, it’s a place that suffers from “too many gifts” down through the ages! In much the same way, the church’s spaces, both inside and out, sometimes reverberate with the competing hymns and chants of diverse Christian communities, the atmosphere often suffused with incense, smoke, and fire. In short, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre can engage—and assail—the senses in startling ways.

For all these reasons, this unique place elicits a wide range of responses from modern visitors, from the devotion of the true pilgrim, whose traditional rites resonate with a spirit of pious awe, to the curious fascination of secular visitors who, mostly divorced from matters of faith, nonetheless embrace the church’s compelling history and rich (if somewhat jumbled) architectural heritage. Of another sort again, and perhaps somewhere in the middle, is the way many Western Christians, especially those of the Protestant-Evangelical traditions, encounter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. They may come with a sincere desire to understand and appreciate the church, but—especially if they are not prepared for the experience—can instead be left in speechless bewilderment, if not shock and disgust!

Nevertheless, anyone who makes the effort to engage the Holy Sepulchre church on its own terms can perhaps begin to appreciate the uniqueness and almost mystical attraction of the place. A Roman Catholic scholar in Jerusalem expresses it this way: “Those who permit the church to question them may begin to understand why hundreds of thousands thought it worthwhile to risk death or slavery in order to pray here.” (Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, The Holy Land)

A prudent tour guide will almost always refer to a place like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as the “traditional” spot where a Biblical event occurred. This is only right, since ultimate, objective proof for any site—and, indeed, of things essentially rooted in faith—is impossible. Without a fuller perspective, though, the person to whom the historical roots of faith are important can be left with a dismissive attitude toward such “traditional” holy places: that because it is just a tradition it is not worthy of serious consideration. But, traditions have roots—sources and connections that can often be traced and subjected to critical appraisal, and this is the broader view we wish to pursue here: to examine various strands of evidence and begin to discern how likely this particular “tradition” is to be authentic.

In the case of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the task is not as hard as it might seem, for the place has been the object of more attention and scrutiny over the ages than perhaps any other
piece of real estate on earth! Today, drawing on a variety of sources, it is actually possible to trace the evolution of this site in considerable detail over almost 3,000 years of history. By consulting the New Testament text, other historical writings, topographical information, and the findings of modern archaeology, it may be that some evidences for the church’s authenticity will come into focus.

The First Century Walls of Jerusalem

As we begin exploring how this complex and fascinating structure came to be erected where it was, John 19:20 is a convenient starting point and provides a vital geographical marker: It tells us that the place of Jesus' crucifixion was “near the city,” that is, outside Jerusalem’s city walls of that day, ca. 30 A.D. It is extremely useful, then, in assessing the Holy Sepulchre site, to see whether it meets this basic criterion drawn from the gospel text. By reconstructing the course of the various walls of Jerusalem in the 1st century, which is actually possible with some degree of certainty, we will see that the Holy Sepulchre did indeed lie outside the city of Jesus’ time. Along the way, we will also discover why it lay inside the city of later ages, including today’s walled Old City.

The best textual source we have for understanding the walls of Jerusalem is Flavius Josephus, the Jewish-Roman historian who, in his Wars of the Jews, paints a detailed, eyewitness picture of the city as it existed ca. 66 to 70 A.D., the time of the Great Revolt of the Jews against Roman occupation. Josephus in fact mentions three perimeter walls enclosing various quarters of Jerusalem at that time (War 5:142-148) and helps us, if imperfectly, to understand how they relate to one another, both geographically and in time.

(The those consulting the text of Josephus will realize that his actual reference point for both the First and Third walls is the “Hippicus Tower,” now usually identified as the so-called “Tower of David” whose massive Herodian base stands as a landmark just inside Jaffa Gate. Note also, at least with Whitson’s translation, that the directions given [“westward,” “southward,” “towards the east”] usually mean the wall faced—not ran in—that direction.)

The First Wall described by Josephus ran west from the Temple Mount to today’s Jaffa Gate area—south of the Holy Sepulchre site. It then turned south, following the ridge of the southwestern hill. (Traces of this segment, dating from both the Hasmonean and Herodian periods, are visible today incorporated into the Old City wall south of Jaffa Gate.) It then turned east and then north, encompassing the areas known today as Mount Zion and the City of David, and ended back at the Temple Mount, on its eastern side. Thus, the First Wall, having actually evolved over many centuries beginning in the earliest days of the Israelite monarchy, enclosed the southern (and oldest) parts of 1st century Jerusalem.

The information from Josephus on the so-called Second Wall is, by comparison, quite meager. This wall is described, first, as beginning at some point along the northern line of the First Wall, at the “Gennath Gate.” (Though the location of this gate is uncertain, the name “Gennath” probably derives from the Hebrew word for “gardens” and quite likely refers to the “garden” where John 19:41 places the tomb of Jesus.) Josephus’ only other geographical marker for the Second Wall is that it terminated at the Antonia Fortress, at the northwest corner of the Temple Mount. Thus it enclosed a newer, northern quarter of Jerusalem. Since any remains of
this Second Wall lie buried beneath the densely populated Christian and Moslem Quarters of today’s Old City, reconstructing its course has always been problematical, and only small traces have ever been identified, even tentatively, by archaeologists. The experts agree that the wall ran generally northward for a certain distance, but there is much debate as to how far, and where the wall might have turned east, or southeast, or east-and-south, to joint the Antonia. The important point for our consideration, however—on which there is firm consensus—is that Josephus’ Second Wall, proceeding northward from the First Wall, ran just east of the Holy Sepulchre site.

Just to summarize: according to our best understanding of Josephus, (1) the First and Second Walls were both in existence at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion, ca. 30 A.D., and (2) the Holy Sepulchre site lies outside both of these walls, i.e. north of the First Wall and west of the Second Wall. Thus, the sites for Golgotha and the Tomb enshrined within the church meet this basic geographical requirement from the gospel text: they lay outside—but “near the city”—of Jerusalem.

Finally, the Third Wall of Josephus is critical for understanding why the Holy Sepulchre site now lies inside the walled Old City. Josephus says that Herod Agrippa I, during his relatively short reign over Judea, between 41 and 44 A.D., began building a Third Wall along a line to the west of the Second Wall, and experts generally agree that it ran northwest from the vicinity of today’s Jaffa Gate, west of the Holy Sepulchre site. While these same scholars may debate the northern extent and line of the Third Wall, there is virtually universal agreement on the course of the west-facing segment in question here: It was roughly the same as the line of the present 16th century city wall, from Jaffa Gate at least as far as the northwest corner of the Old City. Indeed, throughout all the intervening historical periods, the city wall in this area, despite some variations, always enclosed the Holy Sepulchre within the city.
So, the place remembered as the site of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial remained “near” the city for only a dozen years or so, and this simple fact—that the city expanded—explains why the Holy Sepulchre lies inside today’s walled Old City of Jerusalem. Moreover, because we know that Jewish laws of ritual purity proscribed burials within the city walls (Mishna, Tractate Kelim 1.7), it also provides a convenient end-date, A.D. 44, for the existence of an active Jewish cemetery at that place. How interesting it is, then, that the Gospel of John, produced probably near the end of the 1st century, many decades after the building of the Third Wall, nonetheless preserves the historical memory of Jesus’ crucifixion occurring outside the city!

The Earliest Known History of the Site

20th century archaeology has greatly aided our understanding of the topography underlying the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, with findings that project us even further back into Jerusalem’s history, for beneath and around the church various excavations in recent decades have found widespread evidence of a limestone quarry dating from the early First Temple period.

Archaeologists suggest that the primary quarrying activity here was in the 9th to 8th centuries B.C., when the highly desirable meleke limestone was chiseled out in blocks, destined for the walls, palaces, and other monumental architecture of Jerusalem in the time of the Kings of Judah. Somewhat later, in the 7th and 6th centuries, some settlement activity took place, and the first rock-hewn tombs appear. From the 5th century B.C. to the 1st century A.D., there is evidence of some additional quarrying but also of cultivation and—critical for our investigation—the cutting of additional tombs.

Evidence of this quarrying has always been visible (i.e., at least since the 11th or 12th century) in the bedrock walls and ceiling of the Chapel of the Finding of the Cross, in the deepest part of the church. The modern excavations, however, found more unmistakable evidence of quarrying beneath the floor of this chapel, in an adjacent private Armenian area known as St. Vartan’s Chapel, and in other parts of the church. Somewhat earlier excavations, in the 1960s and 1970s, had already uncovered parts of the same extensive quarry to the south and southeast of the church, in today’s Muristan market area and beneath the nearby Lutheran Redeemer Church. The quarried area is said to total at least some 200 by 150 meters.

The existence of this large quarry underlying and surrounding the church brings us back to the question of the walls of Jerusalem: It makes perfect sense that the Second Wall of Josephus would have skirted this extensive quarried area on the east. (Proceeding westward, the next logical place for a north-south oriented city wall is atop the northwestern hill, precisely where Agrippa I built the Third Wall, ca. 41-44 A.D.) So, we can visualize the Second Wall running
near the rock scarp formed by the eastern (and possibly southern) edge of this quarry, and the quarry itself serving, in effect, as a ready-made defensive moat just outside the city walls.

The above-mentioned excavations apparently revealed no trace of human occupation in the quarry between the 5th century B.C. and 135 A.D. Thus, by Herodian times (first centuries B.C. and A.D.) the quarry, over hundreds of years, would have accumulated layers of wind- and water-deposited soil, the natural evolution of any such topographical depression. It is also possible that soil was intentionally brought in as fill, a common agricultural practice. Either way, the evidence suggests that the old quarry area at some point came to be cultivated—it became a “garden.” The Greek word rendered “garden” in John 19:41 is kepos (the same word used for the “Garden” of Gethsemane in Jn. 18:1), a very general term simply denoting a cultivated tract of land; a reasonable guess here (likewise for Gethsemane) is that it is a grove or an orchard of some kind. In this garden setting, then, opposite a projecting rocky spur called Golgotha, Jewish tombs, including the one that would hold the body of Jesus, were hewn into the steep walls of the old quarry.

New Testament Golgotha and the Traditional Rock of Calvary

For another geographical clue we turn to John 19:17, where we learn that Jesus’ execution at the hands of the Romans was carried out at “the place called the place of a skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha.” (The other common name for this place, Calvary, is derived from calvarius, the word the Latin Bible uses to translate the Greek cranion, “skull.”) It is worth noting that Golgotha is here identified as a “place” (Greek, topos) and not necessarily a particular hill or outcropping as we have come to think of it. Indeed, the earliest church fathers and pilgrim accounts seem to refer to the whole area as Golgotha.

Let us consider first the particular outcropping, essentially a tall, narrow rock pillar, that has always been venerated as “Calvary” within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It is quite possible that the first Christians, in localizing the place of Jesus’ crucifixion, were already venerating this specific rock as early as the 1st century. Even during the Late Roman period, when Jerusalem was made over as a pagan city, this same rock seems to have been treated as a sacred spot—albeit a pagan one—as we will see later. Standing out above the surrounding terrain as a sort of natural monument, the rock of “Calvary” would have always lent itself to this, and there is no reason not to regard it as part of the topos—the larger “place”—of Golgotha.

Here, however, a disclaimer is in order: Looking critically at this unusual rock pillar, some have noted that, besides standing at least one full storey above any surrounding bedrock, it has a top surface of only about six square meters. Moreover, it shows little evidence of ever having been artificially trimmed. (Above the main floor level of the church, there seems to be evidence of shaping only on the west face, where the bedrock apparently was cut back to accommodate the apse of the first-floor Chapel of Adam.) In short, this particular tall outcropping, some say, while it may be “close”—very close—as a localization of the event, is simply too steep and too narrow to have been the precise spot where a Roman crucifixion was carried out, let alone the triple crucifixion depicted in the gospels.

Close inspection of this rock of Calvary within the church reveals a number of interesting irregularities. First, there is a deep cleft running down the east side (not visible to visitors), a cleft
that actually renders the rock almost hollow. Then there are cracks on the south and west sides, the latter a large fissure running from top to bottom, this one easily visible to visitors and therefore the subject of many legends. Finally, trained eyes have discerned within the rock myriad tiny cracks which alone would have rendered the stone unsuitable for building. All these anomalies, then, suggest why the stone pillar exists at all—why it survived through the ages (that is, until it came to be venerated): the stone was flawed and thus left uncut.

In forming an accurate mental image of the setting of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial—the juxtaposition of Golgotha and the nearby rock-hewn tombs—it helps to return to the context of the ancient quarry-garden. Topographically, the place called Golgotha was probably a spur of land left jutting out into the quarry, from its eastern edge; it may be that this entire spur was intentionally left un-quarried because, like the tall pillar of “Calvary,” the stone there was of inferior quality. Regardless, the position of Golgotha on the irregular rim of the quarry-garden would have fulfilled a key requirement for any place of Roman execution: it lay in full view of passers-by, a grim reminder of the fate awaiting those who dared threaten the public order. In this connection, it is very likely that public thoroughfares ran nearby, just outside the city walls and skirting the rim of the quarry.

John 19:41 tells us that “in [or perhaps, “within the boundaries of”] the place that he was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb,” and verse 42 reiterates that, in relation to the place of crucifixion, the tomb was “close at hand.” This is in perfect accord with the topographical picture that has emerged: a Roman crucifixion site named Golgotha projecting as a spur from the eastern edge of an ancient quarry, and in the quarry-garden below, opposite the Golgotha spur, a cemetery with many Jewish tombs, including that of Joseph of Arimathea, hewn into the western wall.

As for why this area came to have the name “Skull,” there are a number of possible explanations: (1) the topographical appearance of the site, i.e. its shape reminiscent of a human skull; (2) its proximity to a cemetery; and (3) its probable repeated use as a Roman killing-ground. This last explanation carries special weight, since the church father Jerome, who was based in Bethlehem and knew the local languages, says that places of execution were called “Golgotha” in his own day.

Early Christian writers recount—even if they did not embrace—still another, seemingly arcane tradition as to the origins of the name: that Jesus’ crucifixion was in the very spot where the skull of Adam was buried (e.g., see Jerome, Letters 46:3). What may seem to us a curious notion nevertheless almost surely derives, at least in part, from Pauline theology: the idea of Adam as a type of Christ (e.g., see Rom. 5:14-17 and 1 Cor. 15:22). The tradition has at least two connections to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre itself: It is reflected quite graphically, as it has been in all Eastern Christian iconography through the ages, in the Greek Orthodox mosaic mural now gracing the church’s entry hall. It is also the reason that the church has a “Chapel of Adam,” lying directly beneath the upstairs Calvary chapels.

Finally, a most salient (if obvious) point for our purposes is simply this: that the place of Jesus’ crucifixion did have a specific name — Golgotha — that was known to all. This simple fact, coupled with the public nature of Jesus’ crucifixion just outside the walls of crowded, Passover-eve Jerusalem, makes it quite plausible—almost inevitable—that the historical memory of the location would have been transmitted accurately over the ensuing decades.
A Glimpse of the First Century Jewish Cemetery

Many pilgrims and casual visitors to the Holy Sepulchre today unfortunately never see one of the church’s most intriguing features, one that provides dramatic evidence that the church was in fact built on the site of a Jewish cemetery dating from the time of Jesus. It is an actual—and very typical—tomb chamber of the 1st centuries B.C./A.D preserved behind the 4th century wall of the small, westernmost apse of the Rotunda. It is said to have been discovered by chance in the 15th century, after lying hidden for over a thousand years.

Today, following a zig-zag path to the so-called “Syrian Chapel” and then stooping to negotiate a hole in the apse wall, one can see clearly how the church’s Byzantine engineers, in shaping the bedrock, cut diagonally through this ancient tomb chamber. In so doing, they happily left for us tangible evidence of Jewish tombs here—by definition outside the city walls, in conformity with Jewish laws of ritual purity—at roughly the time of Jesus.

This partial tomb chamber features not only a central “standing pit” (covered today by a metal grate, on which visitors stand), but also the most common style of burial niche from Herodian period Jerusalem: three finger-like niches (some now blocked) cut back into each of the two adjacent remaining walls. Known as kokhim (Hebrew) or loculi (Latin), this distinctive configuration of niches is very datable, known to have been in vogue only in the Herodian period of 40 B.C. to 70 A.D. But, again, even within this relatively narrow time “window,” the latest possible date for an active Jewish cemetery here is ca. 41-44 A.D., when the site was enclosed within the Third Wall.

Visualizing the Original Tomb of Jesus

The contention that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre correctly preserves the place of Jesus’ tomb likewise comes with a disclaimer: that the tomb itself—the original rock-hewn chamber, except for some hidden traces, no longer exists. That original bedrock tomb, which lay isolated within the rotunda of the Byzantine church as an adorned, free-standing monument, not only suffered the ravages of relic-hunting pilgrims over several centuries, but sadly became the focus of the church’s systematic destruction in 1009, when whatever was left was almost completely reduced to rubble. Ever since, only traces of the original tomb remain, and these have always been covered by the masonry of a succession of replacement tomb monuments, or Edicules (lit., “little house”). Even these meager remains, however, apparently last seen in 1810 when the
present Edicule was built, yield a clue to their ancient origins: they lie askew in relation to the alignment of the church.

Clearly, it is difficult to reconstruct with any certainty the layout, size, and features of the original tomb of Jesus. Although a few scant written descriptions have survived from the Byzantine period, our understanding of the tomb rests largely on a presumption: that the interior floor plan of the Edicule structure itself—both the present one and all its predecessors—somehow preserves, in masonry, a memory of the original rock-hewn tomb chambers. Based on this, the primary features of the tomb would have been, first, an ante-chamber and, behind that, a narrow central passage with a single funerary couch on the right, for this is what we see in the layout of the present 1810 Edicule.

The tomb’s original antechamber is specifically mentioned by Cyril, the 4th century bishop of Jerusalem, who says this structure (“cave”) was removed in the shaping of the original tomb monument, “cut away at that time for the sake of the present adornment” (Catechetical Lectures 14:9). There has always been a corresponding structure, however, preserving the memory of this antechamber. For the Byzantine tomb monument it was a covered porch built in front of the tomb entrance, and in the present Edicule it is an enclosed vestibule, the so-called Chapel of the Angels.

Beyond the antechamber, the original tomb presumably had only a narrow central passage with a bench hewn into its north wall—on the right as one enters. These features, again, are reflected in the Edicule’s cramped innermost chamber, where a marble slab recreates the single burial couch. They are also in accord with Mark’s resurrection narrative: “Entering the tomb, [the women] saw a young man sitting at the right...” (Mk. 16:5).

This single-bench configuration fits well with what is known as an *arcosolium*, a shallow, shelf-like recess with an arched ceiling which was the other common type of burial niche in use around Jerusalem in the time of Jesus. An *arcosolium* is what many experts assume that the tomb’s original funerary bench was. It is worth noting, however, that tombs with the more common *kokhim*-style niches, as mentioned above, also featured benches; they ran in front of the openings of the tunnel-like niches and probably functioned as workbenches for the anointing and wrapping of the body. Either way—*arcosolia* or *kokhim*—a normal tomb chamber had benches/niches along three walls.

This is an important point to remember: that the burial chamber of Jesus’ tomb, if it had only the central passage and single bench reflected in the plan of the Edicule, was completely atypical. It was either of very unusual design or, more likely, was in an early stage of construction. That is, it was unfinished—perhaps without a proper burial niche of either type—when it was unexpectedly pressed into service. Indeed, the gospel text may very well reflect this when it calls the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea a “new” tomb (Mt. 27:60; Jn. 19:41).

Evidence suggests that the entrance to the original tomb was located not at the level of the quarry-bed, but part way up the western scarp. First, the bedrock floor of the original tomb chambers has presumably never been altered and is thought to lie immediately beneath the paved floor of today’s Edicule. Secondly, Byzantine depictions of the original tomb monument clearly show steps leading up from the rotunda floor to the level of the porch and tomb entrance. The corollary presumption is that the floor level of the Byzantine rotunda, basically following the level of the quarry-bed, was significantly lower than the present floor. Actually, we can picture the entrance to the original antechamber lying at an even higher elevation, since rock-hewn tomb
chambers of Jesus’ day typically had a few steps leading *down into them* from the outside. Finally, the gospel accounts tell us that a stone was “rolled to” the tomb entrance in order to close it, but there is no description of its shape. In the Early Roman period, single-chamber burial caves typically employed a rectangular or square blocking stone for sealing the entrance.

**Transmission of the Historical Memory**

Early Christian sources indicate that in the decades following Jesus' earthly life the primitive Christian community of Jerusalem not only remembered and visited the site of Golgotha and the Tomb, but held liturgical celebrations there as well. For example, the 5th century historian Socrates Scholasticus states: “Those who embraced the Christian faith, after the period of his passion, greatly venerated this tomb” (*History* 1:17). Indeed, one of the best arguments for the authenticity of the Holy Sepulchre church is a simple, historical one: There has always been a Christian community in Jerusalem to pass down, from one generation to the next, the memory of where these events took place.

Documentation of this historical continuity comes also from a reading of Eusebius (265-340 A.D.), the 4th century church historian and Bishop of Caesarea. In his *Church History* (see 4:5 and 5:12, for example), Eusebius names for us all the bishops of Jerusalem, in unbroken succession, starting with James the Just, a relative and contemporary of Jesus himself, and continuing down to Eusebius’ own day. The only exception to this unbroken presence was around the time of the Great Revolt, when church tradition says the Judeo-Christians of Jerusalem left the city, probably in 66 A.D., dwelt in the region of the trans-Jordan city of Pella for a few years, and then returned (Eusebius, *Church History* 3:5).

Again, because Christians were continuously present in Jerusalem throughout those early centuries, there was simply never an opportunity for the tradition—the original, transmitted memory of Golgotha and The Tomb—to be lost.

**The Site in the Late Roman Period: Hadrian’s Forum and Temple**

After the time of Jesus, the first major transformation of the Holy Sepulchre site—the ancient quarry-garden with its rock-hewn Jewish tombs—seems to have come at the hands of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, in the early 2nd century. After crushing the Second Jewish Revolt, the so-called Bar Kochba Revolt, in 135 A.D., Hadrian retaliated by imposing a number of draconian measures, acts seemingly intended not only to punish and humiliate the Jews but also to eradicate their memories rooted in the land of Judea and, especially, to break their historical attachment to Jerusalem. For example, the Romans assigned a new name to the country itself, “Syria Palestina,” a name perhaps intentionally echoing that of the ancient Israelites’ arch-enemies, the Philistines.

As for Jerusalem, the essence of Hadrian’s plan was to build a completely new, paganized Roman city, and it likewise received a new name, “Aelia Capitolina,” an appellation well reflecting the tightened Roman hold on Jerusalem, honoring as it did both the Emperor himself, by the use of his family name, and the Romans’ chief god, Jupiter Capitolina.
Most significantly, Hadrian’s re-made city was one from which all Jews were now banned by imperial edict. In imposing this ban, the Romans appear to have made no distinction between what they saw as various Jewish sects, thus their policy was aimed at Judeo-Christians as well. The impact of the ban on that early community of believers is noted by Eusebius, who tells us that from the time of Hadrian onward there are no more bishops of Jerusalem “of the circumcision,” but only Gentiles (Church History 4:6).

It also seems clear, especially from the Church Fathers, that Golgotha and the Tomb of Jesus lay in the center of the new city that the Romans laid out. However, the early Christian writers go farther, saying clearly that with his building plans Hadrian intentionally targeted an existing place of Judeo-Christian worship. Thus it was that, sometime after 135 A.D., on the very spot where Jerusalem’s primitive Christian community had been coming for a hundred years to pray at the empty tomb of their rabbi-Messiah, the Romans began erecting a pagan temple. The temple was dedicated to a Roman deity, most probably Venus-Aphrodite (see Eusebius, Life of Constantine 3:26; Jerome, alone among the ancient sources and presumed to be mistaken, says it was a temple to Jupiter—see Jerome’s Letters 58:3).

To create this temple complex, Hadrian’s engineers first erected a thick retaining wall and brought in huge amounts of fill in order to create a level platform, in the process completely covering up and then paving over the old quarry-garden with its tomb-shrine. Then, on top, they built the pagan temple directly over the Tomb of Jesus.

The church father Jerome adds another detail: that as part of this temple complex, “on the rock where the cross had stood, a marble statue of Venus was set up by the heathen and became an object of worship” (Letters 58:3). Thus, we have the picture of a separate shine focused on the rock of Calvary, which presumably had been left partially exposed. Indeed, one Roman coin of Aelia Capitolina actually depicts the goddess with her right foot raised on what looks like a rocky outcrop! Assuming that this is the same rock of Calvary enclosed within the church today—standing well above the surrounding bedrock, as we have seen—the fact that this tall rock pillar not only survived Hadrian’s construction but indeed became the centerpiece of a new pagan shrine suggests that it was perhaps already being venerated by the early Judeo-Christian community.

Finally, adjacent to the temple complex and extending to the south, Hadrian’s builders created a broad, paved expanse around which the other structures of a Roman-style forum took shape.

Of Hadrian’s temple itself, practically nothing remains, not even enough to propose with any certainty its basic shape, whether round or basilical—or one of each, aligned on an east-west axis, as some have suggested. Twentieth century excavations within the church, beneath the floor of the Franciscan Chapels area and extending into the Rotunda, have revealed only a few poorly understood substructures. Most of these should probably be interpreted as “consolidation walls,” an internal grid which stabilized the fills of soil and debris and lay beneath the pavement and even the foundations of the temple complex.

Another intriguing feature presumed to belong to the Hadrianic temple complex is a well-preserved vaulted chamber. Discovered in the same area, beneath the floor of the church in the northern part of the Rotunda, this long, narrow chamber—or perhaps tunnel—measures 9.3 by 3
meters, its lower part cut into the bedrock to a depth of .6 meter. Its function, however, has never been determined with any certainty.

A few more surviving elements from the temple complex and forum can be seen today within the Russian Alexander Nevsky Church, the so-called “Russian Hospice” to the east of the Holy Sepulchre. There, at the bottom of the broad modern staircase, one gatepost with its engaged pillar (pilaster) and Corinthian capital are all that is left of a presumed triple arch that would have graced the eastern side of the Roman forum.

Nearby, a thick wall of large, finely dressed stones and projecting pilasters represents the southeast corner of a great retaining wall. The generally accepted view is that it is 2nd century construction, a retaining wall that provided a level platform for the Roman temenos, or sacred precinct, and that the three large doorways cut in the east-facing segment were cut later by Constantine’s 4th century engineers as the main gates of the Byzantine complex. Thus, it would seem to be the Roman wall mentioned by the early church historian Sozomen: “The Pagans … had enclosed the entire place of the resurrection and Mount Calvary within a wall” (History 2:1). A few experts are less sure and prefer to leave the dating “uncertain.” All agree, however, that this wall consists mostly of older, Herodian-period ashlars in secondary or perhaps even tertiary use. Some even suggest that here the engineers—Hadrian’s or Constantine’s, either of whom might have had ample reason—consciously imitated, especially in the pilasters, the surrounding wall of the once-imposing Herodian Temple Mount.
Also visible in the Russian Hospice, in front of the eastern face of the *temenos* wall, is a surviving section of pavement, once a covered sidewalk that flanked the “Cardo,” the main north-south street of the Hadrianic city. Nearby stand two columns remaining from the Cardo’s western colonnade.

Yet another element dating from the time of Hadrian is the great cistern which underlies the Abraham Monastery at the southeast corner of today’s Forecourt. Although the cistern’s arches and overhead vaulting apparently date from the Byzantine and Crusader periods respectively, the reservoir itself is thought to be 2nd century. (Access to this impressive cistern is through the monastery; entry requires special permission from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate).

Nearby, beneath the church’s Crusader façade, another large segment of a 2nd century wall may represent a western continuation of the above-mentioned *temenos* retaining wall. This section consists of an impressive 13 ashlar courses and measures 6.45 meters in height.

Finally, artifacts from a controlled, modern excavation on the east side of the rock of Calvary include coins and pottery of the early 3rd century, traces of pre-Constantinian walls, and part of a
small stone-carved libation altar, all suggesting activity here in the Late Roman period. The wall remains indicate that the rock of Calvary, topped by the statue of Venus and focus of a separate shrine, was probably enclosed within its own surrounding wall.

Perhaps most intriguing is the fragmentary Roman-style libation altar. Dated to the 2nd-3rd centuries A.D., the stone altar originally stood .5 meter in height, and its top surface measured 28 cm square, with a central dish-like hollow and a surrounding molding. In interpreting this find, it is natural to make a connection with Eusebius’ description of the cult of Venus practiced in the Hadrianic temple complex of Aelia—in this very place. Those rites, he tells us, included “offering detestable oblations ... on profane and accursed altars” (Life 3:26). It now seems, with this particular artifact, that direct evidence of those pagan cult practices has been unearthed.

**Constantine and the Rediscovery of the Tomb of Jesus**

The conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity in 312, recounted by Eusebius in his *Life of Constantine* (Chapters 28-32), is all the more dramatic coming as it did only a few short years after the last of the great Roman persecutions of Christians, under the Emperor Diocletian, beginning in 303 and ceasing completely only in 310. A year after Constantine’s conversion, his Edict of Milan in 313 placed Christianity on an equal footing with any other religion of the Roman world. In the ensuing years Constantine not only issued laws granting special privileges to the Christian clergy and the Church but also began involving himself deeply in ecclesiastical affairs, an involvement that included convening church councils, enforcing their decisions through the power of the state, and authorizing—and funding from imperial coffers—the construction of great churches. Though the interplay of his political motives and internal religious experience will always be debated by historians, Constantine the Great, in elevating Christianity to the status of favored religion of the Roman Empire, truly ushered in—practically single-handedly and practically overnight—one of the great watersheds of Western history.

In 323 Constantine defeated the last of his rival emperors and thereafter reigned as *Pontifex Maximus*, sole master of the Roman Empire, both East and West. As such, though he was as yet unbaptized, Constantine was a conspicuous presence at the first ecumenical church council, which he himself had convened, held in Nicaea in 325. It was at that meeting that Bishop Macarius of Jerusalem is said to have issued the emperor an invitation and a challenge: that he should remove the pagan temples built long ago atop Jerusalem’s holiest sites. Thus, Eusebius tells us, it became the emperor’s wish, once the location of Golgotha and The Tomb were confidently established, “that a house of prayer worthy of the worship of God should be erected near the Savior’s tomb, on a scale of rich and royal greatness” (Life of Constantine 3:29).

In choosing the site for the premier shrine of all Christendom, that commemorating both the Crucifixion and Resurrection, Bishop Macarius and Constantine’s other advisors surely subjected to intense scrutiny the received Jerusalem tradition: that the tomb of Jesus lay directly beneath the pagan temple erected by Hadrian some 200 years before. In their appraisal of this tradition, we can imagine they might have been skeptical of a site lying within the city walls of their day, knowing that New Testament placed Golgotha “near [i.e., outside] the city.” By the same token, perhaps they consulted the testimony of Josephus—as we did above—that shortly after the time of Jesus a Third Wall had enclosed areas formerly outside the city. Whatever their deliberations, it is clear that in the end they set aside any other considerations and followed the strong, received
tradition of the Jerusalem community.

Now, a huge excavation got underway as an army of engineers and workers proceeded to, first, dismantle the hated pagan temple and its platform, and then begin removing the huge amounts of fill material in order to explore what lay beneath. Eusebius, apparently an eyewitness to these events, describes vividly this excavation and the rediscovery of the Tomb of Christ: “[A]s soon as the original surface of the ground, beneath the covering of earth, appeared, immediately, and contrary to all expectation, the venerable and hallowed monument of our Savior’s resurrection was discovered” (Life, 3:28).

Thus, the Emperor Hadrian’s original intention—to eradicate forever this sacred place and its memory—had been overcome. Indeed, by erecting on the spot a prominent landmark, his pagan temple, he had in effect helped to preserve the memory!

In bringing the envisioned monumental structures into being, the Byzantine builders now faced almost unimaginable challenges, considering the existing Roman structures on the site as well as the great volume of fill material and the difficult underlying topography of the old quarry-garden. Nonetheless, they went to enormous trouble and expense to put the church exactly where they did, a fact which, in itself, surely points toward the authenticity of the place.

After dismantling and removing the remaining structures and pavement of the Hadrianic forum, and then excavating still more of the old fill material, the engineers and builders—on the instructions of the emperor and supervised by Bishop Macarius—laid out and began constructing an immense complex. Many deep trenches had to be excavated down to the uneven bedrock floor of the old quarry, in places quite deep, and then foundation walls built up to carry the upper walls and colonnades of the church.

Where the tomb of Jesus had once been hewn into an irregular quarry wall, the engineers now imposed a complete change upon the existing topography, carving away all the surrounding bedrock in order to isolate the tomb chamber as a freestanding monument in the center of a vast empty space. Using only iron tools, the workers would gradually cut back the ancient cliff face and remove a huge volume of bedrock—perhaps half the area of the rotunda we see today, to a considerable height.

Again, that the church was built where it was, despite these immense difficulties, is a testimony to the genuineness of the place: Simply put, if the church could have been built anywhere else, it surely would have been.

**Helena and the “Finding of the True Cross”**

Connected by tradition to the creation of the Constantinian sacred complex are a relic of the Church and the tradition—some would say legend—of that relic’s origins, both of which are attested in 4th century textual sources. The relic, which came to be known as the “True Cross,” actually consists of hundreds—perhaps thousands—of fragments of wood scattered throughout the Christian world and held by some to be parts of the actual cross of Jesus’ crucifixion. The tradition of the “finding of the Cross” proposes, among other things, that the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, not only determined the site for the church but also, in the course of the excavations there, unearthed the True Cross.
A foray into this particular topic is offered here only because the traditional story, as it has come down to us, does attribute to Helena—a known, historical figure—a central role in the founding of the church. Perhaps it goes without saying that many critics, if they do not assign these matters to the realm of pious legend outright, at least feel they should be approached with caution. Yet this purported role of Helena, when it is mentioned at all, is most often put forth matter-of-factly, without any caution or qualification, as reliable history. Hence, this brief attempt to explore, as objectively as possible, the sources of this “finding of the Cross” tradition.

We can begin with the main two strands of reliable history on which the tradition hinges and which lend it an air of plausibility: (1) that Helena did make a visit to the Holy Land during the required time frame and (2) that there was (and still is) an actual relic—many relics—of the so-called True Cross in existence.

First, Constantine did, according to Eusebius, send his mother, nearly 80 years old at the time, on a tour of the empire's Eastern provinces, including a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, a journey the emperor himself was never to make (Life of Constantine 3:42-44). Helena, Eusebius says, was not only influenced by Constantine to embrace Christianity, but had also been elevated by him to the status of Augusta, or empress. Scholars have generally dated Helena’s travels in the East from 326 to 328, a time frame that does fit perfectly with what we know about the very earliest stages of the building of the Holy Sepulchre, or, more likely, the excavation and preparation of the site. Helena apparently died shortly after completing this journey, ca. 329.

It is well worth noting that Eusebius (Life 3:43) specifically connects Helena, during this visit, with the building and dedication of two other important memorial churches near Jerusalem: (1) Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity and (2) the Eleona Church which once stood upon the Mount of Olives, memorializing the place of Jesus' ascension (the surviving traces of this church lie within the compound of the present-day Pater Noster Church).

The Holy Sepulchre, however, is conspicuous by its absence from Eusebius' discussion of Helena's pilgrimage itinerary. Even assuming that the Roman structures were still being dismantled or the site still being excavated, the place itself was known—indeed, had always been known—to the Jerusalem Christian community, as we have seen. In all fairness, we must say it is hard to imagine Helena not being taken to see the site (whatever state it might have been in) remembered as the place of Jesus’ crucifixion, burial and resurrection. In the end, however, we are left with the fact that Eusebius, though he writes extensively about the building of the church, not only makes no mention of the Finding of the True Cross but makes no connection between Helena and the Holy Sepulchre at all.

The second historical kernel that lies at the center of this tradition is the very existence of a relic known as the “True Cross,” fragments of wood that have been attested down through the ages and some of which presumably still grace the reliquaries of various churches and cathedrals today. While the question of what the True Cross actually is (or was) lies beyond our purposes here, we know that they were real pieces of wood believed to be or proclaimed to be—by someone—the actual cross of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Indeed, the relics of the True Cross are known quite early, first clearly attested ca. 350 in the writings of Cyril, the Bishop of Jerusalem, whose seat was the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Cyril refers to the presence of the lignum crucis—the “wood of the cross”—in his church (Catechetical Lectures 4:10; 10:19; 13:4), and about the same time he states directly that the wood was found during the reign of Constantine (Letter to Constantius). We also learn from
Cyril that, even in his own day, the wood of the True Cross had already been cut up into small relics and scattered throughout the Christian world.

Besides Cyril, the writings of Eusebius (died ca. 340) may contain some slightly earlier references to the True Cross relics, although these are not so clear-cut. In his *Eulogy to Constantine* (Ch. 9), Eusebius tells us that the emperor opposed his pagan enemies “armed with the salutary Trophy,” and also that the Holy Sepulchre complex included “a temple sacred to the salutary Cross.” Elsewhere, Eusebius quotes a letter from Constantine to Bishop Macarius in which the emperor enthuses over “the monument of [Christ’s] most holy Passion” which had been discovered in Jerusalem (*Life of Constantine* 3:30).

In any event, neither Cyril nor Eusebius mentions the tradition of the “finding of the Cross” by Helena. Likewise, other early witnesses—Gregory of Nyssa (died ca. 385), St. Jerome (ca. 340-420), John Chrysostom (ca. 347-404), and the pilgrim Egeria (early 380s)—all mention the relics of the True Cross, but none credits Helena with their discovery.

Where and when, then—and why—does the “finding” tradition first appear? It is not until the very end of the 4th century that the story can first be documented linking Helena with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, in the context of her Finding of the True Cross. It was long thought that our earliest account of this tradition was the Latin version given by Ambrose of Milan, in his funeral oration for Emperor Theodosius in 395 (*De obitu Theodosii* 40-49). However a slightly earlier Greek version is now known, from the *Church History* of Gelasius which appeared in the year 390. While the original Greek text of this work is in fact lost, an early 5th century translation (Rufinus, *Church History* 10:7-8) preserves the essence of the original Helena legend from Gelasius.

The story from Gelasius (via Rufinus), which contains several supernatural elements, can be summarized as follows: Helena, influenced by divine visions, went to Jerusalem for the purpose of searching for the Cross. She inquired among Jerusalem’s inhabitants, but Golgotha and the Tomb proved hard to locate, indeed had been forgotten, because of the pagan Roman temple built there. After the spot was revealed to her by a heavenly sign, Helena tore down the temple, began excavating the site, and found not only three crosses, lying in disarray, but also the *titulus* (inscribed plaque) that had hung above Jesus’ head, and the nails that had attached his body to the cross. Bishop Macarius helped identify the Cross of Christ from among the three by bringing each of them in turn into contact with a mortally ill woman; the True Cross was shown to possess miraculous healing powers when the woman was fully restored. Helena built a church over the place where she had discovered the Cross. Part of the Cross remained in Jerusalem and part Helena sent to her son Constantine, along with the nails; the nails were incorporated into Constantine’s royal helmet and his horse’s bridle, to ensure the emperor’s protection in battle.

Again, several historical elements, generally regarded as trustworthy, provide the framework for this story and give it a feeling of authenticity: Helena’s presence in Jerusalem, the Roman temples covering the site, the building of the church itself and Bishop Macarius’ role in this undertaking, and the existence of the True Cross relics (and, no doubt, the other relics)—whatever their actual origins—and their delivery to Constantine.

In the decades following the appearance of Gelasius’ version in 390, essentially the same story, with certain variations and embellishments, was repeated by a number of 5th century sources. These include: Sulpicius Severus (363-420), *Sacred History* 2:34; Socrates Scholasticus (380-450), *History of the Church* 1:17; Sozomen Salaminius (380-455), *Church History* 2:1; and
Theodoret (393-458), *Ecclesiastical History* 1:17. It is quite clear, then, that the “finding” tradition, very soon after its first documented appearance, became firmly fixed in the corpus of recognized ecclesiastical history.

It is interesting, moreover, that this rather elaborate story has no discernable evolutionary history, but rather emerges more or less fully developed in its first manifestation. Indeed, this earliest known source for the “finding” tradition—Gelasius—suggests, at least to one scholar, reasons why and by whom the story might have been concocted and spread abroad, for political reasons, in the late 4th century: Several lines of evidence seem to converge on Cyril, the above-mentioned bishop of Jerusalem.
Gelasius was in fact the nephew of Cyril, and when he produced his *History* he was serving as Bishop of Caesarea, having been appointed to that post by his powerful uncle. Moreover, the preface of Gelasius’ *History* suggests that the work was commissioned by Cyril himself. This state of affairs, viewed against the background of Cyril’s long tenure as bishop (ca. 350 to 387), can be seen to mirror the shifting fortunes of the two cities, Jerusalem and Caesarea.

Caesarea, as center of Roman administration in Palestine, had always been the more important city, and in the official church hierarchy Caesarea’s metropolitan bishop had long been the superior of the bishop of Jerusalem. However, with the reclaiming of Jerusalem’s holy sites, the building of memorial churches, and resulting popularity of Jerusalem as a pilgrim destination, the stage was set in the late 4th century for the emergence of Jerusalem as a major center of Christianity. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that Cyril, during his long tenure as bishop, was engaged in a fierce rivalry with the bishops of Caesarea for ecclesiastical dominance.

(This power struggle had theological overtones as well, related to a major Christological debate of the time: Put simply, Jerusalem held to the orthodox view, set forth by the 325 Council of Nicaea, that God the Father and the Son were “of the same substance” and thus equal, while the Caesarea bishops favored Arianism, a belief that had been declared heretical.)

Viewed in the context of such a rivalry, many of Cyril’s acts and pronouncements would seem to form a pattern: promoting the status of Jerusalem and, by extension, his own standing as bishop. As we have seen, he made many references to the *lignum crucis*, the True Cross relic residing in his church (the Church of the Holy Sepulchre), a presence, according to Cyril, which proved Jerusalem’s importance. Also, the discovery of the cross is known to have been celebrated each year in Jerusalem, in ceremonies described by the pilgrim Egeria (381-384) among others. Then there were two supposed sightings of a celestial cross in the skies over Jerusalem during Cyril’s tenure, in 351 and 363, the former described in the bishop’s *Letter to Constantius*, the son of Constantine and the emperor at the time. In this highly flattering letter, Cyril, drawing a parallel with the discovery of the True Cross in Constantine’s day, cites the appearance of the cross as evidence of divine approval of the reign of Constantius.

As for the story of Helena’s finding of the cross—emerging, seemingly full-blown, during this same general time period—all we can say is that it seems to fit into this same pattern and to have served the same purposes: the promotion of Jerusalem as the preeminent Christian center and the forging of special ties with the imperial family in Constantinople.

In any event, it seems Cyril was wildly successful in this promotional campaign. The very fact that in the late 380s he was permitted to appoint a new bishop of Caesarea—and his own nephew, at that—is clear evidence of Cyril’s enhanced status. When we remember that that nephew, Gelasius, through a work produced at his uncle’s request, first recorded and disseminated the story of Empress Helena’s finding of the True Cross, we must at least wonder whether the powerful, astute Cyril might have had a hand in the appearance of this enduring tradition. (For a fuller exploration of this whole theory, see J.W. Drijvers, “The True Cross: Separating Myth from History,” *Bible Review*, July/August 2003.)

Whether Cyril was the source of the tradition or not, we are left with the fact that there is no solid historical evidence linking the discovery of the Cross or the founding of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine.
The Fourth Century Church and Its Visible Remains

The greatest glory of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, architecturally speaking, lay in its original manifestation as a sumptuous 4th century sacred complex, an expression of the newly-liberated Christian faith and the lavish resources of the burgeoning Byzantine Empire under Constantine. That glory, almost completely stripped away in a major destruction (1099) and further obscured by later construction and ill-conceived renovations, is unfortunately only dimly perceived in today’s church.

Constantine’s sacred complex, begun in 326 and dedicated (at least in part) in 335, was vast and impressive, covering some 3.5 acres. From Eusebius, who witnessed and recorded its creation, we get glimpses of the glory of the place: “This temple, then, the emperor erected as a conspicuous monument of the Savior’s resurrection, and embellished it throughout on an imperial scale of magnificence. He further enriched it with numberless offerings of inexpressible beauty and various materials: gold, silver, and precious stones…” (*Life*, 3:40).

The original Church of the Holy Sepulchre compound comprised four main elements stretching from east to west, bounded on the east by the Cardo, the broad, colonnaded, north-south “Main Street” of Roman-Byzantine Jerusalem. (The Cardo generally followed the line of today’s narrow market street, Suk Khan e-Zeit or Beit Ha-bad Street, though it was vastly wider.)

From the Cardo, steps ascended to three gates which gave access to an eastern, outer atrium, an open-air colonnaded courtyard that served as a forecourt to the great basilical church. Of the outer atrium’s three entrances, the southermost is visible today in the nearby Russian Hospice (as mentioned above), while remains of the larger, central gate can be found in the rear of an adjacent shop (the “Zalatimos Bakery”) accessed from the market street. The manner in which
the outer atrium’s doorways were cut into existing 2nd century walls (according to the usual interpretation) provides evidence that Constantine’s builders made partial use of some earlier, Roman structures—despite Eusebius' assertion that absolutely everything of Hadrian, profaned as it was, was stripped away (Life, 3:27).

Proceeding from the outer atrium, the long basilica known as the Martyrium stretched to the west, the second element of the original Holy Sepulchre complex. It had three portals in its façade, a central nave, and four aisles, two each on the north and the south. The church’s single inscribed apse pointed west, toward the tomb (not east, the nearly universal orientation of Byzantine basilicas). Lining the apse were twelve columns symbolizing the twelve apostles, and atop each column a silver bowl, the gift of the Emperor Constantine himself. From back to front, the basilica stretched nearly 60 meters.

As for this structure’s name, we learn from the late 4th century pilgrim Egeria that “it is called the Martyrium because it is in Golgotha behind the Cross, where the Lord suffered.” So, the great basilica’s primary theological and liturgical connections seem to have been not so much to the Tomb as to the Cross, and, indeed, the rock of Golgotha lay immediately adjacent, rising just behind the Martyrium’s western (back) wall.

The Martyrium possessed a glory that was legendary. Again, Eusebius, the contemporary chronicler, describes it for us: “...a noble work rising to a vast height ... The interior of this structure was floored with marble slabs of various colors, while the external surface of the walls ... shone with polished stones exactly fitted together ... [T]he inner part of the roof ... being overlaid throughout with the purest gold, caused the entire building to glitter as it were with rays of light” (Life, 3:23).
Of this magnificent edifice absolutely nothing is left today, or at least nothing visible above its original floor level. However, in 1971 excavators found, beneath the floor of the present church, the foundations of the basilica’s west-pointing apse and of the back (west) wall into which the apse was inscribed. The Byzantine apse is slightly offset (and opposite in orientation) from the east-pointing Crusader apse lying above. Also, the basilica’s two central column-bearing foundation walls, which delineated the original church’s nave, are visible today as the side walls of the underground St. Helena’s Chapel (the north wall consists mostly of Herodian ashlars, probably in tertiary use from demolished Hadrianic structures).

Next, to the west of the great basilica was an inner atrium, open to the sky, with the rock of Golgotha projecting to a height of five meters in its southeast corner. This atrium was thus referred to in Byzantine times as the “Holy Garden,” deriving perhaps from the “garden” of John 19:41. In the 5th century, the rock of Golgotha was surrounded by an open-air chapel; by the 6th century steps ascended its north side; and, following the ravages of the Persians in 614, Golgotha was enclosed beneath the roof of its own chapel, with a silver cross inserted into a socket on its summit. A small cave found by modern excavators hewn into the east side of the rock of Golgotha was probably a tiny chapel dating to this period, the 7th century.

Eusebius describes the Holy Garden as “a space of ground of great extent, and open to the pure air of heaven. This [space Constantine] adorned with a pavement of finely polished stone, and enclosed it on three sides with porticoes of great length” (*Life*, 3:35). The fact that the Holy Garden atrium was surrounded on three sides by porches—roofed colonnades—led a modern scholar to coin another name reflecting the architecture here, the “Tri-portico.”

The long, straight northern wall visible inside today’s church, where the lowest several courses are generally regarded as 4th century masonry, was the northern enclosing wall of this Tri-portico atrium. The line of close-spaced columns running
nearest to the wall (all re-erected in later centuries) gives one a sense of the original northern colonnade.

With a bit more effort, one can trace the line of the eastern colonnade as well: (1) the columns curiously hidden within the small foyers at the side entrances of today’s Catholicon (or “Greek Choir”) and (2) the Catholicon’s arcade of pillars and spiral-fluted columns running in front of the altar screen. Beneath the floor of the Catholicon, modern excavations revealed the **stylotope**, or foundation wall, of this eastern colonnade, with an original column base still in place.

Bordering the inner atrium on the west side was a wall with eight gates or doors, and above each door a window. From the Holy Garden, the gates gave access to the rotunda and its northern and southern transepts. Parts of this wall and some of the gates survive and are visible today on the east side of the Rotunda.

To the west of the Holy Garden and the eight-gated wall lay the focus of the Holy Sepulchre complex, the Tomb of Jesus. Here, at the western end of the sacred compound, the Byzantine engineers had first made a great circular excavation, cutting back the old quarry wall in order to isolate the tomb. They then shaped the surrounding bedrock to receive the masonry of a semi-circular outer wall with three apses. In order to appreciate how the west side of the rotunda nestles into the bedrock of the cut-back quarry wall, below the natural ground level of the surrounding terrain, one need only ascend the many steps from the church’s Forecourt up to Christian Quarter Road; proceeding northward, this street, at an elevation several meters above the floor level of the church, passes no more than a few meters west of the Rotunda.

Within the rotunda, the shaped bedrock of the Tomb of Jesus would have appeared as an isolated monument projecting above floor level. While we have no good written descriptions of this first tomb monument, there are some early depictions, especially on a type of small lead-tin pilgrim flask cast in Jerusalem, examples of which have been found in Italy. These depictions show a polygonal structure surrounded by engaged columns, with a pyramidal, polygonal roof. Originally, it was probably adorned on its exterior with marble slabs, but a pilgrim account from the year 570 says the Tomb in that era was “covered with silver.”

Attached in front of the tomb entrance on the east side was a covered masonry porch, its roof supported by small columns. As mentioned, this porch (and a corresponding enclosed vestibule, beginning with the Crusader edicule) preserved the memory of the ante-chamber of the original Tomb of Jesus, a rock-hewn room carved away when the tomb monument was fashioned so as to focus on the inner burial chamber. Since early depictions of the tomb monument show steps leading up to the porch, some experts guess that the floor level of the Byzantine rotunda was significantly lower than the present floor.

From the first excavation work on the church site, ca. 326, until the dedication of the **Martyrium** basilica in 335, less than ten years elapsed, and in view of this relatively short time span—and because Eusebius does not mention any kind of great edifice enclosing the tomb—many experts ascribe the rotunda and dome to a slightly later period. Some suggest the tomb monument was at first enclosed only within the semicircular surrounding wall with its three apses. Then, according to this scenario, later in the 4th century the wall with eight gates was built between the Holy Garden and the tomb, and the upper part of the rotunda with its dome was erected. From the pilgrim diary of the Spanish nun Egeria, dating from the early 380s, it seems clear that the great domed structure was then in place. The Byzantine rotunda was known by the
Greek word *Anastasis* (“Resurrection”), a name which the Greeks and Arabs still use today to refer to the entire church.

The original rotunda structure was supported by 12 great monolithic marble columns in groups of three, alternating with pairs of square pillars, on the same plan visible in today’s Rotunda. Some experts suggest that the original marble columns here were actually in secondary use, having been “recycled” from Hadrian’s dismantled pagan temple. Some even say Hadrian in turn may have used columns from the ruined Herodian Temple Mount! These theories, though, must be viewed over against the testimony of Eusebius who, again, implies that none of the profaned Roman elements were re-used in the church (*Life*, 3:27). Eusebius also evokes for us the vast imperial resources, noting that Constantine himself requested the specifications for the required “marbles and columns” which were to come from various corners of the empire (*Life*, 3:31, 32), there being no natural source of marble in Israel-Palestine.

Whatever their original source, these great columns of the 4th century rotunda were almost certainly re-used, in altered form, when the church was rebuilt in the 11th century (as described below); the 12 columns one sees today, however, are all modern copies. Of the original square pillars, some parts survive, especially on the north side.

Lying between this ring of columns and pillars and the outer semicircular wall, a broad, open space served as a grand ambulatory for religious processions, but all sense of this surrounding space was lost when it was enclosed and partitioned into storerooms in the 1800s. One of these storerooms, a private Greek Orthodox area, contains the Rotunda’s original southern apse, while on the Rotunda’s north and west sides these original 4th century apses in the outer wall are at least partially visible to visitors.

As for the dome of the rotunda, it is thought that the original dome—and most of the replacement domes until recent centuries—had an *oculus* (Latin, “eye”), that is, that it was open to the sky (and thus to the elements) in the center.
Beyond this, the actual design of the 4th century rotunda—whether it had one or more upper galleries, for example—is a matter of some conjecture. The fact that the structure enclosed a tomb and was round in its plan suggests it might have closely followed a known architectural form of the time, that of a royal Roman mausoleum. Indeed, a contemporaneous rotunda that still exists may give us a glimpse of what the *Anastasis* of the original Holy Sepulchre looked like: the elegant Church of Santa Costanza in Rome, erected in the 4th century as a mausoleum for Constantine’s own daughter.

A model of the 4th century church. From L to R (east to west): Outer Atrium; *Martyrium* basilica; Inner Atrium/ Tri-Portico/ Holy Garden; and the *Anastasis* or Rotunda.
In addition to the four main elements—outer atrium, Martyrium basilica, Holy Garden, and Anastasis—a few adjoining structures were part of the original Holy Sepulchre complex as well. Northwest of the Rotunda, an L-shaped group of rooms erected around an open courtyard served as the seat of the Patriarchate, and much of this original masonry still survives.

Also, somewhere south of the rotunda probably stood a separate baptistery structure (although some experts place it elsewhere). One possible location is the present-day Greek Chapel of Mary Magdalene is today, the middle chapel bordering today’s Forecourt on the west side. Inside this chapel certain features suggest a baptistery here sometime in the church’s history: the upper walls (open to the sky) which form an octagon, and a small apse in each of the four corners.

Finally, great cisterns lay north and south of the Byzantine church and still exist today. One, quite impressive and possibly pre-dating the church, is accessible to the public through the Coptic chapel north of the Ethiopian roof area. Another cistern, lying hidden beneath the Forecourt, has a row of pillars supporting its roof and re-uses a fine Hadrianic wall (mentioned above) on its north side.

The Medaba Map Depiction of the Holy Sepulchre Church

A wonderful visual representation of the great Byzantine church is contained in a famous mosaic map, uncovered as part of an ancient church floor in Medaba, Jordan. Discovered during the construction of a new Greek Orthodox church there in the late 1800s, this stunning mosaic has been preserved and is visible to the public today. The Medaba Map presents the viewer with a sweeping 6th century depiction of the entire Holy Land, complete with myriad Greek place-names reflecting an intimate knowledge of sacred geography, at least as it was understood in the Byzantine period.

Even though the map (which only partially survived) depicts a vast geographic area stretching from Egypt to Lebanon, it nonetheless shows Jerusalem—its centerpiece—in striking detail, as if under a magnifying glass! Indeed, many of the gates, streets, and churches of Jerusalem shown in the mosaic have been identified by scholars, the map often correlating nicely with what is known both from textual evidence and from archaeological finds.
So, there in the Medaba Map, not surprisingly, are the essential architectural elements of Jerusalem’s Byzantine centerpiece, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, depicted in stylized fashion. (The following description proceeds from east to west, paralleling our description of the church above; as in almost all maps until modern times, east is at the “top,” according to the orientation of the legends.)

First, four steps are seen coming up from the Cardo, Jerusalem’s column-lined main thoroughfare. Then the façade of the Martyrium basilica appears with its three portals, and above the portals a triangular gold gable with a single rhomboid window. Next comes the elongated, red basilica roof. (The church’s outer and inner atriums—the open, colonnaded courtyards—seem not to be depicted.) Finally, we see what was no doubt the church’s visual trademark, the great golden dome of the Anastasis.

The Church in the Persian and Early Arab Periods

In 614, when the Persians came out of the East and gained a brief foothold in Palestine, they not only carried out fearsome massacres of the Christian inhabitants of the land but also attacked, and in some cases destroyed, many of their churches. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre fell victim to this onslaught as well, being badly pillaged and set on fire, but not utterly destroyed. The fire consumed the contents of the church and its wooden parts, including the roof, but the structure itself remained essentially intact. Restorations and additions were carried out under the patriarch Modestus, but the church’s original glory was now certainly diminished. In 628 the forces of the Byzantine Empire managed to evict the Persians and once again regain the control of the land, but only briefly.

The conquering Moslem Arabs were the next players to cross the stage of the Holy Land, coming to Jerusalem in 638, and their leader, the Caliph Omar, seems to have taken a friendly or at least benignly tolerant attitude toward Christianity and its holy places. This is a historical interpretation based at least in part on a tale—whether legend or history we will probably never know—whose first known mention comes only centuries later, from Eutichius, a 10th century Patriarch of Alexandria).

The story is that Omar, arriving in Jerusalem to accept the city’s surrender from the Byzantine rulers, paid a visit
to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, hosted by the reigning Patriarch, Sophronius. During the visit, the hour arrived for the ritual Moslem prayers, and the Patriarch invited the Caliph to pray inside the church. However, Omar declined the offer, fearing that his zealous followers, or even future generations, might use his prayer there as a pretext for seizing the church and turning it into a mosque. Instead, Omar prayed outside the church compound, and the church was not molested. Again, the story is often regarded as apocryphal. Nevertheless, a “Mosque of Omar,” presumably commemorating the place where the Caliph prayed, has stood just outside the Holy Sepulchre compound since medieval times.

Ironically—though it is unthinkable—if the original church building had been turned into a mosque, it almost surely would have been spared the utter devastation it suffered a few centuries later. Indeed, we might still be marveling at the Byzantine splendor of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre today, much as we do that of the imposing Hagia Sofia in Istanbul. But Omar—if he is rightly credited with this legendary act of deference to his new subjects—unknowingly guaranteed the church’s later destruction.

**The Destruction of 1009**

By the 11th century, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre not only had survived the periodic ravages of earthquake and fire to which it has always been subject, it had also enjoyed centuries of generally benign treatment under the successive Muslim dynasties—Omayyad, Abbasid and Fatimid—that ruled Jerusalem during the Early Arab period.

When the great destruction of the original Byzantine complex finally came, in the year 1009, it was on the orders of a particularly aberrant Fatimid caliph known as al-Hakim. (The event is described by, among others, the Arab historian Yahia ibn Sa`id.) Al-Hakim, ruling from Egypt and often regarded as insane, is remembered for his acts of extreme cruelty and religious intolerance, and in the Holy Land, where he unleashed a savage persecution of Christians, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre became a special target of his wrath. (It is said that al-Hakim was aware of a particular annual observance in the church, the ceremony of the “Holy Fire” on the eve of Easter—documented as early as the 9th century and still celebrated today—and that he intensely hated the rite, considering it to be bogus.)

Arriving in Jerusalem on October 18th, 1009, Hakim’s men, at his instruction, began systematically demolishing the Holy Sepulchre church. They started with the Tomb itself, the free-standing, shaped bedrock monument which was the sacred focus of the entire complex. Indeed, it is said they put out a “contract” on the Tomb and that a man from the town of Ramle took up the task, first burning the structure with fire and then hacking away at the weakened stone until virtually nothing remained above floor level. Once the Tomb and its decorative attachments had thus been reduced to rubble, Hakim’s men applied the same perverse thoroughness to the rest of the Constantinian structures, pulling down, bit by bit, both the rotunda and the long basilical church, the *Martyrium*. Methodically toppling all the walls and columns they could reach, they stopped only when the growing piles of debris buried—and protected—what lay beneath. The devastation was total.

What is left from the 4th century complex today? Of the original tomb of Jesus, almost nothing. Based on a report from 1810 when the present edicule was erected, a few traces of the
original bedrock of the tomb chamber remain, especially on the northern and southern sides, in one place to a height of over one meter. As for the rotunda, nestled as it is into the bedrock of the old quarry, the original Constantinian walls on its west side largely survived, in places to a height of some 11 meters, though today this masonry is mostly obscured by later construction. Also, the northern wall of the Tri-portico—perhaps overlooked by Hakim’s men as a merely connecting structure or simply buried beneath the piles of debris—remains largely intact; as noted above, it is visible in the North Aisle as the long, interior north wall of today’s church. Finally, the southeastern corner of the outer, eastern atrium, including two of its portals, also survived (these are the remains visible within the Russian Hospice and the adjacent shop, as noted). Otherwise, almost without exception, the vast, splendid Constantinian complex—after standing for almost 700 years—was gone.

Connected to the destruction are two more of the intriguing ironies and historical twists swirling about this amazing place: When huge groups of Christian pilgrims flocked to Jerusalem in 1033 to mark what some regarded as the millennium of Christ’s death and resurrection, they were forced to hold their special observances amid the grim ruins of the once-glorious church, now a dismal shadow of what once was. And, when an extended series of severe earthquakes struck the Holy Land that same year, 1033-34, damaging many of the walls and monuments of Jerusalem, Constantine’s expansive sacred complex had already suffered its great desolation—at the hands of men!

The 11th Century Restoration

On their own, the poor Christian community of medieval Jerusalem was completely ill-equipped to rebuild the church structures that had been lost, even though several years after the destruction, as part of a peace treaty, al-Hakim’s Fatimid successor had granted permission to do so. Apparently the local community did undertake some small-scale restoration, as early as 1012, but it was only with the accession of Byzantine Emperor Constantine IX Monomachus, in 1042, that sufficient imperial funds were allocated to carry out a proper, though still limited, six-year rebuilding project.

To restore the focus of the church on the place of Jesus' Tomb, Monomachus made a replacement edicule from masonry, since the bedrock of the tomb was mostly gone, and around this he rebuilt the rotunda and its dome. In their re-creation of the rotunda, it is evident—and not surprising—that Monomachus' engineers used salvaged pieces from the ruined Constantinian church. This fact is reflected, for example, in the disproportionately short, fat columns we see in the Rotunda today, as well as in the columns’ mis-matched bands and tapers. Reading these architectural clues, experts suggest that some of the largest column pieces left over from Hakim’s destruction—some “tops” and some “bottoms”—were cut to exactly half their original length and re-used.

On the east side of the rotunda, Monomachus built a massive, soaring arch which remains a centerpiece of the church today. Connecting with this arch was an eastern apse (removed by the Crusaders in the next century) whose High Altar would have effectively turned the rotunda itself into a church. In the north transept off the rotunda (the area of the present Franciscan Chapels), the striking floor of inlaid black and white marble one sees today is an exact replica of an 11th century pavement laid as part of Monomachus’ restoration (the damaged original was moved to a
gallery area of the church in 1968).

Parallel to the remaining north wall of the Holy Garden, Monomachus also re-erected a row of columns and arches to at least partially restore the old Tri-portico, or inner atrium. Those columns are still visible in today’s North Aisle, the northernmost of two parallel, adjacent colonnades, and, once again, the mismatched columns, bases, and capitals reflect the seemingly makeshift nature of the 11th century rebuilding. On the east side of the Tri-portico, where the grand basilica had once stood, the restored colonnade now fronted three newly-designed apsidal chapels; these, however, were also removed by the Crusaders less than a century later and are known today only from literary sources.

Beneath the nave of the ruined Martyrium, between its two central foundation walls, the 11th century builders probably excavated the present St. Helena’s Chapel area. In the chapel, each of the side walls visible today was once a stylobate—an unseen column-bearing foundation wall—of the 4th century basilica. Here, Monomachus’ engineers would have also cut away bedrock to form the lower part of the south wall and to make a level floor. Some experts think they cut the staircase leading down to the Chapel of the Finding of the Cross at this time as well.

Among the cluster of Byzantine structures on the northwest side of the Rotunda, the former open courtyard of the Patriarchate was now turned into an enclosed, east-oriented apsidal chapel, with a forecourt lying to the west. This is today’s Franciscan Chapel of the Apparition.

Finally, a new entrance to the church was made on the south side of the Tri-portico, fronted by a large courtyard (today’s Forecourt). On the west side of this courtyard, the three small
chapels seen today were erected, the center one, as mentioned, possibly built around the original early Byzantine baptistery.

We have already noted how Monomachus’ rebuilding of the church at times made use of salvaged parts of the original Byzantine structures, the most striking examples being the truncated monolithic columns of the Rotunda and the re-erected northern colonnade of the Holy Garden, where the elements seem almost comically mis-matched. We should realize, however, that this re-use of older architectural elements, practiced likewise by the Crusaders in the following century, probably transcended the purely practical consideration of “recycling” the available building materials. It almost certainly carried another, deeper meaning as well. We can imagine that it gave these latter-day builders—and the thousands of the faithful who would view their handiwork—a tangible link to the original, ancient church and, by extension, to the essential holiness of the place.

The Crusader Church

The destruction of the Holy Sepulchre church in 1009 was surely among the many causes of the Crusades, as were the capture of Jerusalem by the Seljuk Turks in 1071, their desecration of the holy places, and especially their interruption of Christian pilgrimage. In response, the Pope himself, Urban II, provided the immediate, formal impetus for these “holy wars,” when at a church council in 1095 he called for the re-conquest of the Holy Land. Taking up the call, hundreds of thousands from all over Europe—eventually, even children—filled the ranks of the Crusader armies and began descending in wave after wave upon the land where Jesus once lived.

It is one of the ironies of history that early in 1099, while the First Crusade was enroute to the Holy Land, the Fatimid dynasty, a relatively tolerant regime despite the aberrant al-Hakim, had actually retaken Jerusalem from the offending Seljuk Turks. The massive Crusader enterprise, however, once set in motion, seemingly could not be halted, and the stage was set for what few today would argue was one of the darkest episodes in the history of Christianity.

When the Crusaders first entered Jerusalem under Godfrey de Bouillon on July 15th, 1099—in their perverse zeal slaughtering many of the city’s residents, Moslems, Jews, and Eastern Christians alike—it was to the diminished Church of the Holy Sepulchre that they came, with pious tears, to sing their *Te Deum*. Among the survivors who fled before them were the Greek clergy, long the overlords of the Holy Sepulchre but now abruptly displaced by the newly arrived Latin clerics.

The Crusaders were slow to alter the meager church of Monomachus which they encountered, but, working in stages, they created almost all the structures we see today, here and there incorporating parts of the earlier churches.

First, the Crusader builders apparently took the previously-excavated area of the Chapel (or Crypt) of St. Helena and significantly altered it to create the enclosed underground chapel we see today. This chapel’s arches, vaulting, and central cupola all date from the 12th century, but the mismatched, disproportionately large capitals show that the Crusaders were still re-using pieces from the ruined Constantinian church. Beyond and below the St. Helena chapel, in the deepest part of the ancient quarry, the Crusaders (perhaps adopting an existing chapel) probably attached to this area for the first time the tradition of the “Finding of the True Cross;” despite the oft-
repeated claim, there is no evidence that this area ever served as a cistern.

In 1114 the Crusader engineers began building a monastery, the cloisters of the Canons of the Holy Sepulchre. The Canons were Augustinian clerics, ultimately set apart as a separate order, who had been appointed to the service of the church, among their duties the recitation of the daily Office in the Latin Rite. The cloisters, erected where the great *Martyrium* once stood, have themselves fallen victim to the ravages of time, however a few meager remains are visible on today’s roof area, amid the clustered huts of the Ethiopian monastery: On the west wall are the traces of columns and arches, and a blocked door which once led into the main church; nearby, lining the south side of the roof compound, are a few surviving windows and vaulted chambers of the medieval refectory, or dining hall.

In 1119, the Crusaders completely replaced the edicule, the monument marking the place of Jesus' tomb, in the center of the rotunda. Whereas the original Byzantine monument featured an open porch supported by columns in front of the burial chamber, the Crusader version was the first to include, in the same place, an enclosed vestibule (corresponding to the “Chapel of the Angels” in the present 1810 edicule).

It was not until 1131 that the Crusaders began erecting the massive piers, arches, and vaulting of their great cruciform church, centering it on the old inner atrium or Holy Garden. The Crusader edifice was generally modeled on European churches of the time, but had a special plan unique to this site: The new church, east-west in its orientation, communicated on its west end with the older rotunda through Monomachus’ great arch (with its connecting apse now removed), and had its façade and main portals *on the side*, on the south.

The domed central “choir” of the Crusader church—the church did not have a true nave—is
the present Catholicon or Greek Choir. Today, it is hard to appreciate the expansiveness or even the cruciform plan of the Crusader church because of two 19th century repair walls (discussed below), unfortunate additions which not only block the view through the transept but serve to isolate the central choir from the aisles, essentially turning it into a separate church.

On the north side of the choir, the Crusaders created two aisles. This is today’s North Aisle area, one of the best places to visually trace the church’s checkered architectural history: (1) The Crusader builders retained the north wall of the 4th century Holy Garden as the north wall of their church; (2) they kept Monomachus’ mis-matched 11th century colonnade by which he had restored a section of the old Tri-portico; and (3) just inside this colonnade they now built another row of columns and massive piers delineating the two northern aisles of the new church.

Above these Northern Aisles, the Crusaders constructed broad galleries, to better accommodate the ever-growing number of pilgrims; ironically, most modern visitors to the church are unaware of these largely empty upper spaces, long the private domain of the Franciscans. Wide galleries likewise took shape around most of the circumference of the
Rotunda, at the same level as (and connecting with) the other galleries. The original 4th century rotunda most likely lacked such upper galleries, since the Crusaders now felt constrained to buttress the Rotunda with radiating walls in places, to help bear the additional weight. (Visiting any of these gallery areas today requires special permission; the Rotunda gallery of the Armenians, the most accessible, is worth an inquiry).

On the east end of their church the Crusaders built two concentric apses, with the space between them forming a processional way, or Ambulatory. Then, projecting from the outer apse were three smaller apses, each forming a small chapel. All of these structures remain perfectly intact today. Between two of the small apses, the Crusader-period stairway still descends to the underground chapels already mentioned. Also from the Ambulatory, a still-existing ornate portal gave access to the cloisters to the east.

In what would have otherwise been the Crusader church’s south aisle, the tall rock pillar of Calvary was now enclosed beneath the roof of the larger Church of the Holy Sepulchre for the first time, with chapels on two levels surrounding and almost totally obscuring the rock itself.

Also on the south side were the façade and the church’s twin portals, their bronze doors opening onto the Forecourt we know today. The easternmost of these two portals was blocked by the Muslim authorities in the post-Crusader era and remains so to this day. Gracing the Crusader lintels were two ornate, stone-carved panels. (Removed for safekeeping after suffering damage in a 1927 earthquake, the panels are viewable today in Jerusalem’s Rockefeller Museum). Bordering the Crusaders’ Forecourt on the south, a row of columns supported a covered portico; many of its column bases remain in place today, as do fragments of the western end of the arcade.

In the northeast corner of the Forecourt, the Crusaders built steps leading up to an ornately covered landing with a cupola, and from there a door provided a special ceremonial entrance to the upstairs chapels of Calvary. This was the route by which Crusader-era pilgrims entered the church, following the Stations of the Cross. Today the landing is glass-enclosed and known as the Franks Chapel, and what was once the second-story entrance door to Calvary, blocked in the post-Crusader period, has been altered to make a window.

In the northwest corner of the Forecourt, the bell-tower was added in 1170. That the tower was added as an afterthought is evident from the way it interrupts the symmetry of the façade, even breaking into the curved decorative molding around another now-obscured window.
Among the cluster of auxiliary structures northwest of the Rotunda, the Crusaders kept (but altered somewhat) the 11th century apsidal chapel (today’s Chapel of the Apparition). To the west of this chapel they created a new entrance to the church, one destined to be short-lived however, for in the post-Crusader period it was blocked by the Moslem authorities and never reopened. (This ornate doorway, partially visible today but often overlooked, faces the Old City’s Christian Quarter Road, near the junction with Greek Patriarchate Road; its decorative carved molding is nearly identical to that of the main portals in the church’s façade. Inside the church, fragments of the steps that once ascended to this doorway are still visible, in the center of a tiny courtyard of the Franciscans.

The completed church was a classic expression of medieval French architecture, as interpreted by the Crusaders’ architect, Maître Jourdain, executed in a style that has been called transitional between Romanesque and Gothic. Although evidence suggests that construction was still unfinished at the time, the church’s official dedication was held on the symbolic date of July 15, 1149: fifty years to the day after the Crusaders’ first arrival in Jerusalem.

The Latter Christian Communities of the Holy Sepulchre and the Status Quo

If there was ever a place that belonged to all Christians everywhere, serving as a focus of their devotion and aspirations, it is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It is not surprising, then, that down through the centuries various denominations have always vied for the privilege of praying or saying mass next to the holy sites within the church. Nor is it surprising, perhaps—though regrettable—that the conflicting interests and claims of various Christian groups over the Holy Sepulchre have at times led to prolonged squabbling, or even erupted into bloody disputes.

For many centuries this colorful and confusing aspect of the church’s history had other players as well: Jerusalem’s latter Moslem overlords, first the Ayubbid and Mamluk dynasties of medieval times, and then the Ottoman Turks who, beginning in 1517, ruled the city for exactly 400 years. Finding themselves in what often seemed a forgotten backwater of their empires, the minor functionaries who typically ruled Jerusalem over these 700-plus years relished all the more the control they exercised over the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Whether governing pilgrim access to the church or doling out special privileges to the church’s Christian communities, first to one and then to another, this succession of obscure emirs and pashas always managed in the process to enrich their own coffers through the extraction of exorbitant taxes.

When the European Crusaders arrived in the Holy Land in 1099, their Latin clerics as a
matter of course displaced the Greeks as overseers of the church. After they were themselves evicted from Jerusalem in 1187, the church was closed and the Crusaders subsequently gained brief access only during cease-fires in 1192 and 1229. Then in 1246 the Sultan Ajub handed the keys of the church over to two Moslem families who were to open the doors to arriving pilgrims, a kindness traditionally granted, again, only on payment of a heavy tax. (Though the taxing of pilgrims was abolished by the Turks in 1831, the tradition of Moslem doorkeepers survives in somewhat altered form today).

In the post-Crusader period, as the various Christian communities slowly came back to Jerusalem (the Franciscans, for example, returned in 1335), each in turn naturally sought to re-establish itself within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The inevitable competition that arose over the centuries—to secure rights and privileges from the Moslem authorities—caused some parts of the church to change hands many times. Nor is it surprising that, amid this intense rivalry, some groups fared better than others. One little-known community, for example, the Georgians, quit the Holy Sepulchre church (and Jerusalem) altogether in 1644, no longer able to afford the expensive deals with the Ottoman Turks. The Ethiopians likewise left the confines of the church a few years later, for much the same reason, and ever since have been largely relegated to the roof-top monastery where they live today.

Though squabbles over issues of possession and rights within the church had always erupted periodically, the frequency and intensity of these conflicts in the mid-19th century finally led the Ottoman Turkish authorities to step in. Seeking to impose a measure of order that would minimize future disputes, the Turkish Sultan first appointed a committee to study the question, and then, in 1852, issued a firman (decree) that forms the basis of today’s Status Quo arrangement. The 1852 decree actually referred back to an older Status Quo, that of 1757, confirming it and directing that the arrangements of custodianship that existed then should prevail and be maintained in force indefinitely. (A major issue had been a Franciscan demand for restoration of certain of their rights taken away in 1757; this new decree, in effect, totally rejected the Franciscan claims.)

It should not surprise us, perhaps, that the competing claims of the various Christian communities of the Holy Sepulchre—many of them groups with a strong national-ethnic character—have at times made the church the focus of international politics. This was certainly the case in the mid-19th century, the hey-day of European imperialism, when the interests of certain Christian communities were represented on the world stage by national governments: At that time France represented the Franciscans, for example, and Russia the Greek Orthodox. It was in such a climate that the imposition of the 1852 firman in Jerusalem—sparking other underlying tensions, of course—led directly to an outbreak of hostilities in another land many hundreds of miles away, the Crimean War!

Even today, a dispute between, for example, the Egyptian Copts and the Ethiopian Christian community—their homelands neighbors on the African continent—can likewise have far-reaching political-diplomatic implications. (Such a dispute, over certain chapel areas, in fact exists as of this writing.) Thus, involvement by any third party that might attempt to intervene is vastly complicated, and a seemingly simple disagreement can defy resolution for many years.

Today the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is like no other church in the world: It has no single presiding pastor or priest, and no congregation, but instead is administered by six different Christian communities, each possessing and controlling one or more specific areas of the church
and sharing the rest. Indeed, it is one of the few places in the world where Eastern and Western Christians worship, though not together for the most part, at least under the same roof—and not infrequently at the same time!

The Holy Sepulchre’s three largest communities are the Latin or Roman Catholic, the Greek Orthodox, and the Armenians. The three smaller communities, with lesser rights, are the Syrian Orthodox, the Ethiopians, and the Coptic Church (the ancient Christian church of Egypt).

In this unique environment, the arcane, complex set of understandings known as the Status Quo achieves a certain equilibrium. Deriving, as mentioned, from the 1852 Turkish firman, it was formally documented by the British in the 1920s during their Mandate over Palestine (1920-1948), was faithfully maintained in subsequent years by both Jordan and Israel, and is still in force today. At once both rigid and delicate, the Status Quo (sometimes referred to as “the legal regime”) mostly holds in check the inevitable rivalries and disputes that arise, regulating how the spaces of the church are apportioned or shared, governing the various communities’ times and places of worship, and even dealing with issues like lighting and decoration. This, under the Status Quo, certain parts of the church are under the exclusive control of a specific community, while other areas, such as the Rotunda and Edicule, are shared in various ways.

The church today bears some colorful and sometimes poignant reminders of this unusual arrangement: In the small westernmost apse off the Rotunda (where the ancient burial niches can be seen) the unpaved dirt floor bears testimony that this area has been in dispute between two of the church’s communities—for nearly 200 years! The Armenians claim ownership of the space and refer to it by the proper but cumbersome name “Chapel of Nicodemus and St. Joseph of Arimathea.” The Syrian Orthodox, however, have the “right of use” under the Status Quo, and call it, not surprisingly, the “Syrian Chapel,” as it is more commonly known. The Syrians use the chapel only on Sundays and certain festivals, the only time the dilapidated wooden altar there is dressed.

Then, on the façade of the church, above the blocked eastern portal, a small ladder can be seen connecting an upper window with a small ledge area just below, actually the top of a projecting cornice. This wooden ladder appears in many historic photographs, drawings, and paintings of the church, including an 1830s lithograph by the British artist David Roberts. The ladder is said to date from Ottoman times when the clergy, who were being taxed every time they left or entered the building, responded by setting up living quarters within the church! It seems the tiny ledge, accessed by the ladder, not only allowed the resident Armenians to haul up supplies of food via a rope and pulley, but also afforded their only opportunity to get fresh air and sunshine. At one stage, apparently, they even used the ledge to grow their own fresh vegetables (the potted plants are visible in many of the historic pictures)! Today the ledge is used only occasionally, as a vantage point for viewing special ceremonies in the Forecourt below, yet the ladder is always there, as a permanent, symbolic fixture—a simple, visual declaration that the Armenians own and control the ledge, the window, and the Chapel of St. John in the gallery area inside. Simply put, a ladder was there when the Status Quo came into effect and there it remains!
Finally, in a fascinating little ritual going back many centuries and enjoyed by visitors today, members of the various Christian communities are locked inside the church every night by a Moslem doorkeeper. Once the venerable wooden doors are swung shut, this Moslem porter must ascend a ladder to reach and secure the latch, he then passes the ladder back through a small hatch to the sextons inside—and finally takes the keys home! The opening and closing of the church, what one might think would be simple acts, are actually highly prescriptive rituals. There are, for example, three distinct types of “openings” defined for various occasions. These rituals, and the traditional Moslem control over the keys and doors of the church, apparently passed down through two particular families since the 13th century (one of them the family of Palestinian academic Dr. Sari Nusseibeh), are of course incorporated into the Status Quo.

The Fire of 1808 and Subsequent Repairs

In 1808 a destructive fire broke out in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, consuming the dome of the Rotunda and the dome and roof of the Catholicon, or Greek Choir. The most severe damage occurred at the west end of the Catholicon where it joins the Rotunda, where some of the limestone elements of the structure were “calcinated” and weakened by the intense heat. After the fire, it is said that the Russian government, acting on behalf of the church’s Orthodox communities, paid 2.5 million rubles to the Ottoman Turkish authorities—just to obtain permission to repair the church, while the work itself cost only 1.5 million!

The repairs and renovations made in the wake of the fire gave rise to some notable features of today’s church, a few of them quite unfortunate in terms of the architectural integrity of the historic structures. Alas, it was a case, as someone has observed, where “the remedy was worse than the disease.”

First, the above-mentioned repair walls were erected on either side of the Crusader nave or “choir,” to support the damaged arches and the new dome above. These walls in effect turned the nave into a separate church within the larger church and, regrettably, almost completely destroy the visual unity and expansiveness of the great Crusader edifice. And, even though the walls are no longer structurally necessary, they will probably never be removed, owing, again, to the delicate Status Quo by which the Christian communities share the church.

Beneath the new dome of the Rotunda, the present Edicule was built in 1810 to replace the fire-damaged one dating from 1555. Today, the marble of this 1810 tomb monument is itself crumbling, held together by an exterior framework of iron beams installed during the British Mandatory period. The question of what will become of this admittedly shabby structure—and, indeed, what will replace it—may be the ultimate test of how much cooperation is possible.
among the Holy Sepulchre’s controlling Christian fraternities.

The 19th century (various dates are given) also saw the Rotunda’s processional way blocked by ill-conceived storerooms, so there is no longer any sense of the ancient, sweeping ambulatory that once existed between the ring of great columns and the outer apsidal wall, now almost entirely hidden. Finally, the staircase leading to the upstairs Calvary chapels was installed by the Greeks in 1810, behind the church’s long-blocked eastern portal.

**Twentieth Century Renovations**

In 1954, the church’s three main communities agreed to find a permanent solution to the building’s many structural problems, and in 1960, after more years of negotiations and discussion, they finally agreed on a plan to carry out much-needed repairs and renovations. It was work that was to continue for nearly the next forty years. Some of the difficulties to be addressed went back to a destructive fire in 1934, after which the rotunda was shored up by metal scaffolding; to extensive damage sustained in a 1927 earthquake; and even back to the great fire of 1808. The problems were such that in 1934 the Latin Patriarch had actually proposed the total demolition of all the buildings!

After trial soundings and initial stabilization work, the actual restoration began in 1967. The guiding principle of the project was that only elements incapable of fulfilling their structural function were to be replaced; this also meant, however, that issues of necessity or aesthetics (as with the 1810 repair walls and the rotunda storerooms) would not be taken into consideration. For example, the two repair walls, the side walls of the “Catholicon,” were in fact removed for a period of two years while the adjacent stonework was being repaired. Then—though no longer structurally necessary—the walls were re-erected at the insistence of the Greek Orthodox, who were accustomed to hanging their icons there (and, presumably, under the Status Quo, entitled to do so).

As the work proceeded, special jacks were used to temporarily shift huge architectural elements a fraction of an inch, making possible the removal and replacement of adjacent stones, one by one. Modern stonemasons were even trained to dress the replacement stones in the style of a particular historical period—the characteristic Crusader cross-hatch pattern, for example—so the new masonry would match the old as much as possible.

The great marble columns of the rotunda received special attention, a project that went on for several years and was completed in 1980. The columns themselves, fire-damaged and crumbling, had not been seen for many years, having been sheathed with protective concrete; this casing, in fact, had given them the appearance of square pillars, as seen in some older photographs. In order to restore the columns to their original (i.e., 11th century) appearance, each in turn was painstakingly removed and then replaced with an exact copy, right down to their mis-matched bands and tapers! As for the dome above, its skeleton of iron arches, dating to 1870, was refurbished and around it a new concrete shell was fashioned (1979-80).

After the major structural work was completed, the series of small black-and-white patches visible in the church today were applied to certain key architectural elements throughout the building. These reflective markers will now allow experts to scientifically monitor the stability of the church’s structures over time, utilizing laser-based technology.
Installed in connection with the architectural restoration, two major new adornments of the church are worthy of mention. One is the great wall mosaic which one sees straight ahead on entering the church; it depicts, in their proper orientation to the sites within the church, the events being commemorated nearby: the removal of Jesus’ body from the cross, the anointing of the body, and the entombment.

Another striking addition is the golden sunburst now gracing the interior of the dome, completed only in 1997; featuring a combination of natural and artificial lighting, the 12-rayed design symbolizes the Twelve Apostles and adds a special dimension to the Rotunda, which for so long had been jammed with metal scaffolding and cloaked in darkness.

Recent Archaeological Discoveries

In connection with the renovations of recent years, the three major communities also agreed to have experts carry out archaeological explorations, each in their own areas of the church. In all, 13 trenches were excavated. These were primarily to check the stability of Crusader structures, but certain other soundings were for purely archaeological purposes. The happy by-product was a greater understanding of the history of the various structures erected here through the ages and their relationship to the underlying topography. Most of the discoveries from these excavations have already been mentioned above in their chronological context, but perhaps it is useful to summarize all the major findings here.

First, the Armenians had excavations carried out in a non-public area behind their St. Helena Chapel, a space known as St. Vartan’s Chapel (sometimes viewable on request). There they found extensive—and quite impressive—evidence of ancient quarrying. Both the style of the tool marks left by the quarrymen and the “shadow” of the removed stones, specifically their dimensions compared with known ancient units of measurement, helped the archaeologists date the quarry to the First Temple period. In the adjacent Chapel of the Finding of the Cross, where tool marks had always been visible in the walls, an additional area of unmistakable quarry cuttings was found beneath the floor.

In both places—the deepest part of the old quarry underlying the entire church—it was evident that the ancient quarrymen had actually tunneled beneath an overlying layer to extract the prized meleke limestone below, creating in effect a man-made cave. Thus, before Hadrian’s engineers filled this area in the 2nd century to build the Roman-style forum above, they apparently stabilized the cave with three support walls, parts of which were found in St. Vartan’s Chapel.

On top of the bedrock at the bottom of the quarry, the excavators also found a packed earth
floor, signifying human habitation. Based on the pottery finds here, the occupation was dated to the late 8th century B.C., a time when Jerusalem is thought to have had a dramatic increase in population, especially of refugees from the Assyrian-dominated Northern Kingdom of Israel. These finds also suggest that quarrying operations, at least in this deepest part of the quarry, ceased at about the same time.

Also uncovered in St. Vartan’s Chapel was an interesting graffito, the so-called “Jerusalem Ship.” It consists of a line drawing of a sailing vessel, along with a Latin inscription most often rendered as DOMINE IVIMUS (“Lord, we came”). However, the unusual location of the graffito makes its interpretation especially difficult: It was drawn on a stone built into one of the above-mentioned 2nd century support walls in the deep quarry—a place where it would never be seen! Some have suggested that the stone was inscribed on the surface and installed in the underground wall as an afterthought. The details of the drawing actually reflect considerable nautical knowledge and are consistent with a 2nd or even 1st century date, as is the inscription. However, many alternative readings and datings—and various interpretations as to its meaning and scenarios for its placement—have been proposed, making the “Jerusalem Ship” graffito, though intriguing, a truly enigmatic find.

The Greek Orthodox, excavating beneath the inner apse area of their Catholicon (i.e., the east-oriented Crusader apse), uncovered the foundations of the single, west-oriented apse of the 4th century Martyrium and the section of wall into which the apse was inscribed. The exact location of the apse had previously been unknown. A few meters behind this Byzantine apse, i.e. in the direction of the Rotunda (a decorative arcade with spiral-fluted columns now marks the location), the eastern stylobate, or column-bearing foundation wall, of the old Tri-portico atrium was also found, with one original column base still in place.

In the Franciscan chapel areas north of the Rotunda and extending nearly to the Edicule, excavators found several Roman-period structures. The remains of walls are probably best interpreted as “consolidation walls” whose function was to stabilize the fills on which monumental structures above were built. One other intriguing find was a vaulted tunnel, whose purpose remains largely a mystery. All these structures, however, are thought to be related to the Hadrianic forum and temple from the 2nd century.

Beneath the Forecourt, near the church’s Crusader façade, a fine east-west oriented wall dated to the 2nd century was documented. One interpretation of this wall is that it was a western extension of the southern temenos retaining wall of the Roman temple (visible within the Russian Hospice, as mentioned previously). Preserved to a great height, it is the largest vestige of Hadrianic masonry ever found at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This particular wall had later been incorporated as the north wall of a large Byzantine cistern which still underlies the Forecourt. This cistern itself, amid its many interconnecting chambers, yielded more evidence of earlier, Herodian period rock-hewn tombs.

Finally, archaeological explorations were carried out in a hidden, non-public area behind and below the second-floor Calvary chapels. A small cave discovered there, hewn into the east side of the rock
of Calvary (at and just below the church’s main floor level), has been interpreted in various ways, but is probably best identified as a tiny chapel of the late Byzantine period. Nearby, a small, stone-carved Roman period libation altar was excavated, along with coins and pottery of the early 3rd century and traces of pre-Constantinian walls. Taken together, they reflect activity here, around the projecting rock of Calvary, in the Late Roman period.

Especially intriguing is the presence of a Roman-style altar here, the most obvious connection being to the cult practices surrounding the shrine of Venus-Aphrodite, whose statue was set up and venerated atop the rock. Again, our sources for this are the church fathers Jerome, who attests to the shrine itself (Letters 58:3), and Eusebius, who mentions the offering of “detestable oblations ... on profane and accursed altars” (Life 3:26). Now, actual evidence of these pagan practices has come to light, the altar a mute reminder that—according to the Church Fathers—a Roman emperor, Hadrian, once tried to obscure for all time the places held most sacred by the first Christians.

—END—

Suggested Reading


Biddle, Martin; Avni, Gideon; Seligman, Jon; et al. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Rizzoli/Random House, 2000.


