



Solomon and The Petrified Birds on the Dome of the Rock

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Introduction

On the southern exterior side of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, on the right-hand side of the main entrance, there is a small decoration, which consists of two marble slabs—two cross-sections sliced from the same block of stone. They have been placed side-by-side so that their veins form a symmetrical pattern that resembles two birds sitting on a vase staring at each other. They are framed, like a picture, by four marble strips of a darker color (Fig. 1). Visitors have described the birds as “magpies” (Fig. 2), “doves,” “pigeons,” and “roosters.”¹ In terms of the design scheme and history of the structure, this decoration stands out for six reasons.

First, this is a decorative element that disturbs the symmetry of the southern wall and is in fact the most significant asymmetrical visual element in any of the piers

around the eight outer walls of the Dome of the Rock.² Myriam Rosen-Ayalon described the Dome of the Rock as a “well-thought-out” building, and she added that “nothing in its plan is accidental or coincidental.”³ Therefore, the existence of a decoration that breaks the pattern begs to be examined and interpreted.

Second, marble slabs were commonly used to create symmetrical patterns in both the Christian and Islamic worlds. Members of these cultures often identified meaningful imagery in the veining of marble decorations, and in some instances came to revere these patterns as apotropaic or talismanic.⁴ Usually, these decorations were initially added to structures due to their general aesthetic quality, e.g., their pretty colors and

² There are other asymmetrical elements, none of which is as prominent as the frame with the birds. For example, as a guard from the Waqf kindly pointed out to me, there is a sundial on a pier on the right of the southwest wall.

³ Rosen-Ayalon, *Early Islamic Monuments* (1989), 24.

⁴ On marble decorations and the images perceived in them in the Christian and Islamic worlds, see Flood, “God’s Wonder” (2016) and “Animal, Vegetal and Mineral” (2015), Barry, “Walking on Water” (2007), and Mitchell, “Believing is Seeing” (2012). The symmetrical marble patterns of the Dome of the Rock still attract attention. More recently, conspiracy-minded polemicists online have claimed that a pattern slightly to the right of the petrified birds represents a “demon.”

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¹ Burton, *Inner Life* (1875), 2: 89; Hanauer, *Tales Told in Palestine* (1904), 81; Hanauer, *Folk-Lore of the Holy Land* (1907), 47–48; and Evliyâ Çelebi, *Seyahatnâme* (1996), 9: 235.