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978-1-108-08063-7 - The Holy Sepulchre and the Temple at Jerusalem:

Being the Substance of Two Lectures, Delivered in the Royal Institution

James Fergusson

Excerpt

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# LECTURE

DELIVERED ON THE 21<sup>ST</sup> OF FEBRUARY, 1862.

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## PART I.

### INTRODUCTORY.

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

I cannot feel that any apology is required for introducing to your notice a subject which must be to all Christians the most interesting point of topographical Archæology. Nor will the place in which I bring it forward be considered inappropriate, inasmuch as no fortuitous discovery, no mere literary process, but one of pure induction, such as you continually hear applied in this room to physical phenomena, has led me from known facts to legitimate conclusions.

Although, some time since, Archæology was hardly looked upon as a science, the progress which it has made during the last few years, the number of facts patiently observed and carefully recorded, have fully entitled it to rank among the highest, as it is certainly one of the most interesting branches of human knowledge.

What I do feel may require some apology to many of you is, that, in order to make myself perfectly understood by all, I must begin at the very beginning of my subject, and commence by telling many of you what you already know as well as I

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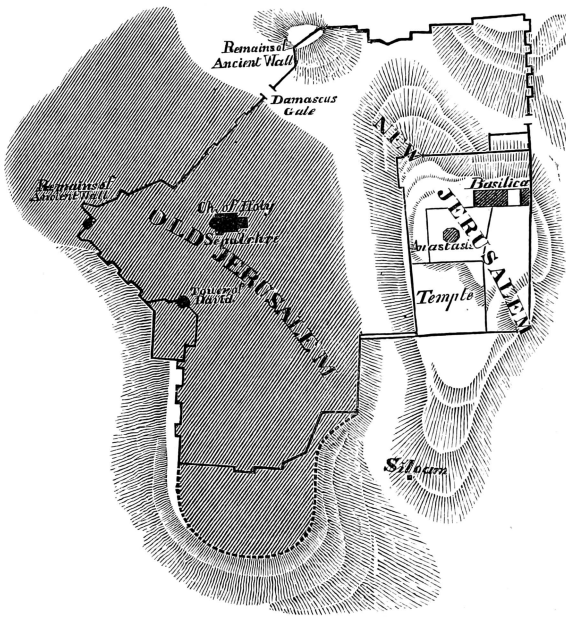
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do myself. Without this, I fear some may fail to appreciate the form of the superstructure from a want of knowledge of the base on which it is erected.

First, then, you are all of you aware that there is at Jerusalem a famous church known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, situated in the middle of the town, in what is now known and seems always to have been designated as the Christian quarter of the Holy City. In its present form this



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church is admitted to have been erected by the Crusaders during the course of the 12th century, say from A.D. 1100 to 1168. But it is generally believed to have been erected on the site of the church built at Jerusalem by Constantine in the 4th century, notwithstanding that no trace of the previous church is to be found in the present edifice.

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FEB. 1862. DOUBTS OF KORTE AND DR. CLARKE. 3

Although this is generally—it may almost be said universally—believed, still, on the other hand, many learned and pious men have entertained grave and serious doubts as to whether the little tabernacle which occupies the centre of the Rotunda of this church really does contain the tomb in which the Saviour was laid—whether, indeed, Constantine was not entirely mistaken in selecting this position for his church, and misled by the want of any satisfactory tradition as to the localities of the scenes of the Passion.

The first person who put these doubts into a tangible form was a German of the name of Korte, who made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem about the middle of the last century. When there he was so struck with what appeared to him the impossibility of reconciling the modern locality with the exigencies of the Bible narrative, that on his return home he published a work in which he stated his reasons for doubting whether what was shown him was or could be the Sepulchre of Christ. Like most men who announce new and disagreeable truths, he met only with contempt and contumely, and his book made no impression on the public. Next to him in importance, if not in date, was the celebrated Dr. Clarke, of Cambridge. He visited Jerusalem at the beginning of this century, and was so struck with the improbability of the supposed site being the true one, that he hardly condescended to argue the question, and treated it as simply preposterous.

Since his time many sincere and learned men, on visiting the place, have followed in the same path, and have expressed their doubts in arguments of more or less cogency. On the other hand, perhaps as many equally sincere and learned pilgrims have upheld the authenticity of the present site, and with at least equal success, as they have had all

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the *vis inertiae* of long-established tradition on their side to supply any failure of logic in dealing with the facts of the case.

Time will not allow of my entering fully on the arguments on either side at present. Those who wish to see all that can be urged in favour of the tradition, will find it stated in the Rev. George Williams's work entitled 'The Holy City,' more especially in the Chapter on the Sepulchre, written by the Rev. Professor Willis. Those whose tastes or reason incline the other way will find the arguments against the site tersely and logically summed up by Dr. Robinson, in his 'Biblical Researches in Palestine.'

It may, however, be stated generally, that those who cling to the traditions argue that Constantine, 300 years after the event, must have had better means of arriving at a correct conclusion than we can have, and would not have fixed on that site without good reasons for the selection; and add that since his time there has been no solution of continuity. On the other hand, it is urged that the Bible narrative represents Christ as going from the judgment-seat—admitted to be the Antonia—towards the country,—crucified outside the walls, and laid in a rock-cut sepulchre nigh at hand; whereas they contend that the present site was always inside the walls—that to reach it he must have passed through a great part of the city—that there is no rock in the present sepulchre, &c.

The opponents of the present site also add that, if we can now point to remains of ancient walls and buildings to the northward of the present church, these indications must have been ten times more distinct in the 4th century, before a dozen of sieges and the rebuilding and alterations of fifteen

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FEB. 1862. THE AUTHOR'S INDIAN EXPERIENCE.

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centuries had done so much to obliterate them. They contend that it is almost impossible that those who acted with Constantine could have been so ignorant of the Bible narrative as to place the sepulchre in what they must have seen was the middle of the old town, as it is of its modern successor.

These propositions are, of course, disputed by the opposite party, but it is easy to see that the real difficulty of the whole case is the want of a *tertium quid*. If this is not the sepulchre, the traditionalists ask, where is it? Nothing is more difficult than to prove a negative; and while there were no positive facts to rest upon, the argument was necessarily inconclusive, and probably incapable of settlement.

It was while the controversy was in this position that I became—I may say, almost by accident—entangled in its meshes; and in explaining to you how this came to pass, I trust you will pardon me if I speak more of myself than may be quite consistent with good taste. I would not do so did I not feel that by a personal narrative I can put the facts of the case more vividly before you, and in far less time, than I could by double the amount of impersonal circumlocution. If I succeed in this, I trust you will forgive the unwilling though apparent egotism.

During a long residence in India I occupied my leisure in studying the architecture of that glorious country, and applied myself to the investigation not only of the Buddhist and Hindoo, but to that of the Mahometan styles which had been practised there. I became perfectly familiar with the mosques of Agra and Delhi, and other great cities of the Moslem conquerors, and knew every form of tomb that had been used from the time of Kootub-ed-deen, the

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first conqueror, to that of the last Nawab of Lucknow. I had visited the mosques and tombs of Cairo and Egypt, and had acquainted myself with those of Persia, Syria, and Asia generally, in so far as was possible from the books then published. But in all my researches one building alone stood out strange and incomprehensible, and that was the so-called Mosque of Omar at Jerusalem. Mosque it certainly was not, for in its arrangements it transgressed the fundamental principles of mosque architecture. The essential definition of a mosque reduced to its simplest expression is that it is a wall at right angles to the direction of Mecca. The precept of the Koran is, "that all men, when they pray, shall turn towards the Kaaba," or holy house at Mecca, and consequently throughout the Moslem world indicators have been put up to enable the faithful to fulfil this condition. In India they face west, in Barbary east, in Syria south. It is true that when rich men or kings built mosques they frequently covered the face of this wall with arcades, to shelter the worshipper from the sun or rain. They enclosed it in a court, that his meditations might not be disturbed by the noises of the outside world. They provided it with fountains, that he might perform the required ablutions before prayer. But still the essential part of the mosque is the Mihrab or niche which points towards Mecca, and towards which when he bows, the worshipper knows that the Kaaba also is before him.

Now the building in question, so far from answering to this description, is an octagon, and with an entrance in each of the four faces fronting the Cardinal points of the compass, but, strange to say, with the principal entrance facing the south, or direction of Mecca, so that every

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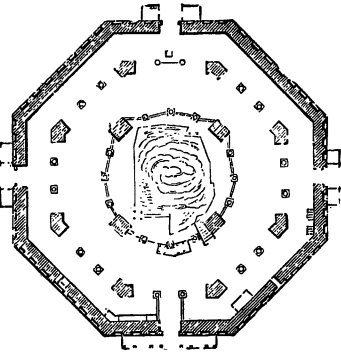
MOSLEM TOMBS.

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worshipper entering by it turns his back on the Holy Kaaba—a sacrilege which any one who has lived long among Moslems will easily feel and appreciate.

Had it been called the *Tomb* of Omar, I probably should hardly have inquired further.

Tombs in the earlier ages of the world were circular. They afterwards became octagonal and sometimes square, and generally, after the Roman period, were surmounted by domes, as this building is.



[No. 2.]

Plan of the Dome of Rock at Jerusalem.  
From Catherwood and Arundale.  
Scale 100 ft. to 1 in.

I had seen hundreds, I may almost say thousands, of Moslem tombs in the East, differing in no very essential respect, in so far as plan is concerned, from this one. Many had four entrances, but generally, it must be confessed, the door facing Mecca was closed, and ornamented with a Mihrab or niche of prayer; but this was not essential, and certainly not always the case.

Though therefore it might, in the then state of my knowledge, have been classed among the tombs, there unfortunately was no tradition or hint of any kind that either Omar or any Mahometan saint or celebrity had been buried beneath its dome.

If, therefore, it was neither mosque nor tomb, what was it? My knowledge was at fault, and I could suggest no answer.

While in this state of perplexity, I learned that Messrs. Catherwood and Arundale, accompanied by Mr. Bonomi,

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had gained access to the Haram area in 1833; had measured and drawn every part of the buildings within the sacred enclosure; and that these gentlemen were then in England. I, in consequence, obtained an introduction to them, and made an appointment to meet them and see their drawings at the house of Mr. Arundale's father-in-law, in Soho Square, in December, 1846.

After turning over the drawings carefully more than once, and examining them with care, I turned to Mr. Arundale, who was standing by me, and said, "Do you know what you have got here?"—"The Mosque of Omar," was his reply. "And who do you suppose built it?"—"Omar." "Omar!" I repeated. "It is impossible he could have done so. This is a Christian sepulchral building of the time of Constantine. It can be no other than the Church of the Holy Sepulchre."

I need hardly add that my new friends scarcely knew whether I was serious or in joke in proposing so startling an hypothesis. I urged them to publish the drawings. They declined. "They had been to every publisher in London—no one would look at them; they could not afford to do it themselves." Finding them immovable on this head, I proposed to purchase the drawings, and publish them. Finally we agreed to meet again on the following Monday.

The week that intervened I spent in the library of the British Museum, consulting every work on the subject to which I could obtain a reference. Everything I learnt confirmed me more and more in the conclusion I had arrived at from the architecture; and consequently, when we met, we soon came to terms. I agreed to pay a certain



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ARCHITECTURE.

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price for such drawings as I wanted, which Mr. Arundale was to furnish. Immediately afterwards I set myself to prepare for the publication of my work on the ‘Ancient Topography of Jerusalem,’ which appeared in 1847.

Now, what I want to explain to you this evening is; what were the data from which I arrived so suddenly at the conclusion, that a building always supposed to be of Saracenic architecture, was really of Christian origin; and why, after fifteen years, I still believe, more firmly than I did at first, that the building popularly known as the Mosque of Omar is, in reality, the sepulchral building which Constantine erected over what he believed to be the tomb of Christ.

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## PART II.

### ARCHITECTURE.

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IN attempting to explain the architectural peculiarities of the buildings within the Haram area, I fear I must again lay myself open to the charge of being too elementary. But, in order that all may follow what I am about to advance, this is probably indispensable.

Those who are familiar with the writings of architectural critics of the last century will recollect how completely the *litera scripta* prevailed over every other class of evidence in determining the age of buildings. If a monkish chronicler related that an abbey was burnt down, and rebuilt from its foundations, during the wars of the Roses, the antiquarians of that day saw nothing to invalidate this

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statement in the circular arches of the nave, or the lancets of the choir. Either these peculiarities were caprices of the architect employed in the restoration, or proofs that all styles were or might have been practised simultaneously during the middle ages, in the same incongruous jumble as prevails at the present day.

The early writings of Britton first let in some light on this subject. In the multifarious buildings which he illustrated, it was generally perceived that a certain form of style agreed with a certain date. Mediæval chronicles, however, in almost every instance, exaggerated so absurdly both as to destructions and rebuildings—that, so long as they were appealed to, there were too many striking exceptions to this rule, to allow of the doctrine of styles being generally accepted in Britton's day.

Rickman\* was the first who boldly dared to grapple with the subject. With very little knowledge of books, but a keen eye for style, he saw at a glance the value of the latter characteristic. Once he had grasped the idea, he set himself to work it out enthusiastically—invented a nomenclature, multiplied examples, and soon educed order out of chaos. Whewell and Willis followed in this path. The French, twenty years afterwards, caught up the idea, and soon surpassed us in the brilliancy of their classifications, and, at last, the Germans awoke to a sense of its importance.

As the case at present stands, it may be broadly asserted that, in every instance of conflicting evidence, an appeal to style is at once allowed to override the most minute and circumstantial written testimony. And now that the general

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\* The first edition of his work was published 1817.