

Wooden Beams from Herod's Temple Mount: Do They Still Exist?

By [Peretz Reuven](#)

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The Romans destroyed Herod's Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. Is it possible that some of the wooden beams from his Temple Mount have survived—and may be identified? I believe the answer is “yes.” Some of the beams may even be from the Temple.

Wooden beams of this quality—especially Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) and cypress (*Cypressus sempervirens*)—were extremely valuable and would have been used and reused, again and again.

Known to archaeologists as “secondary use,” the phenomenon of reuse is widely recognized, mostly in connection with stone building blocks but also with regard to other construction elements such as columns, capitals and bases. The same is true for wood. It was used again whenever possible.

Al-Aqsa Mosque is a prime example. It is one of the two major buildings on the Temple Mount; the other is the Dome of the Rock. Built in the late seventh century, the Dome of the Rock has survived essentially intact. This is not the case for the near-contemporaneous Al-Aqsa Mosque. It has been rebuilt several times.

Why the difference? As its name implies, the Dome of the Rock is built on rock and has been largely impervious to the relatively frequent earthquakes in Jerusalem. Al-Aqsa Mosque, however, is located on the southern end of the Temple Mount, sitting atop what is essentially dirt fill. Herod the Great expanded the southern end of the previous Temple Mount as it drops off into the Ophel. After constructing a new southern wall and linking it to an extension of the eastern wall and to his new western wall, Herod constructed arches in what is now known as Solomon's Stables and filled the rest in with dirt. In effect, Al-Aqsa is built on this dirt fill. It has often sustained serious damage as a result of earthquakes. Sometimes it required large-scale renovations. Wood that had previously been used in an earlier building was often incorporated into the reconstruction.

The original, early-eighth-century Al-Aqsa Mosque, an Umayyad construction, was completely destroyed by an earthquake between 746 and 749 C.E. It was rebuilt twice later in the eighth century and then destroyed again by an earthquake in 1033 C.E. The building that existed into the 20th century is a Fatimid construction, but each rebuild used building materials from the previous structure.

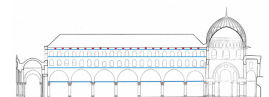
In 1927 a serious earthquake shook Jerusalem. It didn't inflict much harm to the Dome of the Rock, but Al-Aqsa suffered major damage. A less-serious earthquake occurred in 1937, causing additional damage. Essentially, the structure had to be rebuilt yet again. Between 1938 and 1942, major portions of the building were repaired and rebuilt under the direction of the Egyptian architect Mahmoud Bey Ahmad, with funding provided by Egypt. All of the dismantling and restoration work was carefully documented by R.W. Hamilton, director of the British Mandatory Department of Antiquities, and published in a comprehensive report.¹

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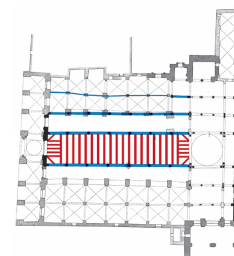
The mosque, both before and after, consists of a central nave with a dome at the southern end (the gray dome is one of the landmarks of Jerusalem), with two sets of aisles on either side of the nave. Columns separate the aisles from each other and from the nave.

The construction of the mosque included enormous wooden beams—mostly Cedars of Lebanon and cypress—in the ceiling to support the roof. Similar beams were used in the dome over the southern part of the nave. Twenty great tie beams (principal beams) span the width of the central nave. On each end of the tie beams were carved cypress boards. These great tie beams are more than 42 feet long! The principal rafters of the roof rested in slots cut in the upper surface of these tie beams above the two long walls.

At certain levels, beams were built into the length of the walls as bond timbers (horizontal tiered beams that strengthen walls longitudinally). In the nave, the highest of the bond timbers were placed at the top of the walls and served as wall plates to carry the principal tie beams of the nave roof. The next levels of bond timbers rest under each row of upper windows. The lowest bond timbers are tie beams above the capitals of the columns. Throughout the length of the arcades the main beams are scarfed (or joined) together above the capitals. Each arcade is branched by a series of wooden tie beams



laid end-to-end on the capitals. When stripped of some modern boards that covered them, the tie beams in the central nave, and in some cases in the side aisles, were covered with paintings that can be dated from the 11th to 13th centuries.



What happened on the Temple Mount between the Roman destruction in 70 C.E. and the construction of Al-Aqsa Mosque is a bit unclear. One view is that it remained empty, essentially a garbage dump in fulfillment of Jesus' prediction that "not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down" (*Matthew 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6*). Others argue that the Roman emperor Hadrian would not have left the Temple Mount empty when he recreated Jerusalem as Aelia Capitolina at the time of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome (132–135 C.E.). The 045 second–third-century Roman historian Dio Cassius reports that Hadrian erected a temple to Jupiter on the Temple Mount. However, the anonymous Bordeaux Pilgrim reports that he saw only statues of Roman emperors when he visited the Temple Mount in the fourth century.²

In any event, there is no report of a building there when the Muslims erected the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. Were some wooden beams from Herod's Temple or other Temple Mount buildings still lying around at this time, and then used and reused in the construction and various reconstructions of Al-Aqsa Mosque?

It is clear from Hamilton's careful report of the reconstruction following the earthquakes of 1927 and 1937 that most of the mosque's Cedar of Lebanon and cypress wood was in secondary use after having been used in an earlier construction (or constructions). The beams often display depressions and protrusions intended to hold them in place from their earlier use.

Carvings of rosettes on the soffit (underside) of a principal beam supporting the nave bear a striking resemblance to rosettes in the sixth-century Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, indicating that the Al-Aqsa beam probably came from a Byzantine church and its earlier use should be dated to the same period as the church.



Other beams (with woodcarvings) removed from the Al-Aqsa nave have been preserved in the Rockefeller Museum in east Jerusalem and in the Islamic Museum on the Temple Mount. Some kept in the Rockefeller have been carbon-14 dated at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot, Israel. One cypress timber was dated to the first century B.C.E. and probably came from a nearby structure on the Temple Mount that existed at that time. Other logs that were removed from Al-Aqsa in the early 1960s were dated to the ninth–second centuries B.C.E., according to the report.³ One beam was dated to 2,834 years before present, +/- 180 years (setting 1950 as the origin of the BP scale, i.e., 884 B.C.E. +/- 180 years). It is possible that some of the timbers originally used in the construction of Al-Aqsa Mosque survived from the First Temple Period!



Undecorated beams that had been used in earlier reconstructions of Al-Aqsa were often left lying around on the Temple Mount if they were not used in later reconstructions. Gradually they disappeared, a process that has sped up in recent years, especially during the recent Muslim excavation of a large stairway leading down to an underground mosque in Solomon's Stables on the 046 southern end of the Temple Mount^a Even worse, the area between Al-Aqsa and the Islamic Museum, previously used for storage, was adapted for other purposes. The beams that had been stored there were piled outside with other ancient beams from other storerooms and were left unprotected. Most of them gradually disappeared.

As a result of concerns expressed by the Public Committee Against the Destruction of Antiquities on the Temple Mount, a nonpartisan committee that included leading Israeli archaeologists, historians and legal experts, a pile of these timbers was recently removed to the area behind the Golden Gate, an area of the Temple Mount less frequented by visitors, where timbers are less likely to be carried away. But they were left unprotected. Exposed to the elements, they will soon begin to disintegrate.



One of the beams that has survived is Beam 13 (see cover), as numbered in Hamilton's report on the 1938–1942 restorations.⁴ For a long time, it was exposed to the elements in a pile of beams, columns and garbage east of Al-Aqsa Mosque. It was then moved to a pile of beams next to the west opening of the Golden Gate and covered with a cloth, meant not so much to protect it as to hide it from view. In 2012, this pile of beams was moved again to yet another location on the Temple Mount, close to the north side of the Golden Gate. Unfortunately, the latest move does not ensure the beams' preservation; it was done to keep them out of view. This beam was originally placed atop five columns in a previous reconstruction of the mosque. We know this because there are carvings of four soffits, which correspond to five columns capitals, exposed on the beam. These soffits are carved with decorations common in the Roman period, including a rope pattern, various kinds of leaves and pomegranates. This

Roman-period beam could be Herodian.⁵

There is another telltale indication that this beam comes from the time of Herod's Temple: The columns that were impressed into the beam appeared at intervals of 10.8 feet. There was a similar interval between the columns in Herod's Royal Stoa, a magnificent basilica that stood on the southern end of the Temple Mount.⁶ Did this beam originally come from one of Herod's Temple Mount structures?



In the early 1960s, the dome of Al-Aqsa was restored. At that time a large group of unused beams was removed from the roof of the mosque. Many of these beams were reportedly sold to a man named Baziyan, the largest junk dealer in the West Bank. Some of these beams were subsequently purchased and stored in a West Bank settlement, where they were examined by the author and the editor of this magazine. The current owners believe that some of this wood may have come from Herod's Temple.

Many of the beautifully carved beams and panels in the Rockefeller Museum have been identified as Cedar of Lebanon and cypress. Both woods are known for their high quality, great durability and resistance to rotting. These wooden beams can last more than two millennia. As the following article by Nili Liphshitz demonstrates (see "[Cedars of Lebanon: Exploring the Roots](#)"), Cedar of Lebanon is an extremely durable wood. The wooden beams from Al-Aqsa were considered valuable enough to be preserved for reuse. It is indeed possible that a 2,000-year-old beam survived and remained in use to the present day.

We can never know with any certainty where all the secondary- and tertiary-use beams in Al-Aqsa Mosque originally came from. It is likely, however, that some came from buildings that stood on or near the Temple Mount—conceivably from the Temple itself—in Herod's time.

Footnotes:

- a. See Suzanne F. Singer, "[Jerusalem Update: More Temple Mount Antiquities Destroyed](#)," **BAR**, September/October 2000.

Endnotes:

1. R.W. Hamilton, *Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque* (Jerusalem: Oxford Univ. Press, 1949).
2. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 69.12. Bordeaux Pilgrim, *Travels (Itinerarium Burdigalense)* 591.
3. Nili Liphshitz, Gideon Biger, Georges Bonani and W. Wolfli, "Comparative Dating Methods: Botanical Identification and C-14 Dating of Carved Panels and Beams from the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 24 (1997), pp. 1045–1050. See also N. Liphshitz and G. Biger, "Secondary and Tertiary Use of *Cedrus Libani* (Cedar of Lebanon) Timber in Constructions," *Qadmoniot* 97–98 (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1992), pp. 19–20, S. Lev-Yadun, N. Liphshitz and Y. Waisel "Ring Analysis of *Cedrus Libani* Beams from the Roof of El-Aqsa Mosque," *Eretz-Israel* 17 (1984), pp. 92–96 (in Hebrew).
4. Hamilton, *Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque* p. 87.
5. P. Reuven, "A Decorated Beam from the Roman Period in the Temple Mount," in E. Baruch et al., eds. *New Studies on Jerusalem*, vol. 15 (Hebrew) (Ramat-Gan: The Ingeborg Rennert Center for Jerusalem Studies Publication, 2009), p. 223.
6. O. Peleg-Bareket, "The Royal Stoa of the Herodian Temple Mount: A Proposed Reconstruction," in D. Amit, G. Stiebel and O. Peleg-Barkat, eds., *New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and Its Region Collected Papers Vol. V* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2011), p. 48.

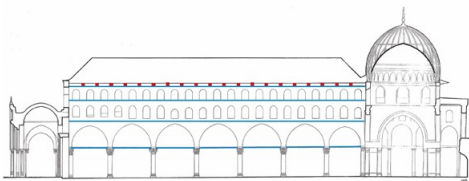


RAISE THE ROOFBEAMS. After being severely damaged by earthquakes in 1927 and 1937, Al-Aqsa was largely dismantled and the ancient wooden beams were removed from the mosque. Examination of the Cedar of Lebanon and cypress beams by R.W. Hamilton, the director of the British Mandatory Department of Antiquities, revealed that many showed signs of secondary use, and must have been used in an earlier structure as well.



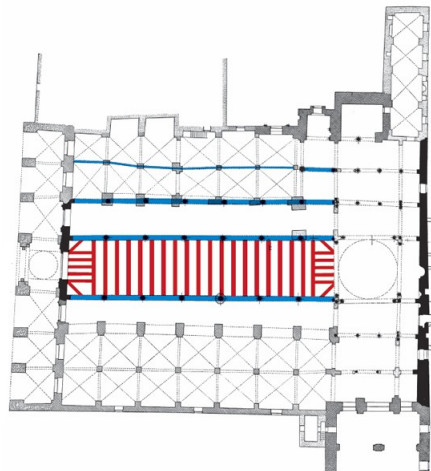
Zev Radovan/www.biblelandpictures.com

BUILT ON SACRED GROUND. Considered the third holiest Muslim site, the iconic gray-domed Al-Aqsa Mosque sits on the southern end of Jerusalem's Temple Mount. When Herod the Great expanded the sloping southern end of the Temple Mount with massive buttress walls, vaults and dirt fill, he constructed the Royal Stoa where Al-Aqsa stands today.



R.W. Hamilton

Enormous wooden beams throughout the mosque serve a variety of structural and aesthetic functions. The tie beams (red) on the nave ceiling that support the roof were covered with carved or painted panels and were adorned with elegantly carved cypress boards on their ends. Bond timbers (blue) were built into the arcade walls that separate the aisles and the nave. The timbers were placed in tiers parallel to the ground above the column capitals, under each row of upper windows, and beneath the ceiling tie beams. Additional smaller beams (not indicated here) removed from other sections of the mosque also predate the construction of Al-Aqsa and show signs of secondary and tertiary use.



After K.A.C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, vol. 2 (1940)

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HIDDEN BEAUTY. Visitors would not have seen Al-Aqsa's ancient wooden beams exposed before they were dismantled in the 1930s and 1940s. As seen in the archive photo above, dark painted boards, affixed with nails and brackets, covered beams on the nave's ceiling, and the bond timbers over the columns were elegantly painted or covered by plaster and whitewash.



Noah Wiener

ROSETTES AS A ROSETTA STONE. In the ceiling of Al-Aqsa's nave, the Byzantine-era floral carvings help decipher the layered history of this beam. The wood was carbon-dated to sometime between the first century B.C.E. and the third century C.E. The decorations match the style of Byzantine church beams from the sixth century, suggesting that the beam's placement in the mosque was at least a tertiary use.



Peretz Reuven

EXPOSED TO THE ELEMENTS. When Al-Aqsa Mosque was dismantled decades ago for restoration, the old beams were left in various locations around the Temple Mount. After being moved to storehouses or piled near the south wall of the Temple Mount, later displacements left the ancient woodpile stashed near the Golden Gate in an attempt to keep the beams out of view.



Garo Nalbandian

PILED HISTORY. This group of timbers was removed from the roof and dome of Al-Aqsa Mosque during restorations in the early 1960s. It was reportedly purchased by a West Bank junk dealer and then resold to a settlement, where it is now stored. The ends of 140 of the beams were sawed off for dendrochronological study, and others were analyzed with carbon-14 testing to reveal an expansive date range: The youngest beams were cut after the initial construction of Al-Aqsa Mosque, while others date to the First Temple period, from the ninth to seventh centuries B.C.E.

Magazine: Biblical Archaeology Review, May/June
2013

Volume: 39

Issue: 3

Source URL (modified on 2020-06-18 19:47): <https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/39/3/3>