Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem
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Introduction

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, known as the Church of the Resurrection (Anastasis) to Eastern Orthodox Christians, is a church in the Old City of Jerusalem that is the holiest Christian site in the world. It stands on a site that is believed to encompass both Golgotha, or Calvary, where Jesus was crucified, and the tomb (sepulchre) where he was buried. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre has been an important pilgrimage destination since the 4th century.

Authenticity

Although it is not certain, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre could be located over the actual tomb of Christ. The most important supporting evidence is as follows:

- In the early 1st century AD the site was a disused quarry outside the city walls. Tombs dated to the 1st centuries BC and AD had been cut into the vertical west wall left by the quarrymen.

- The topographical elements of the church's site are compatible with the Gospel descriptions, which say that Jesus was crucified on rock that looked like a skull outside the city (John 19:17) and there was a grave nearby (John 19:41-2). Windblown earth and seeds watered by winter rains would have created the green covering on the rock that John calls a "garden."

- The Christian community of Jerusalem held worship services at the site until 66 AD (at least according to historians Eusebius and Socrates Scholasticus, who wrote several centuries later).
• Even when the area was brought within the city walls in 41-43 AD it was not built over by the local inhabitants.

• The Roman Emperor Hadrian built a Temple of Venus over the site in 135 AD, which could be an indication that the site was regarded as holy by Christians and Hadrian wished to claim the site for traditional Roman religion.

• The local tradition of the community would have been scrutinized carefully when Constantine set out to build his church in 326 AD, because the chosen site was inconvenient and expensive. Substantial buildings had to be torn down, most notably the temple built over the site by Hadrian. Just to the south was a spot that would have been otherwise perfect - the open space of Hadrian's forum.

• The eyewitness historian Eusebius claimed that in the course of the excavations, the original memorial was discovered. However, he also claimed that all three crosses (those of Jesus and the two thieves) were found at the site, which seems less likely. (Life of Constantine 3:28)

    Based on the above factors, the Oxford Archaeological Guide to the Holy Land concludes: "Is this the place where Christ died and was buried? Very probably, Yes."

    The Israeli scholar Dan Bahat, former City Archaeologist of Jerusalem, has said this of the church: "We may not be absolutely certain that the site of the Holy Sepulchre Church is the site of Jesus' burial, but we have no other site that can lay a claim nearly as weighty, and we really have no reason to reject the authenticity of the site."
History

The early Christian community of Jerusalem appears to have held liturgical celebrations at Christ's tomb from the time of the resurrection until the city was taken by the Romans in 66 AD. Less than a century later, in 135 AD, Emperor Hadrian filled in the quarry to provide a level foundation for a temple to Aphrodite.

The site remained buried beneath the pagan temple until Emperor Constantine the Great converted to Christianity in 312 AD. He soon showed an interest in the holy places associated with his new faith, and commissioned numerous churches to be built throughout the Holy Land. The most important of these, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, was begun in 326 AD.

Constantine's builders dug away the hillside to leave the rock-hewn tomb of Christ isolated and with enough room to build a church around it. They also cleared away Hadrian’s temple and the material with which an old quarry had been filled to provide the temple's foundations. In the process, according to contemporary Christian historians, the Rock of Golgotha was found. The Church was formally dedicated in 335 with an oration by Constantine's biographer, Eusebius of Caesarea.

In the course of the excavations, Constantine's mother St. Helena is said to have discovered the True Cross near the tomb. This is a relatively early legend, but was unknown by Eusebius, the historian and contemporary of Constantine. The legend says St. Helena actually discovered three crosses - those of the two thieves and that of Christ. To discern the one belonging to Christ, a sick man was brought to touch each one, and he was miraculously healed by one of them.
The Constantinian church was much larger than the one that stands today, but had a simpler layout. It consisted of an atrium (which reused part of Hadrian's temenos wall), a covered basilica, an open courtyard with the stone of Golgotha in the southeast corner, and the tomb of Christ, enshrined in a small, circular edifice. The tomb of Christ was not completed until 384 AD, well after the dedication of the church, because of the immense labor involved in cutting away the rock cliff in order to isolate the tomb.

This building was severely damaged by fire in 614 AD when the Persians invaded Jerusalem. They also captured the True Cross, but in 630, Emperor Heraclius marched triumphantly into Jerusalem and restored the True Cross to the rebuilt Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The church was reconstructed under the patriarch Modestus with no major changes to the original plan.

In 638, the Christians were forced to surrender Jerusalem to Muslim control under caliph Omar. In a remarkable gesture for the time, Omar refused to pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, saying, "If I had prayed in the church it would have been lost to you, for the Believers [Muslims] would have taken it saying: Omar prayed here." This act of generosity would have unfortunate consequences, however.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre continued to function as a Christian church under the protection of Omar and the early Muslim rulers, but this changed on October 18, 1009, when the "mad" Fatimid caliph Hakim brutally and systematically destroyed the great church.

Ironically, if Omar had turned the church into a mosque, Hakim would have left it alone. But instead, Hakim had wrecking crews knock over
the walls and he attacked the tomb of Christ with pricks and hammers, stopping only when the debris covered the remains. The east and west walls were completely destroyed, but the north and south walls were likely protected by the rubble from further damage.

The Christian community of Jerusalem could not afford repairs, but in 1048 Emperor Constantine Monomachos provided money for reconstruction, subject to stringent conditions imposed by the caliphate. The funds were not adequate to completely repair the original church, however, and a large part of it had to be abandoned. The atrium and the basilica were completely lost; only the courtyard and the rotunda remained. The latter was made into a church by the insertion of a large apse into the facade.

This was the church to which the knights of the First Crusade arrived to sing their Te Deum after capturing Jerusalem on July 15, 1099. The Crusader chief Godfrey of Bouillon, who became the first king of Jerusalem, declared himself Advocatus Sancti Sepulchri, "Defender of the Holy Sepulchre."

The Crusaders were slow to renovate the church, only beginning to make modifications in the Romanesque style in 1112. They first built a monastery where the Constantinian basilica used to be, having first excavated the Crypt of St. Helena. In 1119 the shrine of Christ's tomb was replaced. The coronation of Fulk and Melisende at the church in 1131 necessitated more radical modifications. The Constantinian courtyard was covered with a Romanesque church (dedicated in 1149), which was connected to the rotunda by a great arched opening resulting from the demolition of the 11th-century apse. A bell tower was added in 1170.
The three primary custodians of the church, first appointed when Crusaders held Jerusalem, are the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian Apostolic and Roman Catholic churches. In the 19th century, the Coptic Orthodox, the Ethiopian Orthodox and the Syrian Orthodox acquired lesser responsibilities, which include shrines and other structures within and around the building. An agreement regulates times and places of worship for each Church.

Subsequent centuries were not altogether kind to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It suffered from damage, desecration, and neglect, and attempts at repair (a significant renovation was conducted by the Franciscans in 1555) often did more damage than good. In recent times, a fire (1808) and an earthquake (1927) did extensive damage.

Not until 1959 did the three major communities (Latins, Greeks, Armenians) agree on a major renovation plan. The guiding principle was that only elements incapable of fulfilling their structural function would be replaced. Local masons were trained to trim stone in the style of the 11th century for the rotunda, and in the 12th-century style for the church.

The church's chaotic history is evident in what visitors see today. Byzantine, medieval, Crusader, and modern elements mix in an odd mish-mash of styles, and each governing Christian community has decorated its shrines in its own distinctive way. In many ways, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is not what one would imagine for the holiest site in all Christendom, and it can easily disappoint. But at the same time, its noble history and immense religious importance is such that a visit can also be very meaningful.
What’s to See?

The exterior facade of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, on the east side of the church, was built by the Crusaders sometime before 1180. A double arcade with frieze at both levels are each surmounted by a cornice. The right entrance door was blocked after 1187 as part of Muslim control of the site after the Crusaders were defeated.

Just inside the entrance to the left was the high bench where the Muslim doorkeeper sat: for years, a Muslim kept control of the keys to the church to prevent disputes between Christian sects over the holy site. Although this has been discontinued, the holiest site in Christendom remains carefully divided between denominations who guard their portions jealously.

The primary custodians are the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian Apostolic and Roman Catholic churches, with the Greeks having the lion’s share. In the 19th century, the Coptic Orthodox, the Ethiopian Orthodox and the Syriac Orthodox acquired lesser responsibilities, which include shrines and other structures within and around the building. Times and places of worship for each community are strictly regulated in common areas.

Back out in the courtyard, the west wall (to your left as you face the entrance) contains 11th-century Greek Orthodox chapels built over the site of the Constantinian baptistery. The east wall has a small domed structure that was once the 12th-century Crusader entrance to the Church on Calvary. It later became the Chapel of the Franks.

Immediately inside the entrance to the church is the Stone of Unction, which commemorates the preparation of Jesus’ body for burial. This limestone slab dates from 1808,
when the prior 12th-century slab was destroyed. Ownership of this site has varied over the centuries, but it now belongs to the four main sects: the opulent lamps that hang over the stone slab are contributed by Armenians, Copts, Greeks and Latins.

Behind the Stone, a mosaic depicting Christ's anointing for burial decorates the outer wall of the Catholicon (on which see below). The Constantinian and Crusader churches did not have this wall, so one could see to the Holy Sepulchre from the entrance.

A stairway on the right just inside the entrance leads to Calvary (or Golgotha), the place where Jesus was crucified. The first chapel is the Catholic (Franciscan) Chapel of the Nailing of the Cross, which is Station 11 on the Via Dolorosa. It features a 12th-century mosaic of Jesus being nailed to the cross on the vault and a Medici altar from Florence. Through a window in the south wall the Chapel of the Agony of the Virgin can be seen. Just to the left of the altar is a statue of Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, which is Station 13 (Jesus' body removed from the cross and given to Mary).

Adjacent to the Catholic chapel is the Greek Orthodox Calvary, which contains the actual Rock of Calvary (Station 12) around which the church was built. The rock can be seen under glass on either side of the main altar, and beneath the altar there is a hole that allows you to touch the rock itself. The slot cut for the cross is shown in the east apse along with those of the two thieves.

Directly beneath Calvary on the main floor (entered through a door next to the Stone of Unction) is the Chapel of Adam, which enshrines a cracked slab of rock behind glass.
This identification with Adam is based on the ancient tradition (noted by Origen in the 2nd century) that Christ was crucified over the place where Adam was buried. The crack in the rock is said to be caused by the earthquake that occurred during the Crucifixion. Archaeologists suggest it was probably an original flaw that caused the workmen to abandon this section of the old quarry. At one time, the tombs of the Crusader kings Godfrey of Bouillon, Baldwin I and Baldwin V were near the entrance to this chapel; they have long since disappeared.

Walking to the west from the Stone of Unction, visitors arrive at the focal point of the Holy Sepulchre Church. The round area of the church, known as the Rotunda or Anastasis, preserves the location and shape, and a few original columns, of Constantine's 4th-century Church of the Resurrection built on the site of Christ's tomb. The Rotunda is surmounted by a large dome, completed in the 1960s. This is decorated with a 12-pointed star (1997) whose rays symbolize the outreach of the 12 apostles. The diameter of the dome is about 20.5 meters; the height is 34 meters.

Underneath the large dome is the Tomb of Christ itself, enshrined in a large, boxy shrine. The shrine, referred to as the edicule, is supported by scaffolding on the outside due to earthquakes and is not terribly attractive. The current structure was built in 1809-10 after the severe fire of 1808. It replaced one dating from 1555, commissioned by the Franciscan friar Bonifacio da Ragusa. (The original 4th-century shrine constructed under Constantine was destroyed by the sultan Hakim in 1009.) The Armenians, the Latins and the Greeks serve Liturgy daily inside the Holy Sepulchre. It is also used for the Holy Saturday ceremony of the Holy Fire, which is celebrated by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch himself.

Inside, the shrine contains two small rooms. The first is the Greek Orthodox Chapel of the Angel, which features an altar containing a piece of the stone rolled away by angels at the Resurrection. In the wall by the entrance, steps lead to the roof of the edicule. A low door on the opposite side leads to the tiny Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, which contains the tomb of Christ itself. This is the 14th Station of the Cross and the holiest site in Christendom. Here a marble slab covers the place where the body of Christ was laid and from which he rose from the dead. A vase with candles marks the spot where his head rested. The slab was installed here in the 1555 reconstruction and purposely cracked to deter Ottoman looters.
After visiting the tomb, walk around to the back (west) of the edicule to an ironwork, cage-like structure containing the Coptic chapel. Beneath the altar is another piece of Christ's tomb. Opposite the Coptic chapel, inside a rough-hewn apse at the far west end of the Church is the Syrian chapel.

To the right (north) of the sepulchre is the Roman Catholic area, which consists of a large square chapel (the Chapel of St. Mary Magdalene) and another private chapel for Franciscan monks. The former is held to be the site where Jesus appeared to Mary after his resurrection. In the Crusader era, this chapel was approached from the street to the west via an impressive entrance portal.

Just opposite the entrance to the Sepulchre is the large nave of the church, which has been enclosed by a wall on all sides. Known as the Catholicon, this Greek Orthodox cathedral features a large iconostasis flanked by the thrones of the Patriarchs of Jerusalem and Antioch. Above is a colorful cupola, which dates from after the 1927 earthquake, decorated with an image of Christ and other icons.

An early tradition associated the site of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection as the center of the world, and by the 10th century it was marked by an omphalos. Today this is marked by a marble vessel in the west end of the Catholicon. (The pagan Greeks had their omphalos in Delphi.)

At the east end of the north aisle is the chapel of the Prison of Christ, which according to 12th-century tradition housed Jesus and the two thieves before the Crucifixion. The first known mention of this is in the 8th century, by Epiphanius the Monk. The chapel probably originated as a liturgical station where the Passion and Death of Christ were commemorated.

Taking a right at the Prison leads into the ambulatory of the Crusader church, which has three chapels located in three apses: the Greek Chapel of St. Longinus (the Roman soldier who pierced Jesus' side and then converted) in the northeast corner; the Armenian Chapel of the Dividing of the Robes in the center; and the Greek Chapel of Derision or the Crowning of Thorns in the southeast apse. The latter contains a relic of the Column of Derision.

Between the last two chapels is a stairway that descends to the large Chapel of St. Helena, which is owned by the Armenians and known to them as the Chapel of St. Gregory. On the stairway walls are many small crosses carved by medieval pilgrims. The chapel has three aisles and two apses: the north apse is dedicated to the penitent thief; the south apse to St. Helena, mother of Constantine. A seat in the southeast corner of the chapel is said to have been occupied by Helena as she searched for the True Cross, a story first mentioned around 351.

From this corner, 13 more steps descend into the Chapel of the Finding of the Cross. The left side is owned by the Catholics, whose altar features a life-sized statue of St. Helena holding a cross. The Greeks have the right side of the chapel.

A door on the north side of the Chapel of St. Helena leads to the Chapel of St. Vartan, an Armenian chapel. This area was just discovered and excavated in the 1970s. The finds include remnants of walls built by Hadrian in the 2nd century, one of which contains a stone with a celebrating drawing of a merchant ship with the inscription DOMINE IVIMVS, "Lord we shall go." This drawing probably
dates from before the completion of Constantine's church. The chapel is locked and not normally open to the public.

After you leave the Church, you might wish to stop by the buildings that have their entrances in the east wall of the courtyard: the Coptic Chapel of St. Michael the Archangel, which includes a staircase leading to the Ethiopian Orthodox Chapel and the Coptic convent to the northeast; the Armenian Chapel of St. James; and the Greek Monastery of Abraham in the southeast corner of the court.