

Recovering Roman Jerusalem—The Entryway Beneath Damascus Gate

By Menahem Magen

Sidebar: [Beneath Damascus Gate: A Visit to Hadrian's Jerusalem](#)



Zev Radovan

Damascus Gate. Built in 1542 A.D. by the Ottoman emperor Suleiman the Magnificent, the present gate stands atop a much older entryway that has been extensively excavated only within the last decade. The Roman emperor Hadrian erected the earlier, triple arched entryway (see reconstruction) when he rebuilt Jerusalem in about 132 A.D. as a pagan city, named Aelia Capitolina. Hadrian's building program probably helped spark the Second Jewish Revolt led by Bar-Kochba. The eastern side-archway of Hadrian's gate appears at lower left. The larger central archway was covered by later Ottoman construction and only the jamb has been found.

In 70 A.D. the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and burnt the Temple. The conflagration would be etched in the collective memory of the Jewish people forever.

The city lay mostly in ruins until, in about 130 A.D., the emperor Hadrian decided to rebuild it as a Roman city named Aelia Capitolina. According to some scholars, this helped trigger the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome in 132 A.D., a revolt also known as the Bar-Kokhba revolt after its military leader.

The second revolt ended like the first; the mighty Roman military machine eventually crushed the rebels despite their courageous and often desperate attacks.

After the Second Jewish Revolt, Jews were banned from Jerusalem, and Hadrian proceeded to create pagan city where Jewish Jerusalem once stood.

In the northern part of the city, Hadrian built a magnificent arched entryway into Aelia Capitolina, flanked on either side by a large tower. Inside the entryway was a large open plaza, and in the center of the plaza was a tall, decorative column. On top of the column probably stood a larger-than-life statue of the Emperor Hadrian himself.

We know about most of this from a remarkable map of Jerusalem—the earliest known map of the city—found in 1884 in the mosaic floor of a church located in Madaba, Jordan. The map is known, appropriately enough, as the Madaba map and originally included not only Jerusalem, but most of the the Holy Land and part of Egypt. Much of the map has been destroyed. Fortunately, all of the city of Jerusalem, the centerpiece of the map, has survived; every tessera is there.



Garro Nalbandian

Jerusalem on the Madaba map. Found in the 19th century on the floor of a church in Madaba, Jordan, this detailed sixth-century A.D. mosaic displays the earliest known map of Jerusalem as the centerpiece of a larger, much-damaged map that originally showed the Holy Land and part of Egypt. At the far left-center, depicting the northern end of Jerusalem the map portrays a simplified version of Hadrian's entryway, showing just the center arch, lying on its side, flanked by towers but without evidence of the two side-arches. The map also shows the plaza within the gateway as a white area surrounded by two rows of yellowish-brown tesserae. The lone column that stood in the plaza is seen as a row of black tesserae across the plaza thickened at the right end to portray the column's base. This column probably once supported a statue of Hadrian, which may have been removed when the city became Christian in the fourth century.

The Madaba map portrays the city as it looked in the sixth century A.D., when the floor was laid. It is a picture of Byzantine Jerusalem. But the northern part of the city, especially the entryway into the city (north is left on the Madaba map) is the same as it was when Hadrian built it in the second century A.D. The only difference is that in the Madaba map the column in the center of the plaza, inside the entryway, has no statue of the emperor on top. It is just a column; apparently someone removed the pagan emperor's statue after the city became Christian in the fourth century. But we strongly suspect that his statue originally graced the top of the column because that was standard practice in the Roman period.

In the 16th century A.D., the great Ottoman emperor Suleiman the Magnificent rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem; these are the walls that presently enclose the Old City. Most of the time, Suleiman followed the line of a previous wall. In the north, he built the most elaborate and beautiful gate of the city. Today, it is called the Damascus Gate, and it is still the most impressive of the Old City's seven gates. Here tourists flock to buy sweet Arab pastries and pistachio nuts; here they enter the covered darkness of the Arab market called the *shouk*.

In Arabic, the Damascus Gate is known as Bab el-Amud, the Gate of the Column. The column that once held Hadrian's statue disappeared long ago, but somehow the memory of the column survived and has been preserved to this day in the Arabic name of the Old City's most beautiful gate.

Suleiman the Magnificent's Damascus Gate completely covered any remains of the earlier entryway that Hadrian had built; and until this century no one had any idea that any part of the Roman entryway lay buried beneath Damascus Gate.



The Library of Congress

A 19th-century view. Completely hidden beneath the Damascus Gate, the remains of Hadrian's entryway lay unsuspected until the 20th century, as shown in this hand-colored lithograph from David Roberts's *The Holy Land* (1842). Roberts depicts the Ottoman gate approached by a dirt road where now we find the concrete pedestrian access seen on page 49. Accumulated earth on either side of the gateway hides any hint of the earlier tripartite gate below.

In the 1930s, R. W. Hamilton of the Antiquities Department of the British mandatory government excavated in the area of the Damascus Gate.¹ Below the gate on the eastern side (on the left side looking in), Hamilton discovered the facade of another, earlier entryway into the city. He uncovered the top of the eastern arch of the gate, as well as some large water cisterns built against the Roman gate. He also uncovered the base of the western tower adjacent to the gateway and another cistern near the western entrance. In this cistern he found the remains of a still earlier, perhaps Herodian, tower. Above the keystone of the eastern archway, he came upon a Latin inscription that read, “according to the decision of the decurians^a of Aelia Capitolina.” The entire eastern entrance arch was preserved, as were the threshold and jambs (doorposts). In the threshold, two parallel grooves were cut, apparently for the passage of wagons. Behind the jambs, one can still see holes for the door hinges; in the walls, square recesses were cut for the wooden beams with which the door was bolted shut at night.

The archway had been blocked in an earlier period, and Hamilton made no attempt to remove the blockage. However, enough of the facade was uncovered to see that this archway was a small side-arch and that adjacent to it—directly under Suleiman’s Damascus Gate—had once stood a much higher and larger center archway.

Adjacent to this side-archway, Hamilton uncovered the jamb of the high center-archway with its large, decorative, engaged column on the outside, in typical Roman style. But this was all that remained when Suleiman built the Damascus Gate at a higher level. It was obvious that on the other side of this center-arch had stood another side-arch like the complete facade that Hamilton uncovered on the eastern side of the center-arch.

With the discovery of this triple-arched entryway, archaeology was able to improve on the Madaba map. The Madaba map showed only a single archway because that’s all that could be fit into the space with the tesserae of the mosaic. In fact, it had been a three-arched gate—a large center-archway; the excavated, smaller side-archway; and another archway that must have balanced it on the other side.

In the 1960s, J. Basil Hennessy of the British School of Archaeology conducted excavations in which he uncovered the entire facade of the eastern gate, as well as the Crusader gate and some earlier remains that he attributed to King Agrippa I (10 B.C.–44 A.D.).²

In 1979, the Municipality of Jerusalem decided to redesign the area in front of the Damascus Gate. This provided an excellent opportunity to conduct additional archaeological excavations which I supervised.

But even before excavations began, there was a significant, though accidental, discovery made in the course of repairing the rampart on top of the Old City wall, which is a favorite tourist (as well as local) walk. In the course of repairing the rampart wall, a small chamber was found in the Ottoman Turkish part of the wall, above the old Roman eastern tower. When the floor of this chamber was cleared of dirt and debris, it appeared that the chamber was in fact the top of a stairwell, all filled with dirt. When the dirt was removed, the stairwell wound down inside the wall through four flights. At the bottom, it was on the level of the entrance to the Roman gate. The lower exit from the stairwell was blocked by large stones and plastered over. Indeed, the lower flight of stairs had been removed, and the area had been made into a cistern by covering the walls with water-tight plaster. A hole was cut in the stairs above the cistern to enable water to be withdrawn.

All the stone stairs except the lower flight were intact—in fact, in such good condition that people could easily walk on them.

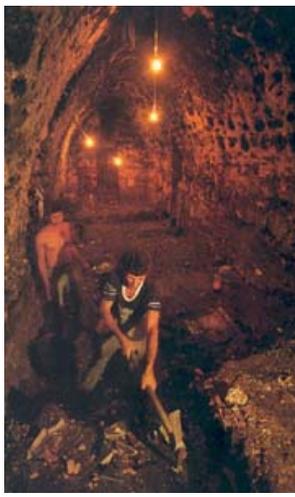
Although the lower part of the staircase had been removed, the stairs appeared to have led originally to the Roman tower that Hennessy had excavated east of the Roman gateway.

Ultimately, we excavated this Roman tower and found that it had been almost entirely preserved to a height of over 35 feet. It is the tallest, preserved Roman structure yet found in Israel! But this is getting ahead of my story.

We wanted to excavate the tower, not from the staircase, but from inside the small-arched entryway whose facade Hamilton had uncovered. However, we first had to see if there was an entrance to the tower from the vault of this small-arched entryway. This required us to clear and unblock the area where the entryway from the archway vault to the tower would have been. When we did so, we found that the entire vault inside Hamilton’s small-arched entryway to the city had been preserved. The floor inside this entryway was beautifully paved with large stone slabs, some more than 3 by 5 feet. Fifteen feet above the floor is the top of the vault, fully preserved.

The actual entrance to the city from this small-arched entryway was blocked by a wall that we were able to date to the Crusader period. We dug through this wall, creating an opening of about 6 by 3 feet, thus creating a new entrance to the Old City of Jerusalem. The visitor can now walk through the ancient Roman entrance to Jerusalem built by the emperor Hadrian in the second century A.D.

A corridor led eastward from the vault of this small-arched entryway. The corridor led to the large tower that flanked the arched entryway on the east. We knew we had to excavate the corridor. Excavating the corridor, like the vault of the entryway, was extremely difficult. We could proceed only a few feet at a time, because as we proceeded we had to fit steel beams in what was now underground construction, in order to support the present Damascus Gate structure, assuring it against collapse. Working in the most crowded conditions, four workers, using three donkeys, eventually removed more than 55,000 cubic feet of debris that filled the entryway, the corridor to the eastern tower and the tower itself.

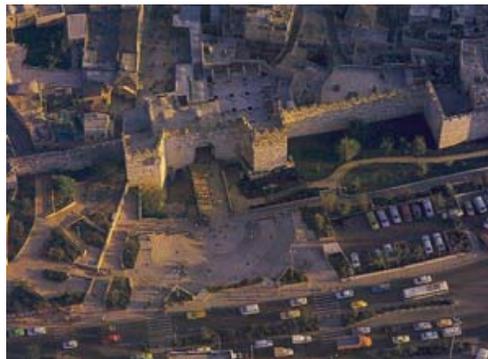


Richard Nowitz

In a Mameluke vault dated to the 13th to 14th centuries, workers labor in cramped quarters to uncover remains of the Roman plaza.

Both the corridor and the tower were built of huge stones, often 5 or 6 feet long and nearly 3 feet high. These large stones are beautifully dressed in Herodian style^b—with flat, raised centers and neat, narrow margins. Here these stones have been reused, or, as archaeologists say, they are in secondary use; they were taken by Hadrian's builders from the walls of the Temple Mount, or some other Herodian structure, destroyed by Hadrian's Roman predecessors in 70 A.D.

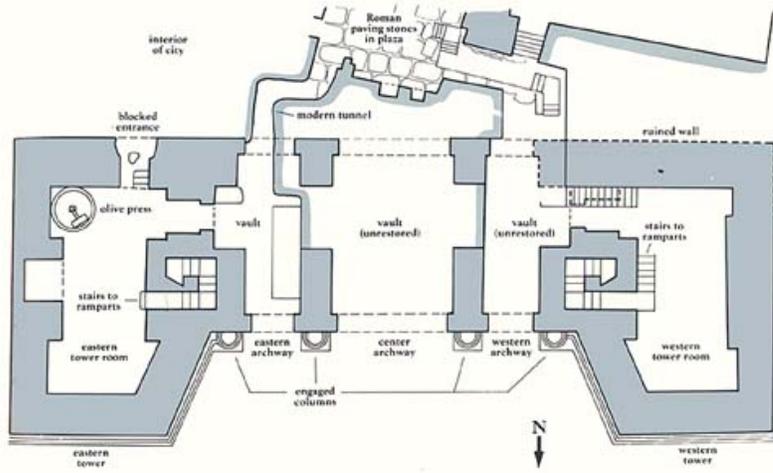
After cleaning the tower, we were able to measure it. It is 33 feet long and 18 feet wide. The walls are between 6 and 8 feet thick. Even most of the floor is intact—paved mostly with irregularly shaped slabs of various sizes from a later period. Around the walls are a few large rectangular slabs that tell us what the original paving was like. The ceiling of the tower was reroofed, probably by the Ottoman Turks.



Baron Wolman

Damascus Gate from the air. The walls of the modern gate follow the outline of the older gate buried beneath (see plan). The eastern tower juts out from the wall on the left side of the gate, and the eastern side-archway, now the entrance to the museum, may be seen in the shadow between this tower and the pedestrian ramp leading to the center archway. The Moslem Quarter of the Old City lies beyond the wall, across the top part of the photo.

Originally there were three entrances to the tower: one from the small-arched entryway to the city, through the corridor we excavated; another from the city walls via the staircase that originally led us to the tower; and a third, directly from inside the city. The entrance to the tower from the staircase had been blocked and covered with plaster. We removed the blockage, and the staircase can now be used to go in and out of the tower from the walk on the city-wall ramparts. The entrance directly from the city unfortunately could not be excavated because of safety considerations. Thus, today the visitor may enter the tower from the corridor that leads from the vault of the small-arched entryway, or from the ramparts by way of the stairwell.



Peter Bugio—Eunice Figueiredo, Architects

Plan of Hadrian's Gate.

Sometime in the late Roman, or Byzantine, period (third to fifth centuries A.D.), the tower was divided into two floors. We discovered, in the walls of the tower, the remains of later supporting arches for the second-story floor. Still later, the tower was used, strangely enough, as an olive-oil factory. We found a huge round stone, 7 feet in diameter, leaning against one of the walls of the tower. It took enormous effort to turn it over and lay it down; but when we did so, we discovered it was part of an olive press, used to crush the olives as the first step in the process of manufacturing olive oil. We have left the olive press inside the tower—actually the easiest thing to do—so all can see it. We also found stone benches built around the tower walls. After thoroughly examining the stones of which these benches were made, we discovered that some of them had been parts of the olive crusher, others had been parts of an olive-pulp press and still others had been parts of large stone vessels. So the stone benches represent a still later use of the tower. The olive-oil factory was in use sometime between the fifth and the tenth centuries. The benches were constructed after the olive-oil press went out of use, sometime between the tenth and twelfth centuries. We dismantled some of the benches so as to restore the olive-oil press.

Finally, in about 1150 A.D., the Crusaders simply filled in the tower with dirt and debris, and the tower went completely out of use until we excavated it and turned it into a little museum.

I have spoken only about the eastern arched-entryway and the eastern tower because they have been so beautifully preserved. But a similar entranceway and tower also existed on the western side of the large center-arch. Only fragmentary remains of the western arch and tower have been found, and the situation is archaeologically quite complicated.³

Just as the municipal decision to redesign the Damascus Gate area provided an excellent opportunity for an excavation adjacent to the gate, so the 1982 issuance of a building permit to construct new Arab shops at Damascus Gate inside the Old City provided an opportunity to extend our excavation inside the city.

At the level of the Roman entrance and tower that we had just excavated, we were delighted to find, still *in situ*, an area of large Roman paving stones. We had come upon the beautiful plaza immediately inside the main entrance to the Roman (and Byzantine) city, just as it was pictured on the Madaba map. Ultimately, we uncovered the remains of the plaza for a distance of nearly 100 feet. The paving stones are indeed large. The largest measures 5 by 7 feet, but none is smaller than 4 by 5 feet. The surface of the pavers is grooved to prevent horses hooves from slipping on the smooth, shiny stone. This Roman Jerusalem plaza has been preserved in the basement of the building that has now been built overhead. The visitor can enter the plaza either from the tower we excavated or from the small-arched entryway. A modern stairway leads from the ancient plaza up to today's level of the Old City.

Naturally, in the course of excavating the plaza, we were hoping to find the column (or at least parts of it) that once stood in the center of the plaza, as pictured on the Madaba map—or perhaps even some of Hadrian's statue that probably stood on top of the column. This had been the visual centerpiece of Aelia Capitolina, Roman Jerusalem, the point from which all distances were measured. Unfortunately, not a trace of the column or the statue was found.



Peter Bugio—Eunice Figueiredo, Architects

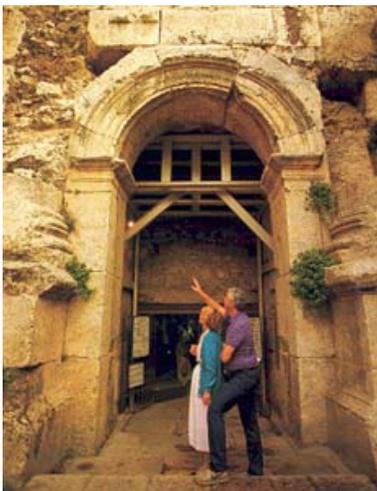
Reconstruction of Hadrian's Gate.

However, to give the visitor an impression of what the column originally looked like—with the statue of Hadrian on top of it—a 4 ½-foot hologram of the column has now been placed in the far end of the basement, where the original column may well have stood. A hologram is a photograph of a model recorded on film by a reflected laser beam while being illuminated by a portion of the same laser beam. The result is a three-dimensional, full-color image on a thin sheet of glass that appears as if the projected object were inside the glass and could be touched. Most holograms are only a few inches high. But this one, developed and manufactured in England, is 4 ½ feet high. It gives an impression of reality and of the sense of splendor that the original must have evoked. The hologram is projected at precisely that point in the Roman plaza where we think the original column once stood.

Beneath Damascus Gate: A Visit to Hadrian's Jerusalem

Sidebar to: [Recovering Roman Jerusalem—The Entryway Beneath Damascus Gate](#)

This photo gallery illustrates some of the principal features of Hadrian's second-century entryway and of the plaza that adjoined it within the city. Both have been excavated and restored as a museum. Until recently, everything seen here lay buried beneath Damascus Gate, or, in the case of the Roman paving stones, beneath the Moslem Quarter of the Old City, just inside the gate.

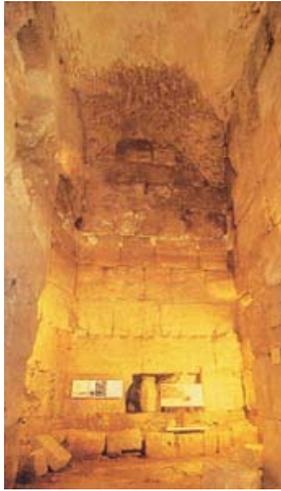


Richard Nowitz

The eastern side-archway.

The eastern side-archway, which R. W. Hamilton partially excavated in the 1930s, gave the first evidence that remains of the earlier, long-hidden entryway built by Hadrian awaited discovery. Holes for the door hinges, and square recesses for the wooden beams once used to bolt the door, can

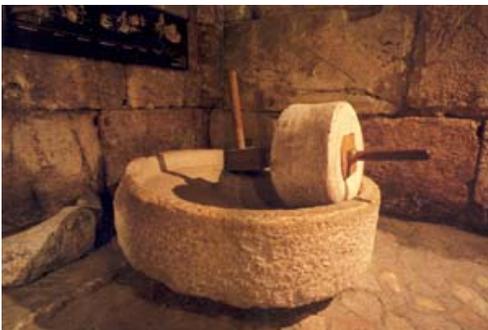
still be seen, although they are not visible in this photo. The eastern archway now serves as the entrance to the excavation museum and to the remains of the original plaza.



M. Magen

The room in the eastern tower of Hadrian's gate.

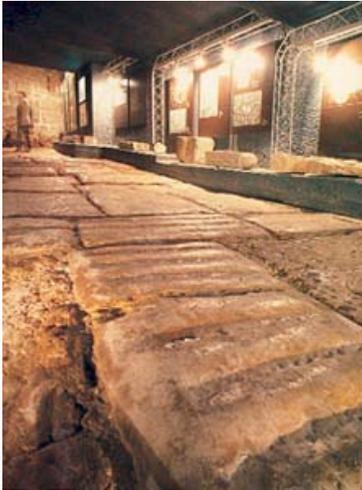
Filled in and forgotten for 800 years, the room in the eastern tower of Hadrian's gate features superbly preserved walls built of huge ashlar, many measuring 5 or 6 feet long and nearly 3 feet high. Hadrian's builders apparently took these stones from the ruins of Herodian structures destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.—perhaps from the Temple Mount itself—for the stones are dressed in the distinctive Herodian style, characterized by flat, raised centers and neat, narrow margins. The room joins the vault of the eastern entryway via a short corridor, and contains a stairway (not shown) that leads up to the ramparts. A third entrance, now blocked, originally led directly into the room from the city. An olive press found in the room testifies to a later time when the room served as an olive-oil factory.



Richard Nowitz

The olive press exhibited inside the eastern tower.

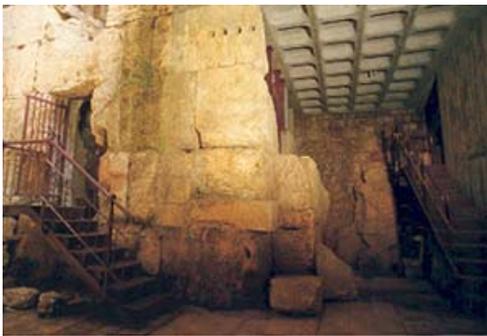
An olive press, used to crush olives for the production of olive oil, is exhibited inside the eastern tower. During his excavation of the eastern tower, the author found the 7-foot-diameter lower stone, on which the olives would have been spread, as well as the rolling crusher stone. The wooden parts were reconstructed. This olive press dates to the time when the eastern tower served as an olive-oil factory, between the fifth and tenth centuries A.D.



Richard Nowitz

Roman paving stones from the gateway plaza.

Roman paving stones from the gateway plaza in Hadrian's day, still in their original positions, exhibit grooved surfaces, intended to prevent horses from slipping. Part of the plaza pictured on the Madaba map, the stones range in size from 4 by 5 feet to 5 by 7 feet. Now enclosed within the Damascus Gate museum, the large plaza stones and the elegantly carved limestone architectural fragments displayed here are reminders of the former grandeur of Hadrian's city.



Richard Nowitz

Confusing remains of the western gateway.

Confusing remains of the western gateway. The original staircase leading from within the western tower to the ramparts begins just beyond the modern stairs on the left. The former entrance at right, to the western tower from the western gateway is now blocked; but the stairs, far right, lead to an excavated passage, not part of the original structure, that joins the two towers. The waffle roof, upper right, is a modern, concrete construction.

Footnotes:

a. The city council.

b. Herodian style ashlar were used both before and after the time of Herod the Great (37–4 B.C.).

Endnotes:

1. R. W. Hamilton, “Excavations Against the North Wall of Jerusalem, 1937–38,” *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine* 10 (1940), pp. 1–57.

2. Basil Hennessy, “Preliminary Report on Excavations at the Damascus Gate, 1964–6,” *Levant (Journal of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem)* 11 (1970), p. 22.

3. In the summer of 1985, we excavated the inside of the western tower. It is not as well preserved as the eastern one. Although its northern side stands the full 36-foot height, the southern side is entirely missing. There are signs (remains of arches) of the tower having been divided into two floors, and it too was used as an olive-oil factory. A tunnel, built by us, now connects the two towers under the street, and one can visit both towers and the Roman square without having to go above ground.

Reference for this article

Magen, Menahem. “Recovering Roman Jerusalem—The Entryway Beneath Damascus Gate.” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June 1988, 48–53, 56. <http://members.bib-arch.org/publication.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=14&Issue=3&ArticleID=4> (accessed 11/20/2013)