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ADOMNÁN, ARCULF, AND THE MOSQUE ON THE TEMPLE MOUNT

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ABSTRACT

Adomnán preserves the earliest surviving account in Latin of a mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, but his account poses a number of problems to students of Umayyad Jerusalem. This paper reviews two recent discussions of the historical value of his description of this mosque before concluding that he probably describes its appearance as it was being repaired c.660 following a great earthquake in 659.

INTRODUCTION

Writing around the year 700 in his treatise *De locis sanctis* (*DLS*), Adomnán, abbot of Iona, makes three specific references to contemporary Arab rule in the Near East: first, to the ‘Saracen’ construction of a ‘rectangular house of prayer’ on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (*DLS* 1.1.14); second, to the role played by the ‘king of the Saracens’ Mavias in adjudicating the ownership of a cloth which was allegedly the one that had covered Christ’s head during his burial (*DLS* 1.9); and, third, to the ‘Saracen’ occupation of Damascus and their construction of a ‘church’ there (*DLS* 2.28.2).¹ Since Adomnán’s text seems to constitute a

¹ Throughout this paper I will cite Ludwig Bieler’s edition as published and translated in Denis Meehan, *Adamnan’s De Locis Sanctis*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 3 (Dublin, 1958); see Michael Lapidge and Richard Sharpe (eds), *A bibliography of Celtic-Latin literature 400–1200* (Dublin, 1985), no. B304. Under the same

precious early witness to conditions obtaining in the Holy Land and the surrounding region during the early years of Arab rule there, it has never lacked attention from students of this period.² However, it has been the subject of particular attention recently, although this has not brought agreement as to the origin and value of the information contained therein any closer. Adomnán claims to have met a Gallic bishop named Arculf who had returned from pilgrimage to the Holy Land and credits him as the source for his contemporary information about the Near East. Unfortunately, there is no independent evidence in support of the existence of this Arculf, even the name Arculf is otherwise unattested, and the information credited to him is often problematic. The result is that doubt has sometimes been cast on his

number, Bieler's *DLS* has been captured and rendered digitally searchable in Anthony Harvey and Angela Malthouse (eds), *Royal Irish Academy archive of Celtic-Latin literature*, second (revised and expanded) edition (ACLL-2, on line at <http://www.brepolis.net> since 2010). On the controversy concerning the date and place of composition of the *DLS*, see David Woods, 'On the circumstances of Adomnán's composition of the *De Locis Sanctis*', in Jonathan M. Wooding, Rodney Aist, Tomas Owen Clancy, and Thomas O'Loughlin (eds), *Adomnán of Iona: theologian, lawmaker, peacemaker* (Dublin, 2010), 193-204.

² For older discussions, see e.g. Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it: a survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam*, Studies on Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13 (Princeton, 1997), 219-23; Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Palestine in the aftermath of the Arab conquest: the earliest Latin account', in Ronald N. Swanson (ed), *Studies in Church History 36: the Holy Land, holy lands, and Christian history* (Woodbridge, 2000), 78-89; idem, 'Perceiving Palestine in early Christian Ireland: martyrism, exegetical key, relic and liturgical space', *Ériu* 54 (2004), 125-37; David Woods, 'Arculf's luggage: the sources for Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', *Ériu* 52 (2002), 25-52. The standard treatment of the text as a whole is by Thomas O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the holy places: the perceptions of an insular monk on the locations of the biblical drama* (London, 2007). This synthesizes much of his older work, but I will sometimes refer to his original papers, as they often contain more detail. There is also a commentary by Maria Guagnano, *Adomnán di Iona. I luoghi santi: introduzione, traduzione e commento*, Quaderni di Invigilata Lucernis 34 (Bari, 2008), but it is fairly basic and tends simply to follow O'Loughlin; see the assessment by John Higgins in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, on line at <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2010/2010-10-30.html> (accessed 22/12/16).

existence.³ Most recently, Nees argues strongly against the possibility that Adomnán could have met a returned pilgrim from the Holy Land, whether known as Arculf or by some other name instead, who then acted as the main source of his information about the Near East, and attacks the veracity of his description of the mosque on the Temple Mount in particular.⁴ On the other hand, Hoyland and Waidler seek to emphasize the originality and accuracy of Adomnán's testimony concerning the activities of the Saracens and argue equally strongly in support of the possibility that he did indeed derive this information from a pilgrim recently returned from the Holy Land.⁵ The purpose of this note is to critique the main arguments on both sides in so far as they relate to Adomnán's description of the mosque on the Temple Mount.

THE ALLEGATION OF PEJORATIVE LANGUAGE

Adomnán provides a brief description of the mosque on the Temple Mount as follows (*DLS* 1.1.14):

³ See e.g. François Chatillon, 'Arculfe a-t-il réellement existé?', *Revue du moyen âge latin* 23 (1967), 134-38.

Alternatively, O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the holy places*, 63 accepts the possibility of an historical Arculf, but argues that the personality emerging from Adomnán's text is a 'literary fiction'.

⁴ Lawrence Nees, 'Insular Latin sources, "Arculf," and early Islamic Jerusalem', in Michael Frassetto, Matthew Gabriele, John D. Hosler (eds), *Where heaven and earth meet: essays on medieval Europe in honor of Daniel F. Callahan*, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 174 (Leiden, 2014), 81-100; idem, *Perspectives on early Islamic art and Jerusalem*, Art and Archaeology of the Islamic World 5 (Leiden, 2016), 33-57.

⁵ Robert G. Hoyland and Sarah Waidler, 'Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis* and the seventh-century Near East', *English Historical Review* 129 (2014), 787-807.

*Ceterum in illo famoso loco ubi quondam templum magnifice constructum fuerat in vicinia muri ab oriente locatum nunc Saracini quadrangulam orationis domum, quam subrectis tabulis et magnis trabibus super quasdam **ruinarum reliquias** construentes **vili** fabricati sunt **opere**, ipsi frequentant; quae utique domus tria hominum milia, ut fertur, capere potest.*

‘However, in the celebrated place where once the temple (situated towards the east near the wall) arose in its magnificence, the Saracens now have a quadrangular prayer house. They built it roughly by erecting upright boards and great beams on some ruined remains. The building, it is said, can accommodate three thousand people at once’.

Nees seeks to dismiss the value of this passage as historical evidence on two grounds: first, that it is highly pejorative; and second, that it draws upon a biblical model in one detail at least. In support of his first claim, he argues first that the language of this passage is pejorative, particularly the use of the adjective **vilis**; and second, that its positioning within the text is also pejorative.⁶ Neither argument is persuasive.

As far as the language of this passage is concerned, it is noteworthy how restrained it really is. The Saracens themselves are referred to by this term alone in an entirely neutral fashion rather than as unbelievers, heretics, enemies of Christ, desecrators of the Temple

⁶ He develops upon earlier claims concerning the pejorative nature of Adomnán’s presentation. See e.g. Ora Limor, ‘Pilgrims and author: Adomnán’s *De Locis Sanctis* and Hugeburc’s *Hodoeporicon Sancti Willibaldi*’, *Revue Bénédictine* 114 (2004), 253-75: 273; Andrew Marsham, ‘The architecture of allegiance in early Islamic late antiquity: the accession of Mu‘awiya in Jerusalem, ca.661CE’, in Alexander Beihammer, Stavroula Constantinou, and Maria Parani (eds), *Court ceremonies and rituals of power in Byzantium and the medieval Mediterranean: comparative perspectives*, *The Medieval Mediterranean* 98 (Leiden, 2013), 87-112: 99.

Mount, or in any other hostile manner.⁷ True, the implicit comparison with the former Jewish temple — and the comparison *is* only implicit — does not reflect well on the new mosque there; but no-one could reasonably have been expected to describe the presence of any building on the Temple Mount and not have mentioned that the Jewish temple had once stood there. Nor could anyone reasonably have been expected to imply that any building even approached the magnificence of the temple, whether the implied contrast is with the temple of Solomon destroyed in 586BC or the second temple destroyed in AD70. In relative terms, therefore, and in the context of the implicit comparison with the Jewish temple, the claim that the mosque was only built with ‘rough workmanship’ (*vili ... opere*) was not necessarily unfair or pejorative. Indeed, due attention must also be paid to the positive aspects of the description of the mosque. The claim that it was built with ‘great’ (*magnis*) beams can hardly be interpreted as anything but respectful; and the same is true of the emphasis on the size of this building, namely that it could hold as many as three thousand people.

It is instructive at this point to compare the language used in the description of the mosque with that used elsewhere by Adomnán. For example, he claims that the tomb of Rachel at Hebron was of ‘rough workmanship’ (*DLS 2.7.3: vili operatione*) also; and there is no obvious religious or political reason why he, or his source, should have wanted to denigrate that monument. Much more interesting again is his description of the nearby town of Hebron (*DLS 2.8.1-2*):

... *nunc, sicut sanctus refert Arculfus, murorum non habet ambitum, quaedam solummodo dirutae olim civitatis in **reliquis** vestigia ostendit **ruinarum**. Vicos tamen quosdam **vili opere** constructos et villas, alios intra et alios extra illas muralium*

⁷ For a hostile description of Arab interest in the site, by way of contrast, see Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia* AM 6127.

reliquias distructionum per campestem habet collocatos planitiem; in quibus videlicet vicis et villis multitudo populi inhabitat.

‘... nowadays, as the holy Arculf relates, [it] has no surrounding walls; and amongst the ruined remains a few vestiges only are to be seen of the city long ago destroyed. There are, however, some crudely constructed streets and detached houses too, some inside and some outside the broken-down walls, all along the level ground. These streets and houses provide dwellings for a great number of people.’

There is a remarkable parallel here in terms of language (in bold) and thought to the earlier description of the mosque. There is a similar emphasis in each case on the fact that rough construction had occurred on or amidst ruined remains, with exactly the same terms being used in each case also; and the final element in each description describes the capacity of this construction work to hold people. Yet there is no obvious reason why Adomnán, or his source, should have wanted to denigrate Hebron.⁸ In particular, no attempt is made here to implicate the ‘Saracens’ in any way in what has happened at Hebron.

The parallel between the description of the mosque on the Temple Mount, built by the ‘Saracens’, and that of Hebron, where no ‘Saracens’ are mentioned, suggests that the choice of language and emphasis has nothing to do with the ‘Saracens’ as such, but reflects some deeper habit of language and thought on the part of Adomnán, if not of his source also. However, this does not entirely explain the phenomenon, and suspicion arises that the common language describes a common underlying reality. It has been recognised, including now by Hoyland and Waidler, that Adomnán’s description of the ruined state of Jericho (*DLS*

⁸ Adomnán’s interest lay not so much in Hebron itself, but in a nearby field containing the graves of Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (*DLS* 2.9-10). See O’Loughlin, *Adomnán and the holy places*, 84-94.

2.13) suggests that it postdates the destruction of that city by an earthquake in 659.⁹ Hence the possibility that Adomnán's descriptions both of the mosque on the Temple Mount and of Hebron reflect their condition after the same earthquake deserves serious consideration. In the case of the mosque, if it was situated at or near the site of the present Aqsa mosque, as most commentators agree, then it would have been perched at the very edge of the Temple Mount, and so particularly vulnerable to the effects of an earthquake.¹⁰ Yet neither Nees nor Hoyland and Waidler even mention this possibility. If one accepts it, though, then the ruined remains upon which the 'Saracens' have built their rough construction may refer to the remains of the first mosque on the site, whether damaged and still standing or completely fallen, rather than to any earlier remains. Furthermore, the badly built appearance of the mosque may reflect the damage inflicted by the earthquake upon those parts of the mosque that were still standing, and any hasty repairs, rather than its original condition. Indeed, the

⁹ O'Loughlin, 'Palestine in the aftermath', 84; Hoyland and Waidler, 'Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', 792. The *Maronite Chronicle* describes major destruction at Jericho and at the alleged site of the baptism of Christ in the Jordan in AG971 [AG = *Anno Graecorum* 'in the year of the Greeks', dating by the Seleucid era] (September 659-660), so Jerusalem can hardly have escaped serious damage also. See Emanuela Guidoboni, *Catalogue of ancient earthquakes in the Mediterranean area up to the 10th century* (Rome, 1994), 358. There are some problems with the text of the *Maronite Chronicle* at this point, and it seems probable that this is the same earthquake as that which it mentions in AG970, whose date and severity is confirmed by Theophanes the Confessor and Elias of Nisibis also. For the text, see Andrew Palmer, *The seventh century in the West-Syrian chronicles*, Translated Texts for Historians 15 (Liverpool, 1993), 30-32.

¹⁰ Palestine suffered major earthquakes in 551, 659, 749, 1033, and 1068. For a survey of the current evidence, see Gideon Avni, *The Byzantine-Islamic transition in Palestine: an archaeological approach* (Oxford, 2014), 325-27. For a detailed list of earthquakes, with known damage, see D. H. K. Amiran, E. Ariei, and T. Turcotte, 'Earthquakes in Israel and adjacent areas: macroseismic observations since 100 B.C.E.', *Israel Exploration Journal* 44 (1994), 260-305.

earthquake may also explain one of the more puzzling aspects of Adomnán's description of the mosque, the claim that it was built with upright boards and large beams.

The claim that the mosque was built with boards and large beams seems somewhat unlikely for two main reasons: first, because it was the custom in the region to use stone rather than wood in any large or prestigious buildings; and second, because a seventh-century text reports that a skilled marble-worker was employed in the construction of the original mosque there, suggesting that it was indeed built in stone.¹¹ It is easily understandable how or why large wooden beams could have been used even in a stone building, but it is not quite so easy to understand what use there could have been for upright boards, assuming that any interested parties would have distinguished correctly between the structure of the building itself and any interior decoration, wood panelling and so forth. So there is a natural temptation to assume that the problem lies in this aspect of the text, the reference to boards. One solution sometimes offered is that Adomnán may have used the term *tabula* here to mean 'slab', a large piece of stone.¹² However, this is inconsistent with the standard classical senses of the term.¹³ More importantly, it is also inconsistent with Adomnán's own usage

¹¹ The Georgian text of the *Pratum Spirituale* by John Moschus contains the tale, unattested elsewhere, of an archdeacon and marble-worker called John who ignored the command of bishop Sophronius of Jerusalem not to work on the mosque, and was then punished by God for continuing to do so. See Bernard Flusin, 'L'esplanade du temple à l'arrivée des Arabes, d'après deux récits byzantins', in Julian Raby and Jeremy Johns (eds), *Bayt al-Maqdis: 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art 9.1 (Oxford, 1992), 17-31.

¹² See e.g. Andreas Kaplony, *The Haram of Jerusalem 324-1099: temple, Friday mosque, area of spiritual power*, Freiburger Islamstudien 22 (Stuttgart, 2002), 211; Marsham, 'The architecture of allegiance', 99; Hoyland and Waidler, 'Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', 798. Nees, *Perspectives on early Islamic art*, 35, accepts that *tabula* means wooden board.

¹³ P. G. W. Glare, *Oxford Latin dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2012), s.v., lists nine main senses of the term, including one which could be used in reference to a stone object (no. 5, 'a tablet of stone or metal set up as a permanent record'), but none of which resemble a slab or block of stone used for construction purposes. The

whereby he always uses it in reference to flat wooden objects in perfect accordance with its main classical senses.¹⁴ Another suggestion is that the term *tabula* may conceal a mistranslation of the Greek term στήλη, ‘column’.¹⁵ Finally, Hoyland and Waidler suggest that Adomnán may simply have assumed that this building was made of wood, since that was the normal building material in the Ireland and northern Britain of his day.¹⁶ Neither of these last two explanations can be totally excluded, not least since faith in Christ’s words as described in the synoptic gospels, that not one stone would be left in place upon the Temple Mount, may have inclined any transmitter or translator of this account against accepting that God would tolerate any stone structure there, and so have coloured the interpretation of his source here.¹⁷ However, there is a fourth possibility also that seems to have passed unnoticed so far: that Adomnán’s ultimate source for the mosque (whether Arculf or some other anonymous pilgrim) did describe this building almost exactly as he relates, but that he misunderstood whatever complex web of beams, planks and scaffolding had been in temporary use to shore up and protect a badly damaged building to be part of this building itself. Furthermore, if one accepts this possibility, then one immediately removes the main

same observation applies to the medieval senses of the word attested in Ronald E. Latham et al. (eds), *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (London, 1975–2013), s.v.

¹⁴ He uses *tabula* in reference to wax writing-tablets (*DLS Praef.*, 1.2.2; *VC* 1.35), to an icon (*DLS* 3.5.2, 3.5.8), to a toilet seat (*DLS* 3.5.4), and to wooden planks for construction purposes (*VC* 1.25). Yet he never uses it in reference to stone, despite the fact that he describes many stone buildings in the *DLS*.

¹⁵ Woods, ‘Arculf’s luggage’, 41.

¹⁶ Hoyland and Waidler, ‘Adomnán’s *De Locis Sanctis*’, 798.

¹⁷ Matt. 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21.6.

objection to any attempt at identifying the earliest remains under the present Aqsa mosque with the building described by Adomnán.¹⁸

The suggestion that Adomnán's ultimate source misunderstood the appearance of a building under repair as its permanent condition would not be reasonable if this source were himself a permanent or long-standing resident of Jerusalem or the wider region, but is entirely possible in the case of a pilgrim staying only a few weeks or months in and about Jerusalem. Such an individual would not have been familiar with the architectural styles or practices in the region; and if his viewings of the mosque happened to occur when the workmen were at rest for some reason, then he may not have been any the wiser as to what he was really looking at. His misunderstanding of what he saw may have been compounded by the fact that, as a foreigner and non-Muslim, he would probably not have been allowed access to the site, and so would not have seen anything up close. Finally, one should take into account that a pilgrim from the Latin-speaking West is unlikely to have been able to communicate very well with locals who may have spoken Greek, Syriac, or Arabic, but were unlikely in most cases to have known much, if any, Latin. In this situation, the pilgrim is unlikely to have been able to quiz the locals very much when he saw something that puzzled him.

THE ALLEGATION OF PEJORATIVE CONTEXT

¹⁸ Nees, *Perspectives on early Islamic art*, 35, objects to the argument by Julian Raby as reported by Jeremy Johns, 'The 'House of the Prophet' and the concept of the mosque', in his (ed), *Bayt al-Maqdis: Jerusalem and early Islam*, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art 9.2 (Oxford, 1999), 59-112: 62 that the earliest remains under the mosque should be re-attributed from the reigns of 'Abd al-Malik and al-Walid to Mu'awiya in the 660s, on the basis that these reveal a substantial arcuated building in stone, whereas Adomnán describes a wooden structure.

One may turn next to the claim by Nees that Adomnán's positioning of the description of the mosque within his text is pejorative also. He emphasizes the fact that Adomnán sets his description of the mosque immediately after a lengthy description (*DLS* 1.1.7-13) of an alleged annual miracle according to which God always sent rain to cleanse Jerusalem of animal waste following a crowded festival when numerous camels, horses, asses and oxen had dirtied its streets.¹⁹ He sees in this close conjunction of waste-cleansing miracle and description of a mosque a deliberate attempt to associate the mosque, and Saracens, with dung. However, this substantially misrepresents what the text actually says. The key words here come at the conclusion of the miracle, immediately before the description of the mosque, when Adomnán seeks to explain the wonder (*DLS* 1.1.13):

Hinc ergo non neglegenter annotandum est quanti uel qualis honoris haec electa et praedicabilis ciuitas in conspectu aeterni genitoris habeatur, qui eam sordidatam diutius remanere non patitur, sed ob eius unigeniti honorificantiam citius eam emundat, qui intra murorum eius ambitum sanctae crucis et resurrectionis ipsius loca habet honorifica.

‘Thus one should carefully note the magnitude and character of the honour which this chosen and famous city has in the sight of the eternal father, who does not suffer it to remain soiled for long, but quickly cleanses it out of reverence for his only begotten son, who has the honoured places of his holy cross and resurrection within the compass of its walls’.

¹⁹ On this annual miracle, a ‘baptism of Jerusalem’, see Rodney Aist, ‘Adomnán, Arculf, and the source material of *De Locis Sanctis*’, in Wooding, Aist, Owen Clancy, and O’Loughlin, *Adomnán of Iona*, 162-80: 174-80.

These words associate the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with the animal waste far more directly than they do the mosque on the Temple Mount. Indeed, the description of the miracle had already made the explicit point that the waste was dispersed ‘everywhere’ throughout the city (*DLS* 1.1.9: *per illas politanas plateas stercorum abominationes propriorum **passim** sternit* ‘filth from their discharges spreads everywhere throughout the city streets’). In contrast, there is no actual mention of the Temple Mount during the description of how the waste was washed from the city. Nees infers a reference to the Temple Mount in the east of the city simply because it is stated that this waste was washed through the eastern gates of the city, but this misses the main point that the waste is depicted flowing from the higher regions to the lower regions throughout the whole city, that is, that it would have to have flowed by many Christian sites also. One should note here that Nees places great emphasis also on what he seems to interpret as an example of ring structure, where the alleged association of the Saracens with dung is claimed to correspond to an event in the second last chapter of the text (*DLS* 3.5) where a Jew at Constantinople is described as desecrating an icon of the Virgin by throwing it in a sewer; and this structure is then condemned as ‘hagiography or exegesis, or something else, but not history’.²⁰ However, even if one were to admit the existence of this alleged ring structure, this would not in itself have any bearing on the historicity of the two events so ordered. Nees confuses form and content; but the artificiality of the form, even if accepted here, does not necessarily affect the content.

The positioning of the description of the mosque near the beginning of the text surprises Hoyland and Waidler also, so that they ask ‘why place a non-Christian monument in such a prime position in the text?’.²¹ In reply, they canvass two possibilities: first, that Adomnán did

²⁰ Nees, ‘Insular Latin sources’, 97; idem, *Perspectives on early Islamic art*, 51: ‘This is hagiography, and diatribe, not history’.

²¹ Hoyland and Waidler, ‘Adomnán’s *De Locis Sanctis*’, 799.

not realise that the ‘Saracens’ who built this were not in fact Christian; and second, that the intent was to imply that God would one day wash the mosque from the city in the same way that he washed the animal waste from it. Neither is particularly convincing. For example, it is not clear why Adomnán could not have expressed his alleged hope that God would one day wash the mosque from the city much more openly and directly, if that was what he really wished; after all, he was not living under Arab or Muslim rule. Instead, it is arguable that the problem really lies in the initial assumption that the treatment of the mosque does occupy such a prime position. It constitutes the third and final part of the first chapter, where the first part describes the walls of the city, with the emphasis on its gates, and the second the annual miracle clearing the animal waste from the city through the gates in its eastern wall. Furthermore, it is far smaller than either of these parts. Consequently, it may be best characterized as a sort of footnote or afterthought to the chapter, where the theme that connects all three parts is that of the city walls, as indicated by the fact that the description of the mosque begins by describing the location of the Temple Mount near the eastern wall. This interpretation is supported by the fact that, while Adomnán takes care specifically to credit Arculf himself for what follows at the start of his descriptions of the walls of Jerusalem and of the annual miracle, he does not do so in the case of the description of the mosque, where his information is vaguely attributed to general knowledge ‘as it is said’ (*ut fertur*) rather than to Arculf. In this case, it seems, he is rather less concerned as to whether his reader believes his information or not. So when Hoyland and Waidler ask ‘why the Temple Mount was the first building to merit consideration, as opposed to Christian monuments such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre’, the answer is that the Temple Mount does not in fact receive any meaningful consideration, and certainly not when compared to the treatment of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Finally, one turns to Adomnán's claim that the mosque could accommodate three thousand people at once. Two points need to be made here. First, there is nothing suspicious in the number itself. It clearly represents a rounded figure or rough estimate such as one often finds in the description of large groups. This does not in itself mean that it has no basis in fact — an observation that is all the stronger considering that, in this text, Adomnán frequently includes other measurements of size or space that are clearly intended to be taken literally.²² This necessitates caution before assuming that Adomnán can only have intended this number in some symbolic or metaphorical sense. Of particular relevance here is the fact that he likewise describes the size of the aedicule containing the tomb of Christ in terms of the number of men that it could hold, namely nine men standing (*DLS* 1.2.6). Nees accepts that the number three thousand 'seems plausible for a large mosque'; and this somewhat undermines his subsequent argument, since if this number really is plausible, and may have been derived from the same source that provided the undeniably correct information that the Muslims of this period did in fact pray on the Temple Mount, then one needs firm grounds to reject it in the manner that he does.²³ There is nothing wrong with exploring other possibilities, but these should not suddenly be declared certainties without firm evidence.

AN ALLEGED BIBLICAL MODEL FOR THE DESCRIPTION OF THE MOSQUE

²² See e.g. *DLS* 1.7.1 (chalice from Last Supper, capacity of a Gallic *sextarius*); *DLS* 2.20.2 (Sea of Galilee, 140 stades long); *DLS* 2.27. 2 (top of Mount Tabor, 23 stades in width); *DLS* 2.30.14 (harbour at Alexandria, 30 stades in width); *DLS* 3.1.4 (walls of Constantinople, 12 miles in length).

²³ Nees, 'Insular Latin sources', 97.

When Nees attempts to explore the possible inspirations for the number three thousand, he focuses very narrowly on the bible in the assumption that this was Adomnán's most likely source. He dismisses the possibility that Adomnán may have been inspired in this choice of figure by some non-Christian author such as Caesar, and probably rightly so because there is no evidence that the library at Iona contained the works of Caesar, but is clear that the library did contain a large number of other Christian texts in addition to the bible, and there is no good reason to confine the search to the bible alone.²⁴ Nevertheless, Nees does so and, much as one would expect given the size and nature of the bible, he does find several passages referring in one way or the other to three thousand persons. He quickly settles upon one passage in particular, the description of how Samson killed three thousand men and women at Gaza by toppling the two main supporting pillars of the building where they were, so that it collapsed upon them (Judges 16:27). In truth, however, there is very little reason to associate this passage with the description of the mosque except that they both describe a building capable of containing about three thousand people. For example, the bible clearly describes a building with columns whereas Adomnán noticeably fails to include any reference to such in his description of the mosque. However, Nees attempts to reinforce his argument by claiming that both buildings are also depicted in a negative context. In particular, he claims that the building at Gaza was 'fated to be destroyed', but one of the surprising features of Adomnán's description of the mosque on the Temple Mount is that he omits any negative comment on the future fate of this recent construction on that most sensitive of sites. On the contrary, his emphasis on the wooden nature of the construction there seems designed to emphasize that such a building was entirely consistent with Christ's prophecy as described in the synoptic

²⁴ See Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The library of Iona in the late seventh century: the evidence from Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', *Ériu* 45 (1994), 33-52; idem, *Adomnán and the holy places*, 246-49.

gospels, that not one stone would be left in its place there, so that the mosque was not in fact ‘fated to be destroyed’. herehere

If one expands the search for possible inspirations for the number three thousand beyond the bible, and does so with due regard to the evidence within *DLS* for the general interests of Adomnán, or his source, then an alternative quickly reveals itself. One may start with the observation that Adomnán’s strange claim (*DLS* 1.6.1) that the True Cross was discovered two hundred and thirty-three years after the crucifixion has needlessly puzzled commentators: he, or his source, has copied the error from the earliest Latin text of the so-called *Inventio Crucis*, or some version of this source.²⁵ This is of relevance here because the same story proceeds to claim that when the empress Helena came to Jerusalem in order to find the True Cross, she rounded up all the Jews in the neighbouring region, and these totalled three thousand men (*tria milia virorum*).²⁶ Hence one could argue that Adomnán, or his source, may have been inspired by knowledge of the claim in the *Inventio Crucis* that three thousand Jews had once inhabited Jerusalem and its environs to claim that the mosque on the Temple Mount could now contain three thousand Muslims. The purpose of such a claim would have been symbolic, to hint that Christians would one day wrest Jerusalem from domination by Muslim non-believers in the same way that they had previously wrested it from Jewish non-believers in the time of Constantine.

²⁵ John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster, 2002), 174, suggests that Adomnán’s figure results from the confusion of the Roman numeral CCXCVIII (298) with CCXXXIII (233). For the earliest edition of the *Inventio Crucis*, see Stephan Borgehammer, *How the Holy Cross was found: from event to medieval legend*, Bibliotheca Theologiae Practicae 47 (Stockholm, 1991), 255-71. This text opens with the date: *Anno CCXXXIII, regnante venerabili Dei cultore magno viro Constantino*. Borgehammer, 181-82, explains this date as the corruption of a numeral originally written in Syriac and then translated into Greek.

²⁶ Borgehammer, *How the Holy Cross was found*, 258.

Yet none of this speculation is strictly necessary since, as Nees himself admits, the claim that the mosque could contain three thousand men is plausible. It would be foolish to try and push this figure too hard and use it as a basis for a calculation of the size of the mosque: first, because it is clearly a rounded figure or rough estimate with significant room for error either up or down; second, because it is not clear how much room Adomnán, or his source, assumed that even one man actually occupied; and third, because it is not clear what proportion of the floor-space would have to be occupied in the mosque for Adomnán, or his source, to consider it full.²⁷ Nevertheless, the figure was probably of the right order of magnitude, and the mosque was clearly a significant building.

CONCLUSION

It has been suggested that Adomnán's puzzling description of the mosque on the Temple Mount as a poorly constructed wooden building built upon ruins represents a misunderstanding of a building in the midst of repair following severe damage by the earthquake of 659, where the boards and beams to which he refers were probably temporary supports, shuttering, and scaffolding, and the ruins were the damaged walls and other features of the existing mosque rather than remnants from the pre-Islamic era. This has important implications for dating this description of the mosque, and the pilgrimage of the source ultimately responsible for this description, because one may assume that the Umayyad authorities prioritized the stabilization and repair of the mosque so that these were completed

²⁷ Haithem F. Al-Ratrout, *The architectural development of Al-Aqsa mosque in the early Islamic period* (Dundee, 2004), 423-26, assumes that a Muslim needs 0.77 square metres in order to have room to prostrate himself during prayer so that 3,000 people would require an area of about 2,310 square metres. The covered part of the earliest surviving remains under the Aqsa mosque, as described by Johns, 'The 'House of the Prophet'', 62, measure just over 50 m by at least 45m, and so have an area of about 2,250 square metres.

within a relatively short period. In other words, the pilgrim responsible for this description probably visited Jerusalem within a year or two of the earthquake in 659. As it happens, this coincides with a short period of peace between the Byzantine and Arab empires c.657-662, when travel, including pilgrimage to Jerusalem, proved possible once more.²⁸ The argument that the pilgrim responsible for this stratum of information within the *DLS* actually visited Jerusalem c.660 sets his pilgrimage about twenty years earlier than the date traditionally assigned to the pilgrimage of the Gallic bishop Arculf whom Adomnán credits as the source for his contemporary information about the Near East.²⁹ If one insists that Adomnán did actually meet the pilgrim responsible for bringing this information to the West, and that he did not simply invent the story of his meeting with him in order to fill his own literary need for an authoritative eye-witness, then one must also accept that he may have done so as early as the mid-660s, particularly if one accepts the evidence of Bede in this matter, who seems to suggest that Arculf was still returning from his pilgrimage when a storm drove his ship to Britain.³⁰ However, Bede's evidence is not without its difficulties either, but this must remain a problem for another day.³¹

²⁸ See Marek Jankowiak, 'Travelling across borders: a church historian's perspective on contacts between Byzantium and Syria in the second half of the seventh century', in Tony Goodwin (ed), *Arab-Byzantine coins and history: papers presented at the seventh century Syrian numismatic round table held at Corpus Christi College Oxford on 10th and 11th September 2011* (London, 2012), 13-25: 20-21.

²⁹ Meehan, *Adomnán's De Locis Sanctis*, 11, dates Arculf's pilgrimage in the East to 679-82.

³⁰ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.15. Hoyland and Waidler, 'Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', 805-07, avoid any discussion of when Adomnán met this returned pilgrim, although insistent that he did do so. Nor do they discuss Bede's evidence in any detail.

³¹ Nees, 'Insular Latin sources', 89-91, suggests that Bede has simply invented his story of how Arculf was blown to the western shore of Britain by a storm, but does not adduce any parallels for such inventiveness on his part, or explain why he should have done so here.