Episode Book

EPISODE #5684

Who Built the Dome of the Rock?

PUBLISHED	2 October 2026 at 15:18 UTC
DURATION	27:41
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/dome-of-the-rock-history/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:38 UTC

SYNOPSIS

The Dome of the Rock was completed in 691 CE — the oldest surviving work of Islamic architecture anywhere in the world, dated by its own inscription. The Al-Aqsa Mosque followed in 715. But beneath these stones lies something even more contested: thirty-five acres that have never been systematically excavated. This episode traces the full architectural history of the Temple Mount — Umayyad builders, Crusader occupiers, Ottoman tiles, Jordanian gold — and then asks why the dirt underneath remains untouched. From Moshe Dayan's 1967 status quo arrangement to the nine thousand tons of soil removed in 1999, we explore how archaeology in Jerusalem became inseparable from geopolitics, and why the most archaeologically sensitive site on earth has no excavation permit.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's what Daniel sent in this week. He starts from something we've talked about before, the Temple Mount as probably the most contested piece of real estate on the planet, the place where the Jewish temples stood. And he says: today there's a mosque and there's the Dome of the Rock.



Herman

Both of them up there right now, visible from half the city.



Corn

So he wants three things, really. First, when were those Islamic structures actually constructed? Second, he wants to look at how archaeology in this city has become fused with geopolitics in an extremely unique way. And third, specifically, how efforts to investigate the First Temple period have been frustrated by what he calls this delicate status quo, and by the tense relations between stakeholders who are perfectly aware that the Mount evokes feelings that could shake the fragile stability the whole city and the region rests on.



Herman

That's a lot of question in one prompt.



Corn

It's a good kind of a lot. And there's a real move in it, actually. He's not asking us to adjudicate who's right about the Mount. He's asking us to look at the arrangement that makes the place almost impossible to study.



Herman

The dirt itself is contested territory.



Corn

So the stones, and then the dirt under the stones.



Herman

Start with the stones. The Dome of the Rock was completed in 691, 692 of the common era, built by the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan. And here's the part that makes it more than a pretty building: it's the oldest surviving work of Islamic architecture anywhere in the world.



Corn

Older than anything in Cairo, older than anything in Cordoba.



Herman

Considerably. It's the earliest archaeologically attested religious structure built by a Muslim ruler, full stop. And it carries the earliest inscriptions proclaiming Islam and Muhammad. A dedicatory inscription in Kufic script dated 72 after the Hijra. That's the anchor. Whatever else you argue about the Mount, that building is dated by its own words on the wall.



Corn

And the Al-Aqsa mosque?



Herman

The congregational mosque at the southern end, the one with the silver dome, was built by the Umayyads under al-Walid the First in 715. But there's an earlier layer. After the Muslim conquest in 637, there's a simpler structure associated with the caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab. The pilgrim Arculf, writing around 670, describes a rectangular wooden house of prayer built over ruins, and he says it held three thousand people.



Corn

A wooden building holding three thousand. That's not a small prayer hall.



Herman

It's a serious structure. So you've got a progression: the conquest, a wooden prayer house, then the Umayyad stone mosque, then the Dome.



Corn

Hold on, because there's a terminology trap here and I want to spring it now, before we're forty minutes in.



Herman

Go ahead.



Corn

When people say "Al-Aqsa," they usually mean that specific building with the dome at the southern end. But "al-Masjid al-Aqsa," the whole phrase, refers to the entire esplanade. All thirty-five acres of it. Including the Dome of the Rock.



Herman

That's exactly the confusion. "Al-Jami' al-Aqsa," or the Qibli Mosque, is the specific building. "Al-Aqsa" as a name for the whole compound is the older and broader use.



Corn

And the Quran never names Jerusalem?



Herman

Surah 17, the Night Journey, describes the journey to "the farthest mosque," al-masjid al-aqsa. It never names the city. The identification with Jerusalem is later tradition, not text.



Corn

Which means the name everyone argues over is doing political work from the very beginning.



Herman

From the very beginning, yes.



Corn

All right. Back to the Dome. Why that shape?



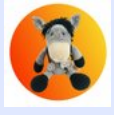
Herman

That's the part I find delightful. The octagonal plan, the mosaics, the proportions. They're patterned on the Byzantine churches and palaces that were already standing nearby. The clearest case is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Its dome is 20.9 meters across. The Dome of the Rock's dome is 20.2.



Corn

Seven tenths of a meter apart.



Herman

That's not a coincidence. That's a conversation.



Corn

Or a competition.



Herman

The medievalist Shelomo Dov Goitein put it well. He said the Dome's form was destined to rival the many Christian domes, and that the inscriptions inside show, in his words, a spirit of polemic against Christianity. You walk in, you look up at the mosaic, and it's arguing with the church down the road.



Corn

Arguing in mosaic. That's a very expensive way to make a point.



Herman

Empires make expensive points. There was a long-standing theory that Abd al-Malik built it to divert pilgrimage away from Mecca, because Mecca was then controlled by his rival Ibn al-Zubayr. Most modern historians have thrown that one out.



Corn

Why?



Herman

It comes out of anti-Umayyad propaganda, later sources with an axe to grind. The more likely motivation is straightforward: a victory monument over Christian Byzantium. A statement that Islam has its own holy place in Jerusalem, and it's bigger and better than yours.



Corn

That's a cleaner reading. An empire builds its signature building in the contested city and says, this is ours now.



Herman

Oleg Grabar called it "a unique monument of Islamic culture in almost all respects," a work of art and as a cultural and pious document.



Corn

Two things at once. Building and document.



Herman

And here's the detail that I think is the best thing in the whole episode, Corn. The inscription on the Dome originally carried Abd al-Malik's name. Later, it was erased and replaced with the name of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun, who reigned 813 to 833.



Corn

They edited the stone.



Herman

But here's the beautiful part: they left the original date alone. 72 after the Hijra, still there. So you read the inscription and it says al-Ma'mun, but it's dated seventy-two years after the Hijra, which is more than a century before al-Ma'mun was born.



Corn

A forgery that dates itself.



Herman

You see it first noted by Melchior de Vogüé in 1864. And this is what the Mount does. Even the stones carry political edits. Someone in the ninth century decided which name should be on the wall, and nobody caught the date for a thousand years.



Corn

Which is about what happens when you're trying to overwrite a monument instead of reading it.



Herman

You focus on the name and forget the calendar.



Corn

So the Dome goes up in 691, the mosque in 715, and then what? Does it stay Umayyad forever?



Herman

Not remotely. The Dome collapsed in an earthquake in 1015 and was rebuilt by the Fatimid caliph al-Zahir in 1022, 1023.



Corn

One building, four empires.



Herman

Then the Crusaders arrive in 1099 and turn the Dome into a church. Templum Domini. And Al-Aqsa becomes the headquarters of the Knights Templar.



Corn

The Templars in the Al-Aqsa mosque.



Herman

The Templars. And here's the detail: they believed the Dome of the Rock marked the site of Solomon's Temple.



Corn

So the people who gave us the word "Templar" got the Temple in the wrong building.



Herman

They located the Temple at the Dome of the Rock. Saladin reconsecrated both buildings to Islam after 1187. Then the Ottomans arrive. Suleiman the Magnificent, in the sixteenth century, covers the exterior in the blue and white tiles everyone recognizes today.



Corn

The tiles are Ottoman.



Herman

The tiles are sixteenth century Ottoman. The building's seventh century Umayyad. Two completely different empires' fingerprints on one structure, and most people think they're the same thing.



Corn

And the gold?



Herman

Gilded with real gold in 1959 to 1964 by Jordan. Then gilded again in 1993. King Hussein of Jordan sold a house in London to fund eighty kilograms of gold for the dome.



Corn

He sold a house.



Herman

He sold a London property to re-gild a dome in Jerusalem. That tells you everything about the emotional weight of that building, and about how much of it travels.



Corn

So on the stones themselves: 691 for the Dome, 715 for Al-Aqsa, earthquake, Crusaders, Saladin, Ottomans, gold.



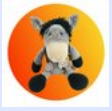
Herman

That's the architecture. Now here's the pivot, and it's the part Daniel is really asking about. The stones are documented. The dirt underneath them is not.



Corn

Because it has never been dug.



Herman

Never been dug. Not once. No systematic archaeological excavation has ever been conducted on the Temple Mount itself.



Corn

Ever? In the history of archaeology?



Herman

There are surveys. Charles Wilson and Charles Warren, working for the Palestine Exploration Fund in the 1860s and 70s, dug tunnels outside the walls and secretly documented the lower courses of the Herodian masonry. Fascinating, dangerous work. Then Robert Hamilton's examination of the Al-Aqsa mosque during repairs, 1938 to 1942, under the British Mandate. That is essentially the only dig inside the compound, and it was a rescue operation, not research.



Corn

So everything we know about what's under there comes from looking at walls, poking a camera down a shaft, and inference.



Herman

And then the situation after 1967.



Corn

The Dayan arrangement.



Herman

June 17, 1967, ten days after the Israelis took the Old City. Moshe Dayan meets Muslim authorities at Al-Aqsa and hands administrative control of the Mount to the Jordanian Islamic Waqf. Israel keeps security control. The phrase people use is: religious sovereignty stays with the Muslims, overall sovereignty stays with Israel.



Corn

That's the birth of the status quo.



Herman

It's not a treaty. It's an arrangement. It's been maintained by practice, not by signature, for almost sixty years.



Corn

And the archaeology consequence is immediate. The Waqf employs its own archaeologist, has near full autonomy on the holy sites. Israeli archaeologists are barred from inspecting the compound. They can only dig around it.



Herman

Around the southern and western walls. The Ophel, the City of David, the western wall tunnels, all the peripheral work. Inside the compound, any earthmoving is Waqf business. Full stop.



Corn

So the most archaeologically sensitive site on earth has no excavation permit. Forever.



Herman

And this is where the arrangement stops being a curiosity and starts getting people killed. 1996, the Western Wall Tunnel opens. Gun battles. Fifty-four Palestinians and fourteen Israeli soldiers die.



Corn

Over a tunnel. Over somebody turning on the lights in a tunnel that had existed for years.



Herman

A tunnel under a street in the Muslim Quarter, opened with a new exit. That was enough.



Corn

1999.



Herman

The big one. The Waqf is constructing the Marwani Mosque in the area called Solomon's Stables. In November 1999, they remove roughly nine thousand tons of archaeologically rich soil from the Mount.



Corn

Nine thousand tons.



Herman

About three hundred and fifty truckloads. Heavy earth moving equipment. No salvage excavation. No sifting. It's dumped in the Kidron Valley.



Corn

I want to sit on that for a second. Nine thousand tons of dirt from the most fought-over thirty-five acres on the planet, moved with bulldozers, and the only people who could have studied it weren't allowed on the site.



Herman

Israel Finkelstein called the whole Solomon's Stables construction "the greatest devastation to have recently been inflicted on Jerusalem's archaeological heritage." Gabriel Barkay said Crusader structures were demolished and ancient Jewish stones were reused.



Corn

Reused as what?



Herman

As building material for the new mosque. Stone from one era stacked into a wall of another.



Corn

Which is exactly what every empire on that hill has done. It's just that this time we were watching.



Herman

Then 2007. The Mughrabi Gate. A ramp collapses, Israel wants to rebuild it, and the whole region erupts. Saudi Arabia, Syria, Malaysia, Jordan, Turkey, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, all condemn it. UNESCO sends a technical mission. The report actually clears Israel of wrongdoing but advises halting work.



Corn

Worse outcome than a brick being laid.



Herman

And in the same period, the Waqf digs a four hundred meter trench across the compound for electric cables. Barkay's line about it is the one everybody quotes: "They should be using a toothbrush, not a bulldozer."



Corn

That's the entire episode in eight words.



Herman

It really is. That's the whole impossible situation.



Corn

So here's what I keep coming back to. If the Waqf hadn't done that 1999 earthmoving, we would have no First Temple era material at all. Because nobody was ever going to get a permit to dig.



Herman

Which is exactly the paradox at the heart of the archaeological side. The destruction produced the evidence.



Corn

Walk me through the Sifting Project, because that's where the actual artifacts Daniel would want to know about come from.



Herman

2004. Gabriel Barkay and Zachi Dvira get a permit, under Bar-Ilan University, to recover the dumped soil from the Kidron Valley. Not to dig the Mount. To sift what had been thrown away. The methodology is wet sifting. You take the dirt, you wash it, and you go through the residue by hand. Everything down to the size of a lentil gets looked at.



Corn

And who does the looking?



Herman

Hundreds of thousands of volunteers and tourists. Ordinary people, school groups, visitors, hand-picking through dirt. It's one of the very few places in archaeology where you can say the public did the work.



Corn

What's actually come out of it?



Herman

About fifteen percent of the pottery dates to the Iron Age. Mostly Iron Age Two B and Two C. That's roughly 800 to 586 before the common era. The period of the later Judean kingdom, the period you'd expect to find on the Mount.



Corn

Give me the marquee items.



Herman

Around a hundred and thirty Judahite figurine fragments. Plus thirty more from an eastern slope garbage dump. A rare impression seal and arrowhead from the tenth or ninth century before the common era. LMLK seals, dozens of ostraca, and bullae.



Corn

Explain bullae for the listener who's only heard the word in a different context.



Herman

A bulla is a small clay impression. You take a lump of clay, you press a seal into it, you use it to seal a document or a container. The bulla survives when the document burns, because clay is forever and papyrus isn't.



Corn

And the famous one there?



Herman

The Immer Bulla. Seventh to sixth century before the common era. It bears the name Immer, which is a biblical priestly family. One member, Pashhur, is recorded in Jeremiah, chapter 20, verse 1, as a Temple office holder.



Corn

So a sealed object, labeled with the name of a family that the text associates with the Temple, found in Temple Mount dirt.



Herman

Found in Temple Mount dirt, twenty-five hundred years after somebody pressed it. And the back of the sealing shows fiber impressions.



Corn

Meaning?



Herman

Meaning it sealed a cloth sack. Possibly tied to the Temple treasury. Possibly. That's the level of inference you're operating at, because you can't dig the building those sacks were stored in.



Corn

That's the frustration Daniel is pointing at. You've got the family name. You've got the fiber. You've got the century. You don't have the room.



Herman

There's also a Scytho-Iranian type arrowhead, which matches the type Nebuchadnezzar's forces would have carried.



Corn

An arrowhead from the people who burned the place.



Herman

In 2007, some of the material from the eighth to sixth centuries before the common era was described as possibly the first physical evidence of human activity on the Temple Mount during the First Temple period. Animal bones, ceramic sherds, juglet fragments.



Corn

"Possibly the first physical evidence." Two thousand years of argument and the sentence ends in "possibly."



Herman

That is precisely the problem. The site is the most documented, most fought over, most prayed at chunk of land in the world, and the archaeology of it is a maybe.



Corn

And the project itself, how's it funded?



Herman

It withdrew from its partnership with the Ir David Foundation in 2017. It's relied on crowdfunding. There was a public commitment from Netanyahu for government backing, and that has yet to bear fruit. It moved to Mount Scopus in 2019.



Corn

So the one workaround that actually functions is running on donations and volunteer labor.



Herman

From an office on Mount Scopus, sifting dirt that was dumped in 1999.



Corn

That's the whole arrangement in one sentence.



Herman

Then there's the scholarly fight underneath all this, which I love because it's open. Finkelstein, Koch and Lipschits, 2014, propose what's called the mound on the Mount theory.



Corn

Which is?



Herman

That the ancient tell of Jerusalem, the accumulated mound of the original city, isn't under the City of David at all. It's under the modern compound.



Corn

That's a massive claim.



Herman

It's a massive claim and it was rejected by other scholars. But even the rejection is interesting, because everything at that site is being argued without a single trench inside the compound.



Corn

What about Ritmeyer?



Herman

Leen Ritmeyer argues that specific visible ashlars near the Golden Gate are Judean Iron Age in style, Hezekiah era. And he argues that a step leading to the Dome of the Rock may be the top of the Iron Age western wall's remaining course.



Corn

A step. A surviving top course of a wall from the First Temple period, disguised as a step.



Herman

Every scholar agrees on one thing, though. The Iron Age Temple Mount was smaller than the Herodian compound you see today. Whoever built the Second Temple expanded the platform outward. So the original sacred footprint is inside the modern one.



Corn

Smaller and buried somewhere inside. And unfindable, because you can't dig the center of the most politically radioactive thirty-five acres on earth.



Herman

That's the paradox. And here's why it's not going to change. The sensitivity is the reason the site hasn't been bulldozed, and it's also the reason it can't be studied. The protection and the blindness are the same mechanism.



Corn

Say more about the legal logic, because that's the piece I find fascinating.



Herman

1976, Justice Aharon Barak. He says every Jew has the right to enter the Temple Mount and to pray there. Then he says: however, as with every human right, it is not absolute, but relative. And in a case where there is near certainty that injury may be caused to the public interest, it is possible to limit the rights of the person in order to uphold the public interest.



Corn

So the right exists, it just loses to the public interest.



Herman

Consistently loses. The practical rules: non-Muslims enter only through the Mughrabi Gate, Sunday through Thursday, four hours a day. Non-Muslim prayer is banned. Violators are expelled by police.



Corn

And the Chief Rabbinate?



Herman

Formally bans Jews from entering the site, out of fear of stepping on the Holy of Holies. A growing number of Modern Orthodox rabbis permit visits to the periphery. Beyadenu reported a record sixty-eight thousand nine hundred and forty-four Jewish visitors this year.



Corn

Which is a lot of people for a place the rabbinate says not to walk on.



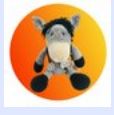
Herman

And that tension is exactly the trigger pattern. Sharon's visit in 2000 sparked the Second Intifada. The 2021 crisis, 2022, 2023. Ben-Gvir's visit in 2023. Perceived changes to the status quo, and it doesn't matter whether the change is archaeological or just a guy walking around.



Corn

Which means the excavation permit question isn't really an archaeology question. It's a security question wearing an archaeology hat.



Herman

Yohanan Danino, who was Jerusalem's police commissioner, put it in a way that I find grimly honest. He said the place is at the center of a holy war, and that anyone who wants to change the status quo on the Temple Mount should not be allowed up there.



Corn

He's not saying they're wrong. He's saying the consequences are so severe that the conversation is off the table.



Herman

And Ron Hassner's observation ties it together. He points out that the rabbinic ban on entry brilliantly solved the government's problem of avoiding ethnic conflict. Because the Jews most likely to clash with Muslims at the site were the ones most respectful of rabbinical authority.



Corn

The religious law does the security work.



Herman

The religious law does the security work the state couldn't legally do.



Corn

And then the Waqf side. Yusuf Natsheh, from the Waqf.



Herman

He says: we regret that some Israeli groups try to use archaeology to achieve political ends, but their rules of archaeology do not apply to the Haram. It is a living religious site in an occupied land.



Corn

That's the whole other frame. Not a site to be studied. A site to be lived in.



Herman

Which is a completely coherent position. If your site is a living religious place, then the question of what's under the floor is not a research question. It's a category error.



Corn

And the UNESCO side of it?



Herman

UNESCO repeatedly intervenes. The 2016 Occupied Palestine Resolution referred to the site only by its Muslim name, Al-Haram al-Sharif. Israel froze ties. Then Israel and the US withdrew from UNESCO in 2017. Irina Bokova, who was UNESCO's director general, said something worth keeping: different peoples worship the same places, sometimes under different names. The recognition, use of and respect for these names is paramount.



Corn

The naming itself is the diplomacy.



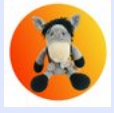
Herman

The naming is the diplomacy. Every word is a claim.



Corn

So Daniel's real question, when you lay it out like that, is whether archaeology and politics in this city can ever be separated.



Herman

And the honest answer is: not at this site. Not while the status quo survives. The sifting project is the entire workaround. Recover what was thrown away, sift it, study it. And even that became a political flashpoint, because it's an argument about who threw away what and why.



Corn

The dirt is evidence and the dirt is a grievance at the same time.



Herman

Twenty-five hundred year old clay, and the question of whether it was disposed of or discarded is still political.



Corn

Which brings us to the arrangement that makes all of it work the way it does. The 1967 handshake nobody signed.



Hilbert

Nine thousand tons is actually the low estimate. It was closer to eleven, and about two hundred of the truckloads went to a quarry outside Bethlehem, not the Kidron.



Corn

I didn't know that.



Hilbert

Most of the written accounts came from the Kidron pile, because that's the one Barkay could get a permit to work. The Bethlehem trucks got crushed and mixed into road fill. Nobody sifted those. I was working at a landscaping supplier in the industrial zone the year the second wave of that came through, and we sold a couple of tons of it bagged as decorative stone for gardens. Ordinary crushed rock, straight from the contract. Twenty shekels a bag.

Corn

Somebody's garden has Temple Mount dirt in it.



Hilbert

Half of Gilo has Temple Mount dirt in it. That's not the part I came out to say. The Dome of the Rock, the mosaics, the octagonal plan. Everyone talks about the Holy Sepulchre as the model. Fine. But there's a second church nobody mentions, and it's the Kathisma. It's on the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and Abd al-Malik's builders looked at it too. I've seen the foundations.



Corn

You've seen the foundations of a fifth century church.



Hilbert

They dug it up for a road widening in the nineties. I drove past it every morning for two years. The octagon's there in the footing stones. You don't copy a church by accident. You measure it.



Corn

So the Dome isn't just modeled on the Holy Sepulchre. It's modeled on the Holy Sepulchre and the pilgrimage church everyone walked past on the way to Bethlehem.



Hilbert

They were making an argument along the whole route, not just at the destination. That's the part I wanted to correct. Everybody says Holy Sepulchre and stops. There's a second building in the sentence.



Corn

That's a bigger correction than you're letting on.



Hilbert

It's small. It's one church. But you can't see the Dome as a one-off if it's riffing on two buildings, because a one-off is a statement and a pattern is a program. Somebody sat down and made a plan for how the city would read. That's what I find interesting about it.



Hilbert (continued)

The layout is the message. I spent one summer in the eighties running a delivery route that went past the Mount twice a day. Most mornings I'd stop at the same coffee stand on the corner. The guy who ran it was a Waqf electrician. He fixed the lights in the Marwani Mosque. He told me his brother worked the cable trench in two thousand seven, and the instructions were: don't slow down for anything. He was proud of it. He said it was the fastest trench in the history of the city. I asked him what they found. He said nothing, they were moving too fast.



Corn

They were moving too fast to find anything.



Hilbert

That's how it goes. You don't decide to destroy the past. You decide to hit a deadline, and the past is what falls behind the schedule.



Corn

That's a good place to land. The deadline and the past.



Herman

And it makes the sifting project make sense in a way the research doesn't. Somebody has to work the pile. The pile is what's left when the schedule wins.



Corn

Which is basically where we are with this. The Dome and Al-Aqsa are dated, and precisely dated, because their own inscriptions say when they went up. The dirt under them is undocumented. And it will stay undocumented, because the arrangement that protects the site from a bulldozer is the same arrangement that keeps a trowel out of it.



Herman

The sensitivity that preserves it is the sensitivity that blinds us.



Corn

If that ever changes, it won't change because somebody got a permit. It'll change because somebody finally decides the risk of not knowing is larger than the risk of digging. And there's no sign of that.



Herman

The Sifting Project will keep going on donations, and the mound on the Mount argument will keep going without a trench, and every headline out of this city that starts with the words Temple Mount will still be about a visit or a fence or a paving stone.



Corn

That's the episode. The stones are dated. The dirt is contested. And we know more about a caliph's name being chiseled off a wall in the ninth century than we do about what's under the floor of the building the whole argument is about.



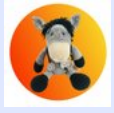
Herman

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing, as always.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you got something out of this one, leave us a review wherever you listen. It helps other people find the show.



Herman

We'll be back soon.