

Period of great hardships

The period of great sufferings for the Patriarchate of Jerusalem lasted over a millennium despite the goodwill which the pillager of Jerusalem, Omar Ibn Al-Hattab, displayed to the Christians and their Patriarch, saint Sophronios. Caliph Omar by personal decree (ahtiname) recognized the Patriarch of "the imperial nation" (namely the Greeks), the position of leader of the nation and spiritual leader of all the Christians of Palestine, even of the heterodox, as well as the legation of honour among all the Christian leaders, granting him guarantees of goodwill, security and freedom from taxation on behalf of future muslim leaders. However, his successors, high handed Arab leaders, proved to be very tough. The Christian community started to become afflicted by intense efforts of islamization and anti-Hellenic cleansing.

Despite the unfavourable external conditions, the spiritual life continued to be cultivated by the persecuted Christians and the Church of Jerusalem played a significant role in the defeat of the heresies of Monothelitism and of the Iconomaches as well as what had appeared for the first time (808AD) in Jerusalem, the frankopapist heresy of the "filioque". Among the many renown theologians, worthy of mention was the Patriarch, saint Sophronios (+638) and the Sabbait hieromonk saint John Damascene (+784) one of the top and unrecurring in the ecclesiastic history persons of theology and hymnography.

The 9th century as the 8th, was characteristic for its persecutions against the Christians and the looting of the shrines, churches, monasteries and of the simple faithful, while civil conflicts were added among the various Arab parties and oppressive steps instituted among which were the prohibition of icon processions and the teaching of Greek, so that for the flock, the use of the Greek language was limited to the worship within the Churches. Also added were the recurring desecrations and destructions of the Church of the

Resurrection and the rest of the sacred places, the exiles and murders of Patriarchs and many more. The height of all sufferings was brought about by Caliph Al Hakim who let loose a persecution (1007AD), which was the worst of all up to then. Beyond the demeaning of the Christians and the looting of sacred treasures, the Church of the Resurrection and the surrounding monasteries were ruined, as was the Shrine of Saint George at Lyddia, while at the height of the persecution the Sacristy of the Resurrection was looted and the process of islamization was imposed through horrible tortures. A slight improvement occurred by the successor of Hakim, Al Zahir, when the Emperor of Constantinople, Constantine Monomachos (1042-1055AD) also contributed significantly in the restoration of the Church of the Resurrection and the rest of the holy Places. Anyhow, the Church was tested again by the strong juxtapositions among the Arabs and the rising power of the Seljic Turks. A minor change in this state of affairs was brought about by the appearance of the Crusaders in 1099, who, at the instigation of the Popes and the Kings of the West, through fire and iron were slicing the eastern Roman "Byzantine" Empire and creating small Latin Kingdoms, thus finally reaching Jerusalem.

The Treaty of "Ahtimanes"

The Ahtiname (treaty) of Caliph Omar-Ibn-al-Khattab, delivered to Sophronios, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, on the 20th Rabiul-awel of the 15th year of Rising (636).

Translation:

"In the name of the good and merciful God of whom we invoke His understanding, Omar Ibn-al Khattab, glory be to God who has reared us in Islam and who has honoured us through Faith, who through His compassion on us, sent us His Prophet Mohammed, may the peace and blessing of the Lord be with him

who led us from deceit to the truth and has gathered us where before we were scattered. Glory to Him who joined our hands, who run to our help against our enemies, who placed under our rule countries and has joined us with true bonds of brotherhood.

Let us give to the Lord thanks, for all the benefits to those who are servants of the Lord. The present decree of Omar Ibn-al-Khattab is a contract and a pact delivered to the distinguished and most reverent Sophronios, Patriarch of the Imperial Nation, on Mount of Olives, in Jerusalem. It includes as well the laity, clergy, monks and nuns and I grant to them full security wherever they wish to be.

Because when a citizen fulfills his duties to the Authorities punctually, we the Faithful as well as our posterity, owe in turn to grant him the necessary security.

Therefore, let then stop reproaching them for their faults for they already declared submission and obedience.

Let them have therefore full and absolute security as concerns their life, their Churches, their beliefs and all places of pilgrimage which they now have within or without the city, namely the KAMAME (the Church of the Resurrection), the Church of Bethlehem, where Jesus, may peace be on Him, was born, the Great Church and the Cave with the three gates, the southern, northern and the western ones. They together with the rest of the Christians who reside here, Georgians, Abessynians (Ethiopians) as well Franks, Copts Syrians, Armenians, Nestorians, Jacobians and Maronites, who will come as simple pilgrims and will belong to the said Patriarch.

They may have the primacy above all the others according to what was granted to them from the part of the Prophet and dear messenger of the Lord, who honoured them with the sign of His gracious hand and ordered they be granted protection and security. Similarly we too, the true faithful, owe to behave,

honouring the example of Him who acted beneficially towards them.

All the Christian pilgrims to the All Holy Tomb, should give the Patriarch one drachma and 1/3 of a silver drachma. Every genuine faithful, man or woman, judge or Governor, who exercises duties of a judge on earth, must respect whatever we have granted by warrant, whether rich or poor, muslim or muslimist disciple of the Prophet. For this reason we have granted for their sake the present Decree. Let everybody act accordingly towards what is contained therein and have this, obtained in their hands continual authority. Glory be to God of the people and suffice for us God the protector and graceful One. Executed on the 20th Rabiul-awel of the 15th year of the departure of the Prophet.

Let him be transgressor of the Agreement of God and hateful against the beloved Prophet, he who acts contrary to the content of this Decree”.

1. Concerning the Arabic text, it is kept handwritten at the National Library of Paris, Histoire de Jerusalem et d'Hebron, section of Saint Germain des Pres, No. 100: Book, Sesostris Sidarous Pasha: Des Patriarcats, pg 510-512.