

# Orthodox in the Holy Land

The beginning of the Church history in the Holy Land is considered to have been at the time of the creation of the first Christian community in Jerusalem during the years of the Apostles in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. This first organized Christian Church, headed by Archbishop James the brother of God, was preserved out of all other Christian communities until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman Emperor Titus in 70 A.D. After the recovering of the city with the name Ailea Capitolina in 135 A.D. by the Emperor Andrianos, the Archdiocese of New Jerusalem had lost its splendour and was inferior to the other Archdioceses in Ashkelon, Gaza, Caesarea, Skythopolis and elsewhere. In 451 A.D. the Ecumenical Synod of Chalcedon recognized the religious and pilgrimage importance of the Archdiocese of Jerusalem and upgraded it to a Patriarchate. Ever since, the Patriarch of Jerusalem had been recognized as the supreme authority in the Holy Land and his ecclesial jurisdiction had been extended to all Palestine as well as to the Archdioceses east of the river Jordan. The present Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem had been recognized by all the conquerors of the Holy Land: Arabs, Mamluks, Ottomans and English, as the rightful protector and custodian of the Christian Shrines.

## The Iberians

The Iberian Christians had already been in the Holy Land since the 4<sup>th</sup> century as pilgrims or monks and clergy. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century the royal lineage Iberian Mourvanos, founded an Iberian monastery in Jerusalem. Soon afterwards he received the name Peter and was ordained Archbishop of Maiouma, a town near the city of Gaza. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century the Iberians were settled at the Monastery of the Sacred Cross, on the west of Jerusalem. Later on, during the 13<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the

Mamluks granted many privileges to the Iberian monks, who as a monastic community bought lands, were spread over many other monasteries in the city, and obtained rights in many shrines such as in Golgotha. The Iberian decline in the Holy Land began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Under the burden of their debts, they started selling their Monasteries, or rent them to other Christian communities. In the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century they abandoned Jerusalem, having become an indebted and disintegrated Fraternity. The few remaining monks lived together with the Greek Monks in the Monasteries of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate.

### The Serbs

The Orthodox Serbs appeared in the Holy Land as pilgrims in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Due to the increase in the number of the Serb pilgrims it became necessary to find a guest house in Jerusalem, as well as to create and organize a Serbian Monk Order for the care of the pilgrims. For this reason, in 1303, the King of Serbia Stephen Uroch bought the Monastery of the Archangels at the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem and offered it to the Serbian Monks, in order to make it a monastic centre and guest house for the Serbian pilgrims. In 1504 Serbian Monks took over the famous Lavra of St. Savvas in the Judea desert and turned it into a Coenobitic Monastery. However, the fortune of the Serbian monks in the Holy Land did not turn out that well. In 1623 they were forced to abandon the Lavra of St. Savvas and the rented Monastery of the Archangels, having become an indebted and disintegrated Brotherhood.

### The Russians

The Orthodox-Christian Russia, government and church alike, have always been supporting the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in its struggles and the occasional disputes among the Christian communities for the protection and the custody of the Shrines.

The Russian Christianization in the 10<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the interest of the Orthodox Russian pilgrims in the Holy Land, either as simple pilgrims or in order to embrace monasticism in one of the Greek Orthodox Monasteries. After the fall of Byzantium in 1453, Russia, as the only independent Orthodox country, took over officially the protection and custody of the Orthodox Church in Palestine. For this reason the first Russian Church envoy was sent in Palestine in 1845, headed by Archimandrite Porphyrios Uspensky, in order to evaluate the situation and support the Patriarchate and the Orthodox Clergy. The Crimea war became the reason to halt this mission in 1854, but later on in 1858, another envoy was arranged headed by Metropolitan Cyril of Melitoupolis. Over the next years, the members of the envoy were increased, therefore lands were bought to build the first Russian monasteries and educational and charity foundations. The constantly increasing numbers of the Russian pilgrims were placed under the care and hospitality of the Russian envoy and in 1860 an old military camp North-West of Jerusalem was bought and the Russian guest house was built therein. In 1864 the impressive Cathedral dedicated to the Holy Trinity was erected in the centre of the guest house. In 1870 to 1880 the monastery of the Russian nuns was built at the top of the Mount of Olives. In 1871 another monastery for nuns was built in the village Ayn-Karem, west of Jerusalem, and in 1888 the beautiful Monastery of St. Magdalene was constructed west of the Mount of Olives. The activity of the Russian envoy in the Holy Land was restricted by the 1<sup>st</sup> World War and the Bolshevik revolution in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## The Romanians

The Orthodox Christian Romanian pilgrimage envoys in the Holy Land have been recorded since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, while during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the number of the Romanian pilgrims had been increased. During the difficult centuries of the

Orthodox Church of Jerusalem, the Romanian people showed an intense interest in the fortune of the shrines, offering donations and financial aid for the prevailing of the Orthodox faith in Palestine. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Romanian Church expressed active interest in the establishment of a Romanian envoy in Jerusalem. The first operations for the mission and the construction of the first Romanian church in the Holy City began in 1914. The 1<sup>st</sup> World War outbreak and the forthcoming difficulties postponed temporarily the completion of the operation, but on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1935 the foundations of the first Romanian church in Jerusalem as well as those of the other construction sites for the hospitality of the Romanian pilgrims were placed. At the same time there was the foundation of another Romanian church – Skete – on the west side of the river Jordan dedicated to St. John the Baptist. At present, the Romanian Church envoy together with that of Russia, headed by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, represent the Orthodox Christian World in the Holy Land.