

# The Holy Monastery of the Sacred Cross

The foundation of the monastery dates back to the Byzantine years of Palestine. The Holy Altar of the church stands on the spot where according to the Christian tradition Lot planted the tree used to structure Christ's Cross. A few years ago parts of a mosaic floor were discovered in the main church, dating back to 1040 A.D. The church was destroyed in 614 by the Persian army. Nevertheless, it was soon afterwards restored by the Jerusalem Patriarchate. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century the Egyptian caliph and imam Al-Hakim (996-1021) caused great damages in the monasteries and churches of Jerusalem. Soon afterwards the monastery was reconstructed and manned with monks by an Athonite monk with Iberian (Georgian) origin, named Prohoros. During Mamluks' occupation (Middle Ages) in Palestine, the monastery had become the most renowned centre of Iberian monasticism in the Holy Land. There were over one hundred monks, most of whom were scholars, educated in sciences and art. The famous Iberian poet Shota Rustaveli lived with them. In the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the monastery was granted to the Greek Patriarchate along with all its spiritual and material property. In 1857 Patriarch Cyril founded the distinguished School of Theology of the Sacred Cross of the Church of Jerusalem which had been operating until 1905. Today this important monastery with all its invaluable spiritual and fine art treasures is kept as a vivacious museum of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. The monastery of the Sacred Cross is a massive construction site. It was completed to its present form in 1855 with the foundation of the School of Theology there. The impressive bell tower of the monastery dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The outstanding Library of the monastery was also built in the same century.

The construction site of the monastery is comprised of five floor levels. On the first floor there are various crypts, storage areas, workshops, the olive press factory, cisterns, the old stables, spacious courtyards and small gardens. On the second and third floors there are teaching classrooms, the common refectory of the School, the kitchen, the ovens, small chapels, the central library and the study areas of the students. The fourth and fifth floor accommodated the spacious and impressive ceremony rooms, the museum and the office of the School Manager. The construction site of the monastery is square shaped, with the Catholicon situated on the centre of the building while the towering walls contribute to the fortress-like image of the monastery.

The Catholicon of the monastery of the Cross was initially dedicated to the Annunciation of the Theotokos. Later on it was dedicated to the King and Queen, Equal to the Apostles, Constantine and Helen and to the Elevation of the Sacred Cross. The architecture of the church is a three-aisled Basilica with a central dome and three sub-domes and it is the only church in Palestine with this particular structure. Nevertheless, it maintains the Byzantine church architectural style we encounter in the 7<sup>th</sup> century in different areas of the Byzantine Empire.

The Catholicon of the Monastery as well as most of the mosaics that decorate it, belong to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. After the 11<sup>th</sup> century there is no known refurbishment in the building, while in 1644 there was some renovation work on the Dome and the Temple was added in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are two layers of mosaics in the Catholicon, the first of which belongs to the first Byzantine church of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

The second mosaic layer is that of the 11<sup>th</sup> century which is still kept intact to the present time. Both mosaic layers are Byzantine in style, similar to those of other churches in

Palestinian towns and especially that of Madaba.

Seventeenth century frescoes with Greek and Iberian inscriptions decorate the walls of the Catholicon, many of which are painted according to the Georgian style. This fact witnesses the presence of monks who belonged to both nations which share the same faith.

The stone-built temple belongs to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It includes icons of the Apostles and Christ in medals, icons of the four great Hierarchs of the Church of Jerusalem (Saint Sophronios, Saint Iouvenalios, Saint James the Brother of Christ, and Saint Cyril of Jerusalem) with two six-winged Cherubim surrounding them. The main icons of the temple are depicted on wood and probably date back to the time of Nikephoros II Phokas' reign (10<sup>th</sup> century). There are also frescoes of Socrates, Plato and other philosophers who are traditionally thought to have been Christians before the time of Christ. Exquisite is finally the small chapel dedicated to Saint John of Damascus.