

Palestine under Arab rule

After the Arab conquest of Palestine and the surrender of Jerusalem, the Holy Lands were placed under Muslim authority. The treaty signed on the Mount of Olives by Patriarch Sophronios of Jerusalem and the Caliph of the Arabs, Umar Khattab, briefly sets out the relations between the authority and the supreme leader of the Church and, in general, of the Christians of Palestine. The best-known text of this covenant (*ahtiname*) states that it is granted to Patriarch Sophronios (634-638) but also that Greek rights in the Holy Land are recognized and enforced. Clerics and monks are relieved from payment of the per capita tax (*jizya*), administrators are commanded to be lenient towards the Christians, whereas foreign pilgrims are obliged to pay the Greek Orthodox Patriarch a fee in silver as a token of submission.

Here follows the text in English translation:

“In the name of God the Merciful, and the Compassionate Umar, son of Al-Khattab! [...] This is a letter by myself, Umar, son of Al-Khattab, given to the honourable and venerable Sophronios, Patriarch of the royal nation, on the Mount of Olives, the site of the Holy Jerusalem, as a covenant and a promise to foster subjects, and priests and monks and nuns, wherever they might wish to be, so that they be protected and guarded because, when subjects observe the duties of subservience, they must be protected and guarded by us the believers and by those ruling with us; and in order to raise the causes of their encumbrances during the subservience they have demonstrated and to provide safety to them and to their Churches and Monasteries and all the other sites of veneration under their sovereignty, either within or without Jerusalem, namely the Church of the Resurrection and the great Church of the Nativity of Christ in Bethlehem, and the Cave with the three gates, and in order for the Christian nations found there to be safe, and those coming to venerate, Franks, Copts,

Syrians, Armenians, Nestorians, Jacobites and Maronites subject to the aforementioned Patriarch, and for him to lead amongst them; for the royal nation has received grace by the honourable and beloved Prophet, God's envoi, and they have been honoured by the seal of his own hand; and he commanded that we be favoured by them and they be trustful of us. Similarly, we the believers today benefit them in honour and grace of their benefactor. Hence, you are henceforth free of per capita tax and relieved of all influences (namely encumbrances) and taxes in both land and sea. When they enter into the Church of the Resurrection and their other sites of veneration, they shall pay nothing. The rest of those entering the Church of the Resurrection to venerate, shall each pay the Patriarch one dirham of silver and a third of the dirham. All the believers must abide by our commands, either king or judge, or ruler having authority upon the earth or either rich or poor amongst the believers".

This is the covenant signed between the glorious Caliph Umar Khattab as leader of the political and religious Islam, and Sophronios, the honourable and venerable Patriarch of the royal nation of the Rums, on the Mount of Olives, as indisputable token of the fact that he received the covenant with marked enthusiasm. With this covenant, the Patriarch of Jerusalem is recognized as the true ethnarch and spiritual leader of all Orthodox Christians, who belong to the royal nation of the Rums, and sovereign of the holy sites of veneration, the main of which are: the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and of the Nativity of Christ in Bethlehem, just as all Monasteries and churches under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate, within or without Jerusalem, that are secured and rendered inviolable. All pilgrims to the Holy Sepulchre – Franks, Copts, Syrians, Armenians etc. are obliged to submit to the Patriarch, recognizing in his face their owner. The covenant explicitly lays out the privileges that pertain to the entire royal nation of the Rums. "Because the royal nation has received grace by the honourable and beloved Prophet,

God's envoi, and they have been honoured by the seal of his own hand; and he commanded that they enjoy favour and security. Similarly, we the believers today benefit them in honour and grace of their benefactor".

These words clearly show that it was not just the Mount of Sinai but the entire royal nation of the Rums that has received grace and favour by the Prophet. The covenant is the direct consequence and result of this general and all-embracing grace and favour; it is not construed as an autotelic and particular covenant but as an interpretive and official act that authentically interprets and explains the covenant of the Prophet upon which he had placed the seal of his honourable hand.

This deed by Umar Khattab, recognizing the pre-existing status quo, asserts the historical rights of the Greek nation in the Holy Land and cedes such privileges to the Patriarch of Jerusalem, securing for all centuries the respect and observance of all conquerors of Palestine, either Arabs or Turks. Through the centuries, the homophonous testament to the authenticity of this document corroborates its unquestionable reliability. The covenant agreed between Umar Khattab, Caliph of the Arabs, and Patriarch Sophronios of the Rums is aligned with the spirit of the Koran and the covenant of the Prophet Muhamad given to the monks of Mount Sinai. This is clearly verified by a multitude of Byzantine and Arab chroniclers.