

The Status Quo of worship in the Middle East

The status quo regarding the ownership and veneration of the Most Holy Sites in the Holy Land has been altered several times. Through almost its entire history, the Hagiotaphite Brotherhood has been struggling to preserve and rescue the shrines. Their struggle reflects the heroic efforts of guardian monks for the preservation of the Greek identity and Orthodox tradition of the Patriarchate and of the Holy Sites. And this is so, because the Sites, the Holy Sepulchre being first among them, have been a field of constant conflict between Orthodox Christians and conquerors of other religions, but also among Christians of different Denominations.

During the 7th c. AD, the conqueror of Jerusalem, Umar bin Al-Khattab, faced the Christians and their Patriarch, St Sophronius. Caliph Umar, by a special order (achtiname) recognized in the face of the Patriarch of the "royal nation" (namely of the Romans, the Greeks) the capacity of the leader of the nation, and spiritual leader of all Christians in Palestine, even for those of other denominations, and also as mediator among all Christian leaders. He also offered him guarantees of special favour, safety and tax protection on behalf of future Muslim leaders. However, Umar's successors, domineering Arab leaders, would go on to be extremely cruel; the Christian community would eventually begin to suffer after coordinated efforts for converting people to Islam and de-Hellenization.

During the period of the Crusades, the imposition of the Latin Church upon the Orthodox clergy had been violent, and the Most Holy Sites were ceded to the Latin clergy, transferred from the West, whereas the Hagiotaphites preserved the right to manage the Church of the Discovery of the Holy Cross and to

officiate in Greek at the Holy Sepulchre and in Bethlehem; they also maintained several Monasteries outside Jerusalem, as well as the Dependency of the Lavra of St Savva near David's Gate within the Holy City, which in fact had been their centre. They also maintained the Monastery of the Great Panaghia. The Crusaders, aspiring at accession of the Armenians and Jacobites, offered them Churches and Monasteries.

In the course of the 14th c., the following property rights take shape: the Greeks owned the Katholikon; the Latins owned the Column of the Flagellation and the site of the appearance of the Lord to Mary Magdalene; the Armenians owned the Chapel of Adam and the Catechoumena; the Iberians owned the Golgotha, the Prison of Christ and the Church of the Discovery of the Cross; the Nestorians owned the altar outside the Church; the Syrian Jacobites owned the chapel behind the Holy Sepulchre; the Arians owned the opposite site and the Campesians owned the area to the right of the Holy Aedicula.

At the end of the 15th c. the Latins took from the Iberians one of the two sides of Golgotha, whereas in 1517 the Ottoman Sultan Selim I, who had seized Palestine, Syria and Egypt from the Mamluks, officially recognized the full sovereignty of the Orthodox in the Church of the Resurrection. This is precisely the period of the formulation and solidification of the Status Quo.

This particular period in the history of Jerusalem is marked by the efforts of mostly the Latins and the Armenians – drawing either on the diplomacy of the European powers or on their economic or other access to the Sublime Porte of Constantinople – to reverse the status that favoured the native (Greek) Church and gain primacy or even exclusivity over the Holy Shrines.

In 1520, Selim's successor, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent,

ceded the keys to the Church, until then owned by the Greeks, by a hereditary right to Muslim families, which to this day hold the keys to the Holy Door and open and close the Church on the basis of relevant agreements.

Today, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem has absolute sovereignty, both in the Church of the Resurrection and the Holy Sepulchre, as well as in the rest of the Holy Sites within Palestine. The Church of the Resurrection, the Golgotha, the Holy Sepulchre and Adam's Chapels, the Crown of Thorns, Centurion Longinus' the Monastery of the Klapon and the Prison of Christ fall within the spiritual, administrative and pastoral jurisdiction of the Patriarchate, as well as part of the Praetorium, the Tomb of Panaghia in Gethsemane, the Church of "Little Galilee" on the Mount of Olives, the site where Protomaryr Stephen was stoned to death, and the house of Theotokos.

The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem also owns the Church of the Nativity of Christ in Bethlehem, the Grotto of the Shepherds, Jacob's Well in Nablus, the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the Holy Site of the Miracle in Kana, Galilee, the Church of the Transfiguration of the Saviour on Mount Tabor, the Church of the Holy Apostles in Capernaum near the Mount of Beatitudes, the Monastery of Tiberias and the Church of the Prophet Elisha in Jericho, where Zacchaeus' sycamore tree stands. Also belonging to the Patriarchate are the very old Monasteries of the St Savva's Lavra, of St George the Hozebite, of Mount Sarantaron, of Bethany, of Abba Gerasimus of Jordan, of Abba Theodosius, of the Holy Cross and of St Simeon the God-Receiver, also known as "Katamonas".