

FOREWORD

Christianity, a religion based upon theophanies, or sacred past events, attaches numinous significance to the sites at which these divine miracles are said to have occurred. Many of these sites are found in and near Jerusalem, the scene of the most eminent and fundamental mysteries. Moreover, the most sanctified and revered sites associated with the more significant and constitutive events upon which Christianity is based are situated in and near Jerusalem. These are the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Crucifixion, Sepulchering and Resurrection in Jerusalem. These sites, having been monumentalized by sumptuous basilicas, evolved into the most sacred shrines of the entire Christian world. As such, these sites became an object of desire for Christians everywhere; a goal of visitation as well as aspirations of attachment, possession and control. From the moment that Christianity split into different churches and rites, these aspirations came into conflict. The Holy Sites Question (as this situation has come to be known) is the complex result of the inter-church conflict over these sanctuaries and the political authorities' attempts to handle the issue. Another set of problems associated with the Question and contributing to its complexity is derived from the fact that these sites—Christianity's holiest shrines—have for centuries been under the political rule of non-Christian powers, and in the case discussed here, under Islamic Ottoman rule.

There exists a large body of literature regarding the Holy Sites Question under Ottoman rule. Most of this scholarship, however, concentrates on the period when the Question of the Holy Sites had already evolved from a local Ottoman problem into an international issue, or one of the elements in the diplomatic complexity which came to be known as the "Eastern Question". The decline of Ottoman strength spurred the European powers into a scramble to become the weakening Empire's heirs. By the mid-eighteenth century, the Holy Sites Question was enfolded into this struggle and became one of its major issues. In the process, this question was gradually displaced from the exclusive care of the Ottoman government, which was forced to accept the dictates of foreign powers. The Question of the Holy Sites now became an all-European problem, whose solutions were generally conceived outside the Ottoman Empire and then

forced upon it by international forums. This process, which culminated in the Treaty of Berlin (1878), has been described in detail in contemporary and later literature.

Very few studies have touched upon the Question of the Holy Sites in earlier times, when the Ottoman Empire was still the dominant power in Europe, and none of these supplies any satisfactory description, let alone explanation, of Ottoman policy concerning this complex and multifaceted issue. So the question remains: What was Ottoman policy with respect to the Holy Sites during the first two centuries of Ottoman rule in Jerusalem? In other words: How did the Ottoman authorities deal with the Holy Sites Question when it was an internal problem of local character, and when these authorities were able to propose independent and original solutions free of foreign interference and outside pressures? The main purpose of the present study is to attempt to answer this question which involves legal, religious, economic and political issues.

As far as is known, this is the first attempt to systematically explore Ottoman policy in the Question of the Holy Sites in the period preceding its transformation into a major international issue. Previous works devote at best a chapter or two to a cursory discussion of the Holy Sites Question during the first two centuries of Ottoman rule in Jerusalem. More problematic, most of these works were actually written on behalf of interested parties deeply involved in the conflict over the Holy Sites, making them too biased to be reliable sources of information on the issue. More scholarly works devoted to the study of a specific church in Jerusalem under Ottoman rule also tend to be equally one-sided. Naturally, for the most part these works draw on source material at the disposal of the church they study and tend to neglect other sources. Consequently, these studies present the Holy Sites Question from a narrow sectarian perspective, which is at best unbalanced, if not actually distorted. In short, the present inventory of publications on the Question of the Holy Sites in early Ottoman times is lacking in both quantity and quality. That leaves the subject in need of a serious research referring to the most relevant, and yet hitherto unused, sources—the official Ottoman records.

Logically, official Ottoman correspondence would seem to be the best place to investigate Ottoman official policy on the Question of the Holy Sites. Major collections of documents embodying Ottoman correspondence with regard to this question are found in the registers

of the *kadi's* court in Jerusalem; in the Başbakanlık Arşivi in Istanbul; and in the archives of certain churches adjoining the Holy Sites.

The registers of the Ottoman *kadi's* court in Jerusalem, presently stored at the local *shari'a* court, are probably the most important source for the study of the region's history under Ottoman rule. The registers consist of records of the court's daily proceedings, called *sijill*. In early Ottoman times, these records touched upon a wide variety of issues encompassing all aspects of life in the city and its surrounding area. For the most part, these records contain copies of imperial decrees (*firman*s) dispatched from Istanbul, as well as protocols of the court's legal and notarial activities. Many of these records deal with various matters concerning the Holy Sites.

The Prime Ministry's Archive (Başbakanlık Arşivi) in Istanbul should in principle have copies of *firman*s and other documents dispatched from the Ottoman capital to Jerusalem, where they were copied into the *sijill*. In practice, however, it is possible to come across copies of many such documents which for reasons unknown did not make it to Jerusalem and were not copied into the *sijill*. It is likewise possible to find in the Başbakanlık Arşivi records of intra- or inter-ministerial correspondence which were not sent to Jerusalem although they discussed the city's particular affairs. This archive is therefore an indispensable complement of material found in local *sijills*.

Original *firman*s are supposed to be stored at the archives of the Christian church hierarchies in Jerusalem, which in many cases were the applicants for, and therefore the recipients of, these decrees, after the *kadi* had copied them into his *sijills*. Here too, it is possible to find documents which were not, after all, copied into the *sijill*. Unfortunately, these archives are not readily accessible for scholarly research. Of all the church hierarchies in Jerusalem, the Greek Orthodox patriarchate was the only one to grant my request to study their archive of Ottoman *firman*s. Other hierarchies have been too sensitive about their archives, which are still unavailable for unhindered research.

Wherever found, it is reasonable to expect that Ottoman official records would reliably reflect Ottoman official policy in any particular field. This policy, as far as it dealt with the Question of the Holy Sites, has long been shrouded in mystery nurtured largely by the prejudices of churches involved in the internecine struggle over the possession and use of these shrines. This work is an attempt to

dispel some of this mystery through the study of official Ottoman records. With the help of these records, I try to establish whether Ottoman rule had a clearly defined policy on the Question of the Holy Sites, and what were its principles, manifestations and goals during the period under discussion. It is hoped that the answers given here to these questions will supply the key to decode and better understand one of the most obscure and controversial issues in the history of Ottoman Jerusalem.

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