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Competition Among Christian Denominations in Jerusalem During the 17th Century According to the Ottoman Documents

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Abstract

This article addresses the complexities of Christian relations in Jerusalem during the 17th century, the outcomes of this conflict, and the measures taken by the Ottoman state to curb this chronic phenomenon that created a dilemma for all people. The article also aims to reveal the interventions carried out by European countries that considered Jerusalem their main entry to the Holy Land, given the divisions among those states and the impact each had on their denominations in Jerusalem. The increasing sectarian tension was, in part, exacerbated by those states themselves, under the pretext of protecting their interests represented each by their own parishioners. The significance of this article stems from lack of standalone studies addressing this topic during the 17th century. The analysis was conducted by referring to archival sources, primarily the records of the Ottoman Sharia court in Jerusalem, which is the primary source containing details and precursors besides other Ottoman archives. The said documents were analyzed using a historical research methodology with an analytical and deconstructive approach. It is hoped that this article will contribute in pinpointing topics of contention that emerged in Jerusalem among the Christian denominations during the 17th century, while revealing the consequences thereof, and documenting the setbacks those denominations in particular and Jerusalem in general have suffered from. It is also an attempt to explore the impact of European countries on this issue and subsequent repercussions. In light of the objectives set in this article, the outcomes align with these objectives, suggesting that Christianity has existed in Jerusalem throughout history without interruption, and that the different denominations were in continuous competition—a competition that never subsided. The pillars of this competition are attributed to religious differences given the diversity of Christian denominations and relevant ethnic affiliations. The vigor of this conflict is attributed to the influence of some European countries, on one hand, and the Ottomans' position vis-à-vis this issue, on the other hand.

Keywords: Christian Denominations, Jerusalem, Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem Court Records, Ottoman State.

Introduction

Jerusalem is considered one of the holiest cities for all Christian denominations, as it is regarded the birthplace of Christianity. It houses some of the oldest sacred sites, including the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in the nearby Bethlehem. Additionally, numerous visible and out of sight churches and monasteries around the city make it a center of religious inspiration for Christians from all over the world.

The Christian religious scene in Jerusalem has historically been a hotbed of competition or rivalry among Christian denominations, each vying to be closer to the holy places where they can serve and worship, to have the honor of managing these sites, and to conduct the ecclesiastical rites, especially during the holiday seasons. These issues have been contentious points in Christian relationships for a long time, and have been a significant and guiding reason

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for the preparation of this article through delving into the conflict between churches in Jerusalem during the seventeenth century.

This paper is also motivated by the fact that such a conflict was not confined within churches and monasteries, but also had political repercussions since European countries each sponsored and controlled its own denomination. Should any sponsoring country control the Holy Sepulcher through its nationals, would claim the spiritual leader of Europe, and patron of the Holy Sepulcher. From this standpoint, this particular phase of research was chosen as it represents a foundational stage in building policies in Jerusalem in the modern era, which became apparent in the second half of the 19th century with the emergence of the European centers and consulates in Jerusalem under the tolerance policy adopted by the Ottoman Empire with its allied countries, represented by the Imperial Edicts of Gulhane and Hatt-i Humayun.

Therefore, this rationale was the main reason for writing this article, as the contemporary complexities surrounding this issue cannot be understood unless we trace its roots, rigorously analyze it, and closely examine the phenomena associated with it. Thus, this article aims to explore these problems that dominated the Christian scene in Jerusalem and the vicinity during the 17th century.

The article diligently tried to address this topic through delving in the Ottoman archives, namely, the records of the Ottoman Sharia Court of Jerusalem, which contain precise and significant data pertaining to the Christian denominations in Jerusalem in general and their interrelations in particular. The abundance of data in this regard is due to the direct administration of the said court that recorded even the nitty-gritty things of the populace, including Christians. Significant cases had a broader share in the Jerusalem court's deliberations. Additionally, the court preserved official correspondences with the governing authority in Istanbul, that was the only body entitled to promulgate decisive resolutions. The Ottoman authorities, and before taking decisions, would take into account relations with European consulates that existed in Istanbul and would review the outcome of investigations issued by the Jerusalem court at each stage of a dispute or conflict between churches during the seventeenth century.

While stationed in Aleppo, the English clergyman Henry Maundrell has visited Jerusalem, and vividly described the situation of the Christian denominations there by stating: " The grand prize contested by several denominations, was to dominate the Holy Sepulcher, a privilege they fiercely fought over, with much harm....

Christians of all denominations, comprised the second largest population in Jerusalem during the Ottoman era. They primarily resided in the Christian Quarter, with smaller groups living in adjacent neighborhoods such as Al-Jawalida and Risha. The Christian denominations that were present in Jerusalem in the 11th century AH/17th century AD included the Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Roman Catholics, Georgians, Copts, Syriacs, Jacobites, Maronites, and Ethiopians(). They also existed in villages around Jerusalem, including Bethlehem, Beit Sahour(), Yabrud(), Beit Jala(), Deir Iban(), Tuqu' and Taybeh(), Soba(), Aboud(), Jifna(), Kharbtha(), Ein Karem and Beit Rima(), Ramallah(), and Deir Yassin().

The number of Christians living in Jerusalem and the vicinity can be determined from the Ottoman survey records dating back to the sixteenth century(). Yet, this study is based on the closest survey conducted in the seventeenth century that was shown in the records of the Ottoman court of Jerusalem, register number 70, dating back to the year 1589 AD().

no. of households	Denomination	No. of households	Denomination
4	Nijma monastery	21	Melkites
7	Hamam monastery	7	Greek Orthodox
3	Saint Elias Monastery	24	Syriacs
20	Ethiopian Denomination	34	Saint James Monastery
29	Christians of Beit Jala	7	Zeitoun Monastery
22	Christians of Bethlehem	7	Saint Andreas monastery
14	Amoud Monastery	61	Copts
		31	Seeq Monastery
		15	Musallaba Monastery

Property Tax for the year 1068 AH/1658 AD

Amount in silver piasters	City or Village
189	Greek Orthodox Christians of Jerusalem
59.5	Syriacs
51	Copts
800	Christians of Lod, Bethlehem and Beit Jala

Christians, like other religious communities, was significantly influenced by the harsh conditions that typically led to a decline in their population. Some Christians had to either emigrate or convert to Islam to evade the burdensome taxes and endless expenses, given murdering and looting they would suffer from, whereas others chose to remain Christian. However, diseases or adverse conditions also contributed to the decreasing of their number. In the year 1063 AH/1653 AD, all monks of the Ethiopian monastery died, leaving only one nun who took over the monastery until another group of monks arrived from Egypt().

This article has chosen to address this issue and deconstruct its components by focusing on the religious sites that were the core of contention between churches at that time. Those religious symbols and sites that include the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Church of the Nativity, will highly boost the religious status of the denomination that becomes in charge of them. Such an analysis may lead to profound outcomes that will highlight the subtleties of the conflict between churches.

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is considered one of the most important churches in the world, being a beacon for Christians everywhere and at all times, due to the beliefs formed around it, and making it a fundamental pillar of Christianity. The said church has significantly contributed to competition and conflicts among Christian denominations throughout ages, including the 17th century era which is the focus of this article.

During the 17th century, disputes came to surface, including the competition between the Armenians and the Papal Roman Catholics over the lighting of candles at the stone of unction inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The dispute occurred after the arrival of the Sublime Porte delegate Qabil Agha along with a group of Muslims to attend the rituals of the Christian holidays. Francis, son of Güzmin, a Greek Catholic monk acting as the deputy of the Roman Catholic head in Jerusalem, Anastos, a Greek Catholic monk residing in the Roman Catholic monastery in Jerusalem, Krikor son of Bakar the Armenian Bishop in Jerusalem, and Khadavardi son of Baghob the Armenian interpreter, all attended the ceremonies. Investigations revealed that a reconciliation had been brokered between the two sides in the previous year by the former judge, Abdullah Efendi().

This assumes that attending the rituals of the Christian religious holidays had political dimensions where the Ottoman Empire would send high ranking officials from the capital to participate in the holiday ceremonies. This was to express care and concern for the Christian denominations and to strengthen Ottoman-French relations, through the French monks of the Papal Greek Catholic denomination. This takes us back to the Ottoman privileges granted to their ally, France, during the reign of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in the year 1536. Other denominations were barred from such privileges due to their being at war with the Ottomans. The document reveals that the Papal Roman Catholic denomination and the Armenian denomination have always existed in the city, which makes us conclude that these denominations were close in terms of doctrine. Yet, a dispute took place between them. Apparently, the Armenians enjoyed the French protection while benefiting from Ottoman privileges. Despite disputes between churches over some rituals, the participation of high-ranking Ottoman officials in Christian celebrations reveals the keenness of the state to maintain the state of tolerance that the city of Jerusalem has all along enjoyed especially during the holiday seasons when pilgrims came from all over the world.

However, the conflict between the different Christian denominations became more fierce in the 17th century, as evidenced by the large number of documents recorded in the Jerusalem court during that period of time. These documents contain court deliberations and relevant decrees representing the stance of the Ottoman Sultanate, along with the mutual correspondences between the court and the government in Istanbul.

This violent phase began when Patriarch Tovani, the Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox denomination, filed a lawsuit before the judge in the presence of the Governor of Jerusalem, Mustafa Bek, demanding the nullifying the Roman Catholics' control over certain sites in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. He based his claim on the Sultan's decree dated in the lunar moon of Dhu al-Qi'dah of 1630 A.D., which instructed the judge of Jerusalem and the governor to resolve the dispute between the Christian denominations in Jerusalem. In light of this, and following the Sultan's directives, Judge Muhammad Effendi, along with the Governor Mustafa Bek, and a large number of scholars, dignitaries, and notables, held a hearing session in the church. The two governors were in the church and requested to hear the arguments of both sides.

Tovani, the head of the Greek Orthodox denomination, and Yousef, son of Juan Beccary, who spoke on behalf of the Roman Catholics in Jerusalem, each presented his own argument. Tovani claimed that the Roman Catholics had taken over the service of unction stone, which was challenged by Yousef Beccary through his interpreter, Petro the Maronite. Afterwards, the governors inspected the site and the tomb, finding that the chandeliers and lamps were owned by the Roman Catholics, not the Greek Orthodox, and decided to maintain the status quo().

In another hearing session, Patriarch Tovani, son of Nicola, filed a lawsuit against Monk Joseph, son of Juan Beccary, the head of the Roman Catholics, demanding that he relinquish control over the lower buildings and facilities in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The religious and civil judges—Muhammad Effendi, the judge of Jerusalem, and Mustafa Bek, the Governor of Jerusalem—attended a court session inside the church. After inspecting the disputed sites, it was decided that the mentioned places would remain under the control of the Roman Catholics(). The witnesses listed at the end of the document indicate that prominent figures from Jerusalem, including notables and scholars, attended the court deliberations().

Following the resolution of the previous case, Tovani again requested the judge and the governor to allow the Greek Orthodox to place two candles in the candleholders above the unction stone, according to old rituals that were practiced by them ten years ago. Such rituals involved lighting two candles in candleholders every Friday evening, placed on the eastern side of the stone. The head of the Roman Catholics in Jerusalem, through his Maronite interpreter, Petro, responded that there was no basis for this, claiming that the rituals stipulate that the Roman Catholics place two candles in candleholders followed by the Armenians placing one candle without a candleholder. He stated this without presenting any legal evidence to substantiate his claims, which gave Tovani the opportunity to bring witnesses to prove his assertion. The judge relied on those witnesses to give his verdict that the Greek Orthodox denomination restore their practice of lighting the two candles. The group of witnesses was diverse and included Muslim Sheikhs and members from various Christian denominations, with a witness from the Roman Catholic denomination itself().

At this stage of the conflict, the Armenian denomination submitted a request for some residences within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to accommodate the increasing number of Armenian pilgrims during the holiday seasons, arguing that most of those residences were owned by the Roman Catholics. The two governors considered the case in the previous court session, where the Armenians claimed that the space allocated to them was too small to accommodate Armenian guests during the holiday seasons, and that the upper monastery in the church, which included 14 residences, was exclusively owned by the Roman Catholics. The Armenians requested that three adjacent residences be allocated to them().

It is worth mentioning that the Armenians attempted make their lawsuit appear as an Ottoman demand, considering that the increase in guests would generate more revenues for the state. Consequently, allocating those spaces to the Armenians and facilitating their pilgrims' affairs would have substantial benefits both domestically and internationally. After considering the matter, the judge ruled in favor of the Armenians, allowing them to take control of the requested spaces to achieve the desired benefits. Yet, this was contingent to not disturbing or causing any harm to other denominations, especially the Roman Catholics.

The aforementioned disputes reveal a significant state of confusion in the mission of Christian denominations at the time . In the light of substantial changes in the ecclesiastical scene in Jerusalem, it was imperative for the sponsoring states to take action or intervene to restore order.

It appears that France, which was the patron of the Papal Roman Catholic denomination in Jerusalem, was most affected. Given the diplomatic relations between Paris and Istanbul, it was easy for France to present its case before the Ottomans through its ambassador(), resulting in a Sultanic decree issued to address the complex issues and order the competent authorities in Jerusalem to investigate the matter and uphold justice().

When the Sultanic decree reached Jerusalem and was examined by the officials, it was decided to hold a court session attended by the relevant parties, namely, the Roman Catholics and the Greek Orthodox. Deliberations led to a judgment obliging Patriarch Tovani to remove the two candles and candlesticks at the unction stone, a privilege he had won in a previous court ruling. The court also warned Tovani to not interfere with the Roman Catholic denomination except within legal and canonical frameworks().

Subsequently, another council was convened inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to address the disputes between the Roman Catholics and Armenians. At the end of the pleadings, the council determined that the Armenians had taken control of certain sites within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in a manner that violated previous rituals and covenants. It was decided that the sites should be returned to the Roman Catholics, and that Paulo the head of the Roman Catholics in Jerusalem should be in charge of serving, cleaning and sweeping around the unction stone from four sides by a measure of seven spans(). Furthermore, a judgment was issued for the Armenians to relinquish the three residences that they had previously taken by a decree of the governor of Jerusalem().

The events that shook the churches and parishioners, were time consuming for all parties, including the Ottoman administration in both Jerusalem and Istanbul where decisive decisions would be taken. After reviewing the documents in the Jerusalem court records dating back to that period, it appeared that the governor of Jerusalem, Mustafa Bek, played a significant role in drawing conclusions different from what is on the ground in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Personal interests seem to have been the primary incentives for this governor. What reinforced Mustafa Bek's alliance with the Greek Orthodox denomination represented by Patriarch Tovani was what has been stated in subsequent documents, that Tovani was accused of conspiring against the new governor of Jerusalem, Mohammed Pasha, in favor of his ally Mustafa Bek, and that he attempted to send messages to his allies in Istanbul to act on deposing Mohammed Pasha and restoring Mustafa Bek. Obviously, the setback that Tovani had suffered by losing some gains would not have occurred without the absence of his ally Mustafa Bek as the governor of Jerusalem. These news were mentioned in a lawsuit filed by the people of Jerusalem against Tovani, alleging that he was the one behind the disturbance in Jerusalem after sending an envoy loaded with gifts to Istanbul to issue a decree restoring Mustafa Bek as a governor of Jerusalem. Despite Tovani's complete denial of these allegations, some witnesses reported that the Greek Orthodox monks had a strong presence and were actively working in Istanbul to fulfill Patriarch Tovani's desire().

However, the dispute over the date of the Christian holidays came to surface in the year 1043 AH/1633 AD. The document also revealed that a letter was written by the governor of Damascus, Ahmad Pasha, pointing out to a lawsuit filed by the Greek Orthodox denomination. The latter claimed that the Armenians in Jerusalem had prevented them from performing their rituals, which included a festival that preceded the festivals of other denominations and that the Armenians were accused of watching on them. In a letter, addressed to the judge of Jerusalem, the Damascus governor requested a court session to resolve the dispute. He affirmed in his letter

that this lawsuit was accompanied by a Fatwa from Sheikh Abdul Rahman, the Mufti of Damascus, which stipulated that things should remain as they were pertaining to the rituals of Christians in Jerusalem and that no delays or advancements be made regarding the festivals, based on the covenants and treaties granted to them throughout different Islamic ages.

Indeed, the judge of Jerusalem complied by this letter and held a court session attended by prominent figures in the city, led by the governor of Jerusalem, Mustafa Pasha, in addition to the Hanafi Mufti, Sheikh Abdul Ghaffar Al-Ajmi, the Shafi'i Mufti, Sheikh Omar bin Abi Al-Lutf, and Mr. Shams Al-Din Al-Husseini, the head of celebrities in Jerusalem, along with Sheikh Abdul Qadir Al-Alami, a notable Sufi of Jerusalem, and Muhammad Agha Mishmish, the commander of the Jerusalem Castle of Muhammad Agha. A large number of people also attended in the presence of the disputing parties represented by the Armenian Bishop Krikor son of Markar, and the Greek Orthodox monk, Bababthou son of Baqouhi, agent and representative of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem Tovani. After lengthy deliberations, the judge dismissed the claim filed by the representative of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch and decided that the rituals should remain as they were and as scheduled. Furthermore, the judge prohibited the Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox from challenging the Armenians in this matter without a valid reason().

This document reveals that the Greek Orthodox continued to challenge other denominations in Jerusalem. They even went too far to seek a document from the Mufti of Damascus to support their cause. We have previously mentioned that they had litigated another case before both the Rumelli and Anatolian Ottoman military judges(). As one may notice that the court's verdicts were entirely contrary to the fatwa, suggesting that the person who demanded the Mufti for such a Fatwa did so for personal reasons and interests. The document also shows that the Greek Orthodox and Armenians were quite close in terms of doctrine, that also adhered to by the Coptic, Ethiopian, and Syriac denominations, all representing the Eastern Church, while the Roman Catholic denomination represented the Western Papal Church.

The document also details that in the festival known as the Greek Orthodox Easter holiday, the Ethiopian monk was the only one permitted to bring out the light, having received permission from the Armenian bishop. The holiday would usually be scheduled to coincide with the season of prophet Moses, which is a religious holiday for Muslims, indicating that the Christian holiday falls on the Saturday following the end of the Prophet Moses' season. The document also lays out the case through a list of witnesses and their stature, concluding with a lengthy list of celebrities from Jerusalem, including Sheikhs and dignitaries().

The Greek Orthodox did not remain idle regarding this decision. They ignored the Damascus authorities and obtained a Sultanic decree based on the Omar pact() that superseded the verdict of the former Judge of Jerusalem and stipulated that the Greek Orthodox leaders enter first into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on Easter and officiate the church service.

The document shows that the two denominations argued the case before the Rumelli military judge i.e the military judge of the European part of the Ottoman empire, who ruled that the Greek Orthodox would have the edge to perform their rituals over other denominations. The ruling was submitted to the Sultan to become into effect. Indeed, the said decree gave that edge to the Greek Orthodox denomination not merely over the Armenians but also over all other ones().

Subsequently, the Greek Orthodox denomination, represented by their Patriarch Tovani son of Nicola and his agents, obtained the noble Sultanic order mandating only the Greek Orthodox to

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be in charge of the candleholder and the candles at the unction stone in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and that Armenians and the Roman Catholics be prevented from being in charge. After the judge read the Sultan's order, he summoned the parties involved, obligated them to act according to its provisions, and then ordered that it be recorded in the ledger to ensure its continuity in the coming years().

This demonstrates that the Greek Orthodox kept on towards their demands and worked at the highest levels to obtain Sultan's decrees that enhanced their status and rituals in the Holy Places of Jerusalem and the vicinity.

Disputes between the Roman Catholics and the Greek Orthodox included a complaint raised to the judge stating that monks from the Greek Orthodox denomination had removed a stone plaque located near the tomb of a French king at the entrance of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and that they hid it in their chapel inside the Church. An inspection was conducted at the site with the presence of the city's dignitaries, led by the judge himself. When asked about this, Patriarch Tovani claimed that the plaque had fallen and the Roman Catholics themselves placed it near the Greek monastery. He also denied that the site was the tomb of any of the Roman Catholics, saying that in his forty years of service there, he had never heard of such a thing. An investigation was carried out, and the plaque was found in the Greek Orthodox monastery, with Tovani finally acknowledging that().

Among the important documents that helped identify some aspects of the ecclesiastical system in effect in Jerusalem, was the document that came within the framework of a decree appointing a new Patriarch for the Greek Orthodox denomination by virtue of an imperial Firman i.e decree issued by the Ottoman Sublime Porte. Upon reading and analyzing its content, it provided significant information():

The process of appointing high-ranking positions in the Ottoman state was always entrusted solely to the Sultan, among which the religious positions of the Christian denominations. This would usually take place after the internal nomination of a certain candidate whose name would be introduced through their delegates in Istanbul to issue the decree. With the issuance of the Sultan's decree, skepticism would no longer exist, and the decision would become binding within the Ottoman territories.

The Ottoman appointment delineates the geographic area represented by the religious position, covering all Palestinian cities, including Ajloun a city located east of the Jordan River. This implies that the Holy Land included Palestine and Jordan, while the Patriarch of Jerusalem had no jurisdiction over cities in Lebanon like Tyre and Sidon.

The appointment of Basilios as Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox in Jerusalem following the death of his predecessor Tovani, who died in the year 1055 AH/1645 AD. With Tovani's death, an important phase in the conflict among Christian denominations in Jerusalem came to a close. Documents also highlight the considerable efforts made by Patriarch Tovani in this regard. Presumably with his passing, other denominations had a big relief.

It appeared that the Greek Orthodox denomination religiously encompassed the Georgians, Coptic, Syriac, and Ethiopian communities. The Sultan's decree emphasized the necessity for these denominations to comply with the Patriarch, to not challenge him in his duties, and to continue their old customs in terms of their rituals and ecclesiastical relationships.

The document also highlights the key functions performed by the Patriarch, including appointing

the clergy in religious positions i.e. monks, priests, and deacons. Additionally, he did oversee marriage contracts. He also had the authority to add or annex to the church's endowment any inheritance that had no heirs. In addition, the Patriarch had the right to claim the property of anyone who dies unbequeathed for the benefit of his denomination .

The document indicates that the decree was not merely a decision to appoint clergy in religious positions, but specified all details pertaining to that position. This included the policies and tasks entrusted to it, according to a long-established ecclesiastical system. It particularly had to do with the property of the Greek Orthodox denomination, being in charge of religious ceremonies held during holiday seasons and related matters in a way not to leave loopholes so that other denominations would take advantage of. In the light of this, the Sultan's decree was an inclusive document that forged the broad guidelines followed by the Greek Orthodox denomination in Jerusalem().

In a subsequent document that was soon drafted after the first one, it was evident that Patriarch Basilios followed the footsteps of his predecessor in managing the denomination's affairs, provided he would gain whatever achievements possible at the expense of other denominations. The first thing he did was to request the record of the Sultan's decree which addressed the issue of the fees paid by the Christian denominations to the state, where he pointed to the fact that such fees were shared among the three main Christian denominations, namely, the Greek Orthodox, Armenians, and the Roman Catholics. He claimed that the Christian denominations imposed on the Greek Orthodox unjustly to pay half of those fees , which was contrary to the tradition that the denomination had followed in the previous era. The Greek Orthodox Patriarch obtained a Sultan's decree obliging the parties involved to act according to the narrative presented by the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Jerusalem judge registered the decree in the court and made it obligatory for all().

The document revealed that the decision was taken in the previous year, i.e. before the death of Tovani, suggesting that Tovani's last endeavour was the issue of sharing the fee dues that all Christians had to pay . Indeed, his last ditch effort was to have the edge for the Greek Orthodox over all other Christian denominations.

It appeared that once again, the Greek Orthodox Church obtained a decision in 1657 AD (1067 AH), that revoked certain privileges from the Armenians. The Sultan's decree was clear, detailing the ecclesiastical arrangements and the church property of all denominations, reminding them of the covenants granted to them since the time of Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab. This piece of information was documented in a record preserved in the Ottoman archives in Istanbul().

It seemed that the conflict over holiday rituals remained the same during that era despite the new covenants and agreements where the Christian denominations in Jerusalem continued to focus on this particular issue. The issue resurfaced in the late 17th century when legal debates and deliberations took place in the Jerusalem court regarding the dispute between the Greek Orthodox and Armenians on one side, and the Roman Catholics on the other. The main issue at the time was to decide which denomination proceeds ahead of the other ones in the "Holy Saturday celebrations" in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. After deliberations, the judge decided to grant seniority to the Roman Catholics , as they presented Sultanate-issued documents sustaining such right().

The Church of the Nativity

The Church of the Nativity is considered one of the holiest Christian churches for all Christians. It is located in Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem, which historically was considered a suburb of Jerusalem. Given its importance and esteemed status, competition among Christian denominations over the rituals that took place within the church was inevitable, similar to what used to happen at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Each denomination was keen to have control over part of the church and to be in the forefront.

The seventeenth century witnessed numerous discussions pertaining to the topic of this article, with several Ottoman documents that came out regarding this matter. The initial spark of conflict in the Church of the Nativity among the Greek Orthodox, Georgians, and the Roman Catholics began during the holiday season of the year 1032 AD. This was exemplified by disputes over who would lead the holiday ceremonies and possess the church keys. Sources indicate that the keys had long been in the hands of the Roman Catholics. However, other denominations also sought this honor(). After extensive deliberations and argumentations, the Greek Orthodox managed to obtain the key to the northern door of the Church of the Nativity, which is of great importance in ceremonies of Bethlehem. It is noteworthy that delivering the key to Greek Orthodox took place under the supervision and patronage of Mustafa Bek's representative, the regional governor(). After getting the key, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Tovani son of Nikola, requested from the judge and the governor's representative that a committee be formed to officially hand over the key to him().

It can be concluded that other factors began to influence the church's status and rituals in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Mutual interests between the civil governor of Jerusalem, known as the Wali, and the Greek Orthodox denomination had a significant impact. The Greek Orthodox took advantage of that relationship and attempted to be in charge of things that had previously not been under their jurisdiction. Historically, the Church of the Nativity was in the hands of the Roman Catholics. Surprisingly, investigations led to different outcomes in terms of rituals among denominations.

This was evident when the Greek Orthodox and the Georgians locked the southern door of the Church of the Nativity and denied entry for the Roman Catholics during Christmas, despite the fact that the keys were traditionally in the latter's possession().

Following these events, the Ottoman Sultanate issued a decree to cease all violations against the Roman Catholics and other denominations in the Church of the Nativity as well as in other churches. The keys of this church were one of the core and controversial issues(). The said decree was followed by a subsequent decree sustaining what had been stipulated in the previous one. Lack of firm resolution to the issue of the keys on the part of the Ottoman authorities in Jerusalem. The promulgation of successive decrees was only due to the fragile situation accorded among denominations and laxity of governmental authorities in Jerusalem in implementing such decrees, and making them binding and to be implemented promptly().

Despite all this, tensions among denominations continued to escalate. The Greek Orthodox filed a claim before the judge of Jerusalem, requesting the off-hands on the part of the Roman Catholics over a piece of land near the Church of the Nativity. The document indicates that the deliberations of this case spanned for decades that would come up to surface whenever necessary. According to the law, cases older than fifteen years are dismissed, and the Greek Orthodox tried to capitalize on this law under favorable circumstances to bring the matter to the

public(). Another document mentioned the request of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch to hang four lamps in the Church of the Nativity, two of them at the birthplace of Jesus Christ, and the other two at the manger inside the church().

One can conclude that the Eastern Greek Orthodox Patriarchate has all along been trying to achieve far greater gains than the other Christian denominations could have imagined, especially when it came to matters that would annoy the Roman Catholics and their sponsor states in Jerusalem and the vicinity.

However, the Roman Catholics did not stay idle. They conveyed the latest news to the French ambassador to Istanbul, who in turn, presented the case to the Sultan who prompted a decree to address this issue, and people in charge were ordered to act accordingly. Officials in Jerusalem District headed to the Church of the Nativity to hear the complaint filed by the Roman Catholics against the Greek Orthodox regarding the keys and candleholders. Upon deliberations, it was proven with evidence that the keys were in the Roman Catholic possession, and that the issue of the candleholders of the Greek Orthodox was baseless. The judge decided to obligate Tovani, the head of the Greek Orthodox denomination, to hand over the keys of the northern door of the church to the Roman Catholics and to remove the four newly installed lamps().

The Greek Orthodox did not acquiesce and insisted on presenting their case anew to the Ottoman Sultanate. A Sultanic decree was issued on November 2, 1632, ordering the governors of Jerusalem to re-consider the most recent judgments regarding the keys of the Church of the Nativity. This decree was a sign of accepting the appeal to reinstate the hearings and deliberations on the case. The governors of Jerusalem convened a major court session to adjudicate between the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholics, during which both parties exhausted all the documents and evidences they had and the supported testimonies. The session concluded by affirming the previous judgment that the Roman Catholics were in rightful possession of the Church of the Nativity, and that the claims made by Tovani were baseless().

In 1045 AH (1635 AD), the dispute between the Greek Orthodox and the Armenians over the keys of the Church of the Nativity was stirred up again. The Greek Orthodox took possession of the keys, preventing the Armenians from entering unless the latter obtained permission from the Greek Orthodox monks ().

In the year 1045 AH/ 1635 AD, the dispute was renewed between the Greek Orthodox church and the Armenians over the keys of the Church of the Nativity. As the Greek Orthodox received the keys, the Armenians were prevented from entering the church unless they obtained a permission from the Greek Orthodox monks. In this regard, a Sultanic decree in favor of the Greek Orthodox was promulgated and the governors of Jerusalem were ordered to visit the church and implement the decree and that the disputing parties abide by it().

The disagreement between the Greek Orthodox and the Armenians also reignited over the Armenians constructing a stable, which they turned into an inn benefiting guests who would commute between Jerusalem and Hebron. In addition, the Armenians were allowed to build their residential houses above the inn. At that point, the Greek Orthodox objected to that, claiming that the construction blocked their access to their designated cemetery. The conflict lasted long and ended with an agreement to build a wall that would allow the Greek Orthodox an access to the cemetery. The records also mentioned another dispute between the Greek Orthodox and the Armenians at the Church of the Nativity as who was entitled to possess the keys. It was reported that the Sharia judge() in Jerusalem referred the case to the Sultanate Mufti() in Istanbul().

In the same context, the Armenians complained to the Jerusalem court judge that the Greek Orthodox prevented them from lighting a candle in the candleholder on the unction stone in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. According to their own rituals, the Armenians are scheduled to light that candle every Friday afternoon. They on their turn presented to the judge supporting documents pertaining to such rituals().

At times, disputes also arose within the same denomination. For example, the Roman Catholic monks, asked the judge to put restrictions on a Roman Catholic sect by the name” Brothers of the Cord”, who had prevented other Roman Catholic visitors from residing in the monastery inside the Church of the Nativity().

St. James Monastery

St. James Monastery is located in the southwestern part of Jerusalem, i.e. in the Armenian Quarter near Zion Gate, and belongs to the Armenians. Traditionally, there was a consensus among all denominations as per a document dated 1627 AD that the monastery belonged exclusively to the Armenians, having been in their possession for 100 years. According to the document, no other denomination had the right to challenge the Armenians or to interfere in matters related to the monastery. This document served as an official recognition registered in the Jerusalem court, and its registration implied endorsement by the responsible authorities in the Ottoman Empire for future reference in any related disputes().

During the seventeenth century, disputes regarding the aforementioned monastery came to surface.

However, it was not long before tensions over the monastery flared up, particularly with the complaint raised by the Greek Orthodox denomination, represented by its Patriarch who got in conflict with the monastery's bishop. The document revealed that the dispute took a new turning point during the reign of Muhammad Pasha the son of Tayyar(), the former Governor of Greater Syria, as the Patriarch approached him and lavished him with gifts to get his support. Sure enough, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch took over St. James Monastery and certain sites and was allowed to exercise some rituals in Bethlehem and in the Church of the Nativity. Indeed, this was a smart move on the part of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch by obtaining the Governor’s support . The document also pointed to the fact that after seizing the Monastery and other sites in Bethlehem, the Patriarch ignored all previous agreements including the consensus that was sponsored by the Sublime Porte in Istanbul, and to which he acquiesced maliciously .

After the execution of this governor, the Armenians broke their silence. Their dignitaries headed to Istanbul to present their case and the injustices they had endured throughout the previous period. It seemed that the Armenians have employed all possible means to achieve this by presenting their case to the military judge of Anatolia and the Grand Vizier, Mehmed Pasha. Furthermore, the issuance of imperial decrees all directed a fully articulated message to the governors of Jerusalem, mandating that they handle the case with transparency and restore the rights to their rightful owners(). A council of governance was formed of governors, judges, and celebrities and included representatives from the Christian denominations involved. It was finally decided to proceed to the monastery with a high-ranking committee, including the deputy judge and the governor of Jerusalem, Hassan Pasha, to hand it over to the Armenians. Then, the committee headed to Bethlehem, where events transpired similar to those at the St. James Monastery. Subsequently, the senior scholars in Jerusalem testified that what happened was a precedent. This manifests that the governors and rulers had a direct influence in escalating the

conflict, especially when some issues were still outstanding. Dissatisfaction on the part of denominations regarding properties and rituals was evident. The most conspicuous case was that of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Tovani, who was among the most fervent Patriarchs in expanding his influence and authority, in an attempt to dominate the Christian scene in Jerusalem while excluding the others().

Al-Amud Monastery (Deir Al-Amud):

"Deir Al-Amud is located in the northwest of the Christian Quarter(), and one of the most prominent monasteries affiliated with the Papal Roman Catholics. Attention to this monastery began in the late seventeenth century when the Westerners funded the construction of a large number of rooms inside the monastery to address the apparent shortfall in accommodating guests during the holiday seasons. This development seemed impossible if it was not for the strengthened relations between France and the Ottoman empire on one hand and recruiting and proselytizing Christians from other denominations to Roman Catholicism in Jerusalem and the vicinity on the other hand().

This monastery appeared in the documents of Jerusalem following a dispute that erupted between the new Abbott, named Frabitre son of Abdul Mun'im the Maronite of Tripoli, and the old Abbott. The former filed a lawsuit against the latter to evict the monastery along with his companions. Traditions and norms of the Roman Catholics stipulated that as they settle in, the new Abbott along with his companions and assistants replace the old one and his team. It is worth mentioning that the deposed Abbott by the name Francis refused to comply by the orders of the court under the pretext that the tenure of each team usually was for ten years, and that it had been only four years for him and his team since they settled in that monastery. He considered the appointment of a new Abbott as deceptive and illegal(). The Jerusalem documents refer to old Sultanic decrees that restricted the number of Roman Catholic priests in Jerusalem to 60. These Sultanic decrees emphasized this fact and reinforced prohibiting assaults against that denomination and the necessity of respecting them due to their good relations with the Ottoman state. According to the document, it was the French ambassador who took the lead in issuing those decrees().

Furthermore, a document stated that the Orthodox Greek denomination filed a complaint before the judge of Jerusalem, protesting against the Roman Catholics as they proved to proselytize and recruit Christians from other denominations. The Greek Orthodox described that as a disgraceful act that should be restrained or ceased, and that each party should adhere to the covenants and laws that regulate the relations among denominations().

Conclusion

After presenting and reading this topic from its primary sources, analyzing its content, uncovering its implications, and deconstructing its data, one may conclude the following:

The Christian denominations in Jerusalem comprised an integral part of Jerusalem throughout ages while playing an important role in social life and occupying a broad space in the public sphere of the city. This was evident in the tolerance exhibited by the Islamic successive reigns that controlled Jerusalem in previous eras.

Given the religious significance of the city and its vicinity to the Christian world, Jerusalem has all along been the headquarter of all Christian denominations, doctrines, races, and genders. Thus, it is inconceivable to find a Christian denomination existing somewhere but Jerusalem that

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represents the cradle of Christianity.

Religious sites i.e. churches and monasteries, have been a starting point for competition and conflict between Christian denominations in Jerusalem. Such a conflict became like a perennial norm especially in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which became a source of spiritual inspiration for all Christians in terms of rituals and ceremonies.

This article emphasized that the conflict was mainly focused in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. This was evident in the attempts of each denomination to be ahead of the others in conducting religious rituals during holiday seasons or by gaining control over places and expanding their influence, like taking over some buildings, monasteries or the keys. Those denominations have continued to act in an endless loop tirelessly renewing their fervor towards exciting events or when new church figures assume office. It seemed like instigating and triggering conflict became part of their enjoyable duty.

Some religious figures played a prominent role in fueling the competition among Christian denominations. It was observed how Tovani, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, was adept at seizing opportunities in all situations and at all levels. He had a passion for bringing points of contention to the surface. Tovani's prominence may have been driven by personal reasons or that he perceived that the Greek Orthodox were unfairly treated compared to other denominations, especially by the Armenians and the Roman Catholics who dominated a plenty of churches and monasteries.

The Ottoman state and its apparatuses also played a role in igniting the conflict, especially when a governor had certain whims or expressed a sort of bias who would mainly resolve conflicts unprofessionally via personal reconciliation. This was evident with Mustafa Pasha, the governor of Jerusalem, and Muhammad son of Al-Tayyar, the governor of Greater Syria. Some denominations would take advantage of such biases to their advantage after realizing that bribery was an effective way that could grant them privileges even beyond expectations. This has aggravated the conflict between denominations for a long period of time.

In another context, and confirming what has been previously stated, the situation went out of control regarding the behavioral rules among Christian denominations when the door was left wide open for each denomination to enhance their presence in Jerusalem. As the seventeenth century neared its end, some denominations, including the Roman Catholics, buttressed their presence by employing logistical, material, and political elements that helped them achieve their goals at the expense of other denominations.

This article concludes that conflict between Christian denominations in Jerusalem had political, sectarian and personal roots. Indeed this was of concern for the Ottoman Authorities on both the local and central levels as well as for the Christian European countries. Conflicts in Jerusalem were merely the mirror image of those countries' inter-conflicts and policies who had local Christians each under their jurisdiction.

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