

The Formation of Armenian Communities of Syria, Lebanon and Jerusalem: From Ancient Times until 19th Century

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Diasporas and their constituent communities are not created suddenly. Before their formation, certain processes take place that prepare the creation of these communities. The processes preceding to the formation of communities and Diasporas have their own causes, which can be of a different nature: ethnic, political, religious or economic. This article is a historical analysis aimed at finding out under what circumstances the formation of Armenian communities particularly within the territories of modern Syria, Lebanon and in the Holy City of Jerusalem took place. The nature of formation of Armenian communities differs in each of these three territories and ranges from economic to religious reasons. Hence, we examine each of these territories separately trying to point out the main differentiating factors of its Armenian communities throughout the history.

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Introduction

The Reasons of Armenian Migrations from Historical Armenia

In the case of so troubled region like Armenia we can surely say that migration and displacements were distinctive feature of its people throughout their history. First, we should talk about the geographical location of Armenia which was one of the main causes of the never-ending wars and continuous invasions of its territory which in its turn was resulting to migration and displacement of its people. The geographical location of Armenia always made it a battleground for bigger powers because it was through its territory that northern invaders from Caucasus mountains had to pass on their way of conquests and likewise invaders from Central Asia like Mongols had to pass during their incursions of the West (Albojajyan: 9).

We should mention that the territory of Levant currently hosts a large number of Armenians, who are gathered in a well-organized communities having mostly preserved their unique Armenian traditions, language etc. but we must point out that the basis of current Armenian communities is laid starting from the early 19th century, then followed by the massacres of Armenians in Anatolia by Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II in late 19th century and furthermore, during the Armenian Genocide by Young Turk regime in early 20th century which caused forced mass migration of Armenians from Western Armenia (Anatolia) to Middle East, Europe etc. Conditionally we will name this communities as “New Armenian communities” and thus, the communities that existed in Levant before the 19th century which is the main subject of the article will be understood under the term “Old Armenian communities”. The so called “Old Armenian Communities” as we will see later in the article didn’t live as a community and gradually assimilated with the locals, while the new communities began to organize themselves over time as a community forming their political organizations, and seeking to preserve its national identity in every possible way. It was because of this reason that in these territories no permanent or long-lasting national states or state-like entities were developed. During these wars and conquests, the plunder and marauding of the Armenian population was the first order of business of the conquerors. As a result, we see damaged economy, destroyed villages, cities, fields etc. These factors along with heavy taxation in some cases were pushing some Armenians to leave their properties and migrate from Armenia searching for better living conditions. For example, in 1254 the Hulagu khan of the Mongol Empire put so strict taxation system on the Armenians that those who couldn’t bear the taxation were forced to migrate to another country, where they could find a job and could live properly (Alboyajyan: 82).

Another consequence of the wars and a source of forced migration of Armenian population were the captives who were being displaced after almost every conquest of Armenia as it was the case with the invasions of Arabs, Persians, Turks, Byzantians etc. Armenians were famous craftsmen and traders and they were being sold in the bazars or markets of Damascus, Baghdad, Egypt etc. in order to boost the economies of these countries. (Alboyajyan: 80).

The natural environment of Armenian highlands played an important role as a cause of Armenian migrations. Due to unfavorable climate and poor natural resources Armenia wasn’t very popular center of arts or trade that’s why many merchants and craftsmen were leaving for famous trading hubs of the world. Since ancient times Armenian merchants were operating on the main trade routes connecting Persia and the Far East to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean (Migliorino: 10). Gradually, thanks to their communal connections, Armenians established themselves as successful commercial intermediaries in almost all the major cities of Anatolia and Levant. But this doesn’t mean that Armenia wasn’t involved in

trade with outside world at all. From the old ages they were in trading activities through land trade with their neighboring countries.

Very profound source of Armenian migrations to and within the Middle East is related with the Christianity and in particular for the case of the Armenian communities in Jerusalem whose center, since the seventh century, is the Monastery of Saint James. Pilgrims from Armenia as well as from another Armenian communities were going to Jerusalem and some of them were deciding not to return and were settling as in Jerusalem as in other cities on the way to Jerusalem like Aleppo, Bethlehem, some regions of Mountainous Lebanon etc.

A question may rise why the region of the Middle East and especially Levant was one of the main destinations of Armenian migrants. The answer lies not only in geographical closeness of these 2 regions but also in cultural commonalities of Armenians and the locals of Levant region. The history of the Armenian people is closely intertwined with the history of the Middle East region because the territory of historical Armenia is geographically overlapping the periphery of the contemporary Middle East. Those migrants fleeing from wars or unbearable conditions didn't have much time and remote plans of the future and they were fleeing to the countries which were not very far from their homeland and which, according to them, had cultural commonality with their own culture and they could find the peace and calmness they desired.

Moreover, those Armenians who were being displaced by force didn't have much choice than to settle in places that their invaders desired, and, usually, these territories were those ones where these people could be assimilated easily, and as we will see was exactly what happened with most of the old Armenian communities.

The Armenian communities in Northern Levant

The region of Middle East and especially Levant are one of the main neighboring territories of historical Armenia where throughout the history a lot of Armenians fled from their motherland for various reasons, mainly seeking refuge because of wars, thus creating Armenian communities in these countries. Under the term Levant(historical Syria) is understood modern day Syria, in addition to modern Palestine and part of Jordan, as well as the mountainous part of Lebanon (Hovhannisyan: 77).

Armenians had an uninterrupted presence in this region since the 5th century. The main differentiating feature of these communities is that they never felt as foreigners in this region and treated their host countries as their second motherland and always worked for the prosperity and development of these countries (Aprahamian: 428). It is noteworthy that initially, they did not intend to settle permanently in Levant, where they found themselves in a completely new environment, which had a number of distinctive factors: ethnic, religious,

linguistic, cultural, etc. Eventually, having found themselves in a very welcoming societies without national discriminations they started to integrate in the local societies and gradually assimilated with the locals.

The relations of Armenians with historical Syria have a centuries-old history. Armenian soldiers and traders visited Syria during the Achaemenid period, in particular, in 6th-4th centuries BC (Sanjian: 1). Already during the reign of Armenian King Tigran the Great, most of Syria was included in the Armenian Empire for a certain period of time (80-60s BC). According to Armenian sources, a large number of Armenians migrated to northern Syria at that time (Arahamian: 428).

About the formation of well-organized Armenian communities with their distinct features we can truly talk only after the spread of Christianity, because for these communities, especially in Jerusalem, religion and the Church were the main factors which gathered them and kept them together as a community. It is known that without common philosophy and ideological commonality the community cannot exist outside its motherland. According to Armenian historian V. Barkhudaryan the term community [Gaghtodjakh] means the existence of the parts of any given nation in a country other than their own where they preserve their language, traditions, religion, literature, in other words they preserve their national identity and in their way of life are distinct from their host nations (Barkhudaryan: 2).

We can talk about serious activities of Armenians in Levant already starting from the 4th century AD when Armenia adopted Christianity as their state religion in 301 AD by King Trdat III and which gave impetus to gradual flow of pilgrims to this region and especially to the Holy City of Jerusalem.

The first reliable information about mass migration of Armenians to Levant is of the VI century when during the reign of Persian king Khosrow I who, after his conquest of Antioch and Edessa from Byzantine Empire between 540 and 544, organized the migration of Christians into this region, a considerable amount of whom were Armenians. (Ter Minasyants: 122).

In the 7th century, Arab invasions of Armenia also led to migrations of Armenians. During the first invasions in 639/40, the Arabs took with them thousands of local captives, as well as Armenians dissatisfied with the Byzantine rule, and resettled them in the areas bordering the Euphrates, mainly in Edessa, Antioch and other parts of northern Levant. (Sanjian: 6)

The number of Armenians in Levant increased especially in the 9th and 11th centuries, as a result of forced migration of a significant number of Armenians by Byzantine emperors followed by overthrowing of the Bagratid kingdom of Armenia in 1045, invasions of Seljuk

Turks, and later overthrowing of Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in 1375. The influx of Armenians to Syria, reached great proportions, especially after the Seljuk invasions of Armenia in 1064-1220 (Arahamian: 430-431).

The migration of Armenians continued also during the Crusades in 11-13th centuries. A lot of Armenians supporting the crusaders participated in their battles in small military groups and furthermore, after the establishment of Latin states in Antioch and Tripoli in 1098 and 1108 respectively some part of them settled in already existing Armenian communities there (Arahamian: 431). According to Arab historians during the Crusades Armenian soldiers were fighting in both Crusader and Arab armies (Varzhapetyan: 5). At that time, Antioch was a region full of Armenians. After the abolition of the Duchy on Antioch (1098-1268), many Armenians living in the mountainous parts of Antioch survived. After the 11th century, small Armenian communities were formed in Al-Karak, Salt, Palestinian Caesarea (now Gaza) and elsewhere (Alboyajyan: 457-458),

The reason for the influx of Armenians into northern Levant in 13-15th centuries was also the danger of the conquest of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia by Mamluks of Egypt. After the overthrow of Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt by Mamluks in 1250 their armies entered into Syria and eventually conquered Damascus (1250) and Aleppo (1260). Already in 1265, they were at the borders of Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. During their first raids to Cilicia Mamluks took around 40,000 Armenian captives, some of whom settled in Aleppo and another part also escaped into the mountains of Lebanon. (Sanjian: 18, Varzhapetyan: 8)

Starting from the 16th century the history of development of Armenian communities in this region is connected with the history of Ottoman Empire. The conquest of the territory of Levant was of strategical importance for Ottoman Empire. Its importance was emphasized with its two cities, Damascus and Aleppo, which paid large taxes to the Sultan's treasury. Damascus was an important center for caravans going to annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Mecca and Madina, and Aleppo was a trading hub between Europe and Middle East.

During the Ottoman era in order to facilitate the easier control of its subjects, in the second half of the 15th century Ottoman sultans implemented the Millet system, which was based on the ethno-religious principle (Meyer:160). According to this, non-Muslims were divided into three religious communities: Greek Orthodox, Armenian-Apostolic and Jewish. Each millet was headed by its own religious dignitary: in the case of Armenians they were the Patriarchs of the Armenian community. In the millet system each community was responsible for the allocation and collection of its taxes, its educational arrangements, internal legal matters etc. The Armenian millet was created when in 1461 the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II invited Bishop Hovakim of Bursa to Constantinople, and awarded him the title of Patriarch who was also the spiritual and political authority of the Armenians of the empire, including the

spiritual and secular communities of Northern Levant. The Patriarch's authority extended to all the Eastern Orthodox Christian communities of the empire, including the Assyrian, Coptic, and Ethiopian Churches, who, however, had their own spiritual leaders as well. (Sanjian: 32-33)

Starting from the 14th century Aleppo becomes the main center of Armenian communities in Levant. At that time, it was considered to be the safest way for travelers and pilgrims both from east and west to Jerusalem. There are even reports of handwritten Armenian manuscripts in Aleppo of 14th century (Arahamian, 433). The Armenian community of Aleppo grows even bigger in the 15th century. The local Armenians were grouped around two Armenian Churches, St. Astvatsatsin (Mother of God) and St. Karasun Mankunq (Forty Martyrs). The oldest of them is St. Astvatsatsin Church, about which there is a mention in an Armenian manuscript written in Aleppo in 1329 (Syurmeyan: The List of Armenian Manuscripts of St. Karasun Mankunq Monastery of Aleppo: 442). Although Armenian sources do not mention the name of the bishop who led the Aleppo diocese in the 1350s, the facts show that the small Armenian community in Aleppo nevertheless had its leader, who in 1438 participates in ecumenical council of Florence by invitation of Pope Eugene IV (Syurmeyan: 36-103).

As early as the second half of the 17th century, the Armenian community in Aleppo consisted of mainly Orthodox Christians. The total Christian population of the city in that period was about 20-30 thousand, representing the Greek (3500), Armenian (6750), Assyrian (3750) and Maroni (3030) communities (Kamel: 234). The 17th century is the Golden age of Aleppo when it becomes one of the centers of the international trade in Middle East. This status of Aleppo encouraged the huge flow of Armenian merchants from Armenia as well as from Armenian communities of other cities such as Mush, Bitlis, Van etc. Some records on the graves in cemeteries of Aleppo of 17th century also prove the fact of presence of Armenians from cities like Mush, Jugha, Bitlis etc. in Aleppo (Akinyan: The life of Armenians in Aleppo: 305).

We can find valuable information about Armenians in Aleppo in the "The Travel Accounts" of Simeon of Poland. During his visit to Aleppo in 1616 he mentions that there are around 300 Armenian households most of whom are merchants, but he also mentions that most of them don't know Armenian language and their main language is Arabic (Akinyan: Travel Accounts of Simeon of Poland: 319). Simeon of Poland describes the Armenian community of Aleppo very thoroughly mentioning the existence of 4 monasteries next to each other: one Maroni, one Orthodox and two Armenian. (Akinyan: Travel Accounts of Simeon of Poland: 322-327). He also reports that for the Latin Catholics of the city: the Italians, the Galicians, who were in Aleppo for trade and did not have their own Church, there were three

tabernacles in the St Astvatsatsin Church, where liturgies were held on Saturdays and Sundays (Akinyan: Travel Accounts of Simeon of Poland: 318-319).

Already in the 18th century, according to the Arab historian al-Ghazi, there were seven Christian communities in Aleppo: Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Orthodox and Catholic, Assyrian, Maronite, Latin Catholic and Protestant (Kamel: 199-200).

Armenian small communities have also been established in cities like Damascus, Antioch and Latakia in 17-18th centuries. For example, according to Simeon of Poland there were 5-6 Armenian households in Damascus (Akinyan: Travel Accounts of Simeon of Poland: 313). The spiritual center of the Armenian community of Damascus was St. Sarkis Church, the construction date of which is unknown, presumably in the 14th century, but it is known that in 1617 it was renovated by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem (Sanjian 58).

Until the 19th century, Armenian spiritual life was in full swing in Latakia. The local community was concentrated around St. Astvatsatsin Church (Sanjian: 56).

The spiritual life of the Armenian community in historical and geographical Levant, despite a number of obstacles, generally developed and maintained its centuries-old Armenian-centered role until the 19th century.

The Armenian communities of Lebanon

Regarding for the early history of Armenian settlements of Lebanon we have a very few information because of lack of historiography on this subject. The location of Lebanon, being surrounded with mountains on the east and with the Mediterranean Sea on the west was not very favorable for mass migrations of Armenians and therefore, the early Armenian settlements of Lebanon could be only as a result of some individual cases or of some small groups of people. Some part of the settlers in Lebanon were people escaping from wars and seeking refuge in its mountainous regions unlike Aleppo where mainly its economical favorable situation was the main temptation of Armenians to settle there. In general, Lebanon, with its impassable mountains and forests, has become a safe haven for all those who opposed the Ottoman government.

Although there are facts about existence of Armenian settlements in Lebanon in Middle ages, the information about these families and individuals is so scarce that we cannot point out any prominent Armenians of that time.

It is speculated that Armenians came to Lebanon mainly in two land routs one of which is Aleppo – Damascus - Beirut and the other one Alexandria – Antioch – Tarsus – Tripoli –

Beirut and a very few Armenians reached Lebanon through sea: Cilicia – Cyprus – Beirut (Varzhapetyan: 9).

Until the second half of the 18th century, there was no significant presence of Armenians in Lebanon. It is true that the coastal cities of Tripoli, Sidon, and Beirut mentioned the economic activity of Armenians at the beginning of the 13th century, but in these cities they were represented only in small groups.

The formation of Armenian communities in Lebanon is strongly intertwined with the history and development of Armenian Catholic community. The Armenian Catholic community officially separated from the Armenian Orthodox Church in the 18th century. It was established in 1740 in Aleppo as a separate structure and ecclesiastical diocese, when Bishop Abraham Artsivyan anointed Patriarch of the Armenian Catholic community in St. Karasun Mankunq Church and in 1742 Pope Benedict XIV ratified Abraham I Artsivyan's Patriarchal election. Initially, Armenian Catholics were persecuted and openly discriminated by Armenian Orthodox clergy. However, eventually, as a result of pressure from European countries, mainly under the influence of the French Embassy in Istanbul, Ottoman authorities recognized the Armenian Catholic millet in 1831 (Stamatopoulos: 257).

Starting from the 18th century Lebanon gave a shelter to Armenians fleeing from the Catholic-Orthodox conflict between the Armenian denominations. Due to the privileged situation of Orthodox Armenians in Ottoman Empire Catholic Armenians were forced to migrate seeking better conditions. Given the existence of influential Catholic Maroni community in Lebanon it was providing safe environment for these Catholic Armenians to settle and build their monasteries, eventually establishing their Holy See there.

The residence of the Armenian Catholic Patriarchs, as well as the center of the Armenian Catholic community, became the Bzoummar (in Armenian: Zmmar) Monastery built on the hill called Bzoummar. The establishment of the Bzoummar Monastery for Catholic Armenians in 1749 was a new impetus for emigration processes to Lebanon. The first emigrants were the kinship of the clergy, who formed small communities in the surrounding villages of the monastery and laid the foundation for the Armenian community of Lebanon (Varzhapetyan: 260). It attracted not only Armenian Catholics seeking refuge for religious reasons but also over time it attracted a lot of merchants, students, pilgrims headed to Jerusalem and eventually settling here (Varzhapetyan: 43). Thus, the Catholic Armenian community of Lebanon started to grow.

The history of the formation of the Armenian community in Beirut also has a religious basis. The city has attracted the attention of Armenians and has gradually grown and became a stable community since the first half of the 1800s. Before that, in the 18th century, Beirut was

a small village with a population of about 5,000 people (Varzhapetyan: 34). The founders of Armenian community of Beirut, as well as the founders of the Armenian Protestantism in Lebanon, are considered to be three Armenian bishops who renounced their priesthood from St. James monastery of Jerusalem and established in Beirut in 1823-1825: Hakob Aghshehirci from Lustratsi, Dionysios Bishop Karapetyan and Hakob Vardapet Bolutsi (Varzhapetyan: 51). These three bishops become protestants and are considered not only the founders of Armenian Protestantism but also the founders of Arab Protestantism in Lebanon,

Very distinctive feature of old Armenian communities in Lebanon is that Armenians settled here not as “Armenians” but as “Christians.” So, there was no discrimination whatsoever towards Armenians as a nation. They were treated as locals, were praying in the same Churches as other Christians, following local traditions etc.

In the 18th century the number of Armenians in Levant in general and particularly in Lebanon starts to decrease because of mainly the anti-Armenian politics of Ottoman Empire and absence of the flow of new migrants into these territories. Another reason for that is the exploration of new geographical routes which transfers the trading routes through Syria and Lebanon to more comfortable oceanic routes. This fact strongly affected on the economic activity of this region resulting to decrease of the migration of Armenians to this region. Already established Armenian communities hardly kept their existence eventually assimilating with locals even to the degree when Arabic became their native language after some generations.

The Armenian communities of Jerusalem

The reasons for formation of Armenian communities in Jerusalem are slightly different from that of the rest of Levant because here the migrations of Armenians were due to mainly religious reasons rather than economic or political. The history and development of Armenian community in Jerusalem is strongly intertwined with pilgrimage and religious importance of this Holy City to Christians in general and for Armenians in particular. Armenians migrated to Jerusalem not fleeing from wars or looking for financial gains but seeking for spiritual values.

There are three main historical Patriarchates in Jerusalem, one of which is the Armenian Patriarchate and the other two being Greek Orthodox and Latin Patriarchates. These three are the joint guardians of Christianity’s holiest sites in this region including the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Jerusalem is one of the exceptional centers of the Armenians, who have maintained their presence in the Holy Land and due to their strong devotion to their religious authorities they

mostly kept their language culture and traditions and haven't been assimilated. Like all Eastern Christian Eastern Churches, the Armenian Patriarchate is divided into a monastic order, the Brotherhood of St. James, and a secular community. The Patriarch heads the Brotherhood and also represents his community before the state.

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem has a unique place for Armenian Apostolic Church and, after the Mother See of Holy Edjmiatsin, it is the second most important religious center for Armenians. About 4000 manuscripts, diplomatic documents, proclamations, etc. are kept in its repository of manuscripts (in Armenian: *matenadaran*).

The prominence of Armenians is manifested also by the fact that out of four parts to which Old City of Jerusalem is divided one is the Armenian quarter the other three being Christian, Muslim and Jewish quarters. It covers roughly one-sixth the area inside the Old City (Hintlian: 46).

The turning point of Armenians' attachment to Jerusalem is considered to be the adoption of Christianity by Armenia as a state religion. As mentioned above it resulted in pilgrimages in large numbers and gave impetus to the formation and development of the Armenian Church from the 4th to the 7th centuries. Already in the 5th century, when Armenian pilgrims began to arrive to the Holy Land, some of them decided to stay rather than return home. Thus, Armenian communities started to grow in Palestine and Jordan as far south as Karak (Hagopian: 10). There is a mention of 400 Armenian pilgrims en route to Jordan River in the 5th century Greek hagiographer Cyril of Scythopolis writings (Hagopian: 5).

Christian congregations existed here starting from the 1st century AD and after the ecumenical council of Chalcedon in 451 in which Armenians didn't take part because of ongoing wars with Persia, the Armenian Church didn't accept the doctrines of Chalcedon council and thus, separating from other so called "Chalcedonian" Churches creating its own Armenian congregation in Jerusalem. This split between Armenian and Greek Churches in its turn led to persecution of Armenians by Greek Chalcedonians in Jerusalem. Eventually Armenians and the Armenian congregation of Jerusalem gathered around their bishop in St. James monastery and elected him as their Patriarch establishing the Patriarchate of Jerusalem which became known as the "Apostolic See of Saint James in Jerusalem". It had jurisdiction over the Armenian communities in Palestine, Transjordan and Syria (Sanjian, 95-97).

The list of Armenian Patriarchs of Jerusalem, as compiled by Mkrtych Aghavnuni, begins with the reign of Abraham who, upon the Arab conquest of Jerusalem in 638, allegedly received a charter from the Caliph Umar guaranteeing the integrity of the Armenian possessions in the Holy Land and recognizing him as the spiritual leader not only of the

Armenian community but also of the other Eastern Orthodox Christian communities. (Sanjian: 97)

Regarding for early Armenian existence in Jerusalem reverend Eghia Kassouni says as follows: “During the Golden Age of Armenia (in 5th century AD) Armenians had their schools and monasteries in Sinai Peninsula and Jerusalem, and furthermore in 6th century there has been found mosaics in Armenian language in Jerusalem and Transjordan (Varzhapetyan: 12). According to accounts of Armenian historians, already in 7th century there were around 70 Armenian monasteries in Jerusalem (Aghavnuni: 12).

According to reverend Eghia Kassouni, during the reign of Catholicos Hovhannes Odznetsi (717-728), the contemporary of Umayyad Caliph Umar II (717-720), Armenians had the right to have their own bishops, monasteries and schools separate from Greeks under Islamic rule (Varzhapetyan: 13).

Already in the 6th century parallel with the Armenian congregation there was also a secular Armenian community in Jerusalem consisting of mainly merchants and craftsmen. As in the case of Aleppo, Jerusalem was also an economical center of Byzantine Empire and thus, attracted the attention of Armenian merchants. Furthermore, at that time there was even a street in Jerusalem called “Ruda Armeniorum” (Armenian road) which was populated mainly with Armenians (Aprahamian: 268).

Throughout the history these Armenian communities saw a lot of hardships, sometimes were on the edge of disappearance but they managed to keep their existence until today. For example, the situation of this community was critical during the wars between Seljuk Turks and Fatimid Caliphate in the end of 11th century when out of those 70 monasteries mentioned above, only 15 were left. New, much better era for Armenians was the era of Kingdom of Jerusalem established by the Crusaders in 1099. A lot of Armenian soldiers from the ranks of the crusader armies (mainly from Cilicia) came to settle not only in Jerusalem but also in neighboring cities.

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem in its present form came into being in the first decade of the fourteenth century, when Armenian monastic order of St. James proclaimed its head, Bishop Sargis, as Patriarch (Der Matossian: 25). Eventually, the Jerusalem Patriarchate exercised its authority over Armenians in Palestine, southern Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, and Egypt. In 1311 Armenian bishop of Jerusalem was recognized as the Patriarch of Jerusalem by the Sultan of Egypt.

During the 400 years of Ottoman rule, the Armenian Church of Jerusalem continued to be one of the three main Churches along with Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches.

The basis for this was the recommendation of Sultan Selim I. According to sources when in 1517 Sultan Selim I entered Egypt victoriously from Egypt, he was greeted by residents of the city, including the Armenian and Greek Patriarchs, along with their congregations. The Armenian Patriarch Sargis (1507-1517) presented to the Sultan the recommendations given by the Prophet Muhammad to the Armenian Patriarch Abraham, which later was also approved by the Caliphs Umar and Ali, which guaranteed the preservation of the authority of Armenian Patriarchs over all the Armenian shrines in Jerusalem, including the superior position of the Armenian Patriarchs over the other three Christian communities (Coptic, Ethiopian, Assyrian). Sultan Selim I reaffirmed that recommendation which was followed by the other Ottoman sultans as well. (Savalanyants: 550)

According to Simeon of Poland during his visit to Jerusalem in 1615-1616 there were 12 Armenian families living there (Akinyan: Travel Accounts of Simeon of Poland: 260).

Jerusalem's Armenian Convent, as it can be seen today, owes its existence to Gregory the Chainbearer (1715-1749). The five years following his arrival in Jerusalem (1721) are considered the period of the revival of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. In 1718, he hung a heavy chain with a large cross round his neck and promised not to take it off until his mission of raising funds for the Armenian Church was completed (Ervine 106-111.). He managed to save the Armenian Church from collapse because of its debts. He reaffirmed its rights to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, secured pilgrimage routes to Jerusalem and finally made significant repairs to the St. James monastery. (Hagopian: 6).

As unique as the city of Jerusalem was in its significance and status compared to other cities in historical and geographical Levant, the status of the local Armenian community was just as distinct. Being the spiritual center of all Armenians, the local secular and spiritual communities in the Ottoman period were considered as one whole. This was due to the fact that the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem refused to organize a secular community separate from the Church according to Ottoman law. 90% of the city's Armenians lived in the old city of Jerusalem, of which 80% lived around St. James monastery (Tsimhoni: 353).

Conclusion

As we have seen the reasons for formation of Armenian communities in Levant are both similar, but at the same time different in each of its main subregions. If in Northern Levant it is mainly due to the continuous wars and displacements that Armenians left their homeland and settled there, combined with the economic and trading attractiveness of this region, in Lebanon and in Jerusalem the formation of these communities is closely related with the religious and political factors.



The existence of Armenians in Levant as we saw can be traced from the ancient times, but as a community they are developed only after the 4th century when Armenia adopted Christianity as a state religion and from then on Christianity became the bond which kept these communities gathered around their Church establishments.

In the case of Lebanon, in contrary to Northern Levant and Jerusalem, the Armenian communities were developed slowly and much later due to its hardly accessible geographical position which determined the nature of the Armenian communities settled here who considered it as a safe haven fleeing from confessional conflicts. This, along with the existence of Catholic Maroni communities there resulted to creation of Armenian Catholic community in Lebanon in 18th century.

It is noteworthy to mention that the “Old Armenian communities” of Levant except that in Jerusalem were mostly assimilated until the 1st half of 19th century, because they lacked well developed communal structures and weren’t giving much importance to preservation of their main ethnic features such as language and traditions. This was due to the fact that Armenians as a nation were not physically endangered in their historical homeland. However, this wasn’t the case with “New Armenian communities” developed from the 19th century which is constituting the basis of existing Armenian communities in modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine.

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