

THE FACE TO FACE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN PATRIARCH SOPHRONIUS OF JERUSALEM AND THE CALIPH 'UMAR IBN AL-KHAṬṬĀB: FRIENDS OR FOES?

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The capitulation of Jerusalem to the Arabs, involving the encounter of Sophronius Patriarch of Jerusalem (634-8) with the second caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (634-44) and the alleged covenant (*ahtnamē*, 'letter of obligation') granted to the Patriarch by 'Umar as a way of securing for the Christians ownership of the holy sites, constitutes an interesting and intriguing footnote, and maybe a valuable chapter, in the earliest period of Christian-Muslim relations.¹ The historical details notwithstanding, this encounter affords an opportunity to concentrate on the two personalities, and to evaluate the relationship that developed between them, speculative though this venture may appear to be.

The dynamics of encounters between people of faith, especially conflicting faiths, are determined by personal predisposition and chemistry. But these are hardly ever recorded, and one has to read between the lines of the written record, allowing the imagination to fill the gaps. Thus the reconstruction of the meeting between these representative men of faith, like the study of the collection of the Qur'an, requires a synthesis of whatever historical fragments can be extracted 'from stones and palm leaves' and 'from the hearts of men', which is to say a kind of 'psychological dissection' of personality traits.

Sophronius' stature, his talent with words, his impressive library (a product of his life at the monastery of St. Theodosius) which was

¹ Cf. Daniel J. Sahas, 'Patriarch Sophronius, 'Umar and the capitulation of Jerusalem', and 'The Covenant of 'Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb with the Christians of Jerusalem' (Arabic translation), in Hadia Dajani-Shakeel and Burhan Dajani, eds, *Al-sira al-islāmī al-faranjī 'alā Filastīn fī al-qur'ān al-wustā*, Beirut, 1994, pp. 53-71, and 72-7; Heribert Busse, 'Omar b. al-Hattāb in Jerusalem', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 5, 1984, pp. 73-119, and 'Omar's Image as the Conqueror of Jerusalem', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 8, 1986, pp. 149-68.

copied and annotated by generations of writers, and especially his contemporaneity with the earliest Muslim conquests (events only scantily documented by Byzantine and Muslim sources), make him a particularly attractive figure and significant historical source.² His *Conciliar Letter*, or letter of credence which he sent to the synod of bishops in Constantinople on his election to the patriarchal throne of Jerusalem in 634,³ communicates the fear of the Christian population and the impoverishment of religious life they experienced, as well as Sophronius' own shock at the 'revolt ... of all the barbarians, especially the Saracens ... who with raw and cruel disposition, impious and godless audacity were ravaging' the Christian community 'unexpectedly', ἄδοκῆτως.⁴ This 'ἄδοκῆτως' betrays how much Sophronius and the neighbouring Christians, as well as Constantinople and the emperor Heraclius, had underestimated the social and religious upheaval which was brewing among the Arab tribes inside and outside Arabia. It points also to the military technique of surprise employed by 'Umar in the first wave of conquest.⁵

A few months after the *Conciliar Letter*, in December of the same year 634 (a date confirmed by internal evidence),⁶ Sophronius delivered his *Christmas Sermon* in Jerusalem instead of Bethlehem.⁷ In this he lamented the apprehensiveness felt by Christians at travelling to the birthplace of Christ to celebrate his birth, because the city was

² Cf. R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others saw it. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Princeton, 1997, pp. 67-73, and *passim*. On Sophronius, cf. the authoritative monograph by Christoph von Schönborn, *Sophrone de Jérusalem; vie monastique et confession dogmatique*, Paris, 1972.

³ G.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, Florence, vol. XI, pp. 461-510, and *PG*, vol. LXXXVII, cols 3148-3200.

⁴ Cf. *PG*, vol. LXXXVII, col. 3197D.

⁵ On the early Muslim conquests, cf. Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, Princeton, 1981; Walter E. Kaegi Jr., *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, Cambridge, 1992; D.J. Constantelos, 'The Moslem Conquests of the Near East as Revealed in the Greek sources of the Seventh and the Eighth Centuries', *Byzantion* 42, 1972, pp. 326-57; Donald R. Hill, *The Termination of Hostilities in the Early Arab Conquests, AD 634-656*, London, 1971; Hugh Kennedy, 'Change and Continuity in Syria and Palestine at the time of the Moslem Conquests', *ARAM*, 1, 1989, pp. 258-67; Felix-Marie Abel, *Histoire de la Palestine depuis la conquête d'Alexandre jusqu'à l'invasion arabe. Tome II: De la guerre juive à l'invasion arabe*, Paris, 1952; Marius Canard, *L'expansion arabo-islamique et ses répercussions*, London, 1974.

⁶ Cf. Schönborn, *Sophrone de Jérusalem*, p. 103.

⁷ Ed. H. Usener, in *Rheinisches Museum* NF 41, 1886, pp. 500-16; reprinted in *Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* 1, Bonn, 1889, pp. 326-30.