

Süryaniler
181502

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DOCUMENTING COMMUNITY IN THE LATE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Abstract

This article traces a conflict that erupted in the late 19th century between the Armenians and the Süryani. This conflict, I argue, precipitated nothing less than the creation of the Süryani community itself. The dispute began over the key to a closet in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but it quickly evolved. Soon, the Armenians and the Süryani were clashing over holy places all around Jerusalem. The dispute centered on an Ottoman administrative arrangement which had been institutionalized nearly 400 years earlier: *yamaklık*. The Ottoman investigators, however, were unfamiliar with this archaic arrangement and had to be reeducated as to its terms and its history. The Süryani and the Armenians offered divergent accounts. Where the Armenians furnished hard documentation, however, the Süryani could produce only claims to tradition and local practice. In this article I argue that, through this protracted conflict, the Süryani came to understand the importance of the documentary record in a post-Tanzimat Ottoman world. They thus turned to an alternative strategy that would conform to this documentary sensibility and render their community visible to the state: a series of petitions with thousands of Süryani signatures from around the Ottoman Empire.

Keywords: Christianity; community; Ottoman Empire; millet; petitions; Süryani; *yamaklık*

On the final day of January 1882, Bishop Jirjis Sadadi sat in a monastery in Jerusalem. He penned a letter in Garshuni, or Syro-Arabic, to Süryani¹ Patriarch Ignatius Peter IV in Mardin, some 500 miles away in southeast Anatolia. A crisis was at hand, and the bishop's letter narrated its development in detail. The Armenians had affixed a lock to the door of a small closet (*khazāna*) in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre that had traditionally been reserved for the Süryani.² When the Süryani demanded the key, the Armenians refused. The Süryani complained to the Armenian leader (*rāyīs*) of the church, but to no avail. They then took the matter to the Armenian patriarch of Jerusalem, who explained, "I told His Excellency your patriarch: if you have papers (*awraq*) such as imperial orders and juridical documents (*firmānāt wa-ḥujaj*) stating that the property (*al-māl*) is yours, show them." Jirjis continued, "At that time the flame of jealousy (*nār al-ghayra*) ignited within us for the rights of our denomination (*tā'ifa*), which they want to subordinate to [the Armenians]."

The conflict over a closet key quickly turned violent. One Sunday after Mass, the Armenians, Jirjis claimed, attacked a group of Süryani worshippers. The Süryani

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