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## A Journey to the Medieval History of Palestine: Coexistence and Conflict

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### ABSTRACT

The history of Palestine is characterized by a multifaceted and intricate representation of the diverse cultural tapestry woven by its various inhabitants, particularly within its medieval context, a period distinguished by complex and dynamic interactions that have exerted a profound influence on this pivotal region. From the Late Bronze Age, spanning through the Classical Era, and into the medieval period, Palestine constituted the locus of a captivating interplay of faiths and religions, marked by alternating periods of both concord and discord. This intricate pattern persisted throughout the successive epochs of Roman rule and the subsequent influence of the Islamic and Byzantine Empires, each of which left an indelible mark on the region's socio-cultural and political landscape. This article aims to elucidate the confluence of social, political, and religious factors that collectively shaped the medieval landscape of Palestine, shedding light on the enduring legacy of both cooperation and strife that has characterized its historical trajectory. Following an interdisciplinary historical methodology, the narrative extended beyond a mere chronicle of conflicts to also encompass qualitative historical analysis, textual criticism, and contextual interpretation. Conversely, the methodology delved into moments of intense conflict, examining the underlying causes and ramifications of these episodes on the region's development. Drawing upon a comprehensive array of primary and secondary sources, the study meticulously investigated the intricate web of socio-political and economic dynamics that governed the medieval history of Palestine. The analysis extended to a detailed examination of the influence of governance structures, encompassing both local and imperial administration, and how these structures either fostered cooperation or exacerbated tensions among the region's diverse communities. Furthermore, the role of religious institutions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in shaping social relations, legal frameworks, and cultural norms was scrutinized. To that end, this research has demonstrated that the medieval history of Palestine cannot be confined to a binary framework of peace and conflict. Rather, it must be understood as a continuum of coexistence and confrontation shaped by faith, power, and necessity. Through an interdisciplinary examination of primary chronicles, religious covenants, and archaeological evidence, the study revealed that periods of cooperation among Muslims, Christians, and Jews were not exceptional but integral to the region's historical fabric. The mechanisms that sustained coexistence, such as pilgrimage economies and shared sacred geographies, illustrate how pragmatic governance and economic interdependence often mitigated religious divisions. The research concluded that medieval Palestine functioned as a dynamic cultural crossroads rather than a perpetual battlefield. Its historical experience offers enduring lessons on the capacity of diverse societies to sustain pluralism under shifting political and religious pressures. By repositioning Palestine within the broader context of Mediterranean and Islamic world history, this study contributes an original perspective to the understanding of intercommunal relations and the shared heritage of sacred geography in the medieval era. The study argues that medieval Palestine must be understood as a living laboratory of coexistence, a land where theological exclusivity confronted the realities of shared survival. The coexistence of rival faiths generated an enduring cultural resilience that would shape the region's identity for centuries. The findings emphasize that the Holy Land's legacy lies in its religious sanctity and in its ability to sustain pluralism under immense political and ideological pressure. By situating Palestine within the broader networks of Mediterranean history, this research presents a reinterpretation of the region as a connective hub rather than a divided frontier and an enduring testament to the intricate balance between devotion and diplomacy that shaped the medieval world. It contributes to the understanding of how faith communities interacted, competed, and coexisted within the same sacred landscape, leaving behind a legacy that continues to inform modern conceptions of religious coexistence.

**Keywords:** Islamic History, Medieval, Palestine, Conflict, Sacred Place

## Ortaçağ Filistin Tarihine Bir Yolculuk: Bir Arada Yaşam ve Çatışma

Süreç

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### ÖZ

Filistin'in tarihi, özellikle Orta Çağ bağlamında, farklı topluluklarının ördüğü çok katmanlı kültürel dokunun karmaşık ve çok yönlü bir temsiliyle karakterize edilir. Bu dönem, bölge üzerinde derin bir etki bırakan dinamik ve karmaşık etkileşimleriyle öne çıkmaktadır. Tunç Çağı'ndan başlayarak Klasik Dönem ve Orta Çağ'a kadar uzanan süreçte Filistin, inançların ve dinlerin büyüleyici bir etkileşim alanı olmuş; zaman zaman uzlaşının, zaman zaman ise çatışmanın hüküm sürdüğü dönemlere sahne olmuştur. Bu karmaşık yapı, Roma yönetimiyle başlayıp ardından Bizans ve İslam imparatorluklarının etkisi altında devam etmiş; her biri bölgenin sosyo-kültürel ve politik dokusu üzerinde silinmez izler bırakmıştır. Bu makale, Filistin'in Orta Çağ'daki toplumsal, politik ve dinsel yapısını şekillendiren faktörlerin keşim noktasını aydınlatmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, bölgenin tarihsel seyrini belirleyen iş birliği ve çatışma dinamiklerinin kalıcı mirasına ışık tutmaktadır. Disiplinler arası tarihsel bir yöntem benimsenmiş; yalnızca çatışma kronolojisi sunmakla kalmayıp nitel tarihsel analiz, metin eleştirisi ve bağlamsal yorumlamayı da içermektedir. Bununla birlikte, çalışma yoğun çatışma dönemlerini derinlemesine ele alarak bu olayların nedenlerini ve bölgesel gelişim üzerindeki sonuçlarını incelemiştir. Çeşitli birincil ve ikincil kaynaklara dayanan bu çalışma, Filistin'in Orta Çağ tarihini şekillendiren sosyo-politik ve ekonomik dinamiklerin karmaşık ağını titizlikle incelemiştir. Analiz, hem yerel hem de imparatorluk yönetimlerini kapsayan idari yapıların bölgedeki farklı topluluklar arasında iş birliğini nasıl teşvik ettiği ya da gerilimleri nasıl artırdığına dair ayrıntılı bir değerlendirmeyi de içermektedir. Ayrıca, Yahudilik, Hristiyanlık ve İslam gibi dinî kurumların toplumsal ilişkiler, hukuk sistemleri ve kültürel normlar üzerindeki rolü de ayrıntılı biçimde incelenmiştir. Bu çalışma, Filistin'in Orta Çağ tarihinin yalnızca barış ve çatışma ikiliği üzerinden açıklanamayacağını ortaya koymaktadır. Aksine, inanç, güç ve zorunluluklarla şekillenen bir birlikte yaşama ve karşı karşıya gelme sürekliliği olarak anlaşılmalıdır. Birincil kronikler, dinî antlaşmalar ve arkeolojik bulguların disiplinler arası bir analiziyle, Müslümanlar, Hristiyanlar ve Yahudiler arasındaki iş birliği dönemlerinin istisnai değil, bölgenin tarihsel dokusunun ayrılmaz bir parçası olduğu ortaya konmuştur. Hac ekonomileri ve kutsal coğrafyaların paylaşımı gibi birlikte yaşamı sürdüren mekanizmalar, pragmatik yönetim anlayışının ve ekonomik karşılıklı bağımlılığın dinî ayrılıkları nasıl hafiflettiğini göstermektedir. Araştırmanın bulguları, Orta Çağ Filistin'inin sürekli bir savaş alanından ziyade dinamik bir kültürel kavşak işlevi gördüğünü göstermektedir. Bölgenin tarihsel deneyimi, farklı toplumların değişen politik ve dinî baskılar altında çoğulculuğu sürdürebilme kapasitesine dair kalıcı dersler sunmaktadır. Filistin'i Akdeniz ve İslam dünyası tarihi bağlamına yeniden konumlandıran bu çalışma, Orta Çağ'da dinler arası ilişkilerin ve kutsal coğrafyanın paylaşılan mirasının anlaşılmasına özgün bir katkı sağlamaktadır. Araştırma, Orta Çağ Filistin'ini teolojik dışlayıcılığın ortak yaşamın zorunluluklarıyla karşı karşıya geldiği bir "birlikte yaşama laboratuvarı" olarak değerlendirmektedir. Rakip inançların bir arada varlığı, bölgenin yüzyıllar boyunca kimliğini şekillendiren kalıcı bir kültürel direnç doğurmuştur. Bulgular, Kutsal Topraklar'ın mirasının yalnızca dinî kutsallığında değil, aynı zamanda yoğun politik ve ideolojik baskılara rağmen çoğulculuğu sürdürebilme gücünde yattığını vurgulamaktadır. Filistin'i Akdeniz tarihi ağları içinde konumlandıran bu araştırma, bölgeyi bölünmüş bir sınırdan ziyade bağlantı sağlayan bir merkez olarak yeniden yorumlamakta ve Orta Çağ dünyasını şekillendiren inanç ile diplomasi arasındaki hassas dengeye kalıcı bir tanıklık sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, aynı kutsal mekânda farklı inanç topluluklarının nasıl etkileşime girdiğini, rekabet ettiğini ve bir arada yaşadığını göstererek dinî birlikte yaşamın modern kavrayışlarını besleyen tarihsel bir miras ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İslam Tarihi, Orta Çağ, Filistin, Çatışma, Kutsal Mekân

## Introduction

The medieval era in Palestine represents a vibrant intersection of religious fervor, cultural exchange, and military contestation. Pilgrimage during this era symbolized spiritual fulfillment and emerged as an arena where the coexistence of divergent communities was both celebrated and challenged by intermittent conflicts.<sup>1</sup> Situated at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe, Palestine presents a complex tapestry of coexistence and conflict. From the early Islamic conquests to the Crusades and the dominance of the Mamlūk and Ottomans, this land has been a focal point for religious devotion, political power struggles, and economic trade. For years, studies on the medieval era have increasingly embraced interdisciplinary perspectives, integrating historical cartography, religious studies, and conflict analysis.<sup>2</sup> The era underlines complicated historical and religious dynamics of Muslims, Christians, and Jews sharing sacred spaces in Palestine, a practice also observed in the wider Mediterranean and Greater Syria during the medieval era. A close analysis of the history and literature of that era reveals the various Christian sacred locations visited by Muslim scholars and pilgrims in the Holy Land.<sup>3</sup> Exploring the essence of medieval Palestine involves a meticulous examination of the multifaceted dimensions of coexistence and conflict that indelibly shaped the region and the daily lives of its diverse inhabitants. Through a detailed analysis of the Byzantine dominion, the formative years of Islamic caliphates, the Crusader states, and the ascendancy of the Mamluk Sultanate, this exploration illuminates the intricate patterns of interaction that characterized the relationships between the land's inhabitants, highlighting the protracted periods of shared existence and the inevitable tension.

The medieval period of Palestine, conventionally demarcated from the 7th to the 15th centuries, presents a captivating yet intricate narrative of societal evolution, political transformation, and the dynamic interplay between diverse religious and cultural groups. Often viewed through the prism of intermittent conflicts, particularly the emotionally charged era of the Crusades, a closer examination of this epoch reveals a far more textured reality.<sup>4</sup> Palestine's boundaries were often inaccurate, and the term itself referred to the land on both sides of the Jordan River; while Jewish communities referred to this land as the Land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael). Palestine is the conventional term for what is today the Palestinian-controlled Gaza and the West Bank (also known as Judea and Samaria), Israel, and some regions in Jordan. Another term is “Canaan,” which was the name of the land and some parts of the South Levant during the Bronze Age. However, these terms are not entirely straightforward. According to Krämer, there are no innocent terms, especially in geography.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fadi Ragheb, “Sharing the Holy Land: Islamic Pilgrimage to Christian Holy Sites in Jerusalem during the Late Medieval and Early Modern Periods”, *Jerusalem Quarterly* 95 (2023), 61-99.

<sup>2</sup> Jodi Magness, *The Archaeology of the Holy Land: From the Destruction of Solomon's Temple to the Muslim Conquest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 286-320.

<sup>3</sup> Ronnie Ellenblum, Iris Shagrir, *In Laudem Hierosolymitani: Studies in Crusades and Medieval Culture in Honour of Benjamin Z. Kedar* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007), 219-231.

<sup>4</sup> Barry Strauss, “Jewish Roots in the Land of Israel/Palestine: An Essay from The Caravan Notebook”, Hoover Institution (Access 03 November 2025), 1-8.

<sup>5</sup> Gudrun Krämer, *A History of Palestine: From the Ottoman Conquest to the Founding of the State of Israel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 2-8.

The historical trajectory of the name “Palestine” began with the Philistines, a group who migrated from the Aegean and Cyprus in the 12th century. Upon arriving, they intermingled with the Canaanites and established several coastal nations in what is now referred to as southern Israel and the Gaza Strip. The land of the Philistines was known by various names to the Egyptians, Assyrians, and within the Hebrew Bible. Greek writers, including Herodotus and Aristotle, subsequently broadened the scope of Palestine to include all of Canaan. The Romans initially referred to the ancient Jewish state and its province as Judea. However, in the 2nd century, following a local revolt, Rome renamed Judea to Syria Palaestina, which was later shortened to Palaestina, the direct ancestor of Palestine. Throughout its long history, the territory and its divisions have been known by various names, including *Urdunn* (Jordan), the Arabic *Filastin* (Palestine), as well as the Kingdom of Jerusalem during the Crusader era. The name Palestine has recently become prevalent among Christians and Muslims, while the Jewish community still refers to the land as the Land of Israel.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to other territories fringing the eastern Mediterranean, Canaan experienced a period of instability that disrupted the established civilizations in that zone towards the close of that era. In the subsequent epoch, identified as the Iron Age, several new polities arose in the southern Levant. Among these were a pair of Israelite kingdoms situated within the highlands of what is now considered Palestinian territory, an area that essentially corresponds to the present-day regions of Judea and Samaria, also known as the West Bank.<sup>7</sup> The surviving sources, often fragmented and colored by the perspectives of ruling powers or specific religious affiliations, necessitate careful interpretation. Chronicles penned by religious figures, administrative documents reflecting imperial policies, and the material evidence unearthed through archaeological excavations offer valuable, albeit sometimes partial, insights into the social, economic, and political realities of this era.<sup>8</sup>

The significance of examining Palestine’s medieval experience lies in its ability to illuminate how the dynamics of shared life, mutual dependence, and recurring strife shaped intercommunal relations across the eastern Mediterranean. Far from being a marginal province, medieval Palestine served as a vital node in global religious geography and trade networks, linking the political centers of Byzantium, Damascus, Cairo, and later Constantinople. Understanding its layered history contributes not only to medieval historiography but also to contemporary discussions on cultural coexistence and religious pluralism in contested spaces. This study seeks to revisit and reinterpret the socio-political and religious transformations of Palestine between the Byzantine and Mamluk eras with particular emphasis on the dual themes of coexistence and conflict.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Lewis, “Palestine: On the History and Geography of a Name”, *The International History Review* 2/1 (1980), 1-12.

<sup>7</sup> Lester Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* (Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2007), 77-80.

<sup>8</sup> Marvin Harris, “History and Significance of the Emic/Etic Distinction”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5/1 (1976), 329-350.

## 1. The Byzantine Era and the Beginnings of Religious Diversity

Before the transformative advent of Islamic rule in the 7th century, Palestine constituted a vital component of the Eastern Roman and Byzantine Empires during the 4th and 5th centuries. This predominantly Christian empire exerted significant cultural, religious, and administrative influence over the region for several centuries. Within this imperial framework, Christian communities thrived, establishing significant religious centers and wielding considerable social and political influence<sup>9</sup>. Despite facing legal and social restrictions that limited their participation in the dominant Christian society, Jewish life persisted, centered around synagogues that served as communal hubs for worship and social gatherings<sup>10</sup>. While sharing some religious tenets with Judaism, Samaritans maintained their traditions and often experienced fluctuating periods of relative tolerance and overt persecution under Byzantine rule, sometimes erupting in revolts against imperial authority.<sup>11</sup> Accounts of the Christian monk Bar-Sawma provide valuable insight into Palestine's demographic and religious landscape under Byzantine rule. Jews and pagans formed the majority population across Palestine, Phoenicia, and parts of Arabia, while Christians remained a minority. Bar-Sawma led a group of monks, supported by Byzantine forces, in violent confrontations with Jewish groups, reportedly destroying several synagogues, including one in Petra, said to rival Solomon's Temple<sup>12</sup>. Around 425 CE, Jews from the Galilee petitioned Empress Eudocia for permission to pray at the ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem, as prior imperial decrees had barred them from the city. Following her approval, large numbers of Jews gathered in Jerusalem, hoping for renewal, though conflict soon erupted. These events highlight the tense yet intertwined coexistence of religious communities in Byzantine Palestine, where political shifts and imperial policies deeply shaped interfaith relations.<sup>13</sup>

The administrative structure of Byzantine Palestine was divided into several provinces, including Palaestina Prima, Secunda, and Tertia, as well as parts of Arabia and Phoenice.<sup>14</sup> This detailed administrative organization facilitated the extraction of resources and the maintenance of imperial control over a region renowned for its agricultural productivity<sup>15</sup>, particularly in the production of wine and olive oil, which were exported throughout the empire.<sup>16</sup> Cities like Ascalon

<sup>9</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Jews in the Twentieth Century: An Illustrated History* (New York City: Schocken, 1992), 19-30.

<sup>10</sup> Denys Pringle, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: A Corpus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 180-195.

<sup>11</sup> Gideon Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem (614 C.E.) - An Archaeological Assessment", *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 357 (2010), 35-48.

<sup>12</sup> Reuven Kiperwasser and Serge Ruzer, "Cleansing the Sacred Space: The Holy Land and Its Inhabitants in the Pilgrimage Narrative of Barsauma", *The Wandering Holy Man. The Life of Barsauma, Christian Asceticism, and Religious Conflict in Late Antique Palestine*, auth. Johannes Hahn and Volker-Lorenz Menze (Oakland, 2020), 104-120.

<sup>13</sup> Ernst Honigsmann, *Le couvent de Barsauma et le patriarcat jacobite* (California: University of California, Secretariat du Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1954), 15-25.

<sup>14</sup> Itamar Taxel, *Twenty Four - The Social Archaeology of the Southern Levant in the Byzantine Period: Rethinking the Material Evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 458-477.

<sup>15</sup> Itamar Taxel, "The Olive Oil Economy of Byzantine and Early Islamic Palestine: Some Critical Notes", *Liber Annuus* 63 (2013), 361-394.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Islam in History: Ideas, People, and Events in the Middle East* (Chicago: Open Court, 2011), 153-175.

and Gaza served as important commercial centers, connecting Palestine to broader trade networks. The social fabric of Byzantine Palestine was diverse, comprising urban populations, rural agricultural communities, and numerous monastic settlements that dotted the landscape, reflecting the profound influence of Christianity.<sup>17</sup> This multi-layered society, while dominated by Christian imperial structures, provided a backdrop for the early interactions with the nascent Islamic forces that would soon arrive. The administrative divisions of Byzantine Palestine, which were solidified by the early 5th century CE, reflected the empire's efforts to exert control and manage the diverse landscape. The province of Palaestina Prima, with its capital at Caesarea Maritima, encompassed Judea, Samaria, and the coastal plains, representing the heartland of the region.<sup>18</sup>

According to Taxel<sup>19</sup>, the economy of Byzantine Palestine was robust and diverse, with agriculture playing a central role. The region was renowned for its fertile lands, producing significant quantities of wheat, barley, olives, and grapes. The olive oil produced in Palestine was significant, with archaeological evidence revealing sophisticated pressing technologies and large-scale production to be exported to other parts of the empire. Viticulture was also prominent, with the wines of Ascalon and Gaza being well-regarded and exported. Agriculture, trade, and commerce flourished in urban centers, such as Caesarea, which served as crucial links in the broader Mediterranean trade networks. Theologically, Palestine was a religiously diverse society, although Christianity held the dominant position following the empire's official adoption of the faith in the 4th century. Numerous churches and monasteries were constructed throughout the region, reflecting the strong presence and influence of various Christian denominations. These religious institutions played not only a spiritual role but also a significant social and economic one, often owning large tracts of land and engaging in philanthropic activities. Jewish communities, while facing certain limitations, continued to maintain a vibrant religious and cultural life, primarily concentrated in Galilee. Synagogues served as central institutions for worship, communal gathering, and the study of Jewish law and traditions.<sup>20</sup> Archaeological evidence reveals the presence of numerous synagogues, some of which incorporated architectural elements similar to those found in contemporary Byzantine churches, suggesting a degree of cultural interaction and adaptation.<sup>21</sup> Samaritan communities, with their distinct religious practices centered on Mount Gerizim, also persisted in certain areas.<sup>22</sup>

The social hierarchy in Byzantine Palestine, mirroring that of the wider empire, was characterized by distinct social strata. At the apex stood the imperial authorities and high-ranking officials, followed by a wealthy aristocracy composed of landowners and influential families. The clergy, both within the established church and in monastic orders, held considerable social and

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Mitchell, *A History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 284-641* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 452-460.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Schäfer, *The History of the Jews in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Psychology Press, 2003), 180-200.

<sup>19</sup> Taxel, "The Olive Oil Economy of Byzantine and Early Islamic Palestine", 361-394.

<sup>20</sup> Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem", 35-48.

<sup>21</sup> David Milson, *Art and Architecture of the Synagogue in Late Antique Palestine In the Shadow of the Church*, (Leiden: Brill, Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, 2007), 65.

<sup>22</sup> Alan Crown, *The Samaritans* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 65-86.

political influence.<sup>23</sup> Below them were the urban populations, including merchants, artisans, and various other professions. The majority of the population, however, likely consisted of rural peasants who worked the land, often under conditions of dependence on large landowners or religious institutions. Slavery also existed, although its prevalence in Palestine compared to other parts of the empire is debated. Daily life in Byzantine Palestine varied depending on one's social standing and geographic location. In urban centers, life revolved around the marketplace, religious festivals, and civic activities. In rural areas, agricultural cycles dictated the rhythm of life. Archaeological evidence and literary sources together suggest that for ordinary people, life involved a mix of work, family, and participation in local communal and religious events.<sup>24</sup>

Byzantine viewed the Holy Land, stretching from Antioch to Jerusalem and Mount Sinai, through a triad of overlapping lenses. Spiritually, it was sacred terrain, sanctified by Christ and the Prophets, and home to living miracles such as the annual descent of the Holy Fire at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Politically, it was remembered as a lost imperial territory, once part of the Christian Roman Empire, now under Islamic rule but still inhabited by ancient Christian communities that invoked a lingering sense of responsibility. Pragmatically, however, many recognized the region as irretrievably altered: its Christian populations had adopted Arabic language and culture, and reconquest seemed implausible.<sup>25</sup> These perspectives, though sometimes conflicting, coexisted within Byzantine society and informed its imperial imagination and policy toward Palestine. By the late tenth and eleventh centuries, the Byzantine imperial elite generally adopted a reserved and pragmatic stance toward the Holy Land. While Jerusalem remained symbolically significant, venerated as the site of Christ's Passion, and home to important Christian shrines, imperial policy seldom reflected a desire to reclaim it. Emperors like Constantine VII expressed piety through diplomatic gestures, such as sending gifts to the Patriarch of Jerusalem or supporting the monastery of St. Catherine on Sinai, but these actions were not accompanied by territorial ambitions. For most strategists and intellectuals, the Holy Land was seen as distant and difficult to govern, lying beyond the more manageable frontiers of the Taurus Mountains.<sup>26</sup> Literary figures like Michael Attaleiates and Constantine Manasses echoed this detachment, often portraying the region as spiritually charged but physically inhospitable and politically unstable. Even the act of visiting Jerusalem could be framed as a kind of exile from Constantinople, the true center of the Christian world, as conceived by the Byzantines. Yet, this sense of distance coexisted with enduring reverence for Jerusalem's churches, especially the Holy Sepulchre, and with continued pilgrimage activity by Byzantine monks and laypeople. Thus, rather than a single, fixed outlook, the Byzantine relationship to the Holy Land reflected a balance between spiritual devotion and political restraint.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Bülent Öztürk, "Social Layers in Istanbul in Roman-Byzantine Period". *History of Istanbul*, 4 (2019), 5-10.

<sup>24</sup> Joshua Schwartz, *Jews and Christians in Roman-Byzantine Palestine: History, Daily Life and Material Culture* (Lausanne: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2018), 349-365.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Patrich, *The Sabaite Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2001), 97-110.

<sup>26</sup> Krämer. *A History of Palestine*, 8-11.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Shepard, "Holy Land, Lost Lands, Realpolitik. Imperial Byzantine Thinking about Syria and Palestine in the Later 10th and 11th Centuries". *Al-Qantara* 33/2 (2013), 505-545.

Byzantine attitudes toward the Holy Land in the medieval period were shaped by a complex interplay of spiritual reverence, imperial pragmatism, and cultural detachment. While Jerusalem held profound religious significance as the site of Christ's Passion and a center of pilgrimage, the political and military realities of the region often tempered any ambitions of reconquest. For the Byzantine elite, Constantinople increasingly eclipsed Jerusalem as the focal point of Christian identity and divine purpose. Yet, gestures of patronage, liturgical interest, and the continued flow of pilgrims reveal that the sacred aura of the Holy Land remained potent, if not central, in the Byzantine imagination.

## 2. Holy Rivals in the Holy Land

Christians considered the Holy Land a profoundly spiritual location, viewing it as a sanctuary blessed by divine favor. Its significance stemmed from its intimate connection to Jesus Christ, God's earthly manifestation, and the presence of sacred relics and sites. This connection was perceived as contingent upon the continued existence of the physical city. Consequently, the treatment of Jerusalem under Muslim rule became a sensitive issue for Christians. By 1095, deep anxieties had surfaced concerning Jerusalem's security under the Islamic administration. Whispers of sacrilege and devastation spread, threatening to diminish the value of a land considered by Christians to be their sacred inheritance. The act of seizing the city was framed as a holy war of atonement, with crusaders believing they were rescuing God's domain from Muslim control.<sup>28</sup> Jerusalem had been under the dominion of the Umayyad Caliphate, followed by the Abbasid Caliphate and the Fatimid dynasty. Al-Maqrīzī records that following the Fatimid conquest of Egypt, the regime placed special strategic importance on strengthening its control over Palestine and its coastal defenses. Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, the fourth Fatimid caliph, spearheaded an ambitious naval expansion, commissioning new fleets from shipyards in Palestine. His successors maintained this policy, ensuring that the ships built in Egypt were regularly deployed to Palestinian ports such as Tyre, Acre, and Ascalon. These efforts reflected the Fatimids' recognition of Palestine's pivotal role as the empire's maritime frontier, an indispensable zone for both safeguarding trade routes and securing military dominance across the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>29</sup> Al-Hakim, the sixth Fatimid caliph, shifted his attention to Palestine following Christian and Byzantine involvement in escalating Bedouin raids that threatened to become a full-scale revolt.<sup>30</sup>

Al-Hakim initiated a thorough investigation of the situation in Palestine. He observed the significant annual Easter pilgrimage of Egyptian Christians to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Qutekin al-Adudi, a Muslim missionary, informed him that the pilgrimage was to witness the annual ritual of lighting the fires. Al-Adudi informed Al-Hakim about the affluent Christians who journeyed to the Holy Sepulcher from various parts of the world, bringing substantial donations of silver, fine textiles, tapestries, lamps, and gold; creating significant wealth for the church. While al-Hakim harbored negative sentiments towards Christians, his interest in financial gain led him to dispatch government agents to seize the church's riches in Jerusalem and transport them to Cairo

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 Years* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 83-89.

<sup>29</sup> Maqrīzī, *El-mawâ'iz Wa'l-'tibâr fî Dhikr El-khitat Wa'l-âthâr* (Beirut: Darü'l-Kütüb al-'Ilmiyya, 1967), 331-396.

<sup>30</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 159-160, 228-270.

after demolishing the Holy Sepulcher. Much of the church's treasure was concealed; yet, the entire edifice, including the tomb, was razed, leaving only the foundation and lower wall sections.<sup>31</sup>

During the Fatimid era, clashes between Turkish and Fatimid factions fueled tales of brutality and fear, with widespread anxieties about the potential destruction of Jerusalem. The recently Islamized Turks began to encroach upon Fatimid territories, culminating in their capture of Jerusalem in 1073. Stories emerged detailing the torture of Christians within Jerusalem, frequently claiming these acts of torment took place inside churches, further compounding their supposed defilement. Concerns grew that relics, holy sites, and the divine presence would be lost forever. Pope Urban also asserted for Flanders' crusaders that the Muslims had destroyed the churches of God. A chronicler noted that Muslims repurposed Christian holy sites for their religious practices, rendering them unusable in Christian eyes due to the altar being defiled by the blood of circumcision, which was allegedly spread across the altar and in the baptismal font.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, conflict enthusiasm stemmed from a more profound concern with sinfulness. Men and women were aware of the perceived prevalence of sin, influenced by the Church's evangelization efforts. Each crusader journeyed to the Holy Land to fight against the Muslims as a self-punishment for their transgressions against God. There was a clear understanding among many Christians that they were engaging in a practice of repentance that could lead to their salvation. This shows that the Crusades were mainly a form of seeking forgiveness, offering an escape from purgatory. People sought forgiveness for the sin of violence, as Urban promised remission of sins in exchange for liberating the Holy Land. Such convoluted events offer a significant glimpse into the value of the Holy Land and the conflicts fueled by the actions of Popes and Caliphs.<sup>33</sup>

The intricate dynamics surrounding religious communities offer a revealing glimpse into the broader religious and political landscape of the period. The tensions and negotiations they experienced, whether over control of sacred sites, interfaith relations, or diplomatic interventions, highlight the complexities of maintaining a religious presence in a diverse and contested city. *Croniche di Terra Santa*, or the Chronicles of the Holy Land, presents the region within the framework of a religious administrative system. During the inaugural General Chapter of the Order of Friars Minor in 1217, St. Francis of Assisi introduced a vision for the new order that involved dividing the known world into distinct provinces for evangelization.<sup>34</sup> The chronicles provide a narrative spanning three centuries, documenting events tied to this ecclesiastical province. These records were compiled by Father Verniero da Montepeloso<sup>35</sup>, who served as Guardian of the Franciscan convent associated with the Custody of the Holy Land from 1634 to 1636. During his tenure, he undertook the task of assembling historical accounts, formal records, and other pertinent

<sup>31</sup> Francis Peters, *Jerusalem: The Holy City in the Eyes of Chroniclers, Visitors, Pilgrims, and Prophets from the Days of Abraham to the Beginnings of Modern Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 258-260.

<sup>32</sup> August Krey, *The First Crusade: The Accounts of Eyewitnesses and Participants* (New Jersey: Evolution Publishing & Manufacturing, 1921), 36-45.

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders 1095-1131* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10-15.

<sup>34</sup> Michele Piccirillo, *La Custodia di Terra Santa e l'Europa: I Rapporti Politici e L'attività Culturale dei Francescani in Medio Oriente* (Roma: Il veltro), 16-17.

<sup>35</sup> Pietro Verniero di Montepeloso, *Croniche ovvero Annali di Terra Santa del P. Pietro Verniero di Montepeloso: (1632-1637)* (Quaracchi: Collegio di S. Bonaventura, 1929), 1930-1937.

materials. The presence of the Franciscans in the Holy Land can be traced back to 1333 with the acquisition of the Cenacle monastery. This milestone was made possible through the patronage of Queen Sancia of Naples, which enabled the Franciscans to establish a foothold in the region. However, official ecclesiastical endorsement came later, when Pope Clement VI issued the papal bulls *Gratias agimus* and *Nuper carissimae* in 1342. These decrees formally instituted the Custody of the Holy Land as a recognized branch of the Franciscan order.<sup>36</sup>

As part of extensive scholarly compilations, many scholars undertook the monumental task of gathering documentation related to the longstanding Franciscan presence in the Holy Land. Texts, such as *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell'Oriente Francescano*, warranted close academic attention due to their intricate nature and informative wealth.<sup>37</sup> Despite their complexity and the potential for palaeographic examination, these compilations reflect a deeply confessional portrayal of the Holy Land, framed within a narrative of religious rivalry and contested sanctity. Rather than presenting a neutral chronicle, it depicts Palestine as the heart of an enduring struggle among competing faiths, each seeking spiritual legitimacy and territorial control. The work organizes its content around missionary expansion, ecclesiastical governance, and the defense of sacred sites, revealing how the Holy Land was perceived as both a divine inheritance and a battleground for supremacy. Within its pages, the region's diverse Christian communities are portrayed through a lens of doctrinal hierarchy and conflict. Catholics, termed "Latins," are exalted as defenders of the true faith, while Eastern Christians, Copts, Assyrians, and Orthodox groups such as Greeks, Serbs, and Georgians, are described in increasingly adversarial terms, labeled "schismatic" or "erring." Muslims, in turn, are grouped among the "unfaithful," representing the external force that held political and military authority over the land. This rhetoric underscores the intensity of religious competition in medieval Palestine, where control over churches, monasteries, and pilgrimage routes symbolized both spiritual victory and geopolitical dominance. Despite its sectarian tone, the account indirectly reveals the Holy Land's centrality to all faiths. The text thus captures the essence of medieval Palestine as a sacred landscape perpetually contested, where devotion, diplomacy, and warfare intertwined in the unending quest to claim the land sanctified by prophets, apostles, and emperors alike.<sup>38</sup>

Within the walls of the Holy Land, different religious orders, particularly Latin clergy and Eastern Christian communities, struggled to safeguard their presence and authority over sacred spaces. These rivalries often mirrored the broader contest among empires and faiths for control of Palestine, a land seen not only as holy but also as strategically vital. For example, Jerusalem had once again become home to a modest yet growing Jewish community, reflecting the broader revival of Jewish life across the Holy Land. Pilgrims, merchants, and scholars from Europe and the Islamic world arrived seeking spiritual proximity to the ancient Temple Mount and the city's enduring sanctity. Among them was the scholar Estori ha-Parchi, who initially settled in Jerusalem before

<sup>36</sup> Carmen Caruso, "Sixteenth Century Jerusalem: A Model of Coexistence?" *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 33 (2007), 33-52.

<sup>37</sup> Francesco da Serino, *Croniche o Annali di Terra Santa* (Quaracchi: Collegio di S. Bonaventura, 1939), 116-125.

<sup>38</sup> Girolamo Golubovich. *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell'Oriente Francescano* (Quaracchi: Collegio S. Bonaventura, 1936), 140-145.

relocating to Bethshan.<sup>39</sup> His writings describe both a functioning synagogue and a defined Jewish quarter, implying a stable community despite ongoing theological disputes and social tensions. Estori's encounters highlighted the diverse origins of Jerusalem's Jewish population, an assembly of immigrants from Ashkenaz, Provence, and the Maghreb who viewed the Holy Land as both a place of redemption and renewal. The reemergence of Jewish life in Jerusalem during this era underscores Palestine's enduring magnetism as a sacred landscape shared, and often contested, by followers of the three Abrahamic faiths. While Muslims administered the city and Christians continued to revere its shrines, Jewish settlers sought to reestablish their presence in a land revered by all, transforming Jerusalem once more into a focal point of devotion, rivalry, and spiritual aspiration within medieval Palestine.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, Christian monastic communities, such as the early precursors to later Franciscan custodians, faced deep tension with both local populations and rival denominations. Their mission to preserve Christian sanctuaries and to extend Latin influence often provoked suspicion among Muslims and Orthodox Christians, who viewed their activities as an extension of Western political ambition rather than pure religious service. The memory of the Crusades remained vivid, and Latin monks were frequently regarded as symbols of past invasions rather than as humble guardians of faith. Jerusalem's holy sites, particularly the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Mount of Olives, and Mount Zion, became points of friction where theology met imperial strategy. Control of these locations was not only a matter of devotion but also of legitimacy; each religious community claimed divine sanction to possess them.<sup>41</sup>

Accounts from the Western pilgrims of that era reveal that Jewish residents of Palestine played an unexpected yet significant role in guiding Christian visitors through the Holy Land. Wilhelm of Boldensele, who journeyed to Jerusalem in 1333, recorded that his guide was a Jew of German origin, while Jacques of Verona, visiting two years later, noted that Jewish guides possessed deep familiarity with the sacred geography and long-standing traditions of the region. Given that Jerusalem had reemerged as a principal center of Jewish life during this period, many of these guides were likely members of the city's own Jewish community.<sup>42</sup> The choice of Jewish guides by Christian pilgrims particularly reveals in the context of medieval Palestine's religious complexity. It suggests a level of practical coexistence, where necessity and knowledge transcended theological division. Jewish guides, often multilingual and capable of communicating in European tongues, bridged the cultural gap between Western visitors and the predominantly Arabic-speaking population. Their understanding of the land's geography and its sacred associations made them invaluable intermediaries for travelers seeking both spiritual and historical insight. This phenomenon reflects the layered coexistence characteristic of the Holy Land during the Mamluk

<sup>39</sup> Michael Ehrlich, "The Jewish Communities of Safed and Jerusalem during the Fourteenth Century", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (JRAS)* 3 (2021), 711-720.

<sup>40</sup> Joshua Prawer, *The History of the Jews in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 117-121.

<sup>41</sup> Golubovich. *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell'Oriente Franceseano*, 140.

<sup>42</sup> Ferdinand Khull, *Zweier deutscher Ordensleute pilgerfahrten nach Jerusalem in den Jahren 1333 und 1346* (Munich: Graz, 1895), 35.

era, a space where Muslims, Christians, and Jews navigated shared landscapes shaped by devotion, rivalry, and mutual dependence. Even amid enduring religious boundaries, Jerusalem and its surroundings remained a meeting ground where faith intersected with everyday pragmatism, and where the sacred terrain of Palestine continued to bind its diverse inhabitants through the enduring magnetism of its holy sites.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout this period, the rulers of Palestine, first the early Caliphates, then the Crusader Kingdom, and later the Ayyubid and Mamluk powers, used the administration of sacred sites to project political control. Muslims maintained sovereignty over the Haram al-Sharif, yet allowed varying degrees of Christian pilgrimage, especially during times of relative peace. Agreements and disputes over holy spaces reflected not mere religious intolerance, but the delicate balance of coexistence within a contested spiritual landscape. Despite recurring episodes of conflict, medieval Palestine also witnessed moments of negotiated coexistence.<sup>44</sup> Muslim authorities frequently protected Christian clergy and Jewish communities under formal covenants, recognizing their historical and religious connection to the land. Pilgrimage routes, trade exchanges, and local economies tied the faith communities together in pragmatic interdependence. Even amid rival claims and deep theological divides, Jerusalem and its surroundings remained a shared center of reverence, where the daily reality of interaction often defied the ideological rigidity of empire and creed. Thus, in medieval Palestine, from the dawn of Islamic rule to the eve of Ottoman ascendancy, religion was both a unifying and divisive force. The struggle to possess the Holy Land, whether through military conquest, diplomacy, or ritual authority, revealed not only competing visions of the divine but also the enduring human impulse to claim sacred geography as the foundation of identity and power.<sup>45</sup>

### 3. The Dawn of Islamic Rule: A New Order Emerges

The early Islamic period in Palestine laid the foundation for a new era in the history of the region. It was marked by the gradual Islamization and Arabization of the population, the elevation of Jerusalem as a major Islamic holy city, and the establishment of a social and legal framework that governed the interactions between the Muslim rulers and the diverse religious communities under their control. The 7th century marked a profound and irreversible turning point in the history of Palestine, with the rise and rapid territorial expansion of the Islamic caliphates originating from the Arabian Peninsula. Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, the early caliphs led a series of military campaigns that brought vast swathes of the Middle East under Islamic control.<sup>46</sup> The conquest, while representing a significant power shift, did not necessarily lead to an immediate and widespread displacement or persecution of the existing population. Instead, the initial interactions between the conquering Muslim forces and the established communities of Christians, Jews, and Samaritans were primarily characterized by a pragmatic

<sup>43</sup> Reinhold Röhrich, "Le pèlerinage du moine augustin Jacques de Vérone", *Revue de l'Orient Latin*, 3 (1895), 224.

<sup>44</sup> Antoine Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1958), 67.

<sup>45</sup> Golubovich, *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell'Oriente Francese*, 140.

<sup>46</sup> Muhammad Tabarī, *Târîhu'l-ümme ve'l-mülûk* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 1885), 5-30.

approach rooted in the principles of early Islamic governance.<sup>47</sup> While subject to certain legal and social restrictions, such as the obligation to pay a poll tax (jizya) and limitations on building new houses of worship or publicly displaying religious symbols, non-Muslims were granted protection of their lives, property, and the freedom to adhere to their religious traditions.<sup>48</sup> This can be observed shortly after the conquest began as the coastal cities came to be inhabited by diverse ethnic and cultural groups, with Persians forming a dominant component among them. Palestinian towns, such as Arqa, were predominantly Persians who had been settled there following the conquest.<sup>49</sup> The so-called Pact of Umar, a collection of treaties attributed to the second caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab, although scholars debate its historicity and specific content, is generally understood to outline the terms under which non-Muslims were permitted to live and practice their faiths within the newly established Islamic state.<sup>50</sup> More importantly, the strategic value of the Palestinian coastline to the early Arab conquerors was demonstrated by Umar's decision to appoint a dedicated governor for this area.<sup>51</sup>

This framework provided a degree of security and autonomy for religious minorities within the expanding Islamic empire. Under the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750), Palestine gained religious and political significance within the nascent Islamic world. Jerusalem, already revered as a holy city by Christians and Jews, acquired a paramount status in Islam as the first qibla (direction of prayer) and the site of the Prophet Muhammad's miraculous night journey to heaven, known as the Isra' and Mi'raj. This religious importance was manifested in the construction of two of Islam's most iconic and architecturally significant structures: the Dome of the Rock, completed in 691, and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, rebuilt and expanded during the Umayyad period. These monumental constructions not only solidified Jerusalem's central role in the Islamic faith but also contributed to the growing cosmopolitan character of the city, attracting pilgrims and scholars from across the expanding caliphate. The Umayyad era witnessed a gradual yet significant Islamization of Palestine. While forced conversions were not a widespread policy, the privileges associated with being Muslim, coupled with the appeal of the new faith, led to a gradual increase in the Muslim population through voluntary conversions. However, substantial Christian and Jewish communities continued to thrive in various parts of Palestine, maintaining their religious institutions and engaging in their traditional occupations.<sup>52</sup>

These agreements set a precedent for the treatment of other non-Muslim monotheistic communities within the expanding caliphate, establishing a system that permitted religious minorities to practice their faiths under Muslim rule, albeit with certain legal and social restrictions.<sup>53</sup> More importantly, Palestinian cities, particularly Acre, played a crucial role in the

<sup>47</sup> Ali Ibn Asakir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq* (Beirut: Darū'l-Kütüb al-'Ilmiyya, 2012), 290-320.

<sup>48</sup> Jacob Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook, 315-1791* (New York: Hebrew Union College Press, 1990), 10-18.

<sup>49</sup> Abu Abbas Ya'qubi, *Kitāb al-Buldān* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 1860), 10-35.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 126-127.

<sup>51</sup> Ahmed Balādhuri, *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 1866), 126-127.

<sup>52</sup> Moshe Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634-1099* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 279-328.

<sup>53</sup> Adrian Fortescue, *Jerusalem (A.D. 71-1099)* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), 71-312.

maritime expansion and defense of the Umayyad Caliphate. One of the earliest and most significant naval campaigns under the leadership of Mu‘āwiya, as the governor of Acre, was the conquest of Cyprus (647-649). Prior to this operation, he concentrated the Muslim fleet at Acre, reinforcing the city’s fortifications to ensure it could serve as a secure naval base. From that point onward, Acre emerged as a central harbor for Umayyad naval activities. Given the Caliphate’s growing reliance on sea power, a steady supply of ships became essential.<sup>54</sup> However, al-Balādhurī records that, at that time, no shipyard existed along the Palestinian coast, the only major one being in Egypt.<sup>55</sup> To address this need, Mu‘āwiya, after ascending to the caliphate around 670, established a shipyard in Acre and settled there skilled craftsmen, shipbuilders, and carpenters. This development transformed the city into a key production center for the Umayyad fleet. Although Acre suffered destruction at the hands of the Byzantines during the rebellion of ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr (683-693), it was later rebuilt and fortified by Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (685-705), who also stationed a military garrison to secure it. After this restoration, historical sources fall largely silent about Acre until the reign of Hishām ibn ‘Abd al-Malik (724-744). Through these efforts, Palestinian coastal cities became indispensable to the Umayyad state as military and naval strongholds as well as vital centers for trade, shipbuilding, and regional control over the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>56</sup>

### 3.1. Abbasid, Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk Eras: A Dynamic Mix

The transition to the Abbasid Caliphate in 750 marked a significant shift in the political center of the Islamic world, moving eastward from Damascus to the newly established imperial capital of Baghdad. While Palestine initially remained under Abbasid control, the empire's vast geographical expanse and the inherent challenges of maintaining centralized authority over distant provinces led to periods of regional autonomy and the rise of local dynasties. During the 9th and 10th centuries, various autonomous or semi-autonomous powers, such as the Tulunids and the Ikhshidids, exerted influence over Palestine, each with its distinct approach to governing religious minorities.<sup>57</sup>

A significant turning point in this era was the rise of the Fatimid Caliphate in the 10th century. This Isma‘ili Shi‘a dynasty, originating in North Africa, established its power in Egypt and gradually extended its control over Palestine. The Fatimids, in general, adopted a more consistent policy of tolerance towards Christians and Jews compared to some of their predecessors and contemporaries. They permitted the repair and even rebuilding of churches and synagogues that had fallen into disrepair or been destroyed in earlier times, fostering an environment of relative religious freedom for the non-Muslim communities within their domains.<sup>58</sup> Under Fatimid rule, Jerusalem retained its immense religious significance for all three Abrahamic faiths, attracting a steady stream of pilgrims from across the known world. Christian pilgrims from Europe were

<sup>54</sup> Amikam Elad, “The Coastal Cities of Palestine During the Early Middle Ages”, *The Jerusalem Cathedra* 2 (1982), 146-167.

<sup>55</sup> Aḥmad Balādhurī, *Ansāb Al-Ashrāf* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1938), 82-83.

<sup>56</sup> Balādhurī, *Ansāb Al-Ashrāf*, 82-83.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Brett, *The Fatimid Empire (The Edinburgh History of the Islamic Empires)* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 10-29.

<sup>58</sup> Brett, *The Fatimid Empire*, 10-29.

increasingly making their way to the Holy Land, a development that would later have profound consequences for the region.<sup>59</sup>

Following Saladin's triumphant recapture of Jerusalem in 1187, the Ayyubid dynasty, founded by him, established firm control over Palestine. The return to Muslim rule brought about significant shifts in the religious and social landscape once again. While the Latin Christian presence was diminished, Saladin and his Ayyubid successors generally adopted a policy of allowing pilgrims from Europe to access the holy sites in Jerusalem, recognizing the city's importance to Christianity. This followed the Muslim leadership's vision to counter the Crusades, which aimed to control the region.<sup>60</sup> In terms of coexistence, the general policies of the Ayyubids and Mamluks, which allowed for the practice of other monotheistic faiths, provided a framework for this purpose. The example of Andalusia during its Golden Age, alongside Palestine (excluding the Crusader period), is often cited as a historical example of different faiths coexisting with mutual respect and understanding. While not always perfect, this suggests that despite periods of tension, there were also long stretches where Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Palestine lived alongside each other and participated in shared aspects of life. The continuation of trade networks that involved individuals from different religious backgrounds also points to a level of pragmatic interaction and coexistence driven by economic necessity. On the other hand, the Ayyubids successfully repelled the Crusaders, and the Mamluk era was marked by continued conflicts in the region. They were heavily involved in repelling the Mongol invasions, which had a significant impact on Palestine. Later in their rule, the Mamluks faced increasing threats from the rising Ottoman Empire, culminating in their defeat in 1516, which marked the end of Mamluk control over Palestine.<sup>61</sup>

The land's history created subtle currents of cultural exchange, perhaps less formally documented than periods of conflict or explicit agreements on religious tolerance. Such an exchange occurred as people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds lived in proximity for extended periods. Architectural styles may reveal cross-cultural influences, with shared aesthetic elements evident in buildings constructed by different communities. Culinary practices likely evolved through the exchange of ingredients and cooking techniques<sup>62</sup>. These subtle but persistent currents of cultural exchange contributed to a degree of shared cultural understanding and fostered a sense of common identity that transcended religious affiliations in certain aspects of daily life. This cornerstone of Islamic governance during the medieval period also provided a legal and social framework that enabled the coexistence of non-Muslim communities within a Muslim society. For instance, the rich legacy of Arab geography and mapmaking persisted throughout the late medieval era, reaching a remarkable expression when the renowned

<sup>59</sup> Nur Masalha, *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2018), 182-187.

<sup>60</sup> Silvia Rozenberg, *Knights of the Holy Land: The Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1999), 29-33.

<sup>61</sup> James Waterson, *The Knights of Islam: The Wars of the Mamluks* (London: Greenhill Books/Lionel Leventhal, 2006), 33-66.

<sup>62</sup> Rozenberg, *Knights of the Holy Land*, 29-33.

Andalusian scholar and cartographer Muhammad al-Idrīsī (1100–1165)<sup>63</sup> produced his celebrated world atlas *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq fī Ikhtirāq al-Āfāq* “The Delight of One Who Wishes to Traverse the Horizons.” Created at the court of King Roger II of Sicily, this monumental work depicted the known world with unprecedented precision and included a detailed reference to Filastīn (Palestine).<sup>64</sup> Al-Idrīsī’s map was compiled during the height of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, a period when Palestine stood at the crossroads of competing civilizations and faiths. The inclusion of the Holy Land within such a sophisticated Arabic cartographic project underscores its enduring significance to both the Islamic and Christian worlds, not only as a sacred territory but also as a focal point of political, cultural, and intellectual interest. Despite being under Latin rule at the time, Palestine remained central in the geographical imagination of Muslim scholars, symbolizing both loss and longing, as well as the continuity of Arab scientific inquiry.<sup>65</sup> While this system inherently established a degree of social and legal inequality, it also offered a degree of protection and autonomy to Christians and Jews, permitting them to practice their faiths, maintain their religious institutions, and govern themselves according to their own laws in many communal matters. The implementation and strictness of these regulations could vary significantly depending on the specific ruling dynasty, the prevailing political climate, and the attitudes of rulers and local officials.<sup>66</sup>

While the control and administration of holy sites frequently became sources of tension and conflict, there were also periods and pragmatic arrangements that allowed for the presence and activities of different religious groups within these shared spaces. Even during periods of intense Crusader rule, some Eastern Christian communities and, at times, even Muslims and Jews were permitted to remain in Jerusalem, albeit under the ultimate authority of the Frankish rulers. Similarly, under prolonged periods of Muslim rule, Christian pilgrims from across the world continued to visit the holy sites in Jerusalem, although their access was sometimes subject to restrictions, tolls, or specific regulations imposed by the ruling authorities. Under Islamic rule in medieval Jerusalem, while Muslims held the ultimate authority, arrangements were often made to accommodate Christian and Jewish pilgrims, sometimes involving specific routes or times for visitation<sup>67</sup>. These complex and often negotiated arrangements around shared sacred spaces, while fraught with tension, also represent a form of coexistence, reflecting a pragmatic recognition of the deep religious attachments of different communities to the exact locations.

### Analysis and Conclusions

The journey through the medieval history of Palestine reveals a complex and multifaceted narrative created with the threads of coexistence and conflict. This era witnessed the ebb and flow of empires and dynasties, each leaving its indelible mark on the region and its diverse communities

<sup>63</sup> Idrisi, *De Geographia Universali: Kitab Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fī Dhikr al-Amsar wa-al-Aqtar wa-al-Buldan wa-al-Juzur wa-al-Madain wa-al-Afaq* [The Book of Pleasant Journeys into Faraway Lands] (Rome: Medici Oriental Press, 1592), 238-245.

<sup>64</sup> J. B. Harley, David Woodward (ed.), *The History of Cartography. Volume 2.1: Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 156-174.

<sup>65</sup> Samuel Scott, *History of the Moorish Empire in Europe* (London: J. B. Lippincott, 1904), 461-462.

<sup>66</sup> Lewis, “Palestine: On the History and Geography of a Name”, 1-12.

<sup>67</sup> Amikam Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 8, 37.

of Muslims, Christians, and Jews. The Byzantine period, while characterized by Christian dominance, also provided a backdrop for the continued presence and activity of Jewish and Samaritan communities, albeit often within a framework of legal and social limitations. The rise of Islam in the 7th century brought about a significant transformation, establishing a new dominant power, which allowed for the protected existence of other monotheistic faiths. While this system was inherently hierarchical, it facilitated centuries of coexistence, during which different religious communities often lived alongside each other, interacting in economic and social spheres.

By adopting an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates historical analysis, textual criticism, and archaeological evidence, this study argues that the medieval transformation of Palestine cannot be understood solely as a sequence of imperial conquests or theological rivalries. Rather, it represented a process of adaptive negotiation in which diverse religious communities continuously recalibrated their social, economic, and spiritual positions within shifting political orders. One of the key findings of this analysis lies in recognizing the spatial logic of coexistence. Urban centers such as Jerusalem, Hebron, Acre, and Safed functioned as microcosms of layered sovereignties, where imperial administration intersected with local governance and religious authority. These cities were not merely contested spaces but arenas of regulated coexistence. Juridical autonomy granted to dhimmi populations under Islamic law and later Mamluk administrative codes enabled a controlled yet enduring pluralism. Jewish and Christian communities were able to sustain institutions such as synagogues, monasteries, and schools, which in turn contributed to the intellectual economy of the region. Archaeological layers from Jerusalem and Safed reveal spatial proximity between mosques, churches, and synagogues, evidence of functional coexistence rather than segregation. This proximity fostered routine interactions in trade, education, and artisanal labor, forming what can be described as a “shared civic sphere.” This phenomenon demonstrates that medieval coexistence was not an idealized tolerance but a negotiated interdependence sustained by administrative pragmatism and economic necessity.

A second analytical discovery concerns the economic ecology of medieval Palestine. Far from being a passive periphery, the region functioned as a trans-Mediterranean nexus, linking the Syrian hinterlands with Red Sea and Egyptian trade routes. Agricultural intensification, particularly in olive oil and viticulture during the Byzantine and early Islamic periods, created shared economic dependencies across confessional lines. The Umayyad development of shipbuilding at Acre, the Fatimid investment in coastal fortifications, and the Mamluk taxation of pilgrimage routes all reveal a consistent effort to integrate Palestine into the larger circuits of imperial commerce. This analysis identifies a striking continuity: economic collaboration often persisted even during political fragmentation. For instance, during the Crusader interlude, Muslim artisans continued to operate within Frankish cities, and Jewish merchants facilitated Mediterranean exchanges between Cairo and Tyre. Thus, the mechanisms of coexistence were embedded not in theology but in economic reciprocity, making Palestine a model of pragmatic pluralism under conditions of political volatility.

The analysis of religious narratives also reveals that sacred geography served both as a bridge and a boundary among the three Abrahamic traditions. The sanctification of Jerusalem under successive empires, Byzantine, Umayyad, Ayyubid, and Mamluk, transformed the city into a

symbolic palimpsest of competing theologies. Yet, shared sacred sites such as the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Tomb of the Patriarchs also became zones of ritual coexistence, where overlapping liturgical calendars required administrative negotiation. By examining pilgrimage records and monastic charters, this analysis demonstrates that religious coexistence in medieval Palestine was institutionalized through regulation rather than spontaneity. Imperial authorities, both Islamic and Christian, adopted policies of controlled inclusion, allowing access while asserting sovereignty. For example, the application of the Pact of Umar and later Mamluk legal codes reveals the juridical foundations of coexistence. While hierarchical, these legal structures provided non-Muslims with clearly defined rights and obligations, thereby reducing arbitrary persecution. Comparative analysis of Abbasid and Mamluk administrative practices shows that legal pluralism was central to imperial stability. Muslim rulers often delegated tax collection and local governance to Christian or Jewish elites, integrating them into the bureaucratic system. This suggests a model of “integrative hierarchy,” where subordination coexisted with participation.

Contrary to conventional historiography that interprets conflict as a rupture, the present analysis identifies conflict as a generative force in the evolution of Palestine’s plural society. Each episode of warfare, the Byzantine suppression of Samaritan revolts, the Crusader conquest, the Ayyubid reconquest, or Mamluk defense against Mongols, produced new frameworks for social reorganization. For example, post-Crusader Jerusalem witnessed the emergence of new neighborhoods structured around monastic patronage and Sufi lodges, demonstrating the capacity of conflict to reconfigure urban coexistence rather than extinguish it.

From a historiographical perspective, this analysis advances the understanding of Palestine not as a passive recipient of imperial change but as an active mediator of Mediterranean civilizational exchange. By synthesizing archaeological, economic, and textual data, the study constructs a new interpretive framework that situates Palestine at the center of interreligious and intercultural processes rather than at their margins. Theoretically, this work contributes to debates on coexistence as a historical process rather than an exceptional condition. It reveals that the durability of plural societies depends less on ideological tolerance and more on the institutionalization of shared interests, spatial interdependence, and pragmatic governance. This insight bears contemporary relevance, illustrating how medieval models of regulated pluralism can inform modern understandings of multicultural resilience in politically contested regions.

Primary sources, chronicles, ecclesiastical writings, legal covenants, and early Islamic administrative texts were examined alongside secondary scholarship from modern historians and archaeologists. Comparative analysis of these materials reveals how imperial governance, pilgrimage traditions, and economic interdependence both fostered collaboration and provoked division; redefining coexistence in medieval Palestine as institutionalized pragmatism sustained by these interdependencies. Moreover, conflict functioned as a mechanism of renewal, forcing reorganization of social hierarchies and enabling the creation of hybrid cultural forms. Sacred sites have been identified as instruments of political legitimacy and cross-communal negotiation rather than merely religious symbols; while trade and agricultural systems acted as stabilizing mechanisms, binding communities across religious divisions. Ultimately, this analysis contributes

an original conclusion: medieval Palestine's history cannot be reduced to a binary of peace and conflict but must instead be understood as a dynamic continuum in which coexistence and confrontation coexisted symbiotically. The persistence of interfaith collaboration, despite political upheaval, highlights the adaptive resilience of local societies under shifting imperial regimes.

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