

Catholic Missionaries in Early Modern Asia

Patterns of Localization

Edited by Nadine Amsler, Andreea Badea,
Bernard Heyberger and
Christian Windler

First published 2020

ISBN: 9780367028817 (hbk)

ISBN: 9780429001246 (ebk)

8 Trading in spiritual and earthly goods Franciscans in semi-rural Palestine

Felicita Tramontana

(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

8 Trading in spiritual and earthly goods Franciscans in semi-rural Palestine*

Felicita Tramontana

The spread of Catholicism among the local Christian population in the Syro-Palestinian region has attracted the attention of many scholars. Previous research has described how missionaries' work was facilitated by the patronage of local notables, by the establishment of personal ties with locals, and more generally by a wide range of daily interactions, such as providing medical assistance.¹ In this framework, academic attention has mostly focused on the cities, consistent with the fact that missions were far more numerous in urban areas. An important exception is a pioneering work by Bernard Heyberger. This early study reconstructs how, departing from their houses in cities such as Sayda and Tripoli, Jesuits and Capuchins visited rural villages in Galilee and Lebanon. Inspired by the model of rural missions developed in Europe during the Catholic Reformation, their activities hinged on confession and preaching. In line with the regional framework, missionaries also carefully built ties with locals and offered their medical competencies, which greatly helped their cause.² Although the importance of interactions with the locals in the spread of Catholicism in the Middle East has been widely acknowledged, many questions about the nature of these interactions still remain unanswered: How did the administrative and economic system that characterized rural and semi-rural spaces influence missionaries' interactions with the surrounding areas? What was the relationship between missionaries' entanglement with local society and their evangelizing activities? And, finally, to what extent did these interactions turn the missionaries into "localized" protagonists?

I will address these issues, focusing on the Franciscans of the Custody of the Holy Land in semi-rural areas of the Ottoman district of Jerusalem and more specifically in Bethlehem and the surrounding villages Bayt Jālā and Bayt Sāḥūr. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the friars had hostels and convents in Ramla, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. They were headed by a Custos elected every three years and their number varied throughout the centuries. In 1620, according to Eugène Roger, they numbered between 90 and 110. Similar figures are attested for the last decades of the century, with 125 friars in 1680.³ Many of the Franciscans were lay people, occupied with craftwork and economic activities. In the seventeenth century

only few of them spoke Arabic, with the number increasing in the following century.⁴

Even though the Franciscans were the main agents for the spread of Catholicism in Jerusalem and the area around it, their “mission” had certain peculiar characteristics that make it especially worthwhile to explore the relationship between the missionaries and local communities. First, the Franciscan minors settled in Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the Middle Ages with the main tasks of offering assistance to foreign Catholics and, primarily, preserving the Holy Sites. It was only from the end of the sixteenth century onwards that – on par with other religious orders that arrived in the Middle East during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – they devoted themselves to the “reconciliation” of local Orthodox Christians. Second, as guardians of the Holy Shrines, and contrary to other missionary orders in Asia, the Franciscans had always been able to rely on a stable source of income. The convent of St. Saviour – the friars’ residence in Jerusalem – regularly received the alms sent from “Christendom” for the subsistence of the friars and the maintenance of the Holy Sites. This meant in practice not only the arrival of big sums of money but also of precious and daily objects, such as food and all sorts of garments. Third, due to the initial lack of a missionary ethos, Franciscans’ relationships with the local actors had not been originally influenced by missionary concerns and strategies but by the friars’ daily needs and the role of the convents as productive units. This was also coherent with the organization of a conventual life that until the 1620s pursued neither sacramental nor charitable activities toward the locals. Following a well-established tradition of mendicants’ medieval missions in Muslim lands, the friars took care almost exclusively of the Catholics coming from Europe: travelers, pilgrims, merchants, and slaves.

Finally, another peculiar characteristic of the Franciscan “mission” in the area is that the friars fostered the adoption among locals of the Latin rite, contrary to the prescription of the Roman Congregation of *Propaganda Fide*. Whereas in the Middle East those who were reconciled would generally become part of the newly established Catholic Eastern Churches⁵ – led by local clergy – this was not the case with those reconciled by the Franciscans. As a consequence of the adoption of the Latin rite, they were instead integrated into the Franciscans’ parishes. Some parishes already existed, mainly devoted to the care of foreigners, and others were established as the reconciliations progressed. Because of this, the friars’ missionary activity also became a sort of extension of their pastoral duties, as noted by Heyberger.⁶

Departing from these considerations, I will investigate Franciscan integration in Bethlehem from different but interconnected perspectives. The first two sections of the chapter reconstruct the friars’ earlier participation in economic and productive networks. In section three, the chapter then goes on to discuss how these patterns of interaction were influenced by the beginning of the missionary activity in the 1620s and influenced it in turn. In this respect the research argues that for a long time after their arrival in the

thirteenth century, Franciscans' entanglement with the local society was fundamentally economic in nature. This explains the role economic exchanges would later play in both conversions of the local Christians and in the friars' relationship with new converts, as highlighted by previous works.⁷ In fact, the spread of Catholicism in Bethlehem starting in the 1620s was facilitated by these pre-existing ties. The engagement in missionary activity led to some changes but did not alter the fundamental characteristics of the friars' participation in village life. The fourth part of the chapter compares the friars' integration into the framework of the existing power relations in the semi-rural environment of Bethlehem and in the urban setting of Jerusalem. This will entail a broader discussion about how the different settings influenced the role of the friars as local agents. The chapter ends with some remarks on the limits of the friars' integration in the local context and their role as "localized actors."⁸

1 The convent of St. Catherine and the economy of Bethlehem

Bethlehem is located eight kilometers south of Jerusalem; the village and the neighboring Bayt Jālā (two kilometers west of Bethlehem) were the most populous villages of the district, respectively numbering 287 and 239 households at the end of the fifteenth century. The great majority of their inhabitants were Christian. To what extent can these villages be defined as semi-rural? And what is the meaning of the term in this case? Sharing some scholars' doubts about the traditional dichotomy of "urban" versus "rural," this study instead considers the Bethlehem cluster (Bethlehem, Bayt Jālā, and Bayt Sāḥūr) as a stage along a continuum that links the two.⁹ This approach more adequately captures the complex and multidimensional reality of early modern Palestine, where borders between towns, cities, and villages were blurred, and the cities, countryside, and desert together constituted an integrated economic and social system.¹⁰ It is also more appropriate for describing an area in which villages were very different from one another, and at the same time shared many features with the cities. This is the case, for example, with some of the parameters that are commonly used to define "ruralness," such as occupational structure. In 1690/91, whereas in Bayt Jālā the majority of the population was employed in agriculture, a high percentage of the population of Bethlehem (94 out of 144 taxpayers) was occupied in crafts and services,¹¹ a percentage reminiscent of the occupational structure that characterized urban areas. Moreover, since Bethlehem and Bayt Jālā were the most populous villages of the district, in the Ottoman surveys they were both divided into neighborhoods, as was usually the case with cities. However, other characteristics of urban settlements as found in tax registers, such as numerous market taxes and roads tolls, were absent from the Ottoman surveys on Bethlehem and Bayt Jālā.¹²

A distinction between the villages and the city is also suggested when we consider the "way of living," which according to some research should

also be a defining characteristic of “ruralness,” and the perception of the friars themselves.¹³ Indeed, in Franciscans’ documents the inhabitants of Bethlehem are usually addressed with the Italian term *villani*, which means dwellers of the countryside, such as peasants.¹⁴ The point is made more explicit in a letter on inter-confessional marriages sent to Propaganda in 1633 by the Guardian Vincenzo Gallicano. Complaining about the lack of Catholic women in Bethlehem, Father Gallicano explains that no Catholic from Jerusalem would willingly give his daughter to a villager from Bethlehem because of the difference in status between them. Women from Jerusalem, moreover, were used to staying at home while the villagers of Bethlehem needed women who would work in the fields.¹⁵

How did the Franciscans, who had settled in Bethlehem in 1347 in a monastery that had once belonged to the Augustinians, participate in the life of the village? In order to answer this question, we might turn to scholarship on Ottoman history, which has recently acknowledged the importance of monasteries as actors in the Greek countryside. When Greece was conquered by the Ottomans, rural monasteries mostly kept their land assets, and during the following centuries, they acquired more land. In addition to agriculture, they developed various economic activities such as fishing, wood cutting, and trade; they also acted as moneylenders. These activities prompted the monks’ participation in rural economic and productive networks, and more generally in a wide range of interactions with the inhabitants of the surrounding countryside.¹⁶

From a legal point of view, contrary to the Greek monks, the Franciscans were not subjects of the Sultan.¹⁷ They were considered *musta’min*, a legal term that was employed for the non-Muslim foreigners who lived under Muslim rule *via* a safe-conduct (the *amān*).¹⁸ This meant, for example, that they could not purchase properties directly, but only through a nominee. In spite of this difference, similarly to the Greek monks, the Franciscans’ acquisition of land, their productive activities, and the activities for covering their daily needs prompted their participation in the local economy in various forms.¹⁹ First, the Franciscans in Bethlehem were buyers who purchased daily commodities. Even though the friars received food, clothes, and objects among the alms that arrived from Christendom, they would still buy local products such as eggs, hens,²⁰ straw,²¹ wood,²² and grapes to make wine.²³ Franciscans also turned to locals for services of different kinds. Sometimes the account book mentions salaries paid generally to the “workers” in Bethlehem.²⁴ In other cases documents are more detailed. In 1672, for example, the friars paid some villagers to build a fence around a newly purchased plot of land in Bayt Sāḥūr.²⁵ Account books also list the wage paid to locals to graze the oxen²⁶ or to shoe the friars’ mules²⁷ along with the expenses related to a grazing easement.²⁸

Local Christians were also employed as dragomans by the convent, acting as interpreters and porters; their salaries are dutifully recorded in the account books of Jerusalem.²⁹ At St. Catherine there were usually two porters, one

at the main gate and the other employed for different services. Dragomans also acted as intermediaries between the friars and the local administration, as has been pointed out by Jacob Norris.³⁰ Accordingly, the sums of money occasionally paid to them in relation with burials may have been taxes due to the Ottoman authorities.³¹ The economic relations between the friars and dragomans were not limited to the latter's employment in the convent. One of the dragomans "Elias il dottore," for example, is mentioned among those who sold grapes to the friars.³² The same name appears years later, in 1647, when the list of expenses records the money given to him to repay a debt incurred by the friars.³³ Moreover, despite explicit prohibitions, evidence suggests that the friars in Jerusalem and in Rama regularly sold textiles to the dragomans;³⁴ this may have occurred in Bethlehem as well. Finally, ties with the dragomans overlapped with the growing network linked to the production of devotional objects in the village, as the dragomans became more and more specialized in handicraft.³⁵

The Franciscans' involvement in the production and trade of craftwork in Bethlehem is well known and testified by numerous sources. Actually, the production of "souvenirs for pilgrims" in the village is amply attested since as early as the Late Antiquity, well before the arrival of the friars. However, from the end of the sixteenth century the friars contributed to the refinement of local skills, especially with regard to the use of mother-of-pearl and the creation of models of the Holy Sites (see Figure 8.1). They established schools

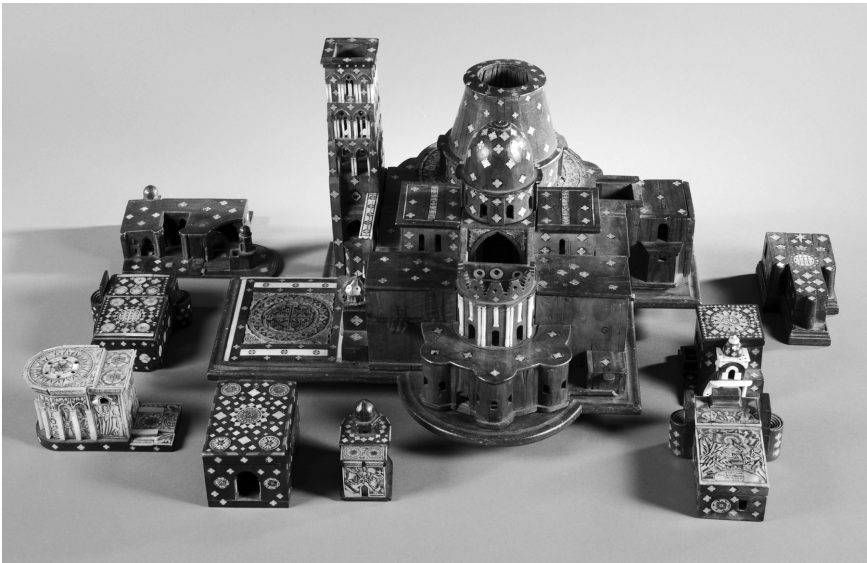


Figure 8.1 Model of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, seventeenth century, olive wood embedded with ivory, mother-of-pearl and ebony

Source: Courtesy of MuCEM, Paris-Marseille, Inv.1010.7.1, photograph: Christophe Fouin

where local artisans would be trained, and they contributed to the spread of workshops and ateliers. As time passed, the friars also became important buyers of these products, which they donated to their benefactors.³⁶

2 Ownership and land use

Another important aspect of the friars' involvement in local life is the acquisition and usage of land, with the connected productive activities. In Palestine the acquisition of land has been considered a characteristic policy of Christian churches, with important repercussions for the landscape. In this respect, the Custody of the Holy Land has mainly been recorded as the purchaser of land with religious and historical significance.³⁷ However, over the centuries the friars also acquired buildings, arable land, vineyards, and orchards. As a mendicant order the Franciscans could not in theory own and manage properties, administer the alms received, or engage in economic transactions.³⁸ Therefore the Pope Clement VI when officially recognizing the Custody (with the *Nuper Charissimae*, 1342) decided that the friars would be joined in Jerusalem by a lay person who would have the same function as performed by the *sindaci apostolici* in the other Franciscan provinces. In Palestine, however, this arrangement proved to be difficult due to the paucity of men who wanted to spend a long time in the area. Because of this, the friars were awarded some dispensations. Before officially recognizing the Custody, Pope Clement VI had already allowed them to own and administer properties (1307). This arrangement was confirmed in 1458 by Pope Callisto III,³⁹ who – with the *devotionis vestrae ardor* – allowed the Franciscans to directly manage the alms received and properties acquired. These faculties were bestowed to the Guardian, who could choose a member of his convent instead. This arrangement led to the development of the office of the *procuratore generale*, who was in fact elected by the Custos. In Palestine some of the friars' properties were acquired through donations. In Bethlehem, for example, they received a donation of a vineyard located near the Cisterns of David. Furthermore, purchases of land and buildings even before the seventeenth century are also well documented. Most of the Franciscans' possessions were close to the convent, such as an orchard and a small garden with bitter orange trees.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the friars also owned fields in other parts of the area, such as a large orchard cultivated with figs and olives on the road to Bayt Sāḥūr,⁴¹ and even in the village itself, where they owned an olive grove.⁴²

Regarding the friars' integration in Ottoman Palestine, these investments are interesting on several levels. The purchase of orchards and vineyards testifies to the participation of the friars in the larger economic processes that affected the land tenure system in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In theory, as most of the land had been owned by the sultan since the Ottoman conquest, peasants could only enjoy the usufruct of the plot they cultivated. Although they did not own the land, according to the Islamic law they had

the property of the orchards and plants they grew and could therefore sell them. Such sales – which became more common in the seventeenth century, as a result of the peasants' indebtedness – would lead de facto to a change of ownership, or more precisely, to the transformation of what was once sultanic land into private property (*milk*).⁴³

The friars' investments are equally significant when considered in the light of their involvement in village life. Land was very important both for the sociopolitical life of the community and as a means of subsistence. Despite the presence of craftsmen, villagers were mostly devoted to the cultivation of wheat and barley, as well as grapes and olives as fruit crops. Agricultural production was primarily intended for the internal consumption of the village and ensured its subsistence. Accordingly, most of the conflicts within the village community arose over ownership or access to land.

The acquisition of land spurred the Franciscans' involvement in the rural economy in various ways. First, the friars rented out arable land to the inhabitants of the area. Such was the case with the already mentioned vineyard near the Cisterns of David.⁴⁴ Second, land was managed by employing locals as wage laborers. Account books, for example, mention the villagers helping the friars with the harvesting of grapes and the production of wine,⁴⁵ or the pruning (*potura*).⁴⁶ Finally, since as early as the fifteenth century, the friars' acquisition of land caused conflicts with the locals, in particular over the ownership of some fields and their usage.⁴⁷ In general, considering conflicts may contribute to an understanding of the relations between missionaries and locals, in that conflicts represent a distinct, albeit problematic form of interaction. The way conflicts were solved is therefore meaningful as well. The friars' choice to appeal (or not to appeal) to the Ottoman authorities, for example, testifies to their knowledge of the local system of conflict resolution.⁴⁸

The existence of tensions between the friars and the inhabitants of Bethlehem in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been described in relation to the friars' missionary activity⁴⁹ or to their production of devotional objects.⁵⁰ Actually, conflicts started well before this, and were related to the use of natural resources and to the very presence of the friars. In the sixteenth century, for example, the existence of tensions with the local population emerges from a set of firmans that prevented the villagers of Bethlehem from bothering the friars.⁵¹

Regarding the use of local natural resources, besides the previously mentioned litigations over land ownership, conflicts also arose over the use of the convent's water tank. In the Palestinian countryside ovens, mills, and wells were normally used by all the inhabitants of a given area. Consequently, they also became places where people met to sell and buy products. Franciscan convents in Palestine, like their European counterparts, had their own facilities: ovens, water tanks, wine presses, and, in Jerusalem, a mill. But whereas medieval monasteries allowed (and often forced)⁵² the local population to use their wells and ovens, in Bethlehem the Franciscans – at

least before Catholicism spread in the village – showed a different attitude. This is suggested by a set of firmans reaffirming the friars' right to close the pipes of the water tank when they pleased. The documents also stated that the friars were not obliged to let the inhabitants of the village use the water tank and that the villagers had no rights upon it.⁵³

The sources analyzed up to now testify to the extension and complexity of the friars' entanglement with the population of Bethlehem, as owners, buyers of goods and services, employers, users of local resources, and litigants. The role the Franciscans came to occupy in the production and sale of religious craftworks, alongside their engagement in agriculture and farming, also testifies to their adaptation to the village's economy, traditionally centered on agriculture and handicraft. Coherently, they would also take advantage of the growth of French commerce in the eastern Mediterranean, which would facilitate their trade in devotional objects with European buyers.⁵⁴ The data also highlight the fundamentally economic nature of the friars' entanglement in the local society. How did this picture change after the beginnings of the missionary activity?

3 Interactions and missions

When the Franciscans of Bethlehem embarked on missionary activity in the 1620s, they used their already established networks to spread the new faith. These patterns of interaction with the local society, as developed over the previous centuries, influenced their model of mission, which remained strictly centered on economic exchanges and linked to the presence of the convent and its productive activities. In this respect, the spread of Catholicism in the area aligns with some of the research findings on the diffusion of religion in rural settings. Taking into consideration different historical contexts, these findings have fostered a model of missionary activity strictly entangled with the economic and daily interactions that resulted from the very establishment of a monastery. Works on the subject have shown how monks facilitated the spread of the new faith by interacting with the surrounding area through the exchange of goods and services and through charitable and pastoral work among the local population.⁵⁵ This is the case, for example, with the role played by Benedictine monasteries in the spread of Christianity in rural Europe, during the sixth and the seventh centuries.⁵⁶ More recently, scholars have highlighted the role of rural monasteries in the “colonization” of Southern Mount Lebanon by the Maronites in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and earlier in the Christianization of the Palestinian countryside during the Byzantine period.⁵⁷ Finally, with regard to the Ottoman Empire, according to Ömer Lütfi Barkan in the newly conquered Balkans, dervish monasteries greatly facilitated conversion to Islam, starting with their servants.⁵⁸

Likewise, in Bethlehem Catholicism spread initially among the dragomans and those who worked for the friars and their families. The recurring

presence of their names as witnesses and godparents in seventeenth-century parish books suggests the existence of an initial nucleus of Catholics whose members had tight ties to one another and with the convent.⁵⁹ From this first nucleus the new faith spread through familial bonds and social relationships until a snowball effect was achieved. As a result, in Bethlehem the number of converts grew as the century advanced, reaching the neighboring Bayt Jālā and Bayt Sāhūr.⁶⁰ In this respect, the importance of the friars' participation in the local economy is confirmed by the growth of the network linked to the production of craftworks in Bethlehem. In fact, conversion to Catholicism, the growing production of devotional objects, and the development of a Catholic community are all different aspects of the same process. This continued throughout the course of the century, to the point that the very definition of the word "dragoman" would come to include not only interpreters of the convent (as in the Ottoman tradition) but also craftsmen, all of them Catholic.⁶¹

The beginning of the mission also introduced changes in the existing patterns of interaction: First, as a consequence of the previously mentioned development of a local Latin-rite community the friars began to engage in pastoral activity. Even though an Arabic parish priest was normally charged with the care of souls, sacramental books suggest that, especially in the first decades after the spread of Catholicism began, it was often the Guardian of Bethlehem who administered the sacraments to locals.⁶² In addition, with the beginning of missionary activity the friars bestowed their charity upon local Catholics and new converts, clearly an incentive for conversion and a means to build a local Catholic identity.⁶³ In doing so, they took advantage of the large sums of money conveyed to Jerusalem as alms for the Holy Sites, despite the opposition of *Propaganda Fide*.⁶⁴

In fact, the very use of charity, alongside the entanglement between the production of craftworks and the development of the Catholic community, suggests that the fundamentally economic nature of the interactions between the friars and the locals was not altered by the beginning of missionary activity. On the contrary, the economic power acquired by the friars – especially with respect to the production of devotional objects – in an economic environment that offered limited opportunities might even explain the higher rate of conversions in Bethlehem as compared with Jerusalem.⁶⁵ This hypothesis is also strengthened by the prominent position acquired by some of the dragomans' families in the social and economic life of the village. In fact, besides employment, the friars also gave these families the opportunity to train their children, to acquire linguistic and artisanal skills that would boost their prospects as traders, and therefore to strengthen their economic position.⁶⁶

Is the role played by pre-existing relationships in the spread of Catholicism an exclusive characteristic of Bethlehem, or is it attested in Jerusalem as well? And more generally is it possible to identify differences in the way the friars participated in local networks in Jerusalem and in Bethlehem?

The nature of the Franciscans' settlement in both Jerusalem and Bethlehem led to close and complex relationships with the dragomans of the convents, the employment of locals for various services, and the purchases of daily commodities. As a result, in both places, a high percentage of reconciliations occurred among those who had close ties with the convent and their acquaintances. Nonetheless, due to the presence of a larger variety of people and social interactions, in Jerusalem the acceptance of Catholicism was favored by a wider range of circumstances, such as recent migrations to the city.⁶⁷ More generally, in the Holy City the friars took advantage of the greater variety of economic and social networks. For example, their role as financial actors was more developed than in Bethlehem: They acted as moneylenders, mostly to the other churches, and also became debtors of Jews and Muslims, sometimes paying high interest rates.⁶⁸

These data suggest that the different characteristics of villages and cities shaped the friars' participation in local life. Such a hypothesis is further strengthened by looking at the friars' interactions with the Ottoman authorities in Jerusalem. Generally speaking, although cities and villages could share similarities as to the number of inhabitants, occupational structure, and even the presence of markets, scholars agree that a distinctive characteristic of cities was the presence of certain administrative institutions.⁶⁹ This is particularly true when we consider a city such as Jerusalem, which was a district capital. Here the presence of Ottoman officials and the position that the city occupied in the empire's administration system determined the groups with whom the Franciscans interacted.

4 Friars and local authorities

According to the Ottoman administrative division, the Jerusalem district was part of the province of Damascus. It was controlled by a *sanjaq-bey*, who was the chief military and civil authority. In addition, different officials guaranteed the functioning of the administration and a permanent military presence at the district level.

Within the districts, villages were fiscal and administrative units whose borders were recorded in official documents.⁷⁰ Villagers interacted with Ottoman officials mostly for the purpose of tax collection. Occasionally they also turned to the Ottoman court, mainly for matters of taxation, to record loans and sales, and sometimes to resolve litigations. Accordingly, in Bethlehem, Franciscan interactions with the local authorities were mostly centered on the payment of taxes. In this regard, the poll tax – imposed on all non-Muslim male subjects of the sultan – did not apply to the Franciscans, as they were “foreigners.”⁷¹ Nonetheless, account books mention the taxes paid by the friars to the *subaşı* of Bethlehem (an Ottoman official assigned one or more villages where he collected taxes and performed police functions) on the occasions of Ramadan, Christmas, and the grape harvest.⁷² The last of these is not surprising; since in Ottoman Palestine taxes were levied

in kind, the harvest was usually supervised by officials and tax recipients, in order to prevent fraud. In some of the friars' documents the tax collector is called *cafariero* or *cafarieri* (plural). The term (derived from *cafarro*, or poll tax) may have designated the *subaşı*, but in some cases it seems rather to indicate the heads of the villages (*shuyūkh al-qarya*), who were designated members of the village community and acted as intermediaries between the community and the Ottoman authorities in matters of taxation.

Leaving aside the tax payments, the Franciscans of Jerusalem were those who dealt the most with Ottoman authorities, even for matters regarding other convents, including the one in Bethlehem. This is consistent with the position of the St. Savior convent as the administrative center of the Custody and with the presence in Jerusalem of numerous high-ranking officials and Ottoman institutions. Besides the governor, the city hosted a unit of janisaries (infantry troops), the previously mentioned *subaşı*, and other officials bearing more specialized functions, such as the *muhtasib*, a market inspector. Jerusalem also had a district court with its personnel. The Franciscans frequently resorted to the Ottoman judge for matters related to the convents of both Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Represented by a dragoman,⁷³ the friars in the court recorded purchases of land and settled litigations with locals,⁷⁴ for instance, the previously mentioned court ruling regarding the use of the water tank in Bethlehem.⁷⁵ When a Muslim wanted to move to a property next to the convent of St. Savior, as another example, the friars, unwilling to have a Muslim neighbour, brought the case before the court and the judge ruled in their favor.⁷⁶ In addition, the judge's rulings were requested by the friars in order to avoid future contestations on their property rights and to avoid fraud and bribes. This is the case, for example, with the permission to make wine and oil or with the ruling stating the friars could not be charged higher than the market price for wheat.⁷⁷ In the same way, to avoid future problems, the friars in Jerusalem also requested the presence of officials during the purchase of grapes.⁷⁸

Further details on the friars' interactions with the local authorities are furnished by some entries of the account books, suggesting that they sold textiles to Ottoman officials.⁷⁹ The same source also reveals that all the Franciscan convents and hostels, including Bethlehem, sent garments to district officials on specific occasions, such as the arrival of a new governor. This was part of a wider policy pursued by the friars and aimed at establishing clientelist relationships with local Ottoman authorities. Such a policy is amply attested by sources and was much more developed in the city because of the presence of high-ranking officials. Father Pietro Verniero di Montepeloso mentions, among various other pieces of advice to a newly arrived guardian, a list of gifts that the friars customarily gave to Ottoman authorities on Muslim festivities and on other occasions. For example, friars would give a garment to the newly appointed qadi upon his arrival, and, when he left the city, one was given to the remaining vice-qadi. Similarly, garments were given to a new *subaşı* and, naturally, to the *sanjaq-bey*.⁸⁰ The presence

of such a list of “gifts” seems aimed at establishing and reinforcing customary norms while preventing fraud and conflicts with the Ottoman authorities. Such a practice is also corroborated by the lists of incomes and expenses presented by the Franciscans to *Propaganda Fide* in the 1650s. It is not easy to say to what extent the friars’ “gifts” were voluntarily given. Among the yearly expenses of the St. Saviour convent, the friars mention commodities that were given to the “Turks” as taxes or “per usanza, per cortesia, o per forza.” Among them, records mention sugar, candles, wax, and various kinds of textiles such as silk, all of them from Europe. Similar evidence is yielded from the records of the Commissariats of the Custody of the Holy Land, established in all the Franciscan provinces. Commissariats were institutions charged with the collection of money and goods for the maintenance of the Custody, sometimes upon the request of the Guardian himself. Among the other necessities of the convent, the lists of requests mention objects to be given as “a gift to the Pasha” and to other local authorities: textiles, garments, mirrors, and snuff boxes.⁸¹

In addition to the gifts, the *sanjaq-bey* and its entourage were also occasionally invited for dinner at the St. Saviour convent. One of the previously mentioned pieces of advice warns newly elected guardians to respect the Muslim method of slaughtering when inviting Ottoman authorities for dinner.⁸² Furthermore, among the objects requested for the Commissariats, the friars also list plates “for when the Pasha has dinner in the convent.”⁸³

The results of the friars’ efforts varied over time and were influenced by the personality of the officials. This information, however, further testifies to the friars’ adaptation to the local context. Furthermore, some clues suggest that over the centuries they succeeded in establishing fruitful relationships with the local authorities, to the point that newly elected guardians were warned not to carry over to Istanbul the frequent conflicts with the Greek Orthodox Christians because the latter had a better power base in the capital. In Jerusalem, by contrast, the friars were more likely to be successful thanks to their bribes and gifts.⁸⁴

5 Concluding remarks: Going local?

The reconstruction of the friars’ entanglements with local Bethlehem society shows differences and similarities with other Catholic missions in Asia. Although, in contrast to other missionaries, Franciscans could count on the arrival of alms from the other provinces, they were also active local economic actors. As Jesuits in Asia, they adapted to the economic context, participating in the main traditional sectors of the local economy: agriculture and the production of devotional objects. In the Franciscans’ documents, the friars’ entanglements in local life is conveyed by numerous routine interactions in which the friars are buyers, employers, and even litigants. All these findings suggest the fundamentally economic nature of the friars’ integration in Bethlehem. This would not be altered by the friars’ engagements in the

reconciliation of local Christians; rather, it helped to shape the missionary activity and the future relations with new converts.

The presence of the friars in both Jerusalem and Bethlehem allows us to consider how the two different settings influenced their participation in social and economic networks. In Jerusalem the friars engaged in more varied economic activities and interacted with different social groups. The administrative structure of Ottoman Palestine – and the political centrality of Jerusalem – strongly influenced the role the friars played in the already existing power relationships and in shaping new ones. Indeed, the presence in Jerusalem of the district’s administrative and judicial authorities encouraged the friars to develop clientelist relationships within already existing power hierarchies. In Bethlehem, by contrast, the Franciscans’ clientelist activities contributed to the very shaping of new social hierarchies, boosting the economic and social role of some families affiliated with the convent. This was made possible by the economic position acquired by the friars in a poorer economic context.

Overall, the case of the Franciscans in Palestine sheds new light on the meaning of the term “localized actors” for missionaries. My analysis shows that the friars’ frequent interactions with locals and participation in economic networks did not necessarily mean their full integration in local societies. For example, the friars’ use of the Arabic language remained extremely limited. Moreover, the request of decrees preventing locals from using the water tanks and the importance given to the demarcation of clear borders for their properties and to the construction of walls to protect their buildings all suggest the friars’ desire to distance themselves from the context. This impression is further strengthened by the lists of objects that arrived from Europe. In contrast to missionaries of other orders, the Franciscans never adopted local habits with regard to clothing and food. Their garments and the food they consumed mostly arrived from Europe or were produced by the friars themselves.

Not only did the friars never go local; they also fostered European influence among the local Christians in various ways. They not only pushed for the converts’ adoption of the Latin rite but also contributed to the spread of Italian-style and, more generally, European-style craftwork through their schools. In the centuries to follow, this process would be further consolidated by the growing of local powers and the increasing French dominance of Mediterranean trade, leading the Catholic community to acquire not only economic power but also unprecedented social prestige.

Notes

* This research has been funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, MSCA, Project: MIGMED 65711.

1 Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient*, 350–377. On Catholic missions in the Middle East see Windler, *Missionare in Persien*; Frazee, *Catholics and Sultans*; Masters, *Christians and Jews*; Valensi, “Inter-Communal Relations and

- Changes”; Heyberger, “Frontières confessionnelles”; Tramontana, *Passages of Faith*.
- 2 Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient*, 370–377.
 - 3 Roger, *La Terre Sainte* and Lemmens, *Acta S. Congregationis*, vol. 1, 374–377, both cited by Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient*, 286. Specifically concerning the area of Jerusalem, however, the number of friars allowed to stay was limited by the decrees issued by the Ottoman authorities. In general, it ranged between 36 and 60, and it was an object of contention between the Orthodox Greeks and the Catholics, each party exerting pressure on the Ottoman authorities. See for example Jerusalem Court Record vol. 139, 122; vol. 146, 296–297, cited by Peri, *Christianity under Islam*, 36.
 - 4 In 1680, out of 125 friars, 44 were lay, cf. Lemmens, *Acta S. Congregationis*, vol. 1, 374–377.
 - 5 Eastern Catholic Churches are formed by Eastern Christians who have left their mother church to join the Catholic communion. They are in full communion with Rome but retain their own liturgy and organization.
 - 6 Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient*, 275.
 - 7 Norris, “Dragomans, Tattooists, Artisans,” 86–104.
 - 8 The first available archival documents pertaining specifically to the Bethlehemite convent date back to the 1740s (ASCTS, CC, PG, Carteggio Conventi, Bethlehem 1). Therefore this work is mostly based on seventeenth-century account books of the St. Savior convent, which provide information on Bethlehem as well (ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri Mastri, vols. SN [1619–1620]; Entrate e uscite Monte Sion; SN [1620–1625]; Entrate e uscite del Monte Sion; 1, Conti del S. Salvatore [1642–1648]; 2 [1665–73]). Further information has been gathered from lists of expenses regularly sent by the Custos to *Propaganda Fide* (APF, SC, Terra Santa. Miscellanea, vol. 1; APF, SOCG, vol. 104); from chronicles and other narrative sources: Horn, *Ichonographiae*; Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*; Francesco da Serino, *Croniche*.
 - 9 Traditionally, in definitions of “rural” the most important dimensions are: not urban, low population density, extensive land use, primary economic activity and employment, community cohesion, and governance. However, in the last decades the classic dichotomy between “rural” and “urban” has been questioned by a growing number of works, such as Champion and Hugo, *New Forms of Urbanization*.
 - 10 Ze’evi, *An Ottoman Century*, 100–104.
 - 11 Peri, “The Christian Population of Jerusalem.”
 - 12 Singer, *Palestinian Peasants*, 80.
 - 13 Swierenga, “The New Rural History.”
 - 14 See for example Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 3, 304.
 - 15 APF, SOCG, vol. 104, fol. 118v.
 - 16 Kolovos, “Monasteries,” 165–171; Vatin and Zachariadou, “Le monastère de Saint-Jean,” 193.
 - 17 Religious minorities living under Muslim rule enjoyed the status of *ahl al-dhimma*, protected people. They were granted protection, as long as they paid the poll tax and recognized the superiority of Islam. See Friedmann, “Dhimma.”
 - 18 Khalilieh, “Amān.”
 - 19 On the economy of the Discalced Carmelites in Persia see Windler, *Missionare in Persien*, 539–573.
 - 20 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, 1 (1642–1648), 1644 (pages unnumbered).
 - 21 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, 1 (1642–1648), 1647 (pages unnumbered); see also ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, SN (1620–1625), fol. 44v–46r.
 - 22 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, 2 (1665–1673), 1665 (21 June, 1 July), (pages unnumbered).

- 23 For example, ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, SN (1619–1620), fol. 58v. On the production of wine, see Horn, *Ichonographiae*, 204.
- 24 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, 2 (1665–1673), 1665 (pages unnumbered); SN (1619–1620), fol. 59v.
- 25 October 1672 (ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, 2 [1665–1673] [pages unnumbered]).
- 26 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, SN (1619–1620), fol. 80v, SN (1620–1625), fol. 49v.
- 27 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, 1 (1642–1648) (pages unnumbered).
- 28 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, SN (1619–1620), fol. 80v, 87v.
- 29 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, SN (1619–1620), fol. 80v, SN (1620–1625), fol. 49v.
- 30 Norris, “Dragomans, Tatooists, Artisans.”
- 31 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, SN (1620–1625), fol. 48r.
- 32 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, SN (1619–1620), fol. 58v.
- 33 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, 1 (1642–1648), 1647 (pages unnumbered).
- 34 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, SN (1620–1625), fol. 9r, 11v.
- 35 See Francesco da Serino, *Croniche*, vol. 11, 200, mentioned by Bagatti, “L’industria della madreperla,” 135–140, here: 136.
- 36 Bagatti, “L’industria della madreperla,” 135–140; Norris, “Exporting the Holy Land”; Girard and Tramontana, “La fabrication des objets de dévotion en Palestine.”
- 37 Frantzman and Kark, “The Catholic Church in Palestine/Israel.”
- 38 On the topic see Todeschini, *Il prezzo della salvezza*.
- 39 This arrangement was also confirmed in 1632 by Urbano VIII (*Ut dilecti filii*).
- 40 Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 4, 86–87. See also Castellani, *Catalogo dei Firmani*, concerning the donation of a field in Ayn Karim.
- 41 The Franciscan property rights over these places are attested by firmans (decrees issued by the sultan). Castellani, *Catalogo dei Firmani*, nos. 100, 136, 181, 205, 381, 499. See also Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 4, 86–87.
- 42 See Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 4, 118. It mentions the purchase of an orchard near Bethlehem with olives and figs in 1593, and the purchase of a land cultivated with figs in Bethlehem in 1597 and 1612.
- 43 Mundy and Smith, *Governing Property*; Joseph, *Islamic Law on Peasant Usufruct*. On Palestine, see Ze’evi, *An Ottoman Century*, 113–139.
- 44 Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 4, 87–88.
- 45 Horn, *Ichonographiae*, 204.
- 46 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, 2 (1665–1673), October 1672 (pages unnumbered). See also ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, 1 (1642–1648), July 1648 (pages unnumbered).
- 47 See, for example, Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 4, 87, 118; see also Castellani, *Catalogo dei Firmani*, nos. 58, 289.
- 48 Tramontana, “La corte islamica,” 791–806.
- 49 Tramontana, *Passages of Faith*, 96–100.
- 50 Norris, “Dragomans, Tatooists, Artisans.”
- 51 Castellani, *Catalogo dei Firmani*, no. 88 (1532); no. 213 (1595).
- 52 Ditchburn and Mackay, *Atlas of Medieval Europe*, 138.
- 53 Castellani, *Catalogo dei Firmani*, nos. 177–178 (1577). See also Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 3, 304, 1636.
- 54 On this trade, see Norris, “Exporting the Holy Land.”
- 55 Park, *Sacred Worlds*, 139–141, 143.
- 56 Beatrice, “La christianisation des campagnes,” 26.
- 57 Mohasseb Saliba, *Les monastères doubles du Liban*; Bar, “Rural Monasticism”; Perrone, “Monasticism as a Factor of Religious Interaction,” 67–98.
- 58 Barkan, “Les fondations pieuses.”
- 59 ASCTS, Fondo Parrocchie, Betlemme, *Register Coniugatorum et defunctorum ab anno 1669*, passim. See Tramontana, *Passages of Faith*, 93–95.
- 60 Tramontana, *Passages of Faith*, 86–110.

- 61 Norris, "Dragomans, Tatooists, Artisans."
- 62 Kümin and Tramontana, "Catholicism Decentralized."
- 63 Tramontana, *Passages of Faith*, 101–103.
- 64 Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 3, 71–73; APF, SOCG, vol. 135, fol. 237.
- 65 APF, SOCG, vol. 135, fol. 237.
- 66 See Norris, "Dragomans, Tatooists, Artisans."
- 67 Tramontana, *Passages of Faith*, 121–125.
- 68 Conti di Terra Santa. Entrate e uscite (1652–1656) (APF, SC, Terra Santa. Miscelanea, vol. 1 [pages unnumbered]). Although this is not mentioned by the sources, the Bethlehem friars may also have borrowed and lent money. On the subject, see Arce, *Documentos y textos*, 257; Arce, *Miscelánea de Tierra Santa*, vol. 2, 273–310.
- 69 For example Baer, "Village and City," 521–546; Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 49–79; Kark and Oren-Nordheim, *Jerusalem and its Environs*, 23.
- 70 Singer, "Transcrire les frontières de village," 133–143; Inalcik, *The Middle East and the Balkans*, 152.
- 71 In general, monks, priests, and religious men were exempted from the payment of the poll tax until 1691.
- 72 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, SN (1620–1625), fol. 97v; Libri mastri, 1 (1642–1648), 1642 (pages unnumbered).
- 73 Castellani, *Catalogo dei Firmani*, no. 214 (1596). The decree rules that when representing the friars before the court, the interpreters must not be subjected to any threat or menace.
- 74 Tramontana, "La corte islamica," 802.
- 75 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, 2 (1665–1673), October 1672 (pages unnumbered).
- 76 Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 1, 120.
- 77 Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 4, 136, 145.
- 78 Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 4, 33.
- 79 ASCTS, CC, PG, Libri mastri, SN (1620–1625), fol. 9r.
- 80 Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 4, 31–32.
- 81 Conti di Terra Santa. Entrate e uscite (1652–1656) (APF, SC, Terra Santa. Miscelanea, vol. 1 [pages unnumbered]).
- 82 Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 4, 34.
- 83 Conti di Terra Santa. Entrate e uscite (1652–1656) (APF, SC, Terra Santa. Miscelanea, vol. 1 [pages unnumbered]).
- 84 Pietro Verniero di Montepiloso, *Croniche*, vol. 4, 33–34.