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Between Traditions: The Franciscans of Mount Sion and their rituals (1330-1517)

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Citation for published version (APA):

Covaci, V. (2017). *Between Traditions: The Franciscans of Mount Sion and their rituals (1330-1517)*.

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General conclusions

The enthusiasm of the friars for Jerusalem never faded. Even when they returned to their homelands in Europe, they did not cease to sing its praises, write about it and replicate its mysteries, as Bernardino Caimi did in the dramatic landscape of Varallo.

From their settlement in Jerusalem and especially in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the friars appropriated the Holy Places, considering themselves, in spite of their recent history in the city, as rightful owners of the sanctuaries they were serving¹. They made the city theirs by guiding pilgrims through its streets and carrying the rituals of their brand of Christianity.

The ritual life of the Jerusalem friars reflects their ambiguous status. They settled in the city as representatives of the the Roman Church, whose rites they were supposed to carry out amidst Christians who deemed them heretics and in a city where they were part of a tolerated minority with significant restrictions on performing their identity. With the exception of the pilgrimage season, and of the occasional lone pilgrim travelling outside the season, they did not have a congregation. The brethren were there to celebrate the festivals of faith and commemorate its mysteries, particularly the memory of the Passion in its Jerusalem setting, *Roman style*.

However, sharing the sacred with the “other” left a mark on the friars’ rituals. “Lists of errors” and ethnographic *clichés* about the Eastern other, popularized by travel books such as those written by Marco Polo or John Mandeville, oftentimes predetermined the terms of the encounter. But often the practice contradicted the norm, and sanitized boundaries were transgressed. It usually happened under the pressure of Islamic rule, for instance, when the friars joined in the Armenian Palm Sunday procession just because they were not allowed to conduct their own. No doubt, although the narrative continued to be structured on the us-and-them logic of the lists of errors, the Franciscans were challenged by the direct contact with the East. For instance, when confronted with the very exotic sight of religious tattoos, the friars tackled the matter by recycling Jacques de Vitry’s opinions, the contemporary authority on all things Eastern. However, in spite of their heavy reliance on the voice of tradition, the

¹ MS XXXIII Archivio Capitolare Pisa records the testimony of a friar from Mount Sion, writing that they were celebrating the rites of the Holy Sepulchre because “now the Sepulchre was theirs” (*Nunc autem habent istam dignitatem fratres minores de observancia, quia Sepulcrum eorum est*). Campopiano, “Tradizione e edizione”, 342.

friars were careful to note that they personally asked the tattooed Christians about the reasons behind this practice. Thus, the friars allowed their narrative on the Holy Land to be changed by the direct observation of the others' rituals and customs.

Three characteristics are common to the rituals of the Jerusalem friars: itinerant commemoration, enrichment of local traditions and fluidity. In my analysis of Franciscan processions, especially of the *Via Crucis* and of its European incarnation, I showed how the friars developed the ancient stational liturgy of Jerusalem, which they enriched by including the flamboyant Passion devotions of the late medieval West. The friars standardized a ritual itinerary in which the recollection of the Passion took them into the footsteps of Jesus. They continued and refined this tradition notwithstanding various restrictions on their performances.

Indeed, the friars carried on the local tradition of previous itinerant commemorations, such as the Palm Sunday procession. They continued but altered its format, due to the necessity to adjust to local circumstances, in which they were allowed various degrees of freedom of movement and sound. They built on the movable character of the liturgy of Jerusalem, developing rituals of their own, such as the procession they led within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which introduced pilgrims to the church and its *memoria*.

Likewise, the Jerusalem Franciscans continued the transmission of devotions and memorabilia between Jerusalem and Europe. The most noteworthy of these exchanges was the transfer of the *ordo peregrinationis civitatis Iherusalem* to complement the new hagiopolite replicas such as those at Varallo and Romans. This exchange was not unidirectional however. The friars transplanted to the landscape of Jerusalem the cult of Veronica, the "Holy Face", which they commemorated in the shape taken by the cult in the Western tradition. In fact, the friars mixed in their practice Roman custom and local traditions. That was the case with the devotion to the Swoon of Mary, an Eastern tradition first adopted by Crusaders and continued by Franciscans, without parallel in the West. The environment of Jerusalem challenged the friars who, outside pilgrimage season, were on their own, a minority within a minority. This permanent dialogue, often of the polemical kind, between friars and Jerusalem's communities forged their identity. Their rituals were an expression of this identity, a means to affirm the Frankish presence in the city but also a way to incorporate practices from other traditions.

Nostalgia tinged these rituals. In Jerusalem, Franciscans and Latin pilgrims felt dispossessed. They lamented the loss of a city they considered rightfully theirs, their “inheritance”, praying for its return to the Christian rule. Thus, many descriptions of Franciscan rituals present a binary structure: the emphasis of the glorious days of the Latin Kingdom when Christians, and especially Franks, indulged in the celebration of splendid rituals, the *tunc* narrative. It was usually followed by a deploration of the reduced form of the same rituals in their own time, the *nunc* narrative. This nostalgic tone colored the recollection of the Palm Sunday procession, the prohibition on ritual sounds, and, most acutely, the ritual remembrance of the crusader kings buried inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

My analysis stops in 1517, when the Ottomans took over Palestine, ushering significant changes in the life of the Jerusalemite Franciscans. Their ritual life in the Ottoman era is better documented, thanks to friars such as Tommaso Obicini da Novara. A reformer of the Franciscan Jerusalem liturgy, he published in 1623, in Venice, a series of liturgical books, including the: *Ordo processionis, quae quotidie post Completorium fit Ierosolymis, Per ecclesiam sanctissimi, & gloriosissimi Sepulcri Domini Nostri Iesu Christi* and *Lavdabilis consuetudo lavandi Peregrinorum pedes, cum processione, quotidie celebranda Ierosolymis in Ecclesia Sancti Salvatoris, pro ea quae olim in Ecclesia Conventus Sacri Montis Sion celebratur*. These books shaped and popularized the format of the Holy Land Franciscan liturgy, which remained the same for centuries². As in the Mamluk era, performing rituals under the Ottomans could land the friars in hot waters. Thus, when sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) ousted the friars from the Tomb of David, he invoked the desecration of the sacred site by Franciscans walking there in procession³. Moreover, the involvement of European states through the system of capitulations further disrupted the balance between communities in Jerusalem⁴. Often the international diplomacy between European powers and the Ottomans had direct consequences in Jerusalem, for instance in the sharing of the Holy Places, leading to such arrangements as the *Status Quo*⁵.

² Milovitch, *Quotidianamente da prima del 1336*, 11, 21, 34.

³ Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land*, 117.

⁴ Capitulations were treaties signed from the sixteenth century between European states and the Ottoman Empire, also between groups of European merchants and the empire, regulating the presence and trading activities of Europeans. Mazza, *Jerusalem*, 54-55.

⁵ The *Status Quo* designates a set of rules, promulgated progressively through *firman*s issued by the Muslim overlords of the city, defining the rights of access and the terms of sharing of the Holy Places by various Christian communities in the Holy Land. The last *Status Quo*, still valid today, was promulgated in 1852, confirming the state of affairs of 1757. *Ibid.*, 56-57.

Thus, the presence of the friars in Jerusalem and the extent of their freedom to carry out rituals remained from the days of Sancha of Mallorca and al Nāsir Muhammad to those of Francis I of France (1515-1547) and Suleiman the Magnificent a matter for international negotiations. It also continued to be a matter for local, circumstantial negotiations, with various degrees of tolerance between Franciscans and the Islamic authorities, and within the Christian community itself. My analysis of the late medieval Franciscan ritual life in Jerusalem and its replication in Europe is but a fragment of this history.

In this dissertation, I sought to interrogate the sometime one-sided approach to the friars' life in Jerusalem, which sees them as a small group insulated from the other communities and reassured in their Romanness. On the contrary, in the various chapters of this dissertation, I emphasized their links to the other communities. Their rituals put them in permanent contact with the "other", a close encounter that challenged them to adapt to a new environment and effectively to be better informed about other religions and cultures than, for instance, their brethren in Europe. In other words, in spite of their small numbers, the friars were one of the Jerusalem communities to be reckoned with.

The scope of this dissertation covered only a chronological segment from the friars' long history in Jerusalem, and only episodes from their ritual life. Each case study could be further developed, by exploring the wealth of details left to us in the remarkable number of pilgrimage accounts coming from this period. Whilst I focused on the dynamics within the Christian community and its permanent negotiation with the Muslim overlords of the city, a change of focus, for instance on the friars' view of Muslim or Jewish rituals would enrich the picture of the ritual life of late medieval Jerusalem.

My research also attempts to contribute to the better understanding of frontier religious communities. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Jerusalem was such a buffer territory, where religions and cultures met, and identities challenged. In this mixed milieu, the friars strived to assert their brand of Christianity, but, engaged in a permanent contest for orthodoxy, their Romanness became if not faded, at least more nuanced. On their return to Europe, they enriched the Latin Church by importing hagiopolite rituals. In Jerusalem and back to Europe, the friars of Mount Sion acted between traditions.