

Georg Christoph Fernberger in the Holy Land (1592)

Abstract

The secretary to the imperial envoy in Constantinople, Georg Christoph Fernberger (1557-1593), who came from Vorchdorf in Upper Austria, took several extended trips to the Near and Middle East between 1588 and 1593. While doing so, he kept a travel journal in Latin, which he later transcribed. The journal includes a very illuminating account of his visit to Jerusalem. It clearly describes, for instance, the religious-confessional pluralism of that city, as well as the system for administering the various holy sites. Every religious community was responsible for the administration of particular holy sites that were important not only to them but to all. There was also a complex system regulating how much the various pilgrims had to pay to be admitted to the different holy sites.

Source

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is located about 500 feet from the Monastery of the Holy Redeemer in the eastern part of the city, which the Turks keep locked up for the whole year and only open for pilgrims and to exchange monks. In Jerusalem there are ten different Christian religious communities, namely Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox Catholics, Armenians, Abyssinians, Ethiopians from the Empire of the Priest John, Georgians, Copts or "Zunnar Christians" from Egypt, Syrians, Maronites, Jacobites, and Nestorians. Two patriarchs from these groups also live here, namely, the Greek and the Armenian. One or two monks from each of these Christian religious communities are confined to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to supply the lamps with oil and to perform other duties. The monks are switched every three or six months. Their food is passed in to them once a week through a gap in the portal. If pilgrims arrive, the guardian, after an offering of candles, wax, and sugar is proffered, requests that the superior open the church. The latter sends his men with the treasurer's officials to whom all pilgrims from abroad must pay a head tax of nine ducats before entering the church. However, the pilgrims under Turkish rule, that is, Greeks, Armenians, and the like, pay half. After nine sequins had been collected from me and I recorded my name and my father's name, the church opened on February 8, the Saturday before Ash Wednesday. However, to maintain the sequence in which the holy sites are viewed, one must first know that there is a stairway with twelve steps to the right in front of the church's portal, leading to Calvary. The gate to it is blocked by a wall on the right, and here a plenary indulgence is granted. The church portal on the south side has two entrances. The middle section remains permanently locked and is never opened. The Chapel of Holy Mary, which the Franciscans have in their charge, is located immediately inside the entrance to the church interior. In fact, each Christian community has its own place in this church. There are three altars in this chapel; the main altar depicts how Christ appeared to his mother after his resurrection. The altar to the right includes a wooden cross, the mid-section of which contains a sliver of the actual holy cross. The altar to the left includes one-third of the column on which Christ was whipped in Pilate's palace. The piece is approximately two hand-widths high. The second part of this column is located in the Patriarchate in Constantinople, and the third can be seen in Rome. Part of the column of derision and a piece of the actual holy sepulcher are also included in the same altar. At these two altars a plenary indulgence is granted, at the third altar, at that of the holy Mary, only a septenary indulgence, or for seven periods of forty days. And in this chapel, [every day], at every vespers, there begins a solemn procession to visit the following sites: After the chapel, the first site to the left is the place called the "dungeon of Christ," where Jesus was held by the henchmen as the hole was prepared. This site belongs to the

Greeks, and here a septenary indulgence is granted. Next is the chapel of the distribution of clothing, as it says in the Bible, “And they divided my clothes among themselves and rolled dice for my cloak.” Here, too, a septenary indulgence is granted, and this site belongs to the Armenians. Third, a climb of over thirty-six steps, which are partially cut into natural stone and partially built of brick, leads up to the place where the holy Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great was found. This place, which belongs to the Minorites, is at the foot of Calvary, and a plenary indulgence is granted here. From here, the fourth station is reached by another ascent of over twenty steps to the chapel of the holy Helena, who had this church built; seen here is a seat cut from stone on which the holy Helena sat while constantly present during the construction of the church. A septenary indulgence is granted here. The site belongs to the Armenians. A climb up the remaining steps to the level of the church, again, and a turn to the left ends at the fifth station, a place with an altar in a chapel; below the altar is a large piece of the column of derision where the crown of thorns was placed on Christ. Here, the plenary indulgence rules, and this area directly at the foot of Calvary belongs to the Abyssinians. At the sixth site, a climb up a stairway with fifteen steps leads to Calvary; here even the hole can be seen which held the most holy cross on which our redemption was fulfilled. And a bit to the right the crack in a rather large rock is visible; the Bible also says of the crack, “And the rock split open” between the cross of Christ and the robber to his left. Here, plenary indulgence is granted, and the site belongs to the Georgians. The seventh station is a chapel next to the right side of the mountain, where Christ our redeemer was stretched out on the ground and nailed to the cross for the salvation of the world. At this site, a plenary indulgence is granted, and the site belongs to the Franciscans. Eighth, we climb from the mountain to the stone of unction where our redeemer was placed in the arms of his grieving mother after being taken down from the cross and where he was anointed over the stone with precious oils. Here, a plenary indulgence is granted, and the site belongs to the Franciscans. The stone is located directly opposite the church portal. Ninth, our path leads to the holy grave into which the body of our Lord Jesus Christ was laid and where he gloriously arose on the third day. Here, the most perfect plenary indulgence is granted, and the site belongs to the Franciscans. It is noteworthy that no priest from any community can hold mass at the holy grave or at Calvary without permission of the Franciscan Observants. At the tenth station, two round rocks not far from the holy grave are visited; here Mary Magdalene appeared in the form of a gardener and said: “Woman, why are you crying?” Here a septenary indulgence is granted, and this area belongs to the Armenians. At the end of the procession we entered our chapel. At every separate station prayers and hymns of praise are offered.

Source: Roland Burger and Robert Wallisch, eds., *Reisetagebuch (1588-1593): Sinai, Babylon, Indien, Heiliges Land, Osteuropa, Lateinisch-Deutsch*. Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1999, pp. 238-42.

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

Recommended Citation: Georg Christoph Fernberger in the Holy Land (1592), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/migration/ghis:document-43>> [July 09, 2025].