



Jerusalem

My Memories of Khassaki Sultan or "The Flourishing Edifice"¹

Yusuf Sa'id Natsheh

At the heart of the Old City of Jerusalem stands the architectural complex of Khassaki Sultan, or what is called in the *Waqfiyya*, al-'Imara al-'Amira, "The Flourishing Edifice."² It is located about 150 meters to the west of the Nazir Gate, one of the gates of al-Haram al-Sharif (see fig. 1).

¹ Translated from Arabic by Dr. Amal Amireh, al-Najah National University.

² The Ottoman Turkish text of this *waqfiyya* can be found in St. H. Stephan, "An Endowment Deed of Khassaki Sultan, dated the 24th May 1552," *QDAP* 10 (1944), pp. 170-192.

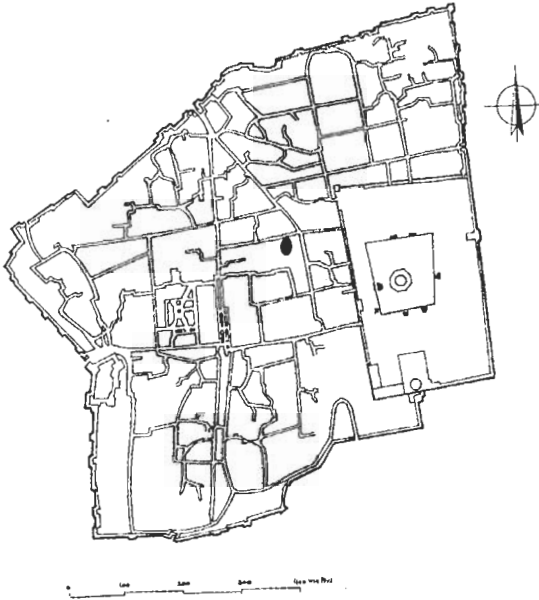


Fig. 1

The northern entrance of the complex is located in 'Aqabat al-Takiyya. In the colloquial language of Jerusalemites, *takiyya* means the place of free food. The southern entrance is located in the road of 'Aqabat al-Saraya. *Al-Saraya* means the ruler or governor's place, in reference to the place of the Ottoman ruler before the British Mandate (1917-1948). The complex is surrounded by the Mawardiyya School³ and the Ribat Bayram Jawish on the east, and by the Palace of Sitt Tunshuq on the west. These buildings have been integrated with each other for a long time and have composed an architectural complex called today "Dar al-Aytam al-

³ The Mawardiyya School has been wrongly identified in several monographs as al-Rasasseyya, and was considered part of Ribat Bayram Jawish, but in fact it is a *madrasa* independent of the Ribat. About this *madrasa* and the Ribat, see Yusuf Natsheh, "The Architecture of Ottoman Jerusalem," in *Ottoman Jerusalem: The Living City 1517-1917*, ed. Sylvia Auld and Robert Hillenbrand (forthcoming).

Islamiyyah" (The Muslim House of Orphans) (see fig. 2).⁴



Fig. 2

As its name "Khassaki Sultan" indicates, this architectural complex is related to Roxelane, the wife of the Ottoman Sultan Sulayman al-Qanouni (1520-1566). She is known as *khurrem*, which means the laughing or happy one, but in Ottoman sources she is known as "Khassaki Sultan," which means the Sultan's favorite or beloved. It took about four years (1552-1556) to build the complex, which is the largest charitable institution not only in Jerusalem, but in all of Palestine.

⁴ It is worth mentioning that Madrasat al-Aytam al-Islamiyya is two sections: the first is vocational, with the students either boarding in the school or outside; the second is academic, with the students studying the regular curriculum taught in other Palestinian schools.

As an eight-year-old child in the early sixties, it never crossed my mind when I stepped into the complex for the first time that my relationship with it would never be interrupted, and that one day it would become the main focus of my doctoral dissertation on Ottoman Islamic architecture in the sixteenth century.⁵ In fact, from the memories I have stored, my relationship with this complex passed through four stages.

I clearly remember that the first stage goes back to childhood, the period of happiest and sweetest days despite the hardships the Palestinians of the Old City had to face for lack of work opportunities. I remember how my friends and I used to gather in the neighborhood near the Khassaki Sultan in 'Aqabat al-Saraya, in the early morning soon after sunrise, to go get free soup from the kitchen of Khassaki Sultan. We would walk in the alleys of the Old City, empty of pedestrians, except for those heading early to work and for municipal employees, who in those days really kept the streets clean instead of just talking about it.

I remember the funny shapes of the pots in which we got the soup. Some of us would take a huge pot, hoping to get more soup than usual from the ladle of the attendant at Khassaki Sultan. But with no luck. Often we would stand in line waiting for the soup to cook; and sometimes with the innocence and mischievousness of

children, we would push and help each other forward in line, hoping to return home early and to get our soup before the supply ran out. I still remember the joy of the children who got the soup, but I remember even more vividly the disappointment of children when there was no more soup to serve. Although it was just soup, they would feel that they had been deprived of something special.

As children we looked in awe at the huge cooking pot and at the high chimneys and the main dome over the kitchen.⁶ The people of Jerusalem used to have soup instead of breakfast, mainly because of poverty. But some families used to send their children to get soup as a blessing (*baraka*) and for the distinct taste of the soup, which one couldn't get in regular home cooking. That soup was often sweetened with sugar, and some would add to it lard and nuts. A group of well-off Old City merchants would sometimes send someone to fetch some of this soup for them because of its taste and because they believed there was a blessing in eating it. Thus soup in Jerusalem, like the meal (*simat*) of Ibrahim al-Khalil, was not for the poor only, but also for the rich and for anyone who wanted to taste.

After the June 1967 Israeli occupation of Jerusalem, people's lives changed. By that time my family had moved out of the Old City to the Ras al-'Amud area, which is about two kilometers east of the walls of Jerusalem. My family moved because of the weak infrastructure of the Old City.

⁵ Yusuf Natsheh, "Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Public Buildings in Jerusalem: A Study based on the Standing Monuments and the Evidence of the Jerusalem *sijill*," (Ph.D. diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1997).

⁶ Fortunately, these pots are on display at the Islamic Museum at al-Haram al-Sharif.

Moreover, after the residents of the Sharaf and Maghariba neighborhoods were displaced, too much pressure was put on the other neighborhoods to absorb these residents, which constricted living space. This happened even though some of the residents of these quarters left to Jordan soon after 1967.

Although I moved out of the Old City, I soon came back, and to Khassaki Sultan specifically. But this time I came for education, not soup. It is well known that after 1967 the Israeli authorities rushed to take over the public schools in Jerusalem, as part of an attempt to normalize life as quickly as possible after occupation. So my peers and I joined one of these schools, only to discover that the curriculum had been changed. For example, certain Quranic verses replaced others and the pre-Islamic poet al-Sumaw'l bin 'Adiya was included. Change affected most of the literary and cultural topics. As a result of these changes, there was discrepancy and contradiction between what we studied before and what we were studying in the Israeli curriculum. Sometimes the debates with teachers would reach a point of ideological conflict, especially since some of them were not well qualified for the job and were recently appointed, the majority of educators at the time having refused to work with the Israeli authorities. In short, the new curriculum was not helping us succeed and was not preparing us for university education. It had to be changed.

Coincidentally, a group of fine and loyal educators who realized the extent of the problem and its implications—in coordination with Jordanian educational institutions—opened national schools to

replace public schools in teaching the Jordanian curriculum.⁷ One of these schools is Madrasat Dar al-Aytam al-Islamiyya, which was located in Khassaki Sultan, the Mawardiyya, and in Ribat Bayram Jawish.

When I returned to the complex as a student in 1969-1970, the second stage of my relationship with this institution began to take shape. In fact, the other students and I were shocked at the reality of the new school. It had a dark entrance and a long narrow staircase. It had yards situated at different levels. The floor had beautiful ancient tiles, but also large holes in much need of repair. The rooms were either too large or too small, unsuitable for the purpose. In either case, the paint was peeling off.⁸ The school had no playgrounds, labs, or library. Moving from the Rashidiyya School to this one seemed to us like moving from the modern age to the Stone Age.

⁷ Among those I remember were the late Tawfiq Abu al-Su'oud, Ahmad Abdul-Latif, and Husni al-Ashhab. Many of these educators continue to work in teaching or in other fields, including Mr. Zeydan Abu Zayyad, the teacher at the al-Ma'mouniya School; the lawyer Ibrahim Qundlt, who works in al-Awqaf ministry and is the advisor for Christian affairs; and the honorable Shaikh Abdul-Qadir 'Abdeen, the mufti of Jerusalem and the former chief of judges, and Dr. Fahim Jaber, dean of the Faculty of Education, al-Najah University.

⁸ Despite the many well-meaning attempts to repair the rooms of this school, things have not changed much, which prompted the director of the Technical Office of the Welfare Association, Dr. Shadia Touqan, in cooperation with the Islamic Awqaf, to list this assembly as one of the projects in the Sharqa Appeal, which was organized by the Welfare Association in late 1998. As a result, the assembly received generous donations. Hopefully, efforts will focus on taking comprehensive and scientific care of this institution.

Despite this bleak picture, the school attracted a large number of students, some of whom have become among the leading intellectuals of the Old City and Jerusalem as well as teachers in the school itself. Two factors contributed to the success of the school: the first was the rejection of the Israeli curriculum by residents and students; the second was the administration of the school by a group of Palestinian teachers and educators known for their dedication and achievement. With these qualities they compensated for the lack of teaching aides and entertainment and made up for the many problems that had no reasonable solutions.

When I returned to the school at the end of my secondary education, my early memories of the institution were revived. My archaeological knowledge about the place was limited at this stage, and I did not grasp its deep history. My school peers and I would wander throughout the complex, looking at its archaeological structure, realizing how old it was and how related to our history. But we had no knowledge of the history of the complex or of its archaeological development, and failed to understand why visitors and tourists took such interest in it, photographing the fronts, gates, and beautiful decorations.

After receiving my first university degree from Cairo University in Islamic archaeology in 1977, it fell to some of my colleagues and me to establish a department for taking care of Islamic monuments in the Islamic Awqaf in al-Haram al-Sharif. Shortly after, I became the head of this department and am still in that position today. This is the beginning of

the third stage of my connection with the complex. One might call this the period when I began to form my architectural awareness, not about the complex only, but about the Old City and Jerusalem generally. My relationship grew with time, especially when I took university students and others on field visits to teach them about Islamic monuments and buildings. This complex was always admired and appreciated.

My relationship with Khassaki Sultan reached a climax when in 1992 I chose as a topic for my doctoral dissertation "The Public Ottoman Buildings in the Sixteenth Century." Since then I have not stopped visiting the complex in an attempt to answer some of the difficult questions that I could not find an answer to in the past. I would visit the complex to look into one issue, only to discover other issues that needed satisfying answers. One of the important issues about this place, which was first built in the sixteenth century, is its borders and components. Also who were the architects who built it? Were they local? If not, where did they come from? And is it true what is said that the well-known Ottoman architect Sinan is the one who designed the complex? If so, where else do we find his style and influence on architecture in Jerusalem?

These points, among others, are subject to debate and controversy, and they take on added importance if we keep in mind that the Khassaki Sultan complex was sponsored and looked after by most of the Ottoman Sultans for over 400 years. And that the sultanic kitchen originally founded to serve the Jerusalem poor and the nearby Sufis is still offering weekly meals and daily soup for those interested and for the

needy, despite the loss of most of the *waqf* land, especially after 1948.

When it was established, the complex was composed of several sections, some of which are still standing and some of which were lost with time. There was an inn for travelers and merchants and a mosque with high domes and arches for praying, reading the Quran, and blessing the donor (Khassaki Sultan) for her good deeds. There was a *ribat* made up of 55 rooms to accommodate the Sufis and the poor. Finally, there was a big kitchen and, annexed to it, a bakery, a mill, several storehouses, and a fountain to provide water for residents and for cooking.

Khassaki Sultan established several endowments (*awqaf*) to guarantee the continuity of the complex and its associated charities. She was so generous that the income of thirty Palestinian and non-Palestinian towns and villages used to go for the budget of this project. Four additional villages, along with their farms and fields, from the *waqf* of the Sultan Sulayman al-Qanouni were added to these villages immediately after the death of his wife Khassaki Sultan. These villages were located in different regions in Gaza, Nablus, Jerusalem, Saida, and Tripoli.

The management of this institution was supervised by a group of the highest employees of the Ottoman administration. The *waqf* employee would be sent from Istanbul directly. Fifty employees were assisting him, each with a specific job designed by the *waqfiyya* and a detailed job description. One was responsible for washing off drinking glasses, another for preparing the rice for cooking. There were two cooks and they had three helpers in

addition to a repairman and a man for building maintenance. These are only examples of how active and giving this institution was in the sixteenth century. The annual salaries of these employees reached approximately 79,505 silver *durham*, aside from food and other running expenses.

I have written a complete and pioneering study of the complex that includes many photographs and architectural and decorative plans, supported with modern and original documents through which I have tried to answer most of the artistic and historical questions about the complex.⁹ However, whenever I visit this place and see crowds of children having soup, I wonder whether one of these children will sometime in the future criticize my study and offer a different point of view, thus connecting the past with the present and the future.

I would like to conclude this memoir by saying that my relationship with the soup has never ended. For along with my colleagues in the Islamic Archaeology Department, whenever we miss the soup, we send away for some. But nothing tastes like the soup of childhood. Perhaps my fondness for the innocent and free days of childhood is the reason for this feeling. It is my good fortune that I can walk around in the places of my childhood and remember the bygone days, unlike many Palestinians who are kept away by exile from the places of the past and their memories.

My relationship with Khassaki Sultan in

⁹ The study is about 24,000 words and will be published shortly in *Ottoman Jerusalem: The Living City 1517-1917*.

the Old City of Jerusalem is not merely about memories. For me and for many Jerusalemites, it is about existence, life, and continuity into a better future despite the daily annoyances and despite the clouds over the Old City these days. But the hope for a real peace for Jerusalem, although not close by, will never die.

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