

**OSMANLI ARAŐTIRMALARI
VII-VIII**

**EDITORS OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE
İSMAIL E. ERÜNSAL — CHRISTOPHER FERRARD
CHRISTINE WOODHEAD**

**THE JOURNAL OF OTTOMAN STUDIES
VII-VIII**

İstanbul - 1988

AN APPARENTLY UNKNOWN MANUSCRIPT ABOUT
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SYRIA AND PALESTINE

Jacob M. Landau

A lengthy, interesting and apparently unresearched manuscript, entitled *Relation de ce qui s'est passé en missions de Syrie de la Compagnie de Jésus, de leur commencement jusques au bout de l'an 1651*, may be found in the Netherlands¹. It comprises 104 folios, on which the written text of each page is 18.5 x 12.5 cms. The last folio ends with the following words: «A Seide le 5^e Janv. 1652.» This is followed by the signature of the author, Jean Amien. The document is apparently an autograph and the handwriting is fairly legible, except in several places where writing on the *verso* makes the reading of the *recto* difficult and vice versa. French is used throughout, interspersed with Latin. This paper offers a brief presentation of the manuscript's contents and a preliminary evaluation of its significance.

Jean Amien's memorandum is addressed to the *Provincial* of the Jesuits in France. While shorter reports, called «lettres volantes», had been sent periodically, Amien now considers a more comprehensive account to be necessary. Although it purports to be merely an account of the Jesuit missions in Syria, its main interest evidently lies in the personal, direct observations of Father Amien himself.

Following the dedication to the *Provincial*, the report itself is divided into twenty-eight chapters, essentially arranged in chronological order: 1. Initial activities of the Aleppo mission. 2. Amien's arrival in Aleppo. 3. The arrival of Père Aymé Chesaud in Aleppo.

1 Royal Library, the Hague, Ms. 74 J 17.

4. The home of the Nichangy family, where dissemination of Christian doctrine began. 5. The home of Jerosme Conti, where Maronite and other congregations were established. 6. The arrival of Père Gaspar Manuel in Aleppo and Jesuit plans to spread Christianity in Persia. 7. A trip to Damascus for purposes of conversion. 8. The return of Amien from Damascus to Aleppo. 9. The mission in Sidon. 10. The mission in Tripoli (Syria); the new Maronite Patriarch; the General Assembly of Jesuit Fathers in Syria under the chairmanship of a Jesuit General. 11. The congregation of the merchants of Sidon and their persecution. 12. How Divine Providence prevented two great misfortunes. 13. Official intervention preventing the despatch of Maronite students to Rome. 14. The mission's home and school in Sidon. 15. Letters from the King of France. 16. Amien's pilgrimage to Nazareth. 17. Mission activities in Sidon and Tripoli. 18. Correspondence with a Maronite. 19. Persecution of Catholics. 20. Amien's Pilgrimage to Jerusalem. 21. The jailing of Amien in Tripoli and another priest in Damascus. 22. Misfortunes in Sidon. 23. Persecution of the Christian Church. 24. Assistance given to the suffering Christians. 25. The death of certain priests. 26. Arrival of Catholic priests in Sidon. 27. Work carried out by Amien in Tripoli and his return to Sidon. 28. Work carried out by Amien in Sidon after his return from Tripoli.

Obviously, some interest attaches to the period covered by Amien's *Relation* and its scope. Regarding the former, Amien informs us that the mission in Aleppo was inaugurated in 1625, on the orders of Pope Urban VIII. These matters are summarised in ch. 1, while the bulk of the account is dedicated to the years in which Amien himself served in Syria, i.e. from 27 October 1635 to 31 December 1651 (although there are lengthy references to earlier times as well). It may be pertinent to point out that these sixteen years are relatively little known in the history of Syria. Amien's arrival occurred half a year after the execution on 13 April 1635 of Fakhr al-Din, the Druze Emir whose flamboyant and chequered career in Syria had received considerable attention. By contrast, after 1635, interest in Syria decreases somewhat and source materials are rather meager. Hence the importance of Amien's account.

The next point to be considered concerned the subjects which appeared sufficiently significant for Amien to mention. As the table of contents already suggests, emphasis is laid on all matters concerning Christians in general (e.g., their persecution, such as extortion of money in the guise of taxes or fines) and most particularly regarding the activities of the Jesuits (engaging in missionary work and educational projects, leading prayers, listening to confessions and performing marriages). Actually, much more information is available: rates of exchange, prices (including complaints about price increases, costs, rents and salaries); means of communication, travel distances and times; notes on travel from Aleppo to various cities, such as Damascus, Tripoli, Nazareth, Jerusalem and Sidon (in the last of which Amien resided in the later years of his missionary activity) — along with observations on the roads and on those cities; relations between Christians, Muslims and Jews, as well as amongst the Christians themselves, e.g., Maronites, Armenians and Greeks (Amien displays much interest in and affection for the Maronites — and appears to have been befriended by them along with the other Jesuits). Various foreign Christians also merit brief mention — Frenchmen, Poles, Portuguese and others, whose adventures and misadventures Amien records faithfully. There are vivid descriptions of various types of disease — some of them endemic — and their symptoms and cures, including the plague in Sidon in the mid 1640s. Amien documents the construction and repair of houses with observations on workmen and materials and comments on foods consumed by the local population. Other passages highlight misunderstandings with the authorities, sometimes brought about by the incitement of «renegades» and leading, in extreme cases, to the imprisonment of Amien and other Jesuits, as well as several Maronites. Amien describes frequent (and at times violent) persecution of the Church by the powers-that-be, which he calls «des continuelles tyrannies.»

A few general observations will aid in assessing the significance of this manuscript for future research. The report is written in the third person singular (i.e., Amien went ..., and so forth) in a modest, unassuming style, with frequent references to the author's fervent belief in God. Everything is carefully noted: precise dates,

accurate details about sums of money, etc. Starting with his own arrival in Syria, Amien employed every free moment to study Arabic (while other Jesuits were busily translating Thomas à Kempis into Arabic). Thus, he was soon able to lead services in Arabic. When the Jesuits discovered that Armenians preferred their own language to Arabic, Father Aymé; another Jesuit in the Aleppo mission, applied himself to studying Armenian and conducting services in that language.

Although the focus of the manuscript is to report on Catholic educational and religious work, mostly among the local Christians, one finds information, albeit somewhat less comprehensive, about the Muslims and Jews as well. Proselytising among the Muslims was avoided, as it was against local law. However, the parametres of Amien's account are considerably wider. Even though much of its contents deal with Aleppo and Sidon, there are long reports of the situation in the area between Alexandretta and Jerusalem, parts of which he visited himself, while other matters were reported according to hearsay. Although Christian religious, social and economic problems are accorded priority, the account clearly draws up a picture of overall poverty, often in a depressing form, with lack of money a constant worry. Townspeople, including the priests, would travel to the country to buy wheat as it was cheaper there than in the cities. Indeed, the Jesuits' lack of adequate financial means constituted a major obstacle to their missionary activities and educational work, as did the complexities of the Ottoman Administration.