
Byzantine Medieval Cyprus***D. Papanicola-Bakirtzi and M. Iakovou (eds.)******Sofronis Sofroniou***

In the current debate about the European credentials and destiny of Cyprus, which cannot but be a subjective affair mainly because the very concept of Europe is a fuzzy one, it is well to bear in mind that for four centuries in medieval and early modern times, i.e. from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, Cyprus was not only an integral part of what was then considered to be Europe but also a very bulwark of Christian Europe against the Moslem domination of the Middle East and especially the Holy places. At the same time Cyprus was a kind of gateway to Europe for the exotic and not so exotic products from the Middle East and beyond, especially in the form of spices and fabrics and even sugar, the latter of which Cyprus was itself a main producer.

It all started with the third Crusade and Richard I, the Lionheart in 1191 and ended with the fall of Nicosia and Famagusta to the besieging forces of the Turkish Sultan Selim II, in 1570 and 1571, and with the heroic resistance and death of the Venetian defender of Famagusta Marco Antonio Bragadino.

This fascinating part of Cyprus and European history is the subject of a number of essays collected under the title **Byzantine Medieval Cyprus** and published by the Cultural Institute of the Bank of Cyprus, under the editorship of Demetra Papanicola-Bakirtzi and Maria Iakovou.

The volume was published in connection with an exhibition of the same title in Thessaloniki and as part of the events organised there on the occasion of the town being the cultural capital of Europe for 1997. Besides essays by Cyprus scholars such as Athanasios Papageorgiou, Marina Solomidou-Jeronymidou and the editors, on Byzantine art, the production of sugar, ceramics and cartography, some overseas scholars such as Peter Edbury, Nicola Coldstream, Michael Metcalf and Benjamin Arbel contribute papers on Cyprus and the Crusades, the Lusignan Kingdom of Cyprus, the Gothic architecture of the Lusignans, the numismatic economy of medieval Cyprus, the Venetian rule over Cyprus and the Venetian fortifications of Nicosia and Famagusta, many of which are still in place. The volume is copiously illustrated with icons, household and other objects, coins, maps, engravings and photographs right up to the nineteenth century, with informative commentaries. It can thus be considered as a permanent exhibition of medieval Cyprus.

The work, though quite authoritative, is meant for the general reader who can cull a lot of interesting information on various aspects of Cypriot life during the periods covered.

Cyprus experienced the full force of Arab and Moslem expansion very early on, in 648/9 AD, and for a time it was wrested from its Byzantine shell but it was soon considered to be a neutral territory between the latter and Islam. Both powers exercised a kind of condominium over the island, mainly in the form of double taxation, until 965 AD when the island was again incorporated into the Byzantine empire to which it culturally belonged. History does not repeat itself but it does provide some uncanny parallels. It is also interesting to note that during the rapid expansion of Arab rule in the Middle East Cyprus provided, on many occasions, a safe haven for persecuted Christians and occasionally even Moslems from the region.

Richard the Lionheart's disembarkation at Limassol and his subsequent occupation of the island was not a happy one for the people of Cyprus as we can gather from the testimony of the contemporary monk Neophytos of Enkleistra in Paphos, 'Neophytes the Recluse', who summarises the evils of Cyprus, of Richard's invasion or escapade, in the following words, "There is a country called Ingliterra, far from Romania [i.e. Byzantium] in the north from which a cloud of Englishmen [cloud was then usually colligated with locusts] together with their leader having embarked in long boats called nakkae were trying to reach Jerusalem...But England [as in Shakespeare, this meant the King of England] disembarked in Cyprus and the wretched man, used the island as a nursing mother...". This first confrontation between the English and the Cypriots was not a happy one. Yet Richard's Cyprus adventure proved to be one of his most lasting achievements in this part of the world, as Peter Edbury notes, as he started what later developed into the Latin or Lusignan rule over Cyprus which lasted from 1192 to 1489.

The Lusignan social structure, though essentially feudal, copied the earlier Byzantine structure but the Lusignan or the Venetian rule that followed should not be confused with later imperialist, racist and purely exploitative structures as both Peter Edbury's and Benjamin Arbel's essays indicate. In spite of regular religious friction between Latins and Greeks and some related crimes on the part of the former, it seems that a *modus vivendi* was worked out, mutual assimilation was taking place in social matters and the local inhabitants could attain high office in the administration. In fact a number of the Latin overlords were partially hellenised in both language and religion.

During much of both the Lusignan and the Venetian periods Cyprus experienced two of its most recurring states, prosperity and vulnerability. Michael Metcalf's authoritative paper on the numismatic evidence shows that Cyprus had a positive balance of trade in much of the Lusignan period when Famagusta was the Hong Kong or the Singapore of the Mediterranean both in trade and services. In the Venetian period the centre of commercial gravity shifted to Larnaca with its profitable salt trade.

The essay on the Venetian period by Benjamin Arbel has made me revi_se my

general understanding of this period. The writer believes that the two key-words for understanding the period are profit and honour and he conceives of honour as certain moral exemplars, (such as that of justice to the local population) that controlled the life of the Venetian Republic. In such a context it is no wonder that the population of the island doubled to 195,000 people, with Nicosia having 30,000 and being one of the major towns of the Mediterranean. There was both Venetian and Greek nobility who lived together in a kind of inter-cultural co-existence and the famous University of Padova was accessible to a number of educated Cypriots, as it was to many Greeks during the Turkish occupation. One of the most famous Cypriots of the time Jason de Noces became a Professor of Moral Philosophy there from 1578 to 1590. We also learn that occasionally the Venetians were setting free a number of paroikoi (i.e. serfs or in the common language of the time, which is still preserved in some parts of Cyprus, villoni) out of Christian sentiment. The Venetian public works and the fortifications of the main towns which were paid for by such noble families as the Quirini, the Roccas, the D'Avilas and the Podocatoro still testify to the dynamism of Venetian Cyprus.

But, of course, all was not well in Cyprus under the Lusignans and the Venetians and if another uncanny historical parallel is to be sought it can be found in the assessment that the peace and prosperity of Cyprus was finally smashed through the murderous rivalry of the two super-powers in the Mediterranean at the time, i.e. the two maritime republics of Genoa and Venice.

The book is not without its lacunae or blemishes. Occasionally the term "Greek-Cypriots" is used which is a glaring anachronism. The term was the invention of the British Prime colonial rulers in the 1950's.

It contains too many and repetitive maps of Cyprus, which cannot be read with the naked eye, and yet it contains no maps of the wider region. Moreover the highly informative and absorbing Chronicle of Leontios Makhairas which provides the best account not only of events but also of the mind-set of the Lusignan period, deserves a special chapter. A general index would also have been most welcome.

The publication contains some memorable quotes printed on the margins and I would like to finish this review with one by Makhairas himself:

"The poor Cypriots are encamped on a rock in the sea and on one side there are the enemies of God, the Sarasens, and on the other the Turks...".

Needless to say, "the enemies of God" was a value judgement.