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PILGRIMS VIEW THE WOMEN OF THE ISLAND OF VENUS\*

Pilgrimages from Latin Europe to Jerusalem were much in vogue during the 14th and 15th centuries. Not a few pilgrims prepared accounts of their travels, to illuminate or amaze friends and neighbors. Cyprus, ruled between 1191 and 1489 by kings of the famous French Crusader family Lusignan, and thereafter as a Venetian colony, was on the route of many pilgrims. They crossed the Mediterranean sea by islands: the Venetian colony of Crete (Candia), Rhodes of the Knights Hospitallers<sup>1</sup>, and then Cyprus, the easternmost outpost of Latin Christendom<sup>2</sup>. The foreign Latin aristocracy of Cyprus lived in luxury and splendor which amazed the rather unsophisticated pilgrims, although the lot of the native Greek Orthodox Christians of Cyprus was a hard one.

Latin Christian pilgrims visited Cyprus for several reasons. Seafaring in the Mediterranean still involved sailing close to the shore, stopping frequently at small ports on the mainland and crossing near islands, truly a coasting trade. Because of its tempestuous reputation vessels scrupulously avoided the Mediterranean sea east of Rhodes between Cyprus and the mainland of Anatolia (Asia Minor). Therefore, almost all vessels plying the sea between Rhodes and the Levant coast touched port on the southeast coast of the island of Cyprus. Sea routes from both the Aegean sea and the central and western Mediterranean converged at Rhodes and followed a single route past tiny Meis island (Kastelorizo) to Cyprus; likewise the westward bound vessels of all the ports of the Levant from Ayas and Iskenderun (Alexandretta) in the north to Dumyat (Damietta) and Iskandariya (Alexandria) in Egypt to the south converged on the southeast coast of Cyprus.

Cyprus had become an emporium of international trade where merchants

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1. Those refugees from the Holy Land captured Rhodes in about 1310. After the fall of Rhodes in 1522 to Ottoman forces of Suleyman the Lawgiver, they migrated again, to Malta. Popularly they were called Knights of Rhodes, later Knights of Malta.

2. In 1291 the Crusaders lost Akka (Acre), their last territory on the Levant coast, to the Mamluk dynasty of Cairo.

from all over the Middle East met others from all over the Mediterranean in Famagusta and Nicosia, two splendidly wealthy cities whose bazaars and shops held luxury goods from all over the world. There Latin pilgrims bought supplies, first for their trips eastward into the land of the infidel and then for their long return voyages to the west. Some also purchased costly spices and fine cloth of silk, linen, cotton or wool. Sometimes those pilgrims visited the holy places of Cyprus, particularly shrines, tombs, churches, and monasteries associated with the life and martyrdom of the apostle Barnabas, and the prison and tomb of St. Catherine, both Cypriot natives, all in the vicinity of ancient Salamis. Some visited the Orthodox monastery of St. Nicolas, south of Limassol near Cape Gata, where cats were believed daily to fight and destroy the numerous snakes which otherwise would have overrun the monastery and killed the monks.

Cyprus' past, however, was not pristine. According to Homer, Paphos in Cyprus was the native city of Aphrodite. According to Hesiod she was born from the foam of the sea but landed first on Cyprus. There, too, were her chief centers of worship, where sacred prostitutes served. Among Christians that association with the goddess of sexual love and beauty long tainted their perception of the island and its people. The Latin pilgrims knew that history.

Some foreigners viewed Cyprus clearly and perceptively and provided invaluable evidence about the local society and economy, as well as about religious practices and folk customs. They travelled around if they had the opportunity, asked questions about what they did not understand, and observed patiently. Others perpetuated fantastic misconceptions. When told to expect a certain marvel, they inevitably reported seeing it. Still others, lazy perhaps, copied from travel narratives which had fascinated them. (Of course, sometimes that traveller too had never reached the places he claimed to describe). The common Christian faith of Latin and Orthodox was more a cause for calumny and hatred than for mutual love<sup>3</sup>. Most travellers had too little

3. For examples of Latin oppression and Latin-Greek Orthodox antipathy in Cyprus see: Elizabeth Chapin Furber, "The Kingdom of Cyprus, 1191-1291", in Kenneth Setton, ed., *A History of the Crusades* (Philadelphia, 1962), v. 2, pp. 602f., 608, 621f., 625ff. Sir Harry Luke, "The Kingdom of Cyprus, 1291-1369", in K. Setton, ed., *A History of the Crusades* (Madison, 1975), v. 3, p. 350; Luke, "The Kingdom of Cyprus, 1369-1489", v. 3, pp. 362, 376f., 394. For Latin-Orthodox hostilities in general see Deno J. Geanakoplos, *Byzantine East and Latin West: Two Worlds of Christendom in Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 1ff. Geanakoplos, "Byzantium and the Crusades, 1261-1354", in K. Setton, ed., v. 3, pp. 32f.; "Byzantium and the Crusades, 1354-1453", v. 3, pp. 92ff. See also George Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, v. 3, ch. 16 "The Two Churches, 1220-1571", pp. 1041-1104, Cambridge, 1948.

time in Cyprus to observe much or to ask the opinions of other foreigners. For most people in Latin Europe who had even heard of the island, Cyprus was a distant place about which they would never hear more than vague rumors. A traveller who reported seeing in the East the same kinds of fantastic sights others had reported (like unicorns, or sensual women in Cyprus, or fierce cats at a certain Cypriot monastery which kept the entire grounds clear of poisonous snakes) no doubt established his own veracity and enhanced his own esteem in some popular or even literary circles. Consciously or unconsciously, some travellers aimed their accounts at particular audiences at home.

For Wilbrand, count of Oldenburg, canon of Hildesheim, (and in 1228 bishop of Utrecht), whose pilgrimage in 1211 took place only shortly after the Lusignans had seized Cyprus, the island not only had been a disreputable place but to some extent still ~~was~~ remained one. He felt little sympathy for the Cypriots: "They all obey the Franks, and pay tribute like slaves. Whence you can see that the Franks are the lords of this land, whom the Greeks and Armenians obey as serfs. They are rude in their habits, and shabby in their dress, sacrificing chiefly to their lusts. We shall ascribe this to the wine of that country which provokes to luxury, or rather to those who drink it. It is for this reason that Venus was said to be worshipped in Cyprus. And she herself was called Cypris, as it is said, 'the goddess Cypris yields to Mars, or to her own arts'. For the wines of this island are so thick and rich that they are sometimes specially prepared to be eaten like honey with bread"<sup>4</sup>.

An important source for the history of Cyprus is a credulous account of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land (between 1336 and 1341) by Ludolf von Suchen, a simple German priest from Westphalia. By his report Famagusta was "...the richest of all cities, and her citizens the richest of men ... A citizen once betrothed his daughter, and the jewels of her head-dress were valued by the French knights who came with us as more precious than all the ornaments of the Queen of France... But I dare not to speak of their precious stones and golden tissues and other riches, for it were a thing unheard of and incredible. In this city dwell many wealthy courtesans, of whom some possess more than one hundred thousand florins. I dare not speak of their riches". According to Ludolf, Cypriots drank a wine excellent but so strong that "...commonly

4. C. D. Cobham, *Excerpta Cyprica. Materials for a History of Cyprus* (Cambridge, 1908), pp. 13f. In Paphos "...they still show there the tower on which in the days of heathen ignorance Venus was worshipped by her lovers".

men mix one part of wine with nine of water... In all the world are no greater or better drinkers than in Cyprus". Obviously the people of Cyprus, particularly those who lived near Paphos of Venus, were extremely passionate too. Let a warning be given to all. "For the soil of Cyprus, and especially where the castle is, if a man sleep thereon, of its own self will all night through provoke a man to lust". People used to come from distant lands to adore an idol of Venus there until Paul and Barnabus had converted the people of Christ: "SS. Paul and Barnabus turned this city to the faith of Christ, and thence was the whole world turned to that faith, as is shown in the Acts of the Apostles"<sup>5</sup>.

Jacobus of Verona, an Augustian monk from northern Italy, spent twenty days in Cyprus in June and July of 1335. Jacobus, who only mixed his Cyprus wine with four parts water, indeed met the king, Lord Hugh IV, and preached in his chapel. He observed ladies of Famagusta on the streets, "...and thus go all the ladies of Cyprus, showing nothing but their eyes, and when they go out of doors they always wear this black cloak; and this from the time that the Christians lost Acre (1291)..." Nevertheless, the fall of Akka (Acre) hardly seems a logical cause for the custom of women covering themselves when outside their houses. Perhaps the Latins had already assimilated a local custom<sup>6</sup>.

Nicholas de Martoni, a notary of Carinola in Campania, who spent over three weeks in Cyprus in November and December of 1394, provides important details on the women of Famagusta: "There is one custom in force in this city, and throughout the island, that no woman can go out of the city of Famagosta without the leave of the Commandant, and cannot escape giving bail in the Commandant's court for her return to the city: and this is rarely granted to any woman. The reason alleged is that men cannot live in that city but for the women who spin and prepare wool for the camlet, for they have

5. Cobham, pp. 18ff; *De Itinere Terre Sanctae*, Ferdinand Deycks, ed., in *Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins in Stuttgart* (Stuttgart, 1851), v. 25, pp. 30, 32ff. Sometimes it seems that R. J. H. Jenkins may have read only such sources for his account of women in Byzantium in the *Cambridge Medieval History*, v. 4, pt. 2, pp. 88ff. There he wrote: "In all ranks of society harlotry was rife, and was certainly encouraged by the rigorous seclusion of women in polite society. No respectable women ever appeared in the streets unveiled". In describing the patriarchal family he categorically stated that women always kept their eyes downcast and served their husbands meals like servants, although perhaps having some happiness in their family life.

6. Cobham, pp. 16f; R. Röhrich, ed., "Le Pèlerinage du moine Augustin Jacques de Vérone (1335)", in *Revue de l'Orient Latin* 3 (1895), pp. 157, 176f, 178f.

hardly any other means of living. There is another reason too for keeping up the men in the city, which for decency's sake I pass over in silence". Nicolas found women dressed as Jacobus of Verona had described them, "...a custom that all women, as well of that town of Famagosta as of the other towns of the island, wear black mantles on their heads so that their faces can hardly be seen. And this custom began and has been followed on account of the sorrow and dire grief for the loss of that city of Acre and other cities of Syria, and the greater part of the city of Famagosta was made up of the people of Acre". Famagosta is located near a large marsh. "And it is held that on account of that marsh, and the great number of courtesans, a bad air affects the men who dwell in that city"<sup>7</sup>.

On the subject of the women of Cyprus the humanist Aeneas Sylbius Piccolomini (Pius II, d. 1463), otherwise notable for his "analyses of the chief problems" of the lands of Christendom, including Cyprus, wrote: "The women are exceedingly wanton". They were accustomed to giving themselves to foreign sailors who reached the island, for it was the sacred place of Venus<sup>8</sup>.

Felix Faber, Dominican monk of Ulm, saw Cyprus on more than one pilgrimage. In an account of his visit in 1483 he describes Venus' tomb: "When Venus, queen and goddess of the Cypriots, threw aside all modesty and entertained a number of lovers, she took among them to her adulterous arms the god Mars"<sup>9</sup>.

Fra Fancesco Suriano was a Venetian patrician who had travelled frequently to the Levant. His pilgrimage came after his entry into the Franciscan order; he visited Cyprus in August, 1484. "Hence sprang Venus, the goddess of lust". Suriano scorned the slothful people. "The women are lewd. The country and climate of themselves incline to fleshly lust, and nearly every one lives in concubinage. In the days of king Jacques [James II, the last Lusignan] the women went about attired in a seductive manner like nymphs. Now they go decently dressed"<sup>10</sup>.

7. Cobham, pp. 22, 24; L. Legrand, ed., "Relation du Pèlerinage à Jérusalem de Nicolas de Martoni notaire Italien (1394-1395), *Revue de l'Orient Latin* 3 (1895), pp. 566f, 577f, 628f, 632.

8. Theophilus A. H. Mogabgab, *Supplementary Excerpts on Cyprus or further materials for a history of Cyprus* (Nicosia, 1943), v. 2, p. 78; *Cosmographia Pii Papae in Asiae et Europae eleganti descriptione* (1509), p. 78. K. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant (1204-1571)* (Philadelphia, 1978), v. 2, p. 206n.

9. Cobham, p. 43; *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Egypti Peregrinationem*, C. D. Hassler, ed., in *Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins in Stuttgart* (Stuttgart, 1843), v. 3, pp. 239-244.

10. Cobham, p. 49; *Il Trattato di Terra Santa e dell'Oriente*, P. Girolamo Golubovich, ed., (Milano, 1900), p. 243n.

A sonnet on the island of Cyprus printed in Venice about the time of the travels of Faber and Suriano typically alludes to Cyprus' lingering fame. The author, Bartolommeo dalli Sonetti, included Cyprus in his book of islands: "This is that Acamantis which charmed so much delicate and tender Venus... Here are sugar, much salt, and wealth, for Ceres showers here [her!] store of grain. Here a wine black when made grows light of itself. Here the women are not chary of their favours"<sup>11</sup>.

A slightly different account is given in the book of islands of the Paduan Benedetto Bordone, first published in Venice in 1528: "Here formerly was built a temple to Venus on which rain never fell. Venus was called hence Cypria, and the first woman who made a habit of selling her body for money was in this island"<sup>12</sup>.

More detail was offered by Zaccheria Lilio, who in 1552 published a school book on geography: "Cyprus is an island sacred to Venus, ...the most famous of all the islands of the world, abounding in wealth and much given to sports and pleasures.... The island teems with delicacies; the women are very lustful, and so we read in Justin that Cypriot girls, before they marry, are wont to lend themselves to the unholy pleasures of foreigners who touch there in ships, so that our ancestors were not without reason in saying that the island was sacred to Venus"<sup>13</sup>.

"The Cypriot race is addicted to good living and sensual gratification...", according to the pilgrim Jodicus de Meggen, a patrician of Lucerne who travelled around Cyprus in 1542<sup>14</sup>.

Englishman John Locke was in Cyprus from August 12 to 14 and September 25 to October 16, 1553 while making a pilgrimage. He noticed that women were separated from men in churches: "Their women are alwayes separated from the men, and generally they are in the lower ende of the church"<sup>15</sup>.

A move with his family from Venice to Palestine by the Jew Elias of Pesaro was interrupted by a severe outbreak of plague in Syria. In a letter of October 18, 1563 from Famagusta Elias told in detail of his extended stay there, noting some strict precautions which had to be taken with the local women: "They do not allow their women to show themselves in town by day;

11. Cobham, p. 50; *Isolario* (Venice, 1485) (Amsterdam, 1972), last map.

12. Cobham, 62; *Libro di B.B. ...l'Isole de Mondo...* (Vinegia, 1528), p. LXVI.

13. Cobham, p. 67; F. Baldelli, tr., *Breve Descrittione del Mondo* (Vinegia, 1552), p. 28.

14. Mogabgab (Nicosia, 1945), v. 3, p. 148.

15. Cobham, p. 69; *Voyage....*, in Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations...* (London, 1553), v. 5, p. 86.

only by night can they visit their friends and go to church. They say this is by way of modesty, but it is really to avoid the frequent adulteries, for their life is thoroughly perverse. They are all liars, cheats, thieves. Honesty has vanished from their midst". According to Elias the wine "...is very strong, and must be diluted with two-thirds of water"<sup>16</sup>.

A popular geographical account of islands published in Venice in successive posthumous editions after the Venetian loss of Cyprus in 1571 is the work of Tommaso Porcacchi, which, although it gives much detail on the history and economy of Cyprus, still fails to separate myth from reality completely: "The city of old Paphos, built on the seashore looking south near C. Calidonio, was a royal residence, dedicated to the goddess Venus, with a lovely garden. Here the other goddesses, while Venus was away, caught Cupid (so the story runs), bound his eyes with a scarf, and set him on the top of a myrtle tree. Now the air is corrupted by exhalations from the marshes: such changes befall things, that the most charming spot in the island is now scarcely habitable! New Paphos, built by Agapenor, the captain of the fleet of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, was one the nine royal capitals, and is even yet standing, and ranks as a city. Here men and women sacrificed naked to Venus, but at the prayer of S. Barnabas the Apostle, a native of Cyprus, the temple fell, and the scandal ceased. Two leagues from this was Cythera, where Venus was brought up, and whence, according to Hesiod, both the goddess and the island took their names. ... Venus, they say, was born in the Cypriot city Aphrodision: Cupid was her son, who (be the story false or true) might have personified the lascivious temper and habits of the islanders, who allowed their virgin daughters, to win their own dowers, and to yield themselves on the seashore to the embraces of foreigners who landed there. Afterwards they were married"<sup>17</sup>.

### *A Local Parallel*

A chronicle compiled by an Orthodox Cypriot native describes events on Cyprus up to 1432. In a digression Leontios Makhairas, the chronicler, writes: "Learn then from me what befalls men who love women and believe what

16. Cobham, p. 75; Moise Schwab, ed. and tr., "Voyage Ethnographique de Venice à Chypre", *Revue de Géographie* 4 (1879), pp. 207, 225. Perhaps the women just wished to avoid the heat of day.

17. Cobham, pp. 164, 168. Cobham uses the 1590 edition; the earliest edition, of 1571, does not include that section.

they say. For women love men furiously; then they try to get rid of them; and give them magic potions to drink, with ten thousands wicked tricks; and they wheedle them, and finally for a mere word they kill them. And they do as the she-bear does: when she is on heat, she fondles her mate, the male animal; and when he has covered her and she is off heat, then she kills him. But the love of a man goes very deep; for his love for the woman waxes little by little until a perfect love is brought to its perfect end, or his hate waxes little by little until he leaves her completely. But the ladder of a woman's (love) has but one step: if she loves you, (she practices a thousand wicked wiles to make you love her, and right in the midst of them) she kills you. And if she hates you, she tries to get rid of you, and nothing will stop her". Although Makhairas writes of men and women in universal moral terms, he had little chance to leave the island during his long lifetime except for an embassy he made in 1483 to the Turkman principality of Karaman in central Anatolia, so presumably his experiences with women were limited to Cyprus<sup>18</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

The passage of time did not result in clearer perceptions. Myths remained even regarding a place so accessible and so frequently visited as Cyprus. A series of men perpetuated the misconceptions of earlier times without investigating carefully. Sometimes mystery and romance added a little glamour to the misconceptions. The idea of the extreme sensuality of Cypriots, particularly Cypriot women, linked with that of the fabulous wealth of the island, created a fanciful and inaccurate image. The ideas of the depravity of the East and its corrupting effects seem not to have weakened even at the end of the period of Venetian colonization. Probably those writings found eager audiences.

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18. Hill, *A History of Cyprus...*, v. 3, p. 1145. Leontios Makhairas, *Recital Concerning the Sweet Land of Cyprus*, ed. and tr. R. M. Dawkins (Oxford, 1932), p. 575.