BUILDING ACTIVITY AND MATERIAL CULTURE IN VENETIAN CYPRUS: AN EVALUATION OF THE EVIDENCE

Historiography and recent scholarship

It is no secret that the period of Venetian rule on Cyprus (1473-1571) has had a notoriously bad press, the centuries of Ottoman domination being probably the only contender for a worse reputation. Popular narratives usually project the image of yet another era of oppressive foreign occupation in the island’s long history. The colonial power was only interested in the strategic value of its distant possession and its defence from the Ottoman menace, as well as in the exploitation of its agricultural and natural resources. This utterly negative perception, that was hastily reached by 19th century historiography and was uncritically regurgitated subsequently, remains largely prevalent today in the collective imagination but also, not infrequently, in scholarly discourse. So much so that David Holton, looking at the exceptional literary output of 16th-century Cyprus, wondered why this period is so persistently maligned. One cannot fail to concur, especially considering that the scholarship of the past twenty-five years has overturned the picture on the basis of meticulous archival research and sound interpretation of the abundant source material.

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Among the most spectacular outcomes of this recent research is the incontrovertible conclusion that the population of Cyprus more or less doubled in the course of the short century of Venetian domination. The relevant documentary sources are fraught with problems, yet these do not alter the end result: demographic growth was definitely the order of the day, despite the evidence for natural disasters and epidemics. Moreover, it was accompanied by improved economic conditions that offered opportunities for enrichment to at least a few families that through astute management of their assets managed to amass large fortunes; they included a handful of Greek families of Cyprus (most notably the Synglitico) who rose to prominence in the course of the 16th century, acquiring estates, offices and titles. It has also been suggested that the condition of the peasantry, although certainly far from satisfactory, was probably not as dire as previously thought, while the long held belief of a discontented population ready to collaborate with the invading Ottomans and of a disaffected nobility plotting against the Republic have both been questioned and for the most part rejected.


textual indications then are currently being interpreted by the foremost students of the period as conveying an image of stability if not growth, far removed from the gloomy picture presented in the past.

The aim of the brief investigation that follows is to look beyond the written record in order to examine if and how the material culture of Venetian Cyprus, including its architectural production, conforms with, contradicts, or perhaps complements and nuances the revisionist reconstruction outlined above. It should be stressed at the outset that no new or unknown evidence will be presented; what is attempted here is rather limited in scope: namely to bring together scattered material in order to see how it fits together and what it may reveal in view of the afore-mentioned reassessment. This is necessary in order to move ahead the debate about the place of the short period of Venetian rule in the social, cultural and economic history of Cyprus, but also in that of the Stato da mar itself.

Frescos, icons and manuscripts

The monumental decorations found in many a rural chapel all over Cyprus undoubtedly constitute the best known aspect of the period’s artistic output, and indeed perhaps the most sustained expression of its material culture that has come down to us. They have been subjected to considerable scrutiny in recent years, and although disagreements on the chronology and relationship between fresco cycles and workshops persist, one thing remains undeniable: the late 15th and the 16th centuries witnessed an un-

preceded rise in the volume but also, often, in the quality of production. A simple perusal of Andreas and Judith Stylianou’s well known monograph on the painted churches of Cyprus bears this out most eloquently: no fewer than 60% of the 6th to 18th century monuments examined therein boast fresco cycles from this very period, with a slight concentration in the early part of the 16th century. Many more are not included, and others remain to be discovered.6

The same picture emerges from a cursory look at panel paintings whose volume is also bound to increase as more icons are cleaned and studied: although no comprehensive corpus of the material has been compiled so far, the regional study of Sophocles Sophocleous pertaining to the diocese of Limassol confirms the Venetian period as a time of vigorous artistic activity: out of the 233 surviving 12th to 17th century icons examined, a staggering 70% were produced then. As Annemarie Weyl Carr noted in her review of Sophocleous’ earlier study of the icons of Cyprus from the 7th to the 20th century, one of its most striking features is this very peak in the 16th century, which is also documented through the surviving wood-carved templal, some of which preserve many of their original decorative panels and elaborate sculptural decoration.7 Another regional study, this time regarding the dio-


cese of Morphou, shows a more evenly distributed production that nevertheless conforms to the same pattern: a quarter of the seventy-four 12th to 19th-century panels considered are dated or datable to the short Venetian century. Similarly, out of the c. 600 objects presented through the online catalogue of the Byzantine Museum of Nicosia, that include not only icons but also liturgical vessels and garments as well as fragments of mosaic and fresco cycles, well over a fifth (c. 130) are painted panels from the later 15th and the 16th century.

The information at hand about dated Greek manuscripts copied on the island or by Cypriot scribes overseas from the 11th down to the 16th century has been collected in the well known and invaluable corpus by Costas Constantinides and Robert Browning. Once more the chronological distribution favours the Venetian period in a most blatant manner, as 40% of the hundred or so mostly liturgical manuscripts in question were copied at that time. Their copying appears to show a marked rise in the 1550s with more than a dozen securely dated examples (as opposed to an average of three to four for the other decades of Venetian rule), but this may be the result of mere accidents of survival. Beyond their testimony for the rise in volume


of production, these and earlier manuscripts provide yet another type of information, related to the operation of monastic houses.

**Monasteries and churches**

More than twenty Greek monastic establishments appear for the first time in the written record of the Venetian period, either in the marginal notes and colophons of these manuscripts, many of which were indeed written at or for monasteries, or in other sources (Fig. 1). Of course this is largely the result of the increased volume of surviving documentation and does not necessarily constitute evidence for a wave of new foundations, although there is evidence of the latter too; many must be older foundations for which no earlier textual evidence has survived, while others are indeed mentioned by name or alluded to in earlier sources but not explicitly as monastic establishments. What we do know from a number of Venetian reports, however, is that several dozen and possibly as many as fifty or more
Greek monasteries were operating on the island at that time; indeed, approximately the same number are mentioned by name as functioning communities in various sources of the period, and some at least were definitely newly founded. To put these figures in perspective, this is about the same number of attested or presumed active communities as in the last and most prosperous century of Byzantine rule (late 11th – late 12th century).11

Cypriot monasteries appealed to Venice for grants and tax exemptions, and their requests were often favourably answered. Examples from the middle of the 16th century include Kykko, Acheiropoietos and Saint Nicholas of the Roof.12 This state of affairs and the apparently healthy shape of Orthodox monasticism must have had an impact on, or at least be reflected in the period’s building activity. Of course not all establishments shared the same fate, with some older foundations being less successful than others.13 A hint for the prevailing climate, however, is provided by the monumental decorations mentioned above, as some were executed within monastic


churches.\textsuperscript{14} It is the surviving structures themselves, however, that furnish the best indicator, both for the overall condition of monastic houses and, even more importantly as will be argued below, for the state of the Cypriot countryside in this period.

Surveys of the architecture of the Venetian era on Cyprus have always been centred on fortification works, primarily those of Nicosia and Famagusta, which represent some of the most spectacular and innovative monuments of this type anywhere in the \textit{Stato da mar}.\textsuperscript{15} This is indeed the primary reason why these structures have virtually monopolised scholarly attention. At the same time they have also greatly contributed to the elaboration and eager acceptance of the older views outlined above, serving as irrefutable proof of Venice’s alleged sole interest in the maintenance of its military position in the Eastern Mediterranean and its indifference towards the local population. More recent investigations have broadened their scope by including discussion of industrial complexes such as the sugar mills built to process the precious commodity, or the installations established in order to extract salt from the salt-pans of Larnaca, a profitable state monopoly.\textsuperscript{16} There is, however, another vital com-

\textsuperscript{14} The dedicatory inscriptions at the Theotokos of Kakopetria, the Panagia Pode-thou at Galata, the Holy Cross of Agiasmati and the Dormition at Kourdali suggest their monastic function.


ponent of this period’s building activity which is still being largely ignored.

The island’s countryside is littered with well over one hundred ecclesiastical structures built in the century preceding the Ottoman conquest. As in the case of recorded monastic foundations, this compares most favourably with the two earlier periods in the island’s history for which there is a similar surge of archaeological evidence that is invariably interpreted as the result of increased building activity (rather than a mere accident of survival or recovery) reflecting growing levels of prosperity, namely the Justinianic period and subsequent decades down to the early 7th century, and the Comnenian era. The dating of these later churches is based on dedicatory inscriptions, the style of (fragments or cycles of) fresco decoration, their architecture, or indeed documentary evidence. Some of these monuments have attracted attention on account of their frescoes, but their crucial testimony as witnesses to the economic fortunes of Venetian Cyprus has been totally overlooked. Their distribution over the entire territory of Cyprus shows that their proliferation was a widespread phenomenon, affecting primarily the island’s countryside and particularly acute in the valleys of the Troodos massif where roughly half the surviving examples are located, including the two examined briefly below. To illustrate this further it is worth pointing out that a quarter of the timber-roofed churches included in Athanasios Papageorghiou’s survey of this particular type of structure, common in mountainous regions, belong to this period, the rest dating primarily to late Ottoman times (18th / 19th centuries).17

Patronage and rural growth

At the village of Potamiou on the slopes above the west bank of the Khapotami, birthplace of the luminaries of contemporary Cypriot letters...
Solomon Rodinos (1515-1585/86) and his son Neophytos (1576/77-1659), the handsome church of Saint Marina bears the date 1541 carved on the lintel of the south doorway (without any additional text), probably providing a terminus ante quem for its construction, or even the actual year (Fig. 2). In the same period Potamiou is recorded (in the pratico of 1565) with 161 adult free tenants (francomati), which would suggest a total population of at least twice that number and probably more;\(^\text{18}\) Saint Marina was presumably built to serve the needs of this agrarian population. It is an unusually large and austere structure with few openings on its rubble masonry walls, little decoration beyond the moulded doorways and window frames, and a dome with an externally octagonal drum. Its layout is most uncommon and requires detailed discussion that has no place in this cursory overview; it

\[\text{Fig. 2. Church of Saint Marina, Potamiou: view from the northeast (T. Papacostas)}\]
can be described as either a transept basilica with domed crossing, or a cross-in-square structure with extended western bay. The circumstances of its foundation remain unknown, but its scale and careful construction (within the limits of the materials employed) testify to the expectations, aspirations and perhaps capabilities of rural communities. A parallel case from the monastic world is provided by the katholikon of Sindi, in the nearby Xeros valley (Fig. 3).

19. Probably dated to the same years as the Potamiou church (the year 1542 was carved on a stone block at the springing of the bema vault), the dome-hall structure at Sindi shares with Saint Marina certain distinctive architectural features (in particular the octagonal drum and relatively tall proportions, as well as the moulded door frames and austere façade treatment) that strongly suggest their contemporaneity. Just like Potamiou, the name(s) of the patron(s) and details of foundation of Sindi are not known to have been preserved by the written record; yet the (unknown) circumstances that led to the furnishing of what was after all a remote and certainly not prominent monastic community with an elegant albeit far from ostentatious
church, backs up the textual evidence concerning the fate of Greek monasteries in this period.

Investment in such congregational village churches and monastic *katholika*, or in private chapels and in their decoration and furnishings, presupposes a certain degree of prosperity, or at least some income surplus. This was clearly available in rural Venetian Cyprus, significantly in what were supposedly the island’s most deprived areas but where the vast majority of the population lived.\textsuperscript{20} Evidence from archaeological surveys corroborates the healthy state of the countryside, at least in some regions.\textsuperscript{21} The above conclusion is also clearly borne out by a look at patterns of patronage. Obviously there is considerable evidence for the upper strata of society, but there is also ample material demonstrating that families and individuals whose prominence did not stretch beyond the confines of their village did follow suit. Time and again we find among the donors of icons and fresco cycles, and to a lesser extent manuscripts too, village priests and local notables, monks and nuns.\textsuperscript{22} The most striking example of this type of patronage is of course that of Saint Sozomenos at Galata in the Solea valley (Fig. 4). The cost of the decoration of this church, executed in 1513, was defrayed in thirteen shares by no fewer than fourteen villagers.\textsuperscript{23} Of course the fact that so many individuals had to pull their resources together in order to pay for the frescoes of what is after all a rather

\textsuperscript{20} It is estimated that 80-85\% of the population lived outside the main cities: Arbel, “Cypriot population”, *op. cit.*, p. 203.


\textsuperscript{22} The evidence contained in the major publications mentioned above indicates the general trend: almost half the patrons are local priests often with their families, and monks or nuns, followed by lay patrons. Note, however, that the proportion of lay donors is much higher among works including donor portraits: S. Frigerio-Zeniou, *Luxe et humilité: se vêtir à Chypre au XVI\textsuperscript{e} siècle*, Limassol: Editions Nostos, 2012.

modest timber-roofed church suggests that none of them could afford to cover the entire cost. But the social status of these people should not be forgotten: these are peasant farmers, a class that one does not encounter all too often in association with acts of artistic patronage, even of a collective nature.

Clearly the prevailing economic and social conditions not only allowed but perhaps even encouraged the protracted outburst in artistic and building activity. Indeed, there is adequate evidence suggesting that the Republic and its local representatives facilitated through grants and material assistance the construction and repair of churches, regardless of their rite: this was the case of the much damaged Latin Saint Sophia following the severe earthquake of 1491, but also of the new churches at the Greek monastery of Andreion in Nicosia (1558) and at the village of Ayios Symeon in the Karpas peninsula (1559).\(^\text{24}\)

\(^{24}\) Th. Stavrides, “Ο σεισμός του 1491 στην Κύπρο”, Επετηρίδα Κέντρου
Some of these rural buildings are especially ostentatious and frankly surprising in the scale and quality of their construction and decoration, including their furnishings. The *katholika* of Saint Neophyto near Paphos (Fig. 5) and Saint Mamas at Morphou are a potent case in point (Fig. 6).Although not securely dated, they must have been built at around the same time, during the first half of the 16th century, drawing on resources that benefited from generous patrons.\(^\text{25}\) The innovative layout of these excep-

*Fig. 5. Enkleistra of Saint Neophytos: axonometric section of the katholikon (T. Papacostas)*

*Fig. 6. Church of Saint Mamas, Morphou: view of the nave looking east (T. Papacostas)*
tionally well built vaulted structures in ashlar masonry, with their basilical plan and domed nave, illustrates the rapid developments in the building practices of the period, characterized by a multiplicity of sources of inspiration taking their cue from both the island’s earlier heritage and from contemporary trends in the Italian peninsula (an issue that requires further investigation), just like the figural arts of the period. This is especially evident in the few surviving urban monuments. No juxtaposition of examples illustrates it better than the unashamedly Gothic northern façade of the Hodegetria, the Greek cathedral of Nicosia (Fig. 7), and the Renaissance palace façade on the main square of Famagusta (Fig. 8).26 The chasm that


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Fig. 7. Church of the Hodegetria (Be-desten), Nicosia: the north façade (T. Papacostas)

Fig. 8. Royal Palace, later Palazzo del Provveditore, Famagusta: the east façade on the square (T. Papacostas)
separates these contemporaneous buildings in terms of architectural vocabulary, style and form may of course be due to ideological considerations and to questions of function and audience as well as patronage; but at the same time it is surely symptomatic of a plurality that is nothing less than extraordinary in the context of the relatively narrow confines of Cyprus, and must be contingent upon a significant volume of output that has largely disappeared from the island’s cities, eliminating valuable evidence for contemporary social and cultural trends, including aristocratic patronage.

Concluding remarks – further questions

It must be obvious by now that bringing together the surviving albeit fragmentary evidence highlighted above, especially from rural areas, not only confirms but also amplifies the results of source-based research. It also opens the way for further investigation as it raises several questions. The basis of the relative prosperity of rural areas that the surviving material betrays needs to be further scrutinized, in particular as far as the foothills and valleys of the Troodos massif are concerned; although the sources make abundantly clear that the lowlands produced cereals, sugar, cotton, salt and textiles that constituted the bulk of agricultural, processed and manufactured goods exported from the island, the outlook of the agrarian economy of the afore-mentioned mountainous areas remains less known. As none of the products associated with them (primarily wine and fruit) figures prominently among the exported goods, any surplus must have been ab-
sorbed by the growing local urban markets. Did investments by important landowners (both secular and ecclesiastical) play a determining role, and how did the legal status of the rural population (parici, francomati) and the changes it underwent in the course of this period affect developments? The picture obtaining in the countryside must surely relate to conditions prevailing in the urban centres; yet much of the evidence concerning the built environment of Famagusta or Nicosia has either been irretrievably lost, or awaits to be identified among structures and building phases that are not easy to date. Although considerable progress has been made in that direction in recent years, much remains to be done. The chronology of the developments outlined above also needs to be addressed. In other words, how soon after the transfer of power can they be detected? What was the role of state intervention, of the wider economic climate in the Mediterranean, of the omnipresent Ottoman threat, or perhaps of other hitherto unidentified factors? And was the impact uniform throughout the island and the decades? Future research will hopefully elucidate these issues and provide additional insights. What emerges almost effortlessly from the above, however, is that the architectural and artistic production of the period needs to be taken into account and be placed on an equal footing with the textual evidence as valuable and essential testimony for the fortunes of Venetian Cyprus.