



The Medieval Castle of Paphos

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The castle of Nea Paphos, on the west side of the harbour, was first erected in mid-13th century by the Lusignans to replace the castle at “Saranta Kolones” (“Forty Columns”), which is located approximately 600 meters to the northeast. It is a small fortress, built exclusively of limestone blocks. It is accessed through one gate only on its eastern side and it has very small windows. It consists of a single massive tower surrounded by a curtain wall and a terrace at the level of the top floor. The castle was destroyed shortly before 1570 by the Venetians to prevent it from being used by the Ottoman Turks, who were expected to invade Cyprus. The castle was restored by the Turks in 1592, as stated in a Turkish inscription above the entrance. On the same side of the harbour there are the remains of a second fortress, probably built at the same time with the extant one.

Let us travel back in time, so that we may grasp the significance of this castle for the island’s defences, mainly during the Medieval Period (1192-1489).

Cyprus’s unique geographical position in the maritime domain of the Byzantine Empire, coupled with the aspirations of the newly-consolidated Islamic world, turned the island and the surrounding sea into a theatre of fierce competition between the two superpowers of that era, i.e. Byzantium and the Arabs. Because it found itself at the point of collision between those two worlds, Cyprus became Byzantium’s vanguard and outpost. This also explains why Cyprus was chosen as the first target of Arab naval activity initiated with their 649 A.D. incursions. The Saracen raids continued for more than three centuries and caused the island a great many evils and immeasurable disasters.

The grave dangers facing the island underlined the exigency of enhancing existing fortifications, but also of creating new ones along the coasts.

It is believed that this was precisely the reason that led to the erection, in the second half of the 7th century A.D., of the three castles in the northern mountain range: Kantara, Bufavento and St. Hilarion, since security considerations dictated that both the southern and the northern coasts of Cyprus be fortified. Paphos boasted a castle and towers already in the early

7th century. Although it was no longer the island's capital, Paphos remained an Episcopal see and one of the most significant towns.

The first Arab raid of 649 A.D. wreaked havoc. Houses were looted, the walls and the castle were turned to ruins and churches were razed to the ground. According to a legend, only one small church dedicated to Virgin Mary escaped destruction: it was built on a small elevation in Kato Paphos, around 800 meters from the castle, and at the time of the raid a cloud descended upon it, hence its name, Panagia *Theoskepasti*, i.e. veiled by God.

According to existing sources, between 649 and 965 A.D., Arabs raided Cyprus twenty-four times. It all came to an end, however, when the Byzantines recaptured the island during the reign of emperor Nikephoros Fokas.

There followed a period of peace, when important historical personalities visited Paphos and died there, such as Erik Ejegod (i.e. Evergood), King of Denmark, in 1103, Guelph, Duke of Bavaria, in 1101, and Amadeus, Duke of Savoy, in 1148. According to Cypriot saint Neophytos the Enkleistos, i.e. the hermit, (1134–1219), the castle existed at that time and had a naval yard.

Looting resumed with the conquest of Cyprus by Richard the Lionheart, King of England, in 1191 A.D., according to traveller Jacques le Saige. During the Frankish rule, and specifically in the 14th century, Paphos was repeatedly sacked by the Genovese. Indeed, it was the Genovese that raised the height of the walls around the castle towers, dug a moat and filled it with sea water, thus making them impregnable, according to Leontios Machairas.

These two castles are mentioned by many other travellers who visited Paphos during the Frankish and Venetian occupations (1192–1571). Characteristic among those accounts is Venetian chronicler Marino Sanuto's reference to the two towers which existed at the entrance to the Paphos harbour. However, German traveller Dietrich von Schachten mentioned only one tower in 1491, because the second one had been destroyed by a big earthquake, two months before his arrival at the island.

Fifty years later, these two forts were abandoned for financial reasons and were simply guarded by a small garrison. One of the towers collapsed completely, as evidenced by the account of Czech traveller Oldrich Prefat who in 1546 mentioned only one high rectangular tower.

In 1571, during the reign of sultan Selim II, Cyprus was conquered by the Turks and a pasha was appointed as governor. Paphos became the seat of the regional judge (qadi) and then the Episcopal see of the Bishop of Paphos. No interest was expressed in rebuilding the castle until 1592, when Beilerbei (i.e. governor) Ahmed Pasha initiated extensive restoration works resulting in the extant fortress. Several travellers had since described the surrounding ruins, as well as the castle itself, as insignificant, as did William Turner in 1815, underlining its state of disrepair.

The dark years of Turkish occupation were followed by the British rule. From 1878 onwards, the castle of Paphos was denuded of all its military apparatus, the British flag was put up and the place was turned into a government storage facility for the salt brought by boat from the Larnaca Salt Lake. Twenty years later, High Commissioner Sir Garnet Wolseley visited the castle. He travelled to Paphos on board gunboat *Hussar*, an event which was considered very important in the shipping chronicles of the era. The British governor visited the castle and the salt store and then continued on horseback to Ktima (modern Paphos), where he was officially received at the Government House. At that time, the castle was surrounded by three large stone-built warehouses where products of local and foreign provenance were stored. Nowadays these building have been renovated and are used as fish taverns, shops and exhibition venues.

Let us now examine the castle in greater detail.

Strolling along the wide flagstone walkway recently constructed along the coastal road, we see the imposing castle of Paphos at the end of the picturesque harbour, beyond the small fishing boats and the few pleasure craft.

Going closer, we walk through the pedestrian area flanked by fish taverns and small shops and reach “Castle Square” and the proud castle. We clearly see the upper floor of the tower rising in the centre of the terrace, and the large gate in the middle of the curtain wall, accessible through a stone ramp and bridge. Our gaze is also drawn to the right, to the moat which is still filled with water, especially during the winter months. The moat extends farther to the right, terminating at a modern elevated little theatre. On the other side, 50 meters to the left, we see the ruins of the second medieval tower in the sea, while the walkway leads us to the remains of the early Christian basilica of Panagia Limeniotissa (“Our Lady of the Harbour”).

A white marble relief inscription above the entrance to the castle attracts the eye. It bears witness to the restoration of the medieval castle during the Ottoman rule. It reads:

“By divine grace, the honourable Hafiz Ahmed Pasha of the true Koran (who knows it by heart), built the Castle of Paphos, a robust piece of good religious work. May Allah bless its founder, said Atali1592.”(NB: Atali was the name of the craftsman who sculpted the inscription.)

As we saw above, Ahmed Pasha served as governor of Cyprus; he then became governor of Alexandria, which perhaps explains the existence in Alexandria of a castle similar to the one in Paphos.

In its present form, the castle is fairly well-maintained. It is a 33m L x 17m W x 21m H two-storey structure, with a crenellated roof. The parapet is 2 meters high, with regular crenels from which the defenders could target attackers. The castle’s defences were enhanced with cannons, a fact corroborated in 1806 by Catalan traveller Domingo Badia, who was known as Ali Bey. The top floor of the castle stands out on the terrace. It is 4.5 meters high and its dimensions are approximately 13 x 7 meters.

Going through the gate of the monument, we enter a spacious cruciform hall. Protruding from the floor of the horizontal axis are the curbs of two cisterns for the storage of potable water. At each end of the horizontal axis there is a skylight and an identical wing. On the ground floor there are four dark and

dank windowless rooms, along the sides of the cruciform hall. During the Turkish occupation they were used as cells for long-term convicts. When the British captured the island, the castle was turned into a government storage facility for salt until 1935, at which time the salt was moved to one of the customs warehouses and the castle was declared an Ancient Monument.

Across the entrance, next to the warden's office, there is a stone stairway. By mounting the thirty-one stone and wooden steps we access the upper floor and the terrace.

Twelve small cannons used to protect the castle parapet. They were carried to Turkey in 1878. On the upper floor there are three small rooms. The first room on the left was used as a mosque, whereas the other two were for the guards. During the Turkish occupation the castle used to have a garrison of approximately fifty soldiers. Close to the room on the left, there is another staircase, with seventeen stone steps, leading to the roof of the tower.

The rooftop offers an unobstructed view. Anyone standing guard there would have been able to discern any movement within a long radius and spot enemy ships, thus anticipating any unpleasant developments. Today, the visitor can enjoy the immense blue of the Mediterranean and see as far as the islet of St. George in Peyia bay. From the same vantage point you can see the modern hotels, in a row, the spectacular mountains surrounding the city and the lush green valley with Kouklia in the background. The magnificent combination of sea and mountain is enchanting and the scenery is incomparably beautiful.

Since 1999, the Castle serves as the backdrop for the staging of the Opera during the annual "Aphrodite" festival organized in September by the *Pafos Aphrodite Festival Company* with the participation of 3 municipalities. To date the Company has presented the following operas: *Aida*, *Carmen*, *Nabucco*, *Zorba the Greek*, *Turandot*, *Tosca*, *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *Il Trovatore*, *Madame Butterfly*, *Lakme*, *La Boheme*, and *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*.

The town of Kato Paphos has been added to UNESCO's Cultural Heritage List. Besides the castle, the town boasts numerous significant monuments:

The “Archaeological Park”, where one can visit, among other monuments, the four Roman-era houses (of Orpheus, Theseus, Aion and Dionysos) and admire their unique floor mosaics.

Farther down we see the Lighthouse built during the British rule on the grounds of the acropolis of the 4th century BC Hellenistic town of Paphos.

Next to the Lighthouse are the Odeon, the Agora, and the Byzantine castle known as “Saranta Kolones” (i.e. “Forty Columns”). This castle derives its name from the large number of fragments of granite columns which once dominated the site. Let us stop here for a short while, since this was the fortress that was replaced with the castle of Paphos. It was probably built in late 7th century A.D. to protect the town and harbour of Paphos against Arab raids. Together with the two towers at the harbour and the walls enclosing the city, that fortress constituted the main fortification which protected Paphos and its environs during hard times. The “Saranta Kolones” castle was destroyed by the Arabs in 653-4 A.D. and was rebuilt a few years later. In 688 A.D., however, it was demolished in the framework of the extensive demilitarization agreement between Byzantines and Arabs. It was built again in 965 by the Byzantines and then, in 1191, it was surrendered to Richard the Lionheart. The Lusignans effected various modifications around the end of the 12th century. The castle was completely destroyed by the 1222 earthquake.

Outside the Archaeological Park, at a distance of approximately 850 meters northeast of the castle, we can see St. Paul’s Pillar, the ruins of the Gothic church and of the early Christian basilica of Panagia Chrysopolitissa. This was the first church the Pope visited during his journey to Cyprus on 4 June 2010, tracing the Steps of St. Paul. Continuing north, we come to the ancient theatre of Paphos.

Around 2.5 kilometers northwest of the castle we find the “Tombs of the Kings”, yet another Hellenistic monument added to UNESCO’s Cultural Heritage List. It is a necropolis of the ancient Nea Paphos, built during the 4th century BC.

For the fans of trekking, there is a pedestrian trail along the coastline, starting from the Archaeological Park and reaching the Tombs of the Kings.

Next time your steps bring you to Paphos, the premier tourist destination in Cyprus over recent years, remember to go down to its picturesque harbour and enjoy a visit to the Medieval Castle. An if you love the sea, you can always take a short boat ride or simply rest in the comfortable chairs of a café-restaurant sipping a drink and gazing out to the horizon, where the blue of the sky kisses the blue of the sea.