

Hagiographic Narratives and Archaeological Realities

Revisiting the Beginnings of Christianity in Cyprus

Athanasios Papageorgiou and Nikolas Bakirtzis

In the building complex of Eustolios in Kourion, dating from the turn of the fifth century, a mosaic inscription executed in black tesserae on white background celebrates the patronage of one of the city's foremost citizens.¹ Set in the floor of Eustolios's complex, the inscription seemingly proclaims Christ as the city's guardian, and in his protective role, successor to Phoebos (Apollo) who once guarded Kourion.² The juxtaposition of Christ with Apollo is fascinating, as it links the religious past of the city with its Christian present epitomized and strengthened through Eustolios's patronage.³ As such, much has been written on the inscription in the context of Cyprus's process of Christianization. The very existence of the Eustolios house, prominently exhibiting its patron's Christian identity, stands as a monument to Kourion's and Cyprus's transition from polytheism to Christianity, and the complexity of its society's transformation.

In this context, the reference to Apollo is packed with meaning, requiring further scholarly attention. First, considering the date of Eustolios's project, the memory of the religious legacy of Kourion is rather fresh. According to the inscription, the presence of the city's divine protector Apollo, although in the past, is not a distant faded memory. On the contrary, Phoebos is a cultural reality wor-

¹ Arthur H. S. Megaw, "The Episcopal Precinct at Kourion and the Evidence for the Relocation," in *The Sweet Land of Cyprus. Papers Given at the Twenty-fifth Jubilee Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, ed. Anthony Bryer and Georgios Georghallides (Nicosia: Imprinta Ltd., 1993), 53–67; Hans Hauben, "Christ Versus Apollo in Early Byzantine Kourion?" in *Philomathestatos*, ed. Bart Janssens, Bram Roosen, and Peter van Deun (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 269–84.

² DeCoursey Fales, "Kourion – The Amusement Area," *University Museum Bulletin* 14 (1950): 30–34, pl. VII; Terence Bruce Mitford, *The Inscriptions of Kourion* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1971), 531; Ino Nicolaou, "The Transition from Paganism to Christianity as Revealed in the Mosaic Inscriptions from Cyprus," in *Mosaic: Festschrift for A. H. S. Megaw*, ed. Judith Herrin, Margaret Mullet, and Catherine Otten-Froux (London: British School at Athens, 2001), 14–15; Athanasios Papageorgiou, "Βυζαντινή Επιγραφική στην Κύπρο," in *Κύπρος: Το πολιτιστικό της πρόσωπο διὰ μέσων των αιώνων* (Nicosia: Kentro Meleton Ieras Monis Kykkou, 2003), 100.

³ See also the discussions on the Eustolios house in Henry Maguire and Laura Nasrallah's essays in this volume.

idol to pieces.²⁹ Another time, he entered a temple dedicated to Artemis, or possibly Aphrodite, and chased out its priestess.³⁰

The hagiographical narrative of Tychon's relations with the non-Christian population of Cyprus suggests tension, violence, and animosity between Christians and other religious practitioners. Yet, it is important to explore the historical context of the vita's creation.³¹ It is attributed to patriarch of Alexandria, John the Almsgiver, and is dated in the end of the sixth or beginning of the seventh century. Being from Amathous himself, John assumed the patriarchal seat of the metropolis of Alexandria in 610. It is particularly useful to view John's interest in Tychon and the writing of his vita in the framework of Alexandria's legacy of the persecution of polytheism and idols. The narrative of Tychon's struggles against pagan practices echoes the forceful stance of the church of Alexandria against Jewish and local traditional institutions. Indicatively, the actions of Patriarchs Theophilus and Cyril that led to the destruction of the Serapeum and other pagan institutions in 391, the expulsion of the Jewish population of the city, the alleged burning of what remained of the Library of Alexandria, and the murder of the Neoplatonic philosopher Hypatia in 415 are evocative of an environment of animosity and violence.³²

Besides Tychon, there are other narratives that contribute to a legacy of conflict between Christians and others in the early centuries of Christianity in Cyprus. Most of these stories date from the beginning of the fourth century, a time associated with the persecutions of Christians under Diocletian (284–305), Maximian (286–305), Galerius (305–311), Maximinus II Daia (305–313), and Licinius (308–324).³³ Although there is no concrete historical or archaeological evidence about Christian persecutions in Cyprus during this period, hagiographic narratives suggest otherwise. According to the preserved tradition, Saint Spyridon

²⁹ Usener, *Der heilige Tychon*, 151–52. On the cult of Aphrodite in Cyprus, see Jacqueline Karageorghis, *Kypris: The Aphrodite of Cyprus. Ancient Sources and Archaeological Evidence* (Nicosia: A. G. Leventis Foundation, 2005).

³⁰ Usener, *Der heilige Tychon*, 151.

³¹ Usener, *Der heilige Tychon*, 80–107.

³² Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 128–214, 278–330; Johannes Hahn, “The Conversion of the Cult Statues: The Destruction of the Serapeum in 391 AD and the Transformation of Alexandria into the ‘Christ-Loving’ City,” in *From Temple to Church: Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity*, ed. Johannes Hahn, Stephen Emmel, and Ulrich Gotter, RGRW 163 (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 336–67; Judith S. McKenzie, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt, c. 300 BC to AD 700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 195–203, 244–47. See also Edward J. Watts, *Hypatia: The Life and Legend of an Ancient Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 107–20.

³³ On the history and administration of the island in the third and early fourth centuries, David Potter, “Η Κύπρος επαρχία της Ρωμαϊκής Αυτοκρατορίας,” in Papadopoulos, *Ιστορία της Κύπρου*, 855–60; Johannes Lokin, “Ο πολιτικός και διοικητικός θεσμός της Κύπρου από τον Μεγάλο Κωνσταντίνο έως τον Ιουστινιανό,” in *Ιστορία της Κύπρου*, 3:157–97.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	VII
Abbreviations	IX
<i>Laura Nasrallah</i>	
Introduction (and an Analysis of Religion by Means of the Annex of Eustolios)	1
<i>Charalambos Bakirtzis</i>	
Sea Routes and Cape Drepanon: Excavations at Agios Georgios tis Pegeias, Paphos, Cyprus	25
<i>James Carleton Paget</i>	
Cyprus in the New Testament and Beyond	33
<i>Athanasios Papageorgiou and Nikolas Bakirtzis</i>	
Hagiographic Narratives and Archaeological Realities: Revisiting the Beginnings of Christianity in Cyprus	55
<i>Henry Maguire</i>	
The Gods, Christ, and the Emperor in the Late Antique Art of Cyprus	75
<i>Demetrios Michaelides</i>	
Mosaic Workshops in Cyprus from the Fourth to the Seventh Centuries CE: Two Parallel Lives?	93
<i>Andrew T. Wilburn</i>	
Ritual Specialists and the Curse Tablets from Amathous, Cyprus	111
<i>Andrew S. Jacobs</i>	
Epiphanius's Library	133
<i>Young Richard Kim</i>	
Cypriot Autocephaly, Reconsidered	153

VI

AnneMarie Luijendijk

The Gospel of Matthew in the Acts of Barnabas through the Lens
of a Book's History: Healing and Burial with Books 169

Ioli Kalavrezou

The Cyprus Treasures since their Discovery: A Re-Evaluation 195

Stephanos Efthymiadis

The Cult of Saints in Late Antique Cyprus and the Apostolicity
of its Churches: The Testimony of Greek Hagiography 211

Marina Solomidou-Ieronymidou and Giorgos Philotheou

The Representation and Memory of Saints Paul, Barnabas, Epiphanius,
and Others on Wall Paintings of Byzantine and Medieval Cyprus 225

Bibliography 237

Figures 271

Subject Index 317