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Cyprus

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Strabo described Cyprus as "second to none of the islands of the Mediterranean: it is rich in wine and oil, produces grain in abundance and possesses extensive copper mines…." (14.6.5). Geographical proximity placed Cyprus within the orbit of the Levant; currents and winds situated the island in the flow of peoples and ideas between the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean. But at the same time, Cyprus' insularity and large size fostered idiosyncratic developments. This tension—between native and imported ideas, and invention in a middle ground—informs studies of ancient Cyprus.

Sources and Historical Outline.

Archaeology plays a primary role in our understanding of ancient Cyprus, even in the historical periods. Writing first appeared on Cyprus at the start of the Late Bronze Age (1650–1050 BCE), but the script—a curious mixture of Aegean and Near Eastern traits—has not yet been deciphered. The cuneiform, Phoenician, and Cypro-Syllabic, and many Greek and Latin inscriptions of the Archaic, Classical, and Roman periods offer names, places, organizations, and formulae, but in total only a few sentences of narrative. No internal accounts of Cypriot ancient history exist. References to the island or its inhabitants in external texts offer only glimpses of the island's affairs. Nevertheless, they provide the framework of a political history: Cyprus' incorporation into the Assyrian empire (707 BCE) and a brief period of Egyptian rule (c. 570–526/25) during the Archaic period; unsuccessful uprisings against Persian rule (525–333); its submission to Alexander and eventual annexation (294) into the Ptolemaic kingdom; its appropriation by Rome in 58; a brief interval again in the Ptolemaic orbit (presented to Cleopatra VII first by Julius Caesar, then Mark Antony); and incorporation into the Roman Empire after Actium, first as part of the province of Syria, and then as a senatorial province in 22, a status it held until 395 CE, when Cyprus was allocated to the eastern half of the Roman Empire. *Pax Romana* was marred only by a violent Jewish uprising in 115–116 CE and major earthquakes in 15 BCE and 76/77 CE.

Ancient Cyprus was never directly part of the Greek political world. Cimon failed in his attempt to make it so in 450/49. Athens formally renounced all claims in the King's Peace (Antalkidas, 387/86), in which she acknowledged Persian sovereignty over Asia and Cyprus. Nevertheless, Hellenic influence looms large from at least the eleventh century, when an influx of Greek immigrants can be identified in the archaeological record. Despite Assyrian, Egyptian, and Persian rule, Greek is the predominant language of Archaic and Classical inscriptions and it continued to be the lingua franca of Ptolemaic Cyprus and the Roman East. Pottery, sculpture, the iconography of coins, the names and images of Cypriot deities all indicate continuing and strong ties with the Aegean throughout the long*durée* of Cypriot ancient history.

Bronze Age through Archaic.

The Late Bronze Age is characterized by the first appearance of monumental architecture, urban settlements, and burials wealthy with imported exotica. In exchange, Cypriots exported copper and ceramics and served as a conduit for raw materials and finished goods. Mycenaean ceramics, Cretan architectural features, and aspects of the writing system indicate strong Aegean connections. The archives of Egypt, Syria, and Anatolia make evident that Alashiya (a toponym accepted by most scholars as referring to all or part of Cyprus) was fully integrated into the network of diplomatic and economic interrelationships of the eastern Mediterranean littoral.

That entire system crashed circa 1200 and the havoc wreaked elsewhere affected Cyprus, too. Widespread abandonments and destructions of the twelfth century are often attributed to the "Sea Peoples," a shorthand designation for a constellation of causes and refractions whose nature continues to be elusive. The first substantial wave of Greek immigrants may have come to Cyprus at this time.

Certainly they arrived in the eleventh century. As elsewhere, the "Dark Age" of Cyprus is turning out not to have been so dark. It was, rather, a period of new technologies, new overseas ties, new settlements. Greek myth attributes these new foundations to heroes of Troy, stopping en route home. And certainly there is evidence for ties with Greece, most fundamentally in the adoption of the Greek language. As in the case of Cyprus' Bronze Age script, with its Aegean affinities, the association of native Iron Age script (Cypro-Syllabic) with the geographically distant Greek Arcadian dialect is an interesting puzzle, given the proximity of Cyprus to the Levant and the expanding Phoenicians.

The earliest indisputable evidence for Phoenician presence on Cyprus is a tomb inscription dating to circa 850. By 800, Phoenician inscriptions are common especially at Kition, and by the fifth and fourth centuries they are widely distributed. Many are dedications and from them we learn names not only of individuals but also of divinities worshipped on Cyprus, for example, Astarte, Baal, and Melqart. Bilinguals are important indicators of associations made across cultures, for example, Aphrodite-Astarte and Apollo-Reshef. Archaeology fills in the wider context of inscriptions; burials, pottery, architectural spaces, and religious offerings in stone and terracotta form the basis for discussions of Phoenician presence and interaction with other populations on the island.

Phoenicians may have facilitated economic and political relations between Cyprus and Assyria. A stele of Sargon II found at Kition signifies that Cyprus was under Assyrian political control by the end of the eighth century. Assyrians are traditionally portrayed as a ruthless military power but recent reevaluations of texts and archaeological materials suggest that Assyrian control of Cyprus may have been indirect and not inordinately onerous, for the seventh century was a period of prosperity for the island. The relationship continued until the fall of Nineveh (c.612).

An inscription (673/72) erected by the Assyrian king Esarhaddon lists ten Cypriot rulers and later texts add two more names. These twelve city-kingdoms remained the basis for Cypriot political organization until the Hellenistic period. Numismatic, epigraphic, architectural, and funerary evidence suggests that the political divisions were also cultural: for example, Salamis had Greek associations, whereas inscriptions and tombs at Amathus indicate a strong native (Eteocypriot) presence, and Kition had long-standing ties with Phoenicia.

Contact with Egypt spiked during the reign of Amasis (Ahmose II; r. 570–526) when Herodotus (2.182.2) reports that the Egyptian pharaoh "seized Cyprus, the first man to do so, and compelled it to pay tribute." Certain inscriptions and texts can be interpreted as confirming Herodotus' account, but the relationship may have been less hostile than he portrays. Artistic styles and iconography, such as Egyptianizing Hathor-head capitals found on the island, indicate lively exchange among artisans of the two cultures.

Classical and Roman Periods.

Whatever the formal association with Egypt, it came to an end circa 526/25, when Cyprus was made part of Persia's fifth satrapy. Cyprus paid tribute to Persia, but Persian interference with internal affairs was apparently minimal. Cypriot coins, first minted at this time, were all based on the Persian weight standard, but each city-kingdom had its own mint and the iconography and script of their distinctive issues varied greatly. Identifiable Persian influences are rare in the archaeological record. Conversely, freedom of movement within the empire intensified contact with the wider Greek world and Greek influences are easily perceived in the art, architecture, and religion of fifth- and fourth-century Cyprus. In collaboration with Greeks, Cyprus several times revolted against Persian rule. Kings of Salamis played particularly active roles, Onesilos in 499 and Evagoras from 411 to 380.

Coins issued in 306 commemorate Demetrius I Poliorcetes' defeat of Ptolemy, but from 294 Cyprus became firmly incorporated into the Ptolemaic kingdom and cultural sphere. As never before, a foreign power invested in formal symbols of authority. The city-kingdoms ceased to exist. Administration was organized as a military command under overall control of a *stratēgos*, with a garrison posted at each town. Nea Paphos, the closest port of call for ships sailing from Egypt, was made capital and remained so through the end of the Roman period. The mints (now reduced to four) issued coinage at the behest of Ptolemaic authority, their individual marks of identity reduced to subsidiary symbols. Inscriptions attest to the busy activities of the Koinon of Cypriots, an organization dedicated to promoting worship of the ruling Ptolemy. Arsinoë II, wife of Ptolemy II, was particularly popular. Archaeological finds add depth and nuance to the information provided by coins and inscriptions. Alexandrian influences filtered into common culture, but did not overwhelm the existing amalgam of Phoenician, Greek, and native features. So, for example, the cult of Aphrodite at Soloi incorporated Serapis (or Sarapis), but at Tamassos Aphrodite continued to be linked with Astarte and Cybele, and worship at Kaphizin remained centered on a local deity.

Roman Cyprus has traditionally been characterized as a region of stagnant isolation. But theoretical and archaeological approaches have shifted. Now the peripheries and intersections are privileged. Thus studies of the sanctuaries, tombs, civic and private architecture, sculptures, mosaics, jewelry, and pottery of Roman Cyprus currently flourish, adding vitally to the continuing questions of Cypriot cultural history: defining native, foreign, and local, and their shifting interfaces within the island.

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