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Mediaeval Graffiti in the Church of St. Solomomi in
Paphos, Cyprus (pl. 54)

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MEDIAEVAL GRAFFITI IN THE CHURCH
OF ST. SOLOMONI IN PAPHOS, CYPRUS

(PL. 54)

The purpose of the following study is to record the mediaeval occidental graffiti in the Cave-church of St. Solomoni in Paphos, Cyprus. In terms of the historical studies of the mediaeval pilgrimages to the Holy Land in general and to Cyprus in particular, only little attention has so far been focused upon the graffiti of the pilgrims. True, over the centuries many graffiti have suffered so severely that they have become almost illegible, and yet, here and there, the task of the mediaevalist may be supported by a date or a name scratched into the plaster of the walls of a church or a monastery.

For the mediaeval pilgrims to the Holy Land, Sinai, Egypt and Cyprus, it was customary to engrave either one's name preferably one's coat of arms in the walls of a sanctuary or pilgrimage site. Thus, for example, in the Monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai¹, in the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem², in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem³, and in the Coptic Monasteries of SS. Antony and Paul in the Egyptian Red Sea Desert⁴, occidental pilgrims from the XIVth to the XVIIIth century have registered their presence.

We know from the Itineraries of the mediaeval pilgrims, that the galleys were accustomed to anchor at Larnaca, where they loaded up with "lovely salt, white as crystal, in fine pieces like tiles, four or six fingers thick" from the salt lake at Larnaka⁵. From here, the pilgrims

1. R a b i n o, M.H.L., *Le Monastère de Sainte - Catherine (Mont Sinai). Souvenirs épigraphiques des anciens pèlerins*, Bulletin de la Société Royale de Géographie d'Égypte 19, 1935, pp. 21-126.

2. M e i n a r d u s, O., *The Mediaeval Graffiti in the Monasteries of SS. Antony and Paul*, *Studia Orientalia Christiana Aegyptiaca*, *Collectanea* 11, 1966, p. 516.

3. V i n c e n t, H. and A b e l, F.M., *Bethléem. Le Sanctuaire de la Nativité*, Paris 1914, p. 189, pl. XIX.

4. M e i n a r d u s, O., *op. cit.* pp. 519-527.

5. S c h e f e r, C.h. (ed.), *Voyage de la Sainte Cyté de Hierusalem. Recueil de Voyages et de Documents pour servir à l'Histoire de la Géographie*, Paris 1882, vol. II, p. 104.

used to visit the Monastery of Stavronoumi, the Monastery of the Holy Cross, where they venerated the relic of the Cross of Dysmas the penitent thief⁶. Sometimes, when the galleys anchored for any length of time, the pilgrims would roam around the island to explore any additional holy places, which would also include Paphos, because of its relationship to St. Paul's ministry and preaching which resulted in the conversion of Sergius Paulus, the Roman governor of the island⁷.

The Cave - church of St. Solomoni in Paphos belongs to one of the most ancient churches in Cyprus. St. Solomoni (Hannah) was the mother of seven children, who suffered torture and martyrdom for their faith in Jehovah during the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanus in 186 B.C.⁸ On the 1st of August, the Greek Orthodox Church commemorates St. Solomoni and her seven sons, when a special service is conducted in this church in their memory.

During the Hellenistic period, the rock - hewn subterranean site was probably used as a necropolis. According to a local tradition, this particular site served also as the place of an ancient synagogue of the Paphian Jews⁹. Following the conversion of this region to the Christian Faith, it is said that this cave was used by hermits, though after the IVth century anchorites ceased to live in the proximity of towns¹⁰. Our knowledge of the history of this church is limited to the archaeological evidence of the site. Philippou and Burmester attribute the frescoes of the church to the IXth century¹¹, which would mean that they belong to the earliest examples of wall - paintings on the island. They represent the Doctors of the Church, and in the apse, there is a slightly later fresco representing the *Μελισμός τοῦ Χριστοῦ*, the Dismemberment of Christ's Body or the Distribution of the Holy Eucharist. Here, Christ is represented standing in a chalice and on either side, he is attended by two angels holding back a veil¹².

6. Felix Fabri, *The Wanderings of Felix Fabri*. Transl. A. Stewart, London 1892-1897, Vol. VII, pp. 194-195.

7. Acts XIII: 1-12.

8. II Maccabees VII.

9. Keshishian, Kevork K., *Romantic Cyprus*, Nicosia 1967, p. 88.

10. Philippou, Loizos and Burmester, O.H.E. KHS-, *Paphos, the Birth Place of Aphrodite and the most Attractive District of Cyprus*, Nicosia 1948, pp. 26-27.

11. *Ibid.*

12. I regret to say that the wall-paintings of this church are neither referred to by Andreas and Judith Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus*, Ni-

Throughout the Middle Ages, Paphos suffered severely from devastations by nature and from marauding pirates. When Ludolph von Suchem (1336-1341) travelled to the Orient, he merely remarked that "Paphos is the oldest city in Cyprus, it lies on the seashore opposite Alexandria, and is well nigh destroyed by frequent earthquakes"¹³. Indeed, the number of occidental pilgrims visiting Paphos was very small. Only, if compelled by circumstances beyond their control did the pilgrim ships from Venice anchor at Paphos, as Friar Felix Fabri so pointedly remarked: "The third see is Paphos, the oldest of all the cities of Cyprus. It is now desolate, no longer a city, but a miserable village built over the ruins; on this account the harbour too is abandoned, and the ships only enter it when forced to do so, as was our fate. As the city was laid low by an earthquake so it lies still, and no king nor bishop gives a hand to raise it up again"¹⁴.

By the XVIth century, the town must have regained some of its former prestige, and also the Church of St. Solomoni was considered as one of the principal sites of Paphos to be visited by pilgrims. According to Denis Possot (1533), Paphos was identified by men "as the site of the martyrdom of the Maccabees". Undoubtedly, we have here a reference to the dedication of the Church of St. Solomoni and to her seven sons who suffered martyrdom during the Maccabean Revolt¹⁵. An interesting reference regarding the Church of St. Solomoni is supplied by the famous traveller Richard Pococke, who visited the Orient in the fourth decade of the XVIIIth century. In his "Description of the East", Pococke mentions that "near the cistern before referred to there is a church under ground cut out of the rock, dedicated to the Seven Sleepers, and in the town there are ruins of several churches, and houses, most of which are uninhabited"¹⁶. It is interesting to note here the transference from the Seven Maccabean Youths, who suffered martyrdom at the time of Antiochus Epiphanus, to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, who at the time of the Decian Persecution (249-251 A.D.) refused publicly to offer sacrifices to idols. Afraid of the consequences of their demonstrative refusal, they took refuge in a mountain nearby

cosia 1964, nor by A. Papageorgiou, *Masterpieces of the Byzantine Art of Cyprus*, Nicosia 1965.

13. Cobham, Claude D., *Excerpta Cypria. Materials for a History of Cyprus*, Cambridge 1908, p. 18.

14. *Ibid.* p. 45.

15. *Ibid.* p. 64.

16. Pococke, R., *A Description of the East*, London 1745, vol. II, p. 226.

and fell asleep in a deep cavern. Some 150 to 200 years later, the young men rose from sleep and, feeling hungry, sent one of their number to go cautiously into the town to buy something to eat. The youth found what he wanted and offered for payment the old pagan imperial coin. The city of Ephesus being at that time entirely Christian found the story significant enough to contact the Emperor. In the meantime, however, the youths really died, but their bodies remain incorrupt.

Still, Paphos remained a second class town, and the references to it by occidental travellers are very scarce. Mariti's comment (1769) is only in so far significant as it substantiates the desperate situation of the town. "Pafo, which is written in the maps as Bafo, is no longer a city such as historians described it, having been more than once destroyed. It had a harbour, and even now vessels coming to load here anchor outside, but only in summer, for it is the most dangerous roadstead in the island, exposed and with a bad and rocky bottom, which does great damage to the cables, which are sometimes cut through. The only building of Christian times is the Church of St. George, now used by the Greeks" ¹⁷.

In view of these statements the occidental graffiti in the Church of St. Solomoni are even more significant, since they testify to the fact that in spite of these unfavourable circumstances, Western pilgrims went to this church in order to venerate either St. Solomoni and her seven sons, or, what seems to be more likely, the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, whose relics were highly venerated in the Church of San Sebastiano in Rome, and which were later transferred to that of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome, where they remain at present ¹⁸.

The graffiti in the Cave - church of St. Solomoni are scratched into the plaster of the south wall and the northern part of the east wall of the church. They are silent witnesses that in addition to the veneration of this site by the Greek population, also occidental pilgrims considered this church worthy of their visit ¹⁹. We distinguish two different kinds of graffiti in this church. There are those in Gothic characters, which

17. Mariti, Giovanni, *Travels in the Island of Cyprus*, Transl. Claude D. Cobham, Nicosia 1895, p. 103.

18. Žužić, M., *A Short History of St. John in Ephesus*, Lima Ohio 1960, p. 81.

19. Outside the cave there is another subterranean cave containing a well of holy water, which is believed to be beneficial to those suffering from malaria. On the tree at the top of the steps which lead down to the church people hang rags from their garments on the branches as votive offerings!

are found on the northern part of the eastern wall of the church (pl. 54 a). These graffiti should be assigned to the late XIVth and XVth century. They are severely damaged and partly covered with plaster. In fact, it seems impossible to identify more than one or two names, though the remains of at least eight different graffiti are recognizable. These graffiti resemble in many ways those scratched into the plaster of the walls of the Church of St. Paul the Theban in the Monastery of St. Paul and of the Church of St. Antony in the Monastery of St. Antony in the Red Sea Desert of Egypt. There is the name of "chamball" which is clearly legible. Below this graffiti, we can identify the letters ". . o . . llre".

The graffiti in capital Latin characters, which are scratched into the plaster of the southern wall of the church ought to be assigned to the XVIIth century (pl. 54 b). These graffiti extend over ten lines and the letters are more or less legible, though here and there it seems that the pilgrims were unable to complete their purpose. There is the name of MARC ABRACH, which stands by itself above the nimbus of a church father. In the second line, we read the letters ANBE, and in the third line the name IA DELAHAYE. While the name Delahaye is, of course, a very common French name, it is nevertheless possible that this graffito was scratched by the same Delahaye who engraved his name on the wooden door of the original Latin pilgrim hostel, the old Casa Nova, of the Custody of the Holy Land in Jerusalem²⁰. In the third, fourth and fifth line, there are three graffiti, partly illegible, which include the letters FRE, standing probably for "frère". Thus we read TI FRE.. TE.., IUL.. FRE and L FRE. To the right of the last graffito, though in smaller lettering, there are the capital letters BEL... On the sixth line, there are two letters TE and the only date, namely 1611. The seventh line shows the name BERNART, again a very common name, which should not be confused with FR BERNARD, who left his graffiti on the haikal - screens of the Church of St. Mark in the Monastery of St. Antony²¹. The eighth and ninth line show three unfinished graffiti, namely PGA ... PELE and BELN. The tenth line, which stands by itself considerably below the other graffiti has the name DE MARIS.

20. The wooden door with the large number of pilgrim graffiti from 1600-1850 is now within the Franciscan Monastery of St. Saviour. The room, in which the door is found, is now the tailorshop of the Custody of the Holy Land.

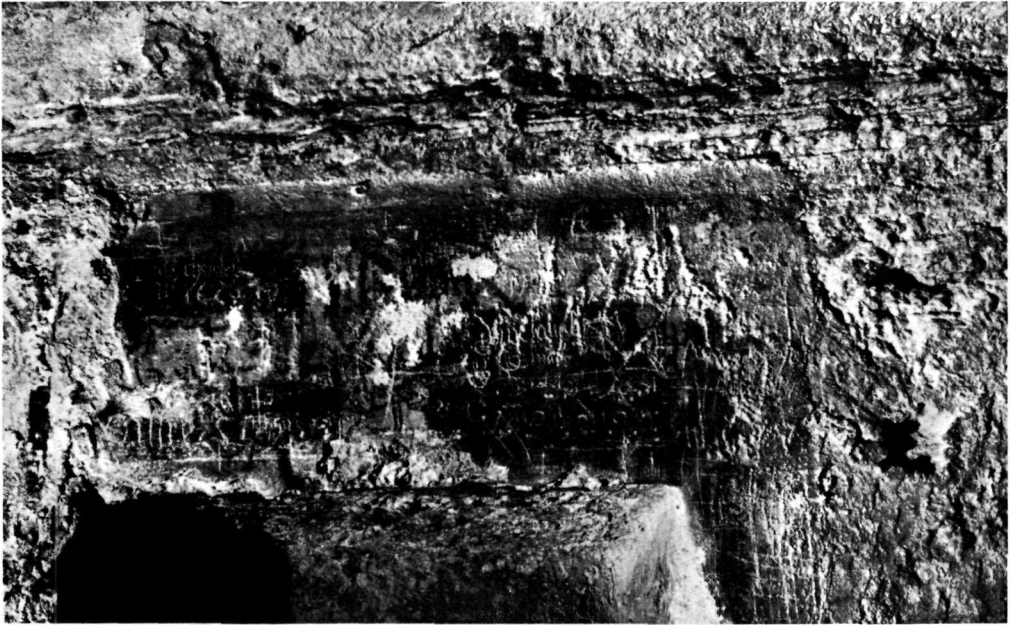
21. Me in a r d u s, O., loc. cit.

We may assume from the arrangement of the graffiti, that, except for the graffito of MARC ABRACH, all the other persons belonged to one particular group of pilgrims, including both religious and lay, who in the year 1611 were on their way to or from the Holy Land, and for some reason or another were held up in Paphos, at which occasion they visited the Church of St. Solomoni.

The two types of graffiti, therefore, belong to two distinct eras in the history of Cyprus. The XIVth and XVth century graffiti fall into the period of the end of the Lusignian dynasty and the beginning of the Venetian occupation of the Island, whereas the XVIIth century graffiti fall into the period of the Turkish domination of Cyprus. Throughout the Middle Ages, irrespective of the government of the Island, this small subterranean church served as a significant pilgrimage site for the occidental pilgrims on their way to the East.

Athens

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a. XIVth - XVth cent. graffiti. Church of St. Solomoni, Paphos, Cyprus.



b. XVIIth cent. graffiti. Church of St. Solomoni, Paphos, Cyprus.