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The Siege of Nicosia of 1570 in the Poetic Armenian Vision of *The Lament of the Island of Cyprus* and in the Italian Historical Narratives

The Ottoman Empire well realized that bringing the region of the Eastern Mediterranean under its control was vital to their interests. By the year 1570 and following the conquests under its benevolent and far-sighted ruler, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–1566), the Empire had reached the summit of its power and splendour. The Ottomans conquered Anatolia only 60 km to the north of Cyprus, the Levantine coast to the East and Mameluke Egypt to the South. With Rhodes taken from the Knights of St. John in 1522 and Chios from the Genoans in 1566, they had total domination of the Aegean, and in the eastern Mediterranean only Crete and Cyprus remained out of their hands. Especially in case of Cyprus, strategically located on the route between Egypt and Istanbul and in the midst of the Ottoman territory, its conquest by the Ottomans was only a matter of time.

In the sixteenth century Cyprus was ruled by Venice, which had gradually assumed control of the territories vital to its trade interest in the eastern Mediterranean. Venice assumed direct control over Cyprus in 1489, when the last queen of Cyprus, a Venetian Catarina Cornaro, was persuaded to abdicate, thus allowing Signory to take over the island. Cyprus was still, however, under the suzerainty of the Mameluke Sultans of Egypt who were Moslems, and Venetians had to pay an annual tribute to them which was devoted to Mecca and Medina. With the Ottoman conquest of Egypt, the tribute continued to be paid to Constantinople. The relations between the Venetians and the Ottomans had never been easy. Open hostilities had first taken place already in 1427. Subsequent conflicts took place in 1463–79, 1499–1503 and 1537–40. When in 1539 Limassol was raided, the Venetians were forced to renegotiate a treaty with the Ottomans and they managed to maintain their rule over Cyprus for the next thirty years by bribing the Ottoman officials in Constantinople.

In the 1560's the long standing Ottoman plans to take Cyprus became obvious. At the same time, the bad administration of the island caused great disaffection among the population, which in 1562 led to a rebellion led by James Diassorinos, a cousin of the despot of Moldavia, who conspired with a Cypriot captain of horse, Megaducos,

to seize the island with Turkish help. And a delegation of Cypriot Orthodox serfs went to Constantinople to beg that they would prefer Ottoman rule to that of the Venetians, believing that under Turks they would achieve their freedom, denied by the Roman Catholic Frankish and Venetian masters. In 1566 again, some Cyprus exiles discussed with the sultan the possibility of a Turkish conquest. The fact that islanders were prepared to conspire with the Ottomans showed how little loyalty or association they felt for the Venetians. The stage for the conflict known in history as the Fourth Ottoman-Venetian war, and of which the conquest of Cyprus was only the first phase, was set.¹

The sources for the history of the siege of Nicosia, which started the conquest of Cyprus, are quite numerous and they come from both the Western and Oriental authors.² The most objective of these and quite rich in detail, seems to be the work of Giovanni Pietro Contarini;³ then comes the well-informed work of the official historian of Venice, Paolo Paruta,⁴ *De Bello Cyprio* by bishop Antonmaria Graziani, the Papal Nuncio organizing the Holy League,⁵ and Natale Conti's *Historie*.⁶ Quite useful and detailed is also the work of Umberto Foglietta, a Genoese noble, who in his history of the reign of Selim II included an account of the siege of Nicosia.⁷ But the most interesting, if not necessarily the most objective, are the accounts of eye-witnesses. First of all, there is the account of Angelo Calepio, a friar, who was among the

¹ The best analysis of the successive stages of the war is given in K. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant, 1204–1571*, vol. 4, Philadelphia 1984, IV: *The Sixteenth Century from Julius III to Pius V*, pp. 923–1104, and of the conquest of Cyprus in George Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, vol. 3, Cambridge 1948: *The Frankish Period, 1432–1571*, pp. 844–1040.

² Only the sources connected with the subject matter of this presentation will be mentioned here. The best discussion of the sources is given by Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, 3: 1149–1155, and Cobham in his edition of *Giovanni Mariti, Travels in the Island of Cyprus, translated from the Italian of Giovanni Mariti. With Contemporary Accounts of the Sieges of Nicosia and Famagusta*, transl. C. D. Cobham, Cambridge 1909, pp. 163–168. *Excerpta Cyprica. Materials for a History Of Cyprus*, transl. C. D. Cobham, Cambridge 1908, pp. 484–486, gives also a bibliography of narratives dealing with the siege of Nicosia.

³ *Historia delle cose successe dal principio della guerra mossa da Selim Ottomano a' Venetiani, fino al dì della gran Giornata Vittoriosa contra Turchi* Venetia 1572. The parts describing the siege of Nicosia were printed in English translation in *Mariti's Travels*, pp. 169–175.

⁴ *Storia della Querra di Cipro, Libri tre*, Siena 1827, pp. 92–122; “made English” by Henry Carey, second Earl of Monmouth, *The history of Venice : written originally in Italian, by Paulo Paruta, Procurator of St. Mark. To which is added the Wars of Cyprus. By the same author. Wherein the famous sieges of Nicossia, and Famagosta, and battel of Lepanto are contained* London 1658, Book I, Part II: pp. 46–60.

⁵ Antonmaria Graziani (1537–1611), *De Bello Cyprio*, Roma 1624. Translated into English by Robert Midgley London 1687, it was edited by C. Cobham as *The Sieges of Nicosia and Famagusta* London 1899.

⁶ Natale Conti, *Delle historie de suoi tempi*, transl. G. C. Saraceni, 2 parts, Venetia 1589.

⁷ Umberto Foglietta, *De Sacro foedere in Selimum* (pre-1581). The parts describing the siege of Nicosia were printed in English translation by C. Cobham in Umberto Foglietta, *The Sieges of Nicosia and Famagusta in Cyprus*, London 1903.

defenders of Nicosia, being in 1570 Superior of the Dominican Convent in Nicosia. He was taken prisoner but later ransomed. After his return to Cyprus he wrote his account of the sieges of Nicosia and Famagusta.⁸ Another eye-witness account of the siege of Nicosia was written by Giovanni Sozomeno, a Cypriot engineer, who saw one of his daughters murdered and the other taken slave by the Turks. He himself was taken prisoner, ransomed himself and returning to Venice wrote in 1571 a report addressed to the Grand Duke of Tuscany.⁹

Apart from the accounts of the siege of Nicosia written in prose, there are also some written in verse. The most important of these is the *Θρήνος της Κύπρου* [Lament on Cyprus]¹⁰ in rhyming verse by a contemporary *poietaris*, which includes some interesting details.¹¹ Some literary critics attribute the *Lament* to Solomon Rodinos (1516–1586),¹² whereas others claim that his authorship is not acceptable.¹³ Its rude, 777 rhyming verses of 15 syllables, describe the siege of Nicosia and the beginning of the siege of Famagusta, with occasional didactic and moralising elements.¹⁴ The author laments not only the destruction of Cyprus, but also deplors

⁸ Angelo Calepio, *Vera et fidelissima narracione del successo dell'espugnatione, and defensione del Regno de Cipro*, which was added to Stefano Lusignano, *Chorografia et breve historia universal dell'isola de Cipro principiando al tempo di Noe per in fino al 1571*, Bologna 1571, f. 93-112. It was translated into English by C. Cobham, in *Excerpta Cypria*, pp. 125–148.

⁹ Giovanni Sozomeno, *Narracione della Guerra di Nicosia fatta nel Regno di Cipro da' Turchi l'anno 1570*, Bologna 1571. Printed in English in *Excerpta Cypria*, pp. 81–87.

¹⁰ It was discovered by Simon Menardos in 1903 and printed as *Θρήνος της Κύπρου* [Lament on Cyprus], [in:] *Δελτίον της Ιστορικής και Εθνολογικής Εταιρείας της Ελλάδος* [Bulletin of the Historical and Ethnological Society of Greece], 6 (1906): 405–432, text at pp. 407–31.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 405–406.

¹² Eg. Bruce Merry, *Encyclopedia of Modern Greek Literature*, Westport, NC, 2004, s.v. Cyprus, p. 92; *Prose et poésie chypriotes : VIIe siècle av. J. C. – XXe siècle : anthologie bilingue*, ed. Josette Doron and Anna Olvia Jacovides-Andrieu, Paris 1994, p. 41; Matthias Kappler, *Towards a Common Turkish and Greek Literary History in Ottoman Cyprus*, [in:] *Ottoman Cyprus. A Collection of Studies on History and Culture*, ed. Michais N. Michael et al., Wiesbaden 2009, pp. 285–297, at pp. 291.

¹³ Cf. Kostas Prousis, *Τα ιστορικά Κυπριακά τραγούδια. Ανατυπωση' απο Τις "Κυπριακες Σπουδες"* [Historical Cypriot Songs. Reprinted from *Cypriot Studies*], 7 (1943), Nicosia 1945, pp. 26–9, especially 27, n. 18.

¹⁴ See C.D. Cobham's note in *Giovanni Mariti, Travels in the Island of Cyprus, translated from the Italian of Giovanni Mariti. With Contemporary Accounts of the Sieges of Nicosia and Famagusta*, transl. C. D. Cobham, Cambridge 1909, pp. 166–167. Immediately after the conquest, there were texts written also in Turkish, praising the conquerors of Nicosia and Famagusta, called *Gazevât-nâme*, stories and chronicles. Matthias Kappler, *Towards a Common Turkish and Greek Literary History in Ottoman Cyprus*, [in:] *Ottoman Cyprus. A Collection of Studies on History and Culture*, ed. Michais N. Michael et al., Wiesbaden 2009, pp. 285–297, at pp. 290–291.

the loss of his son and daughter taken by the Turks. The poem does not have much historical value, but is the only known account written by an Orthodox Cypriot.¹⁵

Θρήνος της Κύπρου belongs to a large group of the numerous literary compositions inspired by the fall or destruction of cities, which in Greek are called *thrēnoi*.¹⁶ The tradition of the laments for cities goes back at least to Aeschylus,¹⁷ and is alive even today, but it became widespread with the gradual collapse of the Byzantine Empire, especially the tragic fall of Constantinople in 1453.¹⁸

Θρήνος της Κύπρου has been known to historians for over one hundred years, but there has recently appeared an English translation of another poem belonging to the same group and on the same subject, which was originally written in Armenian and thus was not easily available to the students of Cyprus history. This poem was written by Nikoghayos Stampoltsi (Nicholas of Constantinople), an Armenian poet who was probably born in Constantinople. During his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1570, he witnessed the initial stages of the conquest of Cyprus. As the result of this experience he wrote the “Lament on the Island of Cyprus”.¹⁹ The poem consists of 28 four-line stanzas with all but two at the end of the poem, having “As punishment for all their sins” as the last line. Thus, the poet is of the opinion that the tragedies of Cyprus befell its inhabitants at the hands of the infidels as the result of their sins. This moralizing tone, by no means original in laments,²⁰ may have been influenced by the example of the Book of Job and Lamentations.

In the year one thousand, Armenian era,

¹⁵ But see a 55-verse poem *Ασμα της Κύπρου πτώσεως υπό τους Οθωμανούς* [Song of the Fall of Cyprus under the Ottomans], printed in A. A. Sakkelarinos, *Τα Κυπριακά ήτοι πραγματεία περί γεωγραφίας, αρχαιολογίας, στατιστικής, ιστορίας, μυθολογίας και διαλέκτου της Κύπρου* [On Cyprus, that is, treatise on geography, archeology, statistics, history, mythology and dialect of Cyprus], 2 vols., Athens, 1890–1, 2: 55–7, which was discussed in Filios Zantetos, *Ιστορία της Νήσου Κύπρου από της Αγγλικής Κατοχής Μέχρι Σήμερα* [History of the Island of Cyprus from the English Occupation until now], 3 vols., Larnaka 1910–12, 1: 1018–20.

¹⁶ See Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, revised by Dimitrios Yatromanolakis and Panagiotis Roilos, 2nd edn, Oxford 2002, especially chap. 5: *The Historical Lament for the Fall or Destruction of Cities*.

¹⁷ E.g. *Persians*, verses 249–52.

¹⁸ E.g. *Άλωσης της Κωνσταντινουπόλεως* [Capture of Constantinople] and *Ανακάλημα της Κωνσταντινόπολης* [A Lament for Constantinople], ed. E. Kriaras, *Earlier Texts of Modern Greek Literature* 4, Thessaloniki 2002.

¹⁹ The original Armenian text entitled “Voghb Ghprozi kghzuyn asatsyal é” is printed in *Ush mijnadari Hay banasteghtzutiune, XVI-XVII dd.* [Armenian Poetry of the late Middle Ages, XVIth-XVIIth century], 2 vols. Yerevan 1986–7, 1: 358–64, and the English translation is given in *The Heritage of Armenian Literature*, ed. Agop J. Hacıkyan *et al*, 4 vols., Detroit 2002, vol. 2: *From the Sixth to the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 776–782.

²⁰ Cf. the beginning of another Armenian lament:

In the year nine hundred and two [i.e. AD 1453],
In bitter and in wicked times,
The Lord was angered much again
By the Greek and Rum nation.

And nineteen years on top of that,²¹
 Calamity struck the island
 As punishment for all their sins.

Enthroned in the Turkish nation,
 Sultan Selim was sovereign;
 He planned evil deeds for Cyprus,
 As punishment for all their sins.

In 1566 Suleiman was succeeded by his son, Selim II, called by Ottoman historians “Selim the Sallow” (Sari Selim) and “Selim the Drunkard” (Sarhos Selim), and by Western historians “Selim the Sot”. Selim had already coveted Cyprus in his father’s lifetime and some claimed that at least one of his reasons to want Cyprus was his attraction to its wines and liqueurs.²² More probably Selim felt the need for a victory over Christian forces to redeem the defeat of his father in 1565 at the siege of Malta and wanted also to go down in history, like his illustrious father, as one who added fresh territories to his already vast dominions.

During the 15th and 16th centuries Jews flourished under Turkish rule. They held influential positions such as advisers, administrators, comforters and physicians at the Sultan’s court and it was even said that “every Pasha had his Jew who was his *homme d'affaires*”.²³ One of the most influential Jews at the court of Selim II was Joseph Nasi, descended from an ancient Spanish Jewish family.²⁴ Nasi was instrumental in helping Prince Selim in his struggle with his brother, Bayezid, for his succession to the throne, and in recognition of his services he was created Duke of Naxos and the Seven Seas. Now Nasi became the main mover in trying to convince the sultan to attack Cyprus. Nasi may have had a personal interest in the war as he was, some historians argued, aspiring to become “King of Cyprus”.²⁵

Abraham Ankiuratsi “Lament on the Fall of the City of Costantinople”, *The Heritage of Armenian Literature*, p. 714.

²¹ *I.e.* year 1019 according to the Armenian calendar, and Anno Domini 1570.

²² Stephen Turnbull, *The Ottoman Empire 1326–1699*, London 2003, p. 57. It is ironic, however, that in 1574 Selim apparently drank a bottle of Cyprus wine (believed to be a sweet red commandaria type) and, on entering his bathroom, slipped and fell on the marble floor, receiving an injury to the skull which brought on a fatal fever. Stavros Panteli, *Place of Refuge. The History of the Jews in Cyprus*, London, n.d., p. 53. Selim was also said to have been attracted to Cyprus falcons. Calepio, p. 125.

²³ Panteli, *Place of Refuge*, p. 46.

²⁴ On Nasi, see C. Roth, *House of Nasi: The Duke of Naxos*, London 1948; P. Grunebaum-Ballin, *Joseph Naci, duc de Naxos*, Paris 1968.

²⁵ Apparently, Selim was to promise Nasi the Crown of Cyprus as a reward for putting the idea of capturing Cyprus in his mind. J. Basnage, *The History of the Jews: From Jesus Christ to the Present Day*, London 1708, p. 718; Calepio, p. 125.

In 1569 there was a terrible explosion in the arsenal at Venice, thought to have been the work of Nasi's agents,²⁶ with – it was reported to Selim – Venetian forces considerably weakened. Also in year 1569 there was so great a scarcity of grain throughout almost all Italy, as there was “great want found thereof in the City of Venice, and in all parts thereabouts: so as it was thought, that not having wherewithal to feed their own people, it would be impolitic for the Venetians to maintain an Army, and a Fleet”.²⁷ These events helped to make hesitant Selim II allow the campaign.

It was customary for the Ottoman Sultan to obtain a *fetva* (opinion or approval) from jurisconsult (*seyhülislam*), the minister responsible for all matters connected with the Sharia, Muslim religious law and all other religious matters, before starting a military expedition. In case of the planned campaign it was necessary to break the treaty with Venice, which successive sultans had confirmed by oath. Most recently in 1540, the treaty was sworn by Suleyman the Magnificent and confirmed by Selim II in 1567.²⁸ To solve this juridical and moral problem, Ebussuud Efendi, *müftü* of Istanbul and the famous jurisconsult invoked in his *fetva* the Islamic past of the island, which in his view permitted the sultan to do whatever he deemed appropriate. As the island had been ruled at various times previously by Islamic rulers,²⁹ therefore, according to Islamic tradition, its re-conquest was not contrary to any treaty obligations. “The peace... with the infidels is according to the Law when it is for the benefit of all Muslims. If this is not the case, then the peace can never be lawful”. And the *fetva* recalled a precedent set by the Prophet himself, who broke the pact he had concluded with the infidels of Mecca, for the interests of Islam were more important than any other concern. In case of Cyprus, the Islamic mosques which had once existed in the island were profaned by the infidels who gained the control of Cyprus. Thus the honour of Islam was at stake, which took precedence over all other considerations.³⁰

²⁶ Among Venetians the notion that the war of Cyprus was a Jewish making was current in 1570. It was stated that it had been launched against them by the Ottomans on account of “espionage and the evil machinations of the Jews”. David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean*, Oxford 2011, p. 446.

²⁷ Paruta, Part II, p. 12, says, that the fire destroyed only 4 ships, but “those who solicited the War at Constantinople exaggerated these things, representing to the Grand Signeur the Venetians condition to be very low and mean, prognosticating certain ruine to the Commonwealth, and an allured victory to the Ottaman Empire”.

²⁸ Paruta, Part II, pp. 7–8; Samuele Romanin, *Storia documentata di Venezia*, 9 vols., Venezia 1853–1860, VI 1857, pp. 65–6.

²⁹ See R. Browning, *Byzantium and Islam in Cyprus in the Early Middle Ages*, [in:] “Επετηρίς Του Κέντρον Επιστημονικών Ερευνών”, 1977–1979, pp. 101–116; C. P. Kyrris, *The Nature of the Arab-Byzantine Relations in Cyprus from the middle of the 7 to the middle of the 10 century A.D.*, “Graeco-Arabica”, 3, 1984, p. 149–175.

³⁰ The transcribed text of the *fetva*, with English translation, from Kâtib Çelebi, *Precious Gifts from the Expeditions in the Seas*, is cited by Eftihios Gavriel, *The Expedition for the Conquest of Cyprus in the Works of Kâtib Çelebi*, [in:] *Ottoman Cyprus. A Collection of Studies*

On March 18 1570, an Ottoman envoy to Venice presented a formal ultimatum from Selim II “wherein the voluntary surrender of Cyprus was demanded, which if they would not do, he then denounced War against them”.³¹ The main official causes in the ultimatum was the failure of Venice to deal with the so-called “Uskoks”, a band of corsairs operating from Dalmatia, and the issue of Cyprus harbouring Christian pirates who roamed the waters of the Levant assailing Islamic commerce and the seaborne traffic of Muslim pilgrims bound for Mecca.³²

Despite completely inadequate defenses, a disgruntled Cypriot population and a peace party in Venice willing to sacrifice the island for trade concessions, in the end the Venetian government refused the Sultan’s demand and made it clear that Venice is ready to fight to defend Cyprus. The Senate wrote to Selim “that since they perceived that War was pronounced against them now, when they did least suspect it, they would not refuse it, to defend themselves, and to preserve the Kingdom of Cyprus which as their Fathers had possessed for the space of several ages, under a just title, so they did trust in divine justice, to be able to defend it against whosoever should go about to rob them of it unjustly”.³³

He commanded his vizier:

“I want the Island of Cyprus!

Equip galleons for battle,”

As punishment for all their sins.

One hundred and sixty galleys of different sizes were fitted out, sixty boats with low freeboard, eight lighters, six vessels, one galleon, forty horseboats, thirty of the kind called *caramussoli*, three mortar boats (palandre), forty frigates - three hundred and forty-eight in all, although the fleet was said to be of four hundred sail – but two hundred and twenty were manned with rowers.³⁴ According to Turkish historian, Kâtib Çelebi, the Ottoman fleet left from Beşiktaş and sailed to the Mediterranean, with one hundred and eighty galleys, ten barges, and one hundred seventy smaller ships of different kinds, all together three hundred and sixty vessels.³⁵

on History and Culture, p. 32; Gilles Veinstein, “Religious Institutions, Policies and Lives” [in:] *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, vol. 2: *The Ottoman Empire as a World Power, 1453–1603*, ed. S. N. Faroqhi, vol. 4, Cambridge 2013, pp. 330–1. Kate Fleet, *Ottoman expansion in the Mediterranean*, [in:] *Ibid.*, 2, p. 167.

³¹ Paruta, Part II, p. 25.

³² Paruta, Part II, p. 5; Kâtib Çelebi, *Precious Gifts from the Expeditions in the Seas*, pp. 31–32; Calepio, p. 125.

³³ Paruta, Part II, pp. 28–29.

³⁴ Calepio, p. 132; Sozomeno, 86; Foglietta, p. 5, writes about 220 long vessels, of which 160 were galleys, with about 80 “ships of burthen of various kinds and names”.

³⁵ Kâtib Çelebi, *Precious Gifts from the Expeditions in the Seas*, p. 32.

The vizier was quite ruthless
 (His name was Mustafa Pasha);
 This sycophant prepared the fleet,
 As punishment for all their sins.

The Grand Vizier, Mahomet Sokolli, opposed the Cyprus war. For him Turkey's ultimate enemy was the House of Habsburg. But there was a powerful party at court, which included Nasi, who were doubtful of the efficacy of the French alliance propagated by Sokolli, and who thought it more important to secure the Ottoman's southern flank before starting the war with Habsburgs. This policy eventually gained the ear of Selim. And Lala³⁶ Mustafa Pasha, the fifth of the viziers, was appointed as the "chief of the entire army".³⁷ Lala Mustapha was a Herzegovinian, who in Suleiman's reign acted as Selim's instrument in the foul practices by which Prince Bayezid and his family were eventually executed in 1561. Lala Mustafa was known for his cruelty towards his defeated enemies, of which the most infamous example is his punishment of the courageous defender of Famagusta, Marco Antonio Bragadin.³⁸

The sultan had a son-in-law
 Whose name was Piyale Pasha;
 He was put in charge of the fleet
 As punishment for all their sins.

The war party included also Admiral Piale Pasha, a Croat, who was the third vizier. His duty was to guard the side of the sea. Kâtib Çelebi underlines that though Piale Pasha was son-in-law of the Sultan and third vizier, he followed the chief of the army and never opposed him.³⁹

They journeyed by land and by sea,
 Came to the Island of Cyprus,
 And surrounded the whole island
 As punishment for all their sins.

³⁶ It was a honorific title indicating that he had been tutor to the sultan's sons.

³⁷ Kâtib Çelebi, *Precious Gifts from the Expeditions in the Seas*, p. 32.

³⁸ Lala Mustapha promised him safety and then had him skinned alive. Nestor Martinengo, *Relatione di tutto il Successo di Famagusta, ... fortezza, Venetia 1572*, pp. 187–190; Calepio, *Vera et fidelissima narratione*, pp. 156–157; Paruta, *Storia della Guerra di Cipro*, p. 119. The Turkish historian thus comments the accounts of the Italians: "Europeans, with great exaggeration, tell a long story how, before the body of the victim was flayed – however it was that he killed the Moslem prisoners – his nose and ears were cut off, and then he was slain with tortures. If the case is compared with the frightful cruelties committed by the tribunal of the Inquisition upon the Arabs, it is clear anyhow that the Turks were more merciful than they". *Qibris Tarikhi* (A.H. 978), cited in Giovanni Mariti, *Travels in the Island of Cyprus*, p. 196.

³⁹ Kâtib Çelebi, *Precious Gifts from the Expeditions in the Seas*, p. 32.

They moored off the shore of Tuza,
 Where Lazarus's grave could be found,
 And rushed ashore like wolves and beasts,
 As punishment for all their sins.

On 1 July 1570 the Turkish fleet was off Paphos,⁴⁰ and in reaching Lemesos (Limasol) it landed a force which sacked the town and burned the monastery of St Nicholas of the Cats.⁴¹ They were opposed by the vice-captain of Paphos, who killed a few, took two prisoners, and sent them with the heads of the killed to Nicosia.⁴²

On 2 July 1570 the fleet reached Tuza (Salines), the port of Larnaca, famous for the grave of Lazarus.⁴³ According to Cypriot tradition, Lazaros of Bethany, "the friend of Christ" who was raised from the dead, came eventually to Cyprus where he was consecrated first bishop of Kition (Larnaka) by the Apostles Paul and Barnaba.⁴⁴ In 890 a tomb was discovered there, with a marble sarcophagus with a text in Hebrew: "Lazarus dead four days and the friend of Christ". Soon his relics were sent to Constantinople by the emperor Leo VI, who erected a church to house

⁴⁰ *Θρήνος της Κύπρου*, vv. 56–7; Calepio, p. 132; Sozomeno, p. 81.

⁴¹ *Θρήνος της Κύπρου*, vv. 65–6; Foglietta, p. 5; Calepio, p. 132.

⁴² Calepio, p. 132.

⁴³ Kâtib Çelebi, *Precious Gifts from the Expeditions in the Seas*, p. 33; Foglietta, p. 5; Sozomeno, p. 11.

⁴⁴ J. Hackett, *History of the Orthodox Church in Cyprus*, London 1901, pp. 411–415; C. Walter, "Lazarus a Bishop" *Reveu des Études Byzantines*, 27, 1969, pp. 197–208, who suggests that the legend was created in Constantinople (pp. 202–4); M.G. Michaelides, *Saint Lazarus, The Friend Of Christ And First Bishop Of Kition*, Larnaca 1984. Seigneur de Villamont who visited Cyprus in 1589 writes: "They say that Lazarus, whom our Lord restored to life, was Bishop there. But here I find a great contradiction between the Greeks and ourselves, for we hold it certain that Lazarus was Bishop of Marseille, and that he died there: while the Greeks say that he was Bishop of Chity, and of all the territory of Saline. And when we were on shore they showed us a very ancient church... It is really built in the antique style, getting little light but such as enters at the open doors. On the right as you enter you see an ancient sepulchre: to reach it you pass a little opening and go down four steps, then you take a candle and approach the tomb, which is neatly made and ornamented with marble: in some parts it is two feet broad and three high. I was assured that it certainly is the tomb of S. Lazarus, and that the Emperor Leo, surnamed the Philosopher, caused his body to be taken to Constantinople. Zonaras the historian in his third volume says as much. For my part I shall believe that there were two Lazaruses, one of whom may have been Bishop of Chity, and was buried in this church dedicated to him. But to say that this was he whom our Saviour restored to life is, to my thinking, a manifest error. For with all respect to Zonaras and other Greeks, we have his body as well as that of the Magdalen, in our own France". *Les voyages du Seigneur de Villamont, Chevalier de l'ordre de Hierusalem, Gentil-homme du pays de Bretagne*, Arras, 1598, [in:] *Excerpta Cypria*, p. 175. See also the diary of the Roman patrician Pietro della Valle, 17 September, [in:] *Excerpta Cypria*, p. 213.

them.⁴⁵ In Larnaca Leo erected a church, which after the attack of the Turks was changed into a mosque.⁴⁶

Completely unopposed by the defenders of the island, the Turks disembarked on the next day and set fire to Larnaka and started to raid the countryside, burning the monastery of Stavrouni.⁴⁷ The incompetent Venetian commander Nicholas Dandolo, despite the pleadings of Astorre Baglione, the experienced soldier for Perugia, refused to oppose the landing. An attack at that point could have seriously weakened the Turkish forces and might even have halted the invasion.⁴⁸

There were countless thousands of them.
And thousands more of cavalry;
They held council and made ready,
As punishment for all their sins.

The numbers of Ottoman army are difficult to assess, but it is estimated that the invasion was conducted probably with between 20,000 and 40,000 foot-soldiers, and 3,000 to 4,000 horse, and swelled to about 100,000 at the siege of Nicosia, when Mustapha ordered all his troops waiting in the ships in Larnaca to come to the capital.⁴⁹ Calepio writes that they had a hundred thousand men, including the ten thousand cavalry, and twenty-five thousand men who were brought up from the galleys for the last attack. He admits, however, that according to some there were only four thousand sipahis (heavy horse) and six thousand janissaries.⁵⁰

The Turkish generals debated whether to attack first the capital, Nicosia, or Famagusta at the seaside and, eventually, Mustapha decided that as Nicosia was the key to the island, it should be captured before any help could arrive from Europe.⁵¹

⁴⁵ *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae: Propylaeum ad Acta Sanctorum Novembris*, ed. H. Delehaye, Brussels 1902, pp. 146–7, 658–9. From Constantinople the saint's relics were later carried off by the French to Marseilles. His feast is on October 17 and the transfer of his relics to the capital is commemorated in the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*. Portraits of Lazarus, who is always represented pale and skinny, are preserved in a few church decorations of Cyprus including those at Perachorio, at Lagoudera and the 14th layer in St Nicholas tis Stegis near Kakopetria. In Larnaka an early church is dedicated to St Lazarus the Tetraemeros, where a magnificent late Byzantine icon of the saint is preserved.

⁴⁶ In 1589 it was repurchased for 3,000 aspers and used jointly by the Orthodox and Catholics. *Les voyages du Seigneur de Villamont, Chevalier de l'ordre de Hierusalem, Gentilhomme du pays de Bretagne*, Arras 1598, [in:] *Excerpta Cypria*, p. 176.

⁴⁷ *Θρήνος της Κύπρου*, vv. 130–1.

⁴⁸ Foglietta, pp. 5–6. Because of the “insolence and imbecility” of Dandolo, claims Foglietta, some wanted to take the command and the management of affairs out of the hands of this infamous man. *Ibid.*, p. 6; Calepio, p. 132; Sozomeno, pp. 81–2.

⁴⁹ Foglietta, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Calepio, p. 138, 142; similarly, Sozomeno, p. 86.

⁵¹ Foglietta, p. 8.

They had brought huge cannons with them,
 And now hauled them out on wagons;
 They raged like bulls and savage beasts,
 As punishment for all their sins.

The Turks brought with them 30 pieces of heavy artillery and 50 smaller guns. Seeing that the Turks waste the countryside, seeking booty, inhabitants of the village Lefkara gave themselves up to them, either “from hatred to their old masters, and little faith in their rulers” or “for fear of the fire and destruction” and they were well received by the pasha.⁵² To avenge the treachery and warn other villagers, the Lieutenant of Nicosia sent six hundred soldiers to kill all men in Lefkara and burn the village.⁵³

Then they all marched to Limassol,⁵⁴
 Where the Cypriot barons lived,
 And surrounded them one and all
 As punishment for all their sins.

All the surrounding villages
 Came to shelter in the fortress
 And fortified its three-fold gates,
 As punishment for all their sins.

As the war was becoming imminent, the government collected in Nicosia about 8,000 villagers who were to be used as manual workers, but there were also 56,000 women, children and others “unfit for service”.⁵⁵ The Turkish decision to attack Nicosia first was also made as there retired the noblemen of the kingdom, and, adds Foglietta, “there were collected all the riches, all the prizes after which men hanker”.⁵⁶

Expecting a possible attack on the island, between 1567 and 1570 the Venetians decided to fortify the city. A famous Venetian engineer, Giulio Savorgnano, destroyed the medieval walls of Nicosia as they were useless against artillery, and built around the city 4.5-meter-thick walls in the shape of a star. The soil-constructed walls were surrounded by a ditch and their lower sections were faced with stone for half its height, with a grassy slope above. The walls were dotted by 11 bastions (called after the names of the distinguished Cypriot families): Caraffa, Flatro, Loredano, Barbaro, Quirini, Mula, Roucha, Tripoli, D’Avila, Constanzo, and Podocataro.⁵⁷ The three gates (Famagusta, Paphos, and Kyrenia) were the only entrance to the city.⁵⁸

⁵² Foglietta, p. 7, Calepio, p. 132.

⁵³ Foglietta, p. 8, Calepio, p. 132.

⁵⁴ Should be: Nicosia or Lefkosia.

⁵⁵ Foglietta, p. 9.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 8.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 10.

⁵⁸ The plan of the fortifications is printed in Stefano Lusignano, *Chorografia et breve historia universal dell’isola de Cipro principiando al tempo di Noe per in fino al 1571*, Bologna

Cannons were fixed in position
 On the twenty fortress turrets.
 The Turks had no cause to worry,
 As punishment for all their sins.

When the bells began their ringing
 The cannons began to discharge,
 But the Turks were too numerous,
 As punishment for all their sins.

They had many excavators,
 Who dug underneath the fortress
 And placed explosives under it,
 As punishment for all their sins.

The siege was undertaken in the approved method of those days. The Turks raised four earthen forts, on the four hills at some 300 paces from the ramparts, to protect themselves with against the artillery of the city, and to annoy its defenders. From there their first line of batteries were set and started to attack the four southern bastions of the city (Podocarò, Constanzo, D'Avila, and Tripoli).⁵⁹ But as these forts were too far away to cause any serious damage, they decided to move closer to the town walls. Under cover of the fire from these batteries the besiegers occupied the old ditch, which had not been completely filled, when the new walls were constructed, and from there they pushed forward zigzag trenches, and thus they got closer to the ramparts (ca 80 paces) and set up the second line of batteries and began a brisk and sustained bombardment.⁶⁰

As the Turkish fire still had no effect on the earthworks of the city, they drove deep trenches across the ditch, until they reached the corners of the four southern bastions and began to cut away the masonry to form a sloping approach by which they planned to deliver an assault.⁶¹ Calepio complains, that Lieutenant Dandolo, responsible for the defense of the city, did not allow his men to fire at the Turks unless there were ten or more in one place, not to waste ammunition and powder, and, eventually, Dandolo's behaviour led some to suspect that he was a traitor.⁶²

They held them off for forty days,
 Till the Feast of the Holy Cross,

1571, f. 16. George Jeffery, *A Description of the Historic Monuments of Cyprus*, Nicosia 1918, pp. 26–30.

⁵⁹ Calepio, p. 133; Foglietta, p. 11; Sozomeno, pp. 82–3.

⁶⁰ Calepio, p. 133; Foglietta, p. 11; Bartolomeo Sereno, *Commentari della Guerra di Cipro*, 1576, Monte Casino 1845, p. 910; Sozomeno, p. 83.

⁶¹ Foglietta, pp. 12–13; Sozomeno, p. 84.

⁶² Calepio, pp. 133–135.

When they broke through in five places,
As punishment for all their sins.

On Saturday, as dawn was near,
Thousands of them breached the fortress;
The din and clamor reached the sky,
As punishment for all their sins.

After six weeks of the siege, Mustapha decided to take the city by assault. Those janissaries who should first cross the walls were promised huge rewards. A general assault on the four bastions was ordered.⁶³

Before dawn on 9 September the Turks advanced to the attack. Scaling the walls of the Costanza bastion while the defenders were still asleep, they made themselves masters of the bastion and drove defenders into the city square. Many of the citizens defended themselves bravely, but the militia and the villagers seeing the numbers of Turks, disobeyed the orders and ran away escaping the city.⁶⁴ Soon, the last stand was made in the courtyard of the Palace until “a drunken Greek hoisted over the palace the Turkish standard, pulling down that of S. Mark”.⁶⁵

Summoned to surrender, the defenders agreed to lay down their arms to save their lives. But the moment the gates were opened, the Turks rushed inside and started slaughter. In the massacre which followed some 20,000 people were killed.⁶⁶

They attacked the barons’ dwellings,
Breaking down all of their doorways
And entering to slaughter them
As punishment for all their sins.

The accounts give an example of the Countess of Tripoli, who decided to give herself up with all her family to Mustapha. He accepted her valuable gifts, but “kept no faith with her”, and her household met “perhaps the hardest fate of all”. Her husband was killed during the fight; her brother, Hector Podochatoro, was beheaded when sent by Mustapha to see a doctor, and the Countess herself with 300 hundred members of her household, and all her treasure, were put on a ship and probably were drowned.⁶⁷

They killed a few of the barons,
But one escaped to the garden;
Soon he too was also captured,
As punishment for all their sins.

⁶³ Foglietta, pp. 18–19; Sozomeno, pp. 84–5.

⁶⁴ Calepio, pp. 138–9; Sozomeno, p. 85.

⁶⁵ Calepio, p. 139.

⁶⁶ Graziani, p. 42.

⁶⁷ Calepio, p. 141; Graziani, p. 41; Conti, 2: f. 86b.

They dragged this wretch through the ashes
 And brought him before the Pasha;
 His head was cut off with a sword,
 As punishment for all their sins.

They even caught Sultat Bashi
 And the two men who were with him,
 And sent them too to the Sultan,
 As punishment for all their sins.

According to Calepio, Dandolo wrote to Mustapha promising that he would surrender the city upon condition that the persons and property of the inhabitants remained in safety. He dressed in his crimson velvet robe to be easily distinguished from others and thus spared.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, he was taken, his head cut off and sent to Famagusta to convince the defenders there to give up any thought of fighting.⁶⁹ Seeing the head, they regarded his death but an inconsiderable loss in comparison with the tragedy for which he was responsible, but they buried the head in the church of St Nicholas and promised that they would avenge him.⁷⁰

Aged priests and young novices,
 Armenians and Greeks and Franks,⁷¹
 Exclaimed "Woe is me!" high and loud,
 As punishment for all their sins.

Men of consequence and merchants,
 Both believers and heretics,
 Exclaimed "Woe is me!" high and loud,
 As punishment for all their sins.

Both Albanians and Sutats
 With swords and bucklers in their hands
 Battled on the side of the Turks,
 As punishment for all their sins.

The Muslims were a countless host,
 The Christians were fewer by far,
 And God was greatly vexed with them
 As punishment for all their sins.

⁶⁸ Conti, 2: f. 86.

⁶⁹ Calepio, p. 140; Graziani, p. 41.

⁷⁰ Graziani, p. 43.

⁷¹ The term Frank is used here to refer to Europeans in general.

The numbers of the Venetian forces regularly stationed in Cyprus are difficult to estimate. Paruta says that the ordinary garrison comprised of about 2,000 Italian foot soldiers, about 1,000 militia, 1,300 recruits,⁷² and as far as cavalry was concerned there were 500 stradiotes and around 500 feudatories obliged to keep horses for military service.⁷³

Preparing for the Turkish attack, in Nicosia there may have been as many as 20,000 men who should be able to fight, but because of the lack of military training and especially because of lack of equipment,⁷⁴ perhaps only every second was effective.⁷⁵ Calepio who has the most detailed figures writes about some 12,500 men plus stradiotes.⁷⁶ These included 1,300 Italian soldiers,⁷⁷ around 1,500 Cypriot nobles with their servants,⁷⁸ 750 villagers, 3,300 militia from different Cyprus towns, the stratiotes and 500 cavalry of the feudatories.

They streamed down upon the churches
And hacked their portals asunder;
Hosts of them entered the churches,
As punishment for all their sins.

They assassinated the priests
And beheaded the novices
And put the monks to the dagger
As punishment for all their sins.
They grabbed hold of handsome deacons
Who were singing sweet *sharakans*⁷⁹
And dragged them off by their collars
As punishment for all their sins.

Children and courageous young men
Who were praying and reading psalms
Were, all of them, taken away
As punishment for all their sins.

⁷² Paruta, pp. 84–5.

⁷³ Contarini, f. 10b; Calepio, p. 142. According to Paruta, there were only 100 or so feudatories.

⁷⁴ Calepio, p. 142. In case of 900 heavy arquebuses they were not used because the soldiers did not know how to fire them.

⁷⁵ Paruta, pp. 94–5, says that only 2,500 were recruited in Nicosia.

⁷⁶ Calepio, p. 142; he gives division into companies with names of their captains, pp. 128–130. Paruta's figures add up to 18,500, including about 10,000 infantry with 1,500 Italian soldiers; Foglieta, p. 9, writes about around 11,000 fighting men plus 8,000 peasants brought in as labourers; Graziani (p. 77) thinks that there were together about 20,000 fighting men.

⁷⁷ The same figures are given by Contarini, f. 10b.

⁷⁸ Paruta (pp. 94–5), says 1 000 Nicosiote gentlemen.

⁷⁹ Hymns (Armenian).

With the numbers of Turks in the city swelling, there was still fighting in different streets but without any order. A valiant defense was made near the church of SS. Peter and Paul, in front of the Cathedral Church of the Greeks, and near the Greek bishop's house. During the fight there two bishops, and many Greek monks and priests were killed.⁸⁰ The brave defender, Contarini, the Bishop of Paphos, was killed by a janissary, after he had surrendered to a molla.⁸¹

Comely crosses and chalices
And silver-embellished Bibles
They desecrated and plundered
As punishment for all their sins.

Ciboria and thuribles,
Incense and holy chasubles,
They desecrated and plundered
As punishment for all their sins.

Gold-embellished icons of saints
They carted off from the churches
And burned them all up in a fire
As punishment for all their sins.

Calepio says that "Churches were desecrated, altars stripped, sacred pictures burnt, tombs torn open, and those who took refuge in the churches slain".⁸² And soon after their victory, the Turks began to remove from the main Latin church in Nicosia, S. Sophia, all elements they considered idolatry, like the choir and the altars, and on the following Friday, September 15, "the day called Juma, which they keep as a Sunday", the Pasha went there to thank God "for so great a victory".⁸³

They stormed the convent of virgins,
Destroying its door and its roof,
And swarmed in, looking for booty
As punishment for all their sins.

The beautiful virgin maidens,
The nuns who lived in that convent,
Were hauled to Istanbul as slaves
As punishment for all their sins.

⁸⁰ Calepio, p. 139.

⁸¹ But cf. Calepio, p. 140.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 141.

They rushed to every Christian door;
 The owners all tried to resist,
 But they were all put to the sword
 As punishment for all their sins.

Comely women, seeing these things,
 Fainted, losing all consciousness,
 And were all dragged off by their hair
 As punishment for all their sins.

Innocent children were crying
 And asking where their parents were;
 They led them like lambs to their fate
 As punishment for all their sins.

Mothers cried, "Where is my daughter?"
 Sons shouted, "Where is my mother?"
 Sisters screamed, "Where is my brother?"
 As punishment for all their sins.

Foglietta writes that the city was "given over to pillage, and no form of savage cruelty, of insatiable greed and filthy lust was spared in the treatment of their wretched captives. Matrons, virgins, noble children, were all victims to their vilest passions. Neither age nor sex had been respected; a life was never spared except in hope of a very great ransom".⁸⁴

Calepio is most detailed in describing the horrors he witnessed. Instead of roar of artillery now on every side you heard "nothing but the ceaseless wailing of poor women parted from their husbands, the shrieks of children torn from their mothers' arms, the sighs of the wretched fathers which mounted to the very heavens, the cries of maidens and lads who saw themselves separated from their parents, one driven this way, another that, in irremediable division". Any man or woman who resisted was killed; any prisoner who tried to escape was caught up and his legs cut off; the infants in "swaddling clothes" were torn "from their mothers' breasts, dashed some down on the ground, others by the feet against a wall"; old women were killed, and one of the beheaded was Lucretia Calepia, "my mother, whose head they cut off on her serving maid's lap." According to Graziani, Mustapha made the old and sick people and children set apart and led into the public place, where having been thrown one upon another they were all of them burnt alive.⁸⁵

Young men and newly married brides
 And young virgins who were engaged
 Were all dragged away one by one

⁸⁴ Foglietta, p. 21.

⁸⁵ Graziani, p. 41.

As punishment for all their sins.
 Expectant mothers and the ill
 Who lay face down on their pallets
 Were forced to their feet and dragged off
 As punishment for all their sins.

They looted their residences,
 Breaking open cases and trunks
 And stealing their gold and silver
 As punishment for all their sins.

Calepio says that “as they themselves owned, they enriched themselves to such an extent that never since the sack of Constantinople had they won so vast a treasure, as well of things sacred, as those of common use”.⁸⁶

A day after the capture of the city there was held an auction of the spoil. First were sold the good looking youths and pretty girls, “the buyers taking no thought or count of their noble birth, but only of the beauty of their faces”; others were sold at extremely low prices, with the exception of those who were fit for work in the galleys. The stolen goods were sold for a farthing, and “a thing worth a hundred sequins they gave for four”, and if anyone knew anything about gems and pearls, they could make a fortune.⁸⁷

On 3 October the galleon of Mehmed Pasha, a ramamossolin and a galley, filled with treasure and the most beautiful young girls and boys who were to be a gift for the sultan, exploded and “in a moment we saw so many noble youths and maidens hoist into the air, a spectacle of incomparable sadness”. Some claimed that it was “a noble Cypriot lady” who set fire to the powder, choosing death rather than slavery and humiliation of being forced to enter the sultan’s harem.⁸⁸

All of these disastrous events
 Were occasioned by our errors:
 They became the infidel’s slaves
 As punishment for all their sins.

We too should seek to avoid sin
 And tend to the needs of our souls,
 Begging our Savior, Jesus Christ,
 To spare us from the infidel.

⁸⁶ Calepio, p. 141.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 142.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 144–5; Sozomeno, pp. 86–7 (his elder daughter may have been one of the victims of the explosion). Paruta, Part II, pp. 60–61. Graziani, p. 42. This incident was taken up as a theme for poetic, historical and rhetorical writings. See Famianus Strada, *Arnalda sive Captiva Victrix, incerti scriptoris fabella*, ed. C. Cobham, London 1910; Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, 3, p. 986 n. 1.

I, Nikoghayos, full of sin,
 A humble servant of you all,
 Have related the sad lament
 About the Island of Cyprus;

I beseech you, pray earnestly
 That my parents may find mercy
 And not have to suffer anguish
 As punishment for all their sins.

The author of the “Lament on the Island of Cyprus” uses the example of the Cyprus calamities to warn his fellows against breaking God’s Commandments. The Turkish attack and the destruction of Cyprus was also seen as the sign of God’s wrath by Calepio, who claims that “for the shortcomings and sins of the people God sends such scourges, as saith the prophet Amos (ch. ix. 8).” But unlike Nikoghayos who talks generally about “their sins”, Roman Catholic Calepio clearly indicates which sins of the Cypriots were responsible for God’s wrath. It was when the Orthodox Cypriots rose in rebellion against the Church of Rome and refused to accept the decrees of the Lateran Council, “speedily enough God sent as a scourge these infidel ministers of the Divine justice, who enslaved them all, changed their ceremonies into execrable superstitions, the churches into mosques, the Gospel into the Qoran”. God tried to warn the Cypriots, say Calepio, “at sundry times and in divers manners”: it was scourged for many years with locusts; in 1556 He sent a terrible earthquake in Limassol, and recently in November 1569, God sent a comet, “whose tail pointed down towards Cyprus, a clear sign of the sword of God”.⁸⁹

Little did Calepio realise that if the arrival of the Ottomans meant practically the end of the Roman Catholic church on Cyprus, it also meant the rebirth and strengthening of the spiritual, but especially the political and economic power and influence of the Orthodox church of Cyprus, with the archbishops and bishops soon becoming the official etnarchs of the population.

The defeat of Nicosia was followed by the brave defense of Famagusta, but eventually the Turks conquered the island and Cyprus remained part of the Ottoman empire until 1878.

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⁸⁹ Calepio, p. 142–144.

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The Siege of Nicosia of 1570 in the Poetic Armenian Vision of *The Lament of the Island of Cyprus* and in the Italian Historical Narratives

Abstract

The siege of Nicosia (1570) was but the first stage of the conflict known in history as the Fourth Ottoman-Venetian war. The article discusses the similarities and the differences in the way in which the event is shown in a little known Armenian *thrênos* entitled *The Lament of the Island of Cyprus* (1570) and in the major contemporary narratives, mostly Italian. The author of the poem was present on Cyprus during the initial stages of the conflict, and on the whole the poem is true to the historical facts, but its most obvious characteristic is its moralizing tone, which is also found in the Italian prose narratives of the siege.

Key words: Cyprus, siege of Nicosia, *thrênos*, Italian narratives