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Corrupting Aphrodite:

Colonialist interpretations of the Cyprian Goddess

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Abstract

The works of travellers and archaeologists in Cyprus during the second half of the 19th century abound in prurient descriptions of the supposed cult of Aphrodite or Ashtart in ancient Cyprus. “Abominable lust, bloodshed and depravity” is by no means the strongest. To these are added the stories of classical mythology and a series of ill-informed stereotypes about Oriental sexuality, both ancient and modern.

These 19th century interpretations of the worship of Aphrodite in ancient Cyprus are a consequence of various ideologies prevalent among Europeans who travelled to the Eastern Mediterranean. Prurient travellers escaping the moralistic attitudes of Western Europe looked eagerly for exotic and Oriental titillation. Imperial officials and ideologues legitimised their rule by tracing a heritage of amorality from antiquity to the present. Missionaries of western religion and culture found ancient vice and modern heresy convenient tools for the justification of their unpopular proselytising. Two forces in particular drove British imperialist attitudes: colonial desire, the urge to conquer and master a feminised, exotic, oriental Other; and colonial fear, whether of the unknown, of being vastly outnumbered, or of the “unnatural practices” that they themselves had projected onto the Orient.

Aphrodite, according to these writers, had corrupted the Cypriot people, and her influence was still to be seen. Because of the imperial relationship, however, it was these Europeans who had corrupted Aphrodite.

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“Cyprus, Island of Aphrodite”, proclaim the posters and brochures, to tourists who travel “Aphrodite Class” on Cyprus Airways and drink “Aphrodite” wine. It takes little contextual study of the surviving remains of the worship of the Cyprian Goddess in the first millennium B.C. (Budin, MacLachlan, Serwint, this volume) to realise that Aphrodite-as-holiday-icon is a shadow of her former self, and has clearly been appropriated by the tourist industry. This exploitation, however, is a natural continuation of a less innocent appropriation by the British colonial regime which controlled Cyprus from 1878 to 1960. Modern Aphrodite, far from being the focus of people’s cultural identity and a meaningful expression of their existence in the world, was moulded by successive imperialist visitors, who quarried antiquity for their personal satisfaction, political advantage and ideological legitimization.

There was never, of course, any “pure” or “original” version of the Goddess, which was subsequently adulterated and perverted by outside forces. Being the construct of a dynamic and constantly changing society, she grew, developed, changed, shrunk, but always remained relevant to her people; hence, presumably, her current position as patron goddess of tourism. But when British colonial officials, travel writers and archaeologists appointed her head of “spiritual wickedness in high places” (Lewis 1894: 132), they were abusing their control of

the historical and archaeological sources, deliberately or unconsciously, and trying to prove that Cyprus needed to be ruled. Aphrodite and her worship, they declared, had corrupted the Cypriot people, and the consequences could still be seen. Because of the imperial relationship, however, it was these writers who had corrupted Aphrodite.

Aphrodite still has enormous metaphoric power: she can stand for Cyprus, the ancient Greeks, sex, beauty, women. This explains why she became so useful a vehicle for the two great forces which drove British attitudes to the people under their control: colonial desire; and colonial fear. This metaphoric power also suggests that to examine the image of Aphrodite is to study our own attitudes, to Cyprus, for example, or to women. This is why, for me, Aphrodite inhabits the centre of this volume on women and society in ancient Cyprus.

COLONIAL DESIRE

In one of her many manifestations, Cyprian Aphrodite during the 19th and 20th centuries was an expression of colonial desire, the yearning of British and other visitors for some sort of imaginary or idealised beauty. In this role she took her classical Hellenized form, the one created by Apelles and Praxiteles and their Roman copyists. The 1st century B.C. statue from Soloi became the prime example, and was endlessly reproduced; it became, in effect, the logo of Cyprus (cf. Anderson 1991: 182). According to the more Philhellenic British visitors in the late 19th century, it was this version of the goddess which superseded another western stereotype, the dissolute Oriental Ashtart: “Under the magic touch of Grecian refinement, the goddess of luxury and wantonness, Astarte, became the most beautiful of ideal creations, the mother of the Graces, the charming Aphrodite” (von Löher 1878: 100). It was this version which was favoured by the Greek Cypriot intellectual elite (e.g. Lambrou 1878: 6).

A very few British illustrations of Cypriot women reflect this classical ideal of beauty. One such is entitled “A Princess of Cyprus”, published in the illustrated magazine *The Graphic* in 1882 (fig. 1; *The Graphic*, 30 December 1882). The title is a curious one in an island which had seen no princesses since the 15th century, and the classical temple or edifice behind is entirely imaginary. The engraving is a product of the artist’s desire to create a luscious, Grecian beauty in the western tradition.

When the British turned their distancing gaze on the local population, it was more common for them to create a disjunction between the “natives” and their own imposed standards of beauty. The ugliness of the Cypriot women, in contrast to the ancient mythical inhabitants of Aphrodite’s Island, is a constant and tedious theme in the British travel writing of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “Why she [Venus] is represented by the exceedingly plain women of Cyprus surpasses the imagination”, sneered the explorer Samuel Baker (1879: 243). Never is there so much as a hint of the arduous domestic and agricultural work of the average village woman, in contrast to these western visitors, who were upper class women and men of leisure who used local people’s physical appearance to fortify their own feelings of superiority. The desire for an idealised beauty even became the search for a reflection of oneself. Helen Gordon, lamenting the lack of pretty women in what she termed “Love’s Island” (the title of her 1925 book), describes how a photographer had to use an Englishwoman as a model for a photograph of a Cypriot girl in national dress (1925: 12).

For the British upper classes of the late 19th century, a journey to a magical (and imaginary) Orient was often an escape from the repressive public morality of Late Victorian Britain. Colonial desire became a quest for illicit sex, or at least some discreet titillation (Said 1978: 180-88). A western mythology was built up of the harem, the houri, the hamam, the hanoum, and, especially, the veil (Melman 1995: 59-61). Cyprus had no Cairo or Istanbul, but much was made of the Turkish women (commonly known as “ghosts”), and with the vivid

imagination of the likes of W.H. Mallock or Emile Deschamps it was easy to extrapolate from the palm trees, minarets, and hidden courtyards. Besides, the spectral form of Aphrodite was always present, encouraging fantasy and desire.

The relationship between western patron and Oriental houri became an expression of that between colonizer and colonized. As in the racial philosophy of Count Gobineau, the two races were “sexualised” (Young 1995: 111): whites were males, and blacks or yellows were female. This is a constant theme in late 19th century British accounts of Cyprus, in academic writings as well as travel books, and referring to ancient as well as modern Cyprus. Ancient Cyprus excelled in the “feminine arts” of sewing, embroidering, clay modelling and dyeing (Dixon 1879: 27). The effeminacy and luxury of the ancient Cypriots were proverbial (von Löher 1878: 158, 160), though the only real evidence concerns the lifestyle of a few fourth century B.C. kings. This contrast between the effeminate east and the masculine west was made explicit by Robert Hamilton Lang (1878: 118).

The most common metaphor of the Orient as an object of desire was the veiled woman. The very fact that her face cannot be seen gives rise to fertile speculation on the part of the observer, as well as frustration at his inability to see (an important imperialist urge); this merely serves to heighten desire (see texts collected in Mabro 1991: 40-50; cf. Fanon 1965: 44; Alloula 1986: 7; Melman 1995: 120-1). The veil hiding the face produced the same reaction as the inward-turned house hiding the family, or the walled, intricate *medina* hiding the society (Mabro 1991: 40-43). To the imperialist, local society with its tight family structure and its dislike of intruders was not just hidden and mysterious but incomprehensible, different, Other. This is the zone where colonial desire begins to overlap with colonial fear.

The colonial reaction to the veil is to rip it away, thus revealing the hidden, understanding the different, suppressing the fear. Even the colonial women participate. Esme Scott-Stevenson, the wife of the District Commissioner of Kyrenia, describes gloatingly how an ex-

member of the Sultan's harem used to unveil herself in front of her and "display her charms most ungrudgingly" (Scott-Stevenson 1880: 83). When the Greek ladies did the same they displayed "their under garments of Cyprus cotton and coats of Manchester stuff" (82). Even their underclothes had been colonized by the British.

Entering the harem is an action equivalent to removing the veil. Malek Alloula's study of French colonial postcards showing Algerian women analyses this symbolic penetration of the photographer into the harem (Alloula 1986: 21, 34, 37). In Cyprus the same implied intimacy is produced by many colonial photographs, for example Ohnefalsch-Richter's representation of two Cypriot girls from Ayios Andronikos (Ohnefalsch-Richter and Ohnefalsch-Richter 1994: pl. 70b). The French traveller Emile Deschamps, whose book is characteristically entitled *Pays d'Aphrodite* and is full of overblown orientalist fantasy, similarly peeps into a hamam and spies women bathing. An old woman accosts him, but he manages to calm her as she is not a Turk, "only a woman" (1898: 46). Like the imperial explorer who wrote in the "monarch-of-all-I-survey" mode (Pratt 1992: 213), his voyeurism is an expression of power, of forcible penetration into what would normally be forbidden.

The veil is, of course, metaphorical as well as literal: veils were ripped not just from women, homes, and hamams, but from whole societies and countries (Fanon 1965: 42-43). Western conquests of colonies were often portrayed in sexual terms. When the British took Cyprus in 1878, this was illustrated by *Punch* as a courteous but still dominant Sir Garnet Wolseley, the first High Commissioner, kissing the hand of Aphrodite, who stands for Cyprus (fig. 2; *Punch*, 3rd August 1878, p. 46). On this occasion, the goddess of love and Cyprus is given an appropriately British garment, as the caption says: "Lo, Venus, daughter of the foam, draped in the British flag."

According to the sexualisation of the races and the western male attitudes to women of the time, this conquest was actually desired by the victim. In 1939 Sir Richmond Palmer,

governor of Cyprus and author of the *palmerkratia*, the oppressive regime of the late 1930s, told a meeting of the Royal Central Asian Society in London about his experience and knowledge of Cyprus: “Several thousand years ago a lady called Aphrodite landed in Cyprus, and the island has never quite recovered. The people of Cyprus make a luxury of discontent and always pretend that they do not like being ruled, and yet, like the lady I have mentioned as a prototype, they expect to be ruled, and, in fact, prefer it.” (Palmer 1939: 601). This is, of course, the standard male justification for rape.

In Cyprus, where so much imperialist ideology was expressed through the medium of archaeological and historical discourse, this conquest was reenacted in the earth. One thinks of Howard Carter entering Tutankhamun’s virgin tomb in 1922, and the huge popularity of “tombing” in Cyprus in the second half of the 19th century. Cesnola’s illustration showing “How Tombs are excavated, and with what Tools” (fig. 3; di Cesnola 1877: 255) clearly exaggerates the depth of the tomb; but this very exaggeration shows how important it was for Cesnola to boast about his penetration of the earth. Archaeology was a safe means of lifting the veil, demonstrating control over the interior, the deeply buried, the hidden, secret Other.

Unsurprisingly, amateur and academic archaeologists were drawn to the temple of Aphrodite in Palaepaphos. In this way they could penetrate the ultimate harem. Like the pornographic postcards of Algerian women, which were presented as “ethnographic” and pseudo-scientific (Alloula 1986: 27-29), these excavations, Cesnola’s (1877: 204-16) just as much as Gardner’s and Hogarth’s (Gardner et al. 1888), were concerned with measurements and foundations and chronology. This was partly due to the urge to appear scientific, but was also for the more fundamental reason that little was found at Palaepaphos to titillate the colonial imagination.

But the colonial imagination was never impeded by lack of concrete evidence. Aphrodite was the greatest expression of the overt, naked, unveiled woman, and so of the feminine

orient, which did not just need occupation and control but actually wanted it, as Palmer said. Yet Aphrodite had another manifestation, which paradoxically produced equal fascination and repulsion. She was an expression of colonial fear.

COLONIAL FEAR

In every colony, and especially in the districts away from the capital, a handful of westerners ruled thousands or tens of thousands of local people. In Cyprus in the late 19th century, Paphos and Famagusta were notorious among British officials and their families for their isolation and loneliness. Ever since the Indian Mutiny in 1857, this situation had produced fear: fear of attack, fear of being surrounded and overwhelmed, fear of the vast numbers of dark, incomprehensible natives. Any sign or representation of fertility or a large family was a reminder of this uncontrollable, threatening increase in population (Alloula 1986: 40). The “teeming but merciless goddess Astarte” (von Löher 1878: 99) was one expression of that threat.

This fear was heightened by the paranoia of being watched and examined, particularly as it was felt that watching and scrutinizing were uniquely colonial prerogatives. Travellers are full of references to piercing eyes from under the veil, or eyes staring out from the lattices of the harem window (Mabro 1991: 43, 45-47). Esme Scott-Stevenson noted “one of my own sex peeping curiously at me through the doorway” in a monastery (1880: 157), and she comments on the veils worn by Turkish women which “left visible only the single eye that peered so curiously at me as I passed” (20). The desire for what lay within was tempered by the fear of being secretly watched.

Added to this was the fear of impropriety, the public and unashamed rupture of upper class Victorian values: any mention of sex was taboo (though this, like the veil, heightened fascination and desire), let alone open discussion of polygamy, promiscuity, homosexuality or any of the other supposed “unnatural practices” of the Orient. Worst of all was the threat of hybridity: that a union of white male and oriental female would visibly demonstrate that East was not always East, nor West West (Young 1995).

In Cyprus, where suitably unnatural Oriental harems and houris, apparently, were harder to find than in Cairo or Istanbul, it was Aphrodite/Ashtart who had to bear the brunt of this projection of sexual and racial fear. Thanks to a handful of ancient references, imperfectly understood, she became the icon for whatever was immoral, degenerate, or ugly. Mrs Bateson Joyner’s adaptation of Franz von Löher’s travel book in 1878 provides a characteristic account:

It has long been a recognised fact, though dismal enough, that the instincts of sexuality, cruelty, and mystical superstition, are entwined together as if they grew from the same root. In Cyprus this law of nature seems to have asserted itself throughout the land. In presence of the mysteries of Astarte, in which abominable lust, bloodshed, and depravity reigned triumphant, we gladly shut our eyes. (von Löher 1878: 104).

Oriental sexuality has somehow become a law of nature, and torn between fascination and repulsion the author examines her subject with eyes tightly closed (with perhaps just a peep from the corner of her veil).

According to the orientalist discourse of British officials, writers and academics in late 19th century Cyprus, the depravity of the ancient worship of Aphrodite combined with the hot, exhausting climate and effeminate luxury to “enervate” the ancient Cypriots, so that they and their successors became an inferior, degenerate race (e.g. Lang 1878: 12; Smith 1887: 257; Munro and Tubbs 1890: 9; Stewart 1908: 230). This, of course, justified British rule. One of the most influential exponents of this theory, in terms of the breadth and strength of its impact on the discourse, was “General” Luigi Palma di Cesnola, in his book *Cyprus: Its*

Cities, Tombs and Temples (1877). Seeing how often it was cited and plagiarised in the 20 years following its publication, it is worth quoting the passage at length and examining its factual basis in some detail.

The main statement of the “enervation” theory comes in the introduction to the book, in a passage where he is trying to characterise the ancient Cypriots:

The easily acquired products of nature, the wealth arising from trade, the enervating climate, and not least, perhaps, the intercourse with the East rendered the people of Cyprus proverbial as the happiest beings on earth as far as luxury and pleasure could make them so, and the natural consequence of this was that there was no excess or refinement of indulgence which they did not practise. In this the worship of Aphrodite played an important part. To a great extent it decided the character of public and private morality throughout the island, and that the result was highly disgraceful may be seen from numerous passages in the ancient writers [four references]. Every one knows the description which Herodotus gives (i. 199) of the custom of Babylonian women at the Temple of Mylitta, the Assyrian counterpart of Aphrodite, and he adds that the same thing prevailed in Cyprus. Later writers entirely confirm what he says, and the pictures which they draw of the grand festivals to the goddess at Paphos leave little for the imagination of man to invent, one would think, in the way of gross indulgence. (di Cesnola 1877: 7-8).

The four references that Cesnola gives, by way of academic confirmation of his theory, consist of two passages from Athenaeus, one from Plautus, and one from Terence. Athenaeus III, 100, is a discussion of tripe served with silphium juice from Cyrene; perhaps Cesnola is confusing Cyprus and Cyrene, or else considers the eating of tripe to be an unnatural practice. Athenaeus XIII, 586-94, is the passage about famous courtesans, who, as it happens, come from all over the Greek world, but not from Cyprus. Beyond the fact that they are prostitutes, albeit socially superior ones, there is nothing which fits Cesnola’s description of “gross indulgence”. The third reference is Plautus, *Poenulus*, 1251, the beginning of the speech where the Carthaginian Hanno reveals to two prostitutes (who had been stolen as girls and bought by a pimp) that he is their father. In Terence, *Adelphi* II. 2, Sannio is about to take to trip to Cyprus with a cargo of “women and other goods”. It seems that Cesnola has selected a few general references to prostitution and the slave trade, and used them as pseudo-academic proof for his lurid picture of sexual indulgence and dissolution.

The cornerstone of his and others' assessment of the worship of Aphrodite in ancient Cyprus is an offhand remark in Herodotus, who after describing temple prostitution in Babylonia adds that "there is a custom similar to this in parts of Cyprus" (I, 199). Quite apart from the problems of accepting such a brief comment at face value, there are as many problems with Herodotus's interpretations of the Orient as there are with Cesnola's. Many aspects of modern orientalism and western cultural arrogance actually derived from 5th century B.C. Athens. For Herodotus, as for Cesnola, permissive sexuality is one component of the constructed "otherness" of the Orient. Several ancient writers mention temple prostitution in Cyprus and elsewhere, and many of them are clearly aware of the religious power and social importance of the phenomenon (MacLachlan 1992). These few references, however, were used by imperialists to create a picture of an indulgent and permissive Orient that was simultaneously alluring and threatening.

The natural consequence of the degeneracy of the ancient Cypriots was that they should bequeath it to their modern descendants. This causal connection is implied or, more commonly, explicitly stated in nearly all late 19th century imperialist accounts of Cyprus. It explained, for example, the perceived ugliness of contemporary women: the immorality of ancient worship became a curse on them (Baker 1879: 243); or else the rites with which Aphrodite was worshipped were so impure that they debased the character of the women (Smith 1887: 246).

The main logical mechanism for establishing the connection between ancient and modern degeneracy and moral inferiority was that of continuity, one of the most powerful weapons in the imperialist ideological armoury. Ancient Cyprus was primitive; there are many continuities between ancient and modern Cyprus; therefore modern Cyprus is primitive, and needs imperialist rule. Aphrodite and religious worship provided a rich quarry of continuities for the imperialists (and also, conversely, nationalists) to exploit.

The best and most frequently cited continuity was that between Aphrodite of Palaepaphos and Panayia Aphroditissa of Kouklia. To a Greek Cypriot intellectual, this was proof of the continuity of Greek civilization in Cyprus (Lambrou 1878: 13), but to the imperialists it was proof of continuing primitiveness and degeneracy. Cesnola described the continuing reverence paid to the stones of the Temple of Aphrodite (1877: 211). Von Löher mentioned the same idea, though without any specific description (1878: 105), and was then quoted by Thomson (1879: 40) and the devout presbyterian Agnes Smith, who found the idea “ludicrously incongruous” (1887: 206). The theme quickly became a literary and ideological topos (e.g. Luke 1935: 151-53; Storrs 1945: 496).

Much attention was paid to the famous “holy stones”. It made no difference whether these were sacred or functional in origin. To Cesnola (1877: 189) and Deschamps (1898: 220), they were ancient temples or monoliths, which were still used for worship. To the more hard-nosed Guillemard (1888: 475) and Hogarth (1889: 20) they were olive mills, but even so the modern dedications being made at them showed the continuity of primitive religion in modern Cyprus (Hogarth 1896: 179-80). Cesnola demonstrated that priests wore the same conical caps in the Iron Age and the 19th century (fig. 4; Cesnola 1877: 180), and as usual was plagiarised (Dixon 1879: 265). Kataklysmos, the supposed birthday of Aphrodite still celebrated in modern Cyprus, was another popular continuity (Lewis 1894: 138; Deschamps 1898: 100; Stewart 1908: 119). Taken together, these continuities established the primitive and degenerate nature of modern Cyprus. In this manifestation, Aphrodite was a primitive and threatening Other, and had to be suppressed.

CONCLUSION

In the British imperialist discourse, Aphrodite became, as so often, a metaphor for her island and for the women who lived there. Like them, she simultaneously attracted and repelled, disgusted and fascinated. She was the key to hidden fantasies of lust and power, and the symbol of open perversion and degeneracy. This ideological exploitation of Aphrodite brought her a long way from the Iron Age, where she (or her precursor) had been the centre of a profound and sophisticated interpretative system based on the principles of motherhood and nourishment.

Psychologically, the colonial appropriation of Aphrodite did more than provide a convenient ideological legitimization of imperial rule. Lurid fantasies of permissiveness and perversion caused fear and repulsion, as well as a certain fascination and attraction. Desire, when linked to power, was easily satisfied. But the only way to conquer fear was by precisely that, conquest. This applied to colonial officials, missionaries, and romantic travel writers alike: by giving expression to the objects of their fear and forcibly accommodating them to their own prejudices, they resolved their own fears and satisfied their desires by means of conquest and control.

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CAPTIONS TO THE FIGURES

Fig. 1. "A Princess of Cyprus". *The Graphic*, 30 December 1882

Fig. 2. "Bien venu qui apporte!" Sir Garnet Wolseley and Venus. *Punch*, 3 August 1878, p. 46

Fig. 3. "How Tombs are excavated, and with what Tools." di Cesnola 1877: 255

Fig. 4. "Modern Priest. Stone head from Golgoi." di Cesnola 1877: 180



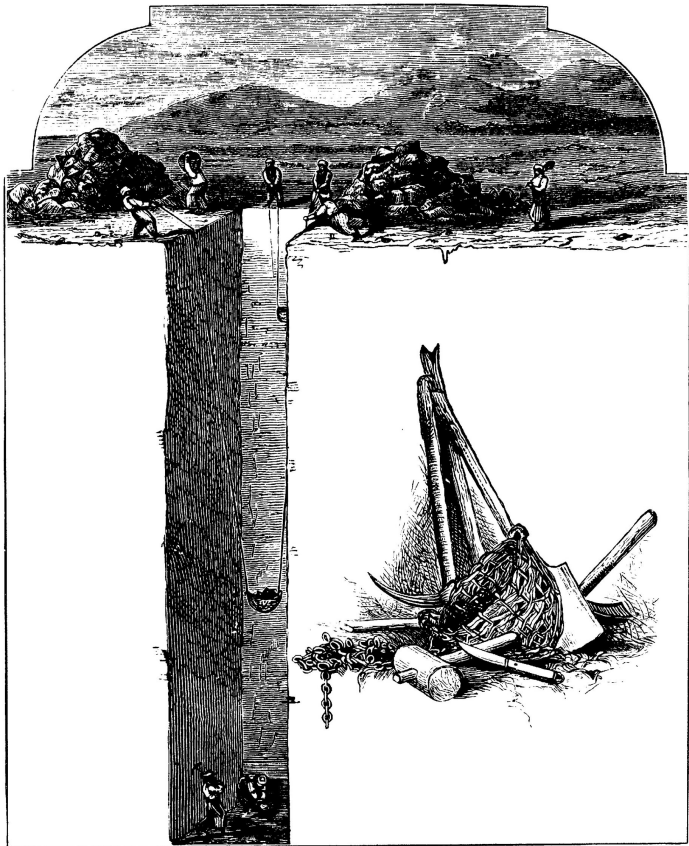
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Stone head from Golgoi.