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Architectural Styles and Ethnic Identity in Medieval to Modern Cyprus

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Abstract

Archaeologists and art historians have often attempted to identify ethnic groups by means of specific stylistic traits in their art and architecture. Close contextual examination, however, reveals that different stylistic groups in different contexts can use the same styles. This article reviews some examples of architectural styles and features which were borrowed and transformed during the Medieval, Ottoman and British colonial periods in Cyprus (1191-1960). One building, the British colonial governor's residence in Nicosia built in the 1930s, is particularly revealing in its deliberate use of styles normally associated with all the other ethnic groups of Cyprus.

Introduction

Archaeologists investigating a low hill on the southern edge of Nicosia in a millennium or two's time are likely to discover the remains of a monumental structure with a bizarre mixture of architectural styles and motifs: Byzantine domes and column capitals, Gothic mouldings and windows, Venetian lions, Ottoman lattices, Cypriot vernacular arches, and British coats of arms, plus further oddities such as stone camels' heads and gargoyles wearing bowler hats. Unless scholarly interests have changed drastically by then (and presumably they will have), the archaeologists are likely to ask questions about the ethnic identity of the builders and inhabitants of this structure: Greek? Turkish? Frankish? Venetian? British? Cypriot? or some mixture of them all?

This is certainly how much 19th and 20th-century scholarship has operated. Architectural historians and archaeologists have identified specific stylistic traits as belonging to specific 'races', 'ethnic groups' or 'nations'. Domes are Byzantine, pointed arches are Frankish, broad eaves are Ottoman, and wide verandas are British colonial. To Camille Enlart, for example, writing in French in 1899 about the Gothic architecture of Cyprus, 'the buildings and inscriptions of Cyprus speak our language in all its native purity' (Enlart 1987, 16). Einar Gjerstad in the 1930s was happy to distinguish 'indigenous Cypriot' and 'Greek' phases in the 5th-century BC palace at Vouni, merely on the basis of its changing architectural layout (Given 1998, 18; Gjerstad 1933, 594; cf. Maier 1985, 36-7). Similarly, the 1990 edition of 'Footprints in Cyprus' is content to sum up the medieval military monuments of Cyprus by declaring without qualification that 'their fashion is not Cypriot but French or Venetian' (Hunt 1990a, 221). In common with much writing on ethnicity, scholars have seen a direct and unchanging connection between particular traits in material culture and the ethnic groups who supposedly produced them.

In this paper, rather than entering the now well-rehearsed theoretical debate on ethnicity in archaeology (e.g. Jones 1997) I aim to demonstrate how different groups use the same architectural styles at different times for different purposes. Particular architectural styles and motifs can suggest particular ethnicities and identities to their builders or inhabitants, but very often they mean something else entirely (Schriwer 2002). This becomes particularly clear with the long-term view of the archaeologist, so my examples will cover the Medieval (1191-1571), Ottoman (1571-1878) and British colonial (1878-1960) periods in Cyprus. Again and again

architectural styles were appropriated and manipulated for local, specific purposes, rather than belonging to any primeval and unchanging 'ethnicity'. After following through the changing uses of a few stylistic traits during this period, I will focus on one building which appropriated them all: Government House in Nicosia, built by the British colonial rulers of Cyprus in 1933-37.

Transformations: Gothic

The major contribution of the Lusignans, the French Catholic dynasty who controlled Cyprus from 1192 to 1489, to the island's architectural landscape was the importation of the French ecclesiastical styles of the 13th and 14th centuries. The most famous and perhaps most influential example of the French Gothic style in Cyprus was the Cathedral of Ayia Sophia in Nicosia (1209-c. 1350), built by French clerics, masons, sculptors and even some workmen (Enlart 1987, 82-6). The plan and most of the structure is what Gunnis called 'the purest early French pointed style' (Gunnis 1936, 49), and the early 14th-century west porch has its best parallels in Rheims Cathedral (Enlart 1987, 125-7). On the face of it there would seem to be no doubt that this building was ethnically French.

Yet this easy identification presupposes, firstly, that there was such a thing as an unambiguous 'French' identity during the 13th and 14th centuries. The 'Franks' in the Eastern Mediterranean were clearly still negotiating their religious and national identities. They were doing this in the face of not just the Muslims but also the local Byzantines and their own highly varied origins in western Europe (Ilieva 1995). That the archetypal 'French' west porch was built while an Italian was archbishop is symptomatic.

More specifically, the later history of buildings such as Ayia Sophia and the influence that their styles had on other structures suggest that there is not such an easy and direct relationship between style and ethnic identity. After the Ottoman occupation of Nicosia in 1570 Ayia Sophia was turned into a mosque, and continued as the most important 'Cathedral-mosque' of the city, where the Ottoman governor came for Friday prayers (Mariti 1909, 42-3). Ottoman policy left Orthodox churches for the Greek Cypriots to worship in but converted the Catholic churches of their Latin predecessors into mosques. This gave rise to a distinctive 'Ottoman Gothic' style that characterised major Ottoman city mosques: Ayia Sophia or Aya Sofya (renamed Selimiye Cami in 1954); Haidar Pasha Camisi (St. Catherine's Church, 14th century); Ömerye Camisi (St. Mary's Augustinian church, 14th century); Yeni Cami (a 13th-century Latin Gothic church); and many more in Nicosia, the other five towns, and even in villages such as Episkopi. When there was a need to distinguish Greek Orthodox from Turkish Muslim, the Gothic style was characteristically Ottoman.

Further transformations in the distinctive Gothic style can be seen in the many and varied imitations of it, both in ecclesiastical and domestic architecture. The influence of Ayia Sophia is most clearly seen in one specific feature which is unusual and so easily traced. All three doors in the early 14th-century west porch are flanked by pairs of niches with elaborately carved brackets and borders, too shallow to hold statues but possibly for paintings of saints (Enlart 1987, 117-8). These were first copied in a building which lies immediately south of this porch: the 14th- to 16th-century 'Bedestan', probably to be identified with the Church of St. Nicholas mentioned in contemporary documents (Enlart 1987, 136-46; Gunnis 1936, 55-8). Although when this doorway was built the Bedestan was a Latin church, by the early 16th century it was the Greek Orthodox cathedral, Gothic arches and all (Enlart 1987, 137). With this as a model, the flanking niches then worked their way into the Cypriot vernacular, and were frequently used in Nicosia town houses of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, both Greek and Turkish Cypriot.

To these can be added a host of other Gothic details which became commonplace in the Cypriot vernacular from the 16th to the 20th centuries. For example, trefoil windows and blind windows, to be seen on Greek and Turkish Cypriot houses, churches, mosques and fountains; corner mouldings derived from stylised colonnettes, to be seen on the doorways of virtually every town house of the late 19th and early 20th centuries; and the pointed arch, which became the structural basis of stone-built village houses and was widely used in arcades and balconies in khans, monasteries, administrative buildings and houses, even till the present day. As well as

stylistic traits, actual architectural members were taken and re-used in new contexts. The church of Ayios Michael Tripiotis in Nicosia, built probably in 1690, is particularly notable for its Gothic, Romanesque and Renaissance sculptures incorporated into a new Greek Orthodox setting (Enlart 1987, 160-3).

One more appropriation of the Gothic style shows how historically specific the meanings of a style can be. When the British community of Nicosia decided to erect an Anglican church in the 1890s, the architect, William Williams of the colonial Public Works Department, chose the style that was expected of him: late Victorian English Gothic Revival (Schaar *et al.* 1995, 27-9). The trefoils in its windows and the needle window in its diminutive spire are derived ultimately from French Gothic, but not via the churches and mosques of Medieval and Ottoman Cyprus but from Victorian reworkings of English Medieval Gothic. In this context, therefore, the Gothic style is not French or Greek or Turkish but authentically British.

Transformations: Venetian

The Venetian state ruled Cyprus from 1489 to 1571, and bequeathed to the island a handful of Renaissance buildings. The few survivals include a two-storey wing added to St. Mary's Augustinian church in the late 16th century, and three round arches from the impressive façade of the Provveditore's Palace in Famagusta, complete with Tuscan columns, their shafts taken from Roman Salamis (Enlart 1987, 468). As with the Gothic structures, elements of this style were emulated by the Cypriots and entered the set of ecclesiastical and vernacular options that masons could choose. The 16th-century church Stavrou tou Missiricou (later Arablar Camisi) in Nicosia had a Byzantine layout, and adopted a range of Gothic and Renaissance features, to which a minaret was added after 1570. By the middle of the 19th century Greek Orthodox churches in the cities displayed a wide range of Byzantine, Gothic and Renaissance styles.

The most famous structure which regularly receives the epithet 'Venetian' consists of the city walls of Nicosia, built in the late 1560s in the face of an imminent Ottoman invasion. Although the earthen core of the walls was completed, only part of the stone facing had been done by the invasion in 1570, the upper half of the walls being faced with turf (Perbellini 1988, 37). To a large extent it was the Ottomans who finished the job, adding the stone facing of the upper parts, parapets on the bastions, and parts of the main gates. This is seen very clearly at the Famagusta Gate, where the Sultan's tughra was added in 1820 to the main pediment over the round-arched doorway. The bastions, too, were renamed, so 'Loredano' became 'Derviş', 'Podocataro' became 'Suslu', 'Roccas' became 'Karaman', and so on.

After the British occupation in 1878 the walls were appropriated again and made not Venetian or Ottoman but British. A famous engraving from the 'Illustrated London News' (7 September 1878, 229) shows the Union Flag flying over the Caraffa (Altın) bastion, and when the Royal Engineers made a new breach immediately north of the Paphos Gate in 1879 to improve traffic flow, they left a plaque with their crest and the date. This was common practice in Malta, where the buildings and structures of the Knights of St. John were all 'reinhabited' and 'reinscribed' (cf. Said 1993, 253) and made unequivocally British.

Transformations: Ottoman

Like the Lusignans and Venetians, the Ottomans brought their own architectural styles, which can be seen in purpose-built mosques, khans, fortifications, aqueducts, fountains, and town houses. Arab Ahmed Paşa Mosque in Nicosia, according to David Hunt, 'has its admirers among those who are attracted by Ottoman 18th-century architecture' (Hunt 1990b, 252). More generously, and more accurately, it is a good example of a cruciform mosque with central dome and pendentives, probably dating to the early 17th century and restored in 1845 (Tekman *et al.* 1982, 3). Hala Sultan Tekke, rebuilt in the middle of the 18th century and again in 1816, is a similar structure with central dome and four smaller half-domes supported by pointed arches, and a stalactite *mihrab*

niche (Çuhadaroğlu and Oğuz 1975, 31-5). The dome was to be taken up in the British representational architecture of the 1930s, most notably in Government House.

It was Ottoman domestic architecture which saw the most frequent transformations. The two most obvious exterior characteristics, broad eaves and a projecting kiosk, became widespread in 18th- to 20th-century townhouses, Greek and Turkish Cypriot alike. The house of the Greek Cypriot *dragoman* Hadjigeorgakis Kornessios, constructed in 1793, has a distinctive wooden kiosk over the main door, shaded by broad eaves, along with an internal arrangement which is inward looking and, as far as public rooms are concerned, focused on the *selamlık* or guest room.

Contemporary portraits show Hadjigeorgakis wearing Ottoman dress with the official fez, proudly displaying the firman granting him his position (Rizopoulou-Egoumenidou 1991, 63-5). These portraits and the façade of his house show a member of the Greek Cypriot elite emulating the forms of display of the Ottoman rulers of the island. The main door, however, is clearly inspired by the now common Cypriot Gothic style, having a pointed arch with successive mouldings including the popular 'dog-rose', and a reused Venetian marble slab showing a lion and a simplified coat of arms. A Greek Cypriot emulating the Ottoman Turks can still use Frankish and Venetian styles and motifs.

In the early years of their rule the British dismissed the Ottoman style and its vernacular derivatives as 'native', but from the 1920s new ideologies of nationalism and imperialism encouraged them to start adopting local styles. By representing local culture in carefully selective ways, they could demonstrate their knowledge of their colony and exclude unwelcome nationalisms, most notably Greek Cypriot nationalism (Given 1997, 69-73). As well as Government House, a good example was the Teachers' Training College designed by Austen Harrison and completed in 1958, whose Ottoman broad eaves and projecting kiosks were combined with other motifs and materials from the Cypriot vernacular (Given 1997, 72-3).

Transformations: (Neo-)Greek

Cyprus had no Ionic or Doric temples in the Classical period, and its Roman temples seemed to have stimulated no imitation in later periods. Some Greek revival influences can be seen in 19th-century Orthodox church architecture, with pediments over doorways and schematic pilasters and classical mouldings. A good example of this is the church of Phaneromeni in Nicosia, constructed in 1872. Its north door is an extravagant composition of a classical pediment enclosing a slightly pointed arch. The door is framed in a Gothic manner by stacked colonnettes with Byzantine capitals, while the pediment is supported by classically fluted semi-columns again with Byzantine capitals, and the dedication plaque above the door is flanked by two Venetian-cum-vernacular lions. A further touch of irony comes from the stone, most of which was taken from the Lusignan castle at La Cava, 5 km south of Nicosia (Gunnis 1936, 235). The rest of the building similarly draws on classical, Byzantine, Gothic and Renaissance styles to produce this church which for most of the colonial period was at the forefront of the Greek nationalist movement.

Many of the British colonial rulers of Cyprus at the beginning of the 20th century were classically trained. For them, the Greek revival style signified education, culture and history, or at least their understanding of such things. The Cyprus Museum, finished in 1907, was in a brownstone version of the Greek Revival style, plus an Ionic porch in Pentelic marble added by the Curator of Monuments George Jeffery, based on the Athena Nike temple of classical Athens. Similarly the colonial Agricultural School of 1913, designed mainly by the High Commissioner, used a central pedimented gable with pilasters and flat Ionic capitals.

As Greek Cypriots increased their demands for union with Greece during the 1910s and 1920s, the Greek Revival style took on a very different meaning. Because of the links which Greek Cypriots saw between themselves and the glorious classical past, the style was appropriate for Greek nationalist statements of identity, above all in the main carriers of the national message: the schools (Given 1997, 66-9). Thanks to Theodoros Fotiades, a Greek Cypriot architect who had been trained in Athens and worked in Alexandria, the towns and villages of Cyprus saw a huge number of Greek Revival schools built in the 1920s, beginning with the Pancyprrian Gymnasium in Nicosia in 1923 and emulated with varying degrees of skill in a host of other Greek Cypriot

schools across the island. The holding of nationalist events such as the staging of classical plays and ceremonies such as 'Flag Days' with this architecture as a backdrop demonstrates the new nationalist associations that this style had.

The popularity of the style then spread to Greek Cypriot domestic architecture, with Fotiades and others designing grand town villas with imposing Ionic façades and verandas. As happened so often, this elite style filtered down into the standard townhouse vernacular, and the 1920s and 1930s saw a huge number of townhouses built with more or less schematic classical façades. Often the style brought its political significance with it, but on some occasions it clearly did not. The Evkaf headquarters in Nicosia, built in 1928, has a façade broken by flat, schematic classical pilasters and mouldings; added to that are two large doorways set in Gothic pointed arches and flanked by Renaissance rusticated quoins (Keshishian 1990, 217). At one level the traits and features of Greek Revival have been added to the broad architectural vocabulary of the Cypriot architect and mason; at another it is directed towards a very specific expression of ideology.

Government House: transformation and representation

Throughout the history of architecture in Cyprus, styles have been continually adopted by different groups and given different meanings. The reasons for such shifts varied from unconscious emulation of specific social groups to deliberate imitation, borrowing or transformation. During the British colonial period, especially in the 1920s to 1950s, we have many clear examples of the deliberate manipulation of architectural style for political and ideological purposes. This is not because the British were the first propagandists, or because modern ideologies were any more overt. The only difference is that for the first time we have extensive and detailed documentation about the intentions and opinions of architects, clients and viewers. An examination of a particular case from this period demonstrates how people give meaning to style for specific, local purposes, rather than accepting some already existing deeply pre-ordained significance.

On the 31st October, 1931, a mass of Greek Cypriot demonstrators demanding union with Greece set fire to the old Government House. Being largely wooden, built from a prefabricated kit sent from England in 1878, it burnt to the ground. For the current governor, Sir Ronald Storrs, the building of a replacement was not just a matter of convenience for himself and his family, it was a chance to recover the colonial regime's lost prestige and authority, and more importantly to project his image of Cyprus. The new structure was to represent a deeply historical Cyprus, but one without any trace of Hellenic nationalism, and one which was unified and consummated in British rule (Given 1997, 70-1; Schaar *et al.* 1995, 75-8).

Storrs' first choice of architect was Austen St. Barbe Harrison (1891-1976), Chief Architect to the Public Works Department of Palestine from 1922 to 1937. In 1931 Harrison's Palestine Archaeological Museum (now the Rockefeller Museum) was under construction, and Storrs clearly favoured Harrison's attempt to represent all styles and histories of the Holy Land in this building: a Crusader tower over the entrance; an Islamic pool and *liwan* in the centre of the monastic cloisters; and a series of sculptures by Eric Gill depicting events in the region's history such as the creation of the Hebrew alphabet and Romulus and Remus (Fuchs and Herbert 2000, 309-24). This 'colonial regionalism', a prevailing imperial ideology of the time, aimed to respect and represent local traditions, and protect it from modern international influences (Fuchs and Herbert 2000, 282-3).

The plans of Harrison's Government House for Cyprus show a building which is on a large scale but varied and interesting, a careful balance of different proportional masses. No details are shown in these plans, but in form at least the historical references are subtle. The central tower is perhaps reminiscent of Medieval military structures, emphasised by the hood-moulds round the windows. Shallow domes cover the tower and porch, and the form at the south end of the east wing is strikingly similar to a colonial bungalow. We only have the plans, however. The foundation stone was laid on George V's birthday on 3rd June 1932, but as the work dragged on and became more expensive, Storrs' tour of duty finished, and his successor, Sir Reginald Stubbs,

had a less grandiose vision of British rule in Cyprus and no personal connection with Harrison (SA1/929/1925).

In February 1933, accordingly, Stubbs terminated Harrison's contract, in spite of the architect's vigorous protests, and three months later he employed a London architect, Maurice Webb, to design a cheaper, simpler building which would only require local materials and labour. Compared to Harrison's harmonious and original design, Webb's building makes up in pomposity what it lacks in interest. In plan the building has three wings set at right angles to make a U-shape. The long repetitive front façade that this produced was interrupted by a disproportionately large porch, set grandly with arches and a monumental British coat of arms. Above the porch rises a squat, blank tower, capped by a small dome (Fig. 1).

What Webb's Government House lacks in architectural originality, however, it gains in ideological interest. The unsubtle level at which it was given some sort of 'Cypriot' association is made clear in a telegram from Stubbs in June 1933:

The plans generally are very satisfactory. As stated in my telegram of the 26th of June I should be glad if it were found possible to give a Cypriot character to the arches in front of the house but I recognise that they must harmonize with the architecture of the entrance porch and it may well be difficult to design a suitable porch with a Cypriot motif. (SA1/1296/1931/1)

This of course begs the question: what is a 'Cypriot motif'? By examining the stylistic features of this structure, we find a clear, if unsubtle, understanding on the part of Webb and Stubbs of what constitutes an authentic 'Cypriot' style. The arches on the porch, for example, are pointed, following the now common characteristic of the Cypriot vernacular, derived ultimately from Frankish Gothic. It is also abundantly clear that they do not harmonise with the round-arched openings at each end of the façade, nor with the rather modernist balustrade at the top of the porch. But ideology takes precedence over artistic harmony.

Further architectural details add to the list of required historical references to include all ethnic groups of Cyprus. The columns of the arcade along the rear façade have a variety of imaginative and slightly unlikely Byzantine capitals. The arches in this arcade, of course, are pointed, though those of the verandas above them are round. The tracery in the large arched lower windows of the pavilions projecting outwards from each rear wing have stylised Gothic tracery. In a tradition dating to the Medieval period but still followed in Britain today, the gargoyles on the rear façade portrayed figures such as the head mason, the head carpenter, and a labourer (one of whom wears the bowler hat). The water spouts of the first floor represent the heads of a camel, a mule, a cow and a goat, thus acknowledging the animals who contributed to the construction (the goat, reputedly, by supplying hair to temper the plaster).

The main tower, which is of somewhat squat proportions, has a dome which presumably had either Byzantine or Ottoman associations for the builders. The domes capping individual rooms in the pavilions which terminate each wing at the rear seem more Ottoman; the latticed windows underneath them make the pavilions resemble a *shaykh's* tomb or a *hamam*. All corners and openings are dressed with sandstone quoins, in the best tradition of British colonial architecture on the island for the last 50 years. Just in case the British component in the 'Cypriot style' is missed, the already pretentious porch is weighed down by an enormous sculpted royal coat of arms, while medallions on the sides of the porch show the royal British lion and the two lions of Richard the Lionheart, first British ruler of Cyprus.

These sculptures and the appropriation of stylistic features from different periods and groups from the island's history were emphasised by the literal appropriation of artefacts and architectural members. Monuments glorifying the European Medieval past of Cyprus were the first to attract the attention of British administrators and be brought to the grounds of Government House: a lintel from the Gothic church that became Yeni Cami (Jeffery 1918, 63); two 15th-century cannons from Kyrenia (Jeffery 1918, 312); and a cannon given by Henry VIII to the Hospitallers, found in Famagusta Bay in 1907 (Gunnis 1936, 192-3). In 1901 two Gothic arches were brought from the Old Konak, previously the Lusignan, Venetian and Ottoman palace (SA1/1402/1901), and in 1906 a further Gothic arched doorway was removed from the west end of the Bedestan (SA1/241/1907;

Jeffery 1918, 89). Originally these were mainly of historical interest, demonstrating the European character of Britain's predecessors as rulers of Cyprus. With the construction of the new building with its ideological aim of representing Cypriot history and all its ethnic groups, the two arches from the Konak were repositioned so that they faced the rear façade of the building on the same axis (Fig. 2). The pointed arches of the 'Cypriot' building replied to the original pointed arches, and gained authenticity and authority from them.

The message is clearly that 'Cypriot' character, to the British, consists of a *mélange* of Byzantine, Medieval, Ottoman and colonial stylistic traits. The classical – associated with the Greek Cypriot nationalism that burnt down the building's predecessor – is conspicuous by its absence. This 'Cypriot *mélange*' (Carøe 1933) characterised much British colonial architecture in Cyprus from the 1930s to the 1950s, such as Harrison's Teachers' Training College in Nicosia. Government House, however, was the most prominent structure in this style. What better stage on which to present the architectural definition of 'Cypriot' identity than the residence of the island's ruler and so the embodiment of the state itself?

Conclusions

Specific architectural and stylistic traits such as mouldings, motifs, and forms, when viewed in the long term, clearly have no single 'meaning'; in particular, they have no one unchanging association with a specific ethnic group. Byzantine capitals, Gothic arches and niches, Venetian lions, Ottoman eaves and even British quoins have all been borrowed, imitated, transformed and given new meanings and new associations with different ethnic groups. Sometimes, as with Gothic corner colonnettes, the new versions seem to carry no particular association. Other motifs such as Venetian lions can be taken into the vernacular style and come to be a generally recognisable characteristic of a different group – Orthodox Greek Cypriots, for example, or the British colonial community in Cyprus.

All the architectural styles and motifs discussed in this paper continue to change, whether they are transferred from one ethnic or social group to another, or whether they are keeping pace with social development within any one group. The Greek Cypriot educated elite, for example, built neo-Classical town houses in the 1920s and modernist international style houses in the 1950s and 1960s, but are now restoring or imitating traditional vernacular houses, complete with the 'Gothic' arches and 'Ottoman' kiosks that they had previously rejected.

The later fortunes of Webb's Government House illustrate even more vividly the ease with which the meaning of styles and motifs can be transformed in a few decades. After independence Government House became the Presidential Palace, initially the office and ultimately the residence of the presidents of the Republic. State visitors are welcomed and often televised on the steps of the Palace, shaking the hand of the President underneath the oversized British royal coat of arms. Even after the coup of 1974 and the bombing of the Palace, the building and the coat of arms were lovingly restored, apart from some sample bullet holes and pockmarks – which have themselves become another architectural trait demonstrating Greek Cypriot identity. The British royal arms may seem an unusual symbol for a postcolonial state, and would certainly confuse those future archaeologists. But symbols and styles can only ever have temporary meaning; they must remain available for others to borrow and transform.

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