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From Alasia to Famagusta: An Historical Survey

My dear Mayor Pouyouros
Excellencies,
Your Worships,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to express my thanks to our active Mayor Pouyouros, for the extremely kind words he has uttered and I need not say that I fully appreciate his kindness in giving me this opportunity to talk to such a distinguished audience. My subject is the role which this town played for a very long time in history, during its four thousand years of life, under several names, as Alasia at the start, as Salamis and Constantia later, and since the Middle Ages, as Famagusta.

Cyprus, as is well known, lies in the crossroads between East and West, North and South. By its strategic position it controls the approaches to the coast of Cilicia and Syria, and its numerous small harbours form an important stage in the coasting route from Egypt to the Aegean. But apart from its geographical position its natural wealth was a further attraction in antiquity; rich in copper and timber for ship-construction, especially cedar, cypress and pine, it grew sufficient cereals to export and was famous for its figs and fruits.

But the best harbour in the island was that of Salamis – Famagusta and the granary of all Cyprus was the plain of Alasia – Salamis. So this eastern area of Cyprus was favoured by nature more than any other area in the island; this was the reason that a town in this region always overshadowed all others.

This city was situated during the second millennium B.C. near Engomi, two miles west of Salamis. It had a harbour of its own at the estuary of the river Pedieos and became very early an important commercial and cultural centre, a centre of Mediterranean exchange of goods which reached there from Minoan Crete and the Aegean islands, and were shipped over to Syria and Egypt, and, vice versa, from Egypt and Syria through it to the west.

This city saw also a centre for refining copper – its work-shops were found near its Cyclopean walls – and a port for its export. It is well known that Cyprus owes its name to its copper, because Kypros and copper is one and the same word.

But a question arises: which was that prehellenic city of Engomi? Prof. Schaeffer, who has been digging at Engomi for the last four decades, has identified very plausibly the city with Alasia, which is mentioned in the Egyptian, the Hittite and Ugarit records.

In a letter, found at Tell el – Amarna of Egypt, the king of Alasia (no name is mentioned) writing to the pharaoh of Egypt, probably Amenophis III, excuses himself for having sent so little copper to him. He gives as the cause, a visitation by the god Nergal, whereby many of his men died. He then asks the pharaoh for silver, an ox, oil and requests him to return the wood which was taken from him by Egyptians. He further desires the pharaoh to send to Alasia the property of an Alasian, who had died in Egypt. Finally, he begs the pharaoh not to take it amiss that his messenger was detained in Alasia, and ends by requesting him not to ally himself to the King of Hatti (probably Hittite) and Sanhar (an unknown people).

Here is a part of the letter:

“Now I have sent to thee five hundred ingots of copper as a present for my brother have I sent it to thee. Let not my brother take it to heart that the copper is little. For in my land the hand of Nergal, my lord, has killed all the men of my land, and so there is no one here to produce copper. Therefore, let not my brother take it to heart”.

The Tell – el Amarna letters, some three hundred in number, date from the reign of Amenophis III and that of his son and successor, Amenophis IV, who changed his name to Akhenaten, reigned from 1375 to 1358 and became famous more for being the husband of Nefertiti than for anything else.

Nefertiti, the beautiful queen of Egypt, was thought for a long time to be a Mittanian princess, but there was nothing at all to prove it. So, the German historians Scharff and Moorgat in their book “Ägypten und Vorderasien in Altertum” i.e. “Egypt and the near East in Antiquity”, suggest, judging from the deformation of her skull and those of her six daughters, a custom which was practised at Enkomi – Alasia, that she might be a Cypriot princess. I propounded this theory to some diplomat friends in Cairo, when I was there, and one of them, the Brazilian ambassador, a few days later, when we met again, complained that he hardly escaped a beating in discussing with some Egyptians my theory of the descent of Nefertiti from Alasia. The Egyptians supported that their queen came from a noble Egyptian family and anything else was wrong. Well, if you go to Egypt, I warn you not to entangle yourselves in this matter; this time, I wash my hands.

The king of Alasia addresses the pharaoh as brother, which means that the two kings were equivalent in rank. The tablets of the Tell el – Amarna letters were inscribed in cuneiform characters and in Babylonian language, the language of diplomacy of that time.

These letters cover roughly the period from 1378 to 1348 B.C. This was the period during which the Mycenaean Greeks were in firm command of the East Mediterranean seas and had made important settlements on Cyprus and particularly at Engomi. The presence of their culture, from pottery to artistic styles, customs and beliefs, is very apparent, particularly in the eastern part of the island; no wonder, therefore, if they brought to it some of their gods at the same time. In the city of Alasia were found inscriptions in the Cypriot language.

script, which testify in the most categorical way that the city was better connected with the Aegean civilization than with that of Anatolia or Syria. So, the bronze statue of the horned god found at Engomi is identified with the Greek god Apollo Kereatas, i.e. the Horned Apollo. With regard to the horns of the god they must be explained by the fact that Apollo was considered the protector of the horned animals, in which the area of Alasia was very rich.

Towards the end of the XIIIth century the city was surrounded by an enormous Cyclopean Wall in order to be protected from the raids of the so called Peoples of the Sea. Nevertheless it was unable to defend itself and was burnt down and destroyed at about the beginning of the twelfth century.

At the same time a new Greek city, the city of Salamis was founded on the same site but nearer to the sea by the Homeric hero Teucer, the son of Telamon, the king of the island of Salamis in Greece. This city played an important role as the easternmost outpost of Hellenism through the ages, from the 12th century B.C. down to the 7th century A.D., when it was burnt down and destroyed by the Arab raids. But the tombs in the necropolis which is partly excavated in an exceptionally scholarly and methodical digging by our learned Director of Antiquities Dr. Vassos Karageorghis, revealed the glory of Salamis.

The objects found in the so called royal tombs of the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 7th century B.C., are the most eloquent samples of the wealth and of the very high degree of culture, which it reached.

The burial customs of these tombs recall the Homeric burials, and treasures; for instance, the throne and bed from the dromos of Tomb 79, enriched with carved ivory plaques and silver, remind us of the ivory and silver throne of Penelope. The wealth of this period stepped in parallel line with political power. We know from Herodotos the story of Pheretime, the mother of the dethroned King of Cyrene, who fled to Salamis in Cyprus at about 560 B.C. "Now", Herodoros writes, "Salamis at this time was ruled by Evelthon, who dedicated that marvellous censer at Delphi which stands in the treasury of the Corinthians. To him Pheretime came, asking him for an army which should bring her son back to Cyrene; but Evelthon being willing to give her all else, only not an army, when she took what he gave her, she said, that this was well, but it were better to give her an army at her request. This she would still say, whatever was the gift; at the last, Evelthon sent her a golden spindle and distaff, and wool therewith; and Pheretime uttering the same words as before, he answered that these and not armies, were fits for women".

But surely the most able king of Salamis was Evagoras I, 5/4 century B.C., whom the Athenians honoured by setting up his statue in the Agora, where stood the image of Zeus the Saviour, a memorial of the magnitude of his benefactions to them.

With regard to his activities Isocrates, the Athenian orator, says that he "acquired much additional territory, surrounded it all with new walls and built triremes, and with other construction, so increased the city that it was inferior

to none of the cities of Greece. And he caused it to become so powerful that many who formerly despised it, now feared it”.

The last king of Salamis, and the last of the Family of Teucer, Nicocreon, died in the year 311 B.C. and so Salamis and the whole of Cyprus became dominion of the Ptolemies of Egypt and was ruled by a general as governor. Now whether Nicocreon died a natural death or committed suicide is still a problem.

At the entrance of the village of Engomi Dr. Karageorghis, who excavated a tumulus there, discovered a cenotaph which, he believes, belong to king Nicocreon of Salamis and his family and thinks that Diodoros of Sicily and other ancient historians have confused things and attributed the event to king Nicocles of Paphos. The event is this according to Diodoros:

“Ptolemy, who was master of the cities of Cyprus, on learning from certain persons that Nicocles, the king of Paphos, had secretly and privately formed an alliance with Antigonos, dispatched two of his friends, Argaeos and Callicrates, ordering them to slay Nicocles; for he was taking all precautions lest any others also should hasten to shift allegiance when they saw that those were left unpunished who had previously rebelled. These two men accordingly, after sailing to the island and obtaining soldiers from Menelaos the general (a brother of Ptolemy) surrounded the house of Nicocles, informed him of the King’s wishes and ordered him to take his own life. At first he tried to defend himself against the charges, but then, since on one heeded him, he slew himself. Axiothea, the wife of Nicocles, on learning of her husband’s death, slew her daughters, who were unwed, in order that no enemy might possess them; and she urged the wives of Nicocles’s brothers to choose death along with her, although Ptolemy had no instructions in regard to the women but had agreed to their safety. When the palace had thus been filled of death and unforeseen disaster, the brothers of Nicocles, after fastening the doors, set fire to the building and slew themselves. Thus the house of the kings of Paphos, after meeting such tragic suffering, was brought to its end in the way described”. This is the story of Diodoros, but Dr. Karageorghis, the living witness says, no; it was not Nicocles of Paphos but Nicocreon of Salamis and his family who died in the way described and here is the evidence, he says, the cenotaph which I discovered on the outskirts of the Necropolis of Salamis and the spade of an archaeologist cannot err. Believe whom you like or none. As for myself Dr. Karageorghis is a dear friend but the truth is a dearer friend of mine. So. I shall investigate further the question, but, God forbid, not now.

Salamis from Ptolemies passed over to the Romans, and the remains of classical antiquity which stand now on the spot, belong to these two periods. Salamis under the Ptolemies began to lose its great importance and Paphos, thanks to its fame as a religious centre of the cult of Aphrodite, was given a superior dignity until it became, during these occupations, the capital city of Cyprus. When, however, Salamis was twice destroyed by earthquakes in an interval of ten years in 332 and 342 A.D. and was rebuilt by emperor Constantius, the son of Constantine the Great, the new city was named Constantia and became once again the capital city of Christian Cyprus.

During the Christian era Salamis was held in a great reverence. St. Barnabas had consecrated its soil with his blood and his burial. It was the first Greek city to accept the preaching of the Gospel from the lips of St. Barnabas and St. Paul. According to the Acts "They, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus. And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews".

Barnabas it seems was stoned to death by the Jews of Salamis during his second mission to Cyprus, probably in 56 and was buried by his cousin Mark in a tomb outside Salamis, where now his holy well is situated near his Monastery.

The town was destroyed and mostly burnt down at the time of the Arab invasions in the seventh century A.D. and was abandoned, to be succeeded by Ammochostos in the south, the mediaeval Famagusta, the richest city of the island during the Lusignan Kings of Cyprus.

So Salamis – Constantia, after a life of splendour for more than one thousand years, now sleeps among its ruins, its ashes and its glorious reminiscences of the past.

Famagusta increased gradually to take over its place. In the year 985 an Arab Chronicler, Shams el din or Muqadasi writes about the wealth of Cyprus and its cities, Famagusta included, the following:

"It is full of populous cities and offers Muslims many advantages in their trade thither, by reason of the great quantities of merchandise, stuff and goods which are produced there".

But the 14th century was the golden age of Famagusta. Half a century after the fall of Acra to the hands of Mamelouks, was enough to place Famagusta at the top of all the commercial towns in the Mediterranean. Tyre, Atalia, Smyrna, could not compare with it. Famagusta shared with Constantinople and Alexandria the incontestable supremacy of commerce of the Orient. Neither Venice nor Genoa could boast that they had richer merchants, better markets, more considerable quantities of products from all the countries of the then world, more numerous inns, and more strangers coming from afar and from so different countries.

A German priest Ludolphus of Sudheim was extremely impressed by the wealth of Famagusta. He visited Cyprus between 1336 and 1341 on his way to the Holy Land and in his itinerary he writes about Famagusta:

The third city of Cyprus is called Famagusta, situated on the sea – shore; here are the harbours of all this sea and realm an a concourse of merchants and pilgrims. It is the richest of all cities and her citizens are the richest of me. A citizen once betrothed his daughter, and the jewels of her head – dress were valued by the French Knights who came with us as more precious than

all the ornaments of the Queen of France. A certain merchant of this city sold to the Sultan a royal orb of gold, and thereon four precious stones a ruby, an emerald, a sapphire, and a pearl, for sixty thousand florins; and anon he sought to buy back that orb for a hundred thousand florins, but it was denied him. The Constable of Jerusalem had four pearls which his wife wore by say of a clasp, and, when and where he would, he could pledge it for three thousand florins. In this city in one ship is more aloe wood than five carts could carry away. I am silent touching drugs, for they are as common there as bread is here, and are sold as commonly. But I dare not speak of their precious stones and golden tissues and other riches, for it were a thing unheard of and incredible”.

About this fabulous wealth of Famagusta speaks also a contemporary Greek Cypriote Chronicler Leontios Makhairas. He says that a certain Sir Francis Lakha, a Christian Nestorian in religion, invited the King with his barons and many knights to his house at Famagusta.

“And he wanted”, Makhairas writes, “to show them a portion of his wealth; and he ordered a great dish to be brought in, carried by four men; it was loaded with pearls in the rough and stones beyond price, and full in the midst of it were four light-stones, that is, carbuncles; and in the corner of the hall he poured out treasure, pouring out ducats as though they had been corn; and in the other corners gros and seraphs. It was cold weather, and in the chimney were logs of aloe-wood and silver braziers, and they were warming themselves with the aloe – wood. And he laid down eighty silken carpets, and on some on some of these were sitting. Now, the ducats and the coins were covered up; then he gave orders, and they put out the torches and brought the tray right into the midst of them and uncovered it, and the light – stones were shining like burning coals; and many of the knights were very greedy and poor, and reached out their hands, and every one snatched at what he pleased, and they took from him great store; and all that they took seemed to him as nothing”. This merchant with only one stroke of luck “built the Nestorian Church from the foundation”, which is still well preserved in the old city of Famagusta known as the Church of Saint George the Exorinos, i.e. The Exiler.

Cyprus, merchants apart, attracted pilgrims, because of its Christian traditions and its holy relics. Such, in the Famagusta are, were the tomb of St. Barnabas, the prison of St. Catherine, between Salamis and the Monastery of St. Barnabas, and the underground Church of Chrysospeliotissa at Kato Varosha, one mile from her, known in the itineraries as La Cava or De Cavata.

Ana anonymous Englishman who visited Cyprus in 1344 writes about this chapel the following: “And presently there appeared to us the city of Famagusta, as it were a paradise of delight. Before its entrance (from the land) are many most beautiful buildings and churches, and the chapel of Our Lord “De Cavata”, underground, where many English soldiers lie buried, because in this place the mortality is so high among the foreigners, who have to learn to abstain from unwatered wine, not to rule themselves according to

the habits of their countries that it might be called a burial-ground of all Christendom". But you have nothing to fear now, because our wines are very well refined at our up-to-date factories.

Famagusta was a joint capital of Cyprus; the Lusignan kings after they were crowned king of Cyprus at Nicosia received the crown of Jerusalem in a very solemn ceremony at the magnificent cathedral of St. Nicolas in Famagusta. It was really an honour that they never enjoyed, because they never were able to recover the Holy City from the Arabs.

A sea port in Cyprus, surely Famagusta of the Venetian period, inspired Shakespeare's genius with the scenes of its great sorrowful tragedy "Othello". Othello is supposed to have been a certain Christoforo Moro, Lieutenant – governor of Cyprus from 1506 to 1508. Moro in Italian means both mulberry – tree and Moor, and this last meaning gave rise to the story which changed the Venetian gentlemen to a Moor.

Uniting the real and the poetic Shakespeare created the unparalleled scene of the awakening of Othello's jealousy. When Iago sees Othello, already ravaged by the jealousy he has put in him, coming towards him, says:

"Not poppy, nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou ow'dst yesterday".

And, unfortunately, that was true; the Othello's Tower of Famagusta has silenced for ever the tender sobs of the dying Desdemona.

In the nineteenth century we Greeks abandoned that haunted city and came out of its walls. We built the new town of Famagusta which is covering gradually the area of the orange groves, which turn into building sites, hotel and multi storied buildings year by year. It is, thanks to the efforts of our Mayor and the Town Council, a very nice and tidy town, which rests very gaily on the golden sands of its beach.

Your Worships,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
You are welcome to our town!