

Famagusta by Michael J. K. Walsh

There are few civic fortifications as impressive and historically important as the walls of Famagusta and yet they remain woefully understudied, even though they are incomparable textbooks of medieval and early modern military architecture that are relatively unscathed by the sometimes distorting ministrations of modern restoration.¹



Dawn over the ruined cathedral of St. George of the Greeks (foreground) and St. Nicholas cathedral (background). Photograph by Dan Frodsham.

Famagusta's history is the stuff of legend, reading as it does like a sermon on the eternal debt to be paid for a brief period of excessive wealth, pride, avarice and greed during the 14th century.

This city, founded in 964, had risen to prominence after the fall of Acre in 1291, been famed for its cosmopolitan population who could speak the tongues of many nations, and benefitted from a negotiated balance of trade between east and west to become unimaginably rich as a result. But it was infamous too for corruption, political intrigue and treachery. At the peak of its medieval wealth and influence it was described by historical novelist Dorthy Dunnett

¹ Alan Langdale, 'At the Edge of Empire: Venetian Architecture in Famagusta, Cyprus' *Viator: Medieval & Renaissance Studies* 41, n. 1 (2010), 155-198.

‘as the richest of all cities, concourse of merchants and pilgrims, haunt of courtesans, sink of unnatural vice, pride and luxury. Famagusta housed a hundred thousand citizens within its two miles of walls, and was a place of fine squares and great houses, of mills and warehouses, shops and monasteries, stables and shambles and forges, barracks and ovens, merchants’ villas and loggias. A royal palace. A cathedral. A hospice of St. John. And three hundred churches.’²

At the time Saint Brigitta preached in Famagusta’s square that because of this excess divine retribution was inevitable. Dante too wrote of the very early stages of that process

In proof of this let everyone pay heed /to Nicosia’s and Famagusta’s lot
whose own beast makes them weil and shriek as he /
keeps pace with all the others of this pack

The Divine Comedy Vol. 3 ‘Paradiso’, Canto XIX, 145-148

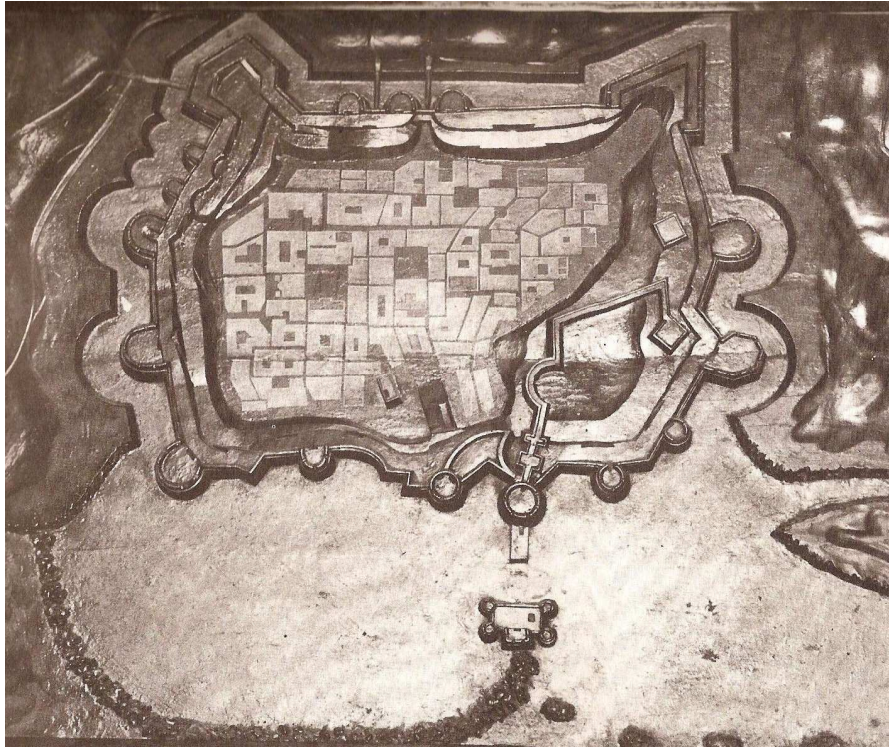
It was during the century-long government of the Genoese (1373-1464) that the decline began which not even the maritime and enterprising might of the Venetians could arrest when they took over the island (1489-1571). Yet they invested heavily in Famagusta, with all the artistry and engineering of the Renaissance, blending what Marie-Luise von Wartburg described as ‘monumental elegance with the expressions of power and defiance.’³ Pilgrims such as John Locke (1553) observed the impregnable Venetian walls, epitomised by the towering Martinengo Bastion and the richly symbolic Sea Gate saying

[Famagusta] is a very faire strong holde, and the strongest and greatest in the Iland. The walles are faire and new, and strongly rampired with foure principall bulwarkes, and betweene them turrions, responding to one another, these walles did the Venetians make.⁴

² Dorothy Dunnett, *Race of Scorpions* Vintage Books (1989), p. 441

³ Marie-Louise von Wartburg, ‘*Vesigia leonis*: Art and Architecture in Cyprus under Venetian Rule,’ in *Cyprus, Jewel in the Crown of Venice*, (Nicosia, 2003), p. 67.

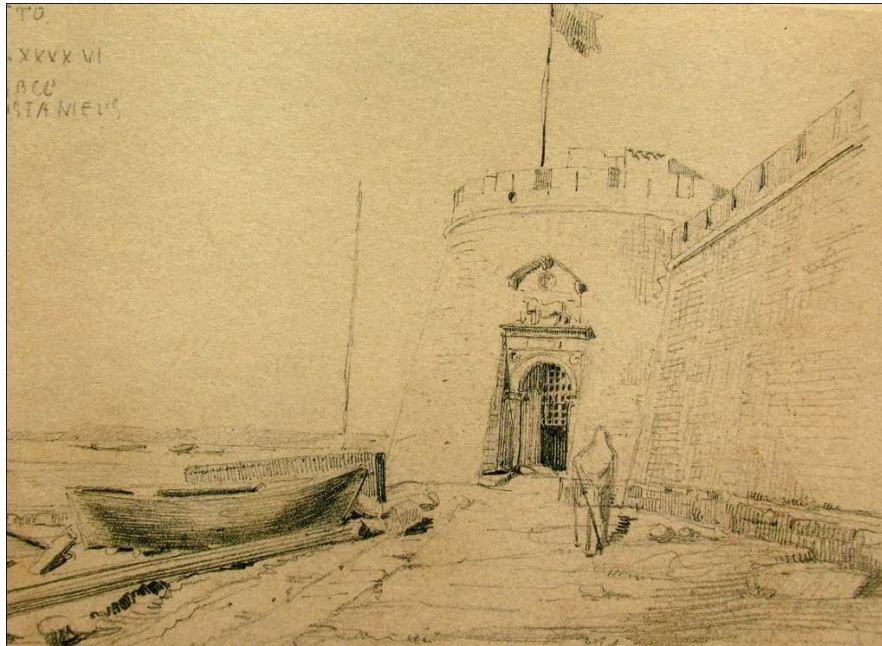
⁴ *Excerpta Cypria. Materials for a History of Cyprus*, ed. & trans. Claude Delaval Cobham (New York: Krauss Reprint, 1969), p. 70. Originally published Cambridge University Press, 1908.



A sixteenth century wooden model of Famagusta's defences from the Maritime Museum in the Arsenal of Venice.



The Martinengo Bastion looking towards the Ravelin (Photograph by Sven Norris).



The Venetian Sea Gate by Edmund Duthoit, 1862, (Musée de Picardie, Amiens)

The mortal blow for Famagusta came later in the same century with the arrival of the Ottoman war machine and one of the most infamous sieges in the history of warfare. A year of attack and counter attack ended with the surrender and subsequent flaying alive of Marco Antonio Bragadin between the Venetian columns in the cathedral square.



Stephano Gibellino, Engraving representing the siege of Famagusta (Brescia, 1571), National Library of France.

In the years that followed the city was cleared of Christians and abandoned by merchants and seamen, though continued to capture the imaginations of Renaissance writers far from Cyprus. To them Famagusta was the stage-set on which other great dramas could be played out, the most celebrated of which was William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603). But in Famagusta itself, centuries of neglect began which, combined with exposure to the elements, earthquakes, plague and flooding, left the city almost completely ruined at the time of the British arrival in 1878. The pioneering Scottish photographer John Thomson, who visited in that same year, called it 'a place of ruins, a city of the dead, in which the traveller is surprised to encounter a living tenant'. French historian Louis de Mas Latrie also noted of Famagusta that

Dans l'intérieur, tout est bouleversé. Églises, palais, maisons, chaussées, remparts, rien n'est intact. Depuis trois cents ans, la solitude et le silence pèsent sur ces ruines.⁵



The ruined city of Famagusta from the Sea Gate circa. 1881. Provenance of the image is unknown.

⁵ Louis de Mas Latrie, *L'île de Chypre. Sa situation présente et ses souvenirs du Moyen Âge*, (Paris, Firmin-Didot et Cie, 1879), p. 45.

Writing of the majestic cathedral of St. Nicholas, the one-time coronation place of the Kings of Jerusalem, Theophilus Moghabghab was poetic. His words captured the mood not only of the great cathedral but of Famagusta in its entirety

It has been a silent witness to scenes of mystic pageantry, and of carnage and horror. It has seen Crusaders, Genoese, Venetians, Turks and now the British, pass under its shadow. Like an aristocrat it looks down upon the parvenus surrounding it with unchanging repose and serene pride, though its life has been interwoven with tragedy and tears – tears in which myriads of human beings have indulged.⁶

As Famagusta lies within the boundaries of an unrecognised state today, it does not receive the expertise and funding that a city of this importance and beauty would normally warrant. As a member of the European Walled Towns group it is hoped that an exchange of ideas and a shared passion for other similar towns elsewhere, will be possible to help safeguard its future.



St. Nicholas Cathedral today. Photograph by Alan Langdale.

⁶ Theophilus Moghabghab, 'Tragedy in Stone' *The Near East* (October 18 1923), p.404.



View of the walls from the Ravelin looking towards the Martinengo Bastion

(photograph by Sven Norris).

For more information on Famagusta see:

[http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calctitle=1&pageSubject=792&sort=pubdate
&forthcoming=1&title_id=11268&edition_id=14764](http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calctitle=1&pageSubject=792&sort=pubdate&forthcoming=1&title_id=11268&edition_id=14764)