

The Cyprus Traces of the Knights Templar

By Kate Shauruk

The Knights Templar (the order of the poor knights of Christ) once passed through Cyprus. The village of Zeytinlik (Templos) which the soldiers known as the Knights Templar used as an administrative centre, still bears the traces of the knights.

The island of the Goddess of Love, Aphrodite, is an island that has embraced many civilizations in world history. Even though they may not have remained for very long periods in Cyprus, the Knights Templar have left important marks here, and the period in which they existed is still talked about today. This era is the period of the Knights Templar, who were known as The Order of the Poor Knights of Christ.



During the period in which they survived, the Knights Templar, also known as Worshippers, became renowned around the world for their combatant skills. It has been stated that when they bought the island from Richard the Lionheart, there were only 14 knights settled here in Cyprus. The quashing of the rebellion on the island by these 14 Knights must be the most important indicator of exactly how strong these warriors were.

TRACES OF THE TEMPLARS

The Knights Templar ruled over the island of Cyprus from 1244 to 1314. It is known that, despite the island being overthrown later, a number of them settled on the island for a long time after. It is because of this that it is possible to come across traces they left behind. For instance, according to Ottoman archives, the Order of the Knights Templar, who held the villages of Upper and Lower Arodez and Rhodes, owned parts of Akursos, Mora (Meriç) and Episkobi (Yalova). Whereas the command headquarters of this Order in Cyprus, known as the Knights Hospitalier, were in the villages of Armanohori, Finike and Templos. During the Ottoman period Templos was given to a prominent Ottoman family.



Templos or Zeytinlik

Because Templos (Zeytinlik) took its name from the knights, it is one of the villages whose name has been ingrained in world history because of this attribute. Templos, which was founded by the Templar or Temple Knights, still continues its legend today, with writers of novels and film producers and those following the tracks of the Knights Templar most certainly paying a visit to that village. They don't call it "Zeytinlik" they know and refer to it as "Templos". Zeytinlik village signifies great meaning in this respect. Elements symbolizing the Knights Templar are displayed at the International Olive Festival organized at this village annually.

TWIN CHURCHES

Today, although the Knights Templar are especially mentioned along with Zeytinlik village, one of the most important traces belonging to the knights and that still stands today are the Twin Churches in Mağusa (Templar and Hospitalier Churches). The two large churches that were built in the 14th Century belonged to the Knights Templar. When the Order of the Knights Templar was dissolved by the Pope in 1313, the adjoining building owned by the Hospitaliers was given to the knights. It has recently been restored and is currently used by the Cyprus Arts Association.

THE PRINCESS THE KNIGHTS CONFINED TO BUFFAVENTO CASTLE

There is a legendary story said to have occurred when the Knights Templar dominated Cyprus in 1191 and 1192...

Like all the other castles on the island, Buffavento meaning, "Brave to the wind" also has a story relating to a Queen that once ruled over Cyprus.



Twin Churches, Famagusta

Buffavento Castle

Bellapais Abbey

It is said that during the time of the Knights Templar, the Empress Helena lived a solitary life in the castle, with only her dog as a companion. She developed leprosy, and this was passed on to the dog. Over time, she noticed that the skin on her dog had begun to heal. Following the dog one day, she saw that the animal was bathing in a spring far below the castle. Doing the same, she was cured of the disease. In gratitude, at the spot near the water source, she founded the monastery of Ayios Ioannis Chrysostomos.

BELLAPAIS MONASTERY

The Knights Templar had a special mason class of stonecutters and bricklayers. It is possible to see the markings of these craftsmen in Northern Cyprus on the walls of the Bellapais Monastery for example.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Officially endorsed by the Catholic Church around 1129, the Order became a favoured charity throughout Christendom and grew rapidly in membership and power. The Knights Templar, in their distinctive white mantles with a red cross, were among the most skilled fighting units of the Crusades. Non-combatant members of the Order managed a large economic infrastructure throughout Christendom, innovating financial techniques that were an early form of banking, and building fortifications across Europe and the Holy Land.

The Order of the Templar had three statutory aims:

- 1 – To assist Christians in performing the pilgrimage
- 2 – To protect the Holy Land
- 3 – To re-erect the temple of Solomon

CYPRUS ERA TEMPLARS

Richard, King of England, took part in the Third Crusade (1189-1192). Three of Richard's ships that did make it on toward Cyprus sank and Isaac of Cyprus took the surviving crewmen prisoner. When Richard arrived in Cyprus with the other English ships he was outraged at what had happened and immediately laid siege to the island. The siege was a complete slaughter, as the Cypriots were ill prepared to stave the attack of a trained army. Isaac eventually surrendered the island to Richard on the condition that he should not be bound in irons. Richard accepted the terms and, instead, bound him in fetters of silver.

Richard sold the island to the then greatest Grandmaster of the Templars Robert de Sablé for 100 000 bezants (a unit of Byzantine gold coins) of which de Sablé gave a down payment of 40,000 with the rest to be paid from profits made on the island. Richard had a very good standing with the Templars and was considered an Honorary Templar. In the Third Crusade he went to war wearing the armour and the cross. De Sablé failed to establish a solid base on Cyprus. According to some sources, the number of Knights under the command of Armand Bouchart was only fourteen, according to other sources there were about twenty. The men sent to look after the island were warriors and not administrators and they behaved badly towards the local inhabitants and the ruling class of the island. The rule of the Templars in Cyprus was marked by great severity and they quickly incurred the hatred of the Cypriots by their harsh demands. At length, in despair at their treatment and seeing that the Templars were few in number, the islanders decided to attempt a general massacre of the knights on Easter Day 1192. The Templars became aware of the plot and took refuge in their stronghold at Nicosia, since they were too few to meet the insurgents in the open. They offered to leave the island if their lives were spared, but as this offer was rejected, they proceeded to fight rather than to be starved into submission.



Sallying into the streets at dawn, they took the Cypriots unawares and slaughtered great numbers, sparing neither age nor sex. The rebellion was crushed, but the Templars felt unable to hold Cyprus by force and they therefore asked Richard to take back their purchase. He took back the island and sold it to Guy of Lusignan. The Templars retired to Syria but they retained some of their possessions in Cyprus. They were permitted to keep their castles and other properties on the island. This allowed the order to maintain a presence on the island.

Despite their great successes, the Latin Kingdoms which the Crusaders established in the Middle East were not destined to survive for long. Salahuddin Ayyubi (Saladin) who in 1187 established the Ayyubid state in Egypt, brought an end to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The Mameluke Sultan Eşref took the fortress of Acre in 1291 and rid the Holy Land of the Crusaders. The Templars left the Holy Land after the defeat at Acre, some settling in Cyprus, being driven out of Jerusalem, they remained in Cyprus until the Order was disbanded in the year 1312.

The history of the Templars and their connection with the island of Cyprus ends in the year 1571, long after the Order had vanished as a formal institution. It was in this year that Ottoman Turks overran the island and the Templar archives were destroyed.

The destruction of the archives was a devastating loss. Had those documents survived, they could have answered many questions relating to the history and mystery surrounding the Templars.