

CYPRUS

The archaeological heritage of Cyprus begins in the pre-Neolithic, in the 10th millennium BC and continues uninterrupted with numerous monuments and sites to modern times. In the Neolithic, the island acted as a staging post for the transmission of Neolithic culture from the Near East to Europe. It flourished as a cosmopolitan trading centre during the Bronze Age when exploitation of its copper resources reached its peak, attracting the attention of the Mycenaean Greeks who settled the island at the end of the Bronze Age, thus determining its future. The amalgamation of Aegean and Near Eastern cultural traits resulted in a uniquely local culture. Due to its strategically important position in the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa, Cyprus came under the domination of

almost all the great powers that ruled over the Mediterranean – the Assyrians, Egyptians, Persians, the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt, and the Romans and in its later history it was dominated by the Lusignans, Venetians, and Ottomans, and formed part of the British Empire until its independence in 1960. The variety of sites and monuments, consisting of settlements, cemeteries, palaces, castles, churches and monasteries, some of which have been included in the World Heritage List, is the legacy of its turbulent history.

Development is one of the factors affecting the cultural heritage of the island. Due to the frequent occurrence of ancient remains during construction projects, there is a growing tendency to incor-



Hill of Agios Georgios, Nicosia –
Byzantine and Medieval remains



Early historical phases of Nicosia
found at new Parliament building
site, from the Late Chalcolithic
period (mid-3rd millennium BC) to
the present day



Church of Panagia Kanakaria, Lythrangomi, impacts of abandonment

porate ancient sites within modern projects, sometimes with detrimental results for both the ancient site and the new building. Two recent proposals to build the new House of Representatives on the Hill of Agios Georgios, Nicosia, and the new Town Hall in the old city of Nicosia, are problematic because antiquities have been found on both sites, in both cases after the plans for the buildings were approved. At the site of the new Parliament superimposed strata have been found belonging to the various historical phases of the city, beginning with the Late Chalcolithic period (mid-3rd millennium BC) to the present day.

The city's history, although one of the longest in the Mediterranean, was little known to its population as the modern city completely overlies its ancient forerunners and until recently no large-scale excavations had been held to document its history. The site of the proposed new town hall adds to the evidence found on the Hill of Agios Georgios and has brought to light important remains of the Byzantine and Medieval periods, times in which Nicosia was an important cosmopolitan commercial and artistic centre. However, as the largest part of the site has not yet been excavated and the archaeological deposits are quite deep, new information from earlier periods is likely to be brought to light in approaching months.

The pressures of pre-fixed excavation deadlines are detrimental factors that may lead to incomplete or inaccurate documentation and a consequent loss of information. In addition, the predetermined plans of the buildings – both winners of architectural competitions – restrict the number of modifications that may be made. In order to minimise the risks of potential damage, the ICOMOS National Committee is proposing a workshop between experts and the authorities with the aim to achieve the best possible solutions under the circumstances.

The ICOMOS Cyprus National Committee is also concerned with the state of conservation of monuments and sites in the north of the island, which has been under Turkish occupation since 1974. The opening in April 2003 of the barrier separating the Greek and Turkish communities enabled the people of Cyprus to visit heritage places all over the island but it also prompted the trafficking of illegally excavated antiquities. The Department of Antiquities, in an effort to mitigate the problem, issued information leaflets to make people aware that such objects were illegally obtained and should not be purchased. The risk of destruction to cultural heritage still continues as occasionally reported in the Turkish Cypriot press. It has come to our attention that the cemetery of Vounous, one of the major cemeteries of the mountain range of Pentadactylos, which yielded masterpieces of ceramic art now occupying an entire gallery in the Cyprus Museum, is to be developed. Although it is known that remaining tombs were looted, there may still be intact tombs and some investigation should at least be carried out before any development begins.

Another serious risk concerns the religious heritage sites of Early Christian, Byzantine and Medieval date in northern Cyprus, which have been abandoned since 1974. One of the most notable examples is the well-known church of Panagia Kanakaria in the village of Lythrangomi, where the wall mosaics dating to the 6th century and considered to be amongst the few surviving masterpieces of the period, were removed in 1979 and sold to an art dealer. The Republic and Church of Cyprus filed a lawsuit in the United States District Court of Indianapolis for the recognition of the mosaics' legal owners and for the mosaics' return to Cyprus. The case was won and a small number of the mosaics were returned in 1991. The church, however, continues to lie abandoned and the impacts are very visible.

Church of Panagia Kanakaria, Lythrangomi, remains of a mosaic

