



Hala Sultan Tekke (Larnaca)

CYPRUS TOURISM ORGANISATION

On the shore of the Salt Lake, two kilometers from the city of Larnaca, across from the old international airport, lies the Hala Sultan Tekke, a significant monument with its minaret and dome soaring amid eucalyptuses, cypresses and, mostly, palm trees, a truly unique spot. Cypriot Muslims consider it as the third most revered monument in the world, after Ka'aba in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. It attracts large numbers of visitors annually, especially during the Ramadan and Bairam holidays.

In accordance with the Muslim tradition, especially in the Arab world, one of the prerequisites for a Muslim to be considered ready to enter Paradise is to visit the following four holy places: the Ka'aba in Mecca, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, the Hala Sultan Tekke in Larnaca, and the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Indeed, according to historical records, during the Ottoman period (1571–1878) Turkish ships passing this holy site were required to pay tribute to Umm Haram (a sainted person for the Muslims) by lowering their flags and firing their guns.

As we shall see later on, the monument's point of reference is the tomb of Umm Haram, a pious woman, as the record has it. The tomb is shielded from prying eyes by means of green drapery, green being the colour of paradise. The dim light does not facilitate a detailed examination of the interior. However, the experienced researcher's eyes discern in it the qualities and value of a prehistoric sepulchral monument, a temple or a treasury, which Cobham (a researcher and author of significant books on Cyprus) considers akin to the other two monolithic monuments in Cyprus. One is known as "St. Catherine's tomb", near Salamis in eastern Cyprus, and the other is the "Faneromeni Church", near Larnaca, in south-eastern Cyprus.

Above the tomb there is a trilithon, a structure consisting of two standing monoliths with a third placed across the top of them. One stands by the head and one by the feet, whilst the third one is believed to be suspended above the other two. The standing monoliths are approximately 15 feet tall. Dutch traveller Cornelis van Bruyn saw and described this structure in 1683. This sacred trilithon is of great significance to Muslims. It is believed that the three stones travelled miraculously from Mecca one night and remained suspended

for centuries. At a later stage, when they started posing danger to worshippers, the standing stones were fixed in place and the third one was brought to rest on them. These monoliths probably date back to prehistoric times.

Records from the spring of 649 AD, when according to tradition Umm Haram was entombed here, yield no information regarding the construction of the *tekke* (monastery for Mevlana monks). However, from van Bruyn's accounts we know that the tomb existed in 1683. We also know that in 1760, after the great plague that erupted in Cyprus, muhassil (i.e., provincial governor) Mehmed Agha had a wooden fence built around the tomb. On the following year, his successor Acem Ali Agha replaced the fence with a wall with two bronze gates. By 1787, a complex had been built comprising a domed mosque, as well as dwellings and cisterns which contributed significantly to the fame of that sacred site; the order of Mevlana monks was dismantled and the shrine operated as a shrine. The current layout of the shrine was completed in 1816 by the then Cyprus governor Seyyid Emin Efendi.

Today the shrine is in excellent condition, especially as a result of the maintenance work funded by the Cypriot government and the latest restoration that took place in the period 2001–2005, sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS). Its gates are adorned with various well-maintained inscriptions in Arabic bearing important dates and dedicatory verses from the Koran.

How did this pious woman, Umm Haram, come to her resting place in Cyprus? Let us examine the sequence of events from a historic point of view:

Cyprus's unique geographical position, in the maritime domain of the Byzantine Empire, coupled with the aspirations of the newly-consolidated Islamic world, turned the island and the surrounding sea into a theatre of fierce competition between the two superpowers of that era. This was precisely the reason why Cyprus found itself at the point of collision between those two worlds as the vanguard of Byzantium. It also explains why Cyprus was chosen as the first target of Arab naval activity. The sea was so alien to

Islam at the time that Muawiyah, son of Abi-Sufyan, had to repeatedly seek permission from the Mecca caliphs in order to sail across it.

When Uthman Ibn Affam became caliph, Muawiyah was appointed governor of all occupied regions of the then Sham, i.e. the area comprising modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel, and set out on the military expedition. Muawiyah was the first Arab leader to realize the futility of any engagement with the Byzantium without the support of a powerful fleet. Thus, immediately following the death of the great Arab conqueror Umar, he started building the fleet and in the 28th year of the Hegira (the flight of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina), once the winter was over, i.e. in the spring of 649 AD, he undertook the first naval campaign. Under his personal leadership, the Arab fleet raided Cyprus. That fleet comprised 1,700 ships which had gathered in the port of Alexandria for that purpose.

According to arabologist Baladhuri, Muawiyah secured caliph Uthman's consent to commence the campaign on specific conditions, including that he be accompanied by his wife. Following their leader's example, other officers took their wives with them. Thus Muawiyah set out from Acre (Akka, in Arabic) with his wife Fakhita, whereas Ubada Ibn al-Samit was accompanied by his own wife, Umm Haram. When they disembarked in Cyprus, a mule was placed at Umm Haram's disposal to carry her to the hinterland. However, Umm Haram fell from the animal and was killed. She was buried where the accident took place. That spot, site of the trilithon, came to be known as the tomb of the Pious Lady.

This incident, which is mentioned by many historiographers, indicates that there was no intention to colonize the island. It is worth noting that during this first raid on Cyprus, the Arabs came to an understanding with the local civil leaders and through a peaceful compromise tried to ensure the neutrality of the island. Thus, according to Arabic sources, an agreement was negotiated whereby Cypriots were to pay 7,000 dinars annually to the Arabs and facilitate them in a number of ways.

As stated in a manuscript entitled "The End of Devotion to Umm Haram", which Cobham obtained from the sheikh of the *tekke* a short while before the

end of the 19th century, Umm Haram is considered a worker of miracles. The manuscript is divided into three chapters.

The first chapter contains the various names attributed to that pious woman, such as Rumayṣa, Rumaylah and Sahlah. Most experts hold that her true name is unknown and that only her holy title as Umm Haram is known. Her father was Milhan and her husband was Ubada Ibn al-Samit, who was the first appointed qadi (judge) in Palestine and died at the age of 72 and was buried in Jerusalem. Umm Haram had a sister by the name of Umm Sulaym, mother of Anas Ibn Malik. The two sisters, as well as Anas and Ubada were companions of the Prophet and served him with love and devotion.

The second chapter sets forth the holy wars in which Umm Haram took part and the purport of the traditions associated with her name. According to a story handed down by Anas Ibn Malik, the Prophet once visited Umm Haram at her house in Medina and after dining with her, Umm Haram offered to pick lice from his head. However, when the Prophet laid down his head he fell asleep, and when he awoke from his holy slumber, he smiled joyfully. When Umm Haram asked him about his cheerfulness, he replied that God had inspired him and given him good tidings, i.e. a group of his followers, although affluent, would wage holy war and forays in order to exalt the name of God and to conquer islands and cities. Those people would enter first into paradise without chastisement and torments. The announcement of the good news filled Umm Haram's enlightened heart with joy and she grew more eager and anxious to participate in the campaign for the conquest of the islands and to be included with the victors. The Prophet then promised her that she would be among the first to fight for the conquest of the islands (*"Thou art of the first"*), and that promise was indeed fulfilled. His words were an announcement that after his death, his believers should set out on expeditions and wage wars in order to spread the Islamic faith and conquer various islands and cities. Those words were also a promise that those who died for their faith would go to paradise.

The third chapter details the background to and the development of the campaign. In the 27th year of the Hegira, with the approval of caliph Uthman

the army started from Medina under the command of Muawiyah and entered Damascus and then Jerusalem. From Jerusalem, by way of Ramla (modern Ramle in Palestine) the army marched to Tripoli in Syria and from there, after gathering several boats and many ships, they embarked on them and came to Cyprus. Ubada, accompanied by his wife Umm Haram, was among the officials. The ships landed at a spot two hours distant from Larnaca. Umm Haram rode a mule but on arriving at the place where her tomb is now located, she fell from the animal, broke her neck and was buried at that spot. Thus was fulfilled the prophetic promise, "Thou art of the first", which is one of Muhammad's miracles.

Umm Haram herself is also considered a worker of miracles. This is the reason why the Tekke attracts numerous Muslim pilgrims annually. Among her miracles, Imam Munawi says that the people of Damascus, sorely tried by droughts and other adversities, and having profound faith in Umm Haram, pleaded with her to intercede for them with God so that He might send them rain and deliver them from all evil and attack. Out of respect to that sainted lady, God dispelled their anxieties and troubles and granted them rain and grace.

In its epilogue, the subject manuscript makes reference to another miracle: On her journey from Jerusalem to Ramla, Umm Haram was put up at the house of a Christian monk. There she saw three huge stones and expressed the wish to buy them. However the monk, firmly believing that the three stones were impossible to transport, offered them to her as a gift. She accepted them with pleasure and departed saying that she would take them away at some other time. By divine might, those stones moved and on the evening of her burial appeared at her tomb. One came to stand by her holy head, the second by her feet, and the third was suspended above the other two. This is one of the many miracles attributed to Umm Haram according to Muslim tradition.

Many renowned travellers visited the tekke through the centuries, among them the Frenchman Delaroiere, on his way to the Holy Land. Specifically, he mentions that he visited the mosque, which he says was a highly revered site

of pilgrimage among Muslims. The tomb was located in an idyllic spot, near a large lake and wooded hills, but the air was very unhealthy.

Close to the wall surrounding Umm Haram's burial place there is a large, white marble tomb which belongs to the wife of king Hussein of Hejaz, Hatidje, who died in Cyprus in 1929. The Hejaz is a region in western Saudi Arabia bordering on the Red Sea and facing Egypt and Africa. The holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located in this region, hence the Hejaz is considered as the cradle of Islam. Hatidje was the first daughter of the renowned 19th century reformer and grand vizier (equivalent to commissioner or minister) of Turkey Mustapha Rashid Pasha.

Let us now walk through this important monument.

The idyllic landscape and the majesty of the monument combine to inspire awe. Crossing the flagstone area that leads to the gate, we descend the steps to the main entrance to the tekke, the former Muslim monastery. This imposing entrance is made from limestone and its lintel bears Arabic inscriptions. As we move forward, the light from the patio bathes our faces.

On our right we see the guesthouse reserved for the wives of the tekke sheikh. On our left are the quarters of the sheikh himself. Traveller Delaroiere, who was also a doctor, mentions this arrangement. He visited the site in 1832 and treated the sheikh's ill wives. The sheikh was accompanied by his brother, who exercised his religious duties. All rooms have a covered veranda and a low wooden peristyle. In the far left corner nowadays we see the monument wardens' office.

Going through the gardens, we reach the ablution fountain and, on our right, the mosque. An inscription explains that the wooden seats around the hexagonal kiosk were donated by the Turkish Bank of Cyprus. Before entering the mosque, worshippers must wash their hands, faces, neck, hair and feet, and leave their shoes at the entrance.

We too remove our shoes at the entrance to the mosque, as required by the rules of conduct. The warmth of the carpet permeates the feet. The white colour prevails in the interior of the mosque. As always, there are no pictures,

no representations of living things. Across the entrance is the *mihrab*, the 2.8 meter high niche in the limestone wall indicating the direction of Mecca, birthplace of Muhammad, the last prophet of Islam. To the right of the mihrab we see the *minbar*, a raised platform with wooden steps painted green, the colour of paradise, with a pointed roof topped by a crescent. At prayer time, the imam addresses the congregation from the minbar reading the Koran, the holy book, written in Arabic. Above the door to the minbar there is an inscription, in Arabic, that reads: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah". In the right corner there is a wooden stand with a circular base, about one meter in height, where the holy book is placed to keep it off the floor.

Looking up we see the dome with eight arabesques at its base. These are wooden octagonal inscriptions in Arabic, mentioning Allah, Muhammad, members of the Prophet's family, such as his grandson Hussein, his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali, as well as other names contained in the Koran.

With our backs to the mihrab, we face the entrance and to the right we see the steps leading up to the women's prayer room – an area above the entrance to the mosque screened off by means of a wooden intricately carved partition. Women entering the area are required to wear loose clothing that covers to the wrists and ankles, and to cover their heads.

We climb the two steps to the left of the mihrab, go through the doorway and find ourselves in an oblong space. Looking to the left, onto the court, we see the big marble tomb of Hatidje, King Hussein's wife. It is flanked by four lower tombs with green wooden covers, which are believed to belong to persons of honour. There is no inscription indicating their identities.

At the centre of the enclosed space behind the wall of the mihrab we see the tomb of the pious lady, Umm Haram, with the three monoliths, as described by Dutch traveller Cornelis van Bruyn. It is surrounded by bronze gates and a closed corridor.

Exiting the tekke and crossing over to the left, we come upon a small area with ruins dating back to the 6th century BC. At a distance of 800 meters west

of the tekke there are the remains of an ancient Cypriot town of the Late Bronze Age (1650–1050 BC). Two British Archeological Missions excavated the area in 1898-9, hence many portable finds are in the British Museum, whereas fewer are housed in the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia. The Swedish Archaeological Society commenced intensive excavations in 1971, with more recent investigations being conducted by the Cypriot Department of Antiquities. Finds are housed in the Cyprus Museum and in the Larnaca Archaeological Museum.

It would be remiss not to speak of the Larnaca Salt Lake on whose shore lies the tekke. At the 2001 meeting of the Ramsar Convention, the Salt Lake was designated as the 1081st wetland of international importance, thus attracting many birdwatchers. In the winter, the lake fills with rain water and many birds of passage spend the winter there, such as the pink flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*), various wild ducks (e.g. *Anas crecca*), gulls (e.g. *Larus cachinnans*, *Larus ridibundus*), and plovers (e.g. *Charadrius alexandrinus*, *Actitis hypoleucos*).

The saltiness of the water is due to the salinity of the subsoil of the lakes of the area. The salty water is ideal for the proliferation of a single-celled alga (*Dunaliella salina*) which is at the bottom of the food chain and on which feeds the *Artemia salina* shrimp. This shrimp is the staple food for the flamingos and the other birds wintering here.

The surrounding area, which is not flooded, is home to halophytic plant societies. Prevailing among them are the tamarisks, the glaucous glasswort (*Arthrocnemum macrostachyum*), the *Halocnemum strobilaceum* and the *Halopeplis amplexicaulis*.

For hiking fans, the Department of Forests has created a one-kilometer long nature trail starting at Hala Sultan Tekke and covering a part of the southern section of the Salt Lake. The trail extends beyond the Tekke to the Larnaca Aqueduct, an 18th century structure, and ends at the Rizoelia National Forest Park, covering a total distance of 12 km. It forms part of the E4 European long-distance path which starts at Gibraltar and spans nine countries.

Tradition has it that St. Lazarus came to this place after his resurrection. There used to be a vineyard in the area and as the saint was walking through, he came upon the owner and asked him what he carried in his baskets. Not wishing to offer the saint any grapes, the vine grower replied that the baskets contained salt. When he returned home and uncovered his baskets, he found that they were indeed filled with salt.

This monument is significant in every respect. It inspired the Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature George Seferis, who composed the poem "Three Mules", part of his book of poems *Imerologio Katastromatos III* ("Logbook III"), which was published in Athens in 1955. Here are some characteristic verses, as translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard:

In Damascus one sleepless night
I saw the shade of Oum Haram pass by,
the venerable kinswoman of the Prophet.
I heard the clatter of hooves like silver dinars,
and I saw her, seemingly crossing hills of salt
towards Larnaca, astride her mule.

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"It was here that my animal slipped. This stone
struck the nape of my pellucid neck
and I yielded up my victorious soul.
I was full of the will of God;
a mule can't bear that much weight;
don't forget it, and don't wrong the mule."

Monument Opening Hours:

Daily, except Christmas Day, Easter Sunday and New Year's Day.

November 1st through March 31st 08:00 – 17:00

April 1st through May 31st 08:00 – 18:00

June 1st through August 31st 08:00 – 19:30

September 1st through October 31st 08:00 – 18:00

Note: during Friday prayers led by the imam (13:00 – 15:00 hrs) the monument is closed.