



Omeriye Mosque

CYPRUS TOURISM ORGANISATION

The Mosque of Omeriye or *Emerkes*, as it is better known to Nicosia residents, is close to the Central Municipal Market, in the south quarter of the walled city, between the Costanza and Podocataro ramparts. It was named Omeriye in honour of the 7th century prophet Omer, who as the Ottoman tradition has it, had visited the city on the way to Egypt and spent a night in the vestibule of a ruined church. The question is, which church that was.

Camille Enlart, a historian of French and Italian Gothic architecture who visited Cyprus in 1896, identified and systematically documented Gothic structures from the Crusades. In his book "Gothic Art and the Renaissance in Cyprus", as translated by David Hunt, he informs us that Count Louis de Mas Latrie, historian and diplomat, was the first to identify the Omeriye Mosque with the church of St. Mary of the Augustinian Monastery. Also that the Count's conclusions were borne out by Tankerville Chamberlayne, Major in the British army and expert on medieval Cyprus.

De Mas Latrie and later scholars based the identification on two gravestones bearing the names of Augustinian monks. Those gravestones were laid on the floor of the mosque where they remained until 1940, among approximately 150 similar fragments, some of which are today in the collections of the Department of Antiquities. Indeed, some gravestones are on display at the Limassol Medieval Museum, within the Medieval Castle of Limassol, on the southern shores of Cyprus.

According to Nicholas of Martoni, a pilgrim who visited Nicosia in 1395, the Augustinian Monastery was one of the three most significant monasteries in the area. The other two were the monasteries of St. Francis and St. Dominic. The Augustinian Monastery was in the midst of sugarcane plantations, close to a wheat and barley field, in a beautiful landscape, very different from what one sees nowadays.

The Augustinian church of the Virgin was converted into a mosque by order of the Ottoman commander Mustapha, one year after the fall of Nicosia, in 1571. Rupert Gunnis, historian of British sculpture and inspector of antiquities for the Cyprus Museum, in 1936 wrote *Historic Cyprus: a Guide to its Towns and Villages, Monasteries and Castles*. Referring to the Augustinian Monastery,

he wrote, "The Ottomans captured the church, turned it into a mosque, tore up the floor which was laid with inscribed gravestones and threw away the bones of those buried underneath. Then they relaid the floor, placing the gravestones every which way so that some faced in the right direction, i.e. towards the apse, whilst others faced towards the western entrance".

A number of those gravestones, which had marked the tombs of Lusignan nobles buried in the monastery grounds, were preserved and transferred from the mosque in 1940, thanks to the actions of M. Munir Bey, as stated again by Rupert Gunnis. Munir Bey was a director of the EVKAF Foundation in Cyprus. EVKAF, a muslim foundation of the Cypriot Republic, owns extensive properties in both the occupied and the free areas.

Let us now see what the monument looks like nowadays.

The extant edifice dates back to the first half of the 14th century. At that time, it had a nave measuring 14 x 11 m, covered by cross-vauls. On the east side there is a three-sided apse and on the west side there is a vestibule with three arches on its façade.

The central vaulted entrance belongs to the original 14th century edifice and preserves its remarkable sculpted decoration. At that time, the church must have been 15 m high, which meant that it was the most imposing building in medieval Nicosia, second only to Agia Sophia. The architectural style of the structure is simple, with massive exterior façades and buttresses. On the northwest side one can see the remains of a Renaissance addition to the building. The roof and the superstructure, roughly to the height of the clerestory, had been destroyed when the Ottomans bombed the city during the 1570 siege.

A year after the fall of the city, the Ottomans rebuilt the walls, constructed a wooden roof over the building and the vestibule, plastered the interior and added a minaret, on the north side.

On the northeast side, there is a wall with a Renaissance-style door believed to belong to the monastery's outbuildings. According to Camille Enlart, that was the wall of the pilgrim hostel erected by the Latin Archbishop of Cyprus,

Guillaume Gonème, after 1469. The hostel was abandoned during the Ottoman occupation. From the 17th century through the beginning of the 20th, it stood in ruins up to the second floor level.

Let us now get acquainted with the Augustinian monks who once lived here. Until the end of the 11th century, the Benedictines were the sole monastic order in the West. Thereafter, societies in Western Europe experienced a fast-paced development and variety in all fields of organized life. Those developments led to reforms in the monastic organization as well, manifested mainly in the establishment of the Augustinian and Cistercian Orders.

Augustinian monks aimed at reviving the strict ascetic way of life in a religious community, based on the writings of St. Augustine, the famous Bishop of Hippo who lived in the late 4th century. They probably came to Cyprus in 1192 or 1198, after leaving Jerusalem. Amarlic, the Lusignan king of Jerusalem, built them a small monastery in the mountains of Kyrenia. King Hugo I of Cyprus (1204–1218) granted them Episcopia, near their monastery, and Thierry, the Latin Archbishop of Cyprus, allowed them to adopt the canon of Prémontré, the strict Augustinian monastery which followed the rules established in 1120 by Norbert, Archbishop of Magdenburg.

Their habit was white, hence they became known as the White Fathers. For a time, they owned the White Abbey, i.e. the Bellapais Abbey to the east of Kyrenia, the monastery in Nicosia, and an annex in Paphos, of which unfortunately no trace has survived.

The head of the Augustinian fraternity was an abbot to whom the King of Cyprus had given the privilege of wearing a mitre. When on horseback, the abbot bore a gilded sword and wore gilded spurs, like the feudal lords of the Cyprus kingdom.

Today the Emerkes Mosque is a medieval monument attracting both local and foreign visitors. It serves the religious needs of Muslims of various nationalities residing in the capital and in the whole of Cyprus. Simultaneously, it constitutes a source of important information for

researchers studying medieval architecture and the history of medieval religious orders in Europe.

If you happen to be in the area on a Friday, around 1 pm, you will notice lots of comings and goings. It is Friday prayers time and people go to the mosque. Let us follow on their footsteps.

Walking on Trikoupi Street, between the coffee shop and the kiosk, we see the entrance to the imposing monument. We cross the iron fence gate and take the cement walkway. To the right we find the ablution fountain. Faithful Muslims wash their hands, feet, neck and face and then proceed to the courtyard. They leave their shoes outside and enter the mosque.

The floor is covered with a green carpet. In Islam, green symbolizes paradise. Past the threshold, on either side, there are wooden bookcases containing the Koran and other religious books. Up ahead we see the mimbar, the pulpit where the imam stands to address the congregation. Close to the mimbar there is the mihrab, the green coloured niche in the wall indicating the direction of Mecca, in other words, the direction in which worshippers must turn to pray. Opposite the mihrab there is a square balcony where women used to pray, away from men's eyes. Now the women's prayer room is located where the chapel of John de Monfort, a Latin saint, used to be.

This is the only part of the whole monument in good repair. Its ceiling retains the pointed arches supported by four tufa pillars with capitals in the eastern wall. The four windows with the wooden frames admit daylight into the mosque.

To the north we can see a part of the hostel where pilgrims used to lodge. The Renaissance style vaulted entrance has survived.

At the northwest corner of the chapel there is a 42-step ladder which used to lead up the old minaret, which collapsed probably due to some earthquake. A new minaret was built, further to the northwest. The imam has to climb fifty steps to reach the first landing to call the faithful to prayer, and another fifty steps to the next landing. Visitors will find this second landing ideal if they wish to admire a panoramic view of the walled city of Nicosia.

To the northeast, one can see the impressive Archbishopric and to the east, the Chadjigeorgakis Kornesios Mansion, a representative sample of the 18th century urban architecture, which has been declared a monument by the Department of Antiquities.

Another thirteen steps lead to the top of the minaret, crowned with a metal cone.

Returning to the interior of the mosque, we see the arabesques (inscriptions in Arabic) on the walls. Three crystal chandeliers and many large fans (indispensable during the summer period) are suspended from the wooden ceiling. According to the Omeriye imam, the ceiling is a mere one hundred years old since the previous ceiling was destroyed when a fire broke out and had to be replaced. The roof is tiled.

On the east side, where the church sanctuary used to be, there are three tall and narrow windows with wooden frames. In the past, those windows used to have stained glasses.

This concludes our visit to the Omeriye Mosque, which replaced the majestic gothic church. It is yet another monument attesting to the rich history of the island.

Let us now take a look at the Omeriye Baths, which are in the old town of Nicosia as well, close to the mosque, to the northwest of the Archbishopric. They were built around 1571, and were donated by Lala Mustapha Pasha to the city after the Ottoman conquest of the island. The bath complex (the hamam) was dedicated to the prophet Omer and the area was named Omeriye.

Entering the Baths through the south side, we cross a small courtyard and access the entrance hall, a large domed room with an octagonal pool in the centre. Visitors undress in this room and then proceed into the areas beyond: the two rooms of the “warm” zone, and then the domed room of the “hot” zone.

Following the 2003 restoration, the Ottoman Baths have become very attractive and have developed into a popular resting place in Nicosia. The restoration was undertaken in the framework of the Nicosia Master Plan (NMP) and was funded mainly through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) and the Partnership for the Future. The Municipality of Nicosia and the Foreign Ministry also shared in the funding. In 2006, the monument was awarded the first prize in the “Conservation of Architectural Heritage” category of the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage / Europa Nostra Awards.