



Petra tou Romiou (The Rock of the Greek)

REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS
DEPUTY MINISTRY OF TOURISM

This is one of the most popular sites in the southwest of Cyprus, a spot where infinite beauty meets legend and tradition. It instantly brings to mind Aphrodite's birthplace, enchanting us with the endless blue of the sky and the sea.

Let us first acquaint ourselves with the geology and history of the area and then delve into the myths and traditions associated with it.

The Petra tou Romiou National Forest Park covers an area of approximately 350 hectares, stretching from the Paphos/Limassol border to the east, to Hapotami to the west and the coastline to the south, while its northern border extends from two to ten kilometres inland.

According to E. Tsiolakis's study, the geology of the area consists of rocks with different mechanical properties, especially with regard to resistance to erosion and weathering: bentonite, lava, limestone, quartz sandstone, argillaceous shale and hornstone, serpentinite, pyroxenite, gabbro, chalks and marls. The most resistant rocks lie over the very soft and fragmented masses.

As a result, the area presents a varied topography marked by rounded hills which are cut by deep valleys with steep sides, whilst its hydrographic network supports the growth of trees.

The wider area of Petra tou Romiou constitutes a region of complex geology with the following formations (from the stratigraphically lower to the stratigraphically higher ones): the Mamonía Complex, the Troodos Ophiolite Complex, the Kannaviou Formation, the Lefkara Formation, the Pakhna Formation, as well as the Plio-Pleistocene deep-sea and alluvial depositions.

The limestone of Petra tou Romiou is a white recrystallized reef limestone. It is exposed in detached blocks of various sizes, ranging from five to one hundred meters, in the same area as the Fasoula lavas, since it is inseparably connected with those lavas. Most blocks have slide surfaces, suggesting that they were fragmented and they moved. Blocks with low recrystallization still maintain fossil remains, mainly algae, shell shards and foraminifera. Other blocks, such as those of Petra tou Romiou, consist of recrystallized breccias.

The Elasmobranchii Halobia fossil found in the particular area determines its age at 210 million years.

Therefore, Cyprus's geological history reaches as far back as the sedimentation in deep seas, but also in shallow seas, at the margin of the Afro-Arabian continent (which includes Africa and Arabia). At that time, farther to the north (i.e., to the south of Cyprus's current location) intense tectonism leads to the formation of a rift valley and to the ocean's crustal extension, resulting in the lava flows of the Dhiarizos Group (the Fasoula Formation). The chemical composition of those lavas resembles the composition of lavas forming intra-oceanic volcanic islands, around which reef limestone is formed, i.e., the Petra tou Romiou formation. Simultaneously, in areas far from those islands we see the deposition of pelagic sediments, which continues beyond the cessation of volcanic activity, whereas at the continental margin (to the south of Cyprus's current location) sedimentation continues (Ayios Photios Group) dating back 95 million years.

On a daily basis, the area attracts hundreds of visitors who are delighted by the idyllic scenery and thrilled by the stories and traditions associated with the place. At the same time, visitors take the opportunity to enjoy nature's beauties, exploring the various trails.

Let us start with tradition. The area is associated with Petra tou Romiou, i.e., the Rock of the Greek, and by extension, with the Greek hero Digenis Akritas. Vasilios Digenis Akritas is the most renowned among the heroes of acritic songs, i.e., of songs about frontiersmen. He is also the leading character of a narrative verse of 11th-12th century, known as the *Epic of Digenis Akritas*. The legend has it that Vasilios was one of the Akrites, i.e., the frontiersmen guarding the borders of Byzantium. The nickname Digenis ('of dual parentage') was given him because of his ethnic descent: his mother was a Byzantine general's daughter and his father an emir from Syria.

According to the Cypriot tradition, Digenis Akritas fought Charon in the Pentadaktylos mountain range in northern Cyprus or tried to protect the island against Arab incursions. In the course of these endeavours, he plucked an immense boulder from the range with his huge hand and catapulted it towards

the southwestern shores. The mass of rock which lies partly in the sea and partly on land resembles the Pentadaktylos rock structure.

The wider area is also associated with a second story. According to Greek mythology, it is the birthplace of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, who came forth from Uranus's semen when Cronus castrated him and threw his testicles (the "ameletita" – unmentionables, as mentioned by Hesiod in his *Theogony*) into the sea. Thus Aphrodite rose from the foam ('aphros') of the sea. Zephyrus, the west wind, carried her to Cythera and then to the coast of Cyprus, hence her name Kypris Aphrodite.

Aphrodite protected love and every enamoured human being, and her favourite pastime was to incite gods to fall in love with mortal women. She loved creating intrigues and enmeshing gods in the nets of love, especially Zeus, who was forever getting involved in love affairs.

Though married to Hephaestus, Aphrodite herself had extramarital affairs with other gods as well as with mortals. Homer's Iliad contains an account of a spicy incident with Ares, the god of war. Her biggest love was Adonis, who was killed by a wild boar. His death devastated her and she took to the forests, where she wandered beside herself with grief. From the drops of Adonis's blood sprouted red roses and from Aphrodite's tears sprouted white anemones; or, according to a different version, from his blood sprouted red anemones (*anemone coronaria*) –a portent of his death– whilst from the goddess's tears (as many as her lover's blood drops) sprouted white roses.

Aphrodite is a synonym of beauty, love and fertility. The cult of fertility is deep-rooted in Cyprus, dating back to the Chalcolithic period, i.e. the third millennium BC. In later periods, we observe an association of Aphrodite with the Phoenician goddess Astarte, and then we come across her again, immersed in the anthropomorphous ancient Greek religion, where she acquires her latest features. In the epoch of great migrations, especially from the 12th century BC onwards, Achaeans helped spread her cult. The Hellenistic period, 4th century BC, marks the first appearance in Cyprus of figurines depicting Aphrodite as a nude and shapely goddess. Her cult lasted

until the 4th century AD, but then the propagation of Christianity left no room for pagan religions.

Aphrodite's cult thrived throughout the island. The Great Goddess, who was worshipped in the earliest sanctuaries in Cyprus (in Kition, Palepaphos and Amathus), was the goddess of fertility who protected all the fruits and products of the earth, including grains and copper. Hence, copper metallurgy workshops were found in the vicinity of her shrines. It was said that Aphrodite was the lover of her favourite priest, King Cinyras of Paphos, rich inventor of tools and of metallurgy.

Homer called her *Kypris*, i.e. Goddess of Cyprus. The very name of the island, of unknown etymology, is at the root of the word for copper in many European languages: *cupro* in Italian, *cobre* in Spanish, *cuivre* in French, and *kupfer* in German.

This important goddess has many titles. Hesiod calls her *Kyprogeneia* (= Cyprus-born). Her other titles include: *Potnia* (= lady, mistress) of Cyprus, *Akraea* (= of the hills, of peninsulas), *Pontia* (= of the deep sea), *Ourania* (= heavenly), *Pandemos* (= of all the people), *Enkheios* (= goddess of the spear, i.e. armed), *Aphroditos* (= male Aphrodite –depicted as a bearded man), *Adonaia* (= mourning for Adonis, associated with the nether world), *Eleemon* (= merciful, compassionate), *Chrysostefanos* (= crowned in gold).

The Cypriot Tourism Organization, in cooperation with the Department of Antiquities, has created the “Aphrodite Cultural Route”, which links areas and sites associated with the goddess across Cyprus.

Sites located fairly close to Petra tou Romiou include New Paphos, the Lempa Chalcolithic Settlement, Yeroskipou (formerly the goddess's Sacred Garden) and the sanctuary of Aphrodite, known across the Hellenic world, at Kouklia, in the area of ancient Paphos known as Palepaphos.

Numerous plants and sea shells are also associated with this exceptional goddess.

Some of the plants include:

- the wild rose (*rosa canina*), the goddess's favourite rose thanks to its smell
- the pomegranate (*punica granatum*), symbol of fertility and prosperity
- oregano (*origanum dictamnus*), with medicinal properties. The goddess used it to treat the wounds of Aeneas, hero of the Trojan War
- the narcissus (*narcissus poeticus*) – young Narkissos spurned the love of the Nymphs because he fell in love with his own reflection and the goddess punished him by turning him into a plant
- the myrtle (*myrtus communis*) – it was behind a myrtle that Aphrodite hid her nudity after her birth
- the anemone (*anemone coronaria*), symbolizing Adonis's blood
- the tamarisk (*tamarix*), symbol of beauty and youth.

Some of the sea shells associated with Aphrodite belong to the families of astartidae, cardiidae, cypraeidae, and veneridae.

For trekking fans, the Department of Forests has inaugurated a nature trail which connects with the E4 Long-Distance European Trail. It starts above the tourist pavilion and leads to a vantage point, to the northeast of Petra tou Romiou, two kilometers away.

Across from the pavilion, a subterranean passage leads safely down to the coast and Petra tou Romiou.

The Department of Forests has also created the Randi Park, at a distance of 1 km to the west, which offers many trails one can follow to explore the area or, alternatively, a bench where you can rest your heels and simply admire the view.

The area around Petra tou Romiou and, in general, the stories associated with Aphrodite have inspired many an artist, poet and painter since antiquity.

Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli has rendered in his particular style and palette the Birth of Venus, a painting in the museum of Florence.

The local tradition suggests that whoever swims around Petra tou Romiou at midnight, under a full moon and in the buff will gain immortality and eternal youth!