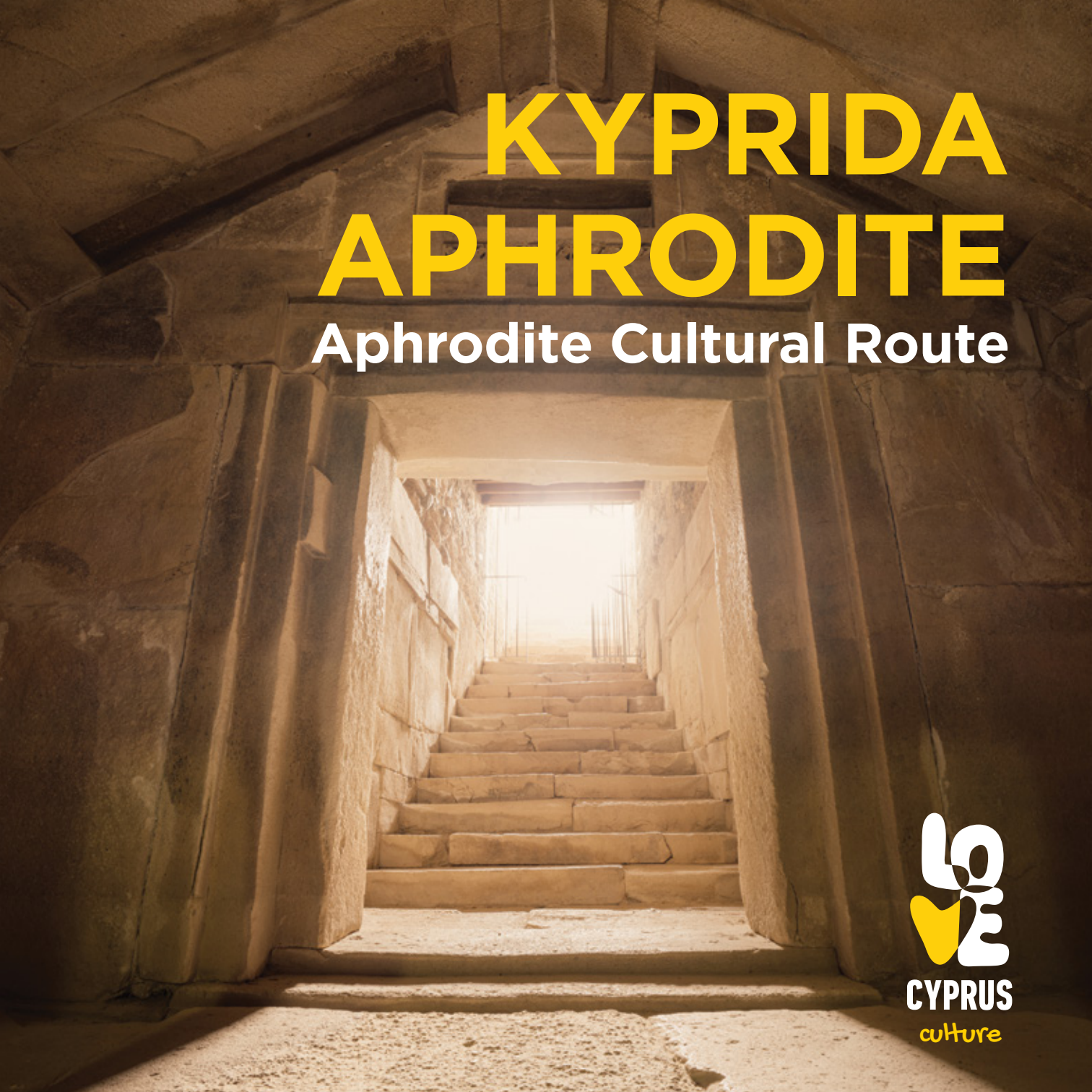


KYPRIDA APHRODITE

Aphrodite Cultural Route

LOVE CYPRUS culture

An invitation by the Cyprus Deputy Ministry of Tourism
to wander through layers of history and culture
in the footsteps of the Great Cypriot Goddess.

REFERENCE

- Primary sites
- Secondary sites
- Nature trail / Nature sites
- Museums



The Aphrodite Cultural Route is not an ordinary route; it is a journey of initiation into the symbolic and historical dimension of the Cypriot goddess, with stations in the history, myth, land, and material culture of Cyprus. It is an experience that transcends the visible and enters the intangible world of belief.

Following the steps of Aphrodite, her presence becomes more tangible along the southern coast of the island. In the southwest, in the heart of the fertile hinterland of Pafos, Palaepafos (modern-day Kouklia), a UNESCO World Heritage Site, houses the oldest and most renowned sanctuary of the goddess. Further south, Amathous (near Lemesos) rises above the sea with its imposing temple, a silent witness to centuries of worship. And in the southeast, Kition, beneath modern-day Larnaka, honours Astarte, a deity of the East, who gradually became associated and identified with Aphrodite.

The Route also includes landscapes of natural beauty which, according to myth, bear the imprint of her presence. At the same time, museums and exhibitions host testimonies of her worship: votive offerings, ritual vessels, works of art, and everyday objects that keep Aphrodite alive in the collective memory, from antiquity to the present day.



Worship of the Great Goddess

Over the passing centuries, the goddess of Cyprus changes form and material, without ever losing her core: *her association with birth, fertility and the continuation of life*. As societies evolved, the goddess gradually also acquired a political role, becoming a source of legitimisation for power and a bearer of ideology. Palaepafos, Amathous and Kition form a symbolic "tripod" that records the phases of this age-long worship.

Fragmented figures dating from the **Preceramic Neolithic Period (10th - 6th milennia BC)** indicate an early ritual interest in the female body and that its representation held a special place in collective expression.

In the **Late Neolithic Period / Choirokoitia (5500 - 3900 B.C.)**, archaeological finds show a clear gender distinction: women are buried with varied and valuable objects, while men mainly with stone tools. This differentiation may suggest an increased social or ideological value of the female presence. The **Chalcolithic period (3900 - 2500 BC)** marks the peak of figurative expression in prehistoric Cyprus. Hundreds of cruciform figurines, mainly carved from picrolite, depict women in a birthing posture.

During the **Early and Middle Bronze Age (2500-1650 BC)**, Cypriot society is based mainly on agriculture and animal husbandry, with limited contact with the outside world. Within this local context, a symbolic fertility cult develops with zoomorphic elements: the bull, snakes, and horned animals. The ox reappears consistently in art, in tombs, and in models of possible sanctuaries, gaining sacred significance as a mainstay of agricultural life: used for draught, for its meat, milk, and hide. Charred animal bones, including cattle, as well as drinking cups found in tombs, reveal funerary rites involving offerings and funerary feasts.

Of note are the plank-shaped figurines of Red Polished Ware, abstract in form, which gradually acquire facial features, shaped limbs, and garments. Many depict kourotrophoi – mothers holding children, clearly signaling the woman's role as bearer of life and care.

In the **Late Bronze Age (1650 - 1050 BC)**, worship in Cyprus acquires a new form and dimension. In addition to the small figurines found in tombs

and settlements, we now see monumental-scale finds. This period gives us temples, sacred gardens, sanctuaries with stoas, and impressive architectural forms. Three major cult centres stand out: Kition, Palaepafos, and Egkomi.

The sanctuary of Kition was probably founded in the 13th century BC and initially consisted of two temples and an open-air space interpreted as a sacred garden. The sanctuary of Palaepafos was founded in the 12th century BC and developed into one of the most important cult centres of Cyprus. It consisted of a temenos with stoas and megalithic structures, including impressive horns of consecration and stepped capitals. At Egkomi, the sanctuary was also founded in the 12th century BC, on top of an earlier dwelling, which may indicate a household cult that evolved into a public sanctuary.

The crisis of the 12th century BC brought upheavals. Kition and Palaepafos stood out, transforming their sanctuaries into political and symbolic centres of power. At the same time, the settlement of Aegean populations brought new ideas, a new language, and new rituals. Archaeological and linguistic evidence, from the Arcado-Cypriot dialect to material culture, reveals the emergence of new identities and deities.



This era ends with the shaping of a strong local religious world, within which the goddess who would be known as Aphrodite becomes clearly visible.

During the **Cypro-Geometric period (1050 - 750 BC)**, after the collapse of the coastal urban centres of the Late Bronze Age, new settlements began to appear, the most characteristic example being the foundation of Amathous on the eastern bay of Lemesos. In Palaepafos, rich tombs of the 11th and 10th centuries BC reveal a period of prosperity, and the sanctuary of the goddess is mentioned by Homer.

In the **Cypro-Archaic period (750-475 BC)**, the city-kingdoms of Cyprus were fully formed, each with its own sanctuary, local dynasty, and distinct cultural identity. Pafos, Amathous, and Kition stand out for their religious and political significance.

During the **Cypro-Classical period (475-312 BC)**, the city-kingdoms maintained their autonomy while receiving strong Greek cultural influences. The goddess, worshipped for centuries with Cypriot traits, became fully Hellenised and was now explicitly identified by name as Aphrodite.

As Cyprus passed into Ptolemaic hands **(Hellenistic Period 312-58 BC)**, its religious life was transformed. The city-kingdoms were abolished and integrated into a unified Ptolemaic system of rule. Religion was not suppressed; it became an instrument of politics, a tool of power, and a symbol of unity. The Ptolemies did not reject the goddess; on the contrary, they embraced and reinforced her, transforming her into a foundation of their dynasty.

The centre of this new era was the sanctuary of Palaepafos. No longer just an ancient shrine, it became a place where politics and faith met. From Nea Pafos, the Ptolemaic capital of the island, a sacred road led to Palaepafos: processions, hymns, offerings, and royal pilgrimages united the goddess with the dynasty. Aphrodite was not only Pafian; she identified with Isis, with Arsinoe II, becoming protectress of the sea and the kingdom. Temples of Arsinoe were founded and had their own priests and ceremonies. The old goddess acquired new faces, and power gained new sacred symbols.

With the **Roman conquest (58 BC-395 AD)**, the religious life of Cyprus changed, though it was not interrupted. The cult of Aphrodite remained central, especially at the sanctuary of Palaepafos, which acquired

international prestige. Julius Caesar himself considered the goddess the ancestor of his line. The Roman rulers showed respect for the old religion, maintained the sanctuaries, and reinforced tradition with new buildings to host visitors and pilgrims from across the Mediterranean.

The *Koinon Kyprion*, the institution that expressed the cultural and political unity of the land, continued to organise the great festivals of the cult, with the aniconic baetyl always at the centre of the sanctuary.

After the destructive earthquake of 15 BC, Emperor Augustus renovated Pafos and the sanctuary. Palaepafos remained an important pilgrimage centre. The goddess's cult appeared on coins, which bore either the temple façade or the image of Salaminian Zeus next to Aphrodite. The cities of Amathous and Kition retained the asylum of the goddess's temples. At the same time, the imperial cult was introduced: the *Koinon Kyprion* organised festivals in honour of the Roman emperors without conflicting with earlier religious traditions.

The decline of pagan worship came gradually. In the early 4th century AD, successive earthquakes in AD 332, 342, and 391 destroyed Pafos and Palaepafos. Emperor Theodosius I, through strict decrees, prohibited all pagane practices and ordered the closure of temples. Despite the persecutions, the fame of the Pafian goddess was not forgotten. Her myth continued to live on, albeit transformed, within the new religious and social realities.





The Names and Epithets of Aphrodite

The wide dissemination of the myth of Aphrodite has misled generations of scholars regarding the true origin of her name. The idea that the name Aphrodite is etymologically connected with the foam of the sea, as is the goddess herself, may be alluring, but it is not supported linguistically. On the contrary, linguists agree that the name Aphrodite is most probably a phonetic rendering of an Eastern name related to Astarte, such as Attorit, which the Greeks gave to the Cypriot goddess. Indeed, the myth of Aphrodite's birth itself carries an Eastern fragrance: in the cosmogonic traditions of the Phoenicians, Sumerians, and Hittites, celestial gods lose their power, and from this act a new, divine, feminine element is born.

In Asia Minor, during the 9th-8th centuries BC, Homer knew Aphrodite as the goddess of Cyprus and was aware of her sanctuary at Pafos. Aphrodite was still unknown in mainland Greece, and her cult is not attested there before the 7th century BC.

The first literary reference to her name appears in Homer, in the 8th century BC, where the goddess is called Aphrodite and Kypris. Hesiod, a little later, calls her Kyprogeneia – "born in Cyprus". Yet in her birthplace, for many centuries, the goddess did not bear this name. In the 6th century BC at Pafos, she was called the Goddess, Goddess, or even God.

From literary and cultic sources:

Adonaii, Adonias, Aeria, Akraia, Amathousia, Anadyomeni, Antheia, Ariadni, Afrogeineia, Afrogenis, Verveia, Golgia, Dionaia, Dolios, Encheios, Einalia, Eleimon, Erythraia, Erykini, Zefyritis, Ideia, Ipiodoros,

Thileia, Idalia, Ierokipia, Iostefanos, Kourotrofos, Kypria, Kypridii, Kyprogeneia, Kyprogenis, Kypris, Kyprou Despoina, Limenia, Morpho, Ourania, Pandimos, Parakyptousa, Pafia, Pafii, Polyktonos, Pontia, Salaminia.

From Cypriot inscriptions:

Akraia, Anassa, Golgia, Epêkoos, Kypria, Kypris, Mykerodis, Mychoia, Oreia, Ourania, Pafia, Pôgonophoros.

The character of the Aphrodite of Cyprus

Aphrodite does not have a fixed character or traits, as she reflects the social perceptions, desires and fears of different eras.





The birth of the goddess

According to Hesiod, her birth began with an act of violence: when Kronos mutilated Ouranos, his genitals fell into the sea. From their foam Aphrodite was born. Zephyros gently carried her to the shores of Pafos, where the Horai welcomed her, dressed her and adorned her. From there she went to Olympus as the “Golden One”, the “Golden-crowned” and the “Kyprida”. Petra tou Romiou still stands as a reminder of a paradox: the goddess of childbirth was not born from a womb; the goddess of love was born from an act of patricide. Born of the sea, she became the protectress of harbours, sailors and voyages.

The sanctuary of Palaepafos

Pafos was not only the birthplace of the goddess but also the heart of her worship. Pausanias recount that Agapenor, returning from Troy, settled there and founded her first sanctuary. This place, surrounded by gardens and courtyards, became her refuge. When Hephaistos exposed her to the gods for her affair with Ares, she did not defend herself, but simply returned to Pafos. On her island, no one dared to judge her.

Pygmalion, king and sculptor of Cyprus, carved from ivory the statue of a woman so beautiful that he fell in love with it. He asked Aphrodite to give him such a woman, and the goddess, moved, gave life to the statue. They named her Galateia. From their love Pafos was born, founder of the city that bore his name and the memory of the goddess. Kinyras also reigned in Pafos: a mythical ruler, priest of the goddess, and according to one tradition, the inventor of metallurgy and founder of the sanctuary of Pafos.

Love and punishment

Her connection with the Kinyrades also hides darker sides. Kinyras's daughter, Myrrha, was punished by the goddess with an unholy desire for her father. She secretly united herself with him, and when the truth was revealed, Aphrodite took pity on her and transformed her into a tree. From its trunk Adonis was born.

Adonis became the great love of the goddess. Ares (god of war), however, killed him out of jealousy. Aphrodite mourned him deeply, and from his blood sprang anemones. Zeus, moved, allowed Adonis to spend half the year with Aphrodite and half with Persephone in the Underworld.

Thus, the cycle of nature was explained: spring and autumn, life and death, love and loss. A cycle that links the goddess to the earth, vegetation and cultivation.

Yet, the goddess did not always forgive. When the Propoitides of Amathous refused to worship her, she turned them into stone. A harsh punishment for impiety, for Aphrodite was not only love, but she was also authority. In some depictions she appears armed, Aphrodite Encheios, goddess of love, battle, war, kings and cities.

At the same time, she was not solely feminine. Her form sometimes combined male and female elements in the figure of Aphroditos. She symbolised the omnipotent nature that fertilises itself and creates life. Thus, according to her cult in Cyprus, the goddess had no husband, which is why in Pafos she was worshipped in the form of a stone.

And when the gods ceased to dwell on Olympus, she remained alive. She transformed once more into the Rigaina, the medieval queen who haunted the castles of Cyprus and its folk tales.





MAIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Sacred Amathous

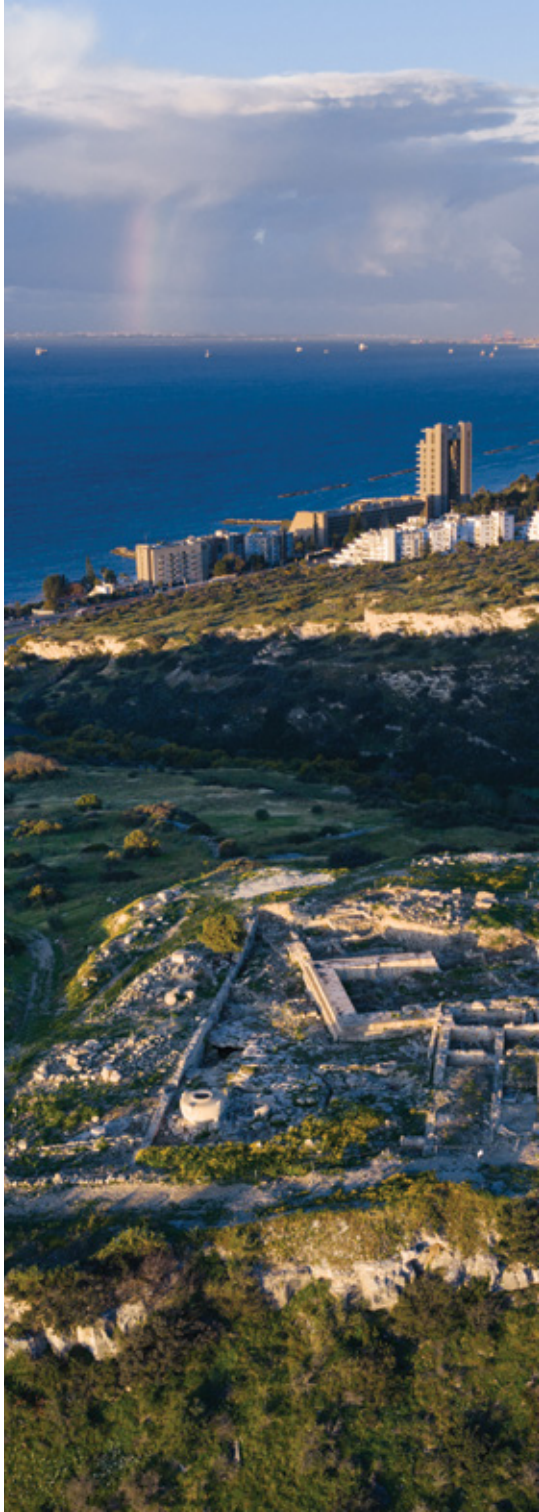
On a rocky height overlooking the southern cape of Cyprus, where the modern city of Lemesos now stretches, stand the ruins of ancient Amathous, one of the island's most enigmatic city-kingdoms. On the Acropolis of Amathous, rose the sacred heart of the city, a place of worship dedicated to the Great Goddess, later identified with Aphrodite.

At the summit of the acropolis, 90 metres above sea level, a female deity was worshipped as early as the 11th century BC. A tomb from this period, to which the ancients attributed mythical significance, was identified as the tomb of Ariadne, the Minoan heroine whom tradition later associated with Aphrodite. On the acropolis, traces of a temple dating from as early as the 8th century BC have been discovered, along with two colossal stone vessels.

The female nature of the cult is confirmed from the literary sources and from two inscriptions of the city's last king, Androcles, in the 4th century BC. The feminine character of the cult is also expressed through the abundance of figurines discovered on site and their association with fertility.

Mythology: Aphrodite in Amathous

Aphrodite is not simply present in Amathous; she is its very centre. She was deeply connected with the place and with the unique cultural identity of the city. Knowledge of this special tradition comes not only from archaeological finds – figurines, inscriptions, sanctuaries – but also from historical references and myths. Her cult in Amathous had a distinctly local character.





The first example of this distinctiveness is its foundation myth. In contrast to other Cypriot cities whose foundation is attributed to heroes of the Greek world, here two figures appear: Amathos, son of King Aerias and grandson of Herakles, and Amathousa, mother of Kinyras, legendary king and founder of Pafos.

Yet the city is not limited to borrowing; it creates its own myths. The myth of Ariadne is characteristic. As Paion, a writer from Amathous, tells us, Ariadne is not abandoned by Theseus in Naxos but arrives pregnant with him in Amathous. There she dies at childbirth and is buried in a grove dedicated to her memory. Her death is not an end but a sacred passage – a return to the womb of nature, like a seed buried to be born again. At her burial place, rituals are established: sacrifices, dances of young people imitating the pains of labour, ceremonies that not only honour her memory, but also highlight fertility and the power of life. Ariadne becomes a goddess, identified with Aphrodite, and from this union is born a new, composite figure: Ariadne-Aphrodite, a goddess more earthly, more maternal, with chthonic traits of the Mother–Earth. In Amathous, Aphrodite is not only a goddess of love and beauty, but also of creation, rebirth, and purifying redemption. Ariadne, in turn, remains a daughter of vegetation, a protector of light as she aided in the escape from the dark labyrinth.

Another version of the myth, recorded by Ion of Chios, has Ariadne giving birth to twins in Amathous: Staphylos and Oinopion, the heroes who introduced vine cultivation to Cyprus. In this telling, the goddess does not die young but reaches old age and is buried with honours in the grove that bears her name.

The sanctity of Amathous is also confirmed through other elements of its mythological tradition. The temple of Aphrodite and Adonis in Amathous was said to house the necklace of Harmonia, a wedding gift from Aphrodite to her daughter. This jewel bestowed eternal radiance but also brought misfortune; it became a sacred relic and a symbol of dangerous beauty.

Yet sacredness is not only a gift; it is also a responsibility. Just as the necklace of Harmonia shines and wounds, so Aphrodite can bless and punish. When the daughters of Proitos, from Amathous, refused to pay her honours, the goddess punished them – driving them into prostitution and, finally, transforming them into stone. She did the same to the Kerastes, horned men who, **according to myth**, sacrificed strangers at the city's entrance.





Rituals connected with the worship of Aphrodite in Amathous

The worship of Aphrodite in Amathous was a primordial cult, connected with life and death, love and redemption, pain and rebirth. The goddess was not limited to one place or to a single form; her presence extended from the depths of the earth to the summit of the acropolis.

Every year, the inhabitants of Amathous held festivals in honour of Ariadne, who, according to myth, arrived in the city pregnant and died in childbirth. Through her death, Ariadne became one with the earth, giving Aphrodite a chthonic aspect. Around this loss, a ritual developed that celebrated the power of regeneration through death. During these ceremonies, a man dressed as a woman imitated the act of giving birth, with cries of pain and rhythmic movements, perhaps symbolising the transcendence of natural limits and the union of opposites through the pain of creation. In this way, the goddess was worshipped as the Great Mother, revealing the deep influence of the East on the religious practices of Amathous.

In the sanctuary of Amathous, the colossal stone vessels were neither decorative nor simply utilitarian objects; they had a ritual function. Their presence in the sacred enclosure was associated with purification ceremonies. The water they contained cleansed not only the body but also the soul, preparing the faithful for contact with the deity. Water served as a means of purification and renewal, while the vessel itself marked the boundary between the profane and the sacred, between the human and the divine.

The worship of Aphrodite was not confined to a single location. Some rites took place in caves, dark and subterranean spaces where the boundaries between the world of the living and the dead became blurred. Other ceremonies focused on fertility.

Men wearing bull masks embodied the power of life and reproduction, turning the sanctuary into a stage for sacred re-enactment. During the annual festivals in honour of Aphrodite and Adonis, funeral laments were performed, acts of remembrance and expectation, mourning and renewal, which narrated the eternal cycle of life.

In the Hellenistic period (312-58 BC), the worship of Aphrodite was enriched with new figures and symbols. Arsinoe, sister and wife of Ptolemy II, was worshipped alongside the goddess, linking royal authority with fertility. In the festival of Karpōsis, which was established by decree, a daily sacrifice was offered for the prosperity of the land and the health of the citizens. The hēgetoras, both religious and political leader, united the two levels of authority in his person, emphasising the importance of ritual in the life of the city.

During the Roman period (58 BC-395 AD), alongside Aphrodite were worshipped Bes, Hathor, the Highest God, Sarapis, Zeus Meilichios, Hera, the Dioskouroi, Eros, and Attis.





Kition – Sacred Spaces, Kition–Kathari

Long before modern Larnaka developed, the heart of one of the oldest cities of Cyprus, Kition, beat on this land for more than eight centuries. Around 1300 BC, at the site of Kathari, a sanctuary complex dedicated to the Great Goddess of the island was founded. Two temples flanked an open-air court, a sacred garden open to the sky, perhaps to welcome the goddess herself.

A century later, while the Eastern Mediterranean was shaken by crises, population movements and the collapse of civilisations, Kition was reborn. The old city wall was rebuilt, the sanctuary expanded, and five new temples were erected. Next to them operated metalworking and weaving workshops, indicating that worship and production coexisted. The Great Goddess of Kition did not dwell only in the sky; she lived in the flame of the furnaces, in the transformation of matter, in the act of creation. As protectress of copper, one of the most sought-after commodities of the time, she embodied the prosperity of the city.

Kition was one of the most important export hubs for copper. To reach the markets of the East and the Mediterranean, however, this precious metal had to cross the sea. The sea was the only route connecting the island with the outside world and through trade Kition ensured its survival and flourishing. In this context, seafaring acquired sacred significance. Sea voyages were dangerous, and every successful departure or return was considered a sign of divine favour. Anchors placed as votive offerings and ships carved in stone record the relationship between people and the sea.

The site was abandoned around 1000 BC, yet the memory of its sacredness did not fade. Proof of this is that in the late 9th century BC, when the Phoenicians arrived in Cyprus, they founded the city again on the same spot. They rebuilt the temple and dedicated it to their own goddess, Astarte.

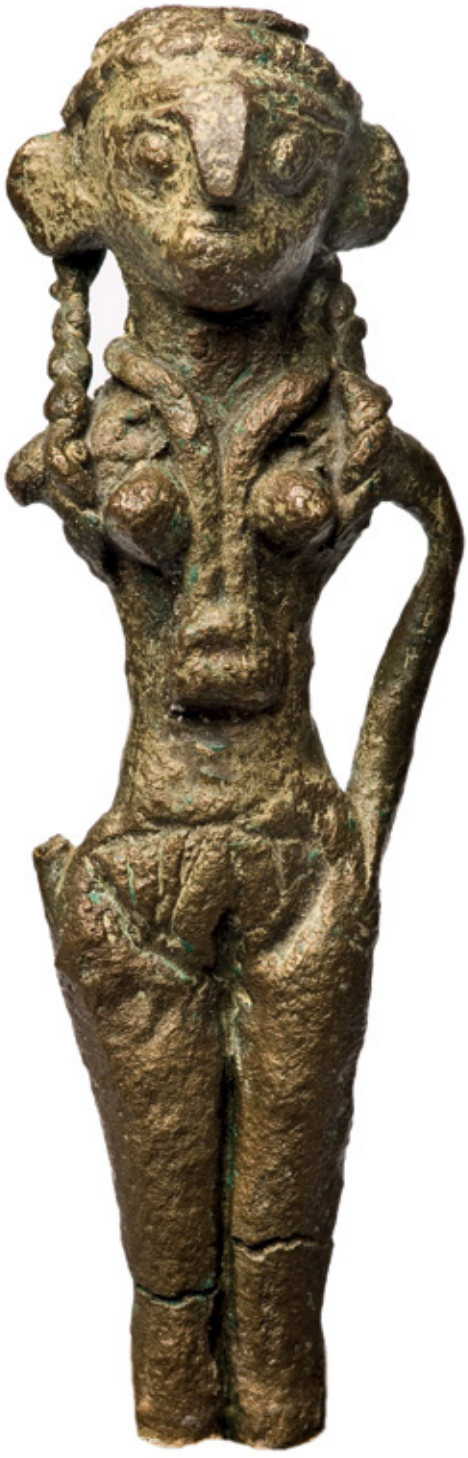
Mythology: The Great Goddess and Copper, Aphrodite and Hephaistos

The geographical position of Cyprus, as a crossroads of cultures, had a decisive influence on her worship. From very early on, the Great Goddess acquired elements from the religious traditions of the East.

The goddess's connection with the earth also extended to metallurgy. At Kition, from the 13th century BC, sanctuaries were established next to metalworking workshops. The Great Goddess was also worshipped as protector of copper, the metal that brought Cyprus out of isolation and elevated it to a trading hub of international importance. A testimony to this relationship is a 12th century BC **bronze figurine, now in the Ashmolean Museum**, Oxford, depicting a naked goddess standing on an ingot of copper, a powerful symbol of her identification with the material and the productive force of the island.

Copper was not merely an export commodity; it became the quintessential symbol of Cyprus. It was linked with the very name of the island and spread it throughout Europe: cupro, cobre, copper, cuivre, Kupfer, all etymological traces that go back to "Kypros" (Cyprus).

As the island's religious tradition evolved, the form of the Great Goddess adapted to new historical contexts. At the end of the 9th century BC, the Phoenicians settled in Kition and revived the old sanctuaries, dedicating them to Astarte, the great goddess of the Phoenician world. Through this transformation, the Great Goddess did not vanish; she survived, embedded within new religious frameworks, without losing her association with life, nature, and fertility.



In the Greek world, the goddess was identified as Aphrodite. Her connection with creation and metallurgy is preserved in myths: through Kinyras, her mythical lover and king, priest of Palaepafos and inventor of metalworking tools, and through her Olympian husband Hephaistos, god of metals.

The Great Goddess, Astarte and Aphrodite at Kition

Around 1300 BC, at the site of Kathari a sacred complex dedicated to the Great Goddess of Cyprus was established. Two temples embraced a sacred garden, open to the sky, ready to receive the goddess herself.

A century later, as the Mediterranean was shaken by crises, Kition was reborn. Five new temples rose, and among them textile workshops and foundries. Copper slag lay scattered around the sanctuary, bearing witness that worship was inseparable from production. Where copper melted and took form, there too stood the goddess, protectress of creation. The radiance of metal and the mystery of birth became one.

Around 1000 BC, the sanctuary fell silent. The silence seemed final, yet it was only a pause. In the 9th century BC, a new power arrived: the Phoenicians. Kition filled with the scent of the East and was transformed. On the same sacred foundations, the Phoenicians erected a new temple dedicated to their own goddess, Astarte. Astarte, who originated in Mesopotamia, was a goddess of love, fertility, music and life. She was identified with Ishtar, and later with the Egyptian Hathor, goddess of love, music and joy.

Astarte did not differ greatly from the Cypriot Aphrodite. Both deities embodied the creative and reproductive force of nature and were associated with love, war, power and death.



Rituals in the Temples of Kition

Through the finds from excavations, the ceremonies held in the temples of the Kition–Kathari area unfold before us vividly while retaining their mystery.

In the open courtyards of the temples, altars for sacrifices and offering tables reveal the constant human effort to communicate with the divine. On the temple floors, skulls of oxen (bucrania) and other animals, sometimes worked to be worn as masks, transformed participants into living symbols of fertility. Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic masks, with prominent features and horns, seem to have given form to the invisible, allowing mortals to touch the immaterial intangible and to become part of the mystery.

The use of masks at Kition, as well as in other major urban centres of the Late Bronze Age (1650 - 1050 BC) and the Cypro-Geometric Period (1050 - 750 BC), has been interpreted by archaeologists as an indication of initiation, transition, or social cohesion rituals. In this context, masks may have functioned as visible symbols of power and protection. Access to their use may have been restricted to certain social or religious groups, which would have given them even greater symbolic value. Their discovery in tombs and sanctuaries suggests that they served not only as apotropaic (warding) objects, but also as instruments of social and political legitimisation.

The connection between the sanctuary and metalworking workshops in the same area reinforces the hypothesis that rituals may also have included elements of technical knowledge. In such cases, the use of a mask may have conferred secrecy or sanctity upon these specialised groups.





Deeper within the sacred space, in the adyton accessible only to the chosen, objects have been found that point to practices of altered states of consciousness: an ivory smoking pipe and perforated vessels, probably for smoking or burning opium. The use of opium, confirmed by archaeobotanical and chemical analyses, appears to have been linked with divinatory practices. An ivory sceptre decorated with a poppy capsule is a characteristic example of this practice. The sceptre probably signified authority, knowledge, and access to ritual experiences.

The consumption of opium seems to have been limited to specific individuals, such as priests or seers, for the purpose of attaining a "liminal state" suitable for hepatoscopy or oneiromancy, practices that sought to discern the will of the gods through the body and the mind.

A unique find, an inscribed bronze model of a kidney, serves as direct evidence for the practice of haruspicy, that is, reading the entrails of sacrificed animals. Games, astragaloi, and carved scapulae found in temples reinforce the interpretation that divinatory rituals were a central element of religious life.

Kition – The ancient city beneath Larnaka

The archaeological site of Kition comprises two main locations, Kathari and Pampoula, which reveal different aspects of the city's public, religious, and maritime life.

At Pampoula, beside the Phoenician harbour, the stele of the Assyrian king Sargon II (707 BC) was discovered in 1845, confirming Cyprus's position on the geopolitical map of the time. This stone stele records that the Cypriot kingdoms were vassals of the Assyrian Empire. In the same area, vessels were found with traces of purple dye, the famous royal colour with its vivid hue, produced from murex shells (Hexaplex trunculus).

The existence of such workshops as early as the end of the 12th century BC reveals a society that was organised, technologically skilled, and capable of producing and exporting luxury goods to international markets at a time when other cultures were collapsing.

From the 9th century BC onwards, Kition underwent significant and gradual urban development, associated with the arrival of the Phoenicians. At this time the city's first sanctuary was founded, probably dedicated to Astarte. The sanctuary was gradually expanded and became more complex: platforms, reservoirs, new buildings, and a large hall for ritual banquets were added. Deposits containing figurines and stone statues attest to long-term worship and the devotion of the inhabitants to a female deity. From the 6th century BC, the cult of Melqart, the Phoenician hero-god identified with Herakles, appears. The sanctuary acquired a dual identity: female and male, eastern and Greek.

Pampoula was not only a place of spiritual life but also a naval station. In 1987, archaeologists uncovered six neoria, stone ramps with roofs, where warships, probably triremes, were hauled up and stored. These installations, located 400 metres from the present shoreline, are among the best preserved in the Eastern Mediterranean and reveal both the technical expertise and the organised defensive power of Kition.





Rituals in the Sanctuary of Astarte at Kition – Pampoula

In the sacred precinct of Pampoula, in present-day Larnaka, the inhabitants of ancient Kition worshipped a female deity, Astarte. The worship of the goddess, which combined elements of fertility and martial power, began in the 9th century BC and developed into one of the most important cults of the period.

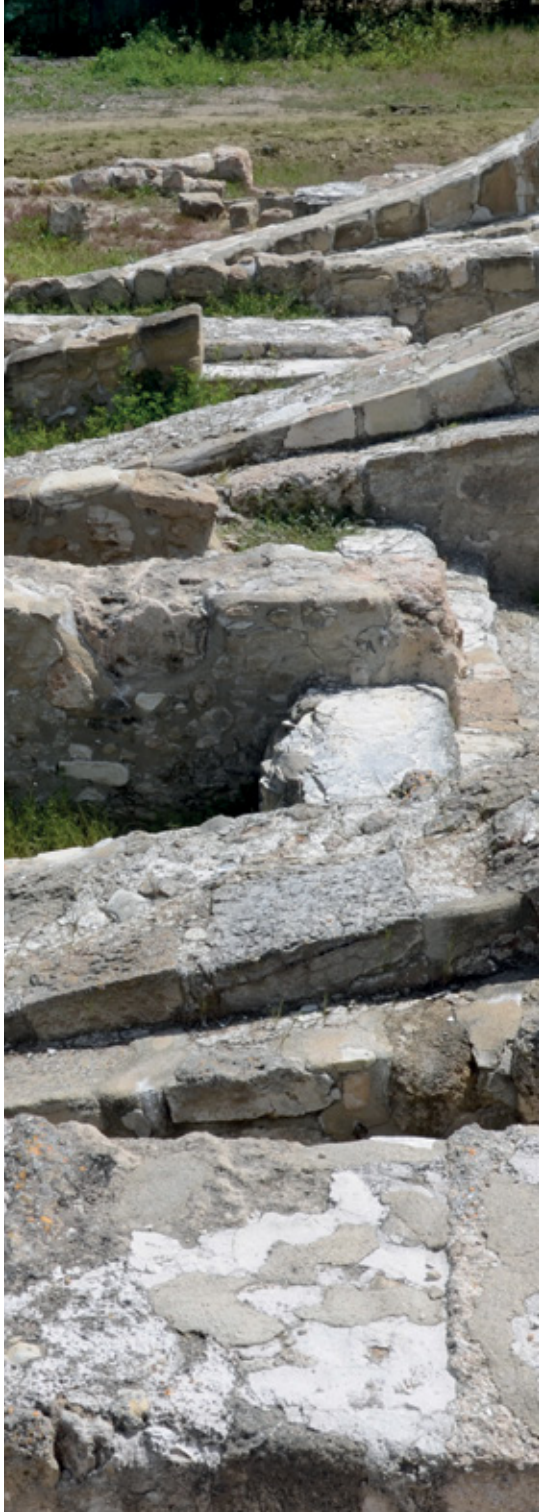
The sanctuary of the goddess initially followed a simple architectural layout. It comprised a central room, a stone altar, and a large open courtyard where most of the ceremonies took place. Over the centuries, the sanctuary underwent an impressive expansion. In the 5th and 4th centuries BC, the sacred area was transformed into a complex ensemble with platforms, new cult buildings, water reservoirs, and a vast hall, probably intended for banquets – ritual meals that combined worship with community life. Water held symbolic significance. It was used not only for cleansing, but also for purification rites and invocations for fertility.

One of the most striking finds from the sanctuary is the so-called Hathoric capitals: stone and clay elements depicting the head of a goddess with long, wavy hair and a stern expression. These forms recall the Egyptian goddess Hathor, protectress of love, music, and motherhood. In Phoenician Cyprus, the local goddess Astarte, already a powerful figure of Eastern worship, was identified with Hathor and eventually with Aphrodite. The Aphrodite of Cyprus embodies a fusion of cultures and cult traditions.

The rituals in the sanctuary were multifaceted. Worshippers chanted sacred hymns, offered sweets and gifts, and took part in divinatory rites or in the ritual cutting of hair, an act of dedication or transition.

From the large number of lamps and vessels that have been found, it appears that sacred banquets were held – meals in honour of the goddess and perhaps also of Melqart, a Phoenician hero-god identified with Herakles.

The inscriptions and the numerous ritual vessels show that the sanctuary was not only a place of individual worship and prayer, but also of collective ceremonies and banquets with active community participation.





Larnaka Salt Lake

The Larnaka Salt Lake wetland transforms with the seasons. In winter it floods, becoming a refuge for thousands of flamingos that arrive to feed on Artemia salina, the tiny shrimp that thrives in the salty waters of the lake and give the birds their characteristic colour. In summer, when the sun evaporates the water, the Artemia salina becomes trapped in salt crystals, ready to come back to life with the first rains. As a Natura 2000 and Ramsar site, the Salt Lake combines unique biodiversity with a natural salt factory that has operated uninterrupted for thousands of years, demonstrating in practice that every ending heralds a new beginning.

On the northern shore once stood an open-air sanctuary. Excavations brought to light mainly clay enthroned goddesses, attesting to a cult that began in the 1st millennium BC and lasted until the Roman period (58 BC - 395 AD).

The local deity was initially identified with Astarte-Aphrodite, but from the 5th century BC onwards was incorporated into the Greek pantheon as Artemis with the epithet “Paralia” (of the shore), either because she guarded the coastal passages or because she stood “by the salt”, indicating the goddess’s direct link to the cycle of filling and draining of the lake and to the economic value of salt for Kition.

Trail length: 4 km

Duration: 1 hour

Difficulty level: 1 (easy)

Sacred Palaepafos (Kouklia)

On an open height next to the village of Kouklia stands Palaepafos. The goddess's sanctuary, an open-air monument, was founded around 1200 BC and remained active until the end of the 4th century AD, safeguarding her worship for sixteen centuries. At its centre stood a baetyl, an aniconic stone, a cult symbol of the deity before she acquired form and name in the person of Aphrodite. For the people of Pafos, she was the Wanassa – the Queen, the Lady.

Pafos was not only a place of worship. It was the political centre of a kingdom, and its king was also the high priest of the goddess. Secular and sacred power merged in one person, in one place, under the protection of the goddess. With the foundation of Nea Pafos in the 4th century BC, the administrative centre shifted. The ancient city was renamed Palaepafos, sealing the transition to a new era, where the old affirmed the sacred continuity and legitimacy of power.

Even when Ptolemy I Soter abolished all the Cypriot kingdoms, around 294 BC, Palaepafos became the first pan-Cypriot religious centre of the now united island. It became the seat of the Koinon Kyprion, the institution that expressed the cultural and political unity of the land.

During the Roman period (58 BC-395 AD) the fame of the sanctuary spread. The Roman historian Tacitus records that the Cypriots assured the Senate that the sanctuary of Palaepafos was older than any other in Cyprus. Despite the construction of a new sanctuary to the north of the prehistoric temenos in the late 1st or early 2nd century AD, the Koinon Kyrion issued bronze coins depicting the sanctuary of Aphrodite, making the temenos a symbol of pan-Cypriot identity.





Neither the spread of Christianity, nor the later interventions of the Lusignans and the Ottomans managed to erase the memory of the goddess. On the same sacred site, during the Lusignan period, the Church of Panagia Odigitria or Katholiki was built in the 13th century. Yet centuries later, in the 19th century, popular imagination called it Afroditissa, an eloquent testimony to the unbroken continuity and persistent presence of the goddess in the collective consciousness.

Palaepafos is not just an archaeological site. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Monument. For although other places honoured Aphrodite, it was Pafos that gave her birth.

From the Great Goddess to Pafia Aphrodite

Pafos did not only give birth to a goddess; it gave birth to a memory. Long before Homer named her “Aphrodite”, the world of Pafos had already turned to the female nature as the source of life, fertility, and creation

The earliest depiction of a female figure in Pafos dates to the Aceramic Neolithic (10th - 6th milennia BC), in the form of a fragmentary figurine from Kritou Marottou. Although it is an isolated find, it may be a solitary forerunner of what was to come.

During the Chalcolithic Period (3900 - 2500 BC), new settlements emerged in the valleys of the Kouris, Klarion, and Diarizos rivers, near deposits of picrolite from which the characteristic cruciform figurines were carved. Alongside the figurines made mostly from clay, they predominantly depict women ready to give birth: seated bodies, open pelvises, swollen breasts, emphasising the woman as a life-giving force.

In the Early and Middle Bronze Age (2500-1650 BC), plank-shaped figurines prevail. Despite their geometric simplicity, the creator strives to go beyond the limits of form: many hold children in their arms, a tender, almost timeless act. Although temples do not yet exist, the idea of the Great Goddess has already taken root and will flourish in the period that follows.

In the Late Bronze Age (1650 - 1050 BC), around 1200 BC, the sanctuary of Palaepafos is founded, a monumental site where, for the first time, the community gathers around a unified axis of faith. Here, the cult acquires a centre and a tangible form.



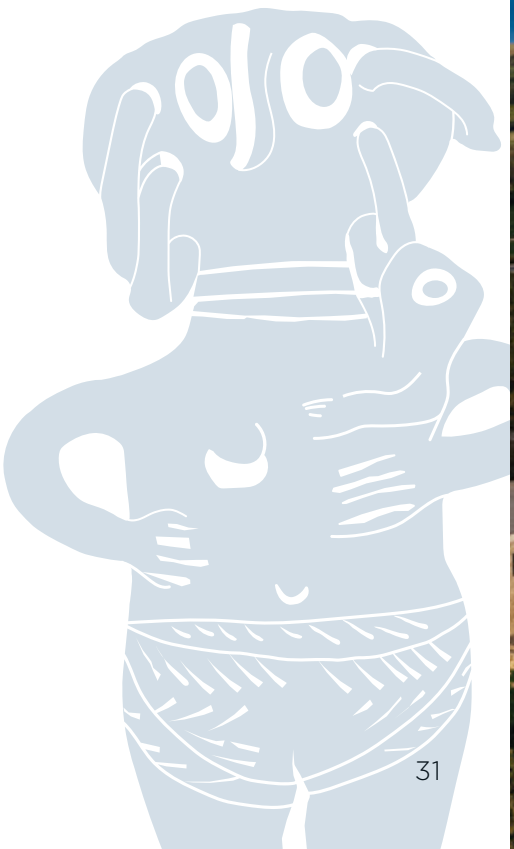


Alongside the bronze figurines emerges a whole world of clay: fragile yet deeply symbolic figures appear in tombs, settlements, and sanctuaries. Two types dominate: figurines with pronounced female features holding a child, and the bird-shaped figure with a beak and large earrings. These are not merely images; they are vessels of belief. They may be goddesses, priestesses, or women of the community who became part of the sacred sphere.

In the 8th century BC, the goddess is given a name: Aphrodite, according to Homer. Yet for centuries in Pafos she was called simply “The Goddess”, “Pafia”, “Golgía” or “Anassa”. And when the world gave her a new name, she remained faithful to her earliest form: the baetyl, a conical stone, that stood in the centre of the sanctuary.

During the Hellenistic Period (312 - 58 BC), the sanctuary of Palaepafos acquires a new role: it becomes the official priestly centre of the Ptolemaic dynasty. The Ptolemies recognise the great significance of the goddess for Cyprus, not only as a protectress of fertility and nature, but also as a symbol of political power, maritime supremacy, and divine legitimisation of authority. The cult of Aphrodite embraces new forms, becoming associated with Isis, Serapis, the Dioscuri, and above all with Arsinoe II Philadelphus, whose divine identification with Aphrodite and Isis served the ideological and economic strategy of the Ptolemies. Under the Ptolemies, Cyprus was politically unified, and at the centre of this unity stood Palaepafos. The sanctuary of the goddess was no longer simply a place of worship; it became a religious landmark of power. Numerous inscriptions were dedicated to the Ptolemies and their officials.

In the Roman Period (58 BC - 395 AD), Palaepafos holds a prominent position in the ideological landscape of the empire. Julius Caesar claimed Aphrodite as his ancestress. Titus sought her oracle. The baetyl, the most ancient symbol of the goddess, gained renewed prestige, appearing on coins and jewellery, proclaiming Pafos as birthplace, cradle, and symbol of unity. The *Koinon Kyprion* continued to organise the worship of Aphrodite and the emperor across Cyprus, maintaining the cultural and institutional continuity from the Hellenistic era. The coins of Nea Pafos sometimes depict the sanctuary of the goddess, sometimes Zeus of Salamis, or both, as images of power and identity.







Rituals associated with the worship of Aphrodite in Pafos

In Pafos, and especially at the sanctuary of Palaepafos, the rituals in honour of Aphrodite evolved over the centuries. The priesthood of Palaepafos had a strict hierarchy. At its head was the High Priest, who was also the king. The priests traced their lineage to the Kinyrads, descendants of the mythical Kinyras, while the seers, under the guidance of the Chief Seer, may have belonged to the Tamirads. At the heart of the ritual lay the sacred marriage of the king with the priestess, a symbolic union that confirmed royal authority and renewed the fertility of the land.

At the centre of the sanctuary there was no statue, but the baetyl – a simple conical stone that was anointed with oil during major festivals. The sanctuary was open to the sky, enclosed by porticoes and megalithic walls. According to tradition, the altar was never touched by rain or blood, but only by flowers, incense, and aromatic plants. As a goddess of life, Aphrodite rejected violence and death.

Animal sacrifices were symbolic: the animals were clay figurines. Instead of slaughter, worshippers offered honey, grain, wine, aromatic plants, and doves. The smoke rising from the altars became a language of communication with the divine, while the se ers read omens in the flames and smoke.

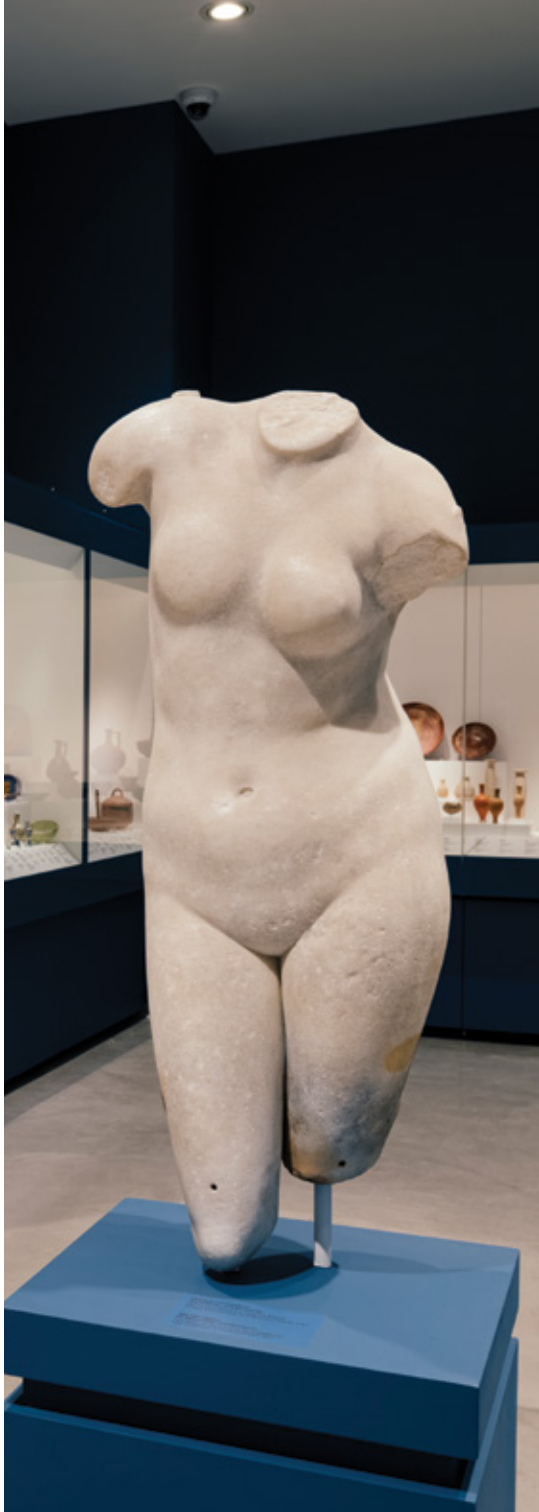
Each spring, when the Morning Star appeared in the sky, a great procession set out from the harbour of Nea Pafos to Palaepafos. Worshippers carrying flames and wreaths walked the sacred roads, accompanied by music, singing, and flutes. Upon arrival, the ceremonies began: burning of herbs, libations of honey, ritual divination, and purifying rites in the sea.

Pilgrims would offer an obol (coin) and receive as a keepsake a clay phallus and a lump of salt, the first as a symbol of fertility, the second as a reminder of the goddess's birth from the sea. As for the supposed "sacred prostitution" mentioned by Herodotus, there is no archaeological evidence for it, and it most likely reflects a misunderstanding of oriental customs.

The festivals lasted into the night and included all-night vigils, musical and poetic contests, chariot races, banquets, and bacchic dances. Women washed the statue of the goddess in the sea and then bathed themselves in its waters before joining the nocturnal celebrations.

During the Hellenistic period (312 - 58 BC), the cult adapted to new dynastic circumstances. Queen Arsinoe II was worshipped as Aphrodite, while the powerful priesthood and the *Koinon Kyprion* undertook the organisation of the festivals. The coins of the period depict the sanctuary of the Pafian goddess and the statue of Zeus of Salamis as symbols of religious and political coexistence.

Even in Roman times (58 BC - 395 AD), the rituals of Pafos remained vibrant. Julius Caesar claimed descent from the goddess, while the future emperor Titus came to the sanctuary to receive an oracle before his campaign.





OTHER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND AREAS RELATED TO APHRODITE

Geroskipou, Pafos

Hidden within the etymology of the toponym, as recorded by the ancient geographer Strabo (late 1st century BC to early 1st century AD), the goddess of Cyprus emerges. Strabo gives us its ancient name: Hierokepis, meaning Sacred Garden.

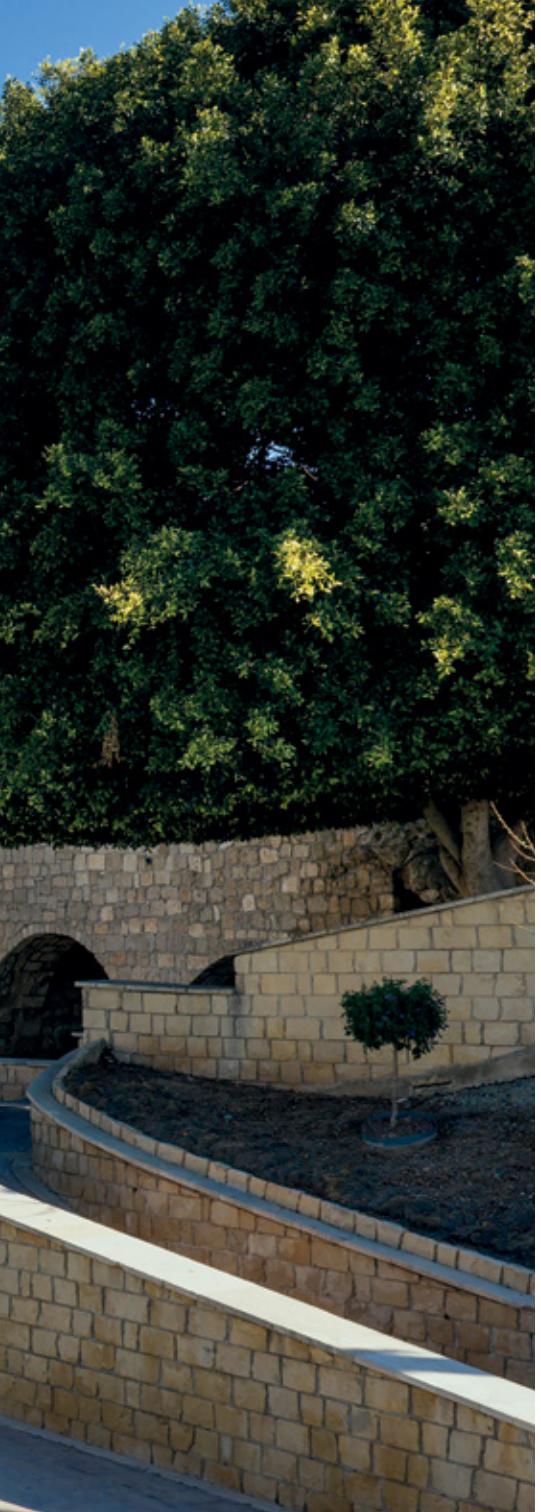
Sacred gardens were always intertwined with the worship of Aphrodite and were associated, like the goddess herself, with the regenerative power of nature and fertility. Strabo locates the Sacred Garden where Palaepafos (modern Kouklia) meets Nea Pafos, between the sacred city and the new administrative centre, just a breath away from the sea, exactly like modern Geroskipou.

Due to its distance from the great sanctuary of the goddess at Palaepafos, the Sacred Garden could hardly have been part of it. During the annual festival in honour of Aphrodite, the ceremonial procession of pilgrims, starting from Nea Pafos and heading towards the sanctuary of Palaepafos, passed through the Sacred Garden. The route came alive with chains of pilgrims, the sounds of chanting, the scents of incense, and the colours of flowers.

Time could not erase the memory of the Sacred Garden. Stefano Lusignan (15th century AD), a learned historian, refers to it as a place of “unparalleled beauty” and as a model for the creation of other gardens. According to him, during the Hellenistic (312 - 58 BC) and Roman (58 BC - 395 AD) periods, people from all over the world flocked to the area to receive from the goddess and her Nymphs the fruit of love.

From the rocky hills north of Geroskipou, the water of Kato Vrysi fountain has been flowing for centuries, running through underground tunnels to quench the thirst of people, animals, and soil. The women of the area washed their clothes in the basins of the spring, feeling that nature itself sanctified their work. The Bath of Aphrodite was located at Kato Vrysi, where the water welled up and watered the Sacred Garden of the goddess.

Numerous clay female figurines of the Archaic period (750-475 BC) have been found at the site of Geroskipou–Monagri. It may have been one of the centres producing votive offerings in the area around Palaepafos.



And it is not only Geroskipou. The entire surrounding area seems imbued with her divine aura. Strabo mentions Zephyria akra, the cape south of the village of Mandria, where the remains of a sanctuary dating from the Classical (475 - 312 BC), Hellenistic, and Roman periods were discovered. Slightly further north, between Zephyria akra and Hierokepia, he also mentions Arsinoe, another ancient location. There stood a sanctuary and a sacred grove, perhaps a temple among trees, perhaps a refuge for souls and prayers. These places may have formed stations along the Sacred Way, the route connecting Nea Pafos with Palaepafos.

Aphrodite in Nea Pafos

Around 320 BC, Nicocles, king of Pafos and high priest of the "Anassa," the female deity who had protected the region for millennia made a bold decision: to create a new capital. He could not, of course, have imagined that within a few decades the Cypriot kingdoms would be abolished forever, nor that his own palace would be engulfed in flames, sealing with ash the end of his dynasty.

Yet his work, Nea Pafos and the worship of the goddess, would not be lost. In his dual role as king and high priest of the Anassa, guardian of motherhood and fertility, Nicocles founded a temple dedicated to Aphrodite. Although the sanctuary has not yet been located, the fragment of a funerary stele (gravestone) of "Timarchos, priest of the Anassa" and the votive offerings found on the southeastern slope of Fabrica Hill attest to the sacredness of the place. From there, Aphrodite, in her capacity as "Akraia," goddess of the heights, oversaw the city and the sea, recalling her ancient role as protector of the kingdom and the king, of seafarers and of maritime journeys.

The worship of the goddess soon permeated every aspect of life in Nea Pafos, from temples and public buildings to private homes. Her name was inscribed in inscriptions, her image appeared on coins, figurines, statues, and sculptures. Aphrodite was everywhere: in religion, in administration, in art.

When Cyprus passed into Ptolemaic hands, the goddess acquired new forms. The deified queen Arsinoe II, wife and sister of Ptolemy II, was incorporated into the cult of Aphrodite. The *Koinon Kyprion* was established to promote dynastic worship. Thus, Aphrodite became a symbol of political unity and the legitimisation of the new dynasty's rule.

In the Roman period (58 BC - 395 AD), Nea Pafos was officially recognised as "holy metropolis of the cities of Cyprus" and developed into an administrative and artistic centre filled with villas with mosaics, statues, and private sanctuaries. In the House of Theseus, a statue of armed Aphrodite was found, a form that reveals the lesser-known, warlike aspects of the goddess. In some depictions, she holds a mirror and wears a strofeion (veil), signs of inner knowledge and ritual power. Several scholars associate her with Ishtar, the goddess of the East, who combines war with love.

In the 4th century AD, the first Christian basilicas were erected in Nea Pafos, imposing in size and decorated with elaborate mosaics. The old temples fell silent. The earthquakes of 380 to 400 AD and the transfer of the capital to Salamis–Constantia sealed the end of public sanctuaries. Yet Aphrodite did not vanish. She did not disappear abruptly. From the hills, she descended underground. In the Villa of Theseus, private sanctuaries and secret places of worship were preserved. There,



among idols of Isis, Demeter, and armed Aphrodite, the old faith survived a little longer, no longer public, but within the domestic, almost secret, world.

The worship of the Cypriot goddess was not violently interrupted; it transformed, diffusing elements and forms into new traditions. The goddess continued to dwell in familiar figures, in protective forms, in female images that continued to inspire faith, care, and admiration. And through them, she endured, not as a deity, but as a memory.

The Chalcolithic settlement of Lempa (Lakkoi site)

On the natural hill that separates the rivers Kotzia and Taisi one of the most important settlements of the Chalcolithic period in Cyprus was founded, at the site of Lakkoi. The history of the settlement unfolds between 3300 and 2500 BC, as attested by archaeological finds.

The inhabitants lived in small communities, in circular dwellings made of stone and clay, with diameters reaching 9 metres. Many were divided into internal compartments, while smaller structures served as workshops or storage spaces. Archaeological finds from Lemba reveal valuable information about the daily life of its inhabitants. Their survival depended on agriculture, animal husbandry, hunting, and fishing. Among the finds are clay vessels, stone and bone tools, woven baskets, textiles, and objects made of deer antlers. Of particular interest are small copper objects, which show that the first metallurgical knowledge had already begun to develop.

Among the practical objects of daily life are also finds that transport us to the world of beliefs, ideology, faith, and ritual. Inside houses, as well as in tombs, mainly of infants, numerous female figurines were found, made of clay, picrolite, and limestone. These small works of art do not seem to be merely decorative: they carry meanings related to fertility, birth, and the cycle of life.

A special place among these finds is held by the famous figurine known as the “Lady of Lemba”. Standing 36 centimetres tall, made of limestone, it depicts a naked pregnant woman with a swollen belly, short and outstretched arms, and an elongated neck with phallic characteristics

supporting her head. The figurine was found inside a circular dwelling, at the point where the clay-covered floor met the “formal” part of the space.

The presence of this imposing figurine forms part of a broader group of finds associated with the female figure and fertility. Around 3000 BC, in the Pafos area (Lemba, Kissonerga, Souskiou), a systematic cult appears to develop, centred on female fertility. Figurines made of various materials, in sizes ranging from 2 to 40 centimetres, depict female figures in childbirth, often in a cruciform posture. Among them stands out a clay figurine of a woman giving birth and a model of a house or sanctuary, possibly connected with childbirth. Today, both are exhibited at the Cyprus Museum in Lefkosia (Nicosia).

Idalion, Lefkosia

Idalion emerged in a fertile plain of Cyprus, on the banks of the Gialias River. The area shows traces of human activity as early as the 7th millennium BC. From the 18th to the 11th century BC, various settlements in the area developed trade relations with neighbouring regions of the Mediterranean, experiencing gradual prosperity. The founding of the kingdom of Idalion was the culmination of this process. The kingdom first appears in Assyrian sources of the 7th century BC and flourished until the mid-5th century BC, when it was conquered by the Phoenician Kition.

As was often the case in powerful urban centres of the time, their political and economic rise was accompanied by the prominence of important cultic figures, which lent legitimacy and prestige to power. Among them, the great goddess of Cyprus, Aphrodite, held a prominent position. The kings of the city-kingdoms ensured that they





associated their authority with her worship, recognising in her divine favour a source of power and political stability.

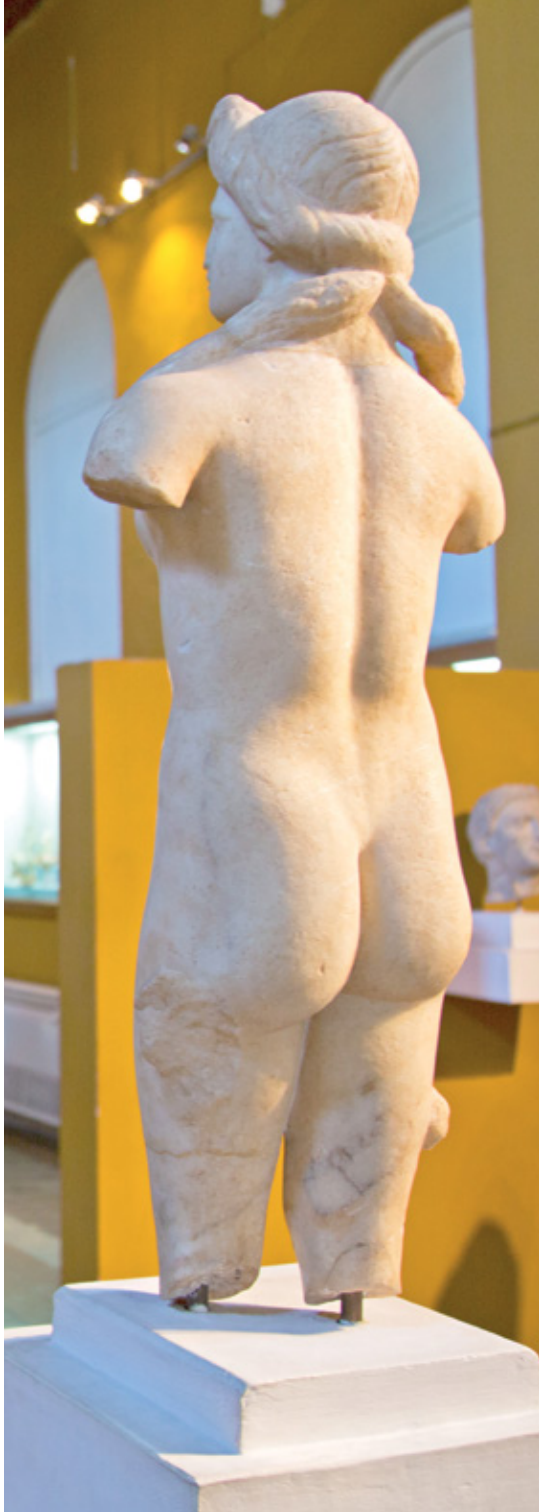
In exploring the goddess's presence in Idalion, one is inevitably led to the site of Moutti tou Arvili. Here, archaeological, iconographic, and epigraphic evidence points to the long-standing and evolving presence of a female deity. Excavations in the late 19th century brought to light more than five hundred votive offerings: clay and stone figurines, metal objects, vessels, and lamps. The sanctuary, though no longer preserved, was recorded in drawings as an organised cult space with an open courtyard surrounded by an enclosure, and auxiliary rooms serving ritual needs.

The iconographic variety of the votives is striking, reflecting both local artistic production and cultural influences from other Cypriot kingdoms. Particularly notable are the large female figures in clay or stone, often placed directly on the rock, as well as figurines of the kourotrophos type, female figures holding infants in their arms or on their laps. Other figures appear enthroned or wear floral diadems (kalathoi), while the characteristic representations of Astarte are also present, with women touching or supporting their breasts.

The presence of animals such as horses and birds, as well as objects with vegetal motifs, enriches the cultic imagery and suggests a synthesis of different cultural currents. In various parts of the sanctuary, figurines were found embedded in floors or in layers associated with funerary practices, an indication of rituals of dedication, renewal, or abandonment. Through these practices, the deep, personal, and enduring relationship of the people with the deity worshipped in the space is revealed.

Based on the archaeological evidence, worship at Idalion appears to have begun as early as the 7th century BC and to have continued uninterrupted into the Hellenistic period (312 - 58 BC) and the Roman period (58 BC - 395 AD). Although the deity is not always explicitly named, the morphology of the votives, the epigraphic evidence, and the iconography all converge in identifying her with Aphrodite. Literary tradition reinforces this image: Theocritus, as well as Catullus, Virgil, and Claudian, speak of the “Idalian” Aphrodite. This enduring reference indicates not only the existence of a prominent sanctuary but also the fame and influence of Idalion within the wider Mediterranean cultural landscape.

During the Hellenistic period, Idalion retained its role as an administrative and religious centre. In the mid-3rd century BC, the foundation of an Arsinoeion, a temple dedicated to Arsinoe II, is attested. According to epigraphic and archaeological evidence, this was not an autonomous sanctuary, but a temple or cult space incorporated into the already existing temenos of Apollo/Resheph or Adonis. This practice was not unique to Idalion, being also found in other Cypriot cities, and reflects the political aim of the Ptolemies to integrate dynastic worship into the religious landscape of Cyprus. This integration did not occur through imposition but on terms of local acceptance and coexistence. Arsinoe was worshipped alongside traditional deities such as Apollo/Resheph, who often appear in inscriptions as “synnaoi theoi,” deities who share the same sacred space. This practice functioned as a mechanism for the cultural legitimisation of Ptolemaic rule, allowing local populations to maintain their religious identities while at the same time strengthening their bond with the new hegemony.



Aphrodite at Ledra, Lefkosia

Ledra, the predecessor of modern Lefkosia, was one of the ancient city-kingdoms of Cyprus. Although deprived of access to the sea and of mineral wealth, its geomorphology, with fertile lands and the Pedieos River, made it an agricultural and pastoral centre. It was already inhabited in the Late Chalcolithic period (2500-2000 BC), as evidenced by remains of a circular dwelling, and continued uninterruptedly until modern times.

Systematic excavations on the PASYDY Hill (Hill of Agios Georgios in the centre of Lefkosia) from 1996 to 2010 revealed successive phases of habitation: from the Cypro-Geometric (1050 - 750 BC) and Cypro-Archaic (750-475 BC) periods, to the Cypro-Classical (475 - 312 BC) and especially the Hellenistic period (312 - 58 BC), during which the city seems to have prospered.

During this period, coroplastic workshops with moulds for figurines, small limestone statues, and a sanctuary that had been in continuous use since the Archaic period were found. The continuation of the cult under Ptolemaic rule indicates not only the deeply rooted spirituality of the inhabitants, but also the adaptation of religious institutions to historical circumstances. The existence of an olive press and a water cistern reinforce the connection of the sanctuary with local production.

Aphrodite was honoured in Ledra with the epithet «Pafia», bringing with her the cultural weight of Palaepafos and the prestige of the official cult. An inscription of the 4th century BC, carved on a stone statue base, records the dedication to the sanctuary of the Pafia and mentions Nicocles, the last king of Pafos and a descendant of Kinyras. This epigram attests to the presence of the Pafian cult in the hinterland and suggests a religious, and perhaps political, link between Ledra and the western coast.

The worship of Aphrodite in Ledra, however, is part of a deeper religious substratum. Clay female figurines of the Late Bronze Age (1650 - 1050 BC) and the Early Iron Age are attributed to the so-called Great Goddess. Her gradual identification with the Greek Aphrodite reveals the resilience and adaptability of local traditions over the centuries.

Aphrodite in Tamassos, Lefkosia

At the foothills of the Troodos Mountains, where the earth hides copper in its depths, lies Tamassos, a city where the goddess does not walk beside the waves, but in the flame of the furnaces and the dust of the mines.

Homer knew this city. He called it “Temese” and described it as a place rich in copper: “to Temese for copper.” In the same area, already from the Late Bronze Age (1650 - 1050 BC), small settlements developed near the copper-bearing strata. In the region of Politiko, identified with ancient Tamassos, the extraction and initial processing of the ore formed the foundation of the local economy.





Around the mines, workshops emerged, and near them, sanctuaries. For in Cyprus, metal was not merely matter; it was a divine gift. And in Tamassos, the protector of copper was none other than Aphrodite herself, or rather her Eastern counterpart, Astarte. The goddess was worshipped here from the 7th century BC until the 1st century BC. Excavations have revealed sanctuaries that were destroyed and rebuilt many times, with altars, halls, and enclosures. Clay figurines, censers, masks, and animal bones around the altars bear witness to enduring and vibrant worship. A huge monolithic altar, carved in limestone, reinforces the sense of sacred space. A small statuette of a goddess flanked by lions perhaps suggests that Cybele was the original inhabitant of the sanctuary.

The goddess's presence continues in myth. Ovid recounts that in Tamassos there was a garden of Aphrodite, with a tree that bore golden leaves and apples. From this tree, the goddess took three apples and gave them to Hippomenes so that he might win Atalanta. Tamassos, then, was not only a place of worship; it was also a setting of myth.

The presence of Aphrodite lasted until the 1st century AD, when Saint Herakleidios, the first Bishop of the city, appears. The coexistence of pagan and Christian faith is recorded in the archaeological layers of the site.

In Tamassos, Aphrodite is not born from the foam of the sea but rises from the fire of copper and the ash of the furnaces. Here, at the foothills of Troodos, the goddess is worshipped not only as a symbol of love and beauty, but as mistress of matter, of production, and of creative energy.

Kyprida Aphrodite – Cape Gkreko Nature Trail, Ammochostos

At the south-easternmost tip of the island, along the eastern coast of Cyprus, lies the ancient cape Pedalion, more widely known as Cape Gkreko. A two-kilometre nature trail descends towards the north-eastern side, where, according to written testimonies, a sanctuary dedicated to the goddess of Cyprus once stood. In the same location once stood the remains of a large temple and stone figures, some larger than life-size, yet today their traces have vanished.





The first to mention it was the geographer Strabo (late 1st century BC-early 1st century AD), referring to the Sanctuary of Aphrodite Akraia, an epithet often given to deities worshipped on steep mountain peaks or hilltops. Today, the walker, leaving behind the clamour of the world, hears only the wind and the waves and, if their imagination allows, walks in the footsteps of a goddess who continues to live at Cape Gkreko, calling us to discover her repeatedly.

Length: 2 km

Duration: 20 minutes

Difficulty Level: 1 (easy)

Plants of Cyprus associated with Aphrodite

On an island where myth permeates the landscapes, monuments and objects, nature, as a creative force, could not but be linked to Aphrodite. In Cyprus, plants are not merely organisms; they are symbols, bearers of memory and of the goddess's presence. Aphrodite left her mark not only on temples and stones but also on flowers, trees and fruits that continue to scent her island.

Adonis annua

Family: Ranunculaceae – Buttercup family

Adonis annua is an annual plant with a delicate stem and vivid red flowers resembling small poppies. Its fine, glossy petals bear a dark blotch at the base, a symbol of blood, and bloom in spring.

According to one version of the myth, Adonis was born from Smyrna (or Myrrha), daughter of Kinyras, king of Pafos. Aphrodite, who had caused Smyrna's unlawful desire for her father, saved the young woman by transforming her into a myrtle tree. From the trunk of the myrtle Adonis was born, whom Aphrodite loved passionately. The bright red hue of the plant's petals recalls the blood that was shed, while the short-lived nature of the blossom mirrors the fleeting beauty and brevity of existence, just like the story of Adonis in mythology.

The myth says that Adonis was killed by a wild boar during a hunt. Aphrodite, inconsolable, wept over his body, and her tears mingled with his blood. From Adonis' blood sprang the flower that bears his name, the anemone, while from Aphrodite's tears grew white roses.

The memory of Adonis was honoured in antiquity in the festival of the Adonia, during which women planted "gardens of Adonis" with fast-growing plants that





withered quickly, symbolising his untimely death and the transience of beauty and life.

The cult of Adonis is thought to have originated in the Near East and reached Greece through Cyprus in the 5th century BC. His name derives from the Semitic "Adon," meaning "Lord."

Species of Adonis in Cyprus:

Adonis annua, Adonis macrocarpa

Anemone coronaria

Family: Ranunculaceae – Buttercup family

Anemone coronaria is a perennial plant with striking flowers in red, blue, pink or white. Its delicate petals emerge each spring, often in large clusters, covering meadows and hillsides in the Cypriot countryside.

According to tradition, the name "anemone" is not related to the wind but comes from lamentation for Na'man ("beloved"), a title linked to the Semitic "Adon" (Lord), identified with Adonis. When Adonis was killed, it is said that anemones, mainly red, sprang from his blood, symbolising the drops of his life's essence. The anemone, whose petals are easily carried away by the wind, symbolises the transience of beauty and life, as well as the eternal cycle of nature that renews itself each spring.

Species of anemone in Cyprus:

Anemone coronaria, Anemone blanda

Narcissus tazetta (Νάρκισσος, Ματσικόριδο)

Family: Amaryllidaceae – Amaryllis family

Narcissus tazetta is a perennial bulbous plant with long, narrow leaves and characteristic fragrant flowers, white with a golden cup, blooming mainly in winter and spring. The flowers, often in clusters, appear to bow gently towards the ground or towards water, as if seeking their reflection.

According to the myth, Narcissus was a youth of extraordinary beauty who captivated goddesses, nymphs, and mortals alike. Yet, arrogant and self-admiring, he rejected every love, choosing only to admire himself. Offended by his indifference, Aphrodite decided to punish him, making him fall in love with his own reflection in the waters of a spring on Mount Helicon. Helpless and entranced by his image, Narcissus either slipped and drowned in the water or withered away from unfulfilled desire, dying on the bank.

In the place where he perished, a flower with white petals and a golden heart grew, which even today bows its head towards the water, as if admiring its own reflection.

The form of the plant, with its bent flower, is a living symbol of complacency and futility, but also of the melancholic beauty born of loss and unfulfilled desire.

Species of narcissus in Cyprus:

Narcissus tazetta, Narcissus serotinus



Asparagus acutifolius (Σπαράγγι)

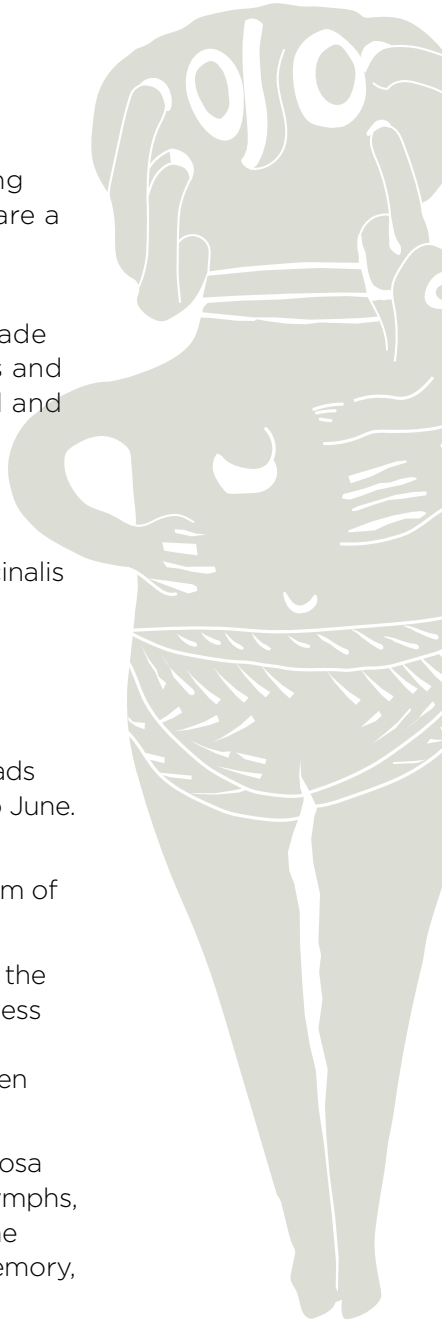
Family: Asparagaceae – Asparagus family

Asparagus acutifolius is a perennial, shrubby plant with slender stems and very sharp, rigid leaves, which are in fact modified shoots. Its young shoots (agrelia, or black/white asparagus) are gathered in spring and are a traditional delicacy in Cypriot cuisine.

In antiquity, asparagus was associated with rituals and offerings to the goddess of love, as its resilience and ability to regenerate each year made it a living emblem of nature's enduring power. Its presence in the fields and forests of Cyprus recalls Aphrodite's timeless connection with the land and its untamed beauty.

Species of wild asparagus in Cyprus:

Asparagus acutifolius (mavroagrelli or koutsagrelli), Asparagus aphyllus, Asparagus stipularis (asproagrelli), Asparagus verticillatus, Asparagus officinalis



Rose – Dog Rose (Rosa canina)

Family: Rosaceae – Roses

The Rosa canina (dog rose), the wild rose, is a native thorny shrub that spreads across the slopes of the Cypriot mountains. It flowers in spring, from April to June.

Since antiquity, wild roses have been linked to the worship of Aphrodite. According to myth, although the goddess of beauty rose from the white foam of the sea, one of her most beloved flowers takes root high in the mountains.

The lyric poet Anacreon (6th century BC) calls it "the fragrance of the gods, the delight of humans" and describes how, at the exact moment when the goddess emerges from the wave, the rose springs from the earth to adorn her. In this version of the myth, the rose is born together with Aphrodite, or perhaps even from her.

The rose is not connected only with Aphrodite. Despite its humble origins, Rosa canina carries a divine lineage. Anacreon also offers it to Charites, Muses, Nymphs, and even to Dionysos, adorning feasts and ceremonies with its blossoms. The wild rose thus becomes a symbol of the union of sky and earth, life and memory, divine and human.

Species in Cyprus:

Rosa canina, Rosa sempervirens, Rosa pulverulenta

Maple (Acer obtusifolium)

Family: Aceraceae – Maples

Acer obtusifolium is a small tree or large shrub native to Cyprus, found mainly in semi-mountainous and mountainous areas. It is a deciduous tree with broad leaves that change colour spectacularly before they fall.

According to an old tradition, it was the sacred tree of Phobos, not as the embodiment of panic or terror, but of fear as a natural human experience before something significant. Phobos, the son of Ares and Aphrodite, personified that mental tension which precedes a decision or a trial. He did not appear to be frightened, but to prepare. When he sought a symbol in nature, it is said he chose the maple – the tree that does not fear to change colour, that welcomes transition with courage, marking the end of one cycle and the beginning of the next.

In oral tradition, the maple is a tree of boundaries, both physical and psychological. It often grows at passes, at the edges of fields, or along paths. It does not inspire fear but commands respect. The sound of the wind through its leaves in autumn is like the whisper of time, a reminder that nothing is constant and that preparing for the unknown is part of wisdom.

It is a symbol of vigilance. It is the tree of silent warning and inner strength.

Species in Cyprus:

Acer obtusifolium, Acer pseudoplatanus, Acer platanoides





Quince (Cydonia oblonga)

Family: Rosaceae – Roses

The quince is a deciduous tree or large shrub with broad, downy leaves and firm, golden-yellow fruit. It has been cultivated for thousands of years in the temperate regions of the Mediterranean and blooms in spring with white to pale pink flowers.

With its rich fragrance and dense flesh, the quince has long been a symbol of love and devotion. In antiquity it was sacred to Aphrodite and appears frequently in mythological and ritual references as the "apple of love." The Athenian lawmaker Solon, in the 6th century BC, included the quince in the marriage rite: the young couple were required to eat a little quince before their wedding night. Its strong, intoxicating scent, released even when unripe, was believed to awaken desire, soften speech, and encourage tenderness. The quince is not eaten raw; it demands patience, boiling, and preparation. Like love itself, it needs care to release its sweetness.

In the cultural memory of Aphrodite, the quince stands not merely as a fruit-bearing tree but as a tree of commitments. It reminds us that love is not fleeting; it is a fruit that matures, that requires preparation, but when given, it rewards.

Oregano (Origanum)

Family: Lamiaceae – Mints

Oregano is a perennial with oval leaves and tiny white to pink flowers that bloom in summer, releasing an intense fragrance. In Cyprus it thrives on sunny slopes, in rocky and dry soils, and is considered one of the most important plants in local medicinal and culinary tradition.

Oregano is more than a herb; it is a plant of cultural, healing, and mythological weight. In antiquity it was praised by at least twenty-four authors up to the 4th century AD. It was also known as Artemidion, after the goddess Artemis, who used it to heal the wounds inflicted by her poisoned arrows. Hippocrates recommended it for ailments of the gall and the respiratory system, while Dioscorides recorded it as a remedy of wide application – from poultices for wounds to expectorant and digestive uses.

Its presence is also linked to the worship of Aphrodite. According to Virgil, the goddess healed the wounds of Aeneas with Cretan dittany, a close relative of oregano. Thus, the plant becomes more than a simple herb – it is a gift of the goddess, a symbol of healing, tenderness, and restoration. Aphrodite, who gives birth to love, also tends to the wounds that love or war may cause.

Species in Cyprus:

Origanum dubium, Origanum onites, Origanum vulgare subsp. Hirtum





Tamarix (Myriki, Merikos or Meritziá)

Family: Tamaricaceae – Tamarisks

The tamarisk is a deciduous shrub or small tree with slender, drooping branches and small, scale-like leaves, thriving in moist or saline areas of Cyprus. Its flowers vary in colour: white, pink, deep pink and blue in spring and summer. The tamarisk was dedicated to Aphrodite and symbolised youth and beauty. According to a moving Cypriot myth preserved by Hesychios, Myriki was the daughter of Kinyras, king of Cyprus, and sister of Adonis. When Adonis was lost, Myriki sank into mourning and from her unbearable grief, she was transformed into the tree that bears her name, perhaps by Aphrodite herself, who protected it as her sacred plant. Another version says that her name derives from the verb emyreto meaning “she wept”, as her tears became the flowers and leaves of the tamarisk.

Species of Tamarix in Cyprus:

Tamarix smyrnensis, Tamarix tetragyna, Tamarix tetrandra, Tamarix dalmatica, Tamarix hampeana, Tamarix aphylla (introduced)

Punica granatum (Pomegranate tree)

Family: Lythraceae – Loosestrifes

The pomegranate is a deciduous tree or large shrub with bright red flowers and striking fruits filled with numerous fleshy seeds.

Since antiquity, the fruit of the pomegranate has held a special place in Greek religion and mythology, being linked to fertility, abundance and the cycle of life. Each pomegranate, closed and mysterious, hides inside its hundreds of seeds, a promise of life, reproduction and prosperity.

In antiquity, the pomegranate was considered a gift from the gods. Hera, goddess of marriage, often held a pomegranate in her hand as an emblem of royal power and immortality. Aphrodite, goddess of love, made it her own symbol of fertility and desire. The seeds of the pomegranate, concealed within its hard shell, became an image of abundance and fecundity, promises of rich harvests and many descendants.

The association of the pomegranate with fertility is further reinforced by the myth of the abduction of Persephone, which explains the change of the seasons: six months of the year in Hades, winter and the silence of nature; six months on earth, spring and fruitfulness. Thus, the pomegranate becomes a gateway between life and death, a symbol of marriage, renaissance and eternal return.

This powerful symbolism also passed into Christianity. The seeds of the pomegranate, a key ingredient in kollyva, an offering prepared for memorial services, maintain the connection with the Underworld, while in marriage traditions, breaking a pomegranate on the threshold of the new home brings wishes for fertility and happiness. The more seeds scattered, the more blessings for newlyweds.



Myrtus communis (Myrtia, Mersinia)

Family: Myrtaceae – Myrtles

Myrtus communis (common myrtle) is an evergreen shrub or small tree with small, glossy, ovate or lanceolate leaves that release a delicate resinous fragrance when rubbed. In spring, particularly in May and June, which is its flowering period, it is adorned with white, elegant blossoms. Its fruit is an ovoid berry, which turns from white to deep red or black when ripe, and is edible.

According to tradition, the myrtle was the first refuge of the goddess Aphrodite when she emerged from the sea of Pafos. Behind its branches she concealed her nakedness, and thus the humble shrub became the first garment of the goddess. From that moment, the myrtle became inseparably linked with Aphrodite and was established as her sacred plant.

The myrtle symbolises beauty, youth, and grace, thanks to its evergreen leaves, its flowers, and its pleasant fragrance. In antiquity, its branches adorned temples and sanctuaries, while at traditional weddings it was used to make wreaths as a blessing from the goddess of love.

To this day, in special ceremonies and celebrations, churches are decorated with myrtle branches, or their leaves are spread on the floor as a sign of honour and hospitality towards important visitors or the divine.

A distinctive feature of the myrtle is its leaves. When observed in the light, they appear perforated with tiny dots – the glands that secrete the plant's essential oil. The ancients attributed this phenomenon to a tragic myth: in Troizen, Phaedra, despairing over her unfulfilled love for Hippolytus, her stepson, pierced myrtle leaves with pins shortly before ending her life. According to another version, this act took place in the sanctuary of Aphrodite, as revenge against the goddess for not helping her win the hero's heart.

Two varieties of this species occur in Cyprus:

Myrtus communis var. communis (produces black fruit), Myrtus communis var. laucocarpa DC (produces white fruits)





Rosemary (Salvia rosmarinus)

Family: Lamiaceae – Mints

Rosemary, also known in Cyprus and Crete as lasmari, is an ornamental and aromatic shrub widely found in courtyards, gardens, and country homes. Its leaves are small, needle-like, dark green on the upper surface and silvery-white on the underside, covered with soft down. It flowers mainly from January to March, with small blossoms in shades from pink to violet, rich in nectar for bees. The scientific name Rosmarinus means dew of the sea. It is mainly propagated by cuttings.

Since antiquity, rosemary has been a sacred plant dedicated to Aphrodite and used in religious ceremonies. The ancients burned its branches on altars as an offering or for purification, especially when valuable incense was unavailable. Its aromatic sprigs were also used to adorn statues of deities with garlands. To this day in Cyprus, the custom survives of placing rosemary sprigs in coffins as a symbol of remembrance and farewell.

The plant is also associated with traditional medicine. From its leaves and flowers, the aromatic oil Oleum Rosmarini is produced, with antiseptic, tonic, and antispasmodic properties. It is also used as a digestive aid, while in the past, when boiled in wine, it was employed to treat skin rashes, heal wounds, or relieve rheumatic pain.

Shells associated with Aphrodite

It is no coincidence that artists often depict Aphrodite rising from a large shell. Beyond evoking her marine origin, the shell reveals the life-giving force of nature. Belonging to the same seascape is the myth of Nerites: the youth refused to follow the goddess to Olympus and was transformed into a shell fixed to the rocks, thus reinforcing the symbolism of the shell as a sign of love and transformation.

In this sense, every shell washed ashore recalls a life that has ended but also the possibility of a new beginning. This transformation of an ending into a birth is precisely the story told by the goddess's own myth. In Hesiod's Theogony, Kronos castrates Ouranos; the severed parts fall into the sea, the foam swells, and from there Aphrodite emerges. This event seals the end of the chaotic age of monsters and inaugurates a world ruled by love, attraction, fertility, and beauty.

The ancient societies recognised the power of this symbol. They filled shells with perfumes and cosmetics, combining practical use with the hope of capturing a drop of the goddess's grace.

The shells displayed here come from the waters of Cyprus, a land that claims the birth of Aphrodite.



Family Astartidae – Astartes (or Astarte's clams)

Morphology: Small clams with a thick, rounded shell and a prominent hinge – the point where the two halves of the shell bond.

Symbolism: The hinge recalls female morphology. The family name derives from Astarte, the Phoenician goddess of fertility and love, who was identified with Aphrodite.

Species in Cyprus:

Astarte fusca , Astarte sulcata, Callista chione , Chamelea gallina, Clausinella fasciata, Dosinia exoleta, Dosinia lupinus, Gouldia minima. Irus irus, Pitar rudis, Timoclea ovata, Venerupis aurea, Venerupis decussata, Venerupis geographica,

Venerupis pullastra, Venerupis rhomboides, Venus casina, Venus verrucosa.

Family Cypraeidae – Cowries



Morphology: These shells are small, glossy, and smooth. They have a curved, drop-like shape and a narrow opening on the underside that resembles a slit. Their colour is usually brown or reddish, with a smooth, porcelain-like surface.

Symbolism: Their shape recalls the female body. For this reason, since antiquity they have been associated with femininity, fertility, and Aphrodite. The English naturalist George Perry wrote in 1811 that a shell of this family had been offered to the temple of Aphrodite in Pafos. Cowries have been found in ancient tombs in Cyprus, used as jewellery or amulets – particularly in female and children's burials.

Species in Cyprus:

Cypraea lurida, Cypraea spurca



Family Carditidae – False cockles

Morphology: These are small bivalve shells with a shape reminiscent of a heart. Their surface is ribbed, and their hinge is prominent and curved.

Symbolism: Their shape has been associated with femininity and fertility. For this reason, many species bear the name Veneri, from Venus – the Roman Aphrodite. They symbolise love and life that begins from the sea and are considered "shells of the goddess".

Species in Cyprus (recorded near Cape Gkreko):

Venericardia antiquata, Venericardia corbis

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