
Cyprus

from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia ¹
CYPRUS sī'prəs. An island situated near the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea, in angle formed by the coasts of Cilicia (modern Turkey) and Syria. In the Old Testament it is called KITTIM; cf. the name of its Phoenician capital Kition.

I. Geography

The island is the third largest in the Mediterranean after Sardinia and Sicily, with an area of about 3584 sq mi (9282 sq km). It lies only 46 mi (74 km) from the nearest point of the Cilician coast and 60 mi (97 km) from the Syrian. Thus from the northern shore of the island the mainland of Asia Minor is clearly visible, and Mt. Lebanon can be seen from eastern Cyprus. This close proximity to the Cilician and Syrian coasts, as well its position on the route between Asia Minor and Egypt, proved of great importance for the history and civilization of the island. Its greatest length, including the northeast promontory, is about 140 mi (225 km), and its greatest breadth 60 mi (97 km).

The southwest portion of Cyprus is formed by a mountain complex, whose highest peak is 6403 ft (1951 m). To the northeast of this complex lies the great plain of the Messaoria, nearly 60 mi (97 km) in length and 10 to 20 (16 to 32 km) in breadth, in which lies the modern capital Nicosia. The plain is bounded on the north by a mountain range (the Kyrenia), which is continued to the east-northeast in the long, narrow promontory of the Karpas, terminating in Cape Andrea, the ancient Dinaretum. Its two highest peaks are just over 3100 ft (945 m). The shore-plain to the north of these hills is narrow, but remarkably fertile.

II. Products

Cyprus is richly endowed by nature. Its fruits and flowers were famous in antiquity. Strabo speaks of it as producing wine and oil in abundance and corn sufficient for the needs of its inhabitants. The elder

Pliny refers to Cyprian salt, alum, gypsum, mica, unguents, laudanum, storax, resin, and precious stones. The chief source of the island's wealth, however lay in its mines and forests. Silver is mentioned by Strabo; copper, which was called by the Greeks after the name of the island, was extensively mined there from the earliest period down to the Middle Ages; iron too was found in considerable quantities from the 9th cent. until Roman times. Scarcely less important were the forests, which at an early date are said to have covered almost the whole island. The cypress seems to have been the principal tree, and the island supplied timber for shipbuilding to many successive powers.

III. Early History

The original inhabitants of Cyprus appear to have been a race akin to the peoples of Asia Minor. The island's vast resources in copper and timber gained for it a considerable importance and wide commercial relations at a very remote period. Its wealth attracted the attention of Babylonia and Egypt, and there is reason to believe that it was conquered by Sargon I king of Akkad, and about a millennium later by Thutmose III of the 18th Dynasty (1501–1447 B.C.).

But the influences that molded its civilization came from other quarters also. Excavation has shown that in Cyprus there were several seats of Minoan culture, and there can be little doubt that it was deeply influenced by Crete. Phoenician influences too were at work, and the Phoenician settlements of Citium, Amathus, Paphos, and others go back to a very early date. The breakup of the Minoan civilization was followed by a "dark age"; but later the island received a number of Greek settlers from Arcadia and other Hellenic states, to judge not only from Greek tradition but from the evidence of the Cyprian dialect, which is closely related to the Arcadian.

In 709 B.C. Sargon II of Assyria made himself master of Cyprus, and tribute was paid by its seven princes to him and to his grandson Esarhaddon (681–667). The overthrow of the Assyrian empire probably brought with it the independence of

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Cyprus, but it was conquered anew by Aahmes (Amasis) of Egypt (Herodotus ii.182), who retained it till his death in 526 B.C. However, in the following year the defeat of his son and successor by Cambyses brought the island under Persian dominion (Herodotus iii.19, 91).

IV. Greek and Roman Periods

In 501 the Greek inhabitants rose in revolt against the Persians, but were decisively beaten (Herodotus v.104ff), and in 480 there were 150 Cyprian ships in the navy with which Xerxes attacked Greece (Herodotus vii.90). In 411 Euagoras ascended the throne of Salamis and set to work to assert Hellenic influence and to champion Hellenic civilization. He joined with Pharnabazus the Persian satrap and Conon the Athenian to overthrow the naval power of Sparta at the battle of Cnidus in 394, and in 387 revolted from the Persians.

Cyprus seems later to have fallen once again under Persian rule, but after the battle of Issus (333 B.C.) it voluntarily gave its submission to Alexander the Great and rendered him valuable aid at the siege of Tyre. On his death (323) it fell to the share of Ptolemy of Egypt. It was, however, seized by Demetrius Poliorcetes, who defeated Ptolemy in a hotly contested battle off Salamis in 306. Eleven years later it came into the hands of the Ptolemies and remained a province of Egypt or a separate but dependent kingdom until the intervention of Rome (cf. 2 Macc. 10:13).

In 58 B.C. the Romans resolved to incorporate Cyprus into their empire, and Marcus Porcius Cato was entrusted with the task of its annexation. The reigning prince, a brother of Ptolemy Auletes of Egypt, received the offer of an honorable retirement as high priest of Aphrodite at Paphos, but he preferred to end his life by poison, and the island passed into Roman hands and was attached to the province of Cilicia. In the partition of the Roman empire between senate and emperor, Cyprus was at first (27–22 B.C.) an imperial province. In 22 B.C., however, it was handed over to the senate together with southern Gaul in exchange for Dalmatia (Dio Cassius Hist. liii.12; liv.4) and was subsequently governed by ex-praetors bearing the honorary title of proconsul and residing at Paphos. Among them was Sergius

Paulus, who was proconsul at the time of Paul's visit to Paphos. The title applied to him in Acts 13:7 is strictly accurate.

V. Cyprus and the Jews

The proximity of Cyprus to the Syrian coast rendered it easy of access from Palestine, and Jews had probably begun to settle there even before the time of Alexander the Great. Certainly the number of Jewish residents under the Ptolemies was considerable (1 Macc. 15:23; 2 Macc. 12:2), and it must have been increased later when the copper mines of the island were farmed to Herod the Great (Josephus Ant. xvi.4.5; xix.26.28). We shall not be surprised, therefore, to find that at Salamis there was more than one synagogue at the time of Paul's visit (Acts 13:5).

In A.D. 116 the Jews of Cyprus rose in revolt and massacred no fewer than 240,000 Gentiles. Hadrian crushed the rising with great severity and drove all the Jews from the island. Henceforth no Jew might set foot upon it, even under stress of shipwreck, on pain of death (Dio Cassius lxxviii.32).

VI. The Church in Cyprus

In the life of the early Church Cyprus played an important part. Among the Christians who fled from Judea in consequence of the persecution that followed Stephen's death were some who "traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus" (Acts 11:19) preaching to the Jews only. Certain natives of Cyprus and Cyrene took a further momentous step in preaching at Antioch to the Greeks also (Acts 11:20).

Even before this time Joseph Barnabas, a Levite born in Cyprus (Acts 4:36), was prominent in the early Christian community at Jerusalem, and it was in his native island that he and Paul, accompanied by John Mark, began their first missionary journey (Acts 13:4). After landing at Salamis they passed "through the whole island as far as Paphos" (Acts 13:6), probably visiting the Jewish synagogues in its cities. Whether the "early disciple," Mnason of Cyprus, was one of the converts made at this time or had previously embraced Christianity we cannot determine (Acts 21:16). Barnabas and Mark revisited Cyprus later (Acts 15:39); but Paul did not again land on the

island, though he sighted it when, on his last journey to Jerusalem, he sailed S of it on his way from Patara in Lycia to Tyre (Acts 21:3), and again when on his journey to Rome he sailed “under the lee of Cyprus,” that is, along its northern coast, on the way from Sidon to Myra in Lycia (Acts 27:4).

In 401 the Council of Cyprus was convened, chiefly in consequence of the efforts of Theophilus of Alexandria, the inveterate opponent of Origenism, and took measures to check the reading of Origen’s works. The island, which was divided into thirteen bishoprics, was declared autonomous in the 5th cent., after the alleged discovery of Matthew’s Gospel in the tomb of Barnabas at Salamis. The bishop of Salamis was made metropolitan by the emperor Zeno with the title “archbishop of all Cyprus”; and his successor, who now occupies the see of Nicosia, still enjoys the privilege of signing his name in red ink and is primate over the three other bishops of the island, all of whom are of metropolitan rank.

VII. Later History

Cyprus remained in the possession of the Roman and then of the Byzantine emperors, though twice overrun and temporarily occupied by the Saracens, until 1184, when its ruler Isaac Comnenus broke away from Constantinople and declared himself an independent emperor. From him the rule was seized in 1191 by the Crusaders under Richard I of England, who bestowed it on Guy de Lusignan, the titular king of Jerusalem, and his descendants. In 1489 it was ceded to the Venetians by Catherine Cornaro, widow of James II, the last of the Lusignan kings, and remained in their hands until it was captured by the Ottoman Turks under Sultan Selim II, who invaded and subjugated the island in 1570 and laid siege in Famagusta, which, after a heroic defense, capitulated on August 1, 1571.

The ensuing three centuries of Turkish rule were marked in general by laxness on the part of the rulers of Cyprus. Minor revolts were frequent, and there were serious revolts in 1764 and 1823. The

population declined; the copper mines ceased to be worked; in the latter part of the 18th cent. cotton, the chief crop, dropped to an average annual crop of about 4000 bales from an average crop of about 8000 bales in the earlier part of that century (and from a crop of as much as 30,000 bales during the earlier Venetian period). In 1878 Britain and Turkey made a defensive alliance in view of the encroachments of Russia toward the south. As a part of this arrangement, Cyprus was occupied and administered by Britain, though nominally remaining a part of the Ottoman empire. When Turkey entered World War I against the Allies, Cyprus was annexed to the British empire, and in 1925 became a crown colony.

In recent years Cyprus has again been a land of tension. A small but powerful minority began agitating for henosis, i.e., union with Greece. The first open demonstrations occurred in 1931. Turkey, however, will not permit Cyprus to become a part of Greece, insisting that the island is more properly an extension of the Anatolian mainland. Though it is true that the larger part of the population of Cyprus (four-fifths) is Greek-speaking, largely through the influence of the Greek Orthodox Church, the natural and historical ties with Greece are not strong. Early in 1959 an agreement was reached among Britain, Greece, and Turkey that provided for setting up the Republic of Cyprus. Britain indicated her willingness to give up her sovereignty over the island providing she could maintain her military bases; Greece gave up the claim to henosis; Turkey gave up its insistence on partition. This agreement seemed to give promise of a lasting settlement, but it soon broke down, and Turkey invaded and occupied much of the island. Throughout its long checkered history the control of Cyprus has been regarded as essential for the control of the eastern Mediterranean. The continuing recognition of its strategic importance seems to destine Cyprus to a future of tension and struggle.