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The History of Cyprus

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Geographic and Strategic Significance of Cyprus
- **Chapter 2** The Earliest Inhabitants: Aceramic and Ceramic Neolithic Cyprus
- **Chapter 3** The Chalcolithic Age: First Metallurgy and Emerging Societies
- **Chapter 4** Bronze Age Cyprus: The Rise of Urban Centres and Trade
- **Chapter 5** Mycenaean Greeks and the Birth of City-Kingdoms
- **Chapter 6** Cyprus in the Shadow of Empires: Assyrians and Egyptians
- **Chapter 7** Persian Rule: Autonomy and Influence under the Achaemenids
- **Chapter 8** The Hellenistic Transformation: From Alexander to the Ptolemies
- **Chapter 9** Cyprus under Rome: Prosperity, Infrastructure, and Identity
- **Chapter 10** The Spread of Christianity and the Early Church in Cyprus
- **Chapter 11** Life in Late Antiquity: The Transition to Byzantine Rule
- **Chapter 12** Byzantine Cyprus: Culture, Religion, and Resilience
- **Chapter 13** Raids and Rivalries: Arab-Byzantine Condominium and Reassertion
- **Chapter 14** The Coming of the Crusaders: Richard the Lionheart and the Lusignans
- **Chapter 15** The Frankish Kingdom: Feudalism, Faith, and Famagusta
- **Chapter 16** Venetian Dominion: Fortress Cyprus and the Threat from the Ottomans
- **Chapter 17** Ottoman Conquest: War, Settlement, and Society Transformation
- **Chapter 18** Life under Ottoman Rule: Communities, Economy, and Faith
- **Chapter 19** The Dawn of Nationalism: British Arrival and Colonial Ambitions
- **Chapter 20** Modernization and Division: British Reforms and Intercommunal Relations
- **Chapter 21** Enosis and Taksim: Competing Nationalisms and the Road to Conflict
- **Chapter 22** The Struggle for Independence: The EOKA Campaign and the 1960 Republic
- **Chapter 23** Fragile Peace: Intercommunal Violence and the United Nations
- **Chapter 24** The Crisis of 1974: Coup, Invasion, and the Division of Cyprus
- **Chapter 25** Cyprus Today: Division, EU Membership, and the Quest for Reunification

Introduction

Situated at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and Africa, the island of Cyprus has long been regarded as a bridge between civilizations and a coveted prize for empires. Its glittering shores and fertile plains have attracted settlers, traders, and conquerors since the dawn of recorded history. Archaeological discoveries reveal that humans first set foot on Cyprus more than 10,000 years ago, and since then, the island's fate has been shaped by the tides of migration, commerce, warfare, and diplomacy that have swept across the wider Mediterranean.

From its earliest settlements, Cyprus developed a unique identity. Yet its position—both a gateway and a crossroads—meant that no civilization, however established, could remain isolated for long. Waves of influence, from Mycenaean Greeks to Phoenicians, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, Crusaders, Venetians, Ottomans, and the British, brought with them new religions, languages, customs, and architectural forms. Each group left indelible traces on the island's landscape, artistic heritage, and society, contributing to a cultural *mélange* that is distinctly Cypriot.

The history of Cyprus is one of resilience amidst adversity. Periods of peace and remarkable prosperity have alternated with times of violence, crisis, and suffering. In medieval times, Cyprus was regarded as a vital bulwark and entrepôt on the edge of Christendom; under Ottoman and later British rule, profound social and economic changes transformed the lives of ordinary Cypriots. The 20th century, with its rise of nationalism and quest for self-determination, brought new challenges: intercommunal tensions, the bitter struggles of decolonization, and ultimately, the traumatic division of the island in 1974.

Today, the Republic of Cyprus stands as a modern nation-state and a proud member of the European Union. Yet the shadow of division lingers over Nicosia, the only remaining divided capital in Europe, and the entire island retains visible reminders of its turbulent past: ancient ruins, Gothic cathedrals, Byzantine monasteries, Ottoman mosques, and Venetian walls. The ongoing political stalemate serves as both a reminder of unresolved grievances and a testament to unresolved hope.

In telling the story of Cyprus, this book traces a continuum stretching from the hunter-gatherer societies of the Neolithic to the diplomatic challenges of the present day. Through an examination of archaeology, political history, social transformation, and cultural evolution, it seeks to reveal how the island's unique position and complex past have shaped both its people and its present-day dilemmas. At every turn, Cyprus demonstrates the enduring interplay between the forces of change and continuity, between local traditions and outside interventions.

By following Cyprus's journey—marked by encounters, exchanges, and ever-shifting boundaries—readers are invited to reflect not only on the island's past, but also on the broader questions of identity, coexistence, and the prospects for reconciliation. The story of Cyprus is a microcosm of the wider Mediterranean world: a story of survival, adaptation, and enduring hope.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Geographic and Strategic Significance of Cyprus

Cyprus, often depicted on maps as a solitary speck in the vast expanse of the Eastern Mediterranean, is anything but isolated. Its very existence is a testament to immense geological forces, and its historical trajectory is inextricably linked to its unique position. Imagine a compass rose, its cardinal points stretching across three continents: Europe to the northwest, Asia Minor directly north and east, and Africa due south. Cyprus lies almost perfectly at the center of this powerful convergence, a natural stepping stone, a watchtower, and a tempting prize all at once.

This geographical centrality has profoundly shaped the island's destiny since time immemorial. It's no mere coincidence that nearly every major power vying for dominance in the ancient world, and indeed up to modern times, cast a covetous eye upon Cyprus. Control of the island meant control over vital shipping lanes, access to invaluable resources, and a strategic military outpost from which to project power across the entire basin. It's a classic case of location, location, location, but on a grand, geopolitical scale.

Geologically, Cyprus is a fascinating anomaly. It is believed to have been formed by the collision of the African and Eurasian tectonic plates, a slow-motion geological drama that pushed up the Troodos Mountains, the island's majestic central range. These mountains, with their verdant forests and snow-capped peaks in winter, are not just a picturesque backdrop; they are a rich repository of minerals, most notably copper. Indeed, the very name "Cyprus" is thought by some to be derived from the Greek word for copper, *kypros*, or perhaps from the Sumerian *zubar*, also referring to copper. This isn't just a linguistic curiosity; it points to the island's immense historical importance as a primary source of this essential metal in antiquity.

The island's topography is characterized by two mountain ranges, the aforementioned Troodos in the south and west, and the less imposing Kyrenia (or Pentadaktylos) range running along the northern coast. Between these two lies the Mesaoria plain, a fertile agricultural heartland that has historically sustained its population. The presence of both mountains and plains, coupled with a Mediterranean climate of hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters, has historically supported a diverse range of agricultural activities, from grain cultivation to vineyards and olive groves. This self-sufficiency in food production, alongside its mineral wealth, made Cyprus a particularly attractive prospect for settlement and conquest.

The coastlines of Cyprus also play a crucial role in its strategic significance. Numerous

natural harbors, albeit mostly small ones, dot the periphery, offering shelter and facilitating maritime trade and naval operations. Famagusta, on the eastern coast, rose to prominence in the medieval period as one of the wealthiest port cities in the Mediterranean, a bustling hub where goods and cultures intertwined. Kition (modern-day Larnaca) and Paphos also served as critical maritime gateways throughout different historical epochs, connecting Cyprus to the wider world. The island's numerous beaches, today a magnet for tourists, were once the landing sites for countless invaders and traders, each leaving their mark.

Beyond its physical attributes, the sheer proximity of Cyprus to the major power centers of the ancient world is striking. From the northern shores, one can almost see the Turkish mainland, a mere 70 kilometers away. Syria and the Levant coast are similarly close to the east, while Egypt lies a manageable distance to the south. This geographical intimacy meant that events on the mainland invariably rippled across to the island, often with profound consequences. Cyprus could never truly isolate itself from the political and economic currents of the wider Eastern Mediterranean.

For ancient empires, Cyprus was an invaluable asset. For the Egyptians, it provided timber for shipbuilding and copper for tools and weapons. For the Hittites, Assyrians, and later the Persians, it offered a forward base for controlling maritime trade and projecting power into the Aegean. The Greeks, with their seafaring traditions, found familiar cultural ground and established flourishing city-kingdoms. The Romans, masters of their vast empire, valued Cyprus for its resources and its strategic position within their eastern provinces. Each successive power understood that possessing Cyprus was not just about owning an island; it was about holding a key piece on the geopolitical chessboard.

The island's role as a cultural melting pot is a direct consequence of this strategic importance. Traders and settlers from across the Mediterranean brought their languages, religions, technologies, and artistic styles. Over millennia, these diverse influences blended and evolved, creating a unique Cypriot culture that bears the hallmarks of its many historical interactions. This rich tapestry is evident in the archaeological record, where pottery, architecture, and burial customs often reveal a fascinating synthesis of East and West.

Even in more recent history, during the age of sail and steam, Cyprus retained its strategic allure. The British Empire, keen to secure its routes to India and maintain influence in the Suez Canal, acquired Cyprus in 1878. For Britain, the island served as a crucial military base and a symbol of imperial might in the Eastern Mediterranean. The two sovereign base areas retained by the UK even after Cyprus gained independence in 1960 are a tangible legacy of this enduring strategic value.

Today, the strategic significance of Cyprus has perhaps shifted from purely military control to energy security and regional stability. The discovery of significant offshore

natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has once again placed Cyprus at the heart of geopolitical discussions, underscoring its enduring importance in the complex dynamics of the region. The island's position as an EU member state, bordering volatile regions, further amplifies its role as a stable anchor in a sometimes-turbulent sea.

In essence, Cyprus is a geographical paradox: an island, yet intrinsically connected to the continents around it. Its history is a narrative of this constant interplay, a story of how a seemingly small landmass at a pivotal junction can become a focal point for global ambition and a crucible for cultural exchange. Understanding its geography is therefore not merely an exercise in cartography, but the fundamental key to unlocking the entire history of Cyprus. It sets the stage for every chapter that follows, explaining why so many have sought to claim it, transform it, and ultimately, endure upon it.

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