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A History of Cyprus

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Introduction

Cyprus, an island jewel in the eastern Mediterranean, stands at the confluence of three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. This strategic location has granted Cyprus a unique and complex history—one shaped by a remarkable succession of civilizations, empires, and peoples. Throughout its existence, Cyprus has served as both a coveted prize and a cultural crossroads, leaving an indelible mark on the people who have called it home.

In tracing the history of Cyprus, we embark on a journey across more than ten millennia. From the earliest traces of human habitation, through the prehistoric and Bronze Age settlements, the island has witnessed technological advancement, social evolution, and the rise of distinctive local cultures. With each new age and ruling power—from the Assyrians to the Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders, Venetians, Ottomans, and British—the island was forced to adapt, absorb, or resist, forging a resilience that characterizes its people today.

Yet, Cyprus is not merely a backdrop to imperial ambition; it is also a land of innovation, religious fervor, and dynamic social exchange. The local population often shaped their own destinies through creativity, trade, and diplomacy, even as they grappled with external pressures. The export of copper, advances in art, architecture, and administration, and the early spread of Christianity are just a few lasting legacies that have their origins within the island's boundaries.

The modern history of Cyprus, particularly in the past two centuries, has been marked by nationalist aspirations, anti-colonial struggles, and a continuing quest for unity and identity. The tumultuous events of the twentieth century—ranging from the fight for independence from British rule, intercommunal strife between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, and the tragic island-wide division of 1974—continue to reverberate, shaping Cyprus's domestic politics and impacting its international relations.

Today, the Republic of Cyprus is an active member of the European Union, seeking to balance its Hellenic heritage with its position at the edge of the Middle East. Yet, the unresolved Cyprus dispute and the enduring partition remind us that the island's journey is unfinished, its wound still open, and its history still in the making.

This book, *A History of Cyprus*, aims to provide a comprehensive, balanced, and accessible overview of the island's fascinating past. By examining archaeological evidence, historical sources, and contemporary debates, this work seeks to illuminate the forces—geographical, political, social, and cultural—that have shaped Cyprus, and to offer readers an understanding of the place and its people throughout the ages.

CHAPTER ONE: The Island Setting and First Footprints

Cyprus, a large island nestled in the warm embrace of the northeastern Mediterranean, owes much of its extraordinary history to its physical characteristics and precise geographical location. Unlike many islands that lie in isolation, Cyprus is strategically positioned almost equidistant from the coasts of Anatolia to the north, the Levant to the east, and Egypt to the south. This unique position has forever placed it at the confluence of major trade routes and the crossroads of diverse cultures, making it a coveted land and a melting pot throughout millennia.

The island itself is a land of striking contrasts, sculpted by powerful geological forces. Dominating the southwestern landscape is the Troodos Massif, a vast, rugged mountain range that was thrust upwards millions of years ago as part of a complex process involving tectonic plates. These mountains rise to heights of nearly 2,000 meters, their slopes covered in pine forests, vineyards, and traditional villages.

To the north, running parallel to the coast, lies the narrower and sharper Kyrenia Range, also known as the Pentadaktylos or "Five-Finger" mountain range, named for its distinctive silhouette in one section. While not as high as the Troodos, these limestone peaks form a formidable barrier, historically separating the northern coastal plain from the rest of the island and offering natural strongholds.

Between these two mountain systems lies the Mesaoria, a broad, fertile plain that stretches from Morphou Bay in the west to Famagusta Bay in the east. This central plain has historically been the agricultural heartland of Cyprus, watered by seasonal rivers flowing down from the mountains. It is also the most populous region and the site of the modern capital, Nicosia, situated centrally within its expanse.

The coastline of Cyprus is varied, featuring sandy beaches, rocky cliffs, and natural harbors. While some areas offer relatively easy access, much of the coast is rugged. The major bays and promontories have played crucial roles throughout history, providing safe havens for ships and sites for important port cities like Kition (Larnaca), Salamis, Paphos, and Limassol, facilitating maritime trade and interaction with the wider Mediterranean world.

This diverse topography provides a range of microclimates and resources. The mountains capture rainfall, feeding the rivers that sustain the plain, though water scarcity has often been a challenge. The geological makeup of the Troodos, in particular, is significant as it contains rich deposits of copper, a resource that would

become synonymous with Cyprus in the Bronze Age, giving the island its classical name, *Kypros*.

Beyond copper, the island offered timber from its forests, fertile land for cultivation (cereals, olives, grapes), stone for building, and various other natural resources. These provided the basis for sustenance and trade for its inhabitants from the earliest times, allowing communities to develop, grow, and engage with their neighbors across the sea.

Given its proximity to larger landmasses, particularly Anatolia and the Levant, it is perhaps unsurprising that Cyprus eventually became home to human populations. The question is not *if* but *when* and *how* these early pioneers made the journey to the island, crossing the sometimes treacherous waters of the eastern Mediterranean. The archaeological record provides tantalizing glimpses into this deep past.

For many years, it was believed that human settlement on Cyprus began relatively late compared to the mainland, specifically with the arrival of agricultural communities in the Neolithic period. Early archaeological surveys primarily identified sites from this later era. However, scientific dating techniques and dedicated research have pushed back the timeline considerably, revealing a much older human presence.

The most compelling evidence for the earliest human activity comes from a site on the southern coast, perched dramatically on a sea cliff near Akrotiri. Named Aetokremnos, meaning "Eagle Cliff," this rock shelter has yielded artifacts suggesting human presence far earlier than previously imagined, potentially marking the very first footprints on the island.

Excavations at Aetokremnos uncovered layers containing stone tools alongside the bones of pygmy hippos and pygmy elephants, extinct dwarf species that once roamed the island. Radiocarbon dating of the bones places the human activity at this site around 12,000 years ago, during the Late Paleolithic or Epipaleolithic period, towards the end of the last Ice Age.

The association of stone tools with the remains of these extinct animals suggests that these early visitors were hunters. The pygmy hippos and elephants, isolated on the island, lacked natural predators and would have been relatively easy prey for skilled hunters arriving from the mainland, offering a rich, albeit perhaps short-term, food source.

The nature of the Aetokremnos site suggests it may not have been a long-term settlement but rather a temporary hunting camp. The inhabitants likely stayed for a period, hunted the local fauna, perhaps processed hides and meat, and then moved on, either returning to the mainland or exploring other parts of the island that have yet to reveal their secrets from this remote era.

This discovery dramatically changed the understanding of Cyprus's earliest history. It demonstrated that humans possessed the capacity for sea travel much earlier than previously thought, capable of reaching islands that were not connected to the mainland, even during periods of lower sea levels near the end of the Ice Age.

The simple stone tools found at Aetokremnos are typical of the technology of the time – blades, scrapers, and points fashioned from flint. They indicate a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, dependent on exploiting available resources. Finding such tools alongside extinct fauna provides crucial data points for understanding the interaction between early humans and island ecosystems.

While Aetokremnos provides a snapshot of this early activity, the period immediately following, between roughly 12,000 and 9,000 years ago, remains something of an archaeological enigma on Cyprus. There is a noticeable gap in the widespread and easily identifiable archaeological record of fixed settlements during this time.

This "gap" has led to debate among scholars. Did the early visitors from Aetokremnos establish a continuous presence on the island, living a nomadic lifestyle that left few enduring traces? Or did they arrive, exploit the resources, and then vanish, perhaps unable to sustain themselves or return to their homeland, leaving the island uninhabited for a time?

The challenges of finding evidence from such an early period cannot be overstated. Nomadic hunter-gatherer groups typically leave behind ephemeral remains – temporary camps, scattered tools, food debris – which are easily lost to time, erosion, or buried deep under later deposits. Much of the coastline from 12,000 years ago is now submerged due to rising sea levels since the end of the Ice Age.

Despite the lack of widespread evidence for the period immediately post-Aetokremnos, the presence of these early humans demonstrates that Cyprus was within the range of maritime travel at the dawn of the Holocene epoch. It shows that the island was known, or at least accessible, to populations in the surrounding Levant and Anatolian regions.

The precise origins of these first visitors are uncertain, but given the geography, they most likely came from the nearby coasts of modern-day Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, or Israel. They would have required some form of basic watercraft, perhaps simple rafts or dugout canoes, to make the crossing, even if the journey was relatively short compared to reaching more distant islands.

The fact that these early humans targeted island megafauna suggests a sophisticated understanding of resources and an adventurous spirit. They were likely aware that islands could serve as ecological refuges where animals might be less wary or easier

to corner than on the mainland.

Understanding this initial phase of human presence is crucial for setting the stage for the later development of Cypriot society. It highlights the fundamental role of geography – an island close enough to be reached, yet distinct enough to foster unique ecological conditions and, eventually, unique cultural pathways.

The presence of pygmy fauna on Cyprus also tells its own story. These dwarf species evolved over long periods of isolation on the island, free from the pressures of larger mainland predators. Their extinction shortly after human arrival, as evidenced at Aetokremnos, suggests that human hunting had a significant and rapid impact on the island's delicate ecosystem.

The journey of these earliest humans was likely fraught with peril. Venturing out of sight of land, relying on rudimentary navigation and vessels, they undertook a significant risk. Their success in reaching Cyprus, however temporary their stay, is a testament to the ingenuity and migratory drive of our ancestors.

The archaeological investigation into this earliest period is ongoing. New techniques and careful surveys may yet reveal more sites from this elusive era, potentially bridging the gap between the fleeting visits evidenced at Aetokremnos and the establishment of the first permanent villages that would mark the beginning of a new chapter in the island's history.

This initial human engagement with Cyprus was shaped entirely by the island's raw, untamed geography and the limited technology available to the first arrivals. They were visitors, exploring a new territory, interacting with its unique environment, and perhaps laying the groundwork, however unconsciously, for the waves of settlers and civilizations that would follow over the next twelve millennia. The island's story begins with its mountains, its plains, its coasts, and the faint, yet undeniable, traces of those who first dared to cross the sea to reach its shores.

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