

A TALE FROM THE PAST and Reflections on the Present

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In 1185 Isaac Dumas Comnenus arrived in Cyprus with forged papers and presented himself as governor of Cyprus by appointment of the Byzantine Emperor Andronicus I. He soon afterwards revealed his true identity and nature; he rebelled against imperial authority and proclaimed himself ruler of Cyprus. The Cypriots were to suffer under his rule for the next six years. Isaac has been described as the worst ruler the Cypriots had ever had until then.

On October 2, 1187 Jerusalem was captured by Saladin who subsequently overran almost all the Christian-controlled territory in the area. Christendom had suffered a severe setback and was in danger of losing its foothold in the Middle-East.

Soon Christian Europe was to come to the rescue; Richard the Lion Heart, King of England, and Philip Augustus King of France, with the blessing of the Pope, embarked on the Third Crusade. They set sail for the Holy Lands but on the way the ship carrying Richard's sister Joanna and his fiancé Berengaria got into a storm, was thrown off course and found itself off the shore of Cyprus near Limasol. Isaac, who was no lover of the English or the European crusaders in general, had already reached an understanding of co-operation with Saladin and was not happy with the arrival of the crusader ships. He tried to get hold of Joanna and Berengaria most probably in order to demand ransom from Richard the Lion Heart whose fleet arrived off Limassol on 6th May 1191.

Isaac unwisely got involved in a conflict with Richard who decided to teach him a lesson and secure control of the island. The real motives of Richard are not so clear but shortly the English landed without resistance and Isaac with his forces withdrew inland having evacuated Limasol. At a meeting held at Kolossi the two reached an agreement with Isaac promising Richard support in the crusade. Soon afterwards Isaac changed his mind and attacked Richard's forces but was defeated. Richard was joined and helped by a number of notables from Syria including Guy de Lusignan who was later to establish the Frankish kingdom of Cyprus. Philip, on his way to Jerusalem, was urging Richard to leave Cyprus and join him to fight Saladin. Richard would not depart until he had secured control of the island and its resources that would be so important to the crusaders in their campaign in the Holy Lands. The crusaders were losing the battle in Jerusalem and the surrounding lands but Cyprus and the Cypriot people were to be at the mercy of foreigners who had no other aim but to serve and promote their own ambitions, interests and objectives.

Richard left Cyprus for Jerusalem and got involved in a dispute with Philip who wanted his share of Cyprus under their earlier agreement to share the booty from this Crusade. Richard would not agree but at the same time he felt uneasy about the situation in Cyprus where a revolt had taken place after his departure. The revolt was crushed but Richard was worried about further trouble in the future. It was under these circumstances that Richard decided to sell the island to the Order of the Knights of the Temple at the price of 100,000 gold dinars. In just less than one year the Cypriot people changed masters three times (Isaac, Richard and the Templars).

The Order sent a few knights under Arnaut de Bouchart who, in order to raise the money to be paid to Richard, introduced new taxes that made life for the Cypriots unbearable. On 5 April 1192 the Cypriots revolted in Nicosia in protest against the Templars' tyranny and exploitation. The revolt was ruthlessly crushed and a lot of Cypriot blood was shed. The Templars managed to maintain control for the time being but they were worried about their ability to maintain control of the island in the future should another revolt occur. It was then decided to sell the island to Guy de Lusignan who had lost his kingdom in Jerusalem. He agreed to pay the Templars the 40,000 gold dinars they had already paid to Richard and undertook to pay the remainder 60,000 to Richard.

Guy de Lusignan arrived in Cyprus in May 1192 and soon made himself king of the island and established the Frankish dynasty that was to rule Cyprus until 1489. The Cypriot people had once more acquired new masters that would suppress and exploit them for the next three hundred years.

All the events described above took place a long time ago between May 1191 and May 1192. Of course one may think that such things could only happen in the Middle Ages and cannot be repeated in the 21st century where the principles of democracy, human rights and respect for international law prevail. After all, these principles are supported by the Charter of the United Nations and the *Acquis Communautaire*.

One might ask what is the connection between this 'Tale of the Past' and the current situation. Cyprus is still suffering from similar vicissitudes as in the Middle Ages; it has been invaded and since 1974 has had an army of occupation that has under its control about 37% of its territory. Even worse the occupying power Turkey, is pursuing a policy of colonization. Currently there are about 180.000 Anatolian settlers in the northern occupied part of Cyprus. Cyprus continues to be treated as a pawn in the game of 'power politics' because of the perceived geopolitical importance of the Eastern Mediterranean. Within these power arrangements Turkey does not recognize the right of the Republic of Cyprus to exist. It also wishes to legitimize and consolidate its strategic control of this island state and also change its demographic character. The people of Cyprus live in the hope and expectation that eventually the international community will put into practice the noble ideals which it purportedly advocates and upholds.