The Venetian defense of the Mediterranean: the Kyrenia Castle, Cyprus (1540-1544)

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Abstract

The Venetian fortifications in the Mediterranean between the XV and XVII century constitute a complex defensive system, designed ‘alla moderna’ and built to control territories and commercial routes leading to the East. The Byzantines built the first Kyrenia castle in the VII century. It is located in the Eastern end of Kyrenia, at the old harbor. King John d’Ibelin built large portions of the castle in 1208-1211. The Genoese destroyed the Castle in the XIV cent., the Venetians captured it in 1491. The entrance to the castle is on the North-West side through a vaulted corridor. The Venetians replaced the original drawbridge at the castle’s entrance with the protected gatehouse that still exists today. The Venetian modifications include the W wall, the NW tower, the S wall and the SE and W towers. The towers on the NW and SE where built with a round shape in medieval times. In the XV century gunpowder came into use, cannons and artillery were developing quickly, so Italian engineers adopted a system of re-modelling medieval fortresses. In Kyrenia the architects shaped the SW bastion with a polygonal plan, according to the new artillery systems. The castle has one entrance over a bridge on the W side, originally crossing the inner harbour, subsequently transformed by the Venetians into the surrounding moat. The proveditore Ascanio Savorgnano and the military engineer Sebastian Vernier both report the castle’s transformation in 1562, but the works were complete by 1544. The paper will analyse the phases of the building, comparing it with other cases in Cyprus and in the eastern Mediterranean, finding parallels with the indications coming from the coeval architectural literature.

Keywords: Cyprus, Venice, Castles, History.

1. Introduction

‘‘With the Venetian Occupation of Cyprus, the castle of Kyrenia passed under a process of transformation which has almost obliterated its medieval aspect’’

(Jeffery, 1918)

The Kyrenia castle located on the north coast at the east end of the old harbour in Kyrenia, was mainly built by the Venetians over a previous crusader fortification, from 1540 to 1544. In 1191, Guy de Lusignan seized the castle from the self-proclaimed king of Cyprus, Isaac Comnenus who was hiding at Kantara, but had left his wife and daughter at Kyrenia. The castle played an important role during the Lusignan period, it underwent through a lot of changes...
due to restoration work. The castle was extended by the Venetians, and the bulk of what can be seen today is the Venetian structure. In spite of being attacked repeatedly, the castle continued to be strengthened and modified by different rulers during the following four centuries. (Molin, 1995). Beneath the Venetian castle, the remains of the Lusignan castle are preserved. It was in use between 1200 and 1479 AD. In those days, attacks were made with bows, arrows, swords, spears and various stone throwing machines. Hence, to recognise a medieval castle, one looks for embattlements, loopholes for arrow slits and usually the square type of tower. Some watch towers were of the horseshoe pattern and the North East tower is a good example of this. The castle was never taken by force, repelling attacks by the Genoese in 1374. However, in 1570 the Ottomans induced the defenders to capitulate by sending the severed heads of the Venetian commanders of Nicosia. Thus in the end, the massive towers of the fortification were never put to the ultimate test.

1.1. Construction Style - History

In the early 15th century, gunpowder became available on a large scale, and thus came to play a major part in warfare, changing military science and particularly replacing existing war machines and neutralizing the defensive capabilities of the existing medieval fortifications, designed for the demands of the martial art of their era. In reaction to this new weaponry, a new system of fortification was designed in Italy in the very early 1500s. Because of high-impact stone and iron balls projected by gunpowder, the walls had to become shorter, thicker, and slightly inclined on the exterior side, and the bastion, as emplacement for the defending artillery, became the basis of fortifications for the next few centuries. This new system is known as trace italienne, although its contemporary Italian authors refer to it only as fortificazione alla moderna. (Dragos Cosmescu, Venetian Renaissance Fortifications in the Mediterranean). The main features of the exterior are the huge round towers. One of them, the Venetian tower built about 1540 AD, fig.1. As soon as they took over Cyprus, the Venetians feared that the Ottomans, who were on the mainland just a few miles away, presented a potential challenge to their ownership of the island. This was a period of history in which warfare was moving away from knights and archers, and gunpowder, cannon and the use of artillery were being developed for the first time in military operations. It was obvious to the Venetians that the castle simply would not stand up to such an attack, so they decided to strengthen and widen the walls by filling in the space between the Byzantine walls and the extended Lusignan walls. The old castle was altered and huge high walls with round towers at the corners were built, since round towers deflect a cannon ball better than a square tower and are stronger. And so a new type of military architecture arose in the 16th century.

Fig. 1- The Venetian South East tower.
The Venetians built numerous gun ports at three levels where cannon fire could be directed against attackers from the land. Inside the castle, huge long ramps were built so that the artillery could be rolled up to the gun ports on the walls. In places, the old walls and towers were modified so that the whole castle was carefully planned to meet a landward attack. However, after all that work a major siege never occurred.

1.2. Description
The castle is mainly rectangular in shape with four corner towers dominating the harbour and town to the west, a large bay to the east, a shore line to the north, and the coastal plain to the south. The North-Western tower, South-Western tower and the South-Eastern tower belong to the Venetian period; the rampart on the South-West tower stands with a massive thick wall to protect it better from its weak southern side. The entry to the castle is through its North-Western entrance. From this first gate, lying to the North-Western of the fortified wall built by the Venetians in the 16th century lays the entrance of the castle following a vaulted corridor. Through a closed passage to the left of the corridor, the church named ‘the church of St. George’ will be entered, which is in the form of a cross dating to the early Byzantine period. The dome of this temple which has marble columns with Corinthian capitals was restored very recently. The Corinthian capitals of the marble columns were taken from an older building elsewhere and placed there.

The church of St. George which was outside the castle walls during the time of the Byzantines and the Lusignans, was left within the castle after the fortified walls were built by the Venetians. Through the entrance of the corridor, lies an open yard.

Fig. 2- The Northern walls of the Kyrenia (Girne) castle.

The big constructions containing arched rooms to the North and East of the yard belong to the Lusignan period. The royal quarters to the West of the yard, as well as the big and arched windows of the little temple, at present without a roof above this part, display the characteristics of the Lusignan period. On the Southern part of the yard there appears to be previous fortifications and small, round and hollow corner towers attached to the main wall and
remaining from the Byzantine period. Behind the fortification wall at the West end belonging to the Byzantine period, there appear rooms belonging to the Lusignan period. To the south curtain wall, the horseshoe shaped tower, which is an original Lusignan construction, some steep stairs will appear (Enlart, 1987). Below this tower, which was used in subsequent periods in the same form and remained sound to the present day, there are original Lusignan constructions displaying the sharp arches which are joined together. The fact that there are arrow battlements in this construction which is in the form of two wide rooms on top of the other has a special significance.

Fig. 3- Plan of the Kyrenia (Girne) castle.

1.3. Comparing the castle

The square enclosure with its corner towers reminds of those enormous castles of North Italy of a similar form, rather than of the donjon-crowned chateaux of North Europe. One example is the incomplete fortification of the Roman Capitol in Italy, where they used the same method of re-arrangement of artillery defence. This principle of defence converted the whole fortress into a gigantic bastion, protected by the flanking fire. As we can see in the Roman Capitol a tower is built at one angle facing the Forum for the purpose of sweeping off assailants attempting to scale the walls of the palace. The same technique is used in the Aragonese Castle of Taranto, which was built in the 4th century in origin and was rebuilt in 1492. Fig.4. Lower and thicker towers were placed instead of tall and narrow towers, and a triangular rampart was added to fortify the southern curtain wall and improve flank defence capability. Another beautiful monument of military and feudal architecture of the beginning of the sixteenth century is the Castle de Monti in Corigliano d'Otranto, Italy. The castle has a square plan with four towers, with three levels of fire on its corners, surrounded by a deep moat. Its similarity in plan to Kyrenia Castle is remarkable.

Fig. 4- Plan of the Aragonese castle of Taranto.

The Copertino castle in Apulia, southern Italy was rebuilt by the architect Evangelista Menga between 1530-1540, with the recent development in military architecture. (Fig. 5). It has a quadrangle plan with a tapered rampart at each of the four corners. The alterations included a ditch and majestic bastions with 90° arrow slits to allow cannon movements.

What we can see on the examples is that the castles before 1500 have round shaped thick bastions and those built after 1500 have arrow shaped bastions.
2. Building Phases

The remains of Kyrenia castle are the evidence of different periods, mainly the Byzantine, Lusignan and Venetian. With the common reaction of protecting themselves from attacks, most of the conquerors have employed various techniques to modify existing previous parts or to build stronger ones.

2.1. Byzantine Period (330-1191)

The Byzantine Period as a whole was an extremely productive era and much of Byzantine art reflected the prosperity, unfortunately; only a tiny percentage of the works has survived. The surviving Byzantine churches are small and simple stone structures. Few secular buildings remain from this period other than the St. Hilarion Castle in Kyrenia. The Kyrenia castle was originally built in Byzantine times as a defence against invasion from Arabs, although the fortifications underwent through modifications during different time periods. It is still possible to identify aspects of the Byzantine castle. The original Byzantine fortifications were built to accommodate armoured knights and archers. The Byzantine church of Saint George, which is thought to date back to the 11th century, still stands within the castle walls. The fall of the Byzantine Empire came when King Richard the Lionheart of England captured the castle on his way to the third crusade, in 1191.

2.2. Lusignan Period (1192-1489)

The rule of the Lusignans in Cyprus was largely based on the feudal system. One of the aspects of Lusignan’s heritage is the medieval architectural monuments, such as the St. Hilarion castle which was built under the Lusignan rule. The 300 years of the Frankish Lusignan Kingdom of Cyprus began when Richard sold the island to the Knights Templar, and then to his cousin Guy de Lusignan who was the former king of Jerusalem. At that time, the castle was quite small. Jean d’Ibelin, a crusader noble, enlarged it between 1208 and 1211. The castle’s main function at that time was military as well and the modifications consisted of a new entrance, square, horseshoe shaped towers, portholes for archers and dungeons. The castle was subjected to several sieges. A Genoese attack in 1373 almost destroyed the castle. By 1489 the Venetians had taken control of Cyprus and in 1540 they enlarged the castle, giving it its present-day appearance.

2.3. Venetian Period (1489 - 1570)

The island of Cyprus was an overseas possession of the Republic of Venice from 1489 to 1570. The Venetian rule in Cyprus is one of the most important but also most decisive periods in the island’s history that has not been sufficiently studied by historians. The Venetian rule in Cyprus commenced after the death of James II, at that time King of Cyprus and husband of Catherine Cornaro. Following her...
husband’s death and especially after the death of her son, James III, Catherine was the only heritor to the royal throne and was under the control of two nobles and one provveditore, who were appointed by the Senate in Venice as her advisers. The Venetians sought for centuries to control Cyprus. Their desire for Cyprus was inspired mainly by profit. They saw Cyprus own military rule on the island. The main objective was to secure a stable occupation on the island, which would allow sea communications to operate unhindered, allowing Venetians vessels with shipping and trade activities in the Eastern Mediterranean to refill their stock and secure the island’s resources. To succeed with these objectives, they needed to organize the island’s defenses as best they could. The Venetians continuously faced a threat from the Ottomans. Improving the island’s defenses was one of their main priorities, justifying the architectural projects constructed on the bulk of the island during this period as fortifications. Expecting conflict, they undertook a compulsive plan of fortification. The defense policy the Venetians applied was aimed at maintaining and primarily adjusting the fortifications they inherited from the Lusignans. In their modification, they had to meet the new defense needs of the island, to be manned with as few soldiers as possible and to be maintained with the minimum of expense. An outer wall was constructed around the Kyrenia castle; the gap being filled with earth to form an artillery bulwark. The best military architects in Europe were brought in to design and perform these projects. The Venetians reconstructed Kyrenia during a period when gunpowder came to the use and won thereby wars. The walls of the castle were extended and thickened. In opposite to that, the towers were actually lowered, coming up a trend that would come to define the last three centuries of the castle’s age. High towers were a problem for three reasons. Firstly, the new, more refined cannons brought on more harm when fired horizontally, firing downwards limited their impact and made them inaccurate. Secondly, the new firearms were much larger and heavier, meaning that it was hard to install them at the highest point of narrow, taking off towers. At last, and above all, large towers made enormous targets, and the new artillery was sufficiently enough to destroy them, falling rock and crumbling walls posed a mortal threat to the castle defenders underneath. Inland castles were likewise developing thick
walls, but seafront castles needed to be even thicker and stronger. On land, it required a lot of effort to move cannons from place to place. Additionally, the artillery had to be set up and dug in within range of the defense’s own firearms, which were at that point arranged and prepared. Naval advancements and large fleets meant that a considerable amount of prepared firepower could be brought right to the castle’s doorstep in a matter of time primarily as a military base. Having managed to conquer Cyprus through diplomatic means, and without having to conquer it by means of war, the Venetians organized their own administration and imposed their Kyrenia’s walls were built thick enough to withstand the most powerful firearms at that time, and were likewise brought to the water’s edge on three sides, so that the sea formed a natural moat. Huge cannons were set up. Long, broad ramps were set up in the courtyard so that firearms could be moved efficiently and wheeled up to the battlements. Yet, the Ottoman army took the town and castle without firing a single shot.

3. Conclusion

Kyrenia castle is considered to be one of the most impressive and strongest castles to survive to the present day. A fortification which has endured through various conquests through the centuries, it is also a castle marked by different architectural styles. It is a castle that stands as a multicultural fort, displaying its’ magnificent cultural background. In particular, it was under Venetian rule, which lasted for 70 years, that great changes to the exterior of the fortification were made. The construction of its towers bear striking similarities to those of Aragonese castle, Copertino castle and many more built by the Venetians. It can therefore be summarised that before the 16th century bastions were constructed with round shapes, and those after the 16th century were built in the shape of an arrow. Furthermore, comparison between the castles proves that the Byzantines and the Lusignans used the castle for military purposes and applied their own changes to the appearance and structure of the fortification. The Venetians however, introduced a complex defensive system known as “alla moderna”, which reinforces the view that they practiced sophisticated modern construction technology in their architecture. A study of Kyrenia castle can teach a great deal about how the architecture of today has evolved.

Fig. 8- Panorama of the Kyrenia castle.

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