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Santa Sophia in Nicosia: The Sculpture of the Western Portals and Its Reception

by Justine M. Andrews

In the center of Nicosia rises the impressive monument that was once the Latin cathedral of Santa Sophia. The former cathedral towers above the old city with its incongruous mixture of Turkish minarets and French Gothic towers. The cathedral, begun in the thirteenth century, has been known since 1571 as the Selimye Mosque. Since the sixteenth century the decoration of Santa Sophia has receded into mystery behind white paint and plaster. The most informative passages are found in the sculpture of figures and foliage on the west portals of the cathedral, a significant part of which was revealed when the plaster was removed in 1948.[1] The three bays of the porch extend from the west end of the cathedral and shelter the three pointed-arched doorways (fig. 1). Each portal has a distinct program of sculpture, including remaining figural imagery in arched registers, or archivolts, over the center doorway.

These fourteenth-century additions to the western end of Santa Sophia have always been discussed in terms of their Gothic style and the emergence of a flamboyant Gothic visual culture on the island.[2] The rise of Gothic and Western forms of art on Cyprus, however, was paralleled by the emerging Paleologan style of Byzantium and even the high court artistic styles of Mamluk Cairo.[3] The sculpture of the western facade of the cathedral of Nicosia, therefore, presents neither a wholly Gothic image nor a primarily Byzantine image. This paper will interpret the messages of the portals of Santa Sophia, finding in them

[1]T. S. R. Boase, "The Arts in Cyprus," in *A History of the Crusades*, gen. ed. Kenneth M. Setton, 4: *The Art and Architecture of the Crusader States*, ed. Harry W. Hazard. (Madison 1977) 170.

[2]The monumental study by Camille Enlart laid an essential groundwork for much of our study of architecture from medieval Cyprus today. However, the work approaches Cyprus from a colonial standpoint and stresses the polarities between East and West with clear emphasis on "pure" Gothic style from the Ile-de-France. Camille Enlart, *L'Art Gothique et la Renaissance en Chypre* (Paris 1899); reprinted as *Gothic Art and the Renaissance in Cyprus*, ed. David Hunt (London 1987).

[3]Annemarie Weyl Carr, "Art in the Court of the Lusignan Kings," in *Cyprus and the Crusades* (Nicosia 1995) 245.

FIG. 1. Nicosia, Cyprus. Santa Sophia, western porch, 14th c.

the reflection of a royal understanding of the unique environment found on Cyprus in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Always an important outpost in Mediterranean trade, Cyprus has accommodated a variety of cultures and religions throughout its history. In the Middle Ages, Latin Christianity and Western rule became strong forces on the island, shaping the community and the imagery of Santa Sophia in particular. Seized by Richard the Lionheart from the tyrant Issac Komnenos in 1191, Cyprus quickly passed through the hands of the Knights Templar, and into the possession of the French lord and vassal of the king of England, Guy de Lusignan.[4] The Lusignan were well accustomed to the dynamics of the Byzantine world. Guy's family had been involved in the Holy Land since 1101, and Guy himself had been married to Sibylla, the heir to the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and had ruled that kingdom for ten years before he became lord of Cyprus in 1192.[5] The Latin church of Cyprus was established under Guy de Lusignan's brother and successor, Aimery, in December 1196. For many years the Lusignan kings of Cyprus supported the cathedral as a symbol of their unity with the Latin Church. At the same time, however, they grew increasingly separate from the church, both physically, in their private chapels, and ideologically, in their refusal to persecute Greeks. In 1222, with the Conference of Famagusta and again in 1260, with the Bulla Cypria, the Latin Church severely limited Greek rights on Cyprus.[6] Despite both of these ecclesiastical mandates, the secular government refused to participate in the churches' dispute. The kings' inaction prompted letters from Gregory IX in 1240 and from Urban IV in 1263 ordering the kings' cooperation with the church and encouraging the archbishop's efforts against the secular authorities.[7] As their unity with the Latin Church dissipated, the kings of Cyprus turned away from Europe as the sole definer of their visual culture.

During the first half of the fourteenth century, the years of the great-

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[4] Peter Edbury, *The Kingdom of Cyprus and the Crusades 1191–1374* (Cambridge 1991) 23.

[5] W.H. Rudt de Collenberg, "Les Lusignan de Chypre," *Epitiris* 10 (1979–1980) 90–92.

[6] The persecution of the Greeks is exemplified by the policies instated at the Council of Famagusta in 1222 as well as the execution of the monks of Kantara; see M. B. Efthimiou, *Greeks and Latins on Cyprus in the Thirteenth Century* (Brookline, MA 1987) 40; and J. Hackett, *A History of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus* (London 1901) 81; see also Nicolas Coureas, *The Latin Church in Cyprus, 1195–1312* (Aldershot 1997).

[7] The sympathy of the Latin kings is evident in various letters from the pope reprimanding the king for his unwillingness to assist the archbishop; see J. L. Lamonte, "A Register of the Cartulary of the Cathedral of Santa Sophia of Nicosia," *Byzantion* 5 (1920–1930) 471–472.

est embellishment of Santa Sophia, the visual image of the cathedral became less a public expression of unity with Europe, whose forms appear to define it, than a mirror in which the king increasingly chose to reflect himself and the unity of Cyprus. This is evident in the coronations which took place there. In 1324 Hugh IV, the king who later would extend the west end of the cathedral and subsidize its decoration, was crowned in the cathedral in Nicosia.[8] Interestingly, Hugh was in fact crowned twice on Cyprus. At Santa Sophia he was crowned king of Cyprus, while at the eastern edge of the island in Famagusta he received the crown of Jerusalem, in the opulent new cathedral of Saint Nicholas which was intended to serve this purpose.[9] Santa Sophia appears to be specifically relevant to Cyprus, while the coronation cathedral of Famagusta is associated more closely with Jerusalem and the world beyond the island.

In addition to the crowning of the king of Cyprus at Santa Sophia, another event reveals the tension between the Cypriot and Gothic natures of Santa Sophia and the king. In 1359, the papal legate, Peter Thomas, gathered all of the Greek bishops into the cathedral in a dramatic attempt to convert them. After all had gathered inside the cathedral, Peter Thomas locked himself in with them and began to preach. The shouts of the legate and bishops from within drew a large crowd outside the doors of the cathedral. In an attempt to free the Greek bishops the crowd began to burn down the doors. The king quickly sent men to free the Greek bishops and remove the papal legate from the rioting crowd.

Contemporary accounts of this event differ.[10] The biographer of Peter Thomas, Philippe de Mézières, expounds upon Peter Thomas's bravery and willingness to sacrifice himself in the face of a crazed mob. The fifteenth-century Greek chronicler Leontios Makhairas's telling of the event describes Peter Thomas as a brave but rather stupid man who had to be rescued from the situation by the king's brother, John, prince of Antioch, and was finally reprimanded by the king himself. In either case, it seems that Peter Thomas's use of the cathedral was

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[8]Edbury, *Kingdom of Cyprus*, 141. He cites as his source, "Documents relatifs à la successibilité," *Recueil de historiens de croisades, Les assises de Jérusalem* (1842–1845) 419.

[9]Enlart, *Gothique*, 272; *Gothic*, 224.

[10]The Greek chonicler Makharias and the French chronicler Philippe de Mézières both describe this event. See Leontios Makharias, *Recital Concerning the Sweet Land of Cyprus entitled 'Chronicle'*, ed. R. M. Dawkins (Oxford 1932) 91; and Philippe de Mézières, *The Life of Saint Peter Thomas*, ed. Joachim Smet, O. Carm. (Rome 1954) 92–94.

inappropriate, inciting anger in both the local populace and the royal court. The cathedral was a viable site for confrontations, but the confrontation was not to be carried out between Latin and Greek clergy, but between the Latin Church and the Cypriot royalty. The legate did not understand that the cathedral had come to represent a Latin Church which embraced, rather than threatened its Greek neighbors.

It was with this understanding that the nobles, clergy and royalty gathered at the doors of the Santa Sophia for the coronation of Peter I (1359–1369), which took place in the same year as the legate Peter Thomas's exploits in 1359. They brought with them their awareness and expectations of this long and precarious relationship of kings and bishops on Cyprus. Peter was the first king of Cyprus to be crowned under the splendid porch created by Archbishop John del Conte and King Hugh IV (1324–1359), in the early part of the fourteenth century (fig. 2). Under the ribbed vaults of the porch and spreading out before the crowd, the three doorways and their sculpted imagery provided an important backdrop for the scene.

Every door consists of perfectly ordered elements including a series of archivolts, tympana, and splayed jambs (fig. 3); each has a tympanum with arcades, the centers of which have been plastered over. Above the tympanum, each portal is framed by four archivolts. The portals have flat niches on both side jambs. The flat niches contain projecting metal hooks, indicating that the areas must have been able, on an occasional or permanent basis, to accommodate ornament in the form of panel painting or textile.

The most informative visual aspects of the western portals are the foliage ornament, the jamb niches, and the sculpture of the central portal and its archivolts (fig. 4). The foliage ornament of the west end shows that artistic styles popular in the Latin East, particularly in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, did play into the Lusignan heritage.[11] During the twelfth century, many elements of Gothic architecture appeared in the Latin churches constructed throughout the crusader states. Buildings of the Latin East, such as the twelfth-century church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, employed the same Gothic pointed arch and the portals with slender colonettes surmounted by carved foliate capitals that are used at the cathedral of Nicosia. Therefore, the idea and image of Gothic architecture was well established in the East by the time the portals of Santa Sophia were created in the fourteenth century, and it is possible that the Western elements at Santa Sophia were more directly

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[11]Camille Enlart, *Les Monuments des Croisés dans le Royaume de Jérusalem* (Paris 1925) 135–145.

inspired by their counterparts in Outremer.[12]

Santa Sophia shares enough ornamental motifs with the monuments of Outremer to indicate a link with them. Yet, at the same time, they

[12]Weyl Carr, "Art in the Court," 243.

F<small>IG</small>. 2. Nicosia, Cyprus. Santa Sophia, western porch from the south, 14th c.

FIG. 3. Nicosia, Cyprus. Santa Sophia, western porch, central portal, 14th c.

Fɪɢ. 4. Nicosia, Cyprus. Santa Sophia, western porch, central portal, tympanum

and archivolts, 14th c.

differ in ways that point to the distinctive visual message of the cathe-dral of Santa Sophia. For instance, Santa Sophia in Nicosia uses some sculptural elements taken directly from French monuments. These point to Reims cathedral and carry probable associations with royalty. Reims had been the site of the anointing of the king of France since the ninth century and by the fourteenth century had become a powerful symbol of kingly power.[13] Meaning in the sculpture of the portals of Santa Sophia is more closely tied to its model at Reims than it is to the scattered monuments in Outremer, with which it shares isolated similarities.

In his nineteenth-century study on Gothic art in Cyprus, Camille Enlart remarked that the scheme of the arcades and the panels of foliage on the tympanum of the central doorway of the cathedral of Nicosia are paralleled in the verso of the west facade of Reims.[14] This kinship is very clear. In both cathedrals, the areas of sweeping foliage enclosed in rectangular panels closely resemble each other. Both monuments position these panels of foliage under figural sculpture, forming a horizontal border. On the verso of the west facade of Reims, large trilobed niches house figural statues which include Old Testament prophets with scrolls and kings wearing crowns and holding scepters. These trilobed niches are copied in the tympanum and on a smaller scale in the niches occupied by the bishops on the archivolts of Santa Sophia (fig. 5).

I also believe the arrangement of the archivolts on the front west portals of Reims was adopted in the central portal of the cathedral of Nicosia. The archivolts of the central door at Reims are separated into orders containing saints, Old Testament figures, angels, and kings. As with many Gothic cathedrals, the central door of Santa Sophia includes orders of figures in the archivolts (fig. 6). The fourth order, the order farthest away from the tympanum, is made up of wild rose flowers and elongated leaves. The third order holds thirty-one bishops in small niches. The bishops are simply sculpted with little variation. The sec-ond order holds thirty-one prophets, which have animated poses. The last has fourteen kings on the right and fourteen queens on the left. This order occupies the most privileged location in the program, closest to the viewer and to a possible image of Christ in the center of the tym-panum. The figures, with their variety of gestures and poses, are also the most individualized of the whole program.

The procession of the archivolt figures at Santa Sophia mirrors the

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[13]Donna Sadler-Davis, "The Sculptural Program of the Verso of the West Facade of Reims Cathedral," (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University 1984) 16.

[14]Enlart, *Gothique*, 134; *Gothic*, 125.

procession of coronation ceremonies which took place outside the

F<small>IG</small>. 5. Nicosia Cyprus. Santa Sophia, western porch, central portal; detail:

archivolt figures (bishop on right), 14th c.

FIG. 6. Nicosia, Cyprus. Santa Sophia, western porch, central portal; detail:

archivolts, 14th c.

doors of the cathedral. Created during the reign of Hugh IV (1324–1359), it is reasonable to assume that the archivolt figures depicted on the portals mirror his own coronation as king of Cyprus. There are few accounts of this ceremony by contemporary writers, so the portal sculpture should not be understood as a precise replication of Hugh IV's coronation. They are, however, an important statement about Hugh IV's definition of the kingship of Cyprus. On the portals of both Reims and Santa Sophia, the kings are shown on the archivolt closest to the tympanum. This parallel with the archivolt figures of Reims also underlines the royal emphasis present in both cathedrals.

Santa Sophia and Reims cathedral shared more than visual similarities; both were coronation churches at a time when the right to crown royalty was not assumed and was often contested. Each cathedral, therefore, emphasized the particular title conferred within its walls. The cathedral of Saint Nicholas in Famagusta, built in the early fourteenth century, relied heavily on the same French and crusader models as those used at Santa Sophia. The cathedral of Famagusta, however, was the site where the Lusignan were crowned kings of Jerusalem, a title they held in conjunction with the crown of Cyprus from 1269–1460. The architects of Famagusta's cathedral also turned to the model of the French coronation church, the cathedral at Reims. The western front of both cathedrals is similar in the use of three sharply gabled doorways. There is an inscription at Famagusta giving the date of the construction as well as describing the progress of the work in terms of vaults completed. It is the same mode of expression used in an inscription at Reims.[15] While both coronation cathedrals on Cyprus adapted specific references to Reims and retained local building techniques such as their flat roofs, the cathedral of Famagusta, particularly its western facade, gives an overall impression of a Gothic cathedral from the Ile-de-France.

Although the creators of the cathedrals of Famagusta and Santa Sophia were greatly influenced by Reims, the look and meaning of the two Cypriot cathedrals were quite different. The western portals of Famagusta cathedral are considerably different from the portals at Nicosia. The west end of Famagusta and Reims cathedrals are not covered by a porch in the same manner as Santa Sophia. The tympana of the three doorways of the cathedral of Famagusta are filled with openwork and tracery, rather than the elaborate sculpture found at Santa Sophia.

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[15]The inscription can be found on the ancient labyrinth at Reims. Enlart, *Gothique*, 278; *Gothic*, 227.

In contrast to Famagusta, Santa Sophia's creators were more selective in their choice of certain elements from the model and their placement, including the panels of foliage, the figures in niches, and the placement of kings in the archivolt closest to the tympanum. By choosing Reims as a model, the patrons of Santa Sophia underlined the cathedral of Nicosia's role as a coronation church for the king of Cyprus. The use of Reims as a model for the portals at Santa Sophia, therefore, emphasized the legitimacy of the king of Cyprus by drawing a parallel between him and the king of France. At the same time, the visual resemblance to Reims is not so overwhelming as at Famagusta, where the king of Jerusalem was crowned, allowing the Cypriot identity of the king of Cyprus to be reflected in the cathedral of Santa Sophia.

While France and Outremer clearly have left their mark on the sculpture of Santa Sophia, additional cultural influence can also be detected in the tympana, and jamb niches. Given its location directly before and just above the viewer, the tympanum of the central portal was very likely the visual focus for a coronation audience gathered in the western porch of the cathedral. The central tympanum has preserved fragments of its sculptural program, including the remnants of figures in the predella, angels in the spandrels, and panels of sculpted foliage (see fig. 4). The areas show evidence of hammered-off marble, covered in part by plaster. This leads me to believe that low relief sculptures must have been removed from these areas.

The three middle sections of the central portal's tympanum held the most figural decoration, as suggested by the extensive evidence of deliberate destruction in this area. These areas have been severely hammered and roughly plastered over. Within the center section of the predella, however, can be seen the outline of a figure, who has a halo and appears to be crawling on all fours. It is possible that this is one of the apostles crouching before the Transfiguration. If this is true, it would be reasonable to assume that the remaining two predella sections also depicted crouching apostles. This arrangement seems to correspond to the Byzantine iconographic tradition of the Transfiguration. Often Christ would have appeared in a central mandorla flanked by Moses and Elijah. Below, the three apostles would be shown bending on one knee or crouching on all fours. This adds a Byzantine iconographic element to the portals so far considered in light of their Gothic form.

The splays of the portals offer one of the most fascinating details of the cathedral, the pairs of shallow jamb niches (fig. 7). Although each portal has different decorative schemes, all of the niches have, under the arch, the same sculpted image of a crown held by two hands (fig. 8). The smooth, flat, polished marble niches are often described as a

FIG. 7. Nicosia, Cyprus. Santa Sophia, western porch, central portal, jamb

niches, 14th c.

FIG. 8. Nicosia, Cyprus. Santa Sophia, western porch, central portal; detail:

jamb niches, 14th c.

decorative form particular to Cyprus, or "local sentiment."[16] Enlart considered these rectangular niches on the splayed flanking walls of the portals to be the one feature unique to Cyprus.[17] Niches in the same shape and placement do not appear on any other cathedrals. The form of these niches, however, is a response to the Catalonian influence on Cyprus. Similar shallow niches are found on the cathedral at Tarragona, begun in 1174, as well as on the Porta dels Apòstols at the cathedral of Valencia from the second half of the thirteenth century.[18] The Spanish cathedrals, however, place the niches on the facade of the west end, flanking the portal, not within the portal itself. The similarities can perhaps be accounted for by considering the role Catalonia, a region that was part of the crown of Aragon, played on Cyprus.

Catalonians frequented Cyprus as merchants throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[19] During the fourteenth century, many men in the group of crusading knights known as the Hospitallers on the island were from Catalonia. These men helped arrange the marriage of Marie de Lusignan, daughter of Henry II, king of Cyprus, to Jaume II, king of Aragon, in 1315.[20] The royal connections with the crown of Aragon were strengthened when Peter I of Cyprus married Eleanor of Aragon in 1353. It is easy to see how the influence of Catalonian culture could greatly effect artistic efforts in fourteenth-century Nicosia, including the western portals of Santa Sophia.

While the form of the jamb niches seems to reflect a Catalonian influence, the ornament within the niches poses an interesting problem. The lack of depth of the niches refutes suggestions that sculpture was placed in these spaces. The jamb niches on the west portals of Santa Sophia were very likely adorned with paintings. It has been suggested that icon paintings once adorned the portals of Santa Sophia.[21] Hooks remain under the crowns in the flat jamb niches, upon which could be hung ornament in the form of textiles or panel paintings. The argument for the use of panel paintings hinges on two points: there exist fourteenth-century panel paintings from Cyprus which reflect Gothic architecture in their elongated shape; and the image of a crown held

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[16]Robert B. Francis, *The Medieval Churches of Cyprus* (London 1949) 33.

[17]Enlart, *Gothique*, 126; *Gothic*, 117.

[18]Pierre Lavedan, *L'architecture gothique religieuse en Catalogne, Valence, et Baleares* (Paris 1935) 46.

[19]Anthony Lutrell, "Notes on Cyprus and Aragon: 1306–1386," *Epetiris* 18 (1991) 130.

[20]Anthony Lutrell, "The Hospitallers in Cyprus: 1310–1378," *Kypriakai Spoudai* 50 (1987) 157.

[21]Boase, "The Arts in Cyprus," 171; and Barbara Zeitler, "Perceptions of the Orient: Studies in the Arts of the Latin East" (Ph.D. diss, University of London, 1992) 198.

above each niche suggests that a figure was intended to hang there.

In the Byzantine Museum of the Archbishop Macarios III Foundation there are four icons, dating to 1356, which take the form of tall thin rectangles, an elongated form which aligns itself perfectly with Gothic architecture. All panels are originally from the early Gothic church of the Virgin Chrysaliniotissa, Nicosia. The present building was built in the fifteenth century, yet still displays the remains of an earlier Gothic cloister that had stood on the site. These panels do not fit the measurements of Santa Sophia. By their shape and association with the Gothic building that once stood on the site of the church of the Virgin Chrysaliniotissa, they do, however, indicate the possibility that this type of painting was specifically designed for display in Gothic architectural settings on Cyprus.

The sculpted crowns held over the niches also indicated the use of figural painting in the niches. The subject of these panel paintings is another question. Enlart has suggested that the paintings represented saints who were being crowned.[22] The hypothesis is possible when we consider that large images of single figures, especially saints, were the predominant subject for large panel paintings in Cyprus.[23] Considering the context of the coronation ceremony, I would suggest as another possible subject the Old Testament kings. Old Testament figures also appear on the portals of Reims cathedral, which we have seen was a model for Santa Sophia. Whomever the twelve images did represent, the image of the crowns gave an essential message to the audience of the coronation of Peter I. The painted figures being crowned on the portals of the cathedral reflected directly the event taking place in front of the doors. The king of Cyprus was to be identified with, and symbolically became, the figures in those effigies. As the bishop crowned Peter, it would be the hands of God, represented in the niches, which would be symbolically associated with the hands crowning the king.

The portals of Santa Sophia incorporate the use of artistic forms from many cultures: France, the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, Spain, and Byzantium. Gothic sculpture on Cyprus is polyglot, and this, in fact, reflects the historical background of the cathedral, reminding us that the Franks in Lusignan Cyprus were not a monolith, but were full of internal tensions. The various elements of sculpture are integrated into a system that is entirely new. Comparable western facades cannot be

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[22]Enlart, *Gothique*, 127; Gothic, *117.*
[23]For a recent discussion of two prominent late thirteenth-century panel paintings of St. Nicholas and the Virgin enthroned see Jaroslav Folda, "Crusader Art in the Kingdom of Cyprus 1275–1291: Reflections on the State of the Questions," in *Cyprus and the Crusades* (Nicosia 1995) 216–217.

found in Cyprus or the Latin East. Lusignan Gothic, however, like Lusignan power, could also draw specifically from the French. The most prominent model is Reims cathedral. The use of this model and its aspects of French coronation architecture at the cathedral of Famagusta brought with it specific meanings of royalty. Santa Sophia, whose porch was contemporary with Famagusta cathedral, must have been just as discriminating in its selective use of Reims-like motifs. However, Santa Sophia's connection with the French cathedral is overwhelmed by the local character of its overall sculptural program. The sculpted foliage of the cathedral clearly demonstrates an established local workshop. The incorporation of painting in the portals adds to the complexity of the local tradition. Santa Sophia brings together the many cultural elements in such a way that the portals retain and promote their identity as art specific to the island of Cyprus. The portals ultimately seem to be a work of art that is neither purely French, nor purely Greek, but is particularly Cypriot.

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