

# The treasure of Ayios Symeon: a micro-historical analysis of colonial relations in Venetian-ruled Cyprus

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The Cypriot village of Ayios Symeon is situated in the Karpass peninsula, about 70 km north-east of Famagusta. It is but one of many human settlements that have left few traces in the historical documentation of pre-modern or even early modern times. Two unpublished manuscripts contain evidence related to this village, based on population censuses carried out by two colonial administrations of the island: in 1565, the Venetians counted 116 free peasants in this village, registered as “Santo Simeo”,<sup>1</sup> whereas seven years later, in a comprehensive census (*tahrir*) carried out shortly after their conquest of Cyprus, the Ottomans found at Ayios Symeon 41 households, 29 of which consisted of married couples, 11 of single adults and one of a widow, whose Greek names were meticulously registered in Arabic letters.<sup>2</sup> These numbers indicate that the village was rather small, and, comparing the figures in the two above-mentioned documents, it is possible to conclude that in the period under consideration its inhabitants, or at least their great majority, were free peasants (*francomati*).<sup>3</sup> However, apart from

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<sup>1</sup> Archivio di Stato di Venezia [hereafter: ASV], Avvogaria di comun, Miscellanea Civil 179, No. Gen. 3926.

<sup>2</sup> Tapu ve kadastro müdürlüğü, Kuyudu kadime arşivi (Ankara), No. 506/64 [hereafter: *Tahrir*], f. 140v.

<sup>3</sup> This conclusion is based on the assumptions that the Venetian census referred to “souls” (*anime*), and that each household numbered, on average, four individuals. The seven-year interval between the two censuses also has to be taken into account. Serfs (*parici*) were not included in the 1565 census, but it is most likely that there were no serfs living at Ayios Symeon in 1565, as in many other Cypriot villages. For a general survey of the Cypriot peasantry under Venetian rule, see Benjamin Arbel, “Η Κύπρος υπό Ενετική Κυριαρχία”, *Ιστορία της Κύπρου*, ed. Theodoros Papado-

their rare and momentary appearance in the Ottoman *tahrir* of 1572, the inhabitants of Ayios Symeon remain, on the whole, anonymous to us (the Venetian list does not include names), belonging to that vast majority of mankind that has been dubiously called "people without history". Yet, thanks to fortuitous circumstances, we get a rare opportunity to glimpse some moments in the lives of these peasants.

On 30 June 1559, three peasants of Ayios Symeon were busy repairing and whitewashing the church dedicated to the local patron saint. In their company there was another villager, a certain Zorlin, or Zorzin tu Glimin, an epileptic who for nearly a year had been going around telling people that Saint Symeon had appeared to him in a dream, revealing to him that there was a treasure hidden somewhere in the church. According to Zorzin, the Saint demanded that the treasure be uncovered and used to rebuild his church, or else it would be ruined and the village burnt to ashes.

Zorzin seems to have occupied the function of the village idiot, for nobody took him seriously and, according to later testimonies, he had been treated as a madman by the local inhabitants. Yet on that particular day, while the three villagers were working at the church, Zorzin again had one of his seizures, though he retained enough of his wits about him to insist that the stairs leading to the church be immediately removed to uncover the treasure which had been indicated by the Saint. Since they were already occupied in repairing the building, the three peasants decided to have a try. And, lo and behold, after removing the middle stair, they discovered three big clay jars full of gold ducats, and 99 additional coins of a similar sort scattered nearby. Altogether the hoard amounted to 1,721 gold ducats.<sup>4</sup>

Treasure-hunting seems to have been a rather common phenomenon in early modern Europe. As already observed by Keith Thomas with reference to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, in the absence of an alternative system of deposit banking, the possibility of coming across a hidden treasure in early-

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poullou, 4/1 (Nicosia: Idryma Archiepiskopou Makariou III 1995), pp. 508-24.

<sup>4</sup> The reconstruction of the events is based on a batch of reports from Cyprus, preserved in ASV, Senato Mar, filza 22 (30 June-16 July 1559).

modern Europe was by no means a chimera,<sup>5</sup> to which I would add the observation that even in those few places, such as Venice, where deposit banks existed, their frequent bankruptcies must also have encouraged people to hide money and valuables in secret caches. Anyhow, our case occurred in a rural setting, in a rather remote area of a rather remote (though important) Venetian colony in the eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, at least on the face of it, it does not concern treasure-hunters using techniques of necromancy, of the kind studied by several historians during recent years,<sup>6</sup> but rather what appears to be a miraculous event, in which the persons directly concerned were only instrumental, and not active and intentional treasure-hunters.

Before proceeding to analyse our little story, let us put it into its historical, cultural and documentary context. A brief reminder of the political and institutional situation would probably not be out of place. Cyprus, an independent Frankish kingdom ruled by the Lusignan dynasty since 1192, came under Venetian rule, in practice from 1473, and remained a Venetian colony until its conquest by the Ottomans in 1571.<sup>7</sup> The island was mainly inhabited by Orthodox Greeks, but well before the Venetian takeover the local élites were dominated by the so-called Frankish aristocracy, whose ethnic and cultural profile was rather heterogeneous. Loyal to its pragmatic system of imperial government, Venice tended to leave unchanged the social, religious and cultural infrastructure inherited from the Lusignan régime, before

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<sup>5</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic. Studies in popular belief in sixteenth and early seventeenth century England* (New York: Oxford University Press 1999), pp. 234-5.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. K. Thomas, op. cit.; Jean-Michel Sallmann, *Chercheurs de trésors et jeteuses de sorts. La quête du surnaturel à Naples au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Aubier 1986); Ruth Martin, *Witchcraft and the Inquisition in Venice 1550-1650* (Oxford: B. Blackwell 1989), esp. pp. 86-96, 148-55; Guido Ruggiero, *Binding passions. Tales of magic, marriage and power at the end of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press 1993), pp. 206-12; David Gentilcore, *From Bishop to Witch. The system of the sacred in early modern Terra d'Otranto* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1992), pp. 228-32.

<sup>7</sup> For the Venetian domination of Cyprus, see Arbel, "Η Κύπρος", pp. 455-536; idem, *Cyprus, the Franks and Venice, 13th-16th centuries* [Variorum Collected Studies Series] (Aldershot: Ashgate 2000).

embarking on a long process of changes and adaptations intended to integrate the territory into the Venetian system of government. Only the most urgent institutional changes were introduced at the beginning of Venetian rule: the Republic replaced the Queen, the feudal *Haute Cour* was suppressed, and Venetian governors were stationed in the main towns. But legal traditions, the Orthodox Church with its Greek bishops dependent on the Roman hierarchy, the feudal and seigniorial system in the countryside, including serfdom, were for the most part left intact.

Venetian governors of overseas territories were required to report frequently on any matter of some importance to the central organs of government in Venice, and their range of autonomy in ruling the territory under their administration was limited. Their term of office usually lasted two years, during which they continuously kept the Signory posted about developments on the island. On their return, they had to present a detailed report to the Venetian Senate, and were held responsible for any misconduct during their service overseas. Periodical tours of inspection were also carried out by the so-called *Sindici*, who had the authority to arrest governors and bring them to trial in Venice. Consequently, in spite of the great distance separating Venice and Cyprus (the sea voyage could last between one and two months in each direction), the central authorities in Venice were no less well informed about developments on Cyprus than about those in other parts of their colonial empire.

The little story – to which we shall now return – is in fact a reconstruction made on the basis of material sent to Venice by the governor of Famagusta, whose jurisdiction included the Karpass peninsula. This material included not only the report written by Venice's colonial magistrate, but also the minutes of an enquiry carried out by lower officials in the village of Ayios Symeon on the governor's orders.

The discovery of a treasure hoard by three peasants in a little village could apparently not be kept a secret. As was customary in Cyprus, the lord of the village, Bernardo della Gridia, was not present, preferring to live in town. He did not even directly exploit his estate (which, most likely, was not his

principal fief), preferring to lease it for a fixed income.<sup>8</sup> But in the village there was an administrator, with the title of *civitan*

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<sup>8</sup> The family, whose origin is yet to be established, is mentioned in numerous documents of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Jean Richard adopted Menardos's suggestion that this family name derived from Agridion, a name given to several fiefs, both in Cyprus and elsewhere; according to Richard, the village to which this family name related was Agridia located to the north west of Nicosia. See Simon Menardos, "Τοπωνυμικόν της Κύπρου", *Αθηνά* 18 (1907) 372, cited in: Leontios Makhairas, *Recital concerning the Sweet Land of Cyprus entitled "Chronicle"*, ed. R.M. Dawkins, vol. 2 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press 1932), ch. 640, n. 2; Jean Richard, *Chypre sous les Lusignan. Documents Chypriotes des Archives du Vatican (XIVe et XVe siècles)* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner 1962), p. 148, n. 2. However, the main estate of the Della Gridia family seems to have been Critia (Krideia), probably the village bearing that name in the Karpass peninsula, from which the family name must have originated. See Gilles Grivaud and Aspasia Papadaki, "L'Institution de la *Mostra Generale* de la Cavalerie féodale en Crète et en Chypre vénitienne durant le XVIe siècle", *Studi veneziani* n.s. 12 (1986) 191 (mentioning Bernardo della Gridia's feudal obligation stemming from his lordship of Critia in 1557 and 1560). Yotin de La Gridie (Γιοτίν τε Λα Γριδιε) accompanied Henry de Lusignan overseas in 1413: Makhairas, *Recital concerning the Sweet Land of Cyprus* vol. 1, p. 625, ch. 640 and n. 2. Thomas de La Gridia (Τουμάς τε Λα Γριδια), *chevetin* of Sivouri, had been killed at Khirokitia during the Mamluk invasion of 1426: Makhairas, *Recital*, I, p. 665, ch. 685. Guy de la Gride appears as one of the two knights representing the Haute Cour in two royal documents of 2 March 1440 and 4 April 1441: Richard, *Chypre sous les Lusignan*, pp.148, 150, and also as a beneficiary of a fixed income from the village of Piscopia in 1468: Jean Richard (ed.), *Le Livre des remembrances de la Secrète du royaume de Chypre* (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre 1983), p. 86. The latter could probably be identified with Guy de la Garde, who appears in another document of 1468: Louis de Mas Latrie, *Histoire de l'île de Chypre sous le règne des princes de la maison de Lusignan*, 3 vols (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale 1852-61), III (1855), p. 264 (Mas Latrie's edition abounds with misspellings). Other family members who appear in contemporary documents are dame Perrin de La Gride, who received the village of Lapithos from King Jacques II, and Morpho de La Gridia, whose name appears in a list of Cypriot incomes which may be attributed to the years 1513-1521: Florio Bustron, "Historia overo commentarii de Cipro", ed. René de Mas Latrie, *Collection de Documents inédits sur l'histoire de France. Mélanges historiques*, vol. 5 (Paris 1886), p. 420; Mas Latrie, *Histoire*, III, 500.

*e banier*, who appears to have learned very quickly about the event and duly reported it to the *bailo* (or *balio*) of the Karpass peninsula, who resided in the village of Koma, or Komi. This *bailo* was a district administrator who was normally elected from among the Cypriot burghers of Famagusta. The *bailo* immediately dispatched the news by horseman to the Venetian Captain of Famagusta, who received the news on the night of 1 July, precisely at nine o'clock, as stated in the papers later dispatched to Venice. Without much delay, the Captain sent out the head of his chancery to carry out an investigation on the spot, an operation that lasted a few days. In the meantime he also reported the affair to the governor-general (*luogotenente*) in Nicosia and to his councillors. Another high-ranking official, bearing the title of *provveditor general*, was also present in the colony, and was likewise informed of the affair.

As far as the circumstances of the discovery were concerned, one can hardly find any substantial disagreement in the testimonies of the various persons questioned by the officials, and the above reconstruction is therefore based on their repetitive and more or less identical versions. The slight variances that do exist stem from the different functions played by the protagonists, as well as from their corresponding whereabouts at the moment of the discovery. Zorzin tu Glimin told the investigators that the Saint had appeared to him on the morning of the previous day, telling him that those who were working in the church were supposed to discover "his" (the Saint's) treasure under the middle stair leading to the entrance. But he could not remember what was going on during his epileptic seizure. Marco tu Zacu and Zorzi tu Pieru described how Zorzin indicated where the hoard should be unearthed and described their actions leading to the discovery. Georgi tu Papa Johanni added that Zorzin had reiterated the same story about the Saint a thousand times in the past, but nobody took him seriously, believing him mad. The village priest, Papa Iani de Zacu, related that he was called to the scene by his son, who had been dispatched to him by Zorzin (apparently recovered from his seizure). When he came to the church the jars had already been placed on the altar, and the remaining 99 ducats were on the church's floor. The village administrator (*civitan e banier*), Sozomeno tu Tomasin, testified that on his return from his field he came upon a gathering around

of pure gold. Compared to the amounts of money dealt with by Venetian merchants in Mediterranean trade, it cannot be viewed as a huge sum, but in the small world of a remote Cypriot village, that sum must have constituted an enormous fortune. Even for Venetian magistrates on the island, 1721 ducats could not be regarded as a trifle. For example, in 1538 the salary of the Captain of Famagusta, one of the highest among the hundreds of Venetian magistracies, amounted to 2,000 ducats of account per year (a little less than 2,000 gold ducats), half of which was held back as caution-money. The value of the treasure unearthed at Ayios Symeon was therefore only slightly lower than the Captain's yearly income. The income of subordinate officials was, of course, considerably lower.<sup>12</sup>

In trying to present as complete a picture as possible to the authorities back home, the Venetian magistrates also included information related to the legal aspects of this case. Interestingly, what Navagero and Diedo could find in this respect was a section of a chapter in the Assizes of the *Cour des Bourgeois* in Italian translation. As already stated, Venice did not abolish the previous legal arrangements of the insular kingdom. In 1531, the Republic even ordered the Assizes of the *Haute Cour*, as well as those of the *Cour des Bourgeois*, the two main law codes of the Lusignan kingdom, to be translated from the Old French original into Italian, and four years later these codes appeared in print. We also know that several Greek translations of the latter were made, one of them during Venetian rule in 1512.<sup>13</sup> Thus, citing a chapter of this law code would not have been exceptional in this context.

It is, however, surprising to find in the quoted Assize a specific reference to treasures discovered as a result of an apparition (*in vision*, and in the French original *par avision*; the Greek translation has *διὰ οὐραίου*). This section of the law actually deals with two theoretical possibilities. In the first, a treasure is dug up on the basis of information or of an apparition,

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<sup>12</sup> For the Captain's salary, see Sir George Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, vol. III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1948), p. 866.

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Grandclaude, *Etude critique sur les Livres des Assises de Jérusalem* (Paris: Jouve & Compagnie 1923), pp. 30, 38; Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, III, 770-1.

without obtaining beforehand licence from the Lord of the land (i.e. the king), in which case it is considered to be a theft and is dealt with accordingly. In the second possibility mentioned in the Assize, licence is requested and granted, and the uncovered hoard is then divided as follows: one half to the king, and the other half divided between the landowner and the person who discovered the treasure; if the latter is also the landowner he is entitled to one third of the hoard, whereas the remaining two thirds supposedly belong to the royal treasury.<sup>14</sup>

The case of Ayios Symeon, as presented by the various persons involved, does not exactly resemble the cases described in the Assize. The information about the treasure had been spread by a person who was believed to be mad by his fellow villagers. It had been common knowledge for ten or eleven months, but nobody was ready to believe in it. Admittedly, the diggers did not ask for a licence, but their initiative was spontaneous and not pre-meditated, at least it was presented as such by everyone involved in the operation. In any case, the final decision as to the fate of the treasure was left to the Venetian Senate, which was supposed to pass its verdict on the basis of the material sent from Cyprus in mid-July 1559.

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At this point the first chapter of the plot is concluded. To analyse it one can follow at least two complementary lines of interpretation. The first, more speculative in nature, would be an attempt to explain in more rational terms the miraculous event. The second would leave the story as it is, trying to learn something from the indirect evidence it offers, the *modus operandi* of the various persons and institutions involved in this affair.

The author of this paper is not easily led to believe in supernatural intervention and miraculous apparitions, and is therefore

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. "Assises de la Cour des Bourgeois", ed. Beugnot, in *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades*, vol. II (Paris: Imprimerie Royale 1843), pp. 214-15. The law bears the number 283 (in other versions 246 and 276). The Italian transcription refers to "No. 124"; for a Greek version see C. Sathas, *Bibliotheca Graeca Medii Aevi*, 9 vols. (Paris: Maisonneuve 1880-90), VI, pp. 220-2.



to receive the part pertaining to him by law. A few days later, however, he expressed his willingness to use the money to rebuild the church and to maintain a priest there. Another person, described as "the prior of the church" (*il prior della chiesa*), also demanded that the money be used to rebuild it.

There was also some kind of arm-wrestling between two senior Venetian magistrates: both the Captain of Famagusta, Piero Navagero, and the *Provveditor General*, Andrea Duodo, purported to have the authority to decide about the fate of the treasure. Apart from defending the honour and status of their respective offices, both magistrates must have hoped to gain some personal profit from judging the case, as was habitual in the Venetian judicial system. Captain Navagero even included in his dispatch to Venice a note specifying that many cases concerning treasures had been dealt with by his predecessors, and that they were normally resolved by dividing the sum into three parts: one to the state (*al dominio*), one to the Captain, and one to the informant [?] (the word referring to the last is difficult to decipher). But in view of their disagreement, the two senior magistrates finally resolved that the entire dossier be passed to the central authorities in Venice for a final decision. Thus it is that the documents pertaining to the affair have come to be preserved in the Venetian State Archives.

The material sent to Venice is accompanied by a report signed by both Navagero and Duodo. The general description of the affair is supplemented by a few remarks that shed additional light on this story, or reflect the writers' impressions. The gold ducats are said to have been old ones (*ducati d'oro venetiani antiqui*), and the church is also described as very old (*molto vecchia*). Both magistrates consider Zorzin to be a poor chap suffering from seizures of epilepsy (*malcaduco*) and regarded as a madman by his fellow villagers.

Finally, Captain Navagero reports having deposited in the colony's treasury 517 ducats as the part belonging to the state (constituting about 30% of the total), intending to bring the remaining sum to Venice upon his return, which was due to take place shortly afterwards.

The excitement over the discovery of the hoard is understandable, considering its substantial value. 1721 gold ducats, weighing some 3.5 grams each, made up around 6 kg (or 13.23 lb)

the church. After hearing what it was all about, he immediately sent a message to Matio Colte, the district administrator (*bailo*) of the Karpass peninsula, residing in the village of Komi (Koma).<sup>9</sup> Other villagers, Piero Turda, Zorzi Papa, Zorzi de P[ier]o Derdi, did not have much to add to the previous testimonies. Piero Valderio, a burgher from Famagusta who himself occupied on several occasions different public offices, such as *bailo* of Karpass and Viscount of Famagusta, and who, according to the investigation, must have held some responsibility over the churches in the area, appeared before the Captain of Nicosia testifying that for some ten months Zorzin had been telling him too about the apparitions of Saint Symeon.<sup>10</sup>

Before long other persons became involved in the affair. Nicolo Sguropolo, lessee of the village, belonged to a respectable burgher family from Nicosia, whose members had often been involved in the lease and the administration of villages in the royal, and later in the Venetian, administration.<sup>11</sup> He claimed to be entitled to a portion of the hoard. Bernardo della Gridia, Lord of Ayios Symeon, after having been informed about the discovery of a treasure in his village, presented a formal request

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<sup>9</sup> In the Ottoman census of 1572 there are three rather big villages bearing such a name, or a similar one: Komi, a location which included a bazaar, with 192 households and a total income of 40,000 *akçe*; Naphtakomi [Hephtakomi], with 174 households and a total income of 35,000; and Koma, with 94 households, including one Moslem, and a revenue of 12,280: *Tahrir*, ff. 126v-129r.

<sup>10</sup> On this personality, see Piero Valderio, *La guerra di Cipro*, eds. Gilles Grivaud and Nasa Patapiou (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre 1996), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> A medical doctor, Dimitri Sguoropulo [sic], received an annual provision from the Crown in 1469: Richard, *Livre des remembrances*, p. 57, No. 119. A certain Nicolo Sguro is mentioned in the list of persons who received lands from Jacques II in the 1460s: F. Bustron, "Historia", p. 421. Zenio Sguropulo, described as "citadin de Nicosia", bought a serf from the royal domain in 1494: Georgios Ploumidis, *Οι βενετοκρατούμενες ελληνικές χώρες μεταξύ του δευτέρου και του τρίτου τουρκοβενετικού πολέμου (1503-1537)* (Ioannina: Panepistimion Ioanninon 1974), p. 125; the name of a certain Alvisse Sguropulo appears as a *provisionato a cavallo* in a list of Cypriots who participated in the *mostra*, or military array, arranged in 1560: Grivaud and Papadaki, "L'Institution de la *Mostra Generale*", p. 192.

tempted to offer an alternative explanation for this story. Yet, a conspiracy theory, which would regard Saint Symeon's apparition and its consequences as an invention intended to justify or to cover up a different reality, is rather difficult to substantiate, considering that none of the many persons directly or indirectly involved, many of whom had conflicting interests in this affair, showed any sign of disbelief in the simple tale which was told by Zorzin and the three peasants and was supported by other people who had known Zorzin before the discovery of the hoard. Our rational way of thinking leaves us perplexed in view of such a unanimous consensus.

The church was described as very old and the coins discovered under its stairs as "antique". But the hoard allegedly included only Venetian coins, which somehow points to a Venetian connection. Supposing that they were really discovered on the spot, one can only imagine that they had been left there under personal duress or during a political crisis. We can only offer a few speculations for the latter possibility. The period of Venetian domination was, on the whole, comparatively peaceful, certainly before the Ottoman invasion of 1570. The previous war with the Ottomans lasted between 1537 and 1540, but apart from some minor raids, Cyprus was not one of its main arenas of military operations. Moreover, the description of the ducats as "antique" excludes a linkage with events that took place merely two decades earlier. One would rather think of the bloody struggles that characterized the pre-Venetian period, such as the Mamluk invasions of the 1420s, the struggle for the crown during the 1460s and early 1470s, or the wars between the Cypriot kings and the Genoese, who held Famagusta between 1373 and 1464. In fact, the Venetian presence on Cyprus had begun long before the island formally became part of the Venetian empire. Could it be that information about a treasure hidden under the church's stairs somehow reached the ears of poor Zorzin, in whose confused mind it was later transformed into an apparition? Perhaps, though one could probably offer other, equally convincing explanations.

Speculation would not, in fact, lead us very far. It would probably be more instructive to accept the story at face value and to examine the course of its development. Indeed, the very fact that no one questioned its veracity is in itself most significant.

The readiness of so many people of such a variety of social and cultural backgrounds to accept the story as truth may indicate that apparitions of this kind were not considered to be such an exceptional phenomenon. True, the Assizes, the laws of the kingdom, which had a clause specifically referring to the discovery of a treasure following an apparition, had originated in the distant years of the thirteenth century, but the reactions to the affair and the reference made by the Venetian authorities to that specific Assize suggest that it was not regarded as obsolete. If there were any individuals, either Cypriots or Venetians, who did not believe in saintly intervention, they certainly did not dare to make their suspicions public. In fact, this complete credulity indicates how such a story could be a perfect cover-up for any illegal act.

The use of the Assizes also helps to clarify the legal aspects of Venice's colonial administration. Venetian policy in the legal sphere was quite clear. As far as the criminal law was concerned, Venetian legislation served as a common law for all Venetian territories, and had, in principle, priority over local traditions. But in the civil sphere, Venetian magistrates throughout the empire were instructed to pass judgments on the basis of local laws and legal traditions, using the Venetian laws only in cases where local laws did not provide an adequate response to a specific problem. Venetian magistrates were also granted authority to pass sentences "according to their own judgment", when neither local nor Venetian law offered any solution. However, beyond these general principles, a long process of assimilation on the one hand, and the growing tendency of intervention by Venetian institutions on the other, increased the weight of Venice's legal tradition in the judicial systems of the Republic's overseas territories.<sup>15</sup> The way in which the treasure of Ayios Symeon was treated is a case in point. The Captain's report reveals that previous cases had already been decided not exactly according to the order established in the relevant Assize, but rather by allotting one third of the money to the public treasury, one third to the deciding magistrate, and one third to the informant;<sup>16</sup> and he adds that he proceeded in the same

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<sup>15</sup> Arbel, "Η Κύπρος", pp. 460-5.

<sup>16</sup> The papers even mention a specific case, dealt with on 2 April 1555.

manner in the present case. His decision was only obstructed by the intervention of the *provveditore*, who was probably hoping that part of the hoard would reach his own pocket.

The treasure episode also demonstrates to what extent it is impossible for a colonial administration to function properly without the collaboration of its colonial subjects. The village's *civitan e banier*, the *bailo* of the Karpass peninsula, the head of the Captain's chancellery, to whom one may add Piero Valderio, who occupied at different periods both the office of *bailo* and that of Viscount of Famagusta, were all Cypriots, either Greeks or Latins. Of course, these persons occupied subordinate offices, the main positions of command being reserved for Venetian magistrates. But it is also obvious that without the assistance of these subordinate officials, who had a command of Greek and were well-acquainted with local laws, customs and traditions, the Venetian administration would have remained quite helpless.

These Cypriots who served the colonial administration or collaborated with it in many ways, constituted a rather heterogeneous, and by no means small group of people. Part of them were Latin or Greek aristocrats, such as the Lord of Ayios Symeon, who resided in Nicosia and was a member of its urban council, where he could hope to be elected to various public offices or gain different advantages from the Venetian rulers.<sup>17</sup> Others were burghers, mostly Greek but not necessarily so, such as the leaseholder of Ayios Symeon, who belonged to a respectable Greek family from Nicosia. From his social milieu were recruited those Cypriots who served in the *Secreta*, or main chancery of the colony in Nicosia, as well as alongside every Venetian magistrate on the island, such as the governor-general (*luogotenente*) and his two councillors, the financial officers (*camerarii*), the Captains of Famagusta, Paphos and Saline. Finally, as exemplified in the case of Ayios Symeon, hundreds of Cypriots must have served as functionaries in the nearly one

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Arbel, "Urban Assemblies and Town Councils in Frankish and Venetian Cyprus", *Πρακτικά του Δευτέρου Διεθνούς Κυπριολογικού Συνεδρίου*, Vol. 2 (Nicosia: Society of Cypriot Studies 1986), pp. 203-13, republished in: Arbel, *Cyprus, the Franks and Venice*, art. IV.

thousand villages that existed on the island, many of which were owned by the state.

At the same time, this case also reflects the power hierarchy prevailing in the Cypriot judicial system. The code known as "Assises de la Cour des Bourgeois" apparently pertained to the Burghers' Court headed by the Viscount. Such courts existed both in Nicosia and in Famagusta (the latter would probably have been the appropriate one in our case),<sup>18</sup> but the Burghers' or the Viscount's court is not even mentioned in the documentation, probably because the amount of money involved exceeded its formal authority. The limitation of the Viscount's judicial authority could already have been an established fact before the Venetian take-over (although this remains to be clarified), but under the rule of Venice it assumed a new significance, since the Viscounts, as well as the members of the jury comprising the court, were Cypriots, whereas the Captain and other senior magistrates were Venetians.<sup>19</sup>

The hierarchy of power in the colony is likewise very clearly reflected in the developments following the discovery of the treasure. In the village itself, there was no one with sufficient authority to have any significant say in this affair. The village administrator (*civitan e banier*) seems to have been a peasant himself, for he testified that he encountered the "treasure company" when returning from his field. Both the lord of the village, who must have been a Latin, and the lessee, a Greek to judge from his name, seem to have been absent from the village. This was a typical pattern in Cyprus, where the aristocrats and burghers owning or leasing rural estates resided in the towns, mostly in Nicosia.<sup>20</sup> There was also no question of passing the case to the village court, which most probably did not exist any more at that stage, certainly not with regard to the free

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<sup>18</sup> For Famagusta, where the court became integrated with the Syrians' court in the fifteenth century, see Jean Richard, "La cour des Syriens de Famagouste d'après un texte de 1448", *Byzantinische Forschungen* 12 (1987) 383-98, reprinted in his: *Croisades et Etats latins d'Orient* (London: Variorum 1992), art. XVII.

<sup>19</sup> Arbel, "ΗΚύπρος", pp. 460-6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 491.

tenants.<sup>21</sup> The district administrator (*bailo* of Karpass) at Komi, also a Cypriot, had likewise no real power to take any decision in such cases. Without even trying to pass judgment, he immediately sent word to Famagusta, the real centre of power, invested in the Captain's magistracy. None of the persons involved appears to have contested this hierarchy of power, and the Captain himself, as well as the *provveditore*, also submitted the case to the Senate's authority, since they could not reach agreement as to who was entitled to pass a judgment in the colony.

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We should now return to the second chapter of our story, and follow the developments of this affair outside Cyprus. Piero Navagero finished his term of office as Captain of Famagusta in July 1559, just a few days after writing his report concerning the treasure of Ayios Symeon (he was soon to return to Cyprus as governor-general, or *luogotenente*).<sup>22</sup> Leaving behind 517 ducats that he deposited in the colony's treasury, he took along with him to Venice the remaining 1206 ducats. As it happened, however, the ship he was sailing on, the *Veniera*, encountered the Ottoman fleet on its way home. To appease the Ottoman commander, Navagero had to part with 200 gold ducats out of the sum that he was carrying with him. Luckily, the remaining 1006 ducats arrived safely in Venice and were duly deposited in the mint, pending government decision.

The case was apparently not considered to be very urgent. It was discussed in the Venetian *Collegio* only towards the end of January 1560 (n.s.) and put to the vote before the Senate as late as 28 March 1560. Referring to the treasure that had been "miraculously discovered" following the apparition of St Symeon to "Zorlin tu Glimini", the Senate declared that it would be in harmony with the piety of the Venetian state to act in this matter in a way that would honour God and express the devotion of the Venetians to His Saints, so that matters appertaining to God would remain entirely His, without any diminution. Con-

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 464, 516.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 534-5.

sequently, it was decided that the money brought to Venice, together with 200 ducats taken from the public treasury to compensate for the sum given to the Ottoman commander, was to be returned to Cyprus and added there to the 517 ducats left in the colony by Navagero. The entire hoard, as originally discovered, was thus to be reconstituted. Subsequently, 300 ducats out of the reconstituted sum were to be given to Zorzin tu Glimin. In case he was no longer alive and had no successors, the sum was to be re-integrated with the rest of the money, which was to be earmarked for the reconstruction of the church of Ayios Symeon, for lighting the same church and for the continuation of religious services there, under the responsibility of the colony's governors.<sup>23</sup>

The Senate's decision is most exceptional in the wider context of Venice's colonial policy. As could be expected in any colonial system, the direction in which money and other resources moved between Venice and its overseas territories was normally the other way round. Even when faced with an urgent necessity to invest in any colony's building projects, defence or public works, Venetian governing bodies always preferred to cover the expenses from the income of the colony itself. In the present case, not only was the pattern reversed, but this extraordinary decision was approved by an overwhelming majority of 182 supporters, against just two senators who opposed the motion, and two others who preferred to abstain.

How can one explain this unusual behaviour on the part of the Venetian senators? The place of religion in Venetian politics is a complex issue. Though always keen to protect the autonomy of the Venetian Church *vis-à-vis* Rome, Venice also jealously protected its image of a most pious Republic. Foreign observers were impressed by the great number of churches and monasteries in the city, and the concentration of many relics in Venice was intended to enhance its image as a saintly city. The myth and rituals around the figure of Saint Mark were central components of Venice's political symbolism. Venetians had served as popes and cardinals and were deeply involved in the leadership of the

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<sup>23</sup> ASV, Senato Mar, Reg. 35, ff. 30-30v (28 March 1560).



Roman Church.<sup>24</sup> The involvement of the State in religious affairs in Venice is further evidence of the importance attributed to religion by the leaders of the patriciate, particularly during those years of the militant Counter-Reformation, which also saw the publication of the Index, and the last session of the Council of Trent.

However, Venice was also a foremost commercial power, and its capital a truly cosmopolitan metropolis. In the mid-sixteenth century, one could always encounter in its *piazza, campi* and narrow streets a great variety of characters: alongside the Venetians themselves, many of whom were of foreign extraction, there were numerous subjects from Venice's Italian territories, as well as Greeks, Jews, Armenians, Slavs, Germans (including Protestants), and even some Muslims. These groups played a central role, as traders, seamen and mediators, in Venice's system of international trade, and in its function as "the hinge of Europe".<sup>25</sup> In the difficult period of growing intolerance that characterized the age of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, Venice was a haven of relative toleration, where no religious wars were being waged, and where people who would have been persecuted elsewhere could live in relative safety. The Venetian colonies in the eastern Mediterranean were part of this world.

This relatively tolerant policy developed from what may seem as a contradictory situation: on the one hand, Venice invested great efforts in maintaining and supporting its highly sophisticated system of international trade, in which the Ottoman empire constituted a major partner; but on the other hand, the same Ottoman empire was the main threat to Venice's presence in the eastern Mediterranean, particularly to its hold of its remotest colony – the island of Cyprus. The Republic therefore conducted a very cautious policy, trying to avoid war as much as possible, but at the same time taking precautions to defend its territories for the eventuality of such a war.

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<sup>24</sup> By 1565 there were seven Venetians in the Sacred College: William Bouwsma, *Venice and the defense of Republican Liberty* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press 1968), p. 187.

<sup>25</sup> The term was coined by William McNeill in his: *Venice, the Hinge of Europe, 1081-1797* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1974).

Cyprus clearly represents the Venetian dilemma. Not only was the island a very important component of the Venetian system of commercial navigation in the eastern Mediterranean, but it was also the biggest and richest of Venice's overseas colonies, and a source of essential products, such as grain, cotton and salt. Yet the island was much closer to Ottoman lands than to Venice, its population was overwhelmingly Greek Orthodox, rural and rather miserable. In view of the Ottoman threat, Venice tried to alleviate the burden placed on the Cypriot peasants, but apparently not sufficiently. The survival of serfdom, growing demographic pressure, problems of food supply, religious tensions and Ottoman meddling in Cypriot affairs, would produce serious troubles in the colony in 1563. In 1558, shortly before the affair of Ayios Symeon, the Republic had organized a peasant militia on the island, and in 1559-60 it was making efforts to ensure the collaboration of the free peasants (*francomati*) who were supposed to serve in this corps.<sup>26</sup> It is most likely that in debating the fate of the treasure of Ayios Symeon, the Venetian Senators took into consideration these wider aspects of Mediterranean and Cypriot realities of the late 1550s and early 1560s.

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To conclude, an affair originating in an obscure Cypriot village has enabled us to follow a few moments in the history of colonial relations in Venetian-ruled Cyprus. The first chapter, whose main protagonists were the villagers of Ayios Symeon, remains puzzling for anyone unwilling to believe in the reality of saintly apparitions, though it can very well serve to expose both the deep-rooted belief in supernatural phenomena and the reality behind the formal institutional framework of that large Venetian colony. The second chapter allowed us to place this plot in the wider context of the Venetian world. The Venetian senators, though somewhat extraneous to the forms of piety of the Greek Orthodox Cypriot peasants, must have been influenced by the growing wave of religiosity characterizing the Catholic world during those years. In our specific case, this tendency har-

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<sup>26</sup> Arbel, "ΗΚύπρος", p. 480.

monized with political interests which aimed to demonstrate to its Greek subjects Venice's benevolence and respect for their religious traditions, in view of the threat of the Counter-Reformation, growing pressures inside the colony and the external pressure exerted by the Ottomans. The miraculous event could therefore be used to enhance the image of the holy Republic, in whose empire saints chose to appear in visions, thus enabling Greeks and Catholics alike to express their Christian piety.

On 19 September 1560, the governors of Cyprus reported that after having received the Senate's decision, they proceeded to the reconstitution of the entire sum and carried out the Senate's instructions.<sup>27</sup> However, ten years later began the Ottoman invasion that ended with the annexation of Cyprus to the Turkish empire. Unfortunately for Saint Symeon, the village bearing his name not only became part of a Muslim empire, but his church was not destined to function for long. When Louis de Mas Latrie visited the village in 1878, it was already inhabited exclusively by Turks.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> ASV, Senato, Dispacci da Cipro, filza 2.

<sup>28</sup> Louis de Mas Latrie, *L'Île de Chypre, sa situation présente et ses souvenirs du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Firmin-Didot 1879), p. 203.