Tassos Papacostas

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Byzantine Rite in a Gothic Setting: Aspects of Cultural Appropriation in Late Medieval Cyprus

Tassos Papacostas,
King's College London

Cyprus was a Byzantine province until 1184 when its governor Isaac Komnenos proclaimed himself independent of Constantinople. His rule did not last long, however, as in 1191 he was ousted by Richard Lionheart who conquered the island during the Third Crusade. Within a year, and following a short period of Templar rule, Guy de Lusignan, former king of Jerusalem, established himself at Nicosia. His successors founded a dynasty that was to rule down to the late fifteenth century when the Crusader kingdom was absorbed into the Venetian Stato da Mar, before finally succumbing to the Ottomans.[1] The centuries of Lusignan rule (1192–1473) and the short period of Venetian domination (1473 – officially 1489 – to 1571) have bequeathed to the island a spectacular architectural heritage. There are elaborate Gothic cathedrals built for the Roman catholic rite of the ruling elite (Nicosia, Famagusta), numerous monastic and village churches founded by and for the majority Greek Orthodox population, mountaintop castles first erected by the Byzantines and rebuilt later on (Saint Hilarion, Buffavento, Kantara), and massive fortifications put up by the Venetian state in a vain attempt to thwart the Ottoman advance (Nicosia, Famagusta, Kyrenia).[2]

All these buildings, emanating from an astonishing array of architectural traditions (especially considering the island's restricted size) and displaying a multiplicity of building techniques, have been more or less neatly categorized by modern scholarship in terms of style and form into either Gothic or Byzantine, with a Renaissance element admitted for the end of the period (sixteenth century). On the margins of this simplified and sometimes highly problematic taxonomy a small group of monuments, which is thought to hover between the two principal traditions, has been assigned its own distinct identity based on its

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[1] HILL 1940–52, vols. 2–3; EDBURY 1991; PAPADOPOULLOS 1995-96.

[2] STYLIANOU 1996, ENLART 1899, VAIVRE & PLAGNIEUX 2006, PERBELLINI 1973, 1986.

perceived hybrid character. In what follows I shall argue that no such identity exists, as it is based on a set of largely untenable assumptions, and I will venture some preliminary thoughts on the implications of this.

The group in question is that of the so-called Franco-Byzantine churches. The term was coined in the 1930s by George Soteriou, one of the earliest students of the island's Byzantine heritage, and refers to no more than half a dozen monuments.[3] What the group lacks in numbers is amply compensated by the status of the buildings, for its main representatives are the Orthodox cathedrals of the island's principal urban settlements of this period, namely Nicosia and Famagusta, and the monastic *katholika* of the Enkleistra of Neophytos the Recluse near Paphos, better known for the twelfth-century frescoes of its founder's rock-cut hermitage, and of Saint Mamas at Morphou, an important pilgrimage shrine housing the Cappadocian saint's sepulchre.

The defining trait of the Franco-Byzantine style, as outlined by Soteriou and subsequently further delineated by Athanasios Papageorgiou, is the combination of a basilical plan with a dome, the former (often with rib vaulting) thought to represent the Gothic tradition, the latter that of medieval Byzantium.[4] There is no doubt that basilical schemes, the trademark of early Christian architecture on the island, became much less common in middle Byzantine times, when centralized types were the norm.[5] The import of Crusader and western architecture to the island from the thirteenth century onwards, however, reintroduced the basilica, albeit now rib-vaulted rather than timber-roofed. It was this development that in the course of the fourteenth century supposedly led to the combination of the western basilica with the eastern dome in churches founded by the island's rising Orthodox elites, in an attempt to marry Gothic grand scale and advanced building techniques with the hallmark of Byzantine church architecture, the dome. Later investigations into the nature of 'Franco-Byzantine' have implied that its inception represents the intentional expression and indeed bold advertisement of a vigorous attachment to the traditions of the island's Orthodox church during a period of animosity and even confrontation between Latins and Greeks.[6] The relations between the two have been recently and most fruitfully re-examined on the basis of a reassessment of the source evidence, most notably by Chris Schabel who brought to light the less antagonistic elements of the equation.[7] This evaluation is corroborated by the material evidence, none of which is more eloquent than that provided by some of the structures examined here.

It is important to stress at the outset that none of the monuments in question is securely dated by epigraphic or documentary evidence. The two *katholika* are stylistically

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[3] SOTERIOU 1931.

[4] PAPAGEORGIOU 1982, 1995.

[5] MEGAW 1974, 59–75.

[6] STYLIANOU 1996, 1241–46.

[7] SCHABEL 2005.

closely related and ascribed to the Venetian period. Based primarily on stylistic considerations, on their liturgical furnishings, and on the surviving frescoes at Saint Neophytos, they appear to date to the first half of the sixteenth century.[8] Both are rather plain albeit robust structures with a tall dome over the nave, which is the main feature that has earned them membership of the Franco-Byzantine group (figs. 1, 2). One would nevertheless be hard-pressed to find evidence of Gothic-inspired input beyond decorative elements such as the capitals and perhaps the tomb niche housing the saint's sepulchre at Morphou (fig. 3), and the plain lancet windows and moulded main doorways of both monuments (the portico at Saint Mamas is a later addition). There is definitely nothing Gothic about either

Fig. 1. Enkleistra of Saint Neophytos, katholikon: plan and longitudinal section; scale (Drawings: Author, based on SOTE-RIOU 1935)

their slightly pointed nave barrel vaults or the arcades which, with their rounded arches on closely spaced columns, are unique in this period and rather intriguing. Their good quality ashlar masonry, although usually associated more with Gothic rather than Byzantine building traditions on the island, is nevertheless typical of the period.

The Hodegetria, Nicosia's now ruinous late medieval Greek Orthodox cathedral (subsequently known as the Bedesten and currently undergoing a disastrous restoration), is a complex structure with several building phases ascribed to the middle Byzantine through the Venetian period (fig. 4). It appears to have acquired its final form in the sixteenth century,
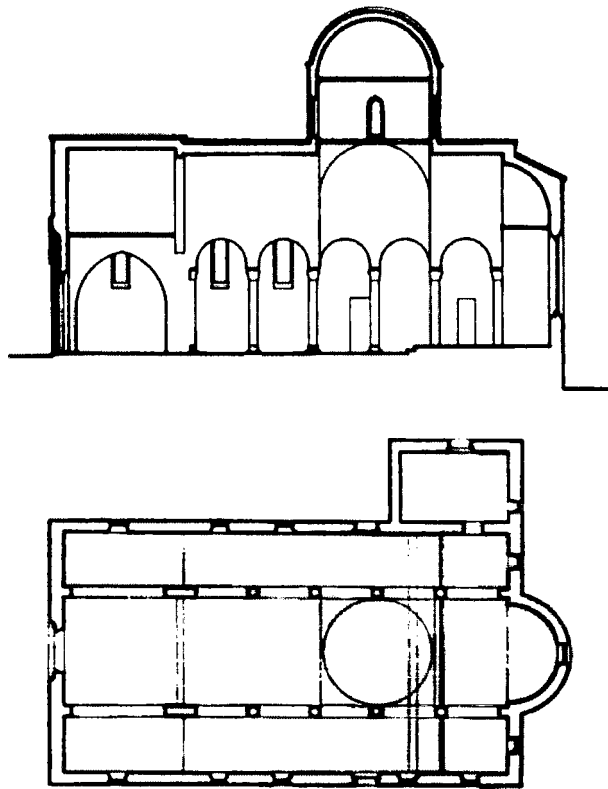
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[8] ENLART 1899, 1.188–93; PAPAGEORGIOU 1982, 223; PAPAGEORGIOU 1995, 278; STYLIANOU 1996, 1244.

Fig. 2. Morphou, Saint Mamas: view from the south-west (Photo: Author)

when an elaborate north façade was added to the north aisle, directly facing the western porch of the Latin cathedral of Saint Sophia whose architecture it imitates, and the nave was rebuilt with rib vaulting and an octagonal dome (figs. 5–6). This reconstruction was perhaps interrupted by the city's Ottoman conquest in 1570 and was never completed. The irregular basilical layout, with a double south aisle, is due to the successive reconstructions of the church and, most significantly, perhaps to the late antique basilica that stood on the site. What the church would have looked like in the fourteenth century, before the reconstruction, remains unclear, although it would appear that a significant portion of the earlier Byzantine building was perhaps still standing next to the more recent double south aisle.[9]

What is significant for the Franco-Byzantine debate is that in the fourteenth century, when this style is supposed to have emerged, neither the thoroughly Gothic rib-vaulted and domed nave of the Hodegetria nor the two monastic domed basilicas had been built yet; indeed, they were not erected until two centuries later. The affiliation of the latter's basilical scheme and the peculiar manner in which this is implemented remain to be established and would merit a separate study that should place the two structures within the context of the output of sixteenth-century Cyprus, but also of architectural developments in Venice.

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[9] ENLART 1899, 1:150–62; PLAGNIEUX & SOULARD 2006, 181–89; SOULARD 2006, 365–71; PA-PACOSTAS 2005.

The fourth representative of the group, and the most important in terms of sheer scale, is Saint George of the Greeks at Famagusta, now a ruin that has lost virtually all its vaulting. Its date, long suspected to fall in the mid-fourteenth century, has been confirmed by the recent publication of a will stating clearly that in 1363 it was under construction.[10] It was erected adjacent to a much smaller domed cross-in-square church that probably dates from the middle Byzantine period and was deemed important enough to be preserved together with its later extensions and additions (fig. 7). The new cathedral dwarfed this earlier complex. It is a regular three-aisled basilica whose sculptural decoration, doorways and windows, as well as the long lost vaulting closely followed Gothic prototypes, echoing the architecture of the slightly earlier Latin cathedral of Saint Nicholas nearby. The Byzantine pedigree of the monument is supposed to manifest itself in two ways. Firstly, in the layout of the

Fig. 3. Morphou, Saint Mamas: tomb niche (after ENLART 1899)

sanctuary with its semi-circular apses covered by semi-domes (fig. 8). This is indeed the type of apse that the vast majority of middle Byzantine churches on the island employ, those built subsequently for the Latin rite having often a polygonal rib-vaulted east end. But is it really a mark of allegiance to Byzantine tradition? Could it not be the mere result of other, less lofty considerations? It is after all the simplest kind of apse, and more importantly, it was used during the same period (fourteenth century) for churches of other communities within Famagusta itself, most notably at Saints Peter and Paul, a shrine probably built for one of the Oriental rites (Nestorian?) and whose architecture is closely linked to that of Saint George (fig. 9).[11] The appearance of the apses at Saint George with their solid masonry, small lancet windows and lack of external articulation or decoration contrasts sharply with the east end of the city's Latin cathedral, an intricate and highly articulated architectural piece replete with Gothic tracery, gables with crockets, pinnacles with elaborate finials, and ornate sculptural detail. The plain treatment of the apses at Saint George is
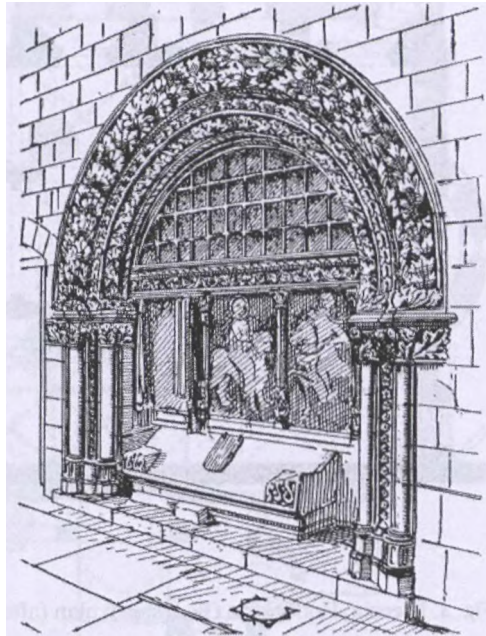
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[10] OTTEN-FROUX 2003, 42.
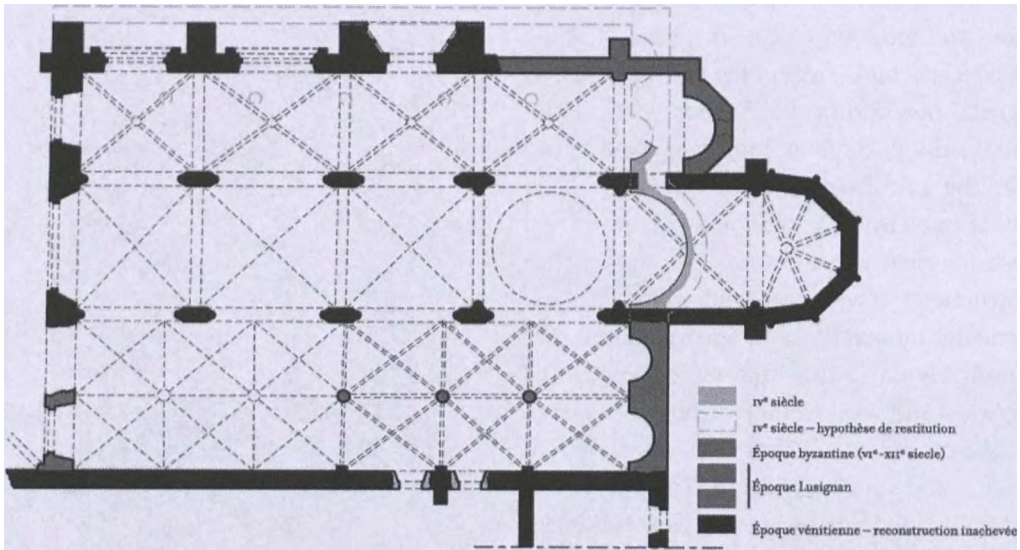[11] PLAGNIEUX & SOULARD 2006, 271–85.

Fig. 4. Nicosia, Hodegetria (Bedesten): plan (after PLAGNIEUX & SOULARD 2006)

Fig. 5. Nicosia, Hodegetria (Bedesten):
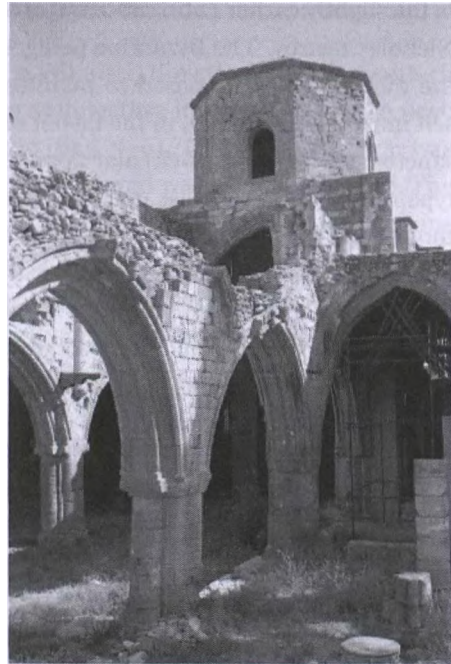north façade (Photo: Author)

Fig. 6. Nicosia, Hodegetria (Bedesten): view of
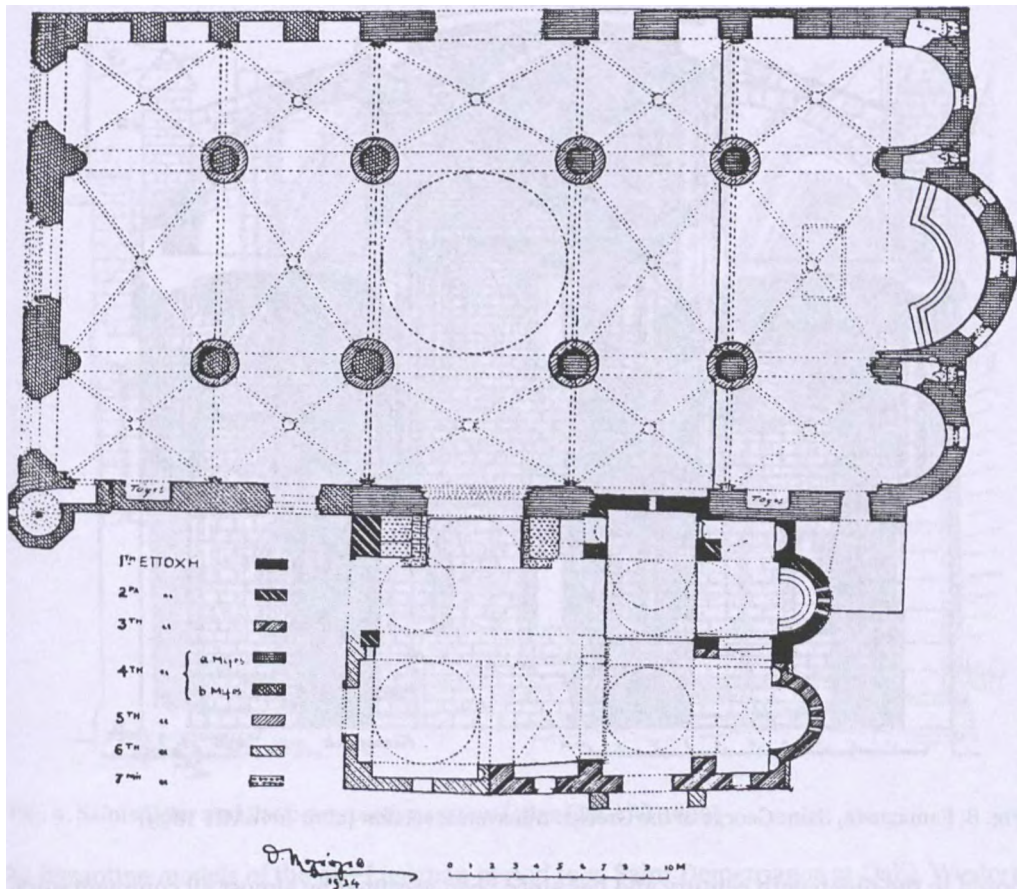the nave from the south aisle (Photo: Author)

Fig. 7. Famagusta, Saint George of the Greeks: plan (after SOTERIOU 1935)

certainly a result of the overall character of the building's austere approach to façade deco-
ration, evidenced by the large expanse of unarticulated wall surface on the surviving south
and west façades, rather than of any attempt to replicate Byzantine forms (fig. 10). Indeed,
the mere height of the apses, and in particular the central one, would work against such an
interpretation, as it would thwart any attempt to apply the all important standard icono-
graphical scheme developed in earlier centuries for much smaller structures; a *sui generis*
programme would have to be invented (fragments of which still survive on the curving wall
surface exposed to the elements), reminiscent of a similar process in the mosaic decoration
of the twelfth-century Norman churches on Sicily (Monreale, Cefalù).

The second element thought to betray a Byzantine affiliation is much more problematic.
It has to do with the existence of a dome over the central bay of the nave. This was first pro-
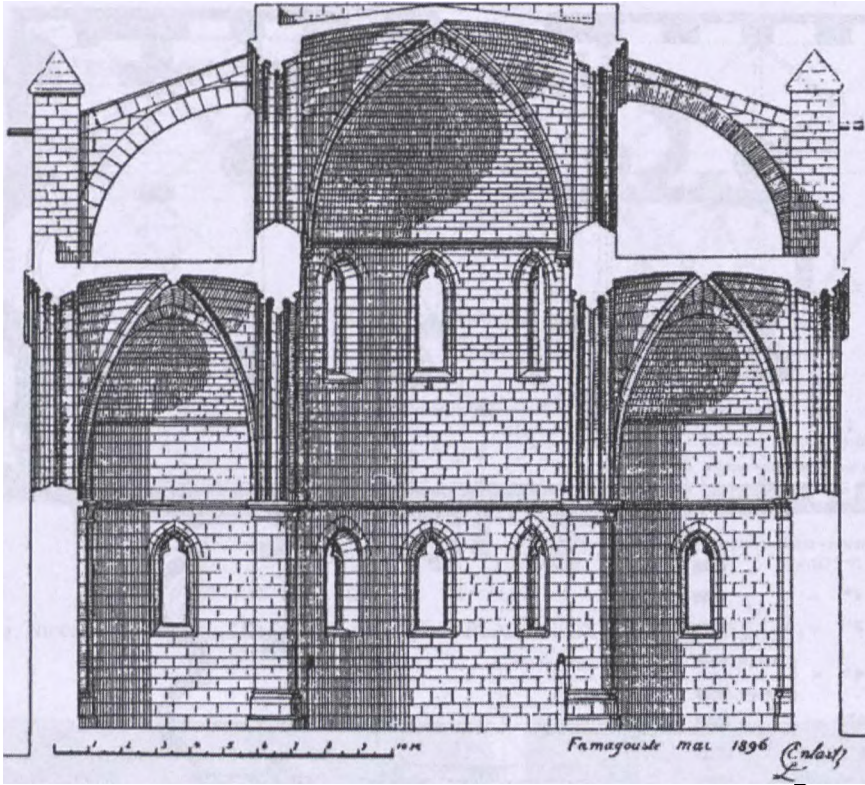
Fig. 8. Famagusta, Saint George of the Greeks: transversal section (after ENLART 1899)

posed in the nineteenth century and has since been accepted by almost all commentators. The recent study of the monument by Thierry Soulard, however, suggests otherwise.[12] One is bound to agree that structurally it would be very difficult if not impossible to support a dome over the tall nave without robust buttressing that the rather flimsy flying buttresses over the aisles cannot have provided. The central bay was differentiated by its square plan not in order to receive a dome, but for functional reasons: it marked the crossing between the main east-west axis of the basilica and the equally significant north-south axis. Along the latter were situated the (now lost) portal of the north façade and, to the south, the all-important point of access to the earlier Byzantine church. Moreover, a cursory look at what was being built in the fourteenth century on Cyprus provides no evidence for the intrusion of such a vaulting device, that is a dome, which is uncommon in Gothic architecture.

Domes were of course being built during this period on the island, but primarily in rural areas, on a small scale, and as part of an indigenous architectural tradition hailing back

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[12] ENLART 1899, 1:311–21; SOTERIOU 1935, 55 (plan); PLAGNIEUX & SOULARD 2006, 286–96; SOULARD 2006, 356–65.
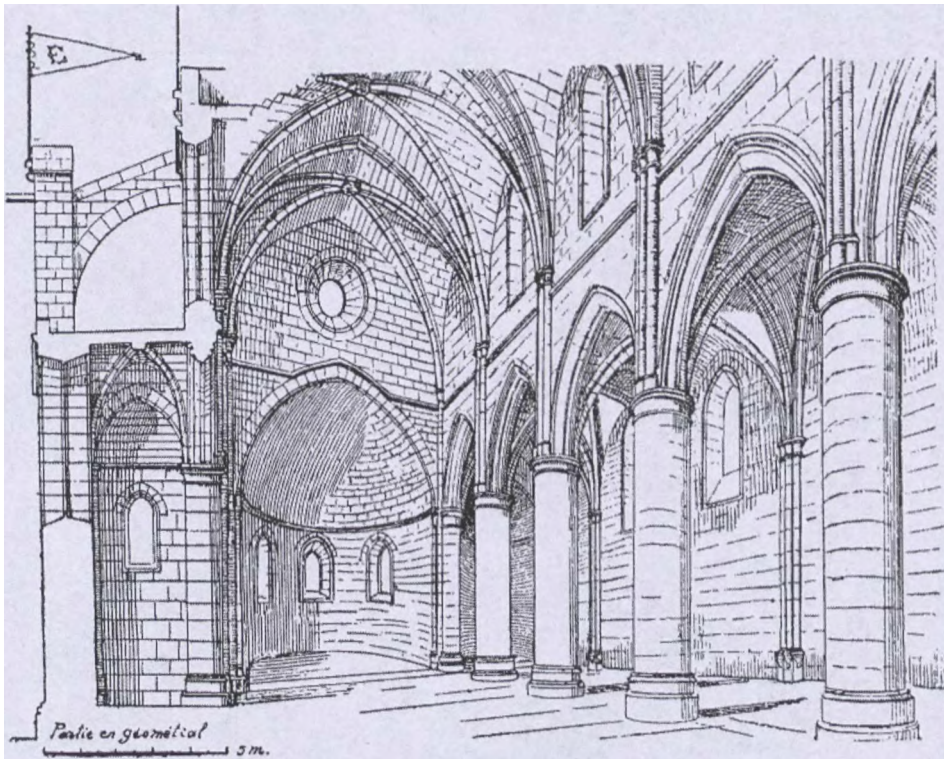
Fig. 9. Saints Peter and Paul: perspective section (after ENLART 1899)

to Byzantine models of the pre-Lusignan period (e.g. Saint Demetrianos at Dali). Western architecture was a predominantly urban phenomenon in Lusignan Cyprus, and at this relatively early stage in the development of Cypriot Gothic (fourteenth century), master masons and architects had not ventured yet into the novel combination of domes with rib vaults, as they would do two centuries later with the construction of the nave at the Hodegetria of Nicosia. None of the numerous contemporary churches of Famagusta adopted such a scheme. Significantly, the much better preserved Saints Peter and Paul which, as mentioned above is stylistically very closely related to Saint George and almost certainly dates from the same period, was rib-vaulted throughout (fig. 11). This is not to deny, however, that a dome may have been added at a later stage, following important alterations to the support system of the structure. The date and interpretation of this intervention are beyond the scope of this investigation; I shall be considering them in a forthcoming study.[13] What matters in the context of the present discussion is that, as in the case of the Hodegetria, the fourteenth--century building phase at Saint George of the Greeks lacked a dome (fig. 12).

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[13] PAPACOSTAS forthcoming a.

Fig. 10. Famagusta, Saint George of the Greeks: view from the south-west (Photo: Author)

Returning to the issue of Franco-Byzantine architecture, I hope it has become clear by now that the monuments said to come under this label have very little in common and none really corresponds to the imaginary Franco-Byzantine model. The two closely related monastic churches belong to a different era and are the result of distinct developments particular to the Venetian period; whether they can appropriate for themselves the above label remains doubtful. Although conceived as domed basilicas, they forsake almost entirely the Gothic vocabulary of the two cathedrals. The latter, on the other hand, were definitely not designed as domed basilicas. In sharp contrast to the *katholika*, both draw on an extensive pool of Gothic vocabulary available locally. Their architecture has virtually no formal characteristics that may be associated with the Byzantine tradition; their domes were afterthoughts of the Venetian period. Thus, the entire concept of the fourteenth-century advent of a church type combining Gothic and Byzantine elements and representing a so-called Franco-Byzantine style has to be rejected as it rests on decidedly shaky foundations.

My argument so far implies that the intentional evocation of the island's Byzantine heritage in the fourteenth century, as allegedly reflected in the domed basilicas, never was. This leaves us with what in the eyes of the modern observer appears to be a major paradox: Saint George is a Greek Orthodox cathedral in a purely Gothic style. In order to appreciate fully the meaning of this, a brief excursus into the history of Famagusta and the Orthodox church is necessary at this point. At the time of the cathedral's foundation the city was home to a diverse population consisting of several religious and ethnic communities. It grew spectacularly in the early fourteenth century from an insignificant settlement to one of the most important commercial centres of the eastern Mediterranean, following the fall of the last Crusader outposts on the Levantine coast to the Mamluks in the preceding decades.[14] Western as well as local merchants from Syria-Palestine transferred their businesses to Cyprus at that time and refugees from the mainland settled in the city, swelling its population and fuelling its economic growth. Contemporary written sources testify to these developments most clearly. But it is the built environment of Famagusta, not least its Latin cathedral of Saint Nicholas and of course the Greek cathedral, that betray most eloquently the sudden rise in its fortunes.

Fig. 11. Famagusta, Saints Peter and Paul: view of the nave (Photo: Author)

An unavoidable question that arises from the construction of Saint George at that particular juncture has to do with the status of the Orthodox church of Cyprus. Soon after the establishment of Lusignan rule over the island in the late twelfth century, a Latin church hierarchy was also created. Following a short period during which the Greek church was
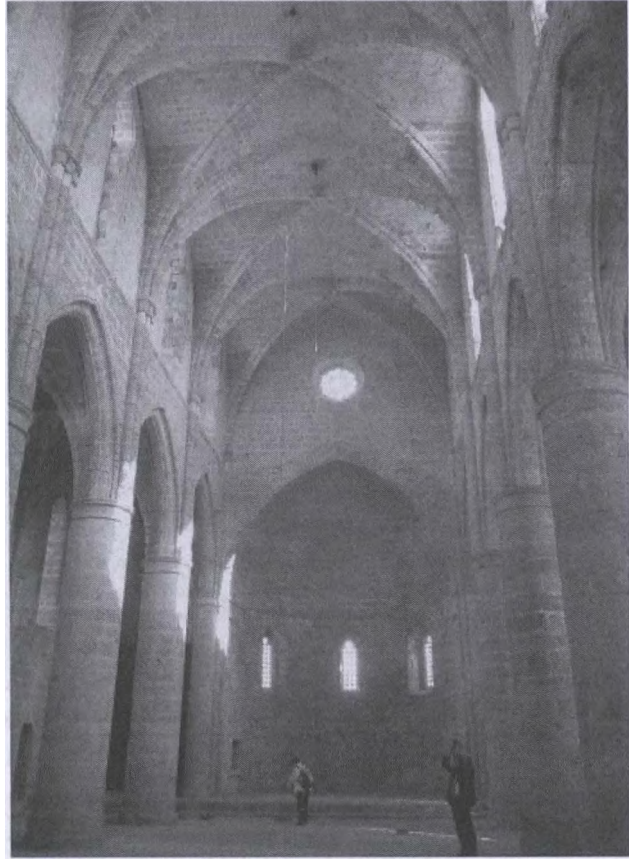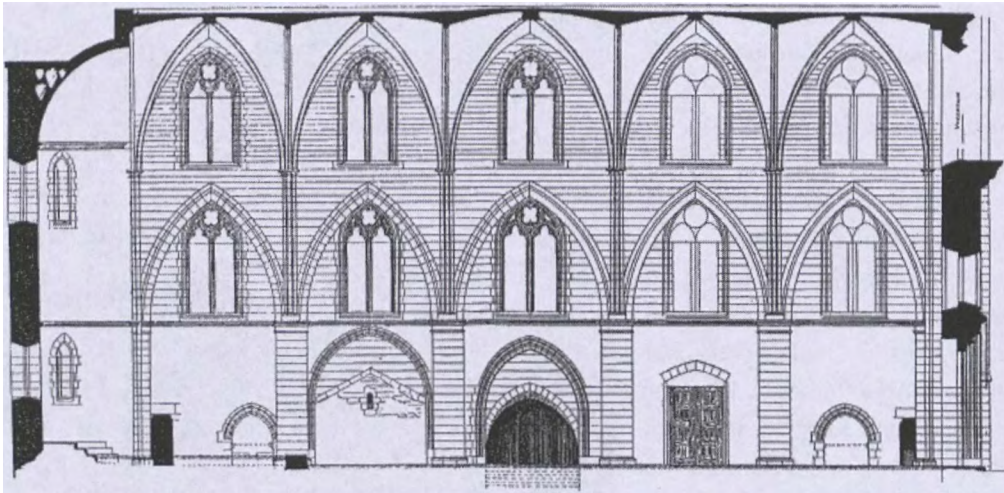
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[14] JACOBY 1984.

Fig. 12. Famagusta, Saint George of the Greeks: longitudinal section (after JEFFERY 1916)

left to its own devices, in the 1220s Latin church and secular authorities attempted to reg-
ulate the issue of tithes, and this touched upon their relations with the Orthodox. This
initiative inaugurated a period of friction and sometimes confrontation that was finally
settled in 1260 with the promulgation of the so-called *Bulla Cypria* by Pope Alexander IV,
representing a compromise between the two churches. In the course of this troubled period
the number of Greek Episcopal sees was gradually reduced from fourteen to four in order
to coincide with the recently created Latin sees, and the Orthodox prelates were confined
to rural areas. Following this arrangement the Greek bishop under whose jurisdiction the
Orthodox population of Famagusta came was to reside in the distant Karpas peninsula.[15]
Yet the mid-fourteenth century witnessed the construction of the city's new Orthodox ca-
thedral that can only have been erected at the initiative of the Greek bishop. Indeed, in
the absence of secure textual evidence, the foundation of this building is regularly cited as
evidence for the move of the Orthodox bishops out of their rural seats and into the urban
centres, barely one century after the *Bulla Cypria*.

The large scale, basilical layout, rib vaulting, carved portals, sculptural ornamentation,
tall proportions and building techniques at Saint George are all elements associated with
Gothic architecture and with its variants imported to Cyprus by the architects and masons
working for the Latin church, the monastic orders and the secular elites of the kingdom.
But in Lusignan Cyprus, as elsewhere in the medieval world, the choice of artistic styles and
practices was not subject to the same criteria as those that our modern perceptions might
like to impose. As Annemarie Weyl Carr has proposed, well established beliefs about the

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[15] SCHABEL 2005, 190–212; PAPACOSTAS forthcoming b.

Fig. 13. Famagusta: view of Saint George of the Greeks with the Latin cathedral of Saint Nicholas in the background (Photo: Author)

correlation between ethnic identity and religious affiliation on the one hand, and artistic and architectural styles and practices on the other, need to be reconsidered.[16]

In the absence of written testimonies it is difficult to imagine what the reaction of the new cathedral's audience may have actually been. Nevertheless, the Orthodox population of Famagusta would have certainly not associated its architecture with western Europe, which is of course the modern observer's instinctive reaction; very few if any would have ever had contact with a built environment beyond their island's shores, after all. Whereas as recently as a century and a half earlier the foreign style of the Latin cathedral of Nicosia (founded in the early thirteenth century) may have led to its association with the newly established Latin church, by this time it had grown roots on Cypriot soil and was surely viewed primarily as a mark of success, prestige, confidence and social advancement. It was simply perceived as the best on offer at the time, in a society that exhibited increasing signs of cultural syncretism among its constituent elements. Its architecture suggests that in fourteenth-century Famagusta what we would call Gothic had lost any cultural or ethnic affiliation it may have had earlier; it was clearly not associated with foreign rule and the concomitant antagonism in ecclesiastical affairs and initial confrontation among the various religious and linguistic

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[16] WEYL CARR 1998/99.

groups that composed the island's social landscape; it had no negative connotations for the Greek Orthodox or for any other community for that matter. A parallel development has been noted in the monumental art of Famagusta and a comparable trend has also been observed by Maria Georgopoulou in the case of Venetian Crete. What is significant about Cyprus, however, is the relatively early date of this development.[17]

By the middle of the fourteenth century the Orthodox church and the see of Famagusta in particular were clearly experiencing a period of regeneration following the difficult thirteenth century. The patrons of Saint George, presumably the Greek bishop of Famagusta and perhaps leading members of his flock, were able to afford both in financial and social terms the building of a cathedral as grand as this, borrowing heavily and unhesitatingly from the architecture of the nearby Latin cathedral. Even more significantly but perhaps not surprisingly, this was done without any reference whatsoever to the island's rich heritage in Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture from before the Latin conquest. What is more, the layout of the church was hardly appropriate for the Byzantine liturgy although, admittedly, very little is known about the way this was performed in Lusignan Cyprus, whereas the arrangement of liturgical furnishings within the church remains unclear.

The sheer scale of the undertaking is without precedent in the religious architecture of the Greek communities in former Byzantine territories. Saint George was perhaps the largest Orthodox church erected in the eastern Mediterranean in late medieval times. It was definitely one of the most important religious structures (together with the Latin cathedrals of Nicosia and Famagusta itself) built on the island since Late Antiquity, and its size would not be attained again in the local ecclesiastical architecture until modern times.[18] The financial background to its construction is not illuminated by the surviving documentation, but patronage from the city's rising Greek merchant class may have played an important role. Moreover, the surviving keystones from the vaults that bear the arms of Jerusalem testify to royal approval, if not direct involvement in the project.[19] In direct visual contact with the Latin cathedral across the urban block that separates them, it vied with it for domination over the city's landscape (fig. 13). That this became possible and came about provides a tangible measure of the state that relations between religious and ethnic communities had reached by the middle of the fourteenth century. It also illustrates the determination of the Greek church, and by extension of the community it represents, to make extraordinary use of architectural ostentation in order to affirm its presence in Famagusta and confidently proclaim its ascendancy.

e-mail: tassos.papacostas@kcl.ac.uk

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[17] WEYL CARR 2005, 315-16; SCHRYVER 2006, 394–95; BACCI 2006; GEORGOPOULOU 2005, 252.

[18] The approximate maximal internal dimensions are 43 x 21m, with a nave vault height of 20m.

[19] VAIVRE 2006, 452.

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