

Report on Othello's Island Conference 2016

Introduction

Part-funding was provided by the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies (Hellenic Society) for ten graduate students to attend Othello's Island, held at the Centre for Visual Arts and Research (CVAR), Nicosia, Cyprus, from 17 to 20 March 2016.

As a whole, this event was a great success and appears to have reached a tipping point in terms of the number of academics attending the conference, the calibre of the academic papers being proposed and selected for the event, and in the reputation Othello's Island is gaining in the wider academic world.

As a multidisciplinary exploration of the medieval and renaissance periods, the conference attracted academics with diverse specialisms from Cyprus, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Lithuania, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Italy, Canada, Russia, France, and elsewhere, and the papers presented ranged from the evolution of Byzantine church design in the middle ages and the relationship between Georgian and Greek Orthodox icon painting, to the journeys of medieval pilgrims to Cyprus and the Holy Lands and the use and abuse of medieval artefacts in Greece, Cyprus and Malta by nineteenth-century colonial powers. This is to name but a few of the topics covered, as 66 papers were presented over the course of the three day event.

Thanks to the grant from the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies a larger number of graduate and early career academics were able to attend the event, with the funding used to pay for living accommodation for this group of attendees during the event. One of the greatest successes of this accommodation was its collegiate nature, as we were able to augment the funds from the Hellenic Society to take over the entire Nicosia Youth Hostel for the duration of the conference. This allowed the younger scholars an opportunity to make use of this shared space and experience to develop academic contacts and also friendships that several have commented in their individual reports will continue long after the conference has ended.

The conference was widely publicised in Cyprus, with acknowledgement of the Hellenic Society as a key sponsor. This included reports and interviews on RIK Radio, and articles in the Cypriot press. The Hellenic Society was also acknowledged as a sponsor on the event website and in the event brochure (programme).

We hope the Hellenic Society will be kind enough to consider similar sponsorship for next year's Othello's Island event.

On the following pages is presented a collective report by those who were beneficiaries of the funding from the Hellenic Society.

Dr Michael Paraskos FRSA
Lead Organiser
Othello's Island 2016
22 March 2016
mp65@soas.ac.uk

Summary Reports

The participants part-funded by the Hellenic Society were:

Andrea-Bianca Znorovszky (Hungary)

Mabrouka Kamel (Egypt)

Harriet Jean Evans (UK)

Sarah Ann Milne (UK)

Rebecca Agar (UK)

Alexander Head (UK)

Anthony Fredette (Canada)

Daniele Dibello (Italy)

Ansgar Holtmann (Germany)

Domenico Frisone (Italy)

All papers were attended by at least some of members of the group, with the conference split over two simultaneous strands. The level of absenteeism was almost nil.

Comments elicited from **Andrea-Bianca Znorovszky**, included particular interest in the paper dealing with the transition of medieval church design in Cyprus from a central to longitudinal plan, delivered by Alessandro Camiz and Nicholas Coureas's paper on different education practises in Lusignan Cyprus. He states he was particularly interested in the variety of papers presented and the way the conference brought home to him the interactions between Greek, Ottoman and Lusignan cultures in the medieval and renaissance periods.

Mabrouka Kamel said she found the paper of Ansgar Holtmann of particular interest for the way Holtmann made use of the relationship between images and texts, which she said will be of use as a methodological approach in her own research in Egypt. She also commented on the unusual breadth of topic covered in the conference giving her access to new lines of enquiry in her own research, and she also mentioned that the conference was a particularly friendly and welcoming environment, a point reiterated by numerous other conference delegates.

Harriet Jean Evans said the experience of the conference and the papers on Cyprus in particular were an eye-opener for her as she had 'never really considered' Cyprus as a place to focus research on the medieval and renaissance periods before. She too welcomed the breadth of expertise at the conference and noted it was a useful and rewarding experience being able to present her research to scholars outside of her usual field of research. She made special mention of the friendship she struck up with Mabrouka Kamel, her roommate during the conference, as an opportunity for her to get to know someone from a muslim country for the first time.

For **Sarah Ann Milne** the ability to engage in a dialogue with speakers dealing with similar material but from different academic subject areas was the most valuable thing she gained from the conference. From this, she says she gained new insights that she will take forward in her research, including a highly specific lead, information on an historical figure called Sir John White, which she will follow up upon her return to university. She mentions the organised trips to see historical churches on the island was a particular revelation for her.

Rebecca Agar found the frequent and extensive discussions on the relationship between western playwrights and the eastern Mediterranean, not least Shakespeare and Cyprus through the play *Othello*, very interesting and useful. In particular, she noted the way this relationship is still played out and explored in the region through new interpretations of historical western writers' plays set in the Greek and middle eastern worlds. She again noted

that she had never really considered the position and role of Cyprus in the context of medieval and renaissance studies, but this had been rectified through attendance at the conference.

Alexander Head said he found the conference interesting and that it had deepened his understanding of the Greek and other cultures of Cyprus beyond the holiday images of the island with which he was most familiar. The architectural history of Cyprus, particularly the Byzantine and Gothic churches of Nicosia, where they intersect as in the Church of St Nicholas of the English, was of especial interest to him.

Anthony Fredette cited Richard Maguire's paper on the King David Treasure, a collection of Byzantine silverware found at Lambousa, Cyprus, was 'fascinating'. He noted the ability to compare this Cypriot archaeological find with similar finds elsewhere was particularly useful. He was also taken with the apparent renewed interest in the 'use of hagiography as a tool for studying historiography' in several papers, which has given him renewed confidence in an aspect of his own research methodology.

Daniele Dibello also found the methodologies used by different speakers of interest as he is attempting to clarify the methodology for his own PhD research at the present time. As well as seeing different approaches in action in the papers, he notes the discussions outside the conference auditorium were especially useful.

Ansgar Holtmann found the papers dealing with the experiences of northern European travellers to Cyprus and elsewhere in the Levant during the middle ages particularly interesting and cites Milda Kvizikevičiūtė's paper on medieval Lithuanian travellers to the eastern Mediterranean, and their encounters with Greeks, Turks and Arabs as particularly enlightening and entertaining. He notes in particular the contacts he made with other PhD students, which will lead to ongoing contacts and exchanges of information. He also notes that the Greek culture of Cyprus was a new experience for him, as he had previously been only familiar with Greeks in Greece. Although there are similarities, he notes, there were also fascinating differences that point to the position of Cyprus in the far east of the Mediterranean and its unique historical legacy.

Conclusion

As these reports demonstrate, the experience of the conference for these young scholars has been an overwhelmingly positive one that has given them not only new academic insights and leads, but an insight in to the culture and history of Cyprus, which had for many of them previously been a mystery.