

# Bare Ruined Choirs

## Turkey's war on the cultural heritage of Cyprus

BY [Katherine Eastland](#)

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*When churches fall completely out of use*

*What shall we turn them into?*

—Philip Larkin, 'Church Going'

*Nicosia*

Soon after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, the roof of St. Andronikos church in Kythrea caved in and fell into its sanctuary. No one came by to clear the rubble, so there's a heap of ruins on the ground covered with tangled greenery. From where I stand, on top of that heap, I can see that the walls, once known for their frescoes, have been stripped white and are now marked with black and neon graffiti. In some places there remain a few painted figures, including ones of Saints Peter and Paul, but their faces are chiseled out and their bodies have been pockmarked by bullets. Cars roll by every so often, but the one persistent sound is the hum of bees coming from a smashed clerestory window.

I came across this church off a road near the Agios Dimitrios crossing point on the Green Line, the boundary running through the island and keeping it cloven in two radically disparate parts: the Republic of Cyprus, and the upper third of the island Turkey seized in 1974. Turkey has since held that part under illegal military occupation, and turned it into a rogue breakaway "state" called the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), recognized by Turkey only.

Dilapidated churches like St. Andronikos are a common sight here. As the journalist Michael Jansen observes, the north, full of 12,000 years of history at a key crossroads in the Mediterranean, now looks like a "cultural wasteland."

During and soon after the invasion, museums in the north and private collections were plundered, artworks were burned in pyres, stolen, or illegally exported, 21 major archaeological sites were captured—including the ancient city kingdoms of Salamis, Soli, and Engomi—along with more than a hundred places that had been inspected or were being excavated, four castles, and over 500 churches, chapels, and monasteries, most of them dating to the Byzantine period (4th-15th centuries). From the interiors were removed several major icons, mosaics, frescoes, Bibles, wood carvings, reliquaries, silver and gold vessels, and more. Sixteen thousand icons alone are reported missing.

The Church of Cyprus and the Republic of Cyprus have worked to repatriate, with some major successes, several of these works through local, foreign, and international courts. But the list of damaged items and places keeps growing. As the occupation continues, so does destruction—whether by intent or neglect, or lack of adequate funds.

While much of the damage that took place in the north cannot be visited—most of the art hangs in other countries, was destroyed, or has been secreted away—the 500 religious buildings are still standing, at least for now. They remain as solid memories of a past that is flickering out as a new, and decidedly Turkish, culture develops in the north. The rise of that culture is quickened by the heavy influx of Turkish settlers, who currently outnumber the indigenous Turkish-Cypriot population by two-to-one. This cultural shift is apparent even in the cafés, where the drink of choice is black tea

in tulip-shaped glass cups, the sort you can buy in twelve-packs in Istanbul. Town names are now Turkish, and the twin red-and-white flags of Turkey and the TRNC are everywhere—from mountain slopes to the rear windows of vans. Another part of this shift is seen in the churches which, with their ravaged cemeteries, are arguably the elements of Greek Cypriot culture that have suffered the most in the occupation. Divorced from their original use as houses of Christian worship, they are now in ruins or used for other purposes.

Most of the 500 buildings belong to the island's Greek Orthodox Church, one of the world's earliest, founded by St. Barnabas in 46 A.D. and decreed autocephalous in 431. Others are Catholic, Maronite, Armenian Apostolic, and Anglican; a few are synagogues. Nearly all of them can be visited; but about 50 are inaccessible since they stand within the U.N.-moderated buffer zone or Turkish military camps, where they are used as barracks, hospitals, cafeterias, and warehouses.

Over a fifth of the northern churches, like roofless St. Andronikos, have been skinned of their art and left to the elements and foraging animals. About 80 other churches still have a religious use as mosques. Some of them are modest, with creaky mihrabs and sheets thrown over what remains of the iconostasis (a gilt wall where icons once hung). Others are rich, with big-branched chandeliers of glass. In St. Paraskeve in Morphou the gilt bishop's throne and epistyle have been reassembled into a mihrab and mimbar. Some mosques that were formerly churches have been abandoned.

Most of the churches have been cast in new, secular roles as garages, luxury hotels, granaries, storage rooms for furniture or potatoes or hay, classrooms, bars, cafés, and art studios. One is a morgue. A few, such as the St. Barnabas Monastery in the Karpass peninsula, have been set up as icon galleries with whitewashed walls, but the works on view are not native to the buildings and are young and relatively worthless, dating from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Of the Christian buildings in the occupied north, three are kept, at least in appearance, as churches. But restrictions on their use and maintenance prevent Christians living in the north from worshiping in them regularly without interruption by Turkish officials.

The history of converting churches into mosques and mosques into churches, and of reappropriating buildings of any faith for secular purpose, is long and well documented. But the argument that Cyprus's occupied religious buildings, and the art within them, are legitimate spoils of war does not hold. In today's Europe, cultural property is seen as subsisting in a special niche that should be protected. Under the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), destruction of cultural heritage is considered a war crime. Furthermore, the European Union itself has several directives on cultural property—which Turkey would have to follow should it enter the EU. (Notably, one of the preconditions the EU has set for Turkey's admission is a settlement to the Cyprus problem; i.e., the island's reunification.)

This past summer in Washington the U.S. Helsinki Commission (CSCE), which monitors compliance between and among member states on the Helsinki accords, issued a 50-page report for Congress on the state of Cyprus's cultural and religious heritage, saying that it was "in peril" and that "under conventional and customary law, Turkey, as an occupying power, bears responsibility for acts against cultural property." It also numbers the various ways Turkey has violated international humanitarian law, as set forth in post-World War II treaties that Ankara has signed.

While there is a promising, but perhaps fatally slow-going, effort to reunify Cyprus by diplomatic means, the Church of Cyprus—which has remained independent through every vicissitude of political rule—believes it has a special, natural obligation to its religious heritage. But this heritage, especially if it's already in shambles, fades in importance when urgent matters such as governance and property distribution are being addressed by the diplomats drafting a political settlement for Cyprus. The churches themselves simply don't get much attention. But the Church, headed by Archbishop Chrysostomos II, is taking significant measures to try to save its property, usurped by the TRNC. And the Church reminds the EU that Turkey still has a long way to go before it conforms with EU policies.

Around Easter last year Chrysostomos opened an office in Brussels next to EU headquarters. When I met with him here in Nicosia—in his long office, featuring an icon of Christ in judgment on the wall behind his desk—he cheerfully said that at the new office there will always be a bishop to welcome EU parliamentarians and "present and promote our efforts." By doing this, Chrysostomos hopes to "exert some pressure with the hope that we will manage to restore all the monuments if possible before it's too late." Thirty-eight are near collapse.

"Of course, it goes without saying that I can see the huge difficulties associated with such a task, not to say its impossible nature. Unfortunately," he continues, "it seems to me that Europe does not know the real dimensions of the

problem.”

Chrysostomos is frank about meddling in politics:

I know that the government might be reacting to such an idea [direct involvement of the Church] especially at this time, but we will continue our efforts. We invited [Cypriot] President Christofias to come and inaugurate our offices with us in Brussels, but he didn't.

To further publicize the churches—and prepare as much as possible for their pending restoration—the Church has underwritten, through the Kykkos Monastery, the work of a young Byzantinist at the Hellenic Open University in Patras, Greece, to catalog all accessible religious monuments in the north. Professor Charalampos G. Chotzakoglou started work on the project with a team of archaeologists and other Byzantinists in 2003, when the Green Line was partially opened by the TRNC government, allowing people to cross the line freely for the first time since 1974. The Helsinki Commission consulted Chotzakoglou's detailed account when it drafted its report for Congress last summer.

Incomplete reports had been made before Chotzakoglou's, such as those by foreign journalists visiting the area, and by Turkish-Cypriot journalists such as Mehmet Yasin, who wrote some of the most eloquent testimonies. But the first report, UNESCO's in 1975, was shelved because UNESCO feared it was too damning! (It has only recently become available, and on a strictly limited basis.) The man who submitted this report—Jacques Dalibard of Canada, who was specially appointed by UNESCO to assess the state of cultural heritage after the 1974 war—was not even allowed access to some of the most damaged churches. Still, he wrote that the whole island of Cyprus should be “regarded as one huge monument,” and that a team of specialists be dispatched solely to protect the remnants of Greek heritage in the north.

His suggestions were not followed.

Chotzakoglou's findings were published in a book in 2008 (*Religious Monuments in Turkish-Occupied Cyprus: Evidence and Acts of Continuous Destruction*; Lefkosia) and will soon be available in an online public database. He has also been tending to a similar project with Greek and Turkish Cypriots on all religious monuments on the island (Muslim and Christian), [cyprustemples.com](http://cyprustemples.com). It is a valuable site, but needs to be updated: Some of the recent destruction, such as the bulldozing of St. Catherine Church in Gerani in the summer of 2008, and its cannibalizing for buildings in the nearby village of Trikomo, has not been noted.

Incidentally, the razing of St. Catherine is not an isolated case: In the past five years 15 churches have been leveled. That such destruction still occurs is especially disappointing because, since 2007, there has been a special government-appointed technical committee of Greek and Turkish Cypriots dedicated to the maintenance and restoration of heritage on both sides of the island. (To be sure, these committees are destined to do only some good as long as Cyprus remains divided: Their success depends on the good faith of both sides to honor promises to restore the other side's damaged buildings.)

Destruction did occur to Muslim monuments south of the Green Line, mostly in the years leading up to the war, when both communities were fighting and the Turkish Cypriots, in the minority, bore the brunt of the violence. But the Church and the republic have worked to restore those buildings—no doubt hoping for a gesture of goodwill in return—and since 1989 the government has spent over \$600,000 in the effort. So far, 17 historic mosques damaged and looted by Greek Cypriots have been restored. In 2000 the project to restore and protect all Muslim sites in the south began; the Department of Antiquities has recorded all their names and will guard them until they are renovated. This project should be completed sometime this year.

In a recent meeting proposed by the EU, the archbishop met with the mufti of northern Cyprus and said that he would welcome him as his guest in the south to inspect the Muslim sites. If the mufti did not find a site well preserved, he said, then “we as the Church of Cyprus would be willing to take full financial responsibility to restore it.” In exchange, he told the mufti that he wanted him to “facilitate our crossing to the Turkish-occupied area in order to begin restoring our churches with our money. And we will bear any and all costs.”

The mufti declined the offer, and suggested that one church in the north be restored for every mosque restored in the south. Deeming the mufti's proposal a “worthless gift”—there are far fewer mosques in the south than churches in the north, and it would take, at best, 500 years to renovate the north's 500 churches and “in 500 years there will be nothing for us to restore”—Chrysostomos rejected the counteroffer.

The north's “real policy,” he believes, “is to procrastinate so the monuments themselves might be destroyed in time.”

On the morning before I visited some of the northern churches, I walked through the Archbishop's Palace museum and looked at the art on view. In one room, I stopped by seven small wooden boxes, each with a glass top and containing a head of a saint, archangel, or Christ rendered in tesserae. The heads rested on white tissue paper that ran around their heads like second halos or bandages.

The master smuggler Aydin Dikmen had raggedly cut these exceptional late fifth/early sixth-century works—some of the few to have survived the rampant iconoclasm of the eighth century—from the walls of the Church of Panagía Kanakariá at Lythrankomí. Efforts at restoration and rocky international flights had weakened them further, causing them to crack. At one point, Dikmen tried to repair the loose tesserae—some with sockets of silver imported from Bethlehem—with Elmer's glue. While they once reminded a visitor of heaven and immaterial gain, they are now symbols of earth and material loss. Which is painful precisely because, as Chrysostomos says, “these are not just art objects for us.”

The case for the restoration of these churches, and the art within them, is compelling—and the loss to art history and to Cypriot culture is immense and immeasurable. Until the island is one again—which could happen in four months or four decades—its two sides will continue to diverge, becoming more lopsided, with a Turkish culture taking root in the north amid the continuing collapse of its Hellenic heritage.

Whatever happens to Cyprus, there remains an eloquent, otherworldly hope, as expressed by Paul in a letter to the Christians at Corinth at about the same time the Church of Cyprus was founded by his coworker Barnabas: “For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” Paul's thought is especially poignant when you're standing inside a church in early ruin, or looking at a torn mosaic—things that were made, at one time, as if to last.

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