



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

## Center for Middle Eastern Studies



### Cyprus and 'The Other'

The island of Cyprus is a small country in the very east of the

Mediterranean Sea. It is located close to three continents: Africa, Asia and

Europe, just 40 miles south of Turkey and 60 miles west of Lebanon. Is it European? Is

it Middle Eastern? In fact it is neither, but a blended place whose inhabitants share the

description "Cypriot." It acted as a model for cultural tolerance until its release from

British rule in 1960 when it became the Republic of Cyprus and entered an era of cultural

disagreement, resulting finally in a brutal civil war, brought to a halt by United Nations

intervention in 1974. Although the island is primarily shared between people of the Greek

and Turkish cultures, it is unlikely to see either on their opposite sides of the island.

Why? It is because they see one another as "the other," and not as "same."

Because of its location as a "stepping stone" between Europe, Africa, and the Middle

East, Cyprus has been at the crossroads of civilizations for thousands of years. The

island is 160 miles long, 60 miles wide at its broadest point, from the Golden Beach in

the North to Aphrodite's Rock in the south, to the Troodos Mountains and St. Hilarion's

Castle overlooking the jewel-like harbor at Kyrenia. Cyprus' very name, which translates

as "copper," provides insight into its historical value as a place not only to find fresh

provisions and water, but valuable metal, as well.

The island's location positioned it for reoccurring conquest, from the Neolithic Age to the present. It has been claimed at different times by all three of the continents. Ancient Greeks in the era of the city-states, named Cyprus as the birthplace of Aphrodite, and left behind impressive ruins of ancient stadiums. Phoenicians, the great traders of the Mediterranean, sailed the coastline, influencing commerce. Later, Roman armies took the island and Antony made a gift of Cyprus to Cleopatra. The Bible mentions Cyprus as the site of Paul's first Christian conversion (Barnabus). Medieval knights, including Richard the Lion-Hearted, established castles and small kingdoms on Cyprus during the Crusades, resulting in strings of solid forts and castles throughout the island. An aunt of the prophet Muhammed joined her husband to conquer Cyprus, died during the attempt, and her memorial, the Umm Harum mosque, has become one of the most sacred places of worship in Islam. The Byzantines helped establish uncountable Greek Orthodox monasteries, and the Ottomans held power until modern times when Britain claimed it as part of its empire. After a colorful history that has included dozens of major and minor cultural influences, today's inhabitants, divided by a UN buffer zone, cannot recognize one another's humanity.

The uneasy truce between Turkish and Greek Cypriots has been enforced to a degree by the "Green Line," a border which divides the small island into two-thirds Greek and one-third Turkish. Even the capitol city, Nicosia on the Greek side, Lefkosha on the Turkish, is separated by the buffer. The fact is few persons from either side cross to the other, immersed in memories of the past and fears for the future, Greek and Turkish Cypriots continue to view one another as "others."

Turkish and Greek Cypriots once lived side by side, or at least, street by street. Today, even with minimal contact and knowledge of the opposite culture, both sides refer to “the others” as being dangerous and dishonest. Tourists at play on the islands sunny beaches do not understand that the people they speak with, will not speak to one another. What can the future of this small country hold, without its citizens recognizing one another as fellow humans? How can humans learn to recognize “same” instead of “other”?