

## **A Short Report on Three Newly Accessible Churches in the Syrian Quarter of Famagusta**

**Allan Langdale and Michael J. K. Walsh**

*Eastern Mediterranean University, North Cyprus*

The northwest corner of the walled city of Famagusta was known in the middle ages as the Syrian Quarter as many refugee communities from Syria, such as the Maronites, Jacobites, and Nestorians lived and founded their churches in that sector of the town (Fig. 1). The presence of these groups was precipitated by an exodus of Levantine, non-Latin Christians which began, more or less, in 1291 after the fall of the crusader city of Acre to the advancing armies of Saladin.<sup>1</sup> The Syrian Quarter is also the location of the small Armenian church, the Latin Carmelite church, an underground church called St. Mary of Bethlehem, and the scant remains of a small medieval Orthodox church excavated by the Department of Antiquities in the 1930s. Until November of 2007 three of these—the Maronite church of St. Anne, the small Orthodox church, and the Jacobite church (also known as the “Tanner’s Mosque” or “Tabakhane”)—were inaccessible owing to their integration into a military base in 1974. However, this area has now been opened to the public after thirty-three years and the attendant opportunity to visit justifies an assessment of the historical architecture of these previously restricted buildings. This report gives a brief account of the three churches now accessible to the public but also includes a brief description of the nearby church of St. Mary of Bethlehem which is one of Famagusta’s most interesting yet least known ecclesiastical edifices.

The church of St. Anne (Figs. 2-3) is well preserved with its vaulting intact.<sup>2</sup> Although originally a Latin, Catholic church (probably Benedictine) it was given over to the Maronites at some point in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The interior consists of a single hall with two groin vaulted bays and a polygonal apse with a ribbed vault over it (Fig. 4). Two transverse arches springing from corbels at the clerestory level demarcate the bays of the vaulting. In its general plan it has similarities to the now ruined St. George of the Latins in Famagusta.

The façade has a simple doorway which has been augmented with additional masonry. Perhaps there were structural concerns about the integrity of the very large lintel which may have threatened to fail under

its own considerable weight. Today the door is completely filled with concrete. In the tympanum, however, some pigments from a fresco survive and the subject matter was similar to the frescoed tympanum of St. Mary of Carmel nearby: the Virgin and Child flanked by angels. Mary's large halo and her purple shawl (the *maphorion*) are discernable, though very faded (Fig. 5). Above the portal are a row of corbels and post holes for the timber-roofed porch which was originally appended to the facade. Above this level is a single lancet window and, above that, three corbels which once carried a small, shallow wooden porch in front of the double bells which hung in the two arches of the belfry. At the top of the belfry is a flagstaff holder. Remnants of similar flagstaff holders can be found on the north and south sides of the belfry at the same level, just around the corner from the façade. More of these can be found at the top of the roof line of the north and south sides. The church must have presented a very impressive spectacle with its many richly coloured flags and banners flying in the persistent winds of Famagusta (Fig. 6). The only other decoration on the exterior is a cross carved in relief on the north wall on the west side which recent research suggests might represent good will to the Greek community or indicate the presence of a relic of the True Cross housed inside.<sup>3</sup>

The interior had an interesting contraption, where a pulley was stored in a shed-like room on the roof and it raised and lowered either a reliquary or candelabra through a hole in the ceiling. Whatever it was, it must have added a dramatic element to the liturgies. George Jeffery suggested that it may have lowered a model of the dove of the Holy Spirit on to the altar, though a chandelier of some sort seems more likely.<sup>4</sup>

There were also, at one time, significant frescos inside the church. Some indications of the original decorations are found in a photograph from the Conway Library at the Courtauld Institute in London, taken c. 1936, which shows what currently lies hidden or lost (Fig. 7).<sup>5</sup> Six panels depict *The Descent from the Cross*, *The Entombment*, *The Death of the Virgin*, an image of a Bishop, *The Presentation of Christ at the Temple* and *The Baptism of Christ*. This is what Enlart saw in 1896 and what was also described by Jeffery in 1917. Both complained of the advanced state of disrepair of the frescoes, not least because the church had been used as a stable until 1907.

Enlart and Jeffery both criticized a *Pentecost* scene, now lost, which the former described as "absurd" and the latter, "deplorable". Other

panels were admired, however, and their eclecticism enjoyed, where a “western” style of image-making was employed for principal characters (i.e. Christ in *The Crucifixion*) and a “Byzantine” style for other peripheral characters.<sup>6</sup> Such stylistic juxtapositions within a single painting might lead art historians to questions concerning cultural exchange in Cyprus from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Jaroslav Folda, for example, has made the point that Greek craftsmen were called upon to paint in Latin churches, and so represented local hands guided by foreign masters.<sup>7</sup> *The Crucifixion* and *The Death of the Virgin* in the church of St. Anne demonstrate strong similarities with the chapel at Pyrga which Enlart could confidently date to 1421.

The decorations were divided into at least 3 horizontal registers (Fig. 8). The top register was painted white, onto which red masonry outlines were painted. A trace of an architectural detail remains on the eastern section of the south wall, similar to a detail in *The Flagellation* in the nearby Armenian Church. A photograph taken in St. Anne’s in December of 2007 (Fig. 9) shows the red painted masonry (top left), the exposure of ashlar masonry under plaster (top right), modern graffiti (bottom left), and the level of the whitewash.

The first register, at ground level, has been concreted over. The first impression is that whatever once lay beneath must now be lost. There are reasons for optimism, however, as it seems the walls were tiled before the concrete was applied. In short, the concrete does not lie directly on the painted surface. Elsewhere, a wooden protective barrier was constructed before the application of cement. One can also see, barely, the remains of *The Assumption* over the founder’s tomb on the north wall. Opposite this, in the western portion of the southern wall, images of Saints Catherine and Ursula are framed within a pair of arches with an ornate and colourful vine decoration (Figs. 10-11). Their faces have gone, as has the orb that Catherine held in her left hand.<sup>8</sup> The palm leaf in Ursula’s hand, symbolic of her martyrdom, has also vanished. Yet we can be certain of their identification, despite the loss of their attributes, as their names are painted beside their heads. On the west wall two male saints are visible, with halos in relief. Gone are the heraldic shields of Italy, the cross of Malta and the useful inscription which told Enlart not only the name of the church but also (mistakenly) the patron of the artistic work within.<sup>9</sup>

Though the paintings are in an advanced state of disrepair, there is yet a lot to be learned from what remains. Cyprus, and Famagusta in

particular, was a historical nexus for western and Byzantine traditions. The continual interaction with Venice, Mistra, Pisa, Constantinople and the Levantine ports of the east, must have had artistic impact.<sup>10</sup> S. H. Young wonders how the western influences in paintings got to Cyprus in the first place. Were they direct or filtered through Syria, Palestine and Lebanon?<sup>11</sup> Issues such as this led the leading scholar of Cypriot Byzantine painting, Annemarie Weyl Carr to ask:

what was the art of the western minority: how much was it the product of western Europe directly; how much was it the product of an eastern Mediterranean cultural *mélange*; how much did it respond to the local, Orthodox artistic production?<sup>12</sup>

Another tragic loss, architectural this time, is of a lovely apsidal chapel photographed by Enlart in the 1890s which was located about 12 meters off the northwest corner of St. Anne's (Fig. 12). This elegant example of medieval architecture was still extant in 1918 when Jeffery wrote about it in his survey of the historic monuments of Cyprus.<sup>13</sup> How and when it was destroyed is unknown.

A hundred meters north of St. Anne's is the medieval church often referred to as the 'Tanner's Mosque' because it was used in the Ottoman period as a prayer hall for the leather tanners in that quarter of the city (Fig. 13). But the building's original function was as a church for the Jacobite community. The Jacobites were a sect from Syria that believed Christ had a single nature (that is, they rejected the notion of the Trinity) and they thus were considered heretics by the Roman Catholics. But the Jacobites, like the Nestorians and Maronites (also Arabic speaking Christians), found refuge and some degree of prosperity in Famagusta by the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Records indicate substantial Jacobite presence as early as the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century when, for example, in 1264 they are recorded as having a Bishop named Athanasius. It is likely that the other Syrian communities were also present at this earlier time. These Syriac communities, with their own religious traditions, were often at odds with their Lusignan, Catholic overlords and the papacy. Still, they found some degree of sanctuary in medieval Famagusta.

The church consists of two groin-vaulted bays, separated by a transverse rib, with a semi-circular apse with a semi-dome on top of it (the divisions are clearly demarcated by the rise and fall of the rooflines

along the north side). A 19<sup>th</sup> century drawing by Enlart gives a good sense of the interior space and its mural articulation (Fig. 14). On the exterior, the west portal has slender colonnettes in its jambs. The voussoirs consist of a distinctive zigzagging moulding—similar designs are found on the nearby Nestorian church—followed by a register of flower motifs and a row of what look like sprays of slender leaves. This leaf motif is visible on the capitals of all three of the building's portals. Framing all of this is the gothic hood mould typical of the Lusignan period. A large stone lintel has a square, raised section which may have been carved in relief—possibly a patron's coat of arms or a cross—but was chipped away when the building was converted to a mosque. At the very top of the façade is a little arch for the church's bell with flagstaff holders on either side. Two rainspouts also survive on this north side, sporting dog-like faces with their ears sticking out and their spout-mouths open.

In 1936 the remains of a small three-apse church, about 15 by 10.5 meters in size, were uncovered about 100 meters southeast of the Jacobite church. These were excavated by Mogabgab in that same year.<sup>14</sup> Excavation photographs from the Mogabgab Archive of the Famagusta Department of Antiquities show work proceeding in an almost empty quarter of the city (Fig. 15). The three semi-circular apses are visible today and sheltered under makeshift roofing. The boundaries of the structure are visible (Fig. 16) but otherwise the site has been obscured by a monument to Atatürk directly on the church's foundations. Mogabgab found remains of four column bases at the center of the structure, thus indicating the columnar supports for a small dome over the center of the nave (or perhaps a timber-framed construction—stone merchants were said to have ravaged this site, thus robbing architectural historians of the building materials which could have resolved the issue of the building's superstructure<sup>15</sup>). Two of these bases are octagonal and two more were originally circular but roughly carved to match the others. Mogabgab thought that they originated, as do so many marble fragments of Famagusta's churches, from Salamis' ruins. Several burials were found under the church's pavements, indicating that the church may have been used by an important family as a kind of funerary chapel.

The most remarkable feature of the church is a large rock-cut cavern about 4 meters below ground level and a few feet to the south of the actual church structure (Fig. 17). Access to the grotto was from a trap door set into the flooring of the west aisle. This led down a narrow

vaulted and stepped corridor about 7 meters long. The stairway, in turn, opened up into a spacious cave over 13 meters long, 5 meters wide and about 2.5 meters high (Fig. 18). A rectangular shaft light-well, now blocked up, helped illuminate the interior. Mogabgab discovered a mass burial of numerous detached skulls. Bronze coins from the reigns of the Lusignan kings Henry II (1316-24) and James I (1382-98) helped indicate the date of the cavern. If the church was built over the grotto in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as the coins indicate, it would place the church firmly in Famagusta's most prolific era of ecclesiastic construction. During the 1936 excavation campaign, the thin wall of stone at the south side of the grotto was broken through to facilitate the clearing of the cave. In 1974, the cave was used as a command bunker for the Turkish Army. Today, one can still gain access to the cavern by entering that lower door in a depression a few meters south of the site of the church.

Another fascinating church lies about 70 meters to the southeast of the apse of St. Anne's, just outside the fence of the former military base. From the street the building looks quite uninteresting and small, with a single door in the center of a low, arched stone façade (Fig. 19). This door, quite against expectations, opens to a flight of steps that, like the Orthodox Church just described, leads down into an underground cavern. However, this underground church is half constructed with a large pointed barrel vault and part quarried out of the solid rock (Fig. 20). At the back of the quarried section, on the left, are a couple of niches carved into the wall, supposedly a focus of devotional exercises, maybe even containing an icon or a sacred statue. Perhaps one of the niches functioned as a prothesis for liturgical preparations. On the corbel of the north strainer arch is carved the double cross associated with the Lusignans, thus indicating a medieval date consistent with the pointed vaulting of the nave. A Genoese map published by Catherine Otten-Froux, in which a church called St. Mary of Bethlehem is marked on the spot of this underground church, is the only reference which helps with an identification.<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, virtually nothing is known of this church and it appears in none of the standard references. Even Enlart, normally thorough, neglected it. On current tourist maps of Famagusta there is a shrine called 'The Underground Church' (located across from the football field in the northeast part of the old city) but this is merely a medieval cellar of the nearby nunnery which in later years was turned into a shrine to St. Fitou. The other two underground churches just mentioned, as well





Fig. 2: The Maronite Church of St. Anne, Famagusta.  
Photograph by Allan Langdale

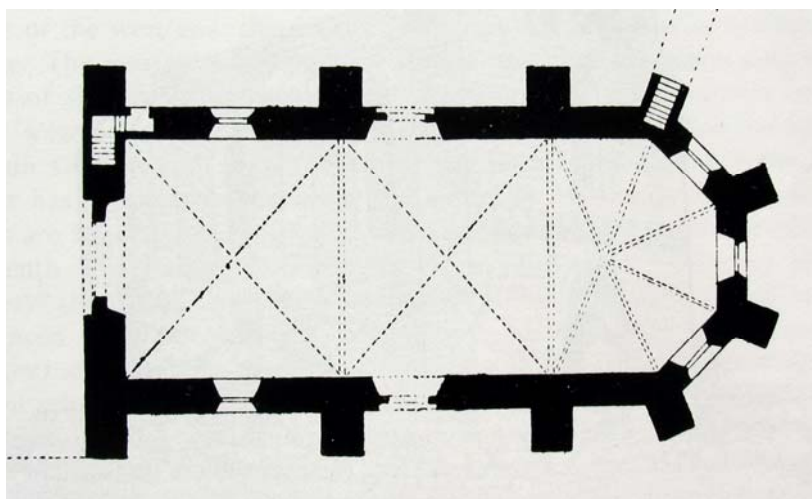


Fig. 3: Plan of the Maronite Church of St. Anne, Famagusta.  
Source: Enlart, Trigraph Edition





Fig. 4: Vaulting of apse of the Maronite Church of St. Anne, Famagusta.  
Photograph by Wilbert 'Skip' Norman



Fig. 5: Tympanum of the Maronite Church of St. Anne, Famagusta.  
Fresco of Mary and Infant Christ. Photograph by Wilbert 'Skip' Norman

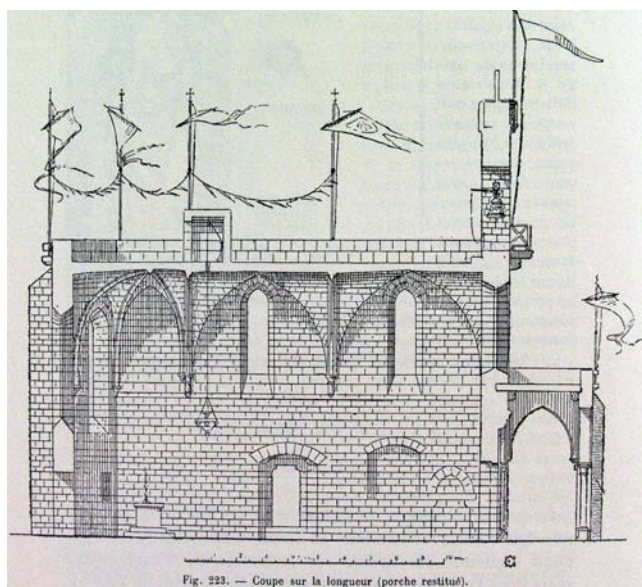


Fig. 6: Drawing by Camille Enlart, c. 1890, of the Maronite Church of St. Anne, Famagusta, with banners in flagstaffs. Source: Enlart, Trigraph Edition



Fig. 7: Photograph taken c. 1936 by Mrs. Bardswell.  
Photograph Conway Photo Archive, Courtauld Institute



Fig. 8: Interior of Church of St. Anne, Famagusta, 2007.  
Photograph by Wilbert “Skip” Norman



Fig.9: Architectural and figural elements in some surviving frescoes in the church of St. Anne, Famagusta, 2007. Photograph by Wilbert “Skip” Norman





Fig. 10: Frescos depicting SS. Ursula and Catherine, the church of St. Anne, Famagusta, 2007. Photograph by Wilbert “Skip” Norman



Fig. 11: Decoration of arch between SS. Ursula and Catherine, Church of St. Anne, Famagusta, 2007. Photograph by Wilbert “Skip” Norman



Fig. 12: Photograph of lost chapel near St. Anne's.  
Photograph Enlart, c. 1890



Fig. 13: The Jacobite Church ("Tanner's Mosque"), Famagusta.  
Photograph by Allan Langdale

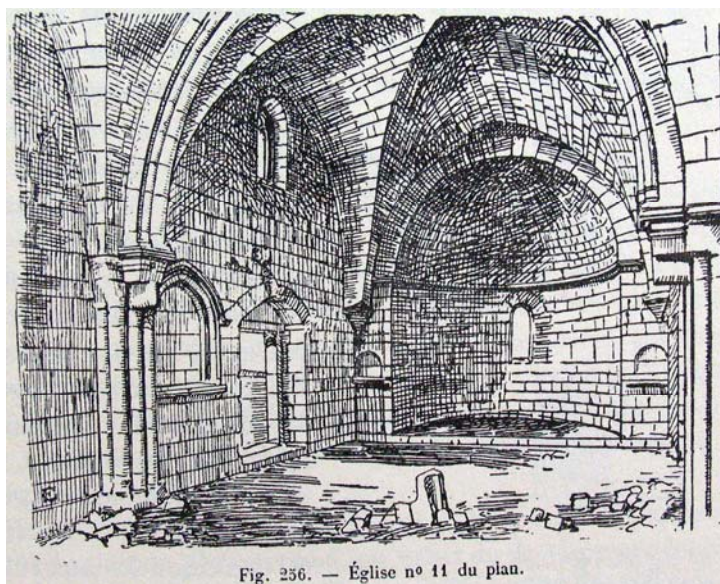


Fig. 14: Drawing by Camille Enlart, c. 1890  
Interior of the Jacobite Church ("Tanner's Mosque").  
Source: Enlart, Trigraph Edition



Fig. 15: Excavations of the Unidentified Orthodox Church, Famagusta, 1936.  
Photograph Mogabgab Archive, Department of Antiquities, Famagusta



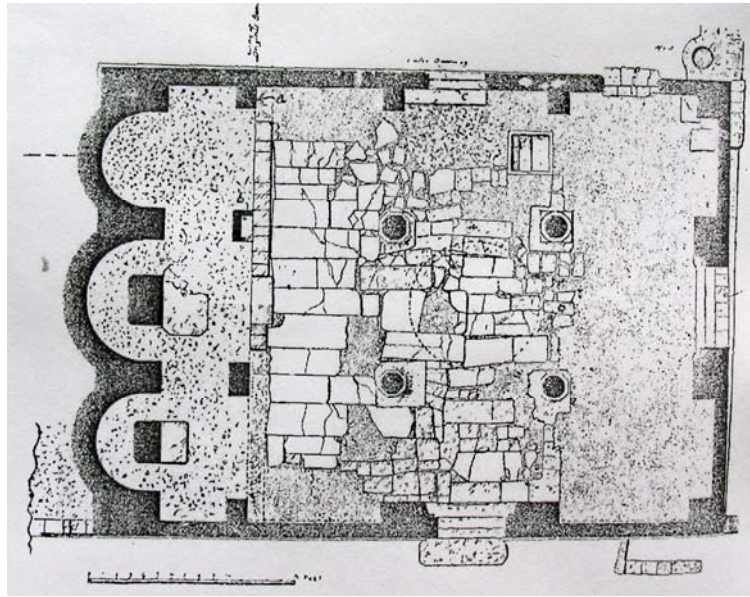


Fig. 16: Plan of the Unidentified Orthodox church.

Source: Mogabgab, 1936

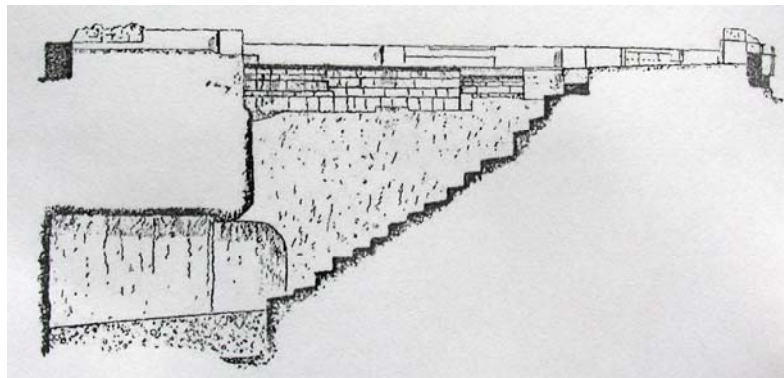


Fig. 17: Cut-away view of the grotto of the Unidentified Orthodox church.

Source: Mogabgab, 1936



Fig. 18: Grotto of Unidentified Medieval Orthodox church, Famagusta.  
Photograph by Allan Langdale



Fig. 19: Façade of the Underground church of St. Mary of Bethlehem,  
Famagusta. Photograph by Allan Langdale





Fig. 20: Interior of Underground Church of St. Mary of Bethlehem, Famagusta. Photography by Allan Langdale

---

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See David Jacoby, “The Rise of a New Emporium in the Eastern Mediterranean: Famagusta in the Late 13<sup>th</sup> Century,” in *Studies on the Crusader States and Venetian Expansion* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1989), 145-179. See also Peter Edbury, “Famagusta in 1300,” in *Cyprus and the Crusades* (Nicosia, 1995), 337-353.

<sup>2</sup> Each of the standard surveys of Cypriot historical architecture contain entries on this church, including Camille Enlart, *Gothic Art and the Renaissance in Cyprus*, trans. David Hunt (London: Trigraph & the Leventis Foundation, 1987, [1899]), 274-280; Rupert Gunnis, *Historic Cyprus: A Guide to its Town and Villages, Monasteries and Castles* (London: K. Rustem & Bros., 1936), 100; and George Jeffery, *A Description of the Historic Monuments of Cyprus* (London: Zeno Press, 1983, [1918]), 140-142. More recently, Philippe Plagnieux and Thierry Soulard, “L’Eglise Sainte-Anne,” in *L’Art Gothique en Chypre, Memoires de l’Academie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*, edited by

Jean-Bernard de Vaivre and Philippe Plagnieux, vol 34 (Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 2006), 261-265. This volume also has an introduction to medieval Famagusta by Catherine Otten-Froux, 109-118

<sup>3</sup> Plagnieux and Soulard, 261-265.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffery, 140.

<sup>5</sup> The photographs in the Conway Archive were taken by a Mrs. Bardswell who was invited by Theophilus Mogabgab, the Director of Antiquities for the Famagusta District, to help with the documentation of Famagusta's frescoes. Bardswell also photographed frescos in Saint George of the Greeks, the Armenian Church, and the Church of St. Mary of Carmel.

<sup>6</sup> Enlart, 279 and Jeffery, 141.

<sup>7</sup> J. Folda, "Crusader Art in the Kingdom of Cyprus c. 1275-91," in *Cyprus and the Crusades*, edited by N. Coureas & J. Riley-Smith (Nicosia, 1995). See also the issues discussed in M. Emmanuel, "Monumental Painting in Cyprus during the Last Phase of the Lusignan Dynasty, 1374 – 1489," in *Medieval Cyprus: Studies in Art, Architecture and History in Memory of Doula Mouriki*, edited by N. P. Ševčenko and C. Moss (Princeton, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> A beaded sleeve is still clear, similar in appearance to one in the Nestorian Church on the image of Menas, whose open left hand carries a ship graffito. At St. Anne's too there is a ship graffito on the exterior wall on the south west side which bears stylistic similarities to one on the interior of the destroyed Orthodox Church of Agios Nikolaus in the Greek Quarter of Famagusta. For Ship Graffiti in Famagusta see: M. J. K. Walsh, "On of the Princypalle Havenes of the See: The Port of Famagusta and the Ship Graffiti in the Church of St. George of the Greeks," *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* (Forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> Enlart believed that Corands Tarigos was a Greek of Famagusta who had paid for the interior decoration of the church, but recently this has been questioned by Plagnieux and Soulard who suggest strongly that he was Genoese. Plagnieux and Soulard, 261-265.

<sup>10</sup> The same point was made for painting in Genoa at this time, see: Robert S. Nelson, "A Byzantine Painter in Trecento Genoa: The Last Judgement at S. Lorenzo," *The Art Bulletin* 67, 4 (December, 1985): 548 - 565.

<sup>11</sup> S. Hatfield Young, *Byzantine Painting in Cyprus During the Early Lusignan Period* (Unpublished PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1983), 11.

- <sup>12</sup> A. Weyl-Carr, "Art in the Court of the Lusignan Kings," in *Cyprus and the Devotional Arts of Byzantium in the Era of the Crusades* (Ashgate Var., 2005), 240.
- <sup>13</sup> Jeffery, 142.
- <sup>14</sup> Theodore Mogabgab, "An Unidentified Church in Famagusta," in *Report of the Department of Antiquities 1936*, Part II (Nicosia, 1936), 86-96.
- <sup>15</sup> Mogabgab thought that the church may have initially had a dome supported by sturdier piers, but that the dome may have collapsed and been replaced by the columns and a lighter, timber roofing.
- <sup>16</sup> Reproduced in Catherine Otten-Froux, "Notes sur quelques monuments de Famagouste à la fin du Moyen Age," in *Mosaic: Festschrift for A.H.S. Megaw*, edited by J. Herrin, M. Mullett, C. Otten-Froux (London: British School at Athens Studies, 2001), 145-154.