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Big Politics Around Cyprus. The Ottoman Empire and Venice in the Struggle for the Island (1570–1573)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article is to provide an idea of the role that Cyprus played in the rivalry between the Ottoman Empire at the height of its development in the sixteenth century, and the Christian forces in the Mediterranean basin, in particular, the Republic of Venice. The Battle of Lepanto is one stage in this rivalry, which culminated in major changes in the strategic and economic balance in the eastern Mediterranean. The article refers to the causes of this rivalry, the war for Cyprus and the Battle of Lepanto, and also points to the important theme of the battle itself in Polish art, also in a metaphorical context. The article concludes by pointing out the consequences of the fall of Cyprus and its placement as a province of the Ottoman Empire.

KEYWORDS: Cyprus, Lepanto (Battle of Lepanto), Venice, Ottoman Empire, Holy League

STRESZCZENIE

Wielka polityka wokół Cypru. Imperium Osmańskie i Wenecja w zmaganiach o wyspę (1570–1573)

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przybliżenie roli, jaką odgrywał Cypr w rywalizacji pomiędzy Imperium Osmańskim, znajdującym się w XVI w. w apogeum swojego rozwoju, a siłami chrześcijańskimi w basenie śródziemnomorskim, w szczególności zaś Republiką Wenecką. Bitwa pod Lepanto jest jednym z etapów tej rywalizacji, która zakończyła się istotnymi zmianami w układzie strategicznym i ekonomicznym we wschodniej części basenu Morza Śródziemnego. W artykule nawiązano do przyczyn tej rywalizacji, wojny o Cypr, bitwy pod Lepanto oraz wskazano również na istotny wątek samej bitwy poruszony w sztuce polskiej, również w kontekście metaforycznym. Artykuł w podsumowaniu wskazuje na następstwa upadku wyspy i znalezienia się jej w składzie prowincji Imperium Osmańskiego.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Cypr, Lepanto (bitwa pod Lepanto), Wenecja, Imperium Osmańskie, Liga Święta

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The idea of writing this text referring to the Ottoman-Venetian (Christian) struggle for Cyprus came from my lecture titled “Lepanto 1571. The Battle that Saved Europe or Victory without Consequences?”, delivered in October 2021 as part of the *Important Anniversaries* series organized by Wawel Royal Castle. In my lecture, I presented the causes, course and consequences of the Battle of Lepanto, the last great clash of galleys and one of the most important events of the sixteenth century, against the background of the sixteenth-century struggle of the Ottoman Turks¹ against Christians in the Mediterranean basin, which took place against the background of the Ottoman-Venetian war for Cyprus.²

In the context of the article, it is worth mentioning the Polish episode related to the Battle of Lepanto, and thus the War of Cyprus. In Poland, the Battle of Lepanto is particularly well known thanks to the monumental painting by the Venetian painter working in Poland, Tommaso Dolabella (ca. 1570–1650), *The Battle of Lepanto*, which is located in one of the rooms of the Wawel Royal Castle, called the hall of the Battle of Orsha. This was also the context of the lecture I mentioned in the footnote.³ Dolabella’s painting commemorates the victory of the Holy League fleet against the great Turkish armada near the fortress of Lepanto. As the battle between the Christian and Muslim fleets raged at sea, a procession made its way through the streets of Rome, and throngs of the faithful gathered to pray the rosary, imploring Our Lady to intercede for the embattled Christian coalition. *The Battle of Lepanto* is held in the Wawel collection as a deposit of the Poznan Archdiocese since 1927 (Wilczyński, 2003, p. 200; Stankiewicz, 2020, p. 142).⁴ The painting was commissioned in 1632 by

- 1 In this article, I use the terms “Ottoman” and “Turkish” interchangeably, using them as synonyms. I adopted this practice for stylistic reasons. It should be noted, however, that it is a mistake to call the Ottoman Empire Turkey.
- 2 The lecture was delivered on MS Teams on October 7, 2021 (6:00 pm – 7:00 pm), due to the restrictions associated with the SARS-CoV-2 virus outbreak.
- 3 Last year was the 450th anniversary of the Battle of Lepanto. As part of the anniversary, the Wawel Royal Castle organized three lectures referring to this occasion on top of the 400th anniversary of the Battle of Khotyn (1621). The lectures were: Łukasz Burkiewicz, *Lepanto 1571. The Battle that Saved Europe or Victory without Consequences?* (07.10.2021); Wojciech Krawczuk, *Khotyn 1621. The Hetman’s Last Victory* (14.10.2021); Jerzy Żmudziński, *The Battles of Lepanto and Khotyn – the Painting by Tommaso Dolabella in the Collection of the Wawel Royal Castle and Its Iconography* (21.10.2021).
- 4 This work has so far received much discussion in the scholarly literature. Additionally, its interpretation and the circumstances of its creation have stirred debate among scholars. Incorrect, mutually exclusive hypotheses were repeatedly made. A recent discussion that summarizes the current state of research and is essentially a reference at this point is Aleksander Stankiewicz’s (2020), Magdalena Białonowska’s catalog from the exhibition *Dolabella. Venetian Painter of the Vasas* (2020) and Jerzy Żmudziński’s articles (2009; 2011; 2012; 2016; 2017).

the Rosary Brotherhood for a chapel at the Dominican Church in Poznań. There was located in the Rosary Chapel and was an element of the ideological program referring to the worship of Our Lady of the Snows and Hyacinth of Poland (Stankiewicz, 2020, pp. 147). The sponsoring of the painting itself was to be part of the tradition of commemorating the Battle of Lepanto, which was considered a victory achieved through the intercession of Our Lady (Stankiewicz, 2020, pp. 145–148).⁵ For years, there has been a debate in scientific literature whether Dolabella's painting also contains references to the battle of the Polish army against the Turks at Khotyn in 1621.⁶

The purpose of the article is to provide an idea of the role that Cyprus played in the rivalry between the Ottoman Empire at the height of its development in the sixteenth century, as well as the Christian forces in the Mediterranean basin, in particular, the Republic of Venice. The Battle of Lepanto is one stage in this rivalry, which culminated in major changes in the strategic and economic balance in the eastern Mediterranean. The article refers to the causes of this rivalry, the war for Cyprus and the Battle of Lepanto, and also points to the important theme of the battle itself in Polish art, also in a metaphorical context. The article concludes by pointing out the consequences of the fall of Cyprus and its placement as a province of the Ottoman Empire.

Venetian-controlled Cyprus was overrun by Ottoman forces in August 1571, when the last point of defense on the island capitulated. Despite the later victory of the Holy League in the naval Battle of Lepanto, which took place just over two months after hostilities ended on the island, the Venetians were unable to regain control of Cyprus. Moreover, despite the skillful use of the victory at Lepanto in Christian propaganda, the Ottoman Empire not only held on to Cyprus, but in 1574 the Turks also captured Tunis, expanding their influence in the Mediterranean. The 1573 Treaty of Constantinople, ending the Ottoman-Venetian struggle, marked the end of European domination of the Eastern Mediterranean. Cyprus

5 *The Battle of Lepanto* by Tommaso Dolabella is one of three paintings known in Polish art depicting this clash (Stankiewicz, 2020, p. 148–149). The first painting is the *Rosary Procession* from 1626, which is also associated with Dolabella, and was commissioned by Tomasz Zamoycki for the church of the Canons Regular in Kraśnik (Żmudziński 2017). The second one is a work painted in 1672 for the Dominican monastery in Warsaw by Tomasz Muszyński (date of birth unknown, died before 1680). This work shows Pope Pius V praying and the procession that took place on the day of victory in the streets of Rome (Stankiewicz, 2020, p. 148–149).

6 The idea of assuming that the *Battle of Lepanto* painting also refers to the Battle of Khotyn from 1621 was born out of a discussion about the image of the rosary procession on the left side of the painting (as for the right side, all researchers agree that it depicts the Battle of Lepanto). Cf., among others, the discussion in the article by Aleksander Stankiewicz (2020).

thus became part of Turkey for the next 307 years until 1878, when under the so-called Cyprus Convention the island came under British administration (Luke, 1921, p. 3; Orr, 1970, pp. 34–36).

Cyprus, thanks to its geographical location considered from a strategic, economic and political point of view, had been an object of interest for various political forces almost from the beginning of history (Edbury, 1993; Coureas, 2005; Burkiewicz, 2010). After the collapse of the Roman Empire, Cyprus remained under the control of Constantinople, which fought with the Arabs over the island, but as it changed owners, Greek culture developed all the time nevertheless (Raszewski, 2014; Burkiewicz, 2021, pp. 159–165). The period of long struggle for control of the island culminated in the final seize of Cyprus by Emperor Nikephoros II Phocas between 964 and 965 (Metcalf, 2009, pp. 31–49). In early May 1191, the fleet of King Richard the Lionheart of England, bound for the Holy Land as part of an expedition that historians later called the Third Crusade, arrived on the shores of Cyprus, then in the hands of the Byzantine usurper Isaac Doukas Komnenos, who did not recognize the authority of Constantinople (Jeffery, 1973). Richard the Lionheart defeated the meager troops loyal to Komnenos within 3 weeks and took the island (Hill, 1940, 1, pp. 318–320; Burkiewicz, 2008a, pp. 29–34; Pernoud, 1994, pp. 105–109). The ruler of England then handed over his conquest first to the Knights Templar, and when the order was unable to completely take control of the island (Richard, 1997), it found a buyer in Guy of Lusignan, ruler of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, who had just lost his state in the Holy Land and began the rule of the Lusignan dynasty in Cyprus (Edbury, 1991; 1999; Coureas, and Riley-Smith, 1995). Lusignan rule lasted until 1473 when James II of Cyprus (1460–1473) died. A year later, his year-old son, James III, died as well. Meanwhile, Venice had been interested in Cyprus for a long time. King James II already ruled in agreement with Venice and to strengthen relations between the two states, he married a Venetian woman, Catherine Cornaro (Hunt, and Hunt, 1989; Sachs-Collignon, 1995). After his death, Catherine Cornaro ruled alone as Venice gained more and more influence on the island (Burkiewicz, 2014a).

In 1489, the Venetians forced Catherine Cornaro to abdicate and placed Cyprus under the full administration of the republican authorities. An important part of the island's security strategy was an agreement with the Mamluk Sultanate to provide protection against the increasingly dangerous attacks of the Ottoman Turks (Hill, 1948b, pp. 821–824).⁷ Although there

7 It should be remembered that from the time of King Janus of Lusignan (1398–1432), the formal sovereign of Cyprus was the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt, who received an annual tribute of 5,000 ducats from the island. This happened after Mamluk troops invaded the island in 1426,

was peace between Venice and the Ottoman Empire between 1503 and 1539, Turkish conquests in the region steadily progressed (Misztal, 2013, p. 297). In 1516, the Ottomans captured Mamluk-ruled Syria and in the following year, Egypt itself. In 1522, they took Rhodes from the Hospitaliers. The conquest of Egypt by Sultan Selim I meant that he became the new suzerain of Cyprus, and the tribute established in 1426 by the Mamluks was to be paid to him (Ziada, 1933; 1934). The next sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent, created an even larger empire than his predecessors. In 1539, an Ottoman fleet razed Limassol to the ground. The following year, Venice resigned to sign a humiliating peace treaty. However, an Ottoman attack on Cyprus was only a matter of time (Misztal, 2013, p. 298; Hill, 1948b, pp. 835–837). The great geographical discoveries led to a decline of interest in trading with the Orient through Turkey. Suleiman I the Magnificent and his son Selim II noticed this problem, and they sought to strengthen the Ottoman Empire economically. The acquisition of Cyprus, and thus control over regional trade routes, was a definite argument for Turkey's economic strengthening (Panteli, 2003, p. 48).

Meanwhile, the Venetians were expecting a Turkish attack and decided to prepare for it. First it was decided to reinforce the fortifications of Famagusta, which was the most important city and harbor in Cyprus from the point of view of the Venetians. Giovanni Girolamo Sanmichele, a military engineer brought from Italy, worked on the fortifications of Famagusta. Another famous Venetian engineer, Giulio Savorgnano, worked on the fortification of Nicosia. Between 1567 and 1570, on his initiative, walls were built in Nicosia, which are still preserved in good condition and are among the most valuable examples of defensive architecture of the Renaissance period (Enlart, 1987; Perbellini, 1994).

The Venetians' position on Cyprus itself was not stable. Of course, they strengthened their defensive potential by expanding not only the above-mentioned fortifications of Famagusta and Nicosia, but also other Cypriot cities such as Kyrenia; at the same time, they also systematically strengthened their economic presence. However, despite these efforts, Venetian

defeated the Cypriot army at Choroikoitia, and captured the King of Cyprus himself, who was brought to Cairo before the Sultan of Egypt. There Janus was humiliated, but regained his freedom at a cost of 200,000 ducats. Half of this sum was to be paid before the king's freedom was regained, the other after he reached Cyprus. In addition, the Kingdom of Cyprus was levied an annual tribute of 5,000 ducats and forced to recognize the supremacy of the Sultan, who officially became Viceroy of Cyprus. Cf. Hill, 1948a, pp. 486, 490; Alastos, 1955, pp. 205–205; Burkiewicz, 2011a. Interestingly, the king of Cyprus sought help in rebuilding his country after the defeat of 1426, among others, from the Polish king Vladislaus Jagiello, to whom he sent a delegation in 1432. Cf. Burkiewicz, 2011b.

power was repeatedly challenged by various adventurers and conspirators, often collaborating with the Sublime Porte.

One such adventurer was James Diassorin, who plotted to drive out the Venetians and take over Cyprus. He appeared on the island virtually out of nowhere and established a school in Nicosia, where he taught ancient Greek history thus kindling the patriotic attitudes of simple Cypriot peasants. After some time, Diassorin was banished from the city and began to present himself as a victim of Venetian persecution, with which he gained even more support, not only from peasants, but also from the Hellenized petty Cypriot nobility. Diassorin, seeking support for his plans, gained Ottoman backing, which ended in 1562 with his capture by the Venetians and his consequent execution. A year later, his cousin, also a notorious rabble rouser, James Basilicos, who occupied the Moldavian throne from 1561 to 1563, made an unsuccessful attempt to seize the island from the Venetians by stirring up the local population. Even Cypriots themselves also went to Istanbul with requests to the sultan to occupy the island and expel the Venetians (Misztal, 2013, p. 300–301).

In 1566, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent died and his son Selim II succeeded him on the throne. Suleiman's as well as Selim II's most influential advisor was Joseph Nasi (João Miquez), a Portuguese Jew who was elevated to the dignity of the Prince of Naxos thanks to the wealth he accumulated and the influence he achieved at the Turkish court (Panteli, 2003).⁸ He developed a plan to create a state in Cyprus that would shelter Jews from persecution in Western Europe. The conquest of Cyprus, and above all taking control of "the pearl of the Levant" – Famagusta – was the goal that Joseph Nasi pursued and to which he wished to convince the Ottoman sultans (Arbel, 2000, p. 28). Also, the infamous fire that consumed the Venetian arsenal in 1569 was attributed to the agents of Joseph Nasi (Hill, 1948a, p. 883; Arbel, 1995, p. 63).⁹ In the end, Selim II's closest circle – including the aforementioned Joseph Nasi – convinced the sultan to seize the strategically located Cyprus, arguing that the island could be captured quickly and without much resistance from the Venetians (Parny, 1976, p. 108). In addition, the Turks began to believe that the Cypriots themselves, who were easily encouraged to revolt against their rulers if they felt that they were being oppressed and exploited, would help in defeating the Venetians (Arbel, 1989). Selim II's advisors, besides the

8 Joseph Nasi was behind the plan to convince the Duke of Savoy, Emanuel Philibert, of his claim to the crown of Cyprus. The Duke of Savoy, however, wanted nothing to do with the Turks. Cf. Burkiewicz & Kostopoulou, 2014b.

9 I wrote about the role of the Jews in Cyprus, also in the context of the Ottoman control of the island, in one of my articles, cf. Burkiewicz, 2008b.

Venetian-friendly grand vizier Mehmet Sokollu, furthermore used arguments that any new sultan should adorn his accession to the throne with a new conquest, and that the capture of Cyprus would be a great opening to the reign of Suleiman's successor (Arbel, 1995, pp. 55–56).¹⁰

In early 1568, word began to reach the Venetians of a planned uprising in Famagusta that was to be inspired by the large Jewish community living there. The planned ventures were to be supported by Joseph Nasi, who obviously involved Turkish forces in his plans. Explosive charges planted under the city walls were supposed to detonate when the Turkish fleet reaches the roadstead of Famagusta (Arbel, 2000, pp. 28–29). In view of reports of a planned anti-Venetian uprising and Turkish plans to conquer Cyprus, the Senate decided to reinforce the troops stationed on the island with additional 30 galleys and 1,000 infantrymen (Arbel, 2000, p. 29). In addition, real or suspected conspirators were arrested and the city's fortifications were strengthened. When the inhabitants of Famagusta saw Turkish ships in June 1568, no part of the walls had been blown up, and the Venetian soldiers gathered on them made such an impression on the Turks that they sailed away peacefully. A consequence of these events was the expulsion of most of the Jews from the city which happened in July 1568 (Arbel, 1995, pp. 29–30).

These events indicated that the Ottoman invasion of the island was imminent (Arbel, 2017a). The aforementioned arsenal fire in Venice (1569), which greatly weakened the potential of its navy and thus the defensive capabilities of Cyprus, prompted the sultan to make a demand to Venice in February/March 1570 for the surrender of Cyprus, while threatening to capture the island by force. When the Venetians rejected these demands, preparations for capturing the island went into full swing. The Ottoman army was headed by Lala Mustafa, who would command the land troops, and Pasha Piale, the commander of the fleet (Hill, 1948b, pp. 882–883, 887–888). The Venetians were able to counter the approaching Turks with a rather small and poorly prepared force for defense, commanded by Nicolo Dandolo. He received reinforcements of about 3,000 infantry sent from Venice on the eve of the Ottoman forces landing, under the experienced commander Girolamo Martinengo (Misztal, 2013, p. 304).

Hostilities began on July 1, 1570. On this day, the Ottoman fleet appeared off the coast of Cyprus, near Paphos (Hill, 1948b, pp. 958–959). Three days later, with the Venetians virtually passive, the Turks landed on the island and first captured the harbor and city of Limassol, where King Richard the Lionheart had married Berengaria of Navarre in May 1191.

10 Selim II had a weakness for alcohol, which earned him the nickname of the Drunkard. One story says that Cyprus' famous wines prompted the sultan to seize the island.

When the Turks arrived at Nicosia on July 26, their army already numbered about 100,000 men. On September 9, 1570, the city was captured and Nicolò Dandolo, who commanded the defense of the island, was killed. Upon hearing of the fall of Nicosia, Kyrenia, located to the north, capitulated (Hill, 1948b, pp. 960–987). Famagusta resisted the invaders much longer (Foglietta, 1903). As early as the end of September 1570, the Turks stood at Famagusta, but they did not resume offensive operations until the following spring, when reinforcements had arrived on the island, and the number of besiegers increased to about 250,000 (Monellog, 2006). The defense of Famagusta was led by the brave Marco Antonio Bragadin. During the nearly year-long blockade of the city, the defenders repeatedly organized raids on the besieging Turks. Finally, due to running out of food supplies and ammunition, the defenders capitulated on August 1, 1571. Despite Lala Mustafa's promise to treat the defenders honorably, he decided not to keep his word. Bragadin was tortured and skinned, and many of the officers who accompanied him in the defense of the city were beheaded (Hill, 1948b, pp. 989–1037).

Upon hearing of Ottoman plans for Cyprus, Pius V appealed for joint international assistance to defend the Venetian island. In May 1571, the Holy League was formally established to end Turkish domination of the Mediterranean. Among European rulers, only King Philip II of Spain responded to the Pope's appeal. Roman Emperor Maximilian II Habsburg and King Sigismund II Augustus of Poland refused to participate in the war, and France had remained in close contact with the Sublime Porte since Suleiman. A fleet of over 200 Venetian, Spanish, and Genoese vessels eventually assembled, along with several galleys each financed by the Holy See, the Tuscan Order of Saint Stephen, the Savoyards, and the Joannites of Malta. The Christian fleet was led by Prince Juan de Austria, an illegitimate son of Emperor Charles V Habsburg. However, as the fleet was proceeding towards Cyprus, news reached them of the fall of Nicosia and it was decided to turn back (Hill, 1948b, pp. 918).

The Turks were soon able to gloat over their success, which the capture of Famagusta undoubtedly was. Not long after Lala Mustafa's seizure of the city, the great naval battle of Lepanto took place. On October 7, 1571, Prince Juan of Austria, commander-in-chief of the Christian fleet, defeated the Ottomans in splendid style. The War of Cyprus ended with a peace treaty concluded on March 7, 1573 in Constantinople under which Venice had to accept the loss of Cyprus (Panteli, 2003, p. 52; Parny, 1976, pp. 109–110). All Italians living on the island were given an opportunity to evacuate from Cyprus to Crete. In addition, the Greek-speaking inhabitants of Cyprus who pledged to remain on the island were guaranteed personal freedom and property rights. They were given two years to make

a decision, and if they decided to leave the island after that period, they were given a letter of safe passage to their new home (Panteli, 2003, p. 50).

Selim II wished to sustain the economic prosperity prevailing in Cyprus and in Famagusta in particular, so he decided to bring additional groups of Jews, who enjoyed considerable privileges under Turkish rule, to the island (Panteli, 2003, p. 54). Moreover, as George Hill noted, the Turks were welcomed by local Jews, as well as by Maronites, Armenians and Syrians, as liberators from the Venetian oppression (Hill, 1948b, p. 808). At the same time, testimonies left by merchants, travelers and pilgrims visiting Cyprus mention the 15th–16th century island as a place of refuge for Jews during their persecution in Western Europe (Panteli, 2003, pp. 61–63). This caused Muslims celebrating the capture of Cyprus in 1571 to be welcomed by the Jews, and especially the Cypriots, as liberators (Arbel, 1996; 2001; 2017b). No doubt the Cypriots saw the Venetians as oppressors and torturers. They looked to the Ottomans with the hope of not only improving their lot, but also looking to gain freedom. Shortly speaking, they preferred the Turks to the Venetian corrupt administration (Arbel, 1989, pp. 137–140). The hatred of Cypriot peasants for the Venetians may have been high. This is confirmed by one story that happened in July 1570, shortly after the Turks landed on the island. When the Turks reached the village of Lefkara, the residents surrendered without a fight and also urged peasants from other nearby villages to do the same. The Venetians, learning of this, killed four hundred men and boys in retaliation to make an example. The hatred of the Venetians was so deep-rooted that during the siege of Nicosia they refused to help the Venetians defend the city (Misztal, 2013, pp. 304–305).

What were the consequences of the victory at Lepanto actually?

Without a doubt, the Turkish advances in the Mediterranean were halted, and the Christian fleet succeeded in dispelling the myth of the invincible Muslim fleet being defeated by infidels. This certainly affected the sultan's image. However, the Christian camp was divided and failed to capitalize on the victory as planned. Above all, Cyprus remained in the hands of the Ottomans. Moreover, the Venetians had to renounce all claims to the island and pay the sultan a substantial compensation. For the next three hundred years, Cyprus fell into the hands of the Ottoman Empire, where it played a not-so-important role as a remote province.

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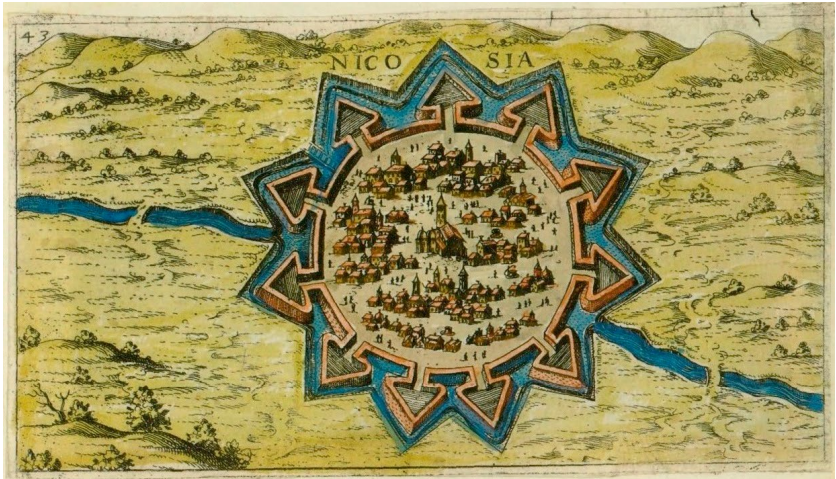
Photo 1. The fortifications of Nicosia, by Łukasz Burkiewicz



Photo 2. The fortifications of Nicosia, by Łukasz Burkiewicz



Photo 3. The fortifications of Nicosia seen from a bird's eye view in a contemporary urban setting. Overview board located at the vantage point of the Shacolas Tower Museum and Observatory in Nicosia. Photo by Łukasz Burkiewicz



Map showing the fortifications of Nicosia in 1597 by Giacomo Franco.

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