

Identity Markers in the Art of 14th and 15th Century Famagusta

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In the late Middle Ages the port-town of Famagusta proved to be one of the most cosmopolitan and multicultural centres of the Mediterranean world. Different artistic traditions coexisted locally, including Crusader, French Gothic, and Armenian architecture, as well as the religious painting of Byzantium, the Latin West and the Arab Christian world. The repertory of forms worked out by each of these traditions happened frequently to be selected and appropriated by the groups settled in towns in order to promote their own social prestige; yet this resulted more often in a juxtaposition of different formulae and patterns in the same space, than in a manifestation of artistic synthesis or "hybridizations". The paper will focus on the dynamics of interactions between patrons, artists and audiences in such a multicultural context: emphasis will be laid on the remnants of murals and furnishings in the extant church interiors, which bear witness not only to the cross-cultural circulation of different artistic schemes, but also, and more precisely, to the widespread appropriation of decorative and typological models originating in the Latin West and being instrumental to the expression of the individual's quest for one's soul's sake.

Extant decorations in the churches of Famagusta bear witness to the fact that lay strategies for the afterlife were shared by both Latin and non-Latin donors: interesting clues are provided by both the diffusion of indoor inhumation, niche-chapels, side-altars, and the frequent representation of lay donors in prominent positions. Another important phenomenon is the working out of specific types of "votive" or "pro anima" murals, i.e. frescoed icons used to promote and enhance the trans-confessional worship of some locally rooted, yet universal saints, such as Catherine, Nicholas, or the Virgin of Mercy, which by 1348 had obtained the status of supernatural defender of the city. Alongside a widespread interest in promoting both collective identity, intended as participation in Cypriot institutions and Famagustan civic life, and individual self-awareness as defined by social prestige or economic status, more peculiar strategies were worked out to give visual expression to each community's sense of group-belonging. Each of the town "nations" was accustomed to gather within its own church and the latter functioned as an obvious symbol of interpersonal solidarity; its religious identity was clearly expressed by inscriptions written in the language associated with each group's liturgical tradition and by paintings displaying each community's favoured saints.