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The Annual of the Koç University Suna & İnan Kırac Research Center  
for Mediterranean Civilizations

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## BOOK REVIEW

Hans-Ulrich Wiblinger, *Kyrenia, A Harbour Town of Cyprus*, Edition Vividus (2016) Nekar Germany, 200 Pages. ISBN 978-3-9817501-0-2.

### A New Book about Kyrenia, The Harbour Town of Cyprus

Netice YILDIZ\*

Kyrenia had been one of the districts of Cyprus which was mainly referred to as a romantic and picturesque site of the island in the travel books related to Cyprus. However, it is almost very difficult for any researcher or tourist to find a compact source relevant to the history of Kyrenia on the shelves of the libraries or the book-shops with a few exceptions. Paul Newman's *Kyrenia Castle*, William Dreghorn's book about the antique monuments of Kyrenia that contains several drawings of the author, or the rare to find book of 1970s written by Rina Katsellis are the sources frequently cited by the authors in their works related to the historical past or heritage of Kyrenia alongside some general guide books, travelogues, or history books about Cyprus. Of course, authors like Camille Enlart, Mas Latr e, George Jeffery or George Hill provided abundant information about the city's history or historic monuments. Hans-Ulrich Wiblinger, a German author, has just published a new book entitled as *Kyrenia, A Harbour Town of Cyprus*, which is expected to fill this gap and would open new paths to several other researches. Thus, this recent publication is shedding light on the history of this small harbour city on the northern coast of Cyprus and its environs through the perspectives of the western sources. Wiblinger's book which will be presented in this short essay has been published by *Edition vividus* in Germany in April 2016.

This book that aimed to bring an annotated history of Kyrenia, a town described by the author as the "Jewel of the Mediterranean Region", consists of fifteen parts in 200 pages. There is a chronological organisation of the chapters covering its history from prehistoric eras until the current times. However, almost half of the book is reserved to the urban development and social life of Kyrenia during the British colonial period.

The first parts of the book contain interesting details about the geographical features and the geological formations of the range mountain system as well as the Five-finger (Pentadaktylos) mountains that separates the northern coastal area from the central inland of the island.

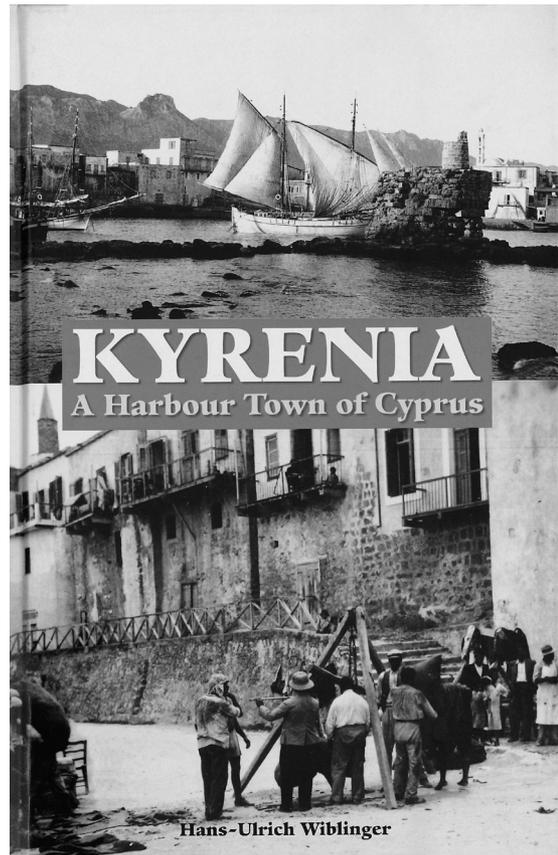
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Wiblinger attempted to cite the publications and illustrations of the foreign travellers, explorers, painters and photographers who surveyed the Kyrenia district in the past in his narratives relevant to its geography. Accordingly, the travel-book of the Dutch traveller Cornelius de Bruyn, who visited the island twice in 1678 and 1684, is mentioned as one of the earliest publication that gives a lengthy description of Kyrenia district with an engraving of its harbour. However, we could refer to earlier sources such as the short description of W. Von Oldenburg, who named it as “Schernæ” and described it as a small but fortified, significant harbour town in 1211 or Pero Tafur who left the island from the harbour of “Aherines” after his visit which is thought to take place somewhere between the years 1435-1439. Wiblinger also cited the name of the watercolour painter Louis-François Cassas who painted beautiful scenes and historic monuments of Cyprus during his two months stay in Cyprus. He considers these and others, such as the photographs of Felix Bonfils, as important documents

that reveals some clues about the town’s past days. At the end of this chapter, he remarks to the division of the island in 1974 that caused Kyrenia falling into “a sleeping city” until the opening of the borders which gave the chance to the city once more to be a tourist attraction.

Like other sources that mentions cartography of Cyprus, Wiblinger is also referring to the so-called map “*Periplus*”, a thirteenth century map, as the earliest source to inscribe Kyrenia as a harbour town. However, he also agrees with other authors that the origin of information noted on this map is based on a 4<sup>th</sup> century BC ancient Greek portolan that was prepared to guide the navigators. There are also indications of several other maps, mainly the ones prepared by Claudius Ptolemais which provided a background knowledge to the Renaissance period maps with the name of the significant settlements including Kyrenia. The maps of Bartolommeo dalli Sonetti (1485), Abraham Ortelius (1527-1598) and Piri Reis (1522) are also mentioned as significant ones that marked Kyrenia on the northern coast of the island. Accordingly, the first detailed topographical map was prepared during the last era of the Ottoman Rule, by the French (1832) and British cartographer, Captain Thomas Greaves (1849), while the 1: 100,00 scale map was drawn by Captain Lord Kitchener in 1879. However, the author did not refer to the touristic map of Kyrenia published in the series of guide books by Kevork Kesishian, an important illustrated map to show the existing buildings and the shape of the harbour in 1940s-50s. All the examples provided reveal several different versions of the name of this town which were pointed out from the maps referred to in Wiblinger’s book, some of which noted down while reading this book are as follows: *Kelena*, *Kerena*, *Corinaeon*, *Cerine*, *Cerines*, *Cerynia*, *Kernia*, *Kurenia* and *Queerenia*.



Contrary to the majority of the authors who described the history of Cyprus or its cities since the Prehistoric times with human settlements, he preferred to mention wild life of Kyrenia and its environs during the prehistoric eras. Thus he refers to the discoveries of fossils or remains of some extinguished animals like pygmy hippopotamus or dwarf mammoths and extinguished fauna, made by some explorers, such as Benedetto Bordone (1528), Cornelius de Bruyn (1683), Dorothea Bate (1910) and a sixteen-year old boy David Nixon (1961) for which usually the local authorities remained uninterested. Thus the author made an important contribution to bring to attention once more some publications already realised in early 20<sup>th</sup> century on these topics by such researchers like Dorothea Bates (1910) or A. H. Simmons (1999). Although the author mentions about the Neolithic excavations and findings in the Kyrenia coastal area, particularly the Neolithic site of Ayios Epiktitos Vrysi (Çatalköy), he did not comment for the present condition of this site which is under a big threat and neglect by the authorities due to the recent kitchen annexations made on the site of the house remains by a tourism complex. So, Wiblinger is rather careful with his critical remarks throughout the book towards the authorities and institutions of North Cyprus or Cyprus Republic.

As it is the custom to refer to a certain nationality as the founder of the cities or towns, Wiblinger remarks on this issue by stating to the tradition of the Greeks living on the island. As he suggests, Greeks had the custom to relate the foundation of every city with mythological stories, in particular by establishing connections with the heroes of the Trojan War. Although the foundation stories of some of the cities, like Salamis, are usually attributed to some well-known supernatural heroes mentioned in the various epics about the Trojan War, Kyrenia according to one of these narratives was believed to have been founded by a certain hero called Cinyras who came and settled to this part of the island with his companion soldiers, while another version of the Trojan War mentions about a certain Kepheus from Peloponnese to have arrived with his army and founded the city of Kyrenia.

According to the documents studied by Wiblinger, Kyrenia is not considered to be a city kingdom but rather a town that evolved under the shadow of Lapithos city kingdom during the Bronze and Iron ages. However, it seemed to gain significance as a harbour town in the Roman era and became an attraction place to the travellers who came for missionary duties during the early Christian period, the legacy of which can be attributed to the existence of some Roman catacombs in the rocky areas around the harbour, while it went down into a decline like other towns due to the destructions resulted by the Arab conquerors.

This book gives interesting facts about the Medieval era of the island which are usually lacking or briefly cited in many history books particularly in the chapters relevant to the Byzantine period. Accordingly, Cyprus became a vassal of Byzantine Empire in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. during which time the island suffered great devastation and economic crisis due to frequent Arab raids. It is during this time that Kyrenia became a bridge between Anatolian coast, particularly (Attalia) Antalya, by supplying better protection to both coast with a harbour well protected with a fortification in Kyrenia. Relevant historical facts for this period are supplied from the Byzantine sources, in particular from the history book written by Princess Anna Kommena, the daughter of Byzantine Emperor Alexius I. As Wiblinger extracts from Anna Kommena's book, Emperor Alexius was mentioned as one of the first rulers who realised the strategic importance of Kyrenia which led him to construct the Kyrenia fortification as well as the three mountain castles, St. Hilarion, Bufavento and Kantara, so as to supply protection to the island as well as to Anatolian coast jointly by Attalia fortification, which were all later on enlarged and reinforced during the Lusignan period. One of the stories narrated by Wiblinger

is related to a certain Saint Constantine the Jew, who travelled from Attalia to Cyprus to seek for the relics of early Christian apostles is interesting to show the period's beliefs in miraculous stories related to the martyrs.

Unlike many medieval chronicles that usually do not give much attention to Kyrenia except few citations about the kings' having retreat in the Kyrenia castle, this book narrates some significant events that took place in the Kyrenia Castle. So, one can read some details of the happenings in this book, which were narrated in a lively, gay manner. For instance, the Crusaders' takeover of the island, which includes Kyrenia, starting from the conquest of Richard I the Lionheart, is narrated in this book in a story telling manner. Kyrenia is another town of the Crusader's State that witnessed the conflicts between the members of the Crusade States, which reflects the failure of their aim to establish a union for the sake of the Latin Church. The Kyrenia Castle and the mountain castles have gone through a hard time during the war between Frederick II, the German Emperor and the Lusignan King of Cyprus.

Kyrenia Castle is described also as the retreat place of the kings and their families during hard times while it was also used as a prison for the rebels or even the royal family members or civil servants. However, the events narrated by Wiblinger reveals the fact that, the castle and the city had never been the burial place of the Royalty. The funeral of Queen Alice the Lombardian, who died in the Kyrenia Castle during the struggle between the German imperialist and the Lusignans in early 1220s, had become a subject of a short cease-fire since both sides joined to pay her their respect and attended her funeral which was carried on by the knights from Kyrenia to Nicosia on foot where she was then taken and buried with another ceremony in the Cathedral. Another event was a family problem related with King Hugh IV and his two elder sons who went to Europe for a travel without getting permission from their king father. Upon the order of the king, they were found and prisoned in the castle. Following the king's death, its harbour hosted the Carmelite priest appointed by the Pope in Vatican to perform the coronation ceremony of the new king and a magnificent parade took place from this town to the capital city to crown the young king, Peter I on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1358, who is considered by Wiblinger as the most powerful Lusignan king.

The court events of the Lusignan period mentioned in the book are recalling the intricate stories of the harems of the eastern palaces. One of such stories recounted is related to Queen Eleonora, the wife of King Peter, who imprisoned and brutalised the eight months' pregnant mistress of her husband, in the Kyrenia Castle. However, although the king got annoyed with his wife's behaviour, he only helped his mistress by providing her with better food, clothing and furniture in her prison cell in the the castle, and after the delivery of the baby, she was located into a convent, since his love to his wife overcame the other one as well as the fear of being blamed with adultery. Another funny story that took place in Kyrenia Castle was transmitted by the author from a contemporary chronicle which was related to John I, his wife Queen Helena Palaeogene, originally a Byzantine princess, and his mistress Marietta from Petras. Accordingly, the king witnessed a fight between his wife and his mistress, which he reacted only with his laughter as his wife had bitten her rival's nose.

Other stories told in this book are related to the rivalries between siblings in order to gain the crown of the kingdom. One of these is about Queen Carlotta and her husband Louis, who shut themselves first in the Kyrenia Castle and then fled to Europe to ask help from Pope and other reigns including the Ottoman Sultan in the long struggle against her step brother James who claimed the right on the throne and managed to achieve his aim by getting support from

the Mameluke Sultan who regarded him as his “son” and proclaimed him as “King James II of Cyprus”.

So, all these events narrated by Wiblinger revealed the days when Kyrenia Castle had been a significant stronghold which slowly and slowly was weakened by the end of the Venetian rule since priorities were given to the fortifications and remodelling of Nicosia and Famagusta and almost no maintenance was done to strengthen the Kyrenia Castle, the city walls and the harbour.

Although Wiblinger attempted to narrate the history of Cyprus, and in general Kyrenia town, in view of interesting sources and documents, which are given in a lengthy list of sources, he did not cite the references so frequently in the text. Above all, the author, similar to many foreign authors, did not refer to the studies published by Turkish authors with the exception of Ahmet Gazioglu’s history book titled as *The Turks in Cyprus* or recent studies done by Greek authors relevant to the same period. Thus, in the short chapter with the subtitle as “Under the Crescent”, the author failed to give original, new information relevant to the three hundred years’ history of Kyrenia under the Ottoman period.

Hitherto, we could assume that the most original and entertaining part of the book is related to the social life of the British Colonial period. As the author provides several information, from mainly the published sources and diaries of the British high officers, civil servants or their families, he tries to show the increasing number of the British aristocracy, families of the high rank officers or intellectuals, mainly the authors and poets who paid visits to Cyprus and mainly selected Kyrenia and Troodos as resort places, which of course initiated the building activities on this part of the island as well as the economic standards of the town. So, it could be said that Kyrenia became another harbour city of Cyprus to witness and initiate the new experiences in the Eastern life style after Larnaca which was settled mainly by consulates and rich European merchants since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. So, perhaps, Wiblinger’s contribution to cite the buildings constructed or renovated by the British in Kyrenia will now encourage further research on such buildings that must be included into national protection list.

Of course, the life styles of these foreign intellectuals with the aim to survey historical heritage and enjoy the climate of the island as well as the privilege of being the colonial rulers reflected contradictions with the life of the local citizens as well as the British soldiers residing in tents on the high hills of Kyrenia under the strong winds or burning heat of the summer which is occasionally narrated with a critical language by the author.

Looting of the archaeological heritage is also revealed in Wiblinger book in the passages that mention the favourite weekend entertainments of the Colonial high rank military and civil servant officers with their families who used to organise outdoor picnics which always included exploration and digging for treasures. He also mentions about some short manuals which instructed the amateur treasure hunters for the methods to discover and make excavations. As also remarked in *Sweet and Bitter Island*, a recent publication by Tobitha Morgan (2010), there were minor improvements in Kyrenia, which is considered to be a sleeping town, during the first few decades of the British Rule, while so many British preferred to settle to Cyprus and built houses in the villages of Troodos mountains or in Kyrenia after the second world-war.

Thus the well-known British architects and engineers, like George Ludovic Houston, Sir Courtenay Manifold, W. D. Caröe and Austen St Barbe Harrison; artists like John Codrington, Godfrey de Selincourt, Colonel Pain, Arthur Legge and Helen Mary Blunt; authors like Freya Stark, John Lehmann, Rose Macaulay and Lawrence Durrell, all of whom mainly wrote travel

books, were colourful images in the social life of Kyrenia after the Second World War. In particular, the books published by such authors formed important background information for Wiblinger's book as well as other authors who recently published on the British era of Kyrenia. Lawrence Durrell, is well-known with his book *Bitter Lemons* and as one of the residents of Bellapais village, is described mainly with his bohemian life style although several mentions were made about his wife, daughter and mother who lived with him from time to time.

Another interesting part is the narratives that show the gradual change of Kyrenia town into a tourist attraction, with its new shops, bars, restaurants and hotels, particularly the harbour area. However, almost all people mentioned in this process are the British who settled in Cyprus and local people almost had no part in all these stories.

Similar to many books narrating the British period, Wiblinger also refers to the 1950s' events in Kyrenia. However, he remarked that although the Greeks attempted so many severe assaults against the British, there were no such attacks to the clubs or bars attended by the British residents in Kyrenia. He also provides some information how the castle rooms were renovated to be used by the "zaphiyeh" (police force) and as prison cells. He also supplied a list with brief information about the antiquities of Kyrenia in the last part of his book.

Accordingly, Dome Hotel was the most frequently mentioned public leisure space attended by the rich and high aristocracy members of the colonials who regularly spent their leisure times for five o'clock teas or dinners. Similar to the military hostels that kept on certain rules in the sitting arrangements, each customer sat at tables that were arranged according to their wealth or rank. Dome Hotel was the first luxury hotel of Kyrenia built after the Sea View, both with the savings of Catselli, a young Greek who worked in America for a while. Wiblinger's description of Dome Hotel's past history is a contribution to the architectural history of the city as he mentioned how it was planned by the famous British architect, W. D. Caröe, as a two floor building with vernacular as well as neo-classical features, particularly with the verandas that runs all-round the building and two domes copied from the famous Antiphonites Church located on the Kyrenia mountain up on the hills that also yielded the name of the hotel. W. D. Caröe, is a member of the Royal Society of Architects who built and restored several churches and houses in Arts and Crafts style whose projects were well known in England. He spent the last decade of his life in Cyprus building an Anglican Church in Troodos mountains for the Government and a house for his residence, titled as Latomia, which is currently the Fine Art Museum in Kyrenia.

The book also supplies interesting information about the night life of Kyrenia during the British Colonial period. Wiblinger transfers all these evidences from the published diaries of the British residents of Kyrenia. Among the most popular entertainment places were the cabarets and night clubs who had some famous singers like Judy Finlay, who ran the club together with her husband and worked as the singer, and Lotti Huber, mainly called as the "Queen of the Harbour", who was a Jewish German woman. Among the well-known entertainment places were the Kyrenia Harbour Club, Kyrenia City Club, Octopus Restaurant, Jack's Bar and the sea-baths located at the back of the castle. Accordingly, these were all reserved to the colonials and particularly no local citizen except the waiters were allowed to the sea-baths where English ladies and gentlemen relaxed on their sun beds with their drinks.

Wiblinger gives critical remarks about the attitudes of the British residents towards the locals which they considered to be "docile and relatively illiterate" who were careful to keep a distance all the time as they have done in other colonies. But at the same time, there were

conflicts between the British residents who were considered by Wiblinger to have established “jealousy, bitchiness and back-biting” manners in their own circle soon after their arrival to the island, particularly at the social events, such as tea-parties, dinners or picnics. He even considered all those elite British who attended five-o’clock teas in the Dome Hotel even during 1930s and 40s as the old fashioned Victorian aristocracy that treated each other insincerely, looked down at each other and gossip after one another.

The lengthy part of the book that narrates the British life in Kyrenia is in fact providing important information about the change of the urban planning and landscape as well as the architectural style of the city, that brings originality to the book.

Although the British had encountered difficulty to find suitable houses for their residence in early years, soon after they realised the low prices of the property market due to economic crisis. Thus, they purchased property and start to renovate some vernacular buildings or sometimes built new houses in Cyprus, mainly selecting Kyrenia or Troodos as the site of their residents. Wiblinger’s research reveals some excellent architectural examples of the British Colonial period which introduced the city with the new trends of European neo-classic or arts and crafts style architecture. Among the significant contributions are large carob storage buildings or Turkish houses which were renovated and transformed as large, luxury mansion houses. It is interesting to learn from the examples of the author that the residence of Mr. Asil Nadir, the well-known businessman located in Lapitos was originally a wine cellar which was renovated in the style of an Islamic style villa by the well-known British architect Austen St Barbe Harrison in which he lived for several years. Wiblinger mentions about a villa called *Villa Fortuna* somewhere close to the shrine of St Omar on the coast, which was constructed by a rich English woman, Marie Millington-Drake, who is said to have an affair with Lawrence Durrell, the author of *Bitter Lemons*. Thus, we could say that this is nowadays called as *Villa Firtma* which has been the the property of the Turkish Embassy since 1960s. Also, Wiblinger reveals some information about the origin of several buildings, one of which is the hospital building still used for the same purpose, to have been constructed in 1883 with the financial help of the community following St. Andrew Church and Cyprus Society.

The author attempted to illustrate each chapter with a map of Kyrenia or engravings or photographs that depict mainly the historical heritage of the city. The postcard illustrating the drawings of *Sea View Hotel* and *Dome Hotel*; the re-constructional plan of Kyrenia drawn by Dr. William Dreghorn; a photograph taken by Mongolian depicting the harbour with a sailing boat and the ruined chain tower; the photograph showing the carob stores and houses as well as the carob merchants on the harbour are the most interesting illustrations of the book. The pocket size book is having a hardback binding and it is printed on recycled paper which did not yield high quality glossy illustrations. Although the author supplied a lengthy list of sources, the book lacks an index at the end of the book, an essential part of a research book.

Finally, it could be added that Hans-Ulrich Wiblinger’s book that attempted to bring the history of the evolution of Kyrenia from a small insignificant harbour town to a popular tourist attraction and its relations with its environs in Cyprus as well as in the Mediterranean area in an entertaining manner with the author’s humoresque and critical approach can be classified as a popular history book that could open ways to more scholarly research for the history of this city which is nowadays fastly growing up into a modern city.

