

Cursed to Isolation

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A Historical and Social Study on Leprosy and the Leper Village in Cyprus, 1790s-1955

Project

This project aims to present a historical analysis of one of the most stigmatised epidemics in history: leprosy. Cyprus was plagued by this contagious disease for centuries until a cure was found in the mid-20th century. The study will focus on the history of leprosy in the Near and Middle East, while using the Leper Village as an example since it covers both the Ottoman and British periods in a multi-community island. The Leper Village, also referred as Leper Farm, was established in the 1790s a mile away from Nicosia, and moved to Larnaca in 1955 when the number of lepers decreased after the discovery of cure. There is a significant volume of scholarship on this subject especially concerning the West, while we do not, in fact, know much about the status of the leper in the Islamic communities in the Near and Middle East. Thus, this project will address the difference between the approaches of Muslim and Christian communities towards the disease and the leper, and the status of the lepers (in terms of myths, stigmatisation, segregation, and conditions) in Cyprus during the late Ottoman and the British periods.

Historical Background

Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, is a city surrounded by the Venetian city-walls. References from the 19th century Ottoman period, state that lepers were forbidden to go into the city and therefore used to beg outside the city walls, especially by the Famagusta Gate which allowed the main access to the city. The first view that any traveller who intended to visit Nicosia was of begging lepers just outside the city-walls.

“And what horrors on the roadside! Human beings dragging themselves along, covered with leprosy, extending their emaciated arms towards the passer by, trying to attract their attention with frightful yells, and begging for alms. They pray to God for relief in their agonies, and not being allowed to enter the town, they make the fields their dwelling-place.”

Levkosia: The Capital of Cyprus, Archduke Ludwig Salvator of Austria, 1881

“One miserable man came, whose nose is almost entirely eaten away. He was also nearly blind. I do not know whether he has the foul disorder or not. It began with a bite. I have seen other afflicted with the same disease. The nurse says ‘it will not leave him if he does not die.’”

18th July of 1836, Nicosia, *The Diaries of Lorenzo Warriner Pease: 1834-1839*

After the establishment of the Leper Village during the late Ottoman period, some of the lepers wandered around the island and begged for alms. In 1878, Britain took over the island as a protectorate from the Ottoman Empire, and then annexed the island with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. During British colonial rule, the conditions of the lepers improved, however there were still complaints by the inhabitants of the village. The village attracted foreign visitors such as Esmé Scott-Stevenson, wife of the Civil commissioner of Kyrenia Captain Andrew Scott-Stevenson. She visited the Leper Village with her husband in the early British period, and devoted a chapter to the Leper Village in her book.



Why leprosy?

Leprosy has been one of the most influential diseases not only in the history of the island but also of the world. More importantly, this ancient epidemic disease contains a complexity in itself; it has been a rare case in which the causes and ways of transmission remained confusingly mysterious for centuries, as it was contagious, but still not highly contagious. This generated lots of myths on the one hand, and medical discussions as to whether or not it was contagious on the other. Being a physically damaging disease in a way that does not kill its victims instantly but causes slow bodily decay which leaves behind a horrifying physical appearance, leprosy provokes considerable fear. In some ways, this fear seems to have affected the lepers as much as the disease itself.

“The nose had sharpened till it stood out like a bone. In some the features were drawn so much to one side, that it gave the appearance of a senile smile, a ghastly contrast to the reality of the suffering. This horrible grin affected me more than anything else. I tried to look away from it; but it was useless, my eyes kept turning back with a painful fascination.”

Esmé Scott-Stevenson, *Our Home in Cyprus*, 2nd ed., 1880