

The Legacy of the Larnaca Salt Lake

By Alexis Michaelides

There are 4 lakes which all together compose in Larnaca an important wetland. Only one, the larger, is also a natural salt lake. The legacy of this salt lake has been long lasting and extremely interesting. It proved to be an important wetland and a natural habitat of sea life for 3 million years. Fossil shell life of this age can be found in its surrounding hills. This salt lake has been a point of reference throughout history and one of the main reasons why the city of Larnaca lived for 4000 continuous and uninterrupted years, which is a rare record. For three religions the effortless production of salt, ready for collection every summer, was a riddle explained only as a blessing of God.

The salt of the lake is not derived by the nearby sea, but it springs from a gigantic geological stock buried deep under the surrounding area. With the beginning of the rain season, rain fall gradually fill the salt lake with water. This rain water dilutes the underground salt in the water, which become extremely dense in salt. The evaporation in the summer time dries the lake up every August, making it snow-white. This is a simple process, which till the middle of the 20th century was not understood because of ignorance of the existence of the gigantic underground stock. Therefore, this natural salt cycle was considered by the people a miraculous gift of the gods to the city.

However, the blessing of the lake was not limited to free salt. It had a second and even better benefit. A lake metamorphosed into a wetland in the winter, a home for thousands of migrating birds. At the time of no hunting limitations or prohibitions, which only started in the 20th century, the salt lake wetland habitat was providing free food to the people. This double blessing could only be the work of gods. So, the area was thought to be under the blessing of Artemis, the goddess of hunting. Her most important temple in the island of Cyprus was the one at Larnaca at the shores of the salt lake. The holy of the temple was decorated with a beautiful statue of the deity of the 4th century B.C. Today it is considered the finest statue ever found in Cyprus, especially for the artistic presentation of the goddess, unique in the Greek world. In 1878 it was illegally exported at the Vienna Museum of Ancient Art, being today one of its most valuable exhibits.

The salt lake, when a wetland, grows in its extremely salty water a tiny unique shrimp known as "artemia salina" or the shrimp artemis of the salt lake, a name given by the scientists that discovered it, in honor of the great goddess of hunting. This tiny shrimp is the reason why thousands of migrating birds choose the Larnaca salt lake in their winter voyages. The artemia salina has a very unique life cycle, in complete synchronization with the cycle of the salt. It lays its billions of tiny reddish eggs in the salty shores of the drying lake and when the first rainfall comes again they come out of their strong shell and swim in the water ready to be eaten by the flying visitors of the lake.

This blessed lake had adjacent fiords which were used in antiquity as natural ports for the salt, wood, copper, natural dyes and other exports of the city. Among the first sea people to visit and trade with the city, were the Phoenicians from the city of Tiro. In the legendary dispute of queen Elissa of Tiro and her brother over the throne, we have in reality the beginning of the Phoenician migration. The first place to host this migration was Larnaca, which was then known as Kition, by its Greek inhabitants. The Phoenicians with queen Elissa named "Carthage" their first settlement in Larnaca meaning the "new city". But, soon Elissa left as she found a similar but even better area to settle. She again named it "Cartage" and its place is here in Tunisia. She left at Larnaca a large Phoenician colony.

The Phoenicians and Greeks of the city of Larnaca developed into a very dynamic mixture of traders and fearless seamen who sold their local products to the end of the world. This continued till a new religion was born in the area. Jesus Christ had a close friend named Lazarus, whom according to the Gospel Jesus resurrected from the dead. Lazarus left Palestine in fear after the crucifixion of Jesus by the Romans. He arrived in Larnaca and became its first Bishop. From then onwards the salt lake is thought to be a miracle of Saint Lazarus, made to favor his new home. Saint Lazarus became the new protector of the salt lake. Artemis, as well as, the other 12 gods of Olympus became obsolete. In medieval times, especially during the Venetian rule, when the Larnaca salt lake was filling the treasury of the Serene Republic with money, the salt collection was initiated with a ceremonial and religious processing starting from the nearby church of Saint Lazarus, ending at the salt lake itself, where there was a religious blessing of the workers and the salt. In respect to the Saint, patron of the salt lake, the Venetians repaired his church, built in 890 A.D. for the first time after almost six hundred years. The church of Saint Lazarus is only 300 meters away from the salt lake.

When the Ottomans occupied Cyprus after 11 months war against the Venetians in 1571, they built a mosque at the shores of the salt lake. They named it Hala Sultan tekke. This mosque is built over the tomb of an Arab apostle of Islam, Oum Haram, who lost her life at the first Arab unsuccessful attempt to Islamize Cyprus in the year 649 A.D. She was the wife of one of the Arab generals responsible for the expedition and a non-blood relative of Mohammed himself. A third religion put its marking in the area, identifying with the blessed wetland habitat of Larnaca, obviously, showing who the new master of the blessed lake is.

Today, in peaceful coexistence you can walk around the wetland area and see the remains of a Greek temple where Virgin Mary succeeded Artemis and Diana, a Christian church of 1225 years of age devoted to Saint Lazarus, a friend of Christ and a beautiful Moslem mosque, devoted to a relative of Mohammed. All three monuments are directly related with the great legacy of the Larnaca salt lake. These important monuments are only one part of the legacy. The other part of the great legacy is the wealth that has been generated over the millennia

and recently from tourism, because of its natural beauty and history, levying the civilization of city.

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