

CYPRUS SCENES

Aphrodite's Rock



Picture: Tony Benson

Perhaps the most famous view in Cyprus is that which looks out towards the dome-shaped sea-girt rock known as Aphrodite's Rock. You take a winding road up from the coast road, then follow a dirt path to a spot where the view opens up before you to the sea, where the waves break against the rock and other smaller rocks nearby. The foaming breakers, and the blue-green sea beyond, set against the pale limestone rocks, all contribute towards a view which deserves its fame. But what has this to do with the goddess Aphrodite, or Venus as she was known to the Romans?

The answer is that this is the traditional site of the legend of the birth of Aphrodite from the sea as a full-grown woman, portrayed graphically in the well-known painting *The Birth of Venus* by the fifteenth-century Italian painter Alessandro Botticelli. It shows the newly-born goddess being wafted gently to the shore in a large shell.

But how is this of interest to us? I was fascinated to find in reading about Cyprus prior to visiting there a number of references to this legend as symbolising the importing of the worship of the mother goddess from Asia, for Aphrodite's Rock is on the south coast of Cyprus, only sixty-five miles from the coast of Syria. The worship of the mother goddess was widespread over the Middle East. In Babylon she was known as Ishtar, in Phoenicia as Astarte, from whence her worship was introduced into Israel by Jezebel. In the Bible she appears as Ashtoreth or Ashtaroth (a name disguised in the AV by the rendering "grove"), and twice in Jeremiah as "the queen of heaven".

There are references all over Cyprus to Aphrodite, and the worship of the mother goddess was eventually carried over into apostate Christianity in the exaltation of the Virgin Mary as an object of worship.—*Tony Benson*