

# CYPRUS SCENES

## The Sanctuary of Aphrodite



Picture: Tony Benson

Several miles from Paphos (the subject of our last three 'Scenes'), and in the foothills of the Troodos mountains, are the remains of Palæpaphos (Old Paphos), so called because it existed hundreds of years before the present Paphos was established by the shore. Its ruins cover a wide area but are scant, as the picture shows. The prominence on Cyprus of the cult of Aphrodite, the Greek equivalent of the Middle Eastern mother goddess Astarte, has already been referred to several times, and this site was the home of the great Sanctuary of Aphrodite, the centre of her cult. It is referred to by a number of ancient Greek and Roman writers, who speak of the annual festival, with its colourful processions, music, dancing and feasting, along with ritual prostitution after the manner of the Canaanites.

The cult was encouraged by Roman emperors, such as Augustus, who paid for extensive repairs. Titus, the Roman general who took Jerusalem in A.D. 70, came here the year before and consulted the oracle, supposedly being promised a great future. The cult persisted into Christian times, though widely criticised by the Church fathers, but came to its end when the Emperor Theodosius, about seventy years after Constantine adopted Christianity, ordered all pagan temples and shrines to be closed. But did the cult really come to an end? In order to attract pagans, the already apostate church changed the worship of Aphrodite the mother goddess into the worship of Mary the mother of God, and behind the ruins can be seen the dome of the church of Panayia Galatariotissa, the Milk-giving Virgin; and young mothers who have difficulty in giving milk to their babies come here to beseech her help. The cult of the Mother Goddess is alive and well today in the Greek Orthodox churches of Eastern Europe, as well as in the Roman Catholic churches of the West.

—Tony Benson