Cyprus, the third largest island in the Mediterranean, is according to mythology, the birthplace of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty. Its 11,000-year history is one of the oldest in the world and has bequeathed on the small island an enormously rich cultural heritage. Its strategic location, nestled in the eastern Mediterranean and at the crossroads of three continents – Europe, Asia, and Africa – and at the meeting point of great civilizations, has been a major factor influencing the course of the island’s history. Throughout the centuries, Cyprus had many conquerors, each leaving an indelible footprint. Its cultural heritage, predominantly Greek, but with a plethora of influences, is one of the richest in the world.

The exhibition “Cyprus: Crossroads of Civilizations”, which starts its North American journey at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, is presented on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of Cyprus. The exhibition was curated by Dr. Sophocles Hadjisavvas, former Director of the Cyprus Department of Antiquities, and was made possible by:

• The Cyprus Department of Antiquities
• The Cultural Foundation of the Bank of Cyprus
• The Byzantine Museum of the Archbishop Makarios III Foundation
• The Holy Bishopric of Morfou
• The Pierides – Marfin Laiki Museum
• The Thalassa Museum of the Municipality of Agia Napa
• The National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

The exhibition is divided into eight sections, each covering a wide but distinct cultural period.
The Birth of an Island

Cyprus rose from the sea around 20 million years ago, a product of the collision of the African and Eurasian tectonic plates.

Its rugged topography influenced every aspect of life on the island: from climate conditions that created rich farming lands, to the distribution of important mineral deposits, including copper ore. Copper has been a vital part of life on the island since 3000 BC, and the Troodos Mountains are among the 5 richest regions in the world for copper.

Cyprus also has large deposits of natural mineral pigments such as umber and ochre. The exploitation of these and other deposits has contributed significantly to the historic and cultural development of the island since antiquity.

Perhaps Greek mythology had good reason to depict Aphrodite – Cyprus’ patron deity – rising from the waves on those very shores.

Early Villages

Neolithic period, 8500-3900 BC

Around 11,000 years ago, seafaring people from the Near East discovered Cyprus’ hospitable green shores.

Substantial human presence in many parts of the island is first attested ca. 8500 - 8000 BC with farmers in the west, on the north coast, and near Amathus in the south. Settlers put down roots, bringing plants from the mainland and breeding stocks of cattle, deer, sheep, and goats. They created villages and dug deep wells, the oldest known wells in the world. In the course of history, this island became known as Kypros – Cyprus.

The world’s earliest evidence of cat domestication also comes from this era. A grave at the Neolithic site of Shillourokambos, in today’s village area of Pareklisha, was found to contain a skeleton of a man and a cat. The burial dates to about 7300 BC, thousands of years before cats were domesticated in Egypt.

The site of the walled village of Khirokitia, which gives its name to the Khirokitia Culture (7000-5200 BC), exemplifies the peak of the Cypriot Neolithic period. Its houses consisted of groups of circular buildings constructed around a courtyard. Villagers cultivated grains and beans, raised sheep, pigs, and goats, and hunted deer. Pottery appeared for the first time on Cyprus in about 4500 BC - 3900 BC.
Dawn of an Age of Copper

Chalcolithic period, 3900-2500 BC

The Chalcolithic (meaning “copper-stone”) period was a time of significant population growth and remarkable arts and crafts, and saw the rise of one of the most distinctive societies of prehistoric Cyprus: the Erimi Culture.

Some 100 villages with their circular houses have been identified, in addition to a unique group of cemeteries at Souskiou, in southwest Cyprus. They yield data showing significant population growth, and remarkable arts, and crafts.

The first examples of metalwork in Cyprus using local copper – mainly for chisels, pins, and ornaments – also date from this period. Cypriots were seeing the start of a technological revolution, and copper would shape the history of Cyprus for centuries to come.

The oldest form of worship on Cyprus was the veneration of the Mother Goddess: the source of life and fertility. A number of figurines from Chalcolithic villages depicting seated or squatting women in the act of giving birth, may be expressions of that devotion. Small cross-shaped figures from this period also appear to represent women giving birth. These were often worn as pendants, especially in death. Great numbers of the stone pendants have been unearthed from cemeteries in the Paphos District in the south west of the island.

An Island of Prospectors and Farmers

Early and Middle Bronze Age, 2500-1600 BC

Beginning in about 2500 BC, prospectors from Anatolia explored the island for copper. The discovery of rich deposits drew many communities from the Anatolian coast to settle on Cyprus. These migrants brought with them new ways of building houses, cooking, spinning, and weaving. They also brought cattle and the ox-drawn plow, creating an agricultural revolution, leading to a boom in food production and a rapid increase in population.

The newcomers spread across the island, settling in the copper-rich foothills of the Troodos Mountains and living harmoniously with the local indigenous people. Over time, the communities merged to produce a rich and unique Bronze Age culture, characterized by local varieties of everyday pottery and an array of more elaborate vessels, models and figurines.

In the Early Bronze Age, the use of metal became more widespread in Cyprus. By about 2400-2300 BC, copper was being cast into standard shapes, such as axe heads, presumably for the purpose of trade.

As the trading of copper became more essential to the economy of the island, an extensive communication network developed between villages. As Cyprus began to export the metal, the island became famed for its rich copper resources.
Cyprus Opens to the World

Late Bronze Age, 1600-1050 BC

The Late Bronze Age was a period of great prosperity. Across the eastern Mediterranean, trade networks linked Egypt, the Hittite Empire of central Anatolia, the Kingdom of Ugarit on coastal Syria, and the Mycenaean of southern Greece in a vast interconnected economy. Cyprus, referred to as Alashiya in documents of the time, occupied a central place as a major supplier of copper.

Bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, became Cyprus’ most important commercial export, and the island emerged as a major player on the Mediterranean stage. Hittites and Egyptians vied for control. Mycenaean and Syrians established commercial outposts on Cyprus’ coast, during the 14th century BC. The production and export of copper boomed.

The mining and export of Cypriot copper flourished in the Late Bronze Age, reaching its zenith in the century after 1300 BC. Copper was traded in the form of large ingots shaped like ox hides. Cypriot ingots have been found as far west as Marseille, France, and as far north as the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria.

In two sanctuaries at Enkomi, archaeologists uncovered bronze statues of gods in horned helmets. One is the largest known bronze figure from the Bronze Age Mediterranean world. Another, dubbed “The Ingot God,” stands triumphantly upon a copper ingot.

The Age of the Cypriot Kingdoms

Iron Age, 1300-300 BC

For a thousand years, Cyprus was divided into ten independent city-kingdoms.

The inhabitants spoke three languages: Greek, Phoenician, and a language indigenous to the island, which scholars call Eteocypriot ("original Cypriot"). By 700 BC, most Cypriot city-kingdoms were led by rulers with Greek pedigrees, although Phoenician- and Eteocypriot-dominated cities continued to flourish. The island itself was known by several names: Alashiya to the Egyptians and Hittites, Ia-Atnana to the Assyrians, and Kypros to the Greeks.

The 9th century BC marks the penetration of Phoenician settlers, firstly at Kition and later in a number of sites further inland. The Phoenicians adopted some aspects of Cypriot culture, worshipping Greek gods under Phoenician names. Phoenician inscriptions on gravestones at Kition show evidence of mixed marriages and include names of at least three different ethnic groups: Greek, Phoenician, and Hebrew.
Bound by a common interest in the mining and export of copper, the Cypriot kingdoms were united when confronting the empires of the day. In 707 BC they negotiated a profitable status within the economic empire of the Neo-Assyrians, and in the sixth century they became allies of Persia. However, the Greco-Persian Wars (499-450 BC) forced most of the Cypriot kings to take sides with Greece in a tense Mediterranean atmosphere that was not resolved until Alexander the Great conquered Persia in 330 BC.

Around 300 BC, the king of Egypt Ptolemy I Soter (one of Alexander’s generals), abolished the Cypriot kingdoms and made Cyprus part of his own empire. The abolition of the city-kingdoms was an externally enforced action that was meant to serve the colonial politics of the newly founded Ptolemaic empire.

Cyprus in the Age of Empires

Hellenistic and Roman periods, 310 BC-AD 330

With the abolition of Cypriot kingdoms, Cyprus became fully a part of the expansive Greek world.

It was the age of Hellenism, the era following the conquests of Alexander the Great, when Greek power and influence was at its height. Under the rule of Ptolemaic Egypt, whose pharaohs were the Greek successors of Alexander the Great, Greek culture spread on Cyprus. The Greek alphabet replaced the old Cypriot syllabary, and images of gods became more definitively Greek in style. With its copper mines, wheat fields, olive groves, and vineyards, Cyprus was a treasure that Ptolemaic Egypt exploited to the full.

But conflicts within the vast territories that Alexander conquered eventually eroded the Hellenistic world. Alexander’s empire soon became part of the growing Roman Empire, and Cyprus was annexed in 58 BC. The island prospered under the Romans, although Rome exacted a heavy price in taxes and exports, while adding monumental buildings and grand villas to the Cypriot landscape. Greek culture, however, persisted – in Greek institutions, theaters, religion, language, and art. A good system of Roman roads was built, linking cities together and the more remote areas to harbors, enabling Cypriot products – timber, wine, oil, grain, and copper – to be transported easily to ports.

In AD 45, the apostle Paul, accompanied by Barnabas, a native of Cyprus, traveled to Cyprus to preach the gospel, making Cyprus the first Roman province to be Christianized.

Marble statue of Aphrodite from Salamis
Byzantine Cyprus

AD 330-1191

In AD 330 the Roman Empire was divided into East and West. Cyprus became part of the Eastern Empire, ruled from the city of Constantinople.

It was a peaceful, prosperous province of the new state. Christianity quickly took hold near the great sanctuaries at Paphos, Amathus, and Salamis, as powerful bishops built large Basilicas.

Due to a weakened economy and imperial neglect, the Church soon became the center of power on the island.

In AD 649 Cyprus suffered the first attack by Arab invaders. Twenty more raids followed until AD 961. Prosperous cities such as Salamis, Lambousa, and Soloi were destroyed; the economic and cultural life of the island was disrupted; and political instability followed through to the 12th century. Treasures of the church and of wealthy merchants vanished from the island – either stolen or removed for safety. At various times, Cyprus was partially or completely occupied by the Arabs, until the Byzantine Empire regained control in AD 965.

The glory of Byzantine art of this period is reflected in the churches of the 11th and 12th century adorned with wall paintings, along with two five-domed village churches.

The Eastern Frontier of Christendom

Crusader and Venetian periods, 1191-1571

The Crusades changed Cyprus’ destiny yet again. In 1191, in the course of the Third Crusade, King Richard the Lionheart of England captured Cyprus, cutting the island off from the Byzantine Empire. A year later, he sold his prize to Guy de Lusignan, whose descendants ruled Cyprus for the next three hundred years.

The first three decades of the 13th century was a period of intensive construction, during which Gothic-style architecture rose on the island. The cathedrals of Nicosia and Famagusta, as well as the finest example of this architecture – Bellapais Abbey – along with some fortresses in the Kyrenia mountain range were being built at this time. In terms of cultural accomplishment, the period of the Lusignan dynasty is considered the golden age of medieval Cyprus.

In 1489 the island passed on to the Venetians and became a military garrison and a trading center. Representative examples are the defence fortifications that were constructed in Nicosia, Famagusta, and Kyrenia, especially during the last decade of the Venetian period.

The art of the period shows a distinctively Cypriot fusion of western and Byzantine styles. Among the treasures of medieval Cyprus are the painted churches of the Troodos Mountains, whose walls glow with luminous frescoes. Ten of these churches are listed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List.

Cyprus’ medieval period ended with the Ottoman conquests of Nicosia and Famagusta in 1570-71. Ottoman rule continued until 1878.
Recent History

In 1878, the British took over administration of the island, ceded by the Ottomans, and in 1925 Cyprus was declared a British Crown colony.

Following the 1955-1959 liberation struggle against British colonial rule, Cyprus gained its independence in 1960. In 1964, UN peacekeeping forces arrive in Cyprus, following intercommunal clashes.

In July 1974, Turkish forces invaded and occupied the northern third of the island, where they remain to this day. Despite the many continuing humanitarian, social, and economic consequences, Cyprus today is a modern society with a robust and healthy economy.

In May 2004, the Republic of Cyprus joined the European Union, adding its own uniqueness to the mosaic and serving as the European Union's lighthouse in the eastern Mediterranean. The island and the Cypriot people stand as a beacon for closer cooperation, understanding, and dialogue with the countries and people in its immediate neighborhood and wider region.

Strategically located, Cyprus continues to have a rich historical maritime tradition. Today, its merchant fleet is the third largest in the European Union and tenth largest worldwide. On January 1st, 2008, Cyprus introduced the euro as its official currency, replacing the Cyprus pound. Cyprus is home to many international companies that use the island as a springboard to the surrounding regions and further afield.

Cyprus is a popular tourist destination: over 2 million visitors annually experience its history, archaeology, religion, and culture. Easily accessible from the United States via most European cities, Cyprus is an explorer's dream and an archaeologist's paradise. Visitors to the island can find a mixture of pine-clad mountains, beautiful beaches, picturesque villages, historic fortresses, Greek temples, Roman amphitheatres, and Byzantine churches.

Cyprus' friendly, hospitable people are always ready to welcome visitors eager to discover the wealth of art, architecture, spiritual, and historical delights that the footprints of history have left behind.

History has shown that Cyprus has been – and continues to be – a true crossroads of civilizations.

Crucifixion from Kokkinotrimithia