

CYPRUS
NICOSIA

AYIA SOPHIA CATHEDRAL

Magnificent St. Sophia Cathedral in Nicosia is the oldest monument of Gothic art in Cyprus. The building was erected by French craftsmen carrying out the works for about 150 years, starting in 1209. The cathedral was modelled on the famous Notre Dame church in Paris. The temple is situated and built on the ruins of the earlier Byzantine church, Ayia Sofia from 1193. The church was consecrated in 1326, but it still was not completed, and construction process was very slow, delayed by numerous wars. In fact the church was never completed. Here was the place where the coronation ceremonies of the French kings of Cyprus (Lusignan dynasty) were taking place, then the new crowned kings went to the cathedral of St. Nicholas in Famagusta for the coronation ceremony of the titular ruler of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. The cathedral was also a centre of the most refined music called now *Ars Subtilior*, known today from so called Turin manuscript. Its closest neighbor was the Orthodox church of Ayios Nikolaos – also in the Gothic style – so both denominations very often celebrated simultaneously in both shrines (although religious and cultural differences prevented both parts from being influenced and inspired by each other). The building was partially renovated by the Genoese in 1373, after damage related to the Genoese conquest. Next damage occurred after the war against the Mamluks. The earthquake in 1491 brought a severe damage of the eastern part of the edifice. Venetians, who were next masters of the island repaired and reinforced the building after next earthquake from 1547. In 1570, the island was conquered by the Ottomans. The conquerors desecrated the church, burned the pulpit and benches. They also opened the tombs under the cathedral's floor, scattering the remains that rested in them the same they did in Famagusta in Ayios Nikolaos Cathedral (now Lala Mustafa Camii). Soon after, the reconstruction of the cathedral into a mosque began. Turks removed partially the tombstones, covered the remaining ones with carpets. They also covered the internal masonry ornaments with plaster, covered the original paintings with white paint and a mihrab and a minbar were made. As part of the construction works, two unfinished towers were transformed into minarets. Turks also added the ablution fountain in the courtyard. In 1735, the mosque was once again damaged by an earthquake. In 1976, the ruins of the previous building were discovered on the south side. The Cathedral is still used as a mosque, under the new name – Selimiye Camii given in 1954 – in honour of Selim II, the sultan of the Ottoman Empire from the time when Cyprus was conquered – although the old name Ayia Sophia (Ayasofya) is still in common use.