



A picture shows the Limassol medieval castle (center), now housing the Cyprus Medieval Museum in the coastal Cypriot city. — AFP photos



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Archaeological officer Elena Stylianou shows a sword thought to be from the period of the crusades.

# KNIGHTS TEMPLAR LEGACY LIVES ON IN CYPRUS

Fables of the Knights Templar are legend, but deep beneath a castle on Cyprus-an island once owned by the Crusader brotherhood-lies a legacy historians say still resonates today. Down steep, narrow and uneven stone stairs in the fort of Limassol is a low-vaulted room lined with tombstones of medieval knights. This is the chapel where England's King Richard the Lionheart is believed to have been married, en route to the Holy Land in 1192. "The architecture and the artefacts here reflect the broad history of Cyprus," said Elena Stylianou, a government archaeologist, brandishing a long Crusader-era sword, rusted and chipped but still sharp.

"Cyprus was a place that many outsiders wanted to capture and own." Richard, the first of so many British visitors to the sunny island, celebrated his wedding night downing sweet red wine before spending his honeymoon laying waste to the countryside, burning, looting and adding Cyprus to his possessions. After the defeated Cypriot ruler surrendered-reportedly on condition he was not bound in iron chains, so Richard used silver shackles instead-the English king swiftly sold Cyprus to the Templars.

### 'European orientation'

The Cyprus Medieval Museum, now housed in the Mediterranean port city's fort, says that while the main castle walls date from the 16th century Ottoman period, they sit on far older foundations. The vault is "probably a chapel of the primary fortifications of the Knights Templar" on Cyprus.

The Templars, an international army of elite warriors set up to guard European pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem, used the

island as their headquarters to fight military campaigns authorized by the pope in the Holy Land, just over 100 kilometers to the southeast. Cypriot medieval historian Nicholas Coureas said the Crusades were a key step in forging the island's national character. "The most lasting consequence of the conquest of Richard is that although Cyprus would change hands several times, it still has a European orientation... and most Cypriots identify more with Europe than say they

see themselves today-part of Europe, far into the past.

### 'Base of operations'

That view matters today. The island has been divided since 1974, when Turkey invaded and occupied the northern third of Cyprus in response to an Athens-sponsored coup seeking to annex the island to Greece. A UN-patrolled buffer zone runs between the Greek-speaking, Orthodox Christian-majority

Western forces operating in the Middle East and North Africa." He noted that the 2011 NATO-backed overthrow of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi was supported from a British airbase near Limassol.

And the echoes of Crusader history even stretch to wine: the island's sweet "Commandaria" red, named by the knights, is the oldest manufactured wine and "protected designation of origin" certification, according to the Guinness World Records.

damned as heretical in 1307 and the knights burned at the stake. The Templar fortune may have long vanished, but Stylianou hopes the ancient sites might help draw visitors back to Cyprus, whose vital tourism industry has been devastated by coronavirus restrictions.

Cyprus is dotted with castles and ruins left by the Crusaders, including the castle of Kolossi, once a key base of the Knights Hospitallers, and the dramatic fortress of Saint Hilarion. Perched on a mountain



A Crusader tombstone on the site where a chapel of the Knights Templar was built at the Limassol medieval castle.



Archaeological officer Elena Stylianou shows a clay ampoule that used to contain holy water.



The cross of the Knights Templar engraved on the 14th century sarcophagus of Adam de Antiochia, Marshal of Cyprus, is pictured.

do with Asia and Africa," Coureas said.

"Thanks to its geographical position, and its population, Cyprus is on the edge of Europe, but with strong links to the Middle East," he added. Coureas works with the government-backed Cyprus Research Centre, which focuses on national history and sociology. He argues that for the most easterly member of the European Union, history is not just about dusty schoolbooks, but about how citizens

south and the breakaway Muslim-majority Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognized only by Ankara. British military bases, which remain sovereign UK territory, cover three percent of the former British colony.

"The Crusades are very relevant today, because there are a lot of parallels," Coureas said. "What also started in the Crusade period... was the importance of Cyprus as a base of operations for

Its label bears the word "Crusaders". While the Templars owned Cyprus outright for only eight months before selling it to French Guy de Lusignan, the order maintained castles on the island.

And, after they were finally chased out of the Holy Land, the Templars made Cyprus their headquarters in 1291. Myths tell of how the Templars hid their wealth-including, according to novels and films, the Holy Grail-when the order was

ridge above the northern port of Kyrenia, it looks like it inspired Walt Disney's fairytale castle. "When people can, I think they will come," Stylianou said. "Because when you are stuck at home, you miss something... and these sites bring you closer to your past." — AFP



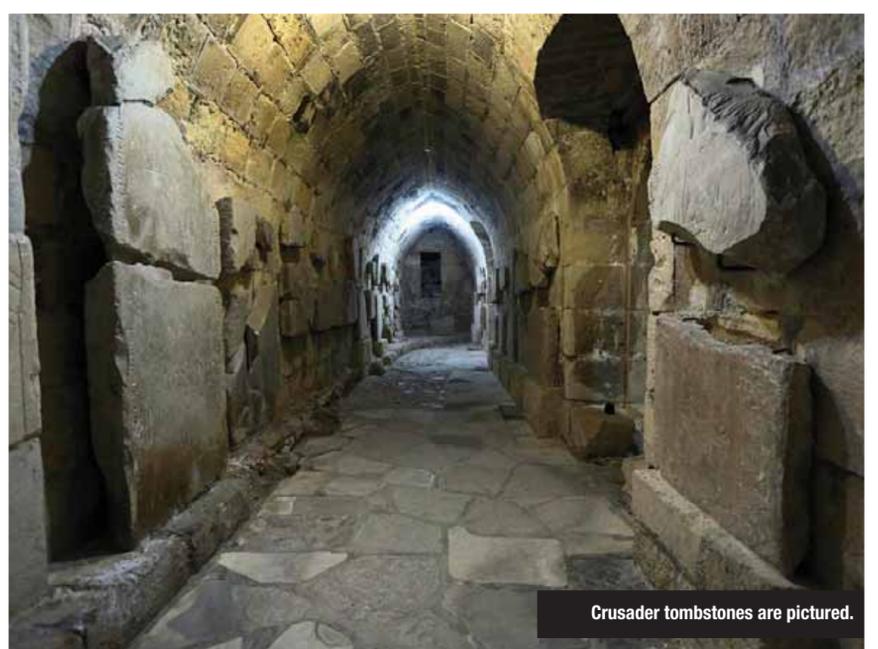
Crusader tombstones are pictured.



The tombstone of noblewoman Akylina, daughter of the bishop of Lefkara, bearing a skull and crossbones, is pictured.



A Crusader tombstone is pictured.



Crusader tombstones are pictured.



An archaeological officer shows a sword thought to be from the period of the crusades.



An archaeological officer shows a comb, said to be from the time of the crusades.