

A SPECIAL TYPE OF “URBAN SITE” IN THE 13TH CENTURY LEVANT? THE CASE OF MARGAT (QAL’AT AL-MARQAB)¹

BALÁZS MAJOR

Pázmány Péter Catholic University of Hungary
Department of Archaeology - Department of Arabic Studies
Syro-Hungarian Archaeological Mission

One of the most important events in the medieval history of the Eastern Mediterranean was the Crusades, which influenced the life of millions in the 12th and 13th centuries and its memory is still vivid in our days. Besides the historical and political events of the two centuries, important processes took place in the field of interrelationship between economy and settlement pattern and there were at least one group of newly created institutions: the Military Orders that seem to have played a large part in it in the 13th century.

The economy of the Levantine cities was largely built on being the sea-gate of the products of the highly developed Syrian interior – and the transit station of imported goods from territories farther East and the West.² Many coastal cities taken over by the Europeans, however did have their own products – especially in such long established industries as silk production, glass manufacture, dyeing and sugar production, the last having been introduced to southern regions of contemporary Europe from the Crusader states.³ It is also generally accepted that in spite of the often intensive military activity, European presence in the Holy Land brought an economic boom to the Levant, which had its positive effects felt by neighbouring Muslim cities as well.⁴ The territories of the Latin states also witnessed a kind of rural and urban renaissance with the expansion of existing towns, the resettling of a number of long abandoned sites and the establishment of new settlements.⁵ A leading role in this – especially in the 13th century – was played by the Military Orders, themselves also new creations owing their existence to the Crusades.

What makes a Crusader period settlement a town or city is hard to identify precisely,⁶ but one can't deny

that there were several dozens of settlements in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem alone,⁷ that could compete for the title, sometimes on more than one bases (size, legal status, ecclesiastical stand, economic importance, infrastructure, etc.). Besides ancient cities of the Levantine coast with well renowned industries, huge fortified centres established by the Military Orders by the beginning of the 13th century developed into settlements possibly rivalling towns or even lesser cities in many aspects. While some of those established in the former Kingdom of Jerusalem, like 'Athlith received serious scholarly attention from an early date,⁸ sites further to the north were often rather neglected. One such property belonging to a Military Order; the Knight's of St John, was Margat (present day Qal'at al-Marqab) in the Syrian coast, always cited as a magnificent castle but never considered as an important centre in the settlement pattern of the 13th century Levant.

Margat is a good example of how the transfer of ownership to one of the most important medieval international organizations could change the fortunes of a settlement. Being established by a local Muslim tribe approximately three decades before the Crusaders arrived to the Holy Land, the castle had Byzantines, Muslims, the Princes of Antioch and finally one of the most outstanding Crusader baronial families; the Mazoirs as its overlords, but without reaching real significance.⁹ In February the first 1187, a few months before the catastrophic defeat of the Crusaders and the fall of the first Kingdom of Jerusalem, Margat and its dependencies were bought by the Order of St John¹⁰ and

1. The main supporter of the research program of the Syro-Hungarian Archaeological Mission is the MOL Company. Hungarian scientific research grant is provided by the OTKA PD 77885.

2. Prawer, J. (1972). *The Crusaders' Kingdom*. New York. pp. 391-402.

3. Rozenberg, S. (1999). *Knights of the Holy Land. The Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem*. Jerusalem. pp. 251-252.

4. Prawer 1972: 352-353.

5. Prawer, J. (1951). Colonization Activities in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. In: *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 29: 1063-1118.

6. See: Prawer, J. (1980). *Crusader Institutions*. Oxford; Ri-

ley-Smith, J. (1973). *The Feudal Nobility and the Kingdom of Jerusalem, 1174-1277*. London. pp. 62-98; Pringle, D. (1997). *Secular Buildings in the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. An Archaeological Gazetteer*. Cambridge. pp. 3-6.

7. Pringle, R.D. (1995). Town defences in the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. in: I.A. Corfis & M. Wolfe (eds.) *The Medieval City under Siege*. Woodbridge. p. 69-121. pp. 71.

8. Jones, C.N. (1947). *Guide to 'Athlith: The Crusader Castle, Town and Surroundings*. Department of Antiquities. Jerusalem.

9. Deschamps, P. (1973). *Les châteaux des croisés en Terre Sainte III. La défense du comté de Tripoli et de la principauté d'Antioche*. Paris. pp. 259-263.

10. *Cartulaire = Cartulaire général de l'Ordre des Hospitaliers de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem (1100-1310)*. 4 vols. ed. J. Delaville le Roulx, Paris, 1894-1906. vol. I. no. 809; Mayer, H.E. (1993).

the decision was made to develop it into its main military and administrative centre in Syria. The importance the order attached to the site is reflected in the speed with which it was expanded. Periodization studies connected with the study of earthquake effects indicate that the vast fortifications on the mountain plateau were raised in less than 15 years.¹¹ The castellans of the new Hospitaller centre counted amongst the highest officers of the Order¹² and it was amongst the few castles that had their own chancellery and treasury.¹³

Margat was evidently the administrative centre of the region: it had a seigneurial court and although no document has been found yet on the existence of a burgess court, the site did have a Cour des Syriens.¹⁴ What also strengthens the legal status of Margat to be considered as a medieval “city” is the fact that following the devastation of his town in 1188 by Saladin, the bishop of Valenia set up his residence in the castle and Margat remained the seat of the bishopric until its fall in 1285.¹⁵

The actual remains and their ongoing research by the Syro-Hungarian Archaeological Mission indicate that the site was more than a simple castle with an attached civilian settlement. The flat mountain top covering 6 hectares was enclosed in a single fortification system that comprised of a huge multi-storey citadel covering more than 1 hectare, but the rest of the plateau was taken up by a civilian settlement. Recent archaeological research has revealed that around the time of the Hospitaller takeover a new fortified suburb covering roughly 10 hectares was also constructed on the western slope of the mountain, thus tripling the size of the civilian settlement in Margat and making it rival many long established cities of the coast in terms of size.¹⁶ Besides remains of a town wall, finely painted

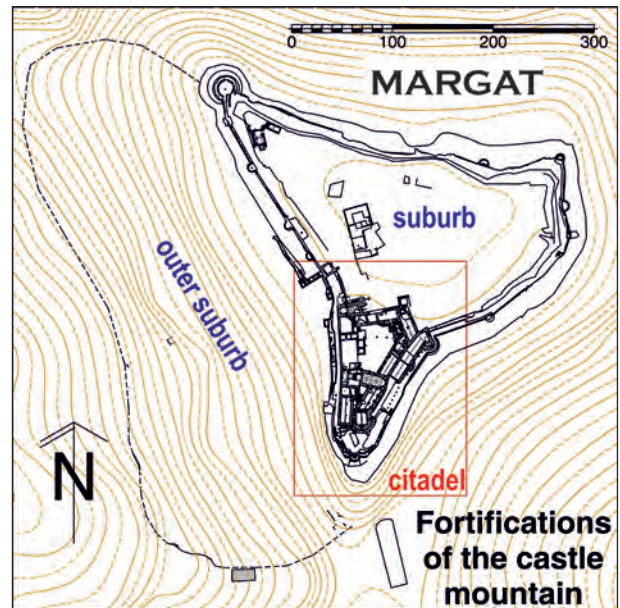


FIGURE 1. Plan of Margat Citadel.

chapel and an attached cemetery, the excavation seasons in 2010 and 2011 detected more than a dozen finely executed buildings resembling town houses in their high quality of execution. They also contained a very rich assemblage of domestic utensils also rather characteristic for urban settlements. The finds which seem to date from the end of the 12th century and from the 13th, combined with the indirect testimony of the sources make it very likely that the outer suburb is nothing else than the nearby town of Valenia (present day Bānyās) re-established under the protection of the castle after the original site was destroyed by Saladin in 1188. It is also likely that the 1212 text of the canon of Hildesheim; Wilbrand of Oldenburg describing the five hundred and nine waggon-loads of income that the mountain under Margat yielded for the castle¹⁷ refers to the goods produced by the outer suburb. Recent field surveys have also revealed a very dense network of rural settlements around the castle in the 13th century, with as many as one settlement per two km² in some areas.

Just like many considerable urban settlements, Margat seems to have been in the focal point of the contemporary trunk-road system too. Treaties between the Hospitallers and their Mamluk rivals also reflect on the dense network of ports belonging to the castle sometimes less than ten kilometres apart.¹⁸ This facili-

Kingdom of Jerusalem varied between 5 ha and 85 ha. (Pringle 1995: 95). Margat with its 15 ha was larger than the suburb of 'Athlith (9 ha) or Caesarea (10 ha) and was covering roughly the same area as Sidon (15 ha).

17. Wilbrand von Oldenburg, *Itinera*, 210.

18. al-Qalqashandī, *Subh* = Abu'l-'Abbās Ahmad ibn Sa'id, *Subh al-ashā fi sinā'at al-insbā*. vol. 14. ed. Muhammad 'Abd al-Rasūl Ibrāhīm, Cairo 1910-1920. XIV./44-45; trans. Holt, P.M.

Varia Antiochena. Studien zum Kreuzfahrerfürstentum Antiochia im 12. und frühen 13. Jahrhundert. Hannover. p. 176.

11. Kázmér, M., & Major, B. (2010). Distinguishing damages of two earthquakes - archeoseismology of a Crusader castle (al-Marqab citadel, Syria). In: Stewart, I., Sintubin, M., Niemi, T. & Altunel, E. (eds): *Ancient Earthquakes. Geological Society of America Special Paper*, 471. pp. 186 - 199. Boulder, Colorado. pp. 193-195.

12. Burgtorf, J. (2006). The Military Orders in the Crusader Principality of Antioch. in: K. Ciggaar & M. Metcalf (eds.) *Antioch (696-1268) Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 147. Leuven: 217-246. pp.2006: 222-223.

13. Riley-Smith, J. (1967). *The Knights of St. John in Jerusalem and Cyprus c. 1050-1310*. Edinburgh. p. 68.

14. *ibid.* 431.

15. Wilbrand von Oldenburg, *Itinerarium Terrae Sanctae*. ed. S. de Sandoli, in *Itinera Hierosolymitana Crucignatorum (saec. XII-XIII)*, vol. 3, Jerusalem 1983. pp. 195-249. p. 212. The bishops seem to have stayed in the castle until its fall in 1285 (Rey, E.G. 1883. *Les colonies franques de Syrie aux XII^{me} et XIII^{me} siècles*. Paris. p.335) and their appointment was controlled by the Hospitallers. Riley-Smith 1967: 413.

16. Areas of urban settlements enclosed by town walls in the



FIGURE 2. Margat Castle stands on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean coast.

tated the movements of goods and personnel especially after land routes became dangerous as a result of the conquests of Saladin following 1188.

The site of Margat can also be linked with another often characteristic feature of medieval urban centres: industrial activities. The huge 13th century war machine comprising of thousands of troops and civilians supplying them, alone created in itself an enormous demand of many sorts, which is faithfully reflected in archaeological remains such as the huge quantities of iron slags – the leftover of very intensive iron production at the site. Margat in 1193 is mentioned to have had a dyework¹⁹ and peace treaties concluded with the Mamluks refer to such industrial installations belonging to the castle as mills, treshing floors, saltpans, fisheries.²⁰ Other elements of infrastructure pointing to the importance of the site include the recently excavated ovens (one with an inner diameter around 5 m) that produced bread in industrial quantities, and until now no less than five Crusader period bathhouses of varying size were brought to light.²¹

(1995). *Early Mamluk Diplomacy (1260-1290): Treaties of Baybars and Qalawun with Christian Rulers*. Islamic History and Civilization, Studies and Texts, vol. XII. Leiden/New York/Cologne. p. 51; Ibn 'Abdazzāhir, *Tashrif* = Muhyī al-Dīn ibn 'Abdazzāhir, *Tashrif al-ayyām wa'l-usūr fī sirat al-Malik Mansūr*. ed. Murād Kāmil, Cairo 1961. 2 vols. pp. 1/83, 2/210; trans. Holt 1995: 63.

19. *Cartulaire* I. no. 941.

20. Al-Qalqashandī, *Subh*, XIV/43-44; Holt 1995: 49-50. The huge artificial *berquilla* or open cistern to the immediate south of the castle might have served as a fishpond as well.

21. Buzás, G. & Major, B. (2012). Crusader and Mamluk Hammāms. In: al-Marqab Citadel. *Balnéorient*, IFPO Cairo-Damascus. Forthcoming.

The monumental constructions on the mountain of Margat and the apparent well being of the site immediately after the cataclysm caused by the reconquista of Saladin in 1187-1188 is rather surprising and might not be explained solely by the scarcely documented help coming from Europe. According to a recent study,²² surviving documents show that the Hospitallers kept to a strategy of agricultural investment and the development of the infrastructure connected to it not only in Europe but also in the Holy Land. The most profitable crop was evidently the sugarcane. It was produced in industrial quantities and its commerce was made even more lucrative for the Hospitallers by their tax exemptions documented in many areas of the Holy Land.²³ Sugar cane plantations are relatively well attested to both in the written sources and the archaeological record in the southern part of the Levant and the region of Tripoli, however there are some indications for the existence of plantations further to the north in Crusader times. The geographical work of Abu'l-Fidā'²⁴ makes explicit mention of

22. Bronstein, J. (2005). *The Hospitallers and the Holy Land. Financing the Latin East 1187-1274*. Woodbridge. pp. 47-63.

23. *Ibid.* 55-56.

24. Abu'l-Fidā', *Taqwīm al-buldān* = al-Malik al-Mu'ayyid 'Imād al-Dīn Abu'l-Fidā' Ismā'il ibn Sa'īd ibn Mahmūd ibn 'Amr ibn Shāhīnshāh ibn 'Ayyūb, *Kitāb taqwīm al-buldān*. ed. J.-T. Reinaud & W.G. de Slane, Paris 1840. p. 255. It is not impossible that the indirect references to the place name 'Uyūn al-Qasab "Springs of the (sugar) cane" might be also be referring to a place in the vicinity of Margat. Ibn 'Abdazzāhir, *Tashrif*, 1/78. Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārikh* = Nāsir al-Dīn Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahīm ibn al-Furāt, *Tārikh ibn al-Furāt*. Vol. 8. eds. Najlā 'Izz al-Dīn & Qusantīn Zurayq, Beirut nd. p. 37.

the sugar canes around Valenia and Margat, which in the 13th century must have formed the property of the Hospitaller centre. It is not hard to imagine that the rising fortunes of 13th century Margat depended not only on its “self-created” consumption demand and on the abundance of the ordinary agricultural products, but also on its active participation in the lucrative Levantine sugar industry.

Although existing only in a certain areas and for a

limited timespan, central sites of the Military Orders in Syria like Margat did fulfil an essential role as centres of administration and production in the settlement pattern of the Latin States in the Levant and as such might be taken into some consideration when enlisting Levantine urban centres of the Middle Ages. Detecting more possible candidates however needs a combined study of the scanty written sources and the archaeological remains.