

BENJAMIN MICHAUDEL

INSTITUT FRANÇAIS DU PROCHE ORIENT, DAMASCUS

The Use of Fortification as a Political Instrument by the Ayyubids and the Mamluks in Bilād al-Shām and in Egypt (Twelfth-Thirteenth Centuries)

INTRODUCTION

Fortification played a major role in the management of conflicts between Franks and Muslims in Bilād al-Shām at the time of the Crusades. In addition to protecting the borders, fortifications preserved the local *iqṭā'*-based economy. Between the end of the twelfth and the end of the thirteenth centuries, Ayyubid and Mamluk rulers used fortification to consolidate their power in Muslim and former Frankish territory. This political use of Islamic fortification knew three distinct stages of development between the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, parallel with the technical evolution of Islamic military architecture and contemporary with political changes in Bilād al-Shām and Egypt (fig. 1).

STAGE ONE: THE DEFENSIVE POLICY OF ṢALĀḤ AL-DĪN AT THE END OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY

Beginning in 1170/1171, ṢalāḤ al-Dīn built fortifications as the Fatimid vizier of Egypt. His considerations were primarily defensive in this period, following the Frankish campaign of 1168 that led to the siege of Cairo, and the Frankish-Byzantine naval expedition against Damietta in 1169. Thus, ṢalāḤ al-Dīn ordered the restoration of the Fatimid walls of Cairo, conquered the castle of Ayla on the Red Sea, and made improvements to the fortifications of Alexandria.¹

The launch of the fortification program of Cairo in 1176 by ṢalāḤ al-Dīn not only symbolized his will to affirm his independence from the dying Nurid power in the Bilād al-Shām, but also to put an end to the Fatimid power in Egypt. This defensive program represented the first step toward the political and military supremacy of ṢalāḤ al-Dīn at the end of the twelfth century. Until that time, Cairo had been the capital of the Fatimid Caliphate, founded in 969 to the north of the city of al-Fuṣṭāṭ. Thus, the city had been subject to careful works of fortification,

©Middle East Documentation Center. The University of Chicago.

¹J. M. Mouton and Sami 'Abd al-Malik, "La forteresse de l'île de Graye (Qal'at Ayla) à l'époque de Salah al-Din: Etude épigraphique et historique," *Annales Islamologiques* 29 (1995): 85; Nasser O. Rabbat, *The Citadel of Cairo: A New Interpretation of Royal Mamluk Architecture* (Leiden, 1995), 6–7.



comprising two defensive walls. The first was built from brick in 971, and the second from stone masonry in front of it between the years 1088 and 1092.²

Şalāḥ al-Dīn entrusted the amir Qarāqūsh with the supervision of a fortification program unequalled in the former Fatimid capital. This program led to the construction of a citadel at the top of a hill to the southeast of Cairo (fig. 2), and a twenty-kilometer-long wall surrounding the whole city (fig. 3).³ Used both as the residence of the new sovereign and as a law court, the citadel symbolized the political preeminence of Şalāḥ al-Dīn and of the Ayyubids over the Fatimid city. It became, moreover, the physical base of Şalāḥ al-Dīn's power in Egypt: it was above all a fortified complex in which Şalāḥ al-Dīn, his relatives, and his mamluk troops could take refuge in case of an invasion of Cairo by the Franks or a revolt in the city against the new sovereign. The construction of the citadel was part of a larger building program aimed at creating a Muslim counterpoint to Crusader Jerusalem. The Ayyubid capital would thus be able to compete with the Frankish capital by virtue of its defensive system. It validated the political transition between the Fatimids and the Ayyubids, which did not represent a total rejection of the pre-existing fortifications, as the defensive walls built around Cairo by the Fatimids were preserved and surrounded by the Ayyubid ramparts.⁴ Therefore, the defensive pragmatism extolled by Şalāḥ al-Dīn came with the political transition. The extension of the defensive policy to the rest of Egypt, with fortification programs applied to the main coastal positions and on the primary communication routes of the Sinai, symbolized the extension of Şalāḥ al-Dīn's power to the entire former Fatimid province and the emergence of a competitive Muslim territory in the turmoil of the Crusades.

Nonetheless, in Bilād al-Shām, Şalāḥ al-Dīn did not undertake a fortification policy similar to the one developed in Egypt, mainly due to a difference in the management of power. After having unified almost all of the former Nurid provinces in Bilād al-Shām with the taking of Aleppo in 1183, Şalāḥ al-Dīn delegated his authority to his most faithful amirs and to his family members. He entrusted former Saljuq and Frankish territories to them as *iqṭā'* and also delegated to them, as *muqṭa'*s (*iqṭā'* holders), the responsibility for the defence of these lands. Thus, delegation of power was accompanied by a delegation of defensive decision-making in which Şalāḥ al-Dīn, who was occupied primarily with the military expeditions

²Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Mawā'iz wa-al-I'tibār fī Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār fī Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah*, trans. Paul Casanova, *Description historique et topographique de l'Égypte* (Cairo, 1920), 4:81, 87.

³Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Fayḥ al-Qussī fī al-Fatḥ al-Qudsī (583/1187–589/1193)*, ed. M. Maḥmūd Şabāḥ (Cairo, 1975), 209.

⁴Rabbat, *The Citadel of Cairo*, 6–7.



he led against the Franks in the region, only rarely interfered.⁵

Therefore, as for Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in Egypt a decade earlier, the fortifications erected by the *muqta*'s in Bilād al-Shām served to affirm their authority and power over a territory recently subjugated and provided the key to semi-autonomy from the Egyptian central power; indeed, the castles became the residence of the *muqta*', received the taxes in coin or in kind, and could shelter the locals in case of threats. A good example of this provincial policy is the *iqṭā'* of the Mengüverish amirs, located on the northern Syrian coast. The amirs, who were granted a vast territory by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in 1188, reigned for more than eighty years in semi-autonomy and launched private fortification programs through the main castles that protected the borders of their *iqṭā'*s, i.e., Ṣahyūn, capital of the *iqṭā'*, Balāṭunus, and Burzayh.⁶

One observes at the end of the twelfth century two facets of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's power bound closely to two defensive policies. In Egypt, the Ayyubid conquest of the Fatimid state was followed by a large fortification program in Cairo and in the main strategic zones supervised largely by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. In Bilād al-Shām, the system of *iqṭā'* applied on a large scale to the territories taken from the Franks and the Nurids generated private and individual fortification programs led by the *muqta*'s, who sought military and financial autonomy.

STAGE TWO: THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF FORTIFICATION IN THE INTERNAL STRUGGLES BETWEEN THE SUCCESSORS OF ṢALĀḤ AL-DĪN DURING THE FIRST HALF OF THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

This period saw tensions between Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's successors for their supremacy as leaders of the vast Ayyubid empire. Two main centers emerged and remained rivals during the first half of the thirteenth century: the principality of Aleppo, controlled by al-Zāhir Ghāzī, and the principality of Damascus/Cairo, under the authority of al-'Ādil.⁷

The war against the Franks was relegated to the background during this period because of numerous truces and peace treaties; the attention of the two main Ayyubid sovereigns was therefore focused on the development of their own territories within the Ayyubid empire. In this regard, they led policies of centralization of the *iqṭā'*s granted at the time of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn that aimed to territorially and politically unify these two main poles of the empire, in order to limit their dissensions and their defensive weaknesses.

Fortification played a major role in these centralization policies of the two

⁵Anne-Marie Eddé, *La principauté ayyoubide d'Alep (1183–1260)* (Stuttgart, 1999), 279 ff.

⁶Ibid., 266–67.

⁷Ibid., 235.



main Ayyubid princes, insofar as control of the *iqṭā'*s was generally symbolized on the ground by the implementation of fortification programs "sponsored" by Aleppo, Damascus, or Cairo. These aimed at improving the defensive system of a region, developing the defensive network of the principality, and affirming the sovereign's power in even the most distant provinces of their territories.

Thus, this empire-wide defensive system appeared mainly as the competition between the two princes of Aleppo and Damascus/Cairo to outdo their respective rival in the quality of a regional defensive system that had to be sufficiently effective in preventing any attack from a neighboring family member. Political and military rivalries generated this defensive emulation, a defensive race internal to the Ayyubid world that encouraged the development of Islamic fortification during this period.

The sites affected by these fortification policies were numerous in Bilād al-Shām: one can mention Aleppo (fig. 4), Hārim, Qal'at Najm, Qal'at Ja'bar, al-Shuḡhr-Bakās, Apamea, and Shayzar (fig. 5) for the principality of Aleppo and Damascus, and Bosra, Ṣalkhad, 'Ajlūn, Shawbak, Karak, and Cairo for the principalities of Damascus/Cairo. The Ayyubid princes were quite careful in the execution of these fortification projects, sometimes personally inspecting the progress of work. The supervision of these fortification programs by the princes led to the emergence of standardized characteristics for this maturing practice of Islamic fortification. The sovereigns in particular turned their attention to the main towns of their principalities, Aleppo, Damascus, and Cairo, whose citadels became their place of residence. There they coupled the fortification works with palatial architectural works intended to change these defensive sites into fortified palaces reflecting both their military and political might.

The castle of al-Shuḡhr-Bakās, located in northeast coastal Syria (fig. 6), experienced the "princely" defensive policies of this period.⁸ Conquered by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn from the Franks in 1188 and granted as an *iqṭā'* to an amir, the site was recovered by the prince of Aleppo, al-Zāhir Ghāzī, shortly after the sultan's death and after the rebellion of the sons of the amir in 1194. The prince of Aleppo ordered immediately the execution of a major fortification program on the site: from the defensive point of view, the upgrading of the castle by the prince of Aleppo ensured direct control of one of the main roads linking the Ayyubid principality of Aleppo to the Crusader principality of Antioch. From the political point of view, the fortification program increased the power of the prince of Aleppo in the region. Indeed, the improved castle symbolized the authority of the

⁸Max van Berchem and Edmond Fatio, *Voyage en Syrie* (Cairo, 1914–15), 1:251–59; Paul Deschamps, *Les châteaux des croisés en Terre-Sainte*, vol. 3, *La défense du comté de Tripoli et de la principauté d'Antioche* (Paris, 1973), pt. 1, 349–50.



prince in a region which had been semi-autonomous since its conquest by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in 1188.

Some Ayyubid *iqṭā'*s and principalities remained in the margins of the policies of the main successors during the first half of the thirteenth century and developed their own defensive programs to strengthen their local power. This was the case in the principalities of Hims and Ḥamāh, in the territory of the Isma'ilis and in the *iqṭā'* of the Mengüverish amirs on the northern Syrian coast around Ṣahyūn castle. This castle, located around thirty kilometers to the north-east of Latakia, was transformed by the amirs into a scaled-down imitation of the citadel of Aleppo, notably with the building of a palace similar to that built in the citadel of Aleppo by the prince al-Zāhir Ghāzī at the beginning of the thirteenth century (fig. 7).⁹

STAGE THREE: MAMLUK FORTIFICATION AS THE REFLECTION OF MILITARY SUPREMACY AT THE END OF THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

The advent of the Mamluks in the second half of the thirteenth century represented the last main turning point of the Crusades with the emergence of a power that took responsibility for subduing the Latin States on the shores of Bilād al-Shām. Following the example of their Ayyubid predecessors, the Mamluks used fortification as a means to establish their power in the provinces of Bilād al-Shām that remained faithful to Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn's successors and in the regions progressively conquered at the expense of the Crusaders.

In the former Ayyubid territories of Bilād al-Shām and Egypt, the Mamluks sought to recover the former *iqṭā'*s and principalities, and gradually replace the *muqṭa'* at his death with a governor, as was the case with the *iqṭā'* of the Mengüverish amirs. Other *iqṭā'*s, such as those of the amir of Karak and the Shawbak castles of Jordan, were recovered after military expeditions. This system was also applied to the last Frankish territories and castles conquered during this period, such as Krak des Chevaliers.

The castles served as residences for the Mamluk governors and centralized the political, economic, and military life of the region, as in the Ayyubid period, but the Mamluk sultans were not able to launch fortification programs similar in extent to those of their predecessors. One notable exception was Cairo, where the citadel was re-fortified at the end of the thirteenth century. The main reason for this situation was that the Mamluks generally recovered castles and citadels in good condition, since they tried to conquer them while inflicting as little damage as possible. Dismantling these Ayyubid and Frankish defensive works and eventually replacing them in face of the threat of a Crusader counteroffensive would have

⁹Yasser Tabbaa, *Constructions of Power and Piety in Medieval Aleppo* (University Park, PA, 1997), 89–91.



required a heavy investment of time and money. Therefore, the sultans could not symbolize their new authority by building numerous towers and palaces *ex nihilo*, but had to adapt their works to the pre-existing fortifications.

The Mamluks, thus did restore and make defensive improvements to these castles, both to strengthen the sites against a potential threat and to symbolize to the locals the fall of the Ayyubids and the beginning of their own rule. These works were characterized by monumentality and ostentation; they built towers and curtain-walls surpassing the size and defensive efficiency of pre-existing towers, such as in Krak des Chevaliers, Aleppo, and Marqab (fig. 8).

Finally, they demonstrated their political and military superiority by displaying in an ostentatious way the progressive transformation of these castles into palatial residences that had been initiated during Ayyubid times: epigraphical registers with floral and animal-shaped patterns were used liberally on castle walls, in addition to decorative designs around such defensive devices as loopholes and box machicolations (ex. Cairo, Krak des Chevaliers, Marqab) (figs. 9 and 10).¹⁰

In conclusion, one can observe, between the end of the twelfth and the end of the thirteenth centuries, a significant evolution in the role of fortification as a major political instrument used by the Ayyubids and the Mamluks. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn used fortification as a precious tool in the affirmation of his power in Egypt. In Bilād al-Shām, it allowed him to rely, politically and militarily, on his faithful amirs and relatives while he was occupied with the struggle against the Franks. During the first half of the thirteenth century, fortification was used as a chessboard in a game played between the two main poles of the Ayyubid empire for their own supremacy over Bilād al-Shām and Egypt: every castle or citadel put under the control of a prince was a pawn in this game and, thanks to the improvement of their defensive systems at that time, could be useful both for the protection of the “king” and for the acquisition of territory. Finally, for the first Mamluks of the second half of the thirteenth century, fortification was essentially used in support of defensive ingenuity at its apogee and of an artistic expression that went beyond the mere military functionality of the castles. They became strong symbols of a military and political power that spread in progressive and inexorable ways over the whole Bilād al-Shām and Egypt at the end of the Crusades.

¹⁰Jean Mesqui, *Quatre châteaux des Hospitaliers: Le Crac des Chevaliers: Le château haut: première et seconde enceinte* (Paris, 2004), 21, 25–26; idem, *Quatre châteaux des Hospitaliers: Qal’at Marqab: Le château* (Paris, 2004), 3.





Fig. 1. Main fortified sites in Bilād al-Shām during the Crusades



©2007 by Benjamin Michaudel.

DOI: 10.6082/M1Z31WS0. (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0>)

DOI of Vol. XI, no. 1: 10.6082/M1DR2SK1. See <https://doi.org/10.6082/ZWRN-BZ17> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.



Fig. 2. Citadel of Cairo: Al-Ramlah and al-Ḥaddād Ayyubid towers on the eastern front



Fig. 3. Ayyubid wall of Cairo: Al-Mahrūq tower near the north-eastern side of the wall



©2007 by Benjamin Michaudel.

DOI: [10.6082/M1Z31WS0](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0>)

DOI of Vol. XI, no. 1: [10.6082/M1DR2SK1](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1DR2SK1). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/ZWRN-BZ17> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.



Fig. 4. Citadel of Aleppo: Ayyubid gate-tower (Mamluk upper part)



Fig. 5. Citadel of Shayzar: Ayyubid and Mamluk keep



©2007 by Benjamin Michaudel.

DOI: [10.6082/M1Z31WS0](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0>)

DOI of Vol. XI, no. 1: [10.6082/M1DR2SK1](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1DR2SK1). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/ZWRN-BZ17> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.



Fig. 6. Al-Shughr-Bakās castle: Western view of the Ayyubid castle of Bakās



©2007 by Benjamin Michaudel.

DOI: [10.6082/M1Z31WS0](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0>)

DOI of Vol. XI, no. 1: [10.6082/M1DR2SK1](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1DR2SK1). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/ZWRN-BZ17> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.



Fig. 7. Şahyūn castle: Portal of the Ayyubid palace



©2007 by Benjamin Michaudel.

DOI: [10.6082/M1Z31WS0](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0>)

DOI of Vol. XI, no. 1: [10.6082/M1DR2SK1](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1DR2SK1). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/ZWRN-BZ17> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

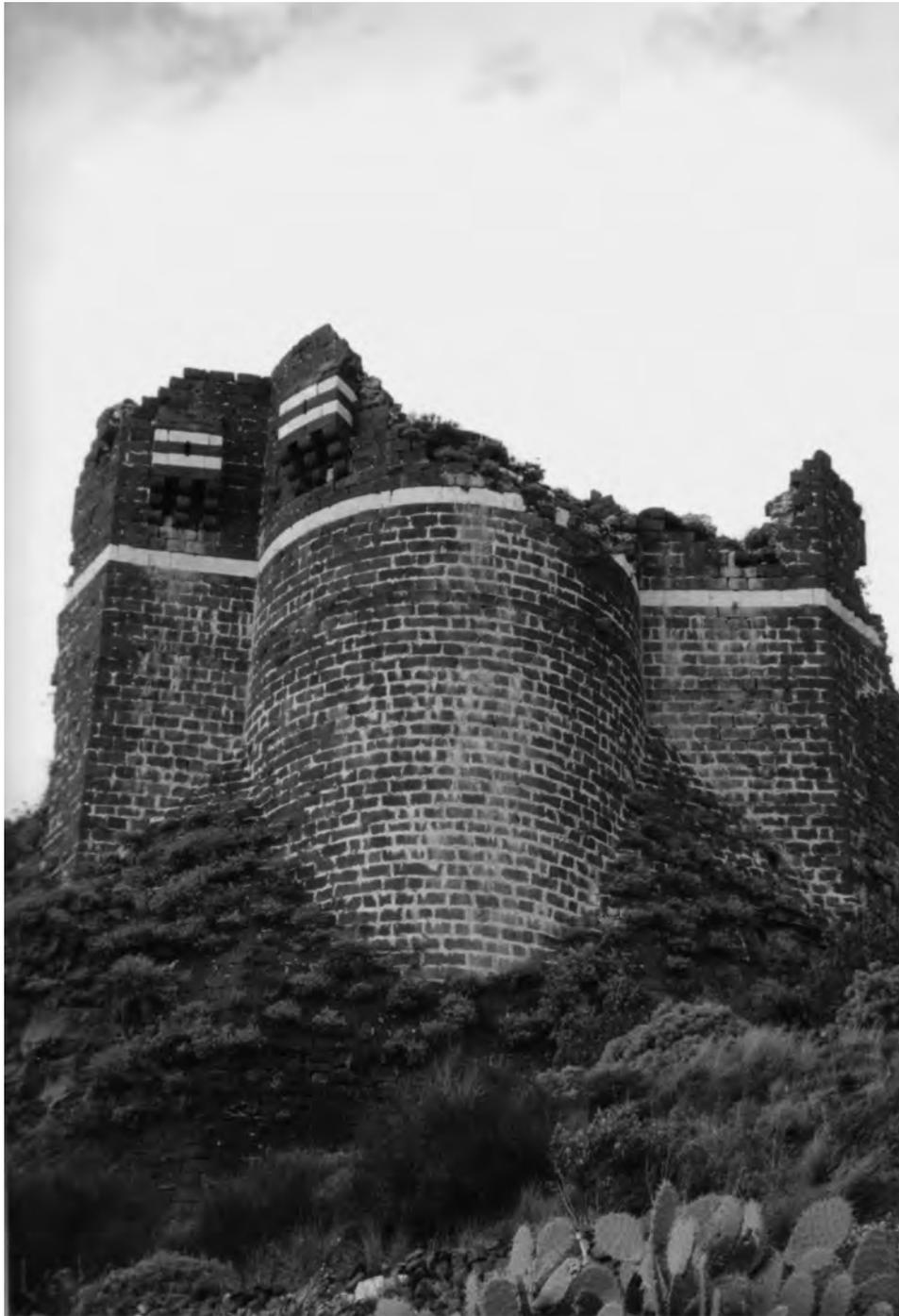


Fig. 8. Marqab castle: Mamluk tower on the southern front



©2007 by Benjamin Michaudel.

DOI: [10.6082/M1Z31WS0](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0>)

DOI of Vol. XI, no. 1: [10.6082/M1DR2SK1](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1DR2SK1). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/ZWRN-BZ17> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

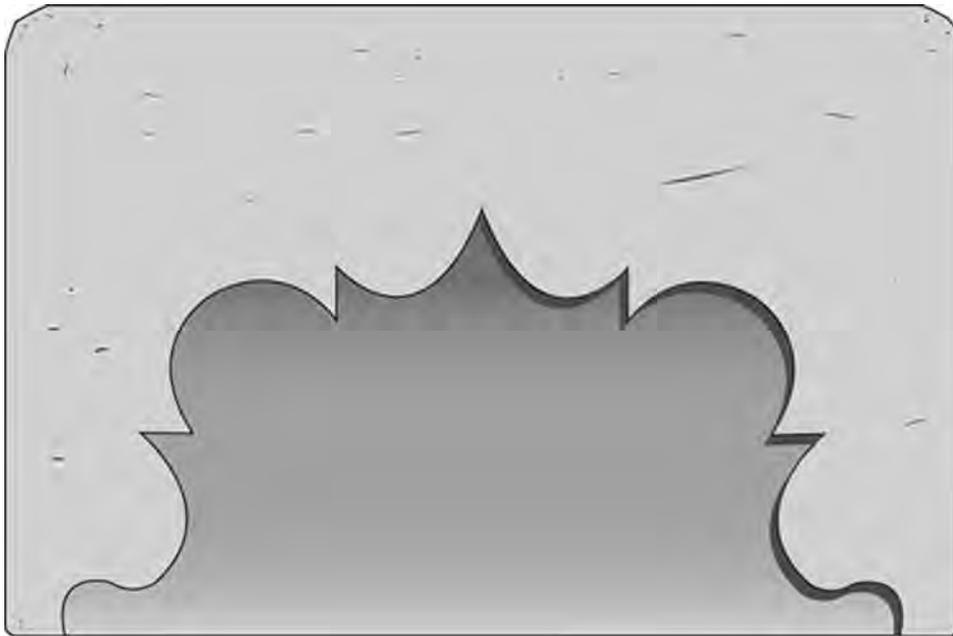


Fig. 9. Krak des Chevaliers: Arabesque pattern engraved on the upper lintels of the Mamluk loopholes



Fig. 10. Marqab castle: Decorative alternation of basalt and limestone courses on the facing of the Mamluk box machicolations



©2007 by Benjamin Michaudel.

DOI: [10.6082/M1Z31WS0](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1Z31WS0>)

DOI of Vol. XI, no. 1: [10.6082/M1DR2SK1](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1DR2SK1). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/ZWRN-BZ17> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.