



Micromorphological and geochemical investigation of formation processes in the refectory at the castle of Margat (Qal'at al-Marqab), Syria



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 June 2014

Received in revised form

26 July 2014

Accepted 30 July 2014

Available online 13 August 2014

Keywords:

Formation processes

Micromorphology

Margat

Syria

Crusades

Use of space

ABSTRACT

Margat Castle, located on the eastern coast of Syria, is an outstanding example of architecture from the Crusader Period, and the most important castle of the Hospitallers, who were one of the most famous Christian military orders during the medieval period. Excavations by the Syro-Hungarian Archaeological Mission have been conducted with the aim of better understanding the history and material culture of this important part of Syrian heritage. Whilst large scale excavation and architectural analysis can provide an understanding of broad changes over the lifetime of the monument, high resolution studies of deposits are essential to understand their formation processes, and to test hypotheses suggested during excavation. In the refectory at Margat, a series of dark deposits overlain by a pale 'ashy' layer, were hypothesised to be the result of a large-scale burning event. In this study we aimed to test this hypothesis by conducting micromorphological and geochemical analysis of the sequence, the first application of microarchaeological techniques to medieval deposits in Syria. It was observed that the composition of the deposits relates to degradation of anthropogenic debris and constructional material through cycles of wetting/drying and microbial and faunal activity, rather than fire/destruction debris. These observations have clarified important changes in the castles' function associated with multiple phases of ownership.

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1. Introduction

Margat citadel, (Qal'at al-Marqab) is one of the most outstanding and best preserved monuments dating from the Crusader Period (1095–1291 AD), and was the most important castle of the Order of St John, otherwise known as the Knights Hospitaller (Fig. 1). The site is an important part of Syrian heritage reflecting the influence of several civilizations during its thousand year long history. The first castle is thought to have been built by the local inhabitants in the year H. 454 (1062/63 AD) (al-Hamawī nd). After a brief period of Byzantine occupation that began around 1104 (Comnena, 2003: 365 [1143–1153]), it was taken by the Franks (Crusaders) in 1117/18 AD, less than two decades after the capture of Jerusalem and the establishment of the crusader

states in the Holy Land. The castle is thought to have reverted to Muslim ownership in the 1130s (Deschamps, 1973) and was recaptured by Renaud II Mazoir in 1140 (de Caschifellone, 1895). The Mazoirs were one of the highest-ranking baronial families in the Crusader principality of Antioch, and were responsible for building most of the earliest surviving structures at Margat. In 1187 AD, the Mazoirs transferred Margat to the Order of St. John (Mayer, 1993: 176, Delaville le Roulx, 1894–1906).

The importance of the castle to the Hospitallers is reflected in the fact that its acquisition resulted in the immediate reorganization of the regional administration (Riley-Smith, 1967: 431), and the Hospitaller castellan of Margat became one of the highest ranking officers in the hierarchy of the Order in the Latin East (Burgtorf, 2007: 222). Although it cannot be proven that the castle ever functioned as the seat of the Order between the fall of Jerusalem in 1187 AD and the retaking of Acre in 1191 AD (Abdazzāhir, 1961[1290]), the fact that the Chapter General of

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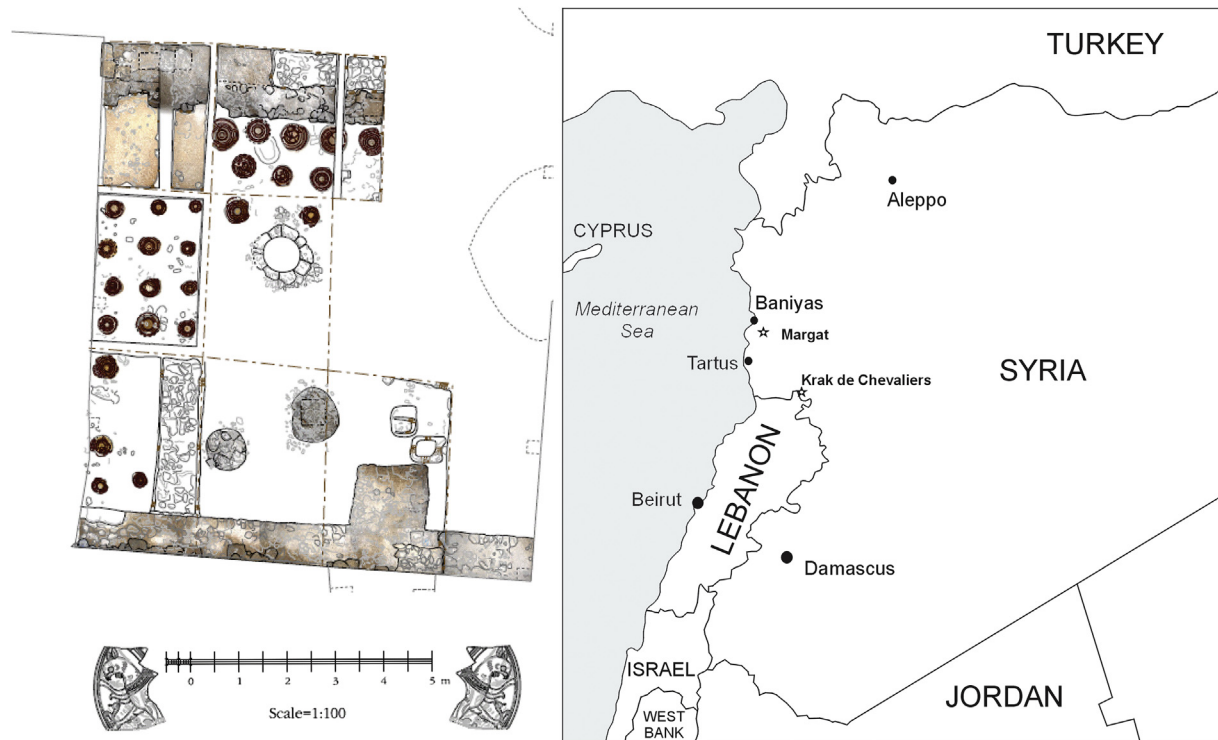


Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Margat and plan of the refectory. Plan produced by Ilona Györfy and József Vajda fotogrammeter@gmail.com.

1204/06 met there and established the rules that officially militarised the Hospitallers indicates its prestigious status.

By the beginning of the 13th century Margat had become the most important administrative centre of the Hospitallers in Syria and one of the largest fortified Crusader sites (Major, 2008). As well as the castle itself, Margat included an outer suburb that covered an estimated 10 ha of the western slopes of the mountain, and there were more than a thousand armed men employed for service, even during peacetime (De Sandoli, 1983). As was the case with other castle garrisons of the military orders, only a small part of the garrison belonged to the sergeants at arms who were the Hospitaller elite. However due to its prominent position amongst the Hospitaller hierarchy there are likely to have been a relatively high number of full members of the Order serving here, especially after the fall of the famous sister castle, Crac des Chevaliers in 1271 AD.

Margat was amongst the castles that resisted Muslim reconquest the longest, falling to the armies of the Mamluk Sultan Qalāwūn on 25 May 1285 after a five week siege (Abdazzāhir, 1961: 77–81). According to contemporary sources, the Sultan agreed to a peace offer to save the castle from further damage and the destruction caused by the siege was repaired immediately. After the expulsion of the Crusaders the castle began losing its importance, and although it is still mentioned until the 19th century as the administrative centre of the region, its diminishing role during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods is reflected in the reduced scale of building activity.

1.1. Environmental setting

Margat is located 360 m above sea level on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea between Tartūs and Bānyās (Fig 1) in the coastal area of Jableh, part of the historic Principality of Antioch (Deschamps, 1973: 259–285). The surrounding area is composed mainly of limestone, with small outcrops of basalt, and the beach between Tartūs and Bānyās is composed of coarse grained basalt

sand with large pebbles. The climate in the region is heavily influenced by the coastal setting and the Jabal Ansāriyya mountains, with annual precipitation being almost 500 mm higher around Latakia and Tartūs than inland. In the winter precipitation originates from the North Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea, whilst in summer subtropical high pressure systems inhibit rainfall except during thunderstorms (Kaniewski et al., 2011). During the Crusader Period (AD 1095–1291), the region was generally humid, following the relatively dry conditions in the Muslim Era (AD 640–1095). Local vegetation during the Crusader Period was dominated by mixed drought tolerant trees and xerophytic shrub steppe (Kaniewski et al., 2010).

1.2. The refectory

One of the main objectives of the Syro-Hungarian Archaeological Mission research programme was to identify the functions of the various constructions that made up the citadel. Another important question was whether the Muslim takeover modified the original functions in the spaces excavated and analysed. Given the presumably large size of the contingent of Hospitaller knights stationed at Margat and their monastic lifestyle, requiring a communal life that included shared meals, a hall of suitable size had to be located in the central part of the castle. Based on architectural analysis, this refectory hall has been identified as the great barrel vaulted hall situated in the western edge of the Hospitaller citadel overlooking the coast (Fig. 1), and was one of the first constructions erected in Hospitaller Margat. Being close to the chapter house, the dormitory and the chapel, the refectory hall was bordered in the north by a kitchen building with a chimney, where a central cooking area comprising of four ovens was excavated, and which had a southern doorway opening into the refectory. The refectory also had a large vaulted storage area beneath it, with two circular ventilation shafts making possible the elevation of barrels (presumably containing wine) with the help of pulleys. The hall was

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