

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE LOCAL ELITES OF THE MEDIAEVAL COASTLANDS OF THE NORTHERN LEVANT: SOME REMARKS

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Abstract:

The period of the Crusades has drawn a considerable amount of scholarly attention and many aspects of this period have been studied thoroughly, but, certain subjects, like the place of the natives in the society of the Latin states received less attention. This is even more true about the Syrian coastal region, where not only academic research, but also the surviving sources are extremely scarce. Supplementing them with results of recent archaeological fieldwork, however, can hint at the possibility of the existence of a local elite that even might have been wealthy enough to sponsor the decoration of churches.

Keywords: Syria, Crusades, local elite

The advent of the Crusades and the establishment of the four Latin states brought the Levant, which had been a backwater region since the 8th century, back into the international spotlight. This was reflected, amongst other things, in a much more varied material culture and a very intense architectural activity. This left a strong mark even in the rural areas, compared to the previous centuries. The interaction with the Europeans not only brought with it an increased attention to the region from local, mainly Arabic, sources, but also resulted in the appearance of a new group of sources, i.e. those written in Latin. This represents an enormous change, especially with regard to rural areas, because while the earlier urban-centred Arabic historiography neglected them, the much more rurally oriented Latin sources, especially the charters, convey a wealth of information. However, we still have huge gaps in knowledge of important aspects of medieval life, especially on such regions as the Syrian coastlands, the northern part of the Levant, which, being as it was far away from Jerusalem and the most important holy places, received less attention. Here only scattered data survive on the ethnic, religious, and social composition of the contemporary population, and almost nothing on such important issues as the existence and role of a possible local elite of the indigenous population. No wonder that this subject was only occasionally and briefly touched upon in the early work of

scholarship on the 12th and 13th century history of the region (Cahen 1927:327–345). Besides drawing on the parallels in neighbouring areas with more historical sources and studies, only the re-examination of the architectural-archaeological material and new archaeological discoveries can be expected to expand our knowledge on this subject regarding the Syrian coast.

1 Historical Data

Despite the nearly complete silence of the written sources there is sporadic textual evidence that shows us that the Crusader rulers did employ former local strongmen in key positions immediately after the conquest. The most famous examples in our region involved Muslim persons, which tells a lot about religious tolerance. In 1106 the sons of Ḥalaf ibn Mulā'ib, the former ruler of Afāmiya, were installed by Tancred in charge of many places in the region of the town (Asbridge 2000:60). After the surrender of Ḡabala in 1109, the same regent of Antioch, Tancred, was prepared to grant fiefs to Faḥr al-Mulk ibn 'Ammār, its former lord, who chose exile instead (Ibn al-Qalānisi, *Dayl*, 163; transl. 90). Ibn Muḥriz, the ruler of al-Marqab, was compensated by the Franks with the castle of al-Maynaqa (Ibn 'Abd az-Zāhir, *Tašrif* 86). Not everybody received the treatment expected, and relocation of the Muslim population together with their leaders from certain strategical regions is also attested to in the sources. The Muslim commander of Qal'at al-Ḥuṣn chose to surrender to Tancred of his own will, expecting better conduct from him than from Bertrand of Tripoli, but in the end he and his people were replaced by a Frankish garrison (Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīḥ* 182; transl. 144). The same happened in 1118 to the Banū Sulay'a who were given three villages belonging to Antioch in exchange for their former livelihood after they surrendered Qal'at al-Mahāliba. After the disastrous defeat of the Frankish forces at Sarmādā the following year, they returned to their original homeland and making use of the Antiochene war of succession, they fell on the Frankish garrison in 1136 (Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīḥ* 170; transl. 134). By this time we do not hear of Muslim overlords enfeoffed with important strongpoints. Ḡabala, the town with the largest concentration of Muslim inhabitants in the Syrian coast had his own *qādī* throughout the period of Crusader rule, and the one who was responsible for surrendering the town to the troops of Saladin in 1188 is said to have been a close associate of prince Bohemond III (Ibn al-Aṭīr, *Kāmil* X, 48).

The category of lesser officials in the Crusader states was well studied in a fundamental article by Jonathan-Riley Smith (1972:1–26), and this subject was further elaborated upon in his book on the feudal nobility in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (Riley-Smith 1973:21–98). At the top of this hierarchy stood the *ra'īs* of the indigenous communities. He was also the head of the jurisdiction of the natives and thus the president of the *Cour des Syriens* established for the non-Frankish inhabitants of the Latin states. In our region we hear at least of one example. In 1174 a certain 'Abd al-Masīḥ, the *ra'īs* of al-Marqab (the Crusaders' Margat) and his son

George made a donation to the Hospitallers of al-Marqab in 1174 (*Cartulaire* I, no. 457). They were certainly local Christians, possibly of the Greek Orthodox denomination (Major 2015:154). Greek Orthodox Christians lived in considerable numbers in the diocese of Bāniyās with an *Ecclesias Graecorum* mentioned in a charter of 1225 (RRH, no. 971) and were represented by a *Cour des Syriens* in al-Marqab (*Cartulaire* I, no. 457). Father and then son in all possibility presided over this Cour, and it is also possible that the charter attests to the presence of a ‘dynasty’ of the local elite (Riley-Smith 1972:5). As he is seen in the course of donating three-quarters of the *casal* Meserafe (in all possibility Mušayrifa to the north of al-Marqab), he was in all likelihood a wealthy person.

Given that we have very little indirect evidence for the existence of villages with European settlers in the Syrian coastal region (Major 2015:159–161), it is very likely that in this area most of the *ru’asā’* of the ‘rural elite’ were of indigenous origin. From another charter we have the impression that local Christians might have featured in considerable numbers in the knightly class of society too. Given their names, the “...*militibus Margati: dominus Zacarias; ... dominus Georgius; dominus Theodorus.*”, witnesses to a charter in 1187 (*Cartulaire* I, no. 783) seem to have been Oriental Christians. So was a certain David the Syrian who even possessed a *cavea*¹ which might have been the fortified cave monastery known today as Dayr Mār Mārūn in the northern region of the Biqā’ valley.

Besides the Greek Orthodox, another Oriental Christian group, that of the Armenians, is also relatively well attested to in the region. After taking al-Marqab in 511/1117–1118) the prince of Antioch garrisoned it with Franks and Armenians (Muḥyī d-Dīn, *Tašrīf* 85). That it is not only the Franks who were permanent residents is proven by the passage relating to *Suriani vel Armeni suburbia* in a charter of 1193 (*Cartulaire* I, no. 941). Excavations of the SHAM project in 2010 unearthed several coins of Armenian origin and a round stone object with a faint Armenian inscription scratched onto it. A part of the letters seems to indicate a date which can be decoded as the year 1195.² Later, in 1225, we hear of *ecclesias Armeniorum* in the diocese of Valenia (Bāniyās) being on equal footing with the Greek Orthodox church and ordered to obey the Latin bishop as they had no bishop of their own (RRH, no. 971). As the Armenians were antagonists of the Greek Orthodox, those living in the suburb of al-Marqab and serving in the castle certainly had their own leaders and their own place of worship.

Another officer was the dragoman, a term derived from the Arabic *turğumān*, and also denoted in the Latin documents with the term *interpres* (Riley-Smith 1972:15). While some were only interpreters, many were special officers of their lords and could amass considerable wealth and status. *Interpres* Bernard might have been one

¹ *Cartulaire* I, no. 144. See also Richard 1994:187–193.

² The deciphering of the inscription was done by Dr. Hamlet Petrosyan from the Armenian Academy of Sciences.

of them, who was witnessing a charter between the bishop of Valenia and the Templars in 1163 (RRH. no. 381). While the majority of these important officers were Franks, there is mention of natives occupying this post (Riley-Smith 1972:18).

The next category of lesser officers were the scribes, who were employed in the cadastral departments and were involved in tax collection as well. Such a native Muslim person in the Principality of Antioch was the paternal uncle of Ḥamdān ibn ‘Abd ar-Raḥīm at-Tamīmī al-Aṭāribī, who was appointed to be the head of the of the *dīwān* in Frankish-occupied Ma‘arrat al-Nu‘mān. Ḥamdān himself was enfeoffed by the Frankish lord of Aṭārib with the village of Ma‘rabūniyya, which he revitalized after bringing in further settlers (Ibn al-‘Adīm, *Buġya* VI, 2926–2932). Most of the *scribani* seem to have been locals in the Crusader states and some are documented to have been very rich. The fief of al-Marqab is also reported to have had such a position (Riley-Smith 1972:23.).

Merchants could amass both wealth and respect and thus could be considered as part of the elite. The most remarkable group of merchants recorded in the second half of the 13th century was a company organized from Mosul with twenty-three members, five of whom resided in Antioch. One of them, the indigenous Saliba, was a Latin Christian and a burgess of Acre. On his deathbed he became a *confrater* of the Order of St John and from his will it is apparent that he was a rich man (Riley-Smith 1973:79–80). He was certainly a member of the native-born elite and was financially capable of being a donator for long-lasting projects.

2 Possible Parallels Nearby

The northern part of Lebanon, which formed the southern region of the County of Tripoli, and which suffers from a similar paucity of written documentation on the Syrian coast, possesses the highest number of medieval rural churches and chapels in the Levant, many of which are in a concentration hard to explain just by the sheer number of the Christian denominations present. One of the best examples is the village of Baḥdaydāt, where there are no less than three churches in a circle with a diameter of a mere 130 metres. The construction of two churches in areas where two different Christian denominations live beside each other was not infrequent, and neither was the joint use of places of Christian worship. However, this concentration of individual chapels needs some extra explanation. The Byzantine world had a rather well documented tradition of private churches constructed and used by well-to-do families of the local elite. Recent research has convincingly proved that in certain places a considerable number of architectural examples for this tradition survive from the 11th century (Ousterhout 2017:49, 372, 477). A large number of the numerous rock-cut churches of Cappadocia, which formerly were considered to be an integral part of the monastic landscape, turned out to have been in fact private foundations often belonging to a large rock-cut residence of the local military elite. These spectacular structures were constructed at a time when the Christians of the

Levant and adjacent regions were witnessing a period called the Syrian Renaissance that lasted until the second half of the 13th century (Immerzeel 2009:25–26). This is reflected on many levels of the material culture with special regard to the medieval wall paintings, in which a certain Syrian style developed and its often-rustic characteristics became widespread in the northern coastal regions of the Levant. The highest concentration of remains of this are found in Northern Lebanon and the church of Mār Tāwudrūs in Baḥdaydāt is the best-preserved example of an almost intact village church. Recent research here has identified the two donors painted on the side walls of the naves as members of the local community, one a priest and the other a lay person (Helou 2019:237–240). While previous research tended to see Latin patronage behind many of the donor presentations in Lebanon (Immerzeel 2009:157–169), recent revision of the subject sees nearly all to be stereotypic depictions of indigenous patrons from the local communities, especially in the rural hinterland of the coastal cities (Helou 2019: 244–245). Many are identified as having been connected to funerals and it is very likely that, especially in places of large church-concentration, some of the churches could have been constructed by local chieftains as family shrines. Like Lebanon, which has a large number of double-naved churches and chapels, Cappadocia has a considerable number too. Many of the lesser size naves of these churches are thought to have been used for funerary purposes (Ousterhout 2017:49), and some of the numerous examples in the Levant might have been serving the same purpose for the family members of the local elite.

3 Archaeology

Field surveys and excavations on the Syrian coast identified or unearthed in the recent decades a number of sites that seem to be worthy of discussion in the context outlined above. The largest 12th-century Crusader castle of Northern Syria, the so-called Qalʿat Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn (Crusader Saône) has no less than four churches identified hitherto. The earliest church was attached to the Byzantine *castron* and later had a larger Latin church added to it that must have served the inhabitants of the upper castle. The lower castle had a Latin parish church, recently excavated, and a relatively well-preserved church that was identified by Denys Pringle as the church of the local Armenian population (Pringle 2001:105–113) (**fig. 1**). This was clearly built by the community itself or possibly by its leaders, who also might have been responsible for the painted decoration the scanty remains of which were detected by the Syro-Hungarian Archaeological Mission in 2018 (**fig. 2**).

Remains of a medieval church stood opposite the main gate of Qalʿat al- Ḥuṣn (Crusader Crac, recently Crac des Chevaliers), from which a number of heavily damaged and incomplete murals were detached. A previous study tended to assign a greater role to the work of Western masters in its execution (Folda 1982:192–196); however, recent and ongoing, laboratory-backed research by the Syro-Hungarian Archaeological Mission suggests a rather Oriental way of execution in the wall

paintings. One thing is already very clear: while the masters of the castle churches in both al-Marqab and Qal'at al-Ḥuṣn were Western artists, the rest of the chapels are all painted more or less in the so-called Syrian style. The identity of the painters, however, does not necessarily define the religious affiliation of the community and its leaders. In the Crusader period church of Mār Sābā in Eddé Batroun, Lebanon, the crucifixion and dormition scenes in the main nave of the basilical church were painted in the Comnenian stylistic tradition by masters trained in Cyprus (Immerzeel 2012–13:84–86), while the inscription over them was in Syriac. To add to the complexity of the picture, the southern aisle preserved traces of murals in the Syrian style characteristic of the 13th century. The region of Qal'at al-Ḥuṣn is almost exclusively Greek Orthodox to this day and there is no indication of it having had other denominations nearby. While we might count with the considerable presence of European settlers in the immediate vicinity of the mighty castle of the Order of St. John, there are no explicit documents referring to them. However, there is reference to the Syrian Christians of Qal'at al-Ḥuṣn as early as the Hospitallers were given the site in 1142 together with the exemption from taxation of the *Suriani of Cratum* on everything they sold or bought on its territory (*Cartulaire* I, no. 144). Muslim sources on the Mamluk siege of the castle in 1271 mention peasants having taken refuge in the outer enceinte of the Hospitaller castle, who were then set free to continue tilling the lands (Ibn Šaddād, *Tārīḥ Lubnān* 117). They were in all probability the local Christians of the suburb that fell in the early days of the siege. It is very likely that the church in the suburb below the castle belonged to these native Christians and the execution of its murals could have been sponsored by members of the local Christian elite, regardless of the ethnicity of the painters themselves.

From the end of the 12th century al-Marqab became the administrative centre of the Hospitaller palatinate of northern Syria. Besides its castle of the knights of St. John it had an inner suburb enclosed within the same defensive circle, and a large outer suburb on the western slopes of the mountain below the castle. This settlement of more than ten hectares was identified and partially excavated by the Syro-Hungarian Archaeological Mission in 2010 and 2011. Based on the archaeological finds, the suburb was established after 1188, when the campaign of Saladin destroyed the nearby town of Bāniyās (the Crusaders' Valenia). It seems that the new settlement was actually established by the inhabitants of Valenia, which seems to have remained abandoned during most of the 13th century (Major 2016:117–130). The outer suburb had a wall with a small fortification at its entrance, houses with a high quality of execution, and the well-preserved bathhouse which was formerly thought to have been a Mamluk construction had evidently been constructed during the Crusader era. The excavations unearthed the remains of two churches decorated with murals (Márk 2016:250–252). Both had a rather short nave as the terraces of the steep mountainside have an axle of north-south, while the apses of the churches had to face east. The northern chapel was almost completely destroyed by recent agricultural activity, and even its shape cannot be reconstructed with certainty

(**fig. 3**). It was rather small, but the high-quality mural fragments found there show the traces of two painted layers (**fig. 4**). The church was surrounded by a cemetery which contained the remains of more than 30 individuals (**fig. 5**). Most of the graves seem to have been used by families who cut shallow grave-shafts into the hard local basalt cinder. The graves often contained a complete skeleton of anatomical order, with the skull and long bones of more than one previous ‘inhabitant’ of the grave, whose remains were exhumated and the bones of considerable size reburied at the feet of the next occupant of the grave. The southern church was also a relatively small one, covering less than 20 square meters. The church had two naves, the northern one being a roughly 2.4 m wide narrow one ending in a small semi-circular apse (**fig. 6**). This preserved the lower part of a *déesis* mural with Christ flanked by the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist (**fig. 7**). This subject is characteristic of Oriental Christian iconography (Dodd 2004:34–36), and the way of the execution can also be identified as representing the Syrian style. The narrow northern nave could have been an area related to funerary liturgy and its decoration may have been sponsored by a donator of the native Christian elite.

Conclusion

The indigenous Christian communities of the Crusader states seem to have had their local elite on which we do find a few references even in the Syrian coastland. Whether any of them achieved the level of influence and potential for architectural and artistic patronage their counterparts in the neighbouring regions like Lebanon did, is still an open question. However, recent archaeological research has already identified a number of sites that might have owed their existence to the presence of a local elite.

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Fig. 1. Interior of the Armenian church in Qal'at Şalāḥ ad-Dīn. (Photo by B. Major, 2019)



Fig. 2. Remains of a painted surface. (Photo by B. Major, 2019)



Fig. 3. Remains of the northern church in the outer suburb of al-Marqab, with the graveyard around it. (Photo by B. Major, 2011)



Fig. 4. Fragments of the medieval murals excavated on the area of the northern church.
(Photo by B. Major, 2016)



Fig. 5. Detail of the northwestern area of the excavated cemetery.
(Photo by B. Major, 2011)



Fig. 6. The little apse of the northern nave of the southern church in the outer suburb of al-Marqab. (Photo by B. Major, 2018)



Fig. 7. The *déesis* fragment. (Photo by Zs. Márk, 2018)