

A HISTORY OF SYRIA IN ONE HUNDRED SITES

edited by

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Cover Illustration: View of the excavation at Hummal site
© The Syro-Swiss mission on the Palaeolithic of the El Kowm Area

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97. The Citadel of Tell Shayzar (Hama)

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The citadel of Shayzar may be regarded as one of the best examples of Muslim military architecture to survive in the Near East. It occupies a long, narrow, rocky plateau overlooking the Orontes on its western bank (Figs. 1 and 2). The area at the foot of the citadel, to the west and north-west, is now covered by a modern town, very probably built over an earlier settlement of which there is no visible trace on the surface.

Between 2002 and 2010 an historical and archaeological research project investigated the citadel of Shayzar, and provided new evidence on the origins and the development of this fortification, especially in relation to the most crucial period as regards the building of the citadel, i.e. from the 10th to the 13th centuries.

The establishment of a settlement in the area of Shayzar goes back to a very remote past, as the site is already mentioned in the written records of the 2nd millennium BC, and its occupation is attested in the Seleucid, Roman and Byzantine periods. At the citadel, however, no securely dated material evidence that can be attributed to these periods has so far been identified: the earliest structures uncovered have been ascribed to a period after the 2nd-6th centuries, i.e. they may equally well relate to the Byzantine or early Islamic period (Period I, 6th? - first half of the 10th century).

In fact the period from the Islamic conquest to the 10th century is also little known, and it is only from the 10th century that the written sources start providing more information on the site. The lack of central power that marked the 10th century caused endless struggles for the control of northern Syria between the Byzantines, the Fatimids, the Hamdanids, and their various allies. Like several other settlements in northern Syria, Shayzar changed hands several times. From the 10th century the written records refer to Shayzar as a fortified site, and for most of the 11th century Shayzar was controlled by the Byzantines.

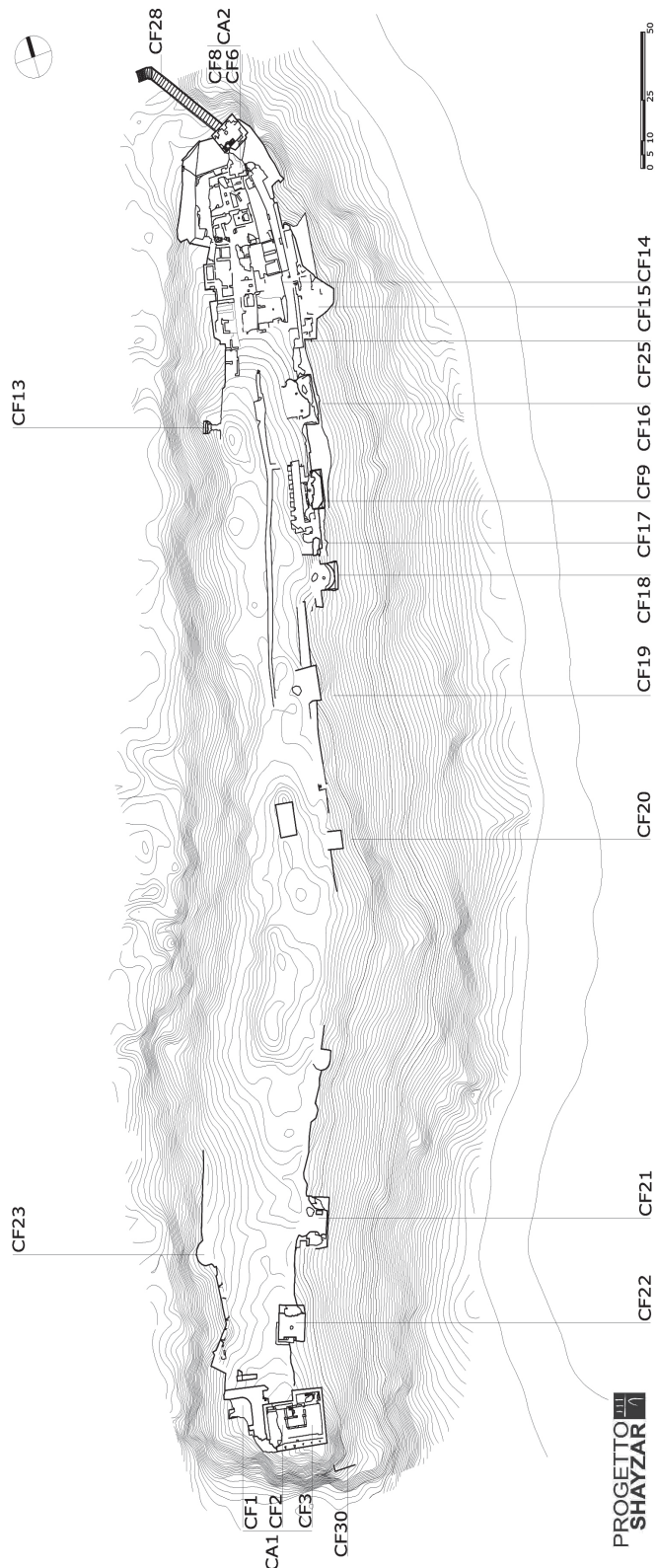


FIG. 1 GENERAL MAP OF THE CITADEL SHOWING THE MAIN BUILDINGS.

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FIG. 2 GENERAL VIEW OF THE CITADEL FROM THE NORTH-EAST.



FIG. 3 BUILDING CF6 FROM THE SOUTH-EAST (PERIOD II).

The remains of a number of structures that clearly relate to a first programme of fortification of the site have been identified in various areas of the citadel (Period II, second half of the 10th -11th? centuries). These remains belong to curtain buildings (CF15, CF26), and stretches of curtain walls in most cases; only CF6 (northern area) can be regarded as a specific building planned to guard the access to the citadel in Period II (Fig. 3).

In the year 1081 the site was sold to the tribe of the Banu Munqidh by the Byzantine bishop of al-Bara. The ruling family established its residence in the citadel; their court seems to have attracted famous literary figures and scholars, and a vivid fresco of life at Shayzar can be found in the well-known memoirs of Usama ibn Munqidh. Various renovation and restoration works, as well as strengthening programmes to the existing defensive lines, are attributed to the age of the Banu Munqidh (Period III). This evidence shows that the programme of fortification of the citadel which had begun in Period II had been completed throughout the entire site by the time of the 1157 earthquake. Among the remains of this period there are not only curtain buildings (CF17, a portion later incorporated into CF1), but also structures that can be interpreted as towers, such as the early CF16.

After the earthquake of 1157 Shayzar passed to Nur al-Din, who appointed the family of the Banu al-Daya as governors. The same al-Daya family remained in control of the citadel on behalf of Salah al-Din and his heirs, enjoying a substantial phase of independence.

An impressive building programme aimed at the restoration and strengthening of the defences was carried out (Period IV, 1157-1200 ca.). A group of buildings (the

FIG. 4 ENTRANCE COMPLEX, CA2: THE GLACIS ATTRIBUTED TO NUR AL-DIN (PERIOD IV) AND THE TOWER BUILT BY QALAWUN (PERIOD V).



FIG. 5 COMPLEX CA1 (PERIODS IV-V) AND THE DITCH FROM THE EAST.



glacis in the northern area, Fig. 4; towers CF16 and CF18 on the eastern front; building CF1 and curtain walls in the southern area) is attributed to the patronage of Nur al-Din (1157-1174): although we know from the historical sources that he commissioned numerous operations to restore the network of fortifications in the region, very little of this intense activity had so far been identified on the ground. Another group of buildings (tower CF9 on the eastern front; building CF3 in the southern area; tower CF13 on the western front) may be assigned to the last decades of the 12th century or to the beginning of the 13th.

The evidence identified at Shayzar illustrates the achievements and features of military architecture in this period, for the first time on the basis of firmly dated elements: curtain walls defended by lines of arrow slits,

massive projecting towers and a defensive ditch carved into the rocky plateau (Fig. 5). But the most impressive element of Nur al-Din's fortification programme is certainly the glacis, a scarped structure that protects the entrance and develops on at least four different levels, with internal vaulted galleries and a defensive parapet at the uppermost level (Fig. 4).

It was only in the year 1233 that the citadel was taken by force from the al-Daya family by the sultan of Aleppo al-Malik al-'Aziz Muhammad, and Shayzar passed under the more direct control of the Ayyubids from Aleppo. The early Mamluk sultans seem to have maintained their interest in this fortification, and commissioned construction and restoration works. Shayzar is still mentioned as an important citadel in the 14th and early 15th century sources. In Period V (1233-1290).

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the system of control of access into the citadel was redesigned in several stages, while the defensive circuit was completed with the building (or rebuilding) of curtain walls and projecting towers. A series of defensive towers was added (or sometimes rebuilt) on the existing lines of fortification of the northern (tower CF8, Fig. 4), eastern (tower CF9) and southern areas (towers CF21, CF22); two defensive buildings that also performed an official representative function were added to the complex CA1, in the southern area: CF2 and CF3 (Fig. 5). This period also saw the rebuilding of the bridge that leads to the access system CA2 (CF28).

This period at Shayzar reflects a mature concept of military architecture, also documented through other sites in the region. Building CF3, attributed to the 1260s, shows a decorative programme that also includes wall paintings in the two main rooms: this testifies to the presence at the site of skilled and sophisticated craftsmanship.

Shayzar is no longer mentioned in the list of fortifications visited by sultan Qaytbay in the year 1477. It appears gradually to have lost its strategic function, and turned into a simple village. The last inhabitants moved down to the plain in 1958.

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