

Hārim: A Crusader-Muslim Castle of the Northern Syria. An Archaeological Approach*



Fig. 1. "Tell" of Hārim and town seen from west (Photo: author).



Fig. 2. The castle from southeast (Taken from: Gelichi 2006b, Fig. 2, p. 211).

Introduction

Among the Crusader castles of Syria, that of Hārim is one of the least well-known (Fig. 1-2). This is probably due to the brevity of the period in which the castle was under the control of the Crusaders. Furthermore, material remains from that period are scarce, if not seemingly inexistent. Lawrence of Arabia, in his posthumous book on the Crusader castles, had already pointed this out¹. Archaeology and the architectural history of the Syrian-Palestinian area, strongly orientated towards evidence of the Crusader period, have therefore determined a scarcity of interest in this site. The state of conservation of its material constructions have done the rest. In fact, prior to restoration work by a Syrian team in the nineteen-eighties, only the surrounding wall of the Hārim castle was visible. Even today, despite the consistent excavations of the eighties, a large part of the castle constructions are still buried.

In spite of its state of conservation (and the fact that it was a Crusader castle only from 1098 to 1164), Hārim is a site of considerable interest; an archaeological location still more or less intact, which may provide a description of the changes through time of a fortification from the Byzantine age to our own times. Before making a critical analysis of research undertaken on this site between 1999 and 2002, I will present some general historical information.

Historical background

Hārim Castle was probably founded by the Byzantines, following the reconquest of these territories in the 10th century, or under the reign of Nicephorus Foca (963-969) or that of John I Zimisce (969-976). The castle already existed when these territories were reconquered by the Seljuks in 1084². In 1097, at the time of the siege of Antioch by the Crusaders, Hārim played an important role in the Muslim defence of the city. It was, in fact, after the defeat of a handful of Muslims from Hārim at a place called *Jisr al-Hadid* (Iron-bridge), in the Orontes valley, that the Crusaders were able to conquer the castle (in 1098) and, immediately afterwards, Antioch. Hārim remained occupied by the Crusaders for about fifty years. In 1119, at the time of the battle of *Ager Sanguinis*, we find a certain Guy Fraissnel mentioned as being lord of Hārim³. In 1149 Nūr al-Dīn conquered the castle for the first time⁴. Given its strategic importance for the kingdom of Antioch, the Crusaders attempted to win it back; this took place ten years later in 1158. The second direct occupation of the castle lasted only a few years, however. In 1164 Nūr al-Dīn managed to take Hārim back again⁵ and it was to remain in Muslim hands, despite several other Crusader attempts on it⁶.

Under the control of the Ayyubid dynasty, the castle, after the death of Salāh al Dīn, passed, together with Aleppo and its territory, to his son

Al-Zāhir Ghāzī, who appointed a governor to the site. In 1260 and in 1271 Hārim was besieged by the Mongols, although we do not know precisely what damage it may have undergone. According to written sources⁷ Hārim was restored in 707 H (1307-1308) by the governor of Aleppo. Subsequent information is not so plentiful. It is likely that the castle lost its residential and military functions in the late Mamluk Period and became a village. In 1832 it seems to have been damaged by the troops of Ibrahim Pascha⁸; but it is likely that serious damage had been caused previously, in 1726 and later in 1822, when – as we know – quite devastating earthquakes hit the region of Aleppo and Harim itself⁹.

Topographical location

Hārim Castle lies in northern Syria (Fig. 3), in the hilly limestone area overlooking the Orontes valley on the border with Turkey. The fortress was built on the western side of the *Ġebel al A'la* massif, on the summit of a more-or-less conical hill, a partly artificial tell. Near the castle lies the present day village of Hārim. The site covers about 4.25 hectares, while the fortress at the summit is of about 1 hectare (Fig. 4). The maximum height of the tell is 190 metres above sea level and 40 metres above the surrounding plain.

The present day entrance to the castle is located on the south side of the

tell (Fig. 6). A steep path forks about midway: one part branches east and after a series of recently cut steps reaches the original main gate; the second branch continues northwards and goes around the tell to reach the summit at a point where the walls are no longer standing.

Towards the beginning of the 20th century a number of travellers visited the site and photographed it (e.g. Gertrude Bell). However, the first accurate description is owed to van Berchem¹⁰, who also copied the inscriptions on the site and drew up an initial basic plan and section of the tell. This drawing indicates that only the outer curtain wall of the castle must have been visible and a sort of fortified stronghold located to the east, which van Berchem calls a *donjon*. That the castle was, in that period, almost entirely covered by rubbish and earth, is clear from a second plan, made by Pirie-Gordon, in the publication which Lawrence devoted to the Crusader Castles¹¹.

Lawrence had visited Hārim in September 1909 during his trip from Latakia to Aleppo. He found a castle

ruined and rebuilt, of which it was impossible to find the traces of its Crusader history¹²: his description also leaves little doubt as to the disastrous conservation conditions of the site¹³. Hārim was recognised as a national monument in 1959 and from then on, although in alternate stages, the castle was subjected to a series of restoration operations¹⁴. These involved the reinstatement of the main entrance, with partial reconstruction of the two towers, and the clearing of the long corridor which, from the main entrance to the south-west, leads to the so-called donjon at the other end of the tell. A number of areas to the north of the corridor were also cleared, bringing to light a *hammam* and a group of buildings of uncertain function. Finally, the area of the *donjon* was also cleared out; here too a number of rooms and another small *hammam* were uncovered.

Towards the end of the Nineties a research project was begun together with Ca' Foscari University of Venice, the University of Pisa and the Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées de Damas. These research

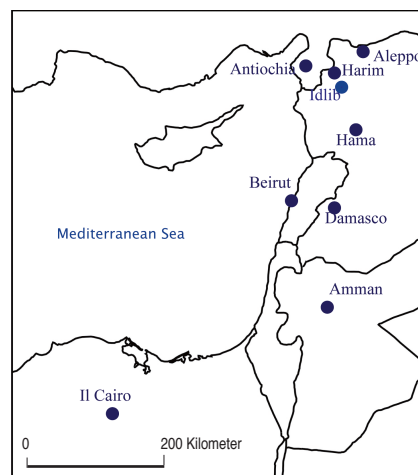


Fig. 3. Location of Hārim on the map (Plan: author).

campaigns (1999, 2000 and 2002) created a complete location plan of the site and some cross sections. Following this an analytical study of the architecture and building techniques began; finally, some excavations were opened, to better define the chronology of the main periods and to obtain information about the nature and quality of 'material culture'¹⁵.

Fig. 4. Topographical map of Hārim Castle (Taken from: Gelichi 2006b, Fig. 3, p. 212).

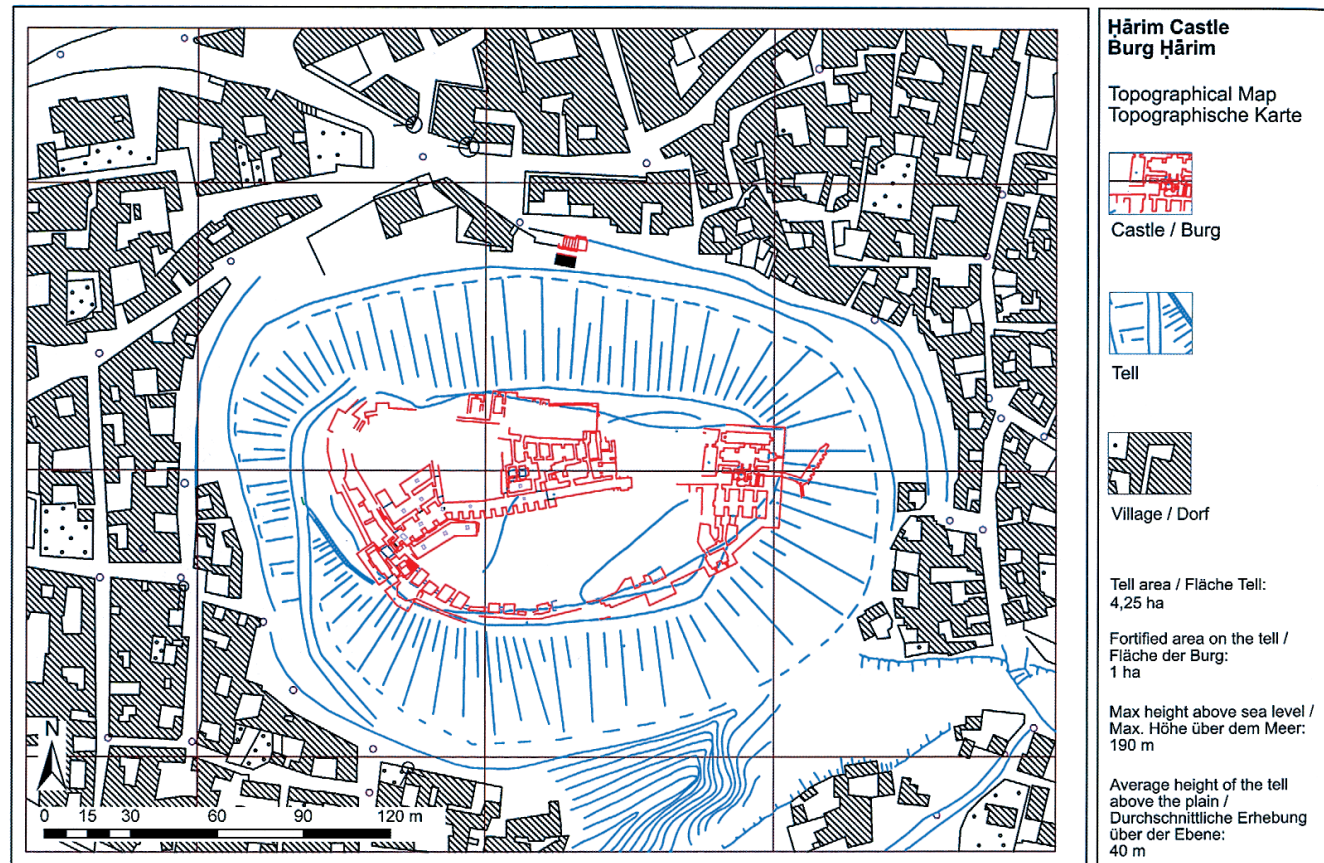
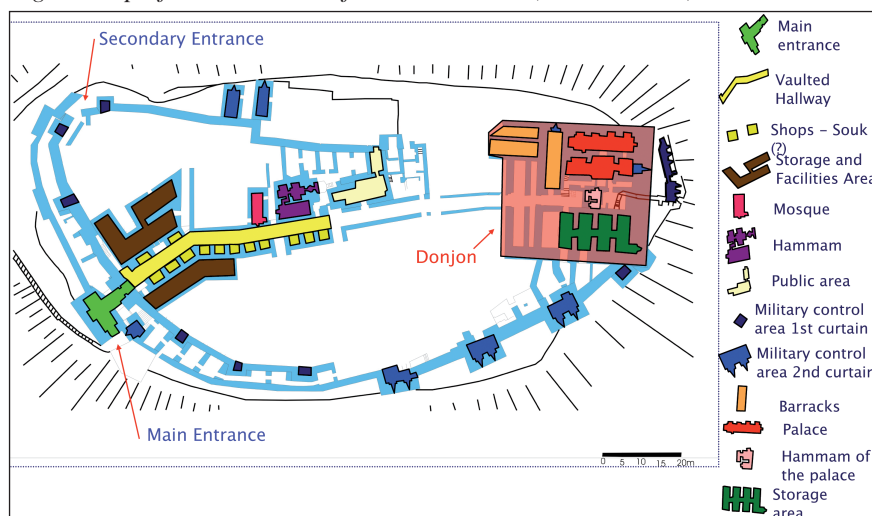




Fig. 5. Floor plan of Hārim Castle and the archaeological context (Plan: author).

Fig. 6. Map of the castle with functional areas (Plan: author).



The archaeological evidence (Fig. 5)

The overall features of the settlement sequence have already been discussed in basic terms elsewhere¹⁶ and here I will just recall them briefly to your attention. I would like to discuss in some detail, however, certain issues regarding the structural and functional aspects of the complex: the military defences, the residential area and the other areas.

The sequence has been divided into 9 main Periods: Period 9, the pre-Classical phase, identified only by a sample at the base of the tell, where traces have emerged of occupation dating to the 4th-3rd millennium B.C.; Period 8, the age of Antiquity up until the Byzantine period, of which at present we have only indirect evidence through pottery residues and the reused blocks in the castle building;

Periods 7-6, including the Byzantine and Crusade phases, evidenced by some wall sections found in excavation, probably the first surrounding wall and some working levels found in trenches 19, 150, 210; Period 5 the Ayyubid phase, to which are attributed the vast majority of visible constructions on the site; Periods 4-3 correspond to activities connected with the Mamluk phase, which may be divided into a first period when the castle still had military functions and a period when these were reduced; Periods 2-1 correspond to the time when the site came under Ottoman control. The castle has now become a village. The last period concerns the occupation during the last century.

The Hārim castle consists of a double surrounding wall (Fig. 6-7), an entrance gate located on the southwest side, a long corridor, partly vaulted,

which leads from the entrance to the so-called *donjon*, and lastly, a number of rooms distributed to the south and north of this corridor, many of which are still buried. The functions of some of these areas are obvious (as in the case of the two *hammam* and a mosque), while for others they are not so clear. There was a time when almost all the visible constructions were in use together; however, some of these were recovered from previous periods and it has not always been easy to establish their chronology.

The military defences The surrounding walls

As we have said, two surrounding walls are visible on the site. As in other cases, for example Shawbak¹⁷ and Damascus¹⁸, they were in use contemporarily, but there is no doubt that they belong to two different periods. The first wall is visible only on the west and north sides and partially on the south side, since the Syrian excavations of the eighties did not continue in the latter part. The construction technique uses limestone blocks of various sizes, many of which were certainly being reused, laid out in fairly regular lines. This wall has towers opening onto the interior, not very prominent and without loopholes: in some cases they are simply protruding out from the wall, as for example in the Crusader phase of the Crac des Chevalier¹⁹. Square towers, also opening onto the interior, without loopholes or protuberances in the wall, are to be found in many castles in these areas, from the Byzantine period up to the Crusades period²⁰. The only different tower is found on the north side: this is square, closed on the interior and with a loophole.

Two excavations have been opened near this surrounding wall: trench 210 and trench 150. The data which emerge partially coincide. Associations of the materials show that the northern section is later than the western part. By analysing the wall embellishment in more detail some differences may be noted in the laying of the ashlar, although similar materials were used. Therefore, the first surrounding wall, despite its continuity of collocation, does not have the same continuity of construction; it is likely that the northern section was rebuilt. The chronology of this structure is

nonetheless still uncertain. Although we have good stratigraphic connections, it is not possible at present to determine the chronology of the areas, due to the scarcity of knowledge we have of the pottery production that was circulating in this area between the Byzantine age and that of the Crusades. It is very likely that the west and southeast sections are Byzantine or a little earlier (the last quarter of the 11th century), as we know that the Crusaders found the site already fortified. In this case the northern part could be a Crusader reconstruction²¹.

The second surrounding wall is a straight section without towers (on the west and south sides) and a section with a group of three square towers with two interior loopholes, on the southwest side. Stratigraphic data (trench 150) confirm that this second wall was built by the son of Saladin, Al-Zahir Ghāzī (1186–1216), governor of Aleppo, towards the beginning of the 13th century. This hypothesis had already been made by van Berchem on the basis of a stone epigraph on the entrance gate, today no longer visible. How this second surrounding wall related to the *donjon* is not altogether clear even though, for a number of reasons, the *donjon* is believed, at present, to be slightly later than the second wall (nonetheless still built during the 13th century).

The gates

Entrance to the castle was by two gates located on the southwest side. One of these, on the interior, had an ogival arch and was connected to the first surrounding wall. It was later absorbed into the layout of the Ayyubid period. The second gate is of the bent entrance type, a gate built in the side of a tower. The entrance was then protected by another tower, today partially restored, but which van Berchem draws as a semi-circular shape. This type of gate became common from the end of the 12th century onwards²².

There was perhaps a third gate on the northwest side, but as yet no excavations have been made here.

The towers and other defences

The towers of the first surrounding wall have already been described. Those of the Ayyubid period are rectangular (approx. 17 x 20 m), vaulted

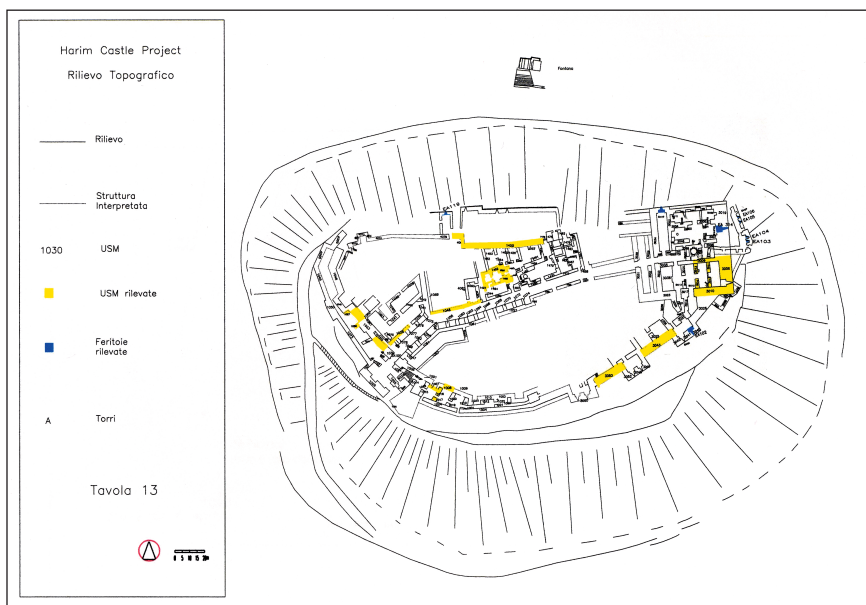


Fig. 7. Hārim Castle with double surrounding wall. Topographical survey (Plan: author).

and each provided with two loopholes all similar in shape.

A number of rooms, still buried but provided with loopholes, are recognisable on the north side. These were undoubtedly further defences of a part of the castle which had little protection. As they have not been excavated, very little can be said of them. They may perhaps be compared to those rectangular towers with several loopholes which are to be found, for example, in the castle of Shawbak and which date back to about the end of the 13th century.

Buried rooms, with loopholes, accessible on the east side, have at present been partially explored. These loopholes were covered by the last *glacis* contemporary with the *donjon* and at present this is the only stratigraphic reference we have.

Analysis of the loopholes recorded on the site has shown that they are basically of two types.

Those of the first type have fairly simple apertures and are quite small. They are not framed by arches but only squared off. They appear to offer a limited range of shot forwards or in a straight line. The roof consists of an architrave. They have been found only in the area buried beneath the *donjon* (E103-104-105-106).

The second type features a kind of frontal space, has a vaulted covering and is generally located higher up than the level of walking. These kind of loopholes have been well recorded

in constructions from the Ayyubid period²³, but are also found in later periods.

The glacis

The *glacis* is not well conserved all over the site. A good section may be seen on the southwest side, near the castle entrance, while another two sections are found on the east side, beneath the *donjon*. Here it may be noted how the external north wall of the *donjon* is closely linked to the first line of the *glacis*. Good traces can also be seen on the north side.

Above all the *glacis* was used in castles or citadels built on artificial tells, that is, on unstable ground, such as that of Hārim²⁴, built on deposits that date back to the 3rd millennium B.C. The instability of the tell was already known in the Middle Ages, as is indicated by written sources concerning the siege of 1157.

Undoubtedly the whole tell was originally covered by the *glacis* (traces, although faint, are in fact visible almost everywhere below); but even the *glacis* was not made in a single period. Near the entrance gate it may be seen in section that there were at least two phases: the most ancient consists of a structure with stones laid in steps, while the most recent follows a more regular, curvilinear path. The most recent phase, clear in its close structural relation to the *donjon*, cannot be dated earlier than the 13th century.

Constructions with collective functions

Inside the castle certain rooms are visible, the function of which is clear enough. The first construction of this type is a *hammam*, which was entered by means of a passage leading from the north of the long corridor (Fig. 8). This *hammam*, emptied and restored by Syrian archaeologists in the eighties, consists of a room which must have been a dressing-room, a further room on *suspensurae*, which must have been the *tepidarium* and lastly, a larger room, also on *suspensurae*, which was the *caldarium*. Alongside the *caldarium* the fire chamber may still be seen, above which there was the water tank. There are no archaeological data for dating this construction, which, however, appears to fit perfectly into the phase we have attributed to the Ayyubid rebuilding period (that of Al-Zāhir Ghāzī or slightly later: end of the 12th – first half of the 13th century). The *hammam* is not the only recorded baths at present in Harim; another smaller one has been excavated in the area of the *donjon* (of which we will talk later).

Opposite the *hammam*, to the west, there is a small mosque, excavated in 2000. The mosque was built in a rectangular room; on the east side in the wall, there has been found a kind of rudimentary *mirhab*, around which were incised, rather crudely, two inscriptions in praise of Allah. The front part of the room had a kind of rectangular

hall (like the mosque, without a paved floor). The excavation of the mosque has revealed the functional organization which, on the basis of the material, appears to have continued during the 13th century (perhaps the mosque was built towards the beginning of the 13th century). The processes by which this place lost its function are also interesting. In the late Mamluk age (15th century?) the mosque lost its original functions and was used as a workshop. Subsequently (during the Ottoman age) the place was used and inhabited (a number of hearths indicate as much), following a process commonly found throughout the castle.

The donjon: a residential and military area? (Fig. 10)

This area, located to the east of the castle, contains an almost rectangular group of constructions measuring 70 m in width. This group was almost entirely emptied during the Syrian restoration, but the entrance area is still partially buried.

Already noted by Berchem, this construction has an internal system that appears to be the result of operations undertaken at various intervals over time. Study of this group has not been completed and the excavation operation has only taken into consideration a room on the south side: the data we have, therefore, are at present only preliminary.

If it is difficult to understand the phases of building of this construction, it is perhaps easier to define its functions in the Ayyubid period. Entrance was through a gate (2 m wide with ogival arch), situated on the west side and flanked by four narrow rooms, now buried. After this there was a second gate, of the same width, with a long narrow area to the north, vaulted and provided with a loophole. Once beyond these gates the route branched off: to the north, along a narrow winding passage, it lead into a vaulted room (a kind of reception hall?: 300). This opened into another four rooms, one of which, located to the north with an east-west axis, was provided with a number of niches in the walls and openings for light, seemingly without loopholes. This central room gave onto a small private bathroom consisting of only two rooms and, of course, an external heating system with bath above. This part of the building had an upper floor, now entirely lost, accessible by means of a stairway at the side of the *hammam*. The features of the construction lead us to suppose that this area had a residential function. But comparisons remain somewhat problematic, due to the few examples we have of evident residential areas which have been excavated. The Shawbak palace, dated to the Mamluk period by Brown on the basis of tenuous stratigraphic evidence²⁵, presents, in fact, certain analogies with our areas (the existence of a central room, interpreted as a recep-



Fig. 8. Hārīm Castle, Hammam (Ayyubid period) (Photos: author).



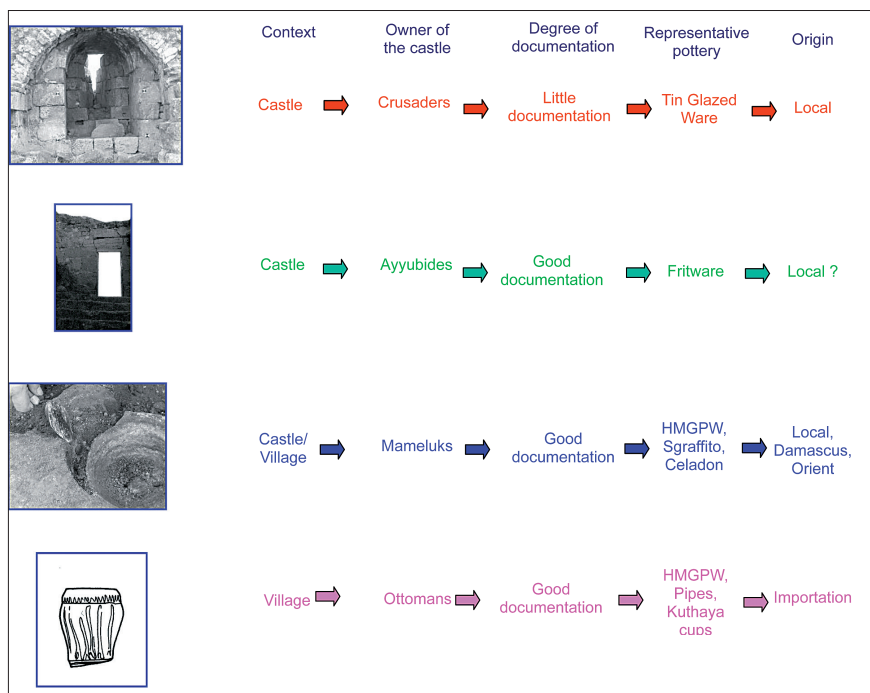


Fig. 9. Social environment of pottery (Drawing: author).

tion hall, and niches in the walls), but it is the residential function itself of that building which is not altogether certain. The residential complex of Sayun, attributed to the Ayyubid period, has also been little investigated as yet, nonetheless this interpretation is preferred at present to that of just a bathroom²⁶.

The southern part of this group, consisting of a series of long, narrow spaces (with north-south axis) must have been used, instead, for military and storage purposes. This hypothesis seems to be supported by the discovery, in trench 314, of a deposit of arrowheads (more than three hundred) at a level marked by fire.

The chronology of this group of constructions is uncertain. If the *donjon* is later than the second surrounding wall, it could date back, at least in its present form, to the second quarter of the 13th century, if not later: such a late date also seems to be confirmed by a decorative feature of false pillars on the north wall and, above all, by its close relation to the most recent *glacis*. False pillars appear on the entrance gate to the citadel of Aleppo, of uncertain age but recently dated, like most of the remains of fortifications, to the Mamluk period rather than the Ayyubid period²⁷. But a residential area could have existed previously; moreover, the existence of such ties in with the policy of the Ayyubid sultans,

at least from Al-Zāhir Ghāzī onwards. The excavation of trench 314-315 has also enabled some suppositions to be made with regard to loss of function of this area. Unfortunately, the Syrian archaeologists had already removed all the deposits above the fire level with the arrowheads (which was directly upon the stone floor) so it is not possible to determine whether this episode somehow meant the end of residential use of the complex. This, however, is all very likely, as in trench 315 excavation has been made of what remained of a large refuse pit, with

material clearly dating to around the 14th century. The existence of such an item seems to indicate, unequivocally, that area 315 (and perhaps those alongside it) underwent a change of function during the 14th century. It is therefore plausible that the castle still had military (and residential) functions towards the start of the 14th century (as written sources also seem to indicate, which mention restoration carried out in 1307 by the governor of Aleppo), but that towards the middle of the century its buildings were already partially unused, giving rise to that transformation which was to turn the castle into a village.

The Hārim sequence and the archaeology of the Crusader-Muslim castles in the Syrian and Palestinian area

Research, still underway, has enabled us to reconstruct at present a sequence of this type (Fig. 9).

An initial settlement phase, with military buildings on the site, is indicated by the existence of ramparts. The nature of some constructions, some typical features and stratigraphic data, confirm that these walls testify to at least two phases and that these must have been between the Byzantine age (10th century) and the Crusader period (first half of the 12th century). It is very likely that the most ancient section of these walls dates back to before the end of the 11th century.

We have no other information concerning the castle in this period and during

Fig. 10. Area of the “Donjon”, aerial photo, in the front the Hammam of the residence (Taken from: Gelichi 2006b, Fig. 19, p. 219).



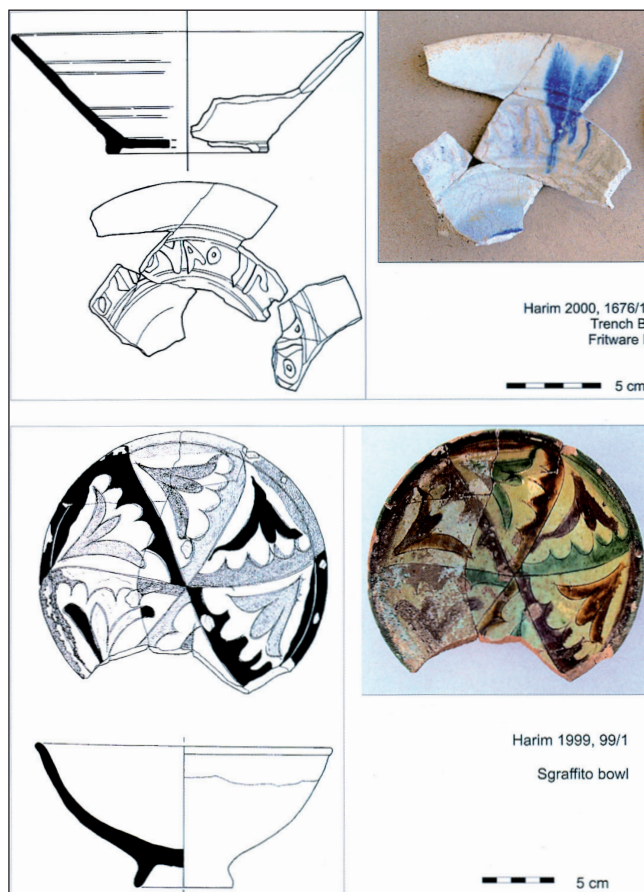


Fig. 11. Fritware and Sgraffito bowl (Taken from: Gelichi 2006b, Fig. 21-22, p. 219).

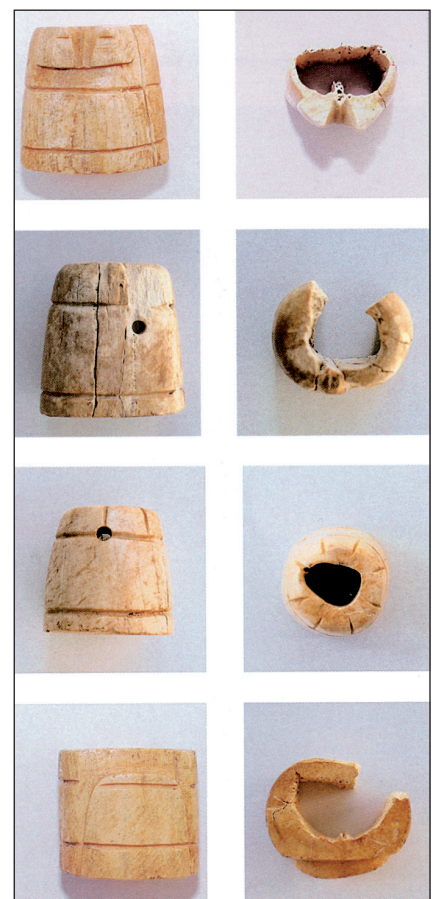


Fig. 12. Chesses form the beginning of the 13th century.

the Crusader occupation; we do not know precisely how far it extended nor what areas were connected to it. Two rectangular towers and a straight stretch of wall, eliminated by the second surrounding wall and by the *donjon* on the east side, may belong to the same period. The excavations carried out so far, although they have brought to light phases of the Crusader period and earlier, have been too restricted to supply any information of a functional or planimetric nature.

As Lawrence had already realized, and before him van Berchem, the castle we see today is substantially the result of rebuilding in the Ayyubid period. The works carried out under Al-Zāhir Ghāzī must have been on the second defensive ramparts, but must also have concerned an overall reconstruction of the layout (even though some buildings were made or rebuilt later on). The Ayyubid phase therefore implies the existence of buildings previously absent, such as the baths, the mosque and perhaps the palace²⁸. It is not, however, easy to determine the extent of works in the Mamluk period. The archaeological record, in fact, becomes clearer beginning with

those stages of destructuring of the site which took place during the 14th century and which give new, well-stratified deposits. Archaeological research on the castle of Hārim – although incomplete – shows how a limited approach to the mere aspects of type and structure is important, but not decisive for clarifying many of the issues connected with these buildings, starting from a correct definition of the settlement sequence chronology. With regard to the difficulties of dating the buildings, I believe the type of features (planimetry, types of openings, types of loopholes, etc.) may still be good markers, as long as they are certified by good stratigraphic associations with the excavations; or else if there are sure stratigraphic connections with the inscriptions (which, where they exist, are used to date buildings or walls, above all from the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods onwards). It is true that our knowledge of the products from these areas is still in the early stages, but if we do not invest in this field, if we do not create good sequences of ‘guiding fossils’ (from coins to pottery, from glass to metals) (Fig. 11-12) and we do not begin serious excavation campaigns, it will be difficult for us to even establish the dates of the very walls themselves. Stratigraphic analyses of constructions are, moreover, still a rarity in

architectural studies of these regions, and until an empirical approach or an approach only based on broad structural relations can be overcome, my impression is that we will not make much further progress in our research. The archaeology of these great architectural structures is still in its infancy; when even the problems of dating are still to be solved, it leaves little space for setting up more complex theoretical approaches. I cannot deny that the study of these architectural features, aimed essentially at analysing the military components (and subsequently the residential elements) may be a good research path. It is clear that the vast majority of these castles were built to protect and defend. I wonder, however, if it may not be possible to use the study of the Crusader castles (later muslim) for understanding something more about the economy, the society and culture of these populations and these places. Without a broadening of objectives into the surrounding area, I have the impression that this will be extremely difficult to achieve.

Notes

* Erweiterte Fassung des Aufsatzes „Die Burg Harim“, in: *M. Piana* (Hrsg.), *Burgen und Schädte der Kreuzzugszeit*, Petersberg 2008, S. 211–220.

¹ Lawrence 1936, p. 57.

² *Ibn Saddād*, p. 34; *Bianquis*, 1986-89, II, p. 603.

³ *Deschamps* 1973, pp. 100–101.

⁴ *Yared-Riachi* 1997, p. 219.

⁵ *Éliseeff* 1967, p. 744.

⁶ *Deschamps* 1973, p. 341.

⁷ *van Berchem/Fatio* 1914, p. 237, note 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238, note 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *van Berchem/Fatio* 1914.

¹¹ *Lawrence* 1936, p. 57, fig. 19.

¹² *Lawrence* 1936, p. 223.

¹³ *Lawrence* 1936, p. 57.

¹⁴ *Kosara* 1988.

¹⁵ Preliminary reports on excavations and archaeological researches are in *Gelichi* 2003a-b; *Gelichi* 2006a-b.

¹⁶ *Gelichi* 2003b and 2006a-b.

¹⁷ *Faucherre/Corvisier/Dangles/Michaudel* 2004.

¹⁸ *Bérthier* 2002 and 2006.

¹⁹ Dating back to between 1142 and 1170: *Mesqui* 2003.

²⁰ See, for example, the first phase of Shawbak: *Faucherre/Corvisier/Dan-*

gles/Michaudel 2004, p. 50 or the castle of Qal’at Abū Sufiān/al Bāra, in the patriarchy of Antioch, these also dating back to between 1098 and 1148: *Foundrin* 1995.

²¹ We know that the site was seriously damaged during the crusader siege of 1157: *Deschamps* 1973, p. 341.

²² *Michaudel* 2006, p. 110–111.

²³ E.g. *Yovitchitch* 2006, castle of ‘Ajlun.

²⁴ *Voisin* 2004, p. 325, fig. 20.

²⁵ *Brown* 1986.

²⁶ *Beddek* 2001.

²⁷ *Gonnella* 2006.

²⁸ *Tabbaa* 2006.

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Harim: eine kreuzfahrerzeitlich-muslimische Burg in Nordsyrien. Archäologische Untersuchungen

Die Burg Hārim liegt in Nordsyrien (Tal des Orontes) und wurde wahrscheinlich von den Byzantinern gegründet. 1098 wurde sie von den Kreuzfahrern während der Belagerung von Antiochia erobert. 1149 eroberte sie Nur ad-Din zum ersten Mal. Die zweite Besetzung der Burg durch die Kreuzfahrer dauerte nur wenige Jahre, und ab 1164 verblieb sie in der Hand der Muslime, trotz mehrerer Versuche der Kreuzfahrer, sie zurückzuerobern. Unter der Herrschaft der Ayyubiden gelangte die Burg nach dem Tod Saladins zusammen mit Aleppo und seinem Territorium an seinen Sohn az-Zahir Ghazi, der einen Statthalter für den Platz ernannte. 1260 und 1271 wurde die Burg von den Mongolen belagert und wahrscheinlich 707 H. (1307 bis 1308) vom Gouverneur von Aleppo renoviert. Weitergehende Informationen fehlen. Wahrscheinlich verlor die Burg ihre Residenzfunktion sowie ihre militärische Bedeutung in der spätmamlukischen Epoche und verfiel zu einem Dorf.

Die Burg wurde auf der Westseite des Ġabal al-A‘la-Massivs auf dem Gipfel eines mehr oder weniger kegelförmigen Berges errichtet, ein in Teilen künstlich angelegter Tell. In der Nähe der Burg liegt das heutige Dorf Harim. Die Stätte bedeckt eine Fläche von ca. 4,25 ha, während die Burg auf dem Gipfel etwa 1 ha umfasst. Die maximale Höhe des Tells beträgt 190 m über dem Meer und 40 m über der umliegenden Ebene.

Harim wurde 1959 als nationales Denkmal anerkannt und seitdem in mehreren Etappen einer Serie von Restaurierungskampagnen unterzogen. Gegen Ende der 1990er-Jahre wurde ein Forschungsprojekt in Zusammenarbeit mit der Universität Ca’ Foscari in Venedig, der Universität von Pisa und der syrischen Antikenverwaltung gestartet. Bei diesen Forschungskampagnen (1999, 2000 und 2002) wurden ein vollständiger Lageplan der Stätte und einige Schnittzeichnungen erstellt. Daran schlossen sich Untersuchungen zur Architektur und zur Bautechnik an. Schließlich wurden verschiedene Grabungen durchgeführt, um die Chronologie der Hauptbauphasen besser bestimmen zu können und Informationen zu Art und Beschaffenheit der „materiellen Kultur“ zu erhalten. Durch die archäologischen Untersuchungen konnten neun Siedlungsphasen vom 4. Jahrtausend v. Chr. bis zur heutigen Zeit identifiziert werden. Der Teil einer ersten Ringmauer ist erhalten. Sie gehört wahrscheinlich zur Kreuzfahrerzeit (oder sogar zur byzantinischen Epoche). Eine zweite Ringmauer, zwei Bäder, eine Moschee und eine Residenz wurde unter den Ayyubiden (az-Zahir Ghazi) zu Beginn des 13. Jahrhunderts errichtet. Die archäologischen Ausgrabungen erbrachten Erkenntnisse zu Veränderungen in der mamlukischen und osmanischen Epoche, als die Burg als Streusiedlung wiederbenutzt und in ein Dorf umgewandelt wurde.