

History of the Crusades.  
Episode 43  
Crac De Chevaliers.

Hello again. Over the past three episodes, we have been examining the contest between the Latin Christians and the Syrian Muslims over the country of Egypt. This week, we take some time out from the conflict to examine the topic of Crusader castles in the Middle East, and to hone in on one castle in particular, the magnificent Crac de Chevaliers.

Now, around the time that the conflict in Egypt was taking place, a bit of a power shift was occurring in the Crusader states. King Amalric's forces were becoming seriously depleted. There was only a limited pool of knights and foot soldiers available to him to muster as an army, and while the odd team of reinforcements would arrive every now and again from Europe, they weren't on a scale large enough to make a significant difference. To make things worse, while King Amalric and his forces were away in Egypt fighting the numerous campaigns, Nur ad-Din remained in Syria, and posed a constant threat to the Crusader states. King Amalric desperately needed some more fighting power, both to assist him on his campaigns and, just as importantly, to defend his lands in his absence.

Deliverance came in the form of the two military Orders, the Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitaller. Back in Episodes 20 to 23 we discussed the establishment of the military Orders, and over the years they had become increasingly wealthy and powerful institutions. The military campaigns in Egypt heralded a significant boost in the power of both the Orders. From the year 1167 onwards, King Amalric handed a large number of castles and surrounding lands over to the military Orders, for them to operate in the defense of the realm.

These gifts occurred across the Crusader states, but were of primary importance in the County of Tripoli. This County was, at this stage at least, the most vulnerable of the remaining Crusader states. The Count of Tripoli was being held captive. There were few wealthy noble families remaining in the County to finance and operate its castles, and it was under constant threat of invasion by Nur ad-Din. Consequently, the city of Tortosa and virtually the entire northern half of the County was given over to the control of the Knights Templar, while the Hospitallers were given control of the Buqai'ah region near the capital Tripoli.

Within the Buqai'ah region is a hill called Jabal Kalakh, which is near the famous Homs Gap, and forms part of the Mount Lebanon mountain range. The hill had been used as a base for fortifications for a long time before the Crusaders showed up. And when I say a long time, I mean a really long time. There is evidence to suggest that the site was used by the Egyptians in their struggle against the Hittites for control of Syria, way back in the 15th century BC. We have come across the hill previously, in Episode 16, when one of the leaders of the First Crusade, Raymond Count of Toulouse, occupied the site on his way to Jerusalem after the terrible events at Maarat al-Nu'man. It was reoccupied by the Muslims after Count Raymond moved on, and was taken by Tancred, acting as the regent of Antioch, in 1110.

The first major move in the Crusader development of the site came in 1144, when Raymond II, Count of Tripoli, transferred the hill to the Knights Hospitaller. The Knights Hospitaller, then proceeded to build a castle on the hill's summit.

Now, during the period in which the Latin Christians were occupying the Crusader states, castles were being constructed at a rapid pace. Back in medieval Europe, if you conquered some territory and you wanted to hold that territory, the best way to do this would be to build a castle or other fortification on your new piece of land. The knights of the Crusades brought this tradition with them to the Holy Land. Consequently, a dizzying number of castles were constructed throughout the Crusader states.

Unlike in Europe, where wood was plentiful, most castles in the Middle East were built of stone. It's safe to say that during the period of the Crusades, there wouldn't have been many stonemasons in the Holy Land who were sitting around, playing dice, and wondering where the next job was going to come from. Stonemasons, designers, and builders would have been in very high demand.

Most castles were built along purely defensive lines. They were designed to take advantage of the landscape around them and were predominantly pragmatic structures, reflecting their purpose as a base from which the surrounding territory could be defended from attack. But that didn't mean they couldn't be beautiful. Most larger castles contained a chapel, which could be aesthetically pleasing, and some castle owners took pains to make their castles as luxurious as possible.

In his excellent book "Crusader Castles", Hugh Kennedy notes that a German aristocrat, Wilbrand of Odenberg, was traveling through the County of Tripoli in 1212, and stayed in a castle near Beirut owned by John of Ibelin. Wilbrand describes with wonder a tower within the castle, which overlooked the sea on one side and ornate gardens on the other side. The interior of the tower was richly decorated, and one chamber featured a marble floor, which rippled like water when you walked across it, and a ceiling which had been painted with clouds so lifelike that they seemed to move when you stared at them. In the center of the chamber was a fountain shaped like a dragon. The waters from the fountain moistened and cooled the air in the room, and unsurprisingly, Wilbrand revealed that he would happily sit beside that fountain for the remainder of his days.

Unfortunately, no trace of this castle currently exists, and that's the fate of many of the Crusader castles built in the Middle East. The whole area is prone to earthquakes, and the damage done during the quakes, along with the ravages of time, has taken its toll on most of the structures. Fortunately, though, some have survived, although many are only ruins. In researching his book "Crusader Castles", Hugh Kennedy traveled around the Middle East, photographing and mapping the castles remaining from the Crusades. He analyzes 26 castles in his book. The castles still standing range from almost unrecognizable piles of stone, to magnificent, well preserved buildings.

Of the castles to have survived, the most famous is the magnificent Crac de Chevaliers. In his book, Hugh Kennedy states, and I quote, "Like the naming of cats, the naming of Crusader castles is a complicated problem" end of quote. And I think he makes a fair point. Crusader castles have at least two different names, one French and one Arabic. Some also have Latin names. Crac de Chevaliers is a fine example. While it only has one French name, the "crac" in Crac de Chevaliers has two variants in spelling. Some people spell it "C. R. A. C." and some "K. R. A. K." While this may seem to be a minor problem, it can cause difficulties for those doing a Google search, or looking the castle up in an index. The Arab version of Crac de Chevaliers also has two variants. It is known most commonly as "Qal'at al-Hisn", but it's also sometimes listed as "Hisn al-Akrad".

Setting aside the problems with its name, there is one thing that everyone can agree on. Crac de Chevaliers is an incredible building. It is most certainly the best surviving example of a Crusader castle. Other commentators, however, have taken it further, comparing the castle to famous structures like the Parthenon in Greece, and describing it as one of the greatest buildings ever constructed. So what's so good about Crac de Chevaliers? What's all the fuss about? Well, we're about to find out.

First, we need to know what it looks like. Imagine, if you will, a castle. Not a Disney-type castle, but a practical defensive structure, complete with circular towers, turrets and massive walls. Make sure your castle is made out of stone. Right, now you're going to have to make this a big castle, a really big one. So imagine a big, solid castle. Got that? Right, now double it in size. In fact, double it again. This thing has to be massive. Right, so hopefully you are now imagining an absolutely enormous castle. Now, if your castle is surrounded by a forest or green fields, that's not quite going to cut it. So take your castle, wherever it is, and plonk it down on a hill in the heat and treeless environment of Syria. Ta-daa! Hopefully what you're imagining bears some sort of resemblance to Crac de Chevaliers.

Now it's not just its incredible size that makes this castle impressive. Its design incorporated the latest in cutting-edge defensive technology, and its construction required a dizzying degree of skill and craftsmanship. To fully appreciate its design, we need to continue our look at the history of its construction.

Right, so we've already established that the Knights Hospitaller started constructing a castle on the hill known as Jabal Kalakh back in the 1140s. There was already a fortification on the hill, and it was known by local Muslims as "Hisn al-Akrad", or "the castle of the Kurds", due to the fact that the Emir of Homs had established a Kurdish garrison at the castle. It's unclear exactly what this castle looked like, but the Knights Hospitaller, who had just been granted a swathe of land in the region, could see the site's potential. The hill overlooked the narrow plain of Buqai'ah, which stretches between the cities of Homs and Tripoli, and its proximity to Muslim territory meant that it would provide both a handy base for inciting attacks on the Muslims and a first line of defense, guarding the County of Tripoli against Muslim incursions.

So the formerly Muslim castle of the Kurds, Hisn Al-Akrad, became known to the Latin Christians as the "castle of Crac", and this was where the Knights Hospitaller decided to establish their base. They expanded and improved upon the Muslim fortification on the hill. What precise works were undertaken is unknown, as neither the Muslim nor Christian chronicles make mention of it, and it's difficult to tell from an archaeological point of view exactly what occurred. However, it's likely that the upper bailey of the existing structure was developed. New buildings may have been added to the site, and a new defensive wall built. Generally, what occurred at this stage was some minor improvements to the site, and this reflected the fact that the Hospitallers were only just getting established in the area, and didn't yet have the financial means to undertake a large scale refurbishment of the castle.

And it was lucky that they didn't spend a lot of time and effort on improving their Castle of the Kurds. The area was hit by a minor earthquake in 1157, which was followed 13 years later by a massive earthquake, which occurred on the morning of the 29th of June 1170. This quake caused a significant loss of life, and vast structural damage across the region.

Many stone buildings suffered damage during the earthquake, including the dome of the Cathedral of St Peter in Antioch, which collapsed on top of the Greek patriarch and his congregation. The castle of Crac sustained significant damage. The walls and the fortifications of the upper bailey collapsed, along with the chapel built by the Hospitallers, and the foundations of much of the remaining structures were cracked. The Knights Hospitaller faced a stark choice. They could either abandon the site entirely, or clear away the rubble and debris and build something entirely new. Luckily for us, they chose the second option.

Now, when the castle was eventually completed, it consisted of two main sections. The first was an inner fortress containing a great hall, chapel, storerooms, hospital, latrines, and a kitchen, and a number of courtyards. The second was a massive outer circuit of walls. The walls surrounded the inner fortress, and were large enough themselves to constitute a separate castle. The walls incorporated a number of towers, and an impressively large stable complex built to house the knights' horses.

The first phase of work, which commenced after the earthquake of 1170, concentrated on constructing the inner fortress. The fortress incorporated the undamaged remains of the castle of Crac, a new chapel was built, and the outer walls of the inner fortress were constructed, along with functional structures such as a gate-tower, hospital, and kitchen. The inner fortress alone was a formidable structure, and had the Knights Hospitaller been content to cease their constructions at this stage, they would have had an impressive and functional defensive castle.

But they weren't content to leave it at that. They were determined to build something even bigger and more formidable.

The next major phase of construction was brought about by yet another earthquake. In 1202 a huge earthquake rocked the region, causing many deaths and significant structural damage throughout the County of Tripoli. To the dismay of the Knights Hospitaller, the newly constructed fortress at Crac was also damaged. For the next 50 years, an incredible amount of work was carried out at Crac. The inner fortress was repaired and strengthened against future earthquakes. One of the innovative measures used to strengthen the fortress was the construction of a talus, or outward sloping wall, which shored up the western and southern walls of the inner fortress. Sloping outwards like the sides of a pyramid, the talus made it less likely that the wall would collapse in the event of an earthquake, and also possessed defensive capabilities. The blocks used to construct the talus were smooth and provided no footholds for attackers who might attempt to scale the walls.

In addition to improving the inner fortress, the massive outer walls were constructed, incorporating a number of round towers. The towers were intended to provide accommodation for the knights who were living at the castle. The castle could operate with a garrison of sixty knights, but occasionally the population of the castle could swell to a couple of thousand and the fortress was large enough to accommodate them.

The castle's main period of construction was during the first half of the 13th century, following the earthquake of 1202. This period was a time of increasing influence and affluence for the Knights Hospitaller, and their wealth and power is reflected in the scale of their construction at Crac, in its innovative design, and in the quality of the craftsmanship used in its construction.

Not only was the castle constructed on a massive scale, some of the designs incorporated within its structure were highly innovative for the time, and reflected advances made not only in European architecture, but in Byzantine and Islamic design as well. We've already discussed the construction of the talus, or sloping wall. A related innovation was the use of round towers. During the main period of construction of the castle at Crac, the trend was to construct square towers. The designer of the towers at Crac went against the flow, and stipulated that its towers were to be round. These were more difficult to build, as it meant that each block of stone had to be shaped with precision, so as to fit together neatly to form a smooth round shape. But the circular design meant that the towers were stronger than the traditional square ones, meaning they were more likely to withstand an earthquake, and less likely to collapse due to undermining.

Around the turrets of the round towers, and around the upper sections of the walls which connected the towers, were numerous arrow slits. These were carefully placed so as to provide maximum coverage over the area outside the outer wall. The slits ended in a triangular stirrup shape, which made it easier for archers to accurately position their weapons when they were firing downwards.

Another innovation concerned the entrance to the castle. The castle is entered from the east. Originally, a drawbridge would have allowed access over a moat into the inner wall of the castle. Now, instead of heading straight over to the entrance to the inner fortress, the passageway does a peculiar thing. It takes you away from the direction of the entrance to the inner fortress, and veers 150 or so meters to the left. The passageway itself, which is called the Great Ramp, is entirely covered and made of stone. It's designed to be used by knights riding horses, so it's wide and high enough to accommodate a horse and rider. The stone ceiling of the passageway contains regular openings which let in light during the day. They also function as murder holes, allowing the castle's defenders to pour hot oil or projectiles onto any invaders using the tunnel. The passage then turns back towards the entrance to the inner fortress, via a hairpin bend. This was designed to slow the charge of any invading cavalry, and above the bend of course, were plenty of murder holes, enabling the defenders to take full advantage of the bottleneck created here by any charging horses.

These innovations, along with ditches, moats, a portcullis, doors reinforced with iron, and a peculiar innovation involving box-machicolations, meant that the defenders of the castle had quite a bit to work with. For those of you wondering about the box-machicolations, they are a form of defense never before seen in Europe, and were likely modeled on Muslim fortifications in the Middle East. Small stone chambers were built jutting out from the walls. The chambers were just big enough to enable a man to crouch inside and to drop missiles down on anyone attempting to interfere with the wall or its foundations down below.

While the design of the castle contained some cutting-edge technology for its day, its actual construction also involved an incredible degree of skill. The limestone which was needed to make the thousands upon thousands of stone blocks used to build the castle, came from a quarry a few kilometers away. Now here's the mind-boggling part. Each stone used in the construction was individually carved and shaped to a precise individual design. It wasn't just a matter of churning out thousands of blocks the same shape, as due to the sloping walls and the curved towers, many blocks needed to have their own specific out of shape, and some, particularly those placed where the sloping walls of the talus met the

round curve of the towers, needed to be cut in multiple planes. Stonemasons carved each block individually by hand. This was undertaken with such a degree of skill and precision that the blocks in the castle fit together perfectly and seamlessly, in many cases making the mortar almost invisible.

In its heyday, the castle contained a garrison of some 2,000 fighters, and played a crucial role in the defense of the Crusader states. After the Crusades however, its fortunes gradually declined. It was used by various Arab governors in a military role until the mid-14th century, and was pretty much forgotten about in the European world until the 19th and early 20th centuries, where it was visited by a number of intrepid European scholars, including T. E. Lawrence, later to be known as Lawrence of Arabia, who wrote a dissertation on Crusader Castles. He visited the castle in the years before the First World War and declared it to be, and I quote “the best preserved and most wholly admirable castle in the world” end of quote. This was despite the fact that, at the time it was home to some 500 Kurdish villagers, who had allegedly damaged some of the internal stone masonry, and had used the castle vaults as rubbish pits.

After the First World war, the French occupied Syria under a mandate. The experience of French troops fighting in the Middle East during the First World War gave rise to a patriotic interest in the history of the Crusades and of Crusader castles. The establishment of a French administration in Lebanon and in Syria, while not of course welcomed by the locals, meant that French scholars could catalog and study the remains of the fortresses. In 1933 the French government paid the state of Latakia the sum of 1,000,000 francs, and Crac de Chevaliers was ceded to France. The Kurdish villagers who had been living in the castle, were relocated, and a workforce of 120 men spent two years cleaning the castle, removing debris, and restoring the stonework, turning the castle into a major tourist attraction for French visitors to the Middle East. Restoration work ended with the declaration of Syrian independence in 1946, and the castle remained in the same state as left by the French restorers, until about a month ago.

In July 2013, the castle was damaged after taking a direct hit from an air strike. For the past two years, a civil war has raged in Syria, with the death toll as at August 2013 around the 100,000 mark, with millions more people displaced from their homes. As a result of the war, UNESCO placed Crac de Chevaliers and five other World Heritage sites in Syria on the list of World Heritage in danger. Their concern was justified when the castle was damaged in July 2013. A team from the Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology (which you can like on Facebook, by the way, just search for the “Protect Syrian Archaeology” page) uploaded a video to YouTube showing the damage that had been done to the inner fortress. It appears that a tower and perhaps the chapel were damaged as a result of the air strike. It remains to be seen how much more damage will be sustained by the castle as a result of the ongoing conflict in Syria, but all we can really do is cross our fingers and hope that it is minimal, and that the magnificent Crac de Chevaliers will survive to be enjoyed by future generations.

And that concludes our look at Crac de Chevaliers. Join me next week as we take a look at the events leading up to the year 1174, in an episode entitled "The Fall of Giants".

If you would like to discover more about Crac de Chevaliers and Crusader castles in general, the best place to start would be the comprehensive and well-written book “Crusader Castles” by Hugh Kennedy. Also very useful is the book “Monuments of Syria, a Guide”, by the former Australian Ambassador to Syria, Ross Burns. If you are able to track

it down, the BBC produced an excellent television series in 2012 called "Battle Castles", and one of the episodes is devoted to Crac de Chevaliers. It's well worth a watch if you can find a copy. I'll list the books for you, along with some pictures of Crac de Chevaliers, on the website at [HistoryOfTheCrusades.webs.com](http://HistoryOfTheCrusades.webs.com). Until next week, bye for now.

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