

# The Citadel of Salah Ed-Din



## THE CITADEL OF SALAH ED-DIN

**T**he Citadel of Salah ed Din is located high in the coastal mountain range, some 24 kilometres east of Lattakia. On a fine day one can see the Mediterranean sparkling in the far distance. Its natural setting is spectacular, resting high on a ridge between two deep ravines, and surrounded by forest. Like many sites in Syria, the history of occupation on the site has gone through many phases, reaching back possibly to the Phoenician period (early first millennium BC). Much of what remains visible today dates from the Crusaders, who occupied the site around 1100 AD. They were responsible for constructing the high stone walls and defensive towers, and cutting a deep moat into the rocks. In the middle of the moat rises a thin needle of remaining natural rock, 28 metres high, on which rested a bridge, once the only entry into the Citadel. The Crusader walls were breached by the armies of Salah ed-Din in July 1188, and it is from this victory that the castle takes its present name. Over the next hundred years, the new Muslim rulers built a mosque and a fine palace and baths at the heart of the castle complex. Later, a madrasa was also constructed. It is these Ayyubid and Mamluk sections of the Citadel that AKTC has selected for its conservation efforts over the past two years.

Conservation work began in 1999 with an extensive survey of the site. This was followed in 2000 by the restoration of the mosque and its minaret and the adjacent madrasa. The minaret posed particular problems: an earthquake had broken the top of the minaret apart, causing it to partially collapse, and many loose stones in the top section were in danger of falling. The team painstakingly recorded the position of each stone, and then slowly took the top apart, not an inconsiderable feat given the size and weight of the stones. The top of the minaret was then re-built using the original stones and knitting-in other stones found around the site to form a stable and durable structure. Different problems were tackled in the madrasa and mosque. Both buildings were structurally stable, but successive phases of modern repairs using inappropriate materials had altered and damaged the historic fabric. Where feasible, the modern interventions were carefully removed, and walls, ceilings and roofs were then repaired and finished using materials and techniques identical to those employed by the original mediaeval craftsmen, making the buildings sound without detracting from their historic character. The restoration process was successfully completed in the autumn of 2000.

*The Citadel of Salah ed Din. The Crusader walls are in the foreground, behind is the minaret of the mosque, to its right the entrance portico of the Ayyubid Palace, and at the highest point are the ruins of the Byzantine castle.*

During 2001, the team has been working on the conservation of the remains of the Ayyubid palace and baths. The palace complex was built in at least two phases between 1188 and 1290. The superstructure of the main qa'a, or inner courtyard at the core of the Palace, is almost gone, although the remains of an octagonal fountain can still be clearly seen at its centre. The



qa'a is surrounded on one side by the ruins of a small bath and on the other by a series of more intact private rooms. In both sets of adjoining spaces, archaeologists working with the project have uncovered the remains of a sophisticated piped water system, which probably fed a *salsabil* (a carved stone or ceramic panel set against the wall over which flowed fresh water, cooling the air and the senses) as well as the fountain and the hot and cold water systems in the bath. The entrance to the palace is still largely intact, and consists of another smaller qa'a with two shallow iwans and a skylight made of finely carved stones. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the complex is the entrance portico with its fine *muqarnas*, or stalactite carvings. Over the years, movement in the structure has prised open the joints between the massive stones that make up the portico, but rather than detract from it, the gaps provide a glimpse of the extraordinary skill and geometrical precision of the craftsmen who built it.

*Above:*

*The Crusader castle; The bottom space is a cistern for storing water, an important aspect of defence in the seasonally arid mountains.*

*Above right:*

*The Citadel sits high on a ridge between two deep ravines. The forest that surrounds it gives it an air of grand isolation. Preservation of the natural environment is a key aspect of planning for the future of the site.*

Conservation work in the palace and baths do not attempt to restore or reconstruct earlier hypothetical conditions. Ruins have been carefully stabilised as found, and only rebuilt where required to gain structural stability. The French architect and archaeologist Ecochard carried out extensive restoration of the entrance area in the 1930's, and whilst this work is in spirit very different from the less interventionist approach of today, it has been respected as an integral part of the historic texture of the site. Much of the wall surfaces in the entrance area were weathered and defaced with graffiti and these have been carefully cleaned and re-pointed. Work at the palace was preceded by a detailed archaeological survey of the ruins carried out by a team from the Sorbonne University in Paris. The first findings are encouraging and indicate that it will be possible to gain a better idea of the structure of the entire complex. Important pottery fragments from the twelfth century were found and will be exhibited on site.



The Citadel of Salah ed-Din is already an important destination for tourism in Syria; during last year, over 50,000 people visited the site. The project at Salah ed Din will also include the provision of a new visitors' centre and exhibition space in the restored mosque and madrasa buildings, and AKTC will invest in other aspects of tourism infrastructure at the site such as toilet facilities, signage and pathways for visitors.

Particular attention is now being given to one of the major attractions of the site, the untouched surroundings of the Citadel which need to be preserved. Master planning for the Citadel as a whole and for the pristine landscape surrounding the Citadel (to be protected as a nature preserve) have been initiated and will continue in the following years. Plans for new roads, hotels on critical view points and more visitors' facilities will have to be carefully scrutinised and controlled, in order to maintain the wilderness in which the Citadel has been historically set.

*Above left:*  
The minaret stands in front of the mosque and madrasa. To their right is the entrance portico of the Ayyubid palace behind which are a series of rooms and open spaces. Conservation efforts sponsored by HCSP have been focused on these Ayyubid and Mamluk sections of the Citadel.

*Above top:*  
Detail of the entrance portico of the

*Ayyubid palace with its fine 'muquarnas' or stalactite carvings.*

*Above middle:*  
One of the massive Crusader donjons on the outer wall of the Citadel.

*Above bottom:*  
The fosse, or defensive ditch, carved out of bedrock, 28 metres deep. In the centre is a thin needle of natural rock upon which rested the bridge access to

*the Citadel. When under attack, the flimsy stone support for the bridge atop the needle would be pushed away leaving the main entrance unreachable.*

***"It was I think the most sensational thing in castle building I have seen: the hugely solid keep upstanding on the edge of the gigantic fosse."***

T. E. Lawrence



*The minaret: An earthquake had broken the top of the minaret apart. To ensure structural stability, the top*



*section was carefully taken apart and largely rebuilt, using new stones where the original were beyond repair.*



*The size and weight of the stones needed to rebuild made the conservation process particularly difficult.*



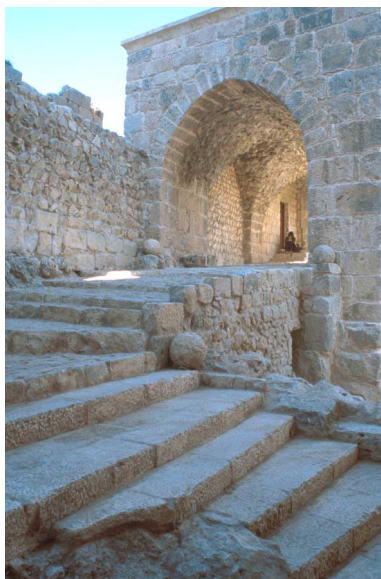
*The madrasa: This part is more recent than the mosque or minaret. The space was formed by filling-in between*



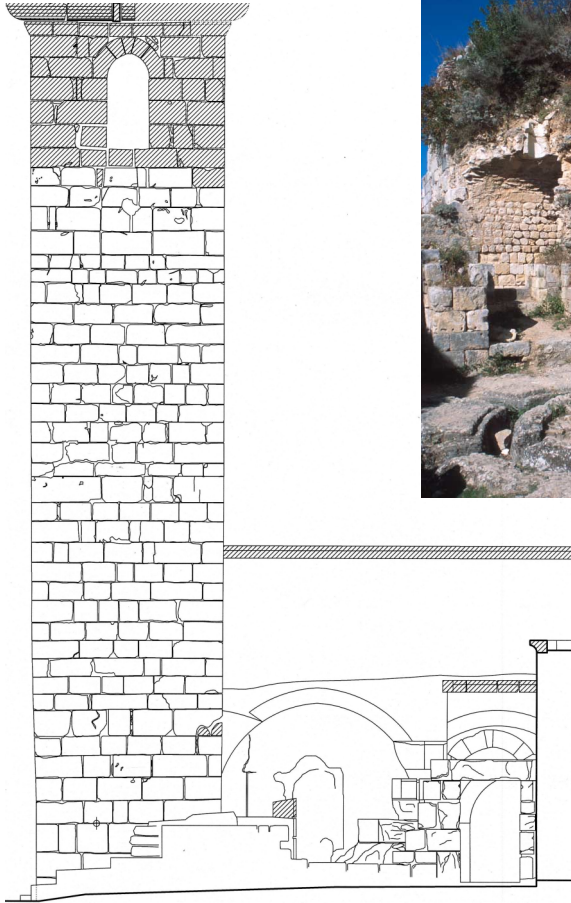
*several vaults of the former palace. All the plasterwork inside the madrasa was badly damaged and had to be*



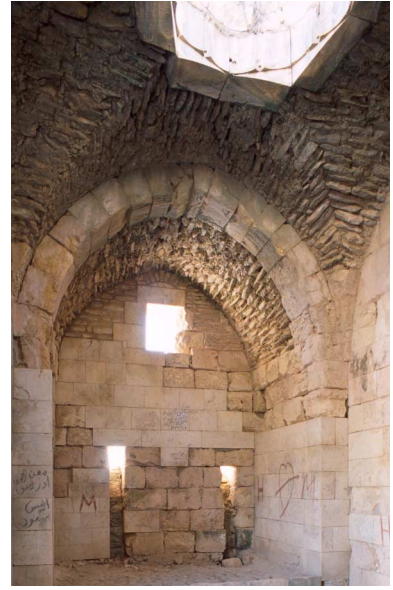
*replaced using materials and techniques similar to those employed by the mediaeval craftsmen.*



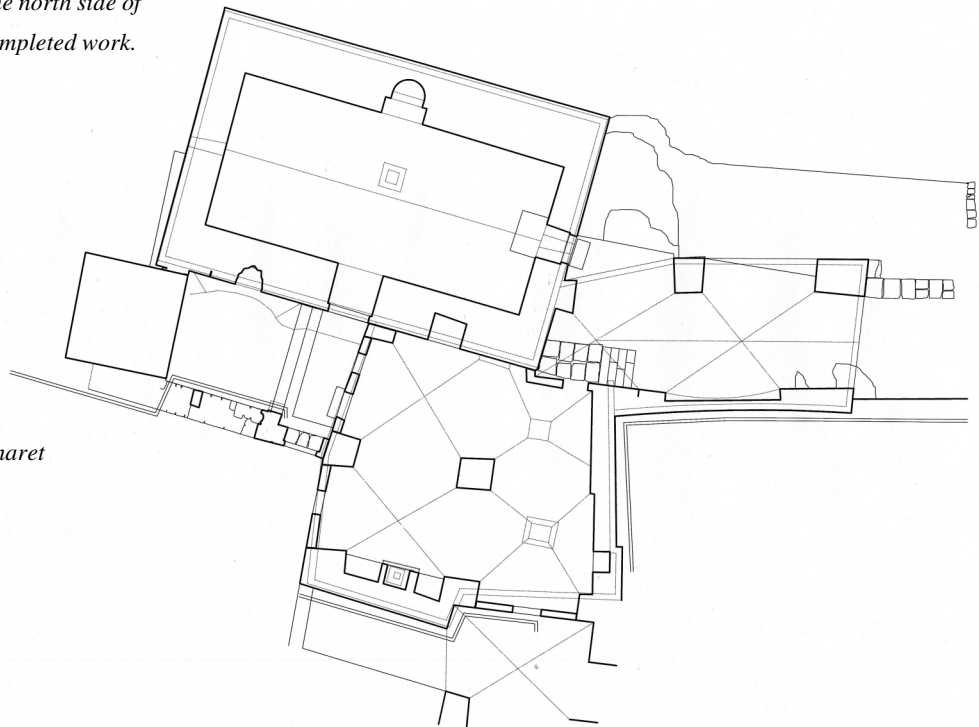
*The entrance to the mosque and madrasa: Great effort was put into preserving the historic character of the site. The mosque and madrasa will be reused for a small exhibition telling the history of the castle and its famous namesake, Salah ed-Din (Saladin).*



*Elevation drawing of the north side of the minaret showing completed work.*



*During 2001, conservation efforts have focused on the Ayyubid palace. The superstructure of the main qa'a, or inner courtyard, has largely disappeared (above left), although the remains of an octagonal pool can be seen at its centre. The entrance to the palace is largely intact, and consists of a portico (previous page) and a smaller interior qa'a (above right) with a skylight of carved stones.*



*Plan of the mosque, minaret and madrasa*