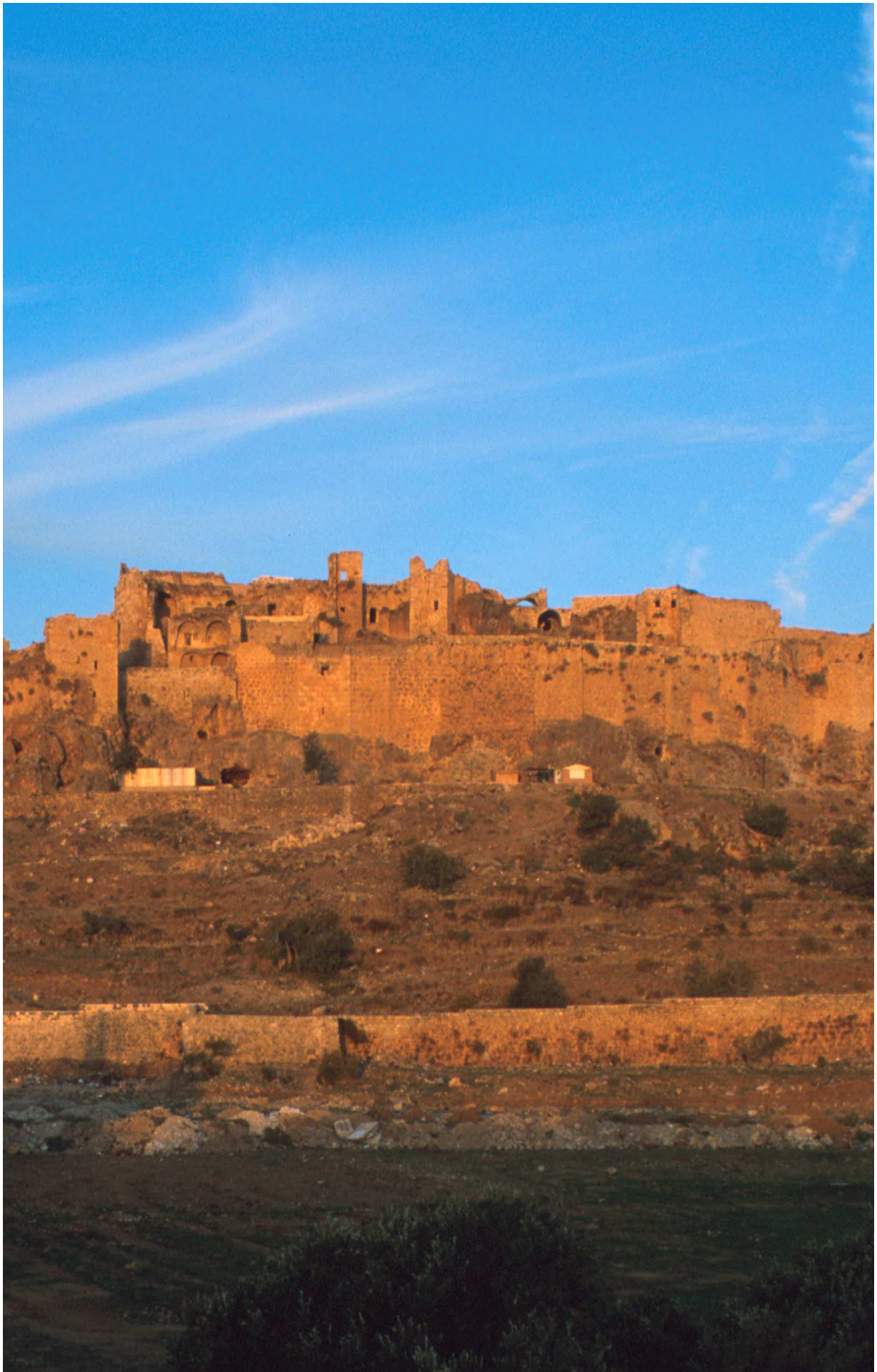# The Citadel of Masyaf

The Citadel of Masyaf

The Citadel of Masyaf is the smallest and least well-known of the three sites. It lies on the edge of the old town of Masyaf, which has grown considerably over the past thirty years, in a dramatic natural setting at the foot of the coastal mountains. Like the other sites, the history of occupation at Masyaf stretches back through many phases, but it is chiefly known as the stronghold of the Ismailis under the leadership of their ruler Sinan, in the twelfth century. Much of what remains today dates from this period of occupation.

The castle's superstructure is largely intact although now crumbling, damaged by armed assault and earthquakes, and within living memory, several generations of townspeople who used it as their home and a place to tether goats. From time to time, old men wander up to reminisce about a childhood spent amongst the battlements. In places, the original plaster still clings to the walls, bearing inscriptions or rough decorative patterns, and massive basalt lintels support door openings. Like many structures in Syria, building materials from earlier phases of construction have been recycled, sometimes with surprising results: a beautifully carved Corinthian capital, almost certainly dating from the Byzantine period props up one wall in the entrance-way. The castle is not as elegant or refined as Aleppo, but matches the mountains around in its rugged beauty.

The first builders on the site took advantage of a natural limestone hill rising above the surrounding plain and village. Successive occupants added layers to the structure, and exploited the natural crevices and hollows in the limestone bedrock to create a series of subterranean passages and chambers. Water management was a crucial aspect of defence in the seasonally arid mountains and three enormous cisterns were hewn out of the rock and connected to the surface by an intricate system of ceramic water pipes. At the centre of the castle, on the highest level, is Sinan's Throne Room, from where, according to local legend, the Old Man of the Mountain ruled. Whether or not this legend has any basis in fact is disputed, but the room is certainly an eyrie, perched above the town and the plane beyond.

Conservation work at the Citadel began in 2000 on a section of the outer wall, which had partially collapsed. Part of the wall had to be rebuilt to make it structurally sound, using stones identical to the original taken from a quarry nearby. Despite considerable technical problems, this restoration work was completed in the autumn of 2000. A more comprehensive consolidation and restoration programme for the entire structure, developed in close consultation with the Directorate of Antiquities, commenced in early 2001. The objective of this programme is to maintain the basic integrity

The Citadel of Masyaf, viewed from the east. The Citadel was built upon a natural limestone hill, rising above the town and surrounding plane.

of the site as a ruin whilst assisting visitors to gain as much from a visit as possible. In physical terms, the intervention will be limited to strict conservation, i.e., consolidating ruins to arrest the process of deterioration, and where necessary, minor reconstruction to avert the threat of collapse. Visitors will be provided with a minimum infrastructure to guide them around the site, including signage, information panels, lighting and improved access. A new guidebook on the history of Masyaf is also being prepared. It is hoped that the project will be completed over the next two to three years.

In addition to conservation of the castle, the project envisages an improvement of its urban context, with a view to conserving and enhancing the historic remains of the adjacent old city of Masyaf, upgrading the markets and pedestrian areas in the old city centre, and creating more attractive facilities for visitors. Support is also provided to the municipality offices, in terms of improving current building regulations. This effort is underpinned by granting free design assistance to land owners and house owners who

The builders of the Citadel took advantage of the natural crevices in the rock to create subterranean passages. The photograph top right shows the curtain wall on the east side before conservation work began (note area of collapse in the centre). Opposite page, top left, is a close up of same section of wall after repairs were completed.

Rebuilding of the eastern wall.

intend to build in the central area. A number of pilot rehabilitation projects for sensitive buildings have been prepared and should hopefully succeed in promoting a new, adapted design vocabulary in the inner city. Public awareness about urban design issues, as well as greater community involvement, has been fostered by a series of public meetings and the formation of civic interest groups.

In addition, a strategic urban-planning concept has been developed in order to resolve anticipated land-use conflicts around the Citadel and to preserve the Citadel's visual dominance, a major asset for the economic future of the city. Ongoing detail studies imply: i) a revision of the current master plan, to retain a sufficient zone non aedificandi on the valley side of the fort (and thus preserve its visual impact), ii) detailed urban design and building regulations for the former walled city abutting the fort, and iii) a number of upgrading and improvement projects to enhance the urban surroundings of the fort, and make them more attractive to visitors and tourists.

Apart from urgent conservation works, AKTC will fund basic visitors facilities, including improved access through the site (paths, stairs, etc.), lighting, signage and a small exhibition describing its history.

Of many historic buildings only the ground floors with the shop arcades have survived. Urban design concepts are being developed to help land owners implement appropriate restoration and infill projects, instead of proceeding with demolition and replacement. In cooperation with the local shopkeepers, a renewal project for the central suq has been worked out, to be implemented on a participatory basis.
(Perspective top right)