Crac des Chevaliers Stands the Test of Time

Sitting in the shadow of the battlements of the Crac des Chevaliers, one cannot help but feel a mixture of awe and dread. Awe, because the fortress stands atop its hill as a perfect storybook castle that seems to have materialized from some deeper myth; and irrational unease because one imagines that such places must be inhabited if not by fire-spewing dragons then by wraiths of warrior armies. As a breeze works its way into the archers' loopholes of the outer wall, one hears a muffled, wind-induced siren as of a distant trumpet call from across time or of bloodcurdling death-cries from a long-forgotten war.

I stood before the castle gates conscious that the great 12th century general Salah-ed-Din, or Saladin, had once stood on the same spot, casting a calculating eye on the fortifications. The Crac des Chevaliers, only a stone's throw from Lebanon's northern border with Syria, was owned and manned by knights of the military-monastic Order of Hospitallers. It dominated a strategic pass between the Mediterranean and the inland cities of Homs and Hama, on the Orontes River, thus securing the flow of traffic and trade between Asia Minor and the Holy Land. Called Hisn al-Akrad, or Fortress of the Kurds in Arabic, it was built on the foundations of an earlier Muslim castle on a southern spur of the Jebel Alawi that drops away abruptly on three sides.

Standing before the impregnable wall, Saladin must have inspected the triangular outer bulwarks, its outer ditch and the stone wall. Inside the wall, he knew, was a deep, water-filled moat. Beyond it he could see the mighty sloping talus of carefully fitted stones 25 meters thick at the base. Lastly, he contemplated the castle's massive rounded keep, which towered over the entire mass and was linked to two equally impressive towers. Then, deciding that a general could find a better use for his army than committing it to a siege of indeterminate length and uncertain outcome, Saladin withdrew.

That was then, in an epoch when veteran knights armed with crossbows and broadswords stood warily on the parapets, ready to repel any attack. But now, 700 years after the last ship of retreating Crusaders set sail for Europe, the Crac stands guard forlornly, its gates open to all and sundry.

In the cool dimness of the vaulted entry, Lebanese tourists as well as Syrian and European visitors were gathered at the booth to buy their entrance tickets to a shared history. Taking two sharp turns up the inclined, cobbled passage, I stepped through a second gate, into the heart of the castle, and emerged into a sunny courtyard. A group of local boys grinned and strutted around like warriors. The still-modest stream of visitors drawn to the Crac from abroad has not discouraged casual visits from the villagers whose houses cling to the steep slope below its eastern walls - and it was clear from the wooden sabers at their belts that the fortress, with its very real battlements and barbican, provided the children with a perfect setting for their games.

As I climbed higher in the castle, I found quiet nooks and private vistas in plenty. From the top of the keep the views to the four points of the compass are breathtaking. Eastward, the low green hills stretch like moorlands toward the distant desert's edge.

South, beyond the castle moat and outer wall, a few new houses of concrete block have crept close to the edge of the castle's outer ditch and an ancient graveyard. Thin cypress trees in their yards grow bent by the constant wind and, beyond them, one discerns the distant peaks of Lebanon.

To the west, the hills roll toward the Mediterranean, clumps of oaks nestled in their folds, gray-green olive groves in terraced rows on their slopes. Dwarfed by distance, villages are scattered in the valleys and up the hillsides like a snapshot of scurrying ants. North, across the deep break of a stream-cut valley, the mountain range continues.

T.E. Lawrence described the Crusader fortress as "the best preserved and most wholly admirable castle in the world," and it is from this vantage that one can truly marvel at the ingenuity of the builders. Although the Crusader castles were originally conceived and built to serve as defensive retreats, as time passed, modifications in their design allowed the knights within to use them as bases for offensive sorties.

The Crusaders held the castle for a century and a half, withstanding enemy sieges on no less than 12 occasions. But while in its heyday the Crac maintained a garrison of 2,000, by the latter half of the 13th century it could muster only 200 knights. In 1271, the Mamluk sultan Baybars laid the last and final siege. After nearly a month of attacks, the Crac's fourth inner line of defense was still holding. The stones still did their job, making up for the lack of defenders inside.

Then a letter arrived from the Crusader commander in Tripoli advising that there was no hope of raising reinforcements; the knights, he wrote, should negotiate a surrender. Defeated by their meager numbers, they did so, abandoning the castle under an offer of safe conduct to the coast. Only after the knights had reached Tripoli did they discover that the letter was a forgery. The castle remained intact as trickery had breached the walls where force had failed.

At the Crac, the stones still fit together with the fineness and strength of a broadsword. The religious wars of the Middle Ages have given way to a battle of the elements - the seasonal shift between sun-scorched and wind-swept. The bravest of the stones stand as stalwart defenders to the weeds and rains. Where stones have fallen, wild thistles grow, their flowers as victorious standards fluttering in the wind. Among the ancient stones the air whispers of ingenuity, determination and, above all, honor. The breezes speak of the warriors who fought both behind these mighty walls and before them: on both sides, noble spirits from a buried age.

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A Modern City of the Past

Legend has it that as Abraham journeyed southward to the land of Canaan, he paused in Aleppo. He milked his cow on the citadel hill, spawning the city's Arabic name, Halab, derived from the word for milk, *halib*.

Cradled in a bowl of dry hills in northern Syria, the city of Aleppo presents an austere facade to those entering its ancient gates.

Halfway between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean coast, Aleppo's location made it a natural commercial depot and a busy center of traffic.

Pilgrims and traders from the north also passed through the city, tracing the edge of the mountains rather than the coast, through Damascus to Mecca.

Today, Aleppo is a distribution point for goods from neighboring countries as well as a market for produce from the hinterland: cotton, grain, pistachios, olives, and sheep. A local proverb conveys the city's legendary mercantile bent: "an Aleppine can sell even a dried donkey skin."

Though eclipsed by the political and economic hegemony of modern Damascus, Aleppo more purely preserves the essence of a traditional Arab city.

Aleppo's character, from its foundations to its minarets, is formed of sturdy stone. Limestone was chiseled into ribbon patterns for Byzantine churches, and into Koranic verses for mosques.

Scrape away the city's accretion of modern suburbs, tune out the blare of traffic, and Aleppo turns back into the city of the past: the souks, the spacious courtyard khans, the great bulk of the citadel. The city's traditional urban fabric is remarkably coherent, less scarred by recent development than Damascus or Beirut, and much of its past, particularly since the Muslim conquest in 636AD, is inscribed in its architecture.

For a city that suffered countless invasions and often found itself on the frayed edge of empires, many monuments remain.

Traces of the wall embracing the old city, built on Hellenistic foundations, sketch a rudimentary square with the citadel at its approximate center. The western gate, Bab Antakya, still holds ancient pride of place as the gateway to the bazaar. Nearby Bab al-Qinnisrine still looks much as it did when it was the departure point of the old route to Damascus and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

But the symbol of Aleppo is the formidable citadel that crowns a precipitous hill in the heart of the old city. The hill itself is partly artificial - a prehistoric tell built up of ruins from many cultures each layered atop the last. Al-Malik al-Zahir Ghazi, the son of Salah ed-Din (Saladin) constructed the citadel in 1209, complete with entrance bridge, gates, and moat, and paved its glacis with slippery stone slabs.

As the Mamluk era progressed, Aleppo prospered as a strategic frontier city, and was enriched with a number of notable buildings, such as the awe inspiring and remarkably intact Mamluk hospital near the souk.

By 1516 and the beginning of the Ottoman era, Aleppo had become the third city of a far-flung empire, exceeded in population only by Istanbul and Cairo. Approaching travelers

repeatedly remarked upon the grandeur of Aleppo's skyline - flat roofs and domes starkly punctuated with minarets and dark , straight cypresses.

In early Ottoman years, a new Christian suburb called Jdeideh flourished north of the old city wall. Today it is one of the liveliest and most intact of the old neighborhoods.

Stone walls channel the flow of traffic like dikes to canals, concealing the quiet charm of the homes behind them. Heavy, half-open doors reveal elegant courtyards and fountains, the most splendid ones in the mansions of the rich, who built their prestigious residences near the churches.

The limestone houses, generally of one or two floors, nestle back-to-back to minimize the expanse of wall exposed to sun.

Privacy is paramount, hence many entrance passageways twist to block courtyards from direct public view. Inside, patios are paved with contrasting flagstones, while citrus trees, jasmine, and roses grow in basins near fountains or pools.

Massive gates open off the streets into the khans. More than any other monument, the khan embodies a city's mercantile essence and prosperity.

Aleppo's great Mamluk and Ottoman khans were built on a model used throughout the Islamic world. Merchandise, and sometimes animals, were housed in ground-floor rooms around a courtyard, while merchants lodged in cells above. The khans' great doors were locked at night to safeguard goods and owners.

Among Aleppo's most beautiful khans is Khan al-Wazir, (the Minister's Khan), built between 1678-1682. Khan Alabiya, with its ornate Venetian balustrade, still bears a trace of its former use as an Italian consulate. The Great Khan, built in 1574, once housed French, Dutch and English trading firms.

Aleppo's covered souk - sometimes called the most beautiful in the entire Middle East - was expanded during the prosperous Ottoman years. The slow pad and clatter of camels over the cobblestones have been replaced by whining Suzuki mini-vans and trikes, the only vehicles small enough to negotiate the alleys - but the ageless din of braying donkeys, bargaining women and shouting boys is straight out of the Middle Ages.

Labyrinthine passages still twist beneath arched stone vaults, their subterranean gloom regularly punctured by shafts of sun from skylights. Overhead, sheep graze on the roofs turned grassy with weeds and where guard dogs once roamed at night to foil inventive thieves.

People and animals still stream down the many miles of bazaar streets.

Donkeys squeeze past, laden with wood, vegetables, or burlap bags full of cotton and wool. Textile businessmen in Western suits brush past bedouins in their flowing robes, their heads swathed in checkered keffiyas.

The khans, souks, and houses fit into the city's tightly-knit urban texture, one that evolved organically over many centuries in response to climate and society. The narrow, meandering streets keep out the hot sun and dust, and jealously guard over 3,000 years of history.

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