

BATHING IN THE MEDIEVAL LATIN EAST A Recently Discovered 13th Century Bathhouse in al-Marqab Citadel (Syria)

BALÁZS MAJOR¹

While bathing culture had suffered a serious setback in Europe with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, Europeans settling in the 12th and 13th century crusader states of the Near East became much more versed in it, although very few material remains of the accompanying infrastructure have survived. The unearthing of a huge medieval bathhouse in the central courtyard of al-Marqab (Latin: Margat) Citadel is a rare example of European bath construction, which is of even greater importance for having been constructed by a military order with a very puritan lifestyle. As the five years of fieldwork by the Syro-Hungarian Archaeological Mission at the al-Marqab Citadel has shown, this was not the only bathing structure constructed in the Hospitaller period of the castle.²

BATHS IN THE LATIN LEVANT

Early Medieval Europe witnessed a decline in the sophistication of several areas of everyday life after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, including bathing culture. Europeans settling in the Near East as a result of the Crusades seem to have quickly adopted the superior bathing culture there that preserved a greater deal of the highly developed Antique traditions. This is clearly reflected in the letters of Jacques de Vitry, the Latin bishop of Acre, who when he came from Europe saw the local Latin settlers as “*more used to baths than battles*”.³ The importance attached to bathing in the Latin Orient is further underlined by the fact that even the military orders felt it was necessary to deal with it in their statutes, which make more than one reference to bathing.⁴ Although at first glance these rules seem to be rather restrictive, which would be normal in the case of a strict monastic organization, it is very likely that they were generally referring to public baths. The knights and other armed soldiers of the orders, who were regularly sent on patrols and military missions, must have had an extra need for hygiene. This necessitated the construction of their own baths, such as at the Templar headquarters in Jerusalem, which “*contained a wonderful number of baths*” below the Temple esplanade, as mentioned by the pilgrim Theoderich.⁵ In spite of the apparent popularity of the baths, very few are known from the Crusader period⁶ and even fewer survived in the context of the sites of the military orders. The discovery, through the excavations of the Syro-Hungarian Archaeological Mission (SHAM), of a hitherto unknown medieval bathhouse that can be clearly dated to the Hospitaller period of the castle can therefore be regarded as a significant contribution to the better understanding of these structures.

¹ Department of Archaeology, Pázmány Péter Catholic University

² The Syro-Hungarian Archaeological Mission is a joint research project of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Pázmány Péter Catholic University of Hungary, with other institutions also contributing with researchers, students and equipment. The Mission is directed by Edmond el-Ajji (DGAM), Marwān Hasan (DGAM-Tartous) on the Syrian side and Balázs Major PhD (Pázmány Péter Catholic University) on the Hungarian side. We would like to thank the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums of the Syrian Arab Republic for the permits and the assistance we received through the years and would like to express special gratitude to the kind and hospitable locals of Syria. The main supporter of the work is MOL – the Hungarian Oil Company – and the research was also supported by the Hungarian Scholarship Fund OTKA PD 77885.

³ Vitry, Jacques de: Letters. Transl.: A. Stewart. In: *Palestine Pilgrims Text Society*, vol. 11 (London, 1896), 64.

⁴ Boas, Adrian: *Archaeology of the Military Orders* (London, 2006), 202–203.

⁵ Theoderich: *Guide to the Holy Land*. Transl.: Aubrey Stewart (New York, 1986).

⁶ Pringle, Denys: *Secular Buildings in the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. An Archaeological Gazetteer* (Cambridge, 1997), 13.

DATING THE BATH

The fortified site of al-Marqab is mentioned in the written sources as having been established in 1062 by local Muslim tribes. It changed owners more than once in the 12th century and was purchased by the Order of St. John in February of 1187.⁷ A decision seems to have been made from the very beginning that the newly acquired site was to be developed into one of the main Hospitaller headquarters, from which they could effectively govern and protect their huge northern Syrian estates. The remodelling of the castle started with the almost complete demolition of the former fortifications and the erection of a new fortified complex with a completely different design, made to serve the needs of the great number of staff in this new governmental and defensive centre. The multi-storey buildings of the inner castle of the order were arranged around a central courtyard in an irregular rhomboid shape, with the chapel in the south, the chapter house in the west, two vaulted arcades framing the courtyard on the east (labelled S and Q on *Fig. 1*) and one vaulted structure on the north (labelled O on *Fig. 1*). Excavations of the SHAM revealed that S was a dormitory and Q was a bakery area with two huge central ovens. Periodization studies combined with research into the earthquake effects indicate that these structures must have been completed by the time of the great earthquake of 1202.⁸ Not long afterwards another vaulted structure (labelled I on *Fig. 1*) was inserted into the courtyard parallel to the dormitory (S). The bathhouse discovered in the summer of 2010 was constructed in the trapezoidal shaped area surrounded on three sides by the vaulted areas I, Q and O.

The bath building underwent several expansions, and might have been destroyed at the time of the Mamluk occupation in 1285. At this time over its paved floor a thick, burnt destruction layer came into existence that contained a silver *gros* from Tours dating from the second half of the 13th century, which provides additional archaeological support for its dating. According to the preliminary study of the objects found, the bathhouse did not seem to have been used in the post-crusader period and most of its walls might have been systematically demolished at a rather early date.

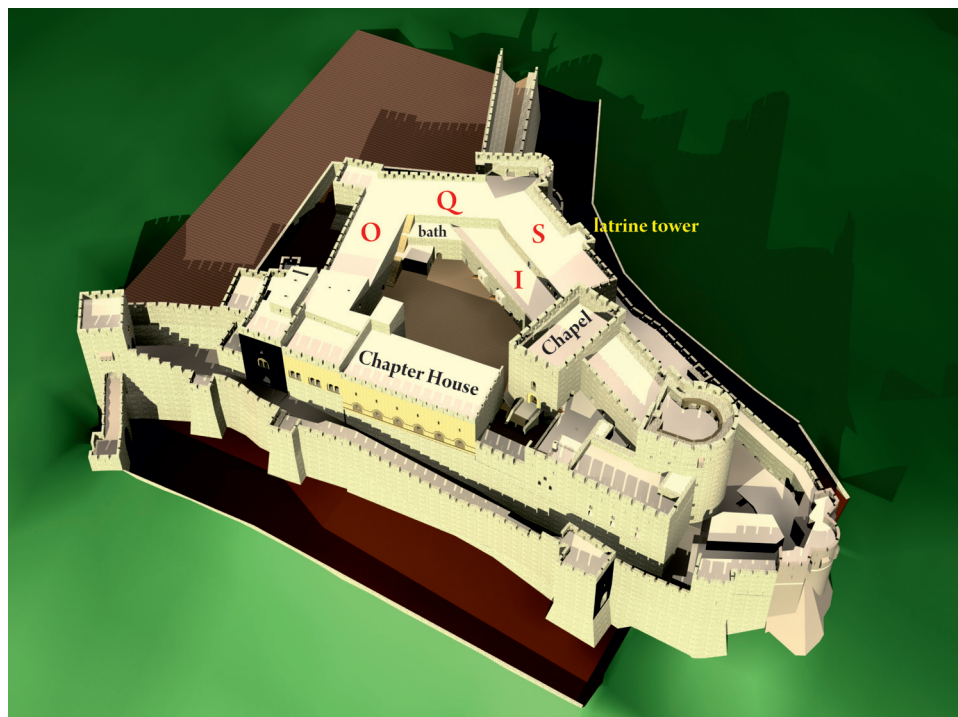


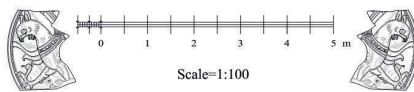
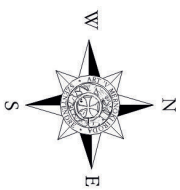
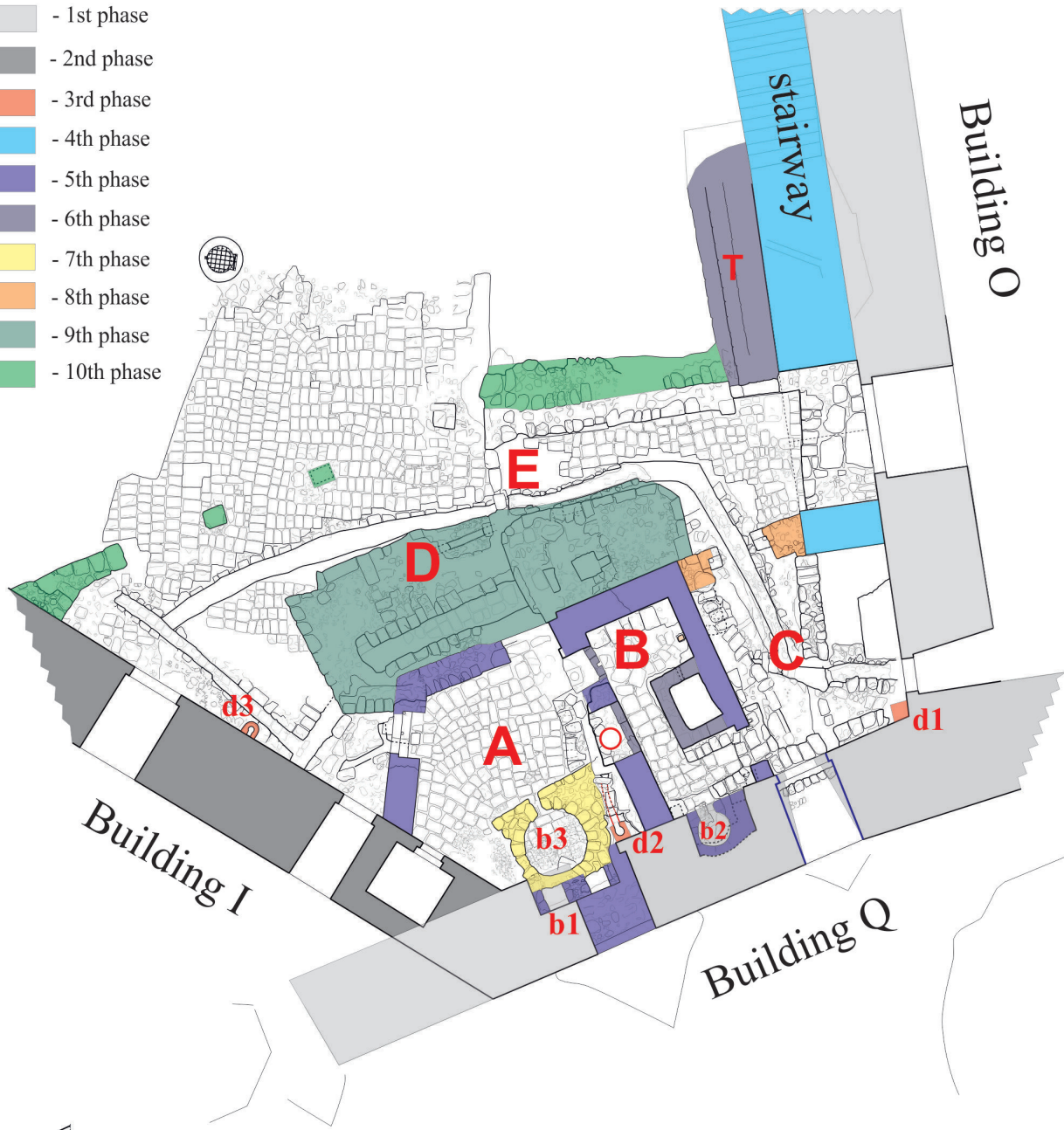
Fig. 1: Reconstructed view of al-Marqab in the 13th century with the labels for the buildings mentioned in the text (illustration by Gergely Buzás)

⁷ For a brief summary on the history of al-Marqab see: Major, Balázs: The Master Plan of al-Marqab Citadel. Historical Background. In: *Project Defence System on the Mediterranean Coast. Euromed Heritage II. Project* (Spain, 2008), 162–174.

⁸ Kázmér, Miklós – Major, Balázs: Distinguishing Damages from Two Earthquakes – Archaeoseismology of a Crusader Castle (al-Marqab Citadel, Syria). *The Geological Society of America. Special Paper 471* (2010), 185–198.

Preliminary Periodized Plan of the Medieval Bathhouse in the Main Courtyard of al-Marqab Citadel

- 1st phase
- 2nd phase
- 3rd phase
- 4th phase
- 5th phase
- 6th phase
- 7th phase
- 8th phase
- 9th phase
- 10th phase



SYRO - HUNGARIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION (SHAM)
Hungarian Director: Balázs Major PhD balazs.major.hu@gmail.com

I M S ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAMMETRY
Ilona Györfy - József Vajda fotogrammeter@gmail.com

Drawn by: Balázs Major

Fig. 2



Fig. 3: General distribution of the drainage system of the bathhouse (by Balázs Major)

THE BATH STRUCTURE

The constant use of the main courtyard of al-Marqab in the past centuries has done much to erase the remains of any medieval structures, so the remains of walls from the bath buildings hardly exceeded 1 m in height at any point, however most of what stood below this level was preserved by the debris.

The preliminary periodization study of the building remains indicates that the bathhouse and adjacent buildings were built in at least ten building phases, although some are suspected to have belonged to the same construction program (Fig. 2). It is clear that the bath was built well after the construction of the huge vaulted areas labelled Q, O and I, the latter one itself also later than the former two. A carefully designed catchwater drain system in the area preceded the construction of the bath itself, and some or maybe all of the three main drains (d 1 – 3 on Fig. 2) collecting the rainwater from the roofs of the structures Q, O and I might have been constructed before the planning of the bath. Drain 1 was possibly a masonry construction, but drains 2 and 3 definitely used huge vertical earthenware drain-pipes attached to the wall surfaces by iron clips. The grooves for affixing the pipes are still discernible in the basalt ashlar of the wall. Drain 2 delivered its water into a rock-carved cistern right beneath the bathhouse.

Construction of the bath itself commenced with the building of two rooms (A and B on Fig. 2), and each had a fireplace (b1 and b2 on Fig. 2), inserted into a former doorway and the wall of building Q respectively. The better preserved structure of b2 (Fig. 4) shows that it held a metal (possibly copper) cauldron above the fireplace. It is also very likely that the central tank in room B and the light dividing walls between rooms A and B were constructed at the same time, but using different methods (Fig. 4), as was the large masonry tank (T on Fig. 2) to the west of the bathhouse. Room A had two doorways and room B had one opening to the outside. The entire surface of the bathhouse area and the adjacent courtyard was paved with basalt



Fig. 4: Detail of room B with the square masonry tank in the foreground and the boiler niche (b2) in the back (photo by Balázs Major)



Fig. 5: Reconstructed view of the central courtyard looking toward the bathhouse (illustration by Gergely Buzás and Zsolt Vasáros)

flagstones and waste water was drained away of with the help of sloping floors and masonry channels. Clean water inside the bathhouse was circulated through lead pipes (p 1-3 on *Fig. 3*) and some raised tanks like the one to the west of the bathhouse (T on *Fig. 2*) were used to provide pressure for delivering the water into the pool of room B and into a portable basin whose hollowed out base is still in a little niche of room A. This first bathhouse covered an area of 77.4 m².

An evidently later improvement was the construction of a new boiler (b3 on *Fig. 2*) in room A, which took over the duty of b1. This might have been connected to the expansion of the bathhouse, one of the first steps of which saw the closing of the formerly open corner of the courtyard (C on *Fig. 2*) between the bathhouse and arcade O with a wall and a doorway. This newly created area was covered with a flat roof and added on to the bathhouse. In a later phase the western side of the bathhouse received a new building (D on *Fig. 2*) that – judging from its very wide drain and its masonry technique – was in all probability a latrine area. The insertion of the new building resulted in a serious remodelling of the former drain system, establishing a complex network of drains inside and outside the bathhouse area. Up to this point excavations in the bathhouse area have revealed three freshwater drains, five sewage water conduits and three lines of lead pipes that delivered clean water to the water tanks. The water conduits transporting clean water in al-Marqab were usually made of earthenware pipes neatly set in liquid mortar in a rectangular stone lined channel. The waste water conduits were always stone lined channels with a rectangular cross-section that drained the waste water towards the main latrine tower attached to the dormitory (S in *Fig. 1*) in the east to be flushed away. Lead pipes laid in a sand bed were only found in al-Marqab in the environs of the bathhouse (lp 1-3 on *Fig. 3*).

It cannot be ruled out that the construction of the latrines necessitated the erection of the huge wall with a series of arches resting on square masonry pillars, of which only the bases or imprints have survived. This new façade closed off the bathhouse area from the rest of the courtyard and increased the final area of the bathhouse to 185 m².

The bathhouse was covered by a roof resting on a timber frame, the wall plate holes for which are clearly seen in the walls of the adjacent vault. However, as there are no remains of an internal staircase, the area above did not necessarily have a function directly connected to bathing. If there was no internal access made of easily perishable wood, this upper floor was most likely accessed from the main stone staircase outside, which ran parallel to arcade O. As finds that can be connected to the active period of the bathhouse are rather simple and few in number, one must describe the bathhouse as having a very utilitarian character without the hints of luxury or decoration that can be seen at some bathhouses that are suspected to have been operated by lay persons.⁹ The building also lacked a hypocaust system and it seems that the only source of heat was the fireplace under the cauldrons set in the recesses of the eastern wall. Given its position in the central courtyard, and having been in close proximity to the largest dormitory area of the castle, this relatively large but simple bathhouse must have been the central bathhouse serving the military personnel.

Providing interesting testimony on the devotion of the Hospitallers to hygiene, the excavations of the SHAM have detected another five separate areas inside the inner castle that were used for bathing and can be dated to the crusader period.¹⁰ While two of them were relatively small areas with sloping stone-paved floors and possibly operating with wooden bath tubs or buckets, two had bathtubs constructed of masonry with hydraulic mortar. The fifth one, which was attached to the very elegant residential area over the inner gate tower of the castle, seems to have been a private bath due to its small size and its hypocaust heating system. The apparent luxury of this bath and the adjacent area makes it clear that it belonged to a highly esteemed person. It would be tempting to see this as the residential zone used by the bishops of Valenia, especially after the Order of St John obtained a huge influence over their appointment.¹¹ The bishop of the nearby town of Valenia moved to the castle at the time of the northern campaign of Salah al-Din, and as their town was destroyed by the invasion, the successive bishops seem to have stayed in al-Marqab until its fall in 1285.¹² After resolving the initial problems in their relationship by the end of the 12th century,¹³ the diocese and the Military Order seem to have had a peaceful relationship and the order might have felt the proper accommodation of their “own” bishop was a priority for their image.

As the wide variety of bath-related infrastructure identified in al-Marqab shows, the Hospitaller Order did pay a considerable amount of attention to the hygiene of its members. Although it is very dangerous to derive far reaching conclusions before archaeological excavations reveal more examples, this special concern of the Hospitallers might be connected to their original duty of caring for the sick and operating hospitals, a function they faithfully maintained even after the takeover of the military wing. The medical duty combined with the harsh climatic and bacteriological conditions of the Near Eastern environment might have been an extra motivating factor in the construction of these highly developed bathing installations, unparalleled in any other crusader castle of the period yet known.

⁹ Smithline, Howard – Stern, Edna – Stern, Eliezer: A Crusader-Period Bathhouse in ‘Akko (Acre). *‘Atiqot* 73 (2013), 71–108.

¹⁰ Major, Balázs – Buzás, Gergely: Crusader and Mamlūk Hammāms in al-Marqab. In: *Acts of the International Balnéorient Symposium*, ed. Fournet, Thibaud. 2–6 November 2009 (Damascus: IFPO-IFAO, 2014)

¹¹ Major, Balázs – Galambos, Éva: Archaeological and Fresco Research in the Castle Chapel at al-Marqab: A Preliminary Report on the Results of the First Seasons. In: *The Military Orders. V. Politics and Power*, eds Edbury, Peter – Nicholson, Helen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), 23–47.

¹² Rey, Emmanuel Guillaume: *Les colonies franques de Syrie aux XII^{me} et XIII^{me} siècles* (Paris: A. Picard, 1883), 335.

¹³ Burgtorf, Jochen: The Hospitaller Lordship of Margat. *East and West in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean II. Antioch from the Byzantine Reconquest until the End of the Crusader Principality*, eds Ciggaar, Krijnie – Van Aalst, V. (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 11–50.

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