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مقرر مورد ثقافي- سياحي 2

السنة الثالثة

Cultural and Tourism Resources

Third year

الدكتور

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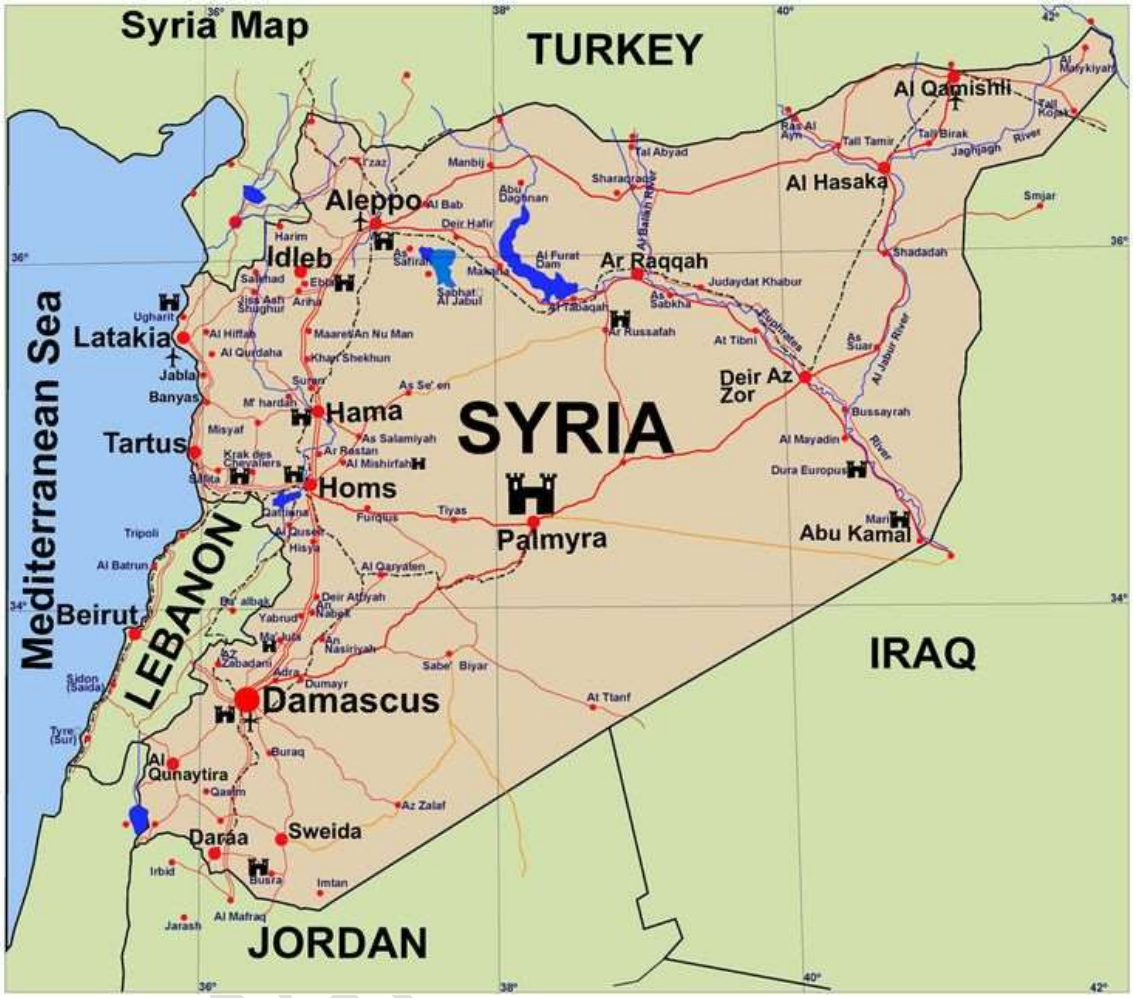
Cultural and Tourism Resources in Homs



Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque

The Ottoman-era Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque is perhaps the most famous monument in the city of Homs. It houses the tomb of Khalid Ibn al-Walid, one of the companions of Mohammed and one of the most important commanders of early

Muslim armies. Khalid Ibn al-Walid was born in Mecca (modern Saudi Arabia) in 592 and died in Homs in 642. He was responsible for conquering much of modern-day Syria for Muslim forces, as well as winning substantial military victories in Arabia and along the Euphrates River in modern Iraq. These victories were widely attributed to the military tactics and strategies developed by him.

The site of Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque was originally a cemetery, with a small mosque constructed next to the tomb in the late 7th century. In 1265, during the Mamluk period, a larger mosque was constructed at the site. That mosque remained standing until the Ottoman governor Nazim Hussein Pasha ordered its demolition to begin construction of the present-day mosque, which itself is fairly modern. While the mosque was built between 1908 and 1913, the interior tomb dates back to the 11th century. The much older sarcophagus that contained the body of Khalid Ibn al-Walid was moved to the National Museum in Damascus.

Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque follows the typical Ottoman plan with a large courtyard and fountain to the north of the prayer hall. There are two thin octagonal minarets on the northwest and northeast corners of the mosque built with white limestone.

The facade of the entrance features alternating horizontal bands of white limestone and black basaltic stone, while the remaining exterior walls are mostly black basalt. The prayer hall is covered by a large central dome supported by four massive columns, and there are eight smaller domes surrounding it. The tomb is in the northwest corner of the prayer hall. The mosque is generally open at all times throughout the day, from the first Morning Prayer until the final evening prayer. Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque suffered significant damage during 2012-2014 fighting, however, and will be in need of substantial repairs in the coming years.

Churches

The old city of Homs has several historic churches worth visiting. Most interesting is the Roman Orthodox St. Elian Church, in the far eastern end of the old city. The church is most noteworthy for its frescoes, which date from the late 12th century or early 13th century. These frescoes decorate the apse of the church, which stands on the site of a fifth century church dedicated to Elian. Elian was the son of a Roman officer from Homs, the ancient Emesa, who was martyred in 284 or 285 for

refusing to renounce Christianity. The paintings in the main church date from the 1970.

Far more well-known is Um al-Zenar Church, a few hundred meters to the west. This church is famous throughout Syria for housing what local tradition says is a fragment of a cloth belt that belonged to the Virgin Mary. The remains were discovered in 1953, and are said to have been placed in the first church on this site in the late fourth century. The present church structure dates mostly from a 1966 restoration, though its foundations may date back to the Byzantine period. The church is the seat of the Syriac Orthodox archbishop.

Remains of the Homs Citadel

Remains of the Homs Citadel, located southwest of the old city, appear to be of Ayyubid origin. The fortifications were restored during the Mamluk period under the rule of Baibars, but were largely destroyed in the 1830s when the forces of Mohammed Ali Basha put down a rebellion against his rule. Several towers survive in varying states of preservation, mostly on the northeastern side. The fortifications

were constructed over an archaeological mound dating back to the Bronze Age, and remains of a Roman temple's alter were excavated at the site in the 1970.

The city walls that once defended the old city of Homs were largely demolished during the Ottoman period. One stretch of fortifications survive in the northwestern corner of the old city, including several towers. Another segment of wall survives on the far eastern end of the old city. While these fortifications are modest when compared to those found in Damascus and Aleppo, they can easily be visited while exploring other sites around the old city of Homs. The citadel mound can be ascended to from the northwestern side.

Temple of Bel in Palmyra

One of the most impressive monuments in Syria is the magnificent Temple of Bel. Located in the southeastern quarter of the ancient city of Palmyra, this massive Roman temple complex is one of the best preserved in the Middle East. The site of the temple had been used for religious purposes as far back as 2200 BC, and as recently as 1929 the building served as the village mosque. This represents a

remarkable period of over 4,000 years of use as a place of worship, rivaling the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

The Temple of Bel, in its present form, was dedicated during the reign of Emperor Tiberius in 32 CE. Construction of this massive project likely began between 17 and 19 CE, and took over a decade to complete. Between 80 and 120 CE the temple was enlarged and the double colonnaded portico on the northern, eastern and southern sides was added. The western portico, along with its propylaeum, or monumental gateway, was constructed in the late second century. Additional modifications were made during later Arab periods, including fortification of the exterior walls and the introduction of a mihrab within the cella's southern adyton. Little remains of the earlier Hellenistic temple or preceding shrines.

Visitors approach the temple from the northwest, where a modern entrance has been established next to the former monumental gateway. That triple gateway was blocked during the 12th century in order to fortify the temple complex for defensive purposes. The utilitarian approach to that construction resulted in decorative stones from the Roman façade being reused arbitrarily to fill in the space. This gateway

was originally preceded by a portico supported by eight columns and a massive central doorway. Other fortifications were also added to the southern and eastern walls of the temple complex. In contrast, the northern wall remained much of the original Roman design, with pilasters alternating with framed windows topped by triangular pediments. Note that the ground level around the exterior walls is lower than the ground level within the temple complex. The original shrine was located on a mound, but an artificial terrace was built up to level the interior.

The interior of the complex, surrounded by an inner colonnaded portico, measures a remarkable 205 meters by 210 meters. The western portico was built on a particularly monumental scale, reflecting the relative wealth and prosperity of the time it was constructed (late second century). The southern side of the colonnade is best preserved, with a large portion of the original columns with Corinthian capitals surviving. The porticos surround a large open courtyard, with the temple's cella located slightly east of center. Preceding the cella are the remains of two common features of contemporary religious architecture of the region. Northwest of the cella's entrance is a sacrificial alter and a long banqueting hall. Animals to be

sacrificed were brought through a passageway the traveled underneath the walls of the complex and up a ramp near alter. Southwest of the cella is a ritual pool for used for ceremonial bathing.

The cella, the focal point of the temple complex, survives remarkably well-preserved. The design follows Greek and Roman traditions, but also incorporates several regional architectural influences. It consists of a single rectangular chamber surrounded by an external portico. The exterior columns of the portico were originally topped with metal Corinthian capitals. These were likely bronze plated with gold or silver, but (unsurprisingly) none have survived. The height of the cella and its surrounding portico is particularly impressive, measuring eighteen meters tall. The portico was topped by a crown of stepped triangles, a common architectural feature of Mesopotamia. The northern and southern walls are fairly austere, decorated only with four Ionic pilasters. The eastern walled is also quite plain, adorned only with two pairs of windows decorated with triangular pediments. The western side, which features the entrance to the cella, is much more richly decorated.

The cella's massive entrance portal was reconstructed during French restorations in 1932.

Roman-era tombs

Surrounding the ancient city of Palmyra is a vast necropolis featuring hundreds of Roman-era tombs, one of the most fascinating aspects of the site to explore. The most remarkable tombs, often constructed for the most prominent residents of the city, feature impressive architecture and detailed funerary art. The wealth and prosperity of this caravan city is reflected in the high quality craftsmanship devoted to these funerary chambers, which were typically shared by entire families.

Several different architectural styles are represented in the tombs of Palmyra. Tower tombs were developed earliest, often featuring several floors of burial chambers. The burial compartment of each individual would customarily be faced with a carved limestone relief of their portrait, most of which have either been destroyed over the centuries or relocated to museums. These tower tombs date no later than 128 CE, and are found mostly west and southwest of the ancient city. In later periods, tower tombs were abandoned in favor of underground burial chambers, or hypogeum.

These date between 81 and 251 and are found primarily to the south of the ancient city.

The western necropolis, often referred to as the Valley of the Tombs, is located in a desert valley that extends roughly one kilometer west-southwest of the acropolis. It is here that most of the tower tombs are found, several of which are particularly impressive and well-preserved. Some underground tombs are also located in this area, but the most remarkable, the Hypogeum of Yarhai, has been relocated to the National Museum in Damascus. Other noteworthy hypogea are located south and southeast of the acropolis. These underground tombs are kept locked, however, and access needs to be coordinated with officials at the museum.

The Theater

Centrally located in the acropolis of Palmyra are the remains of the ancient city's theater. Largely buried under sand until the 1950s, the structure has since been excavated and restored, representing one of the most well-preserved Roman theaters in Syria outside of Bosra. The theater was constructed in the first half of the second

century according to Polish archaeologist Kazimierz Michałowski. It was built in the center of a semicircular colonnaded plaza which opened to the city's southern gate.

The seating area is ninety-two meters in diameter, but only the lowest section of twelve rows survive. It is argued that additional rows of seating would have been constructed from wood, and were therefore not preserved. The seating faces north-northeast. The stage of the theater is particularly impressive, with a beautifully decorated façade. The stage measures forty-five and a half by ten and a half meters. It features three doorways in its façade, with one additional doorway on each end. The columns on the stage are decorated with Corinthian capitals. Emperor Nero is known to have placed his statue in the niche above the main entrance of the stage.

Monumental Arch

One of the most recognizable structures in the ancient city of Palmyra is the remarkable monumental arch. Also known as the triumphal arch or victory arch, it was constructed during the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus, who ruled from 193 to 211. Despite being built more than a half century after Hadrian's visit to the city,

the monument is often erroneously referred to as Hadrian's arch. It was restored in the 1930.

The arch is particularly impressive from an architectural standpoint, addressing a problem somewhat unique to Palmyra. The layout of this ancient city was unusual for the Roman period, as its main streets did not align with the four cardinal points of the compass. The monumental arch was constructed at the point of a thirty-degree turn in the main colonnade between the tetrapylon and the Temple of Bel. To solve this problem, the arch incorporated two façades angled apart from one another. Only one of the original arched façades survive, but the overall design is still easy to appreciate. The arch is richly decorated with stone carvings, one of the most lavishly adorned monuments in the city.

The tetrapylon

Unlike most Roman cities in the region, the ancient city of Palmyra did not conform to the standard city plan of two intersecting colonnaded streets aligned to the points

of the compass. The main colonnaded street of Palmyra twice changes direction, and at these points unique architectural devices were employed to make the route appear more harmonious. One of these is the monumental tetrapylon, marking the location of a ten degree pivot in the main colonnade and an important intersection.

The tetrapylon consists of a stepped square platform that features a plinth in each corner. Each plinth supports four columns that are topped by a solid cornice weighing over one hundred and fifty tons. The original columns were carved from pink granite that was imported from Aswan, Egypt. Only one of these columns survives, while the others are concrete reconstructions that date to a 1963 restoration. The monument is technically a group of four tetrapylons, and can more accurately be described as a tetrakionion. At the center of each is a pedestal that would have originally carried a statue. The tetrapylon is believed to have been constructed during the reign of Diocletian, at the end of the third century.

Museum

The modern town of Palmyra, northeast of the ancient city, was first settled in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Prior to that, around 6,000 villagers lived among the

ancient ruins. French administrators encouraged the local inhabitants to resettle to the modern town, and most had done so by 1932. The modern town's museum was founded in 1961, and contains a collection of artifacts discovered in the region along with educational exhibits.

Particularly noteworthy is the museum's collection of statuary and other funerary art. The more prominent Palmyrene families devoted considerable resources to honoring their dead, as evidenced by the ancient city's enormous necropolis. Many funerary sculptures and sarcophagi are located at the museum. The statuary provides detailed depictions of Palmyrene dress, with men wearing heavily embroidered clothing complemented by patterned worked leather, and women in simple robes with veils complimented by heavy jewelry and headbands. The collection also features mosaics recovered from a private house east of the Temple of Bel. Additionally, there are model reconstructions of the ancient city at its height. If planning to visit the ancient city's underground tombs, access should be coordinated with officials here.

Krak des Chevaliers

The Hospitallers began rebuilding the castle in the 1140s and were finished by 1170 when an earthquake damaged the castle. The order controlled a number of castles along the border of the County of Tripoli, a state founded after the First Crusade. Krak des Chevaliers was among the most important, and acted as a center of administration as well as a military base. After a second phase of building was undertaken in the 13th century, Krak des Chevaliers became a concentric castle. This phase created the outer wall and gave the castle its current appearance. The first half of the century has been described as Krak des Chevaliers' "golden age". At its peak, Krak des Chevaliers housed a garrison of around 2,000. Such a large garrison allowed the Hospitallers to exact tribute from a wide area. From the 1250s the fortunes of the Knights Hospitaller took a turn for the worse and in 1271 Mamluk Sultan Baibars captured Krak des Chevaliers after a siege lasting 36 days, supposedly by way of a forged letter purportedly from the Hospitallers' Grand Master that caused the Knights to surrender.

Renewed interest in Crusader castles in the 19th century led to the investigation of Krak des Chevaliers, and architectural plans were drawn up. In the late 19th or early

20th century a settlement had been created within the castle, causing damage to its fabric. The 500 inhabitants were moved in 1933 and the castle was given over to the French Alawite State, which carried out a program of clearing and restoration. When Syria declared independence in 1946, it assumed control.

Today, the village of al-Husn exists around the castle and has a population of nearly 9,000. Krak des Chevaliers is approximately 40 kilometres west of the city of Homs, close to the border of Lebanon, and is administratively part of the Homs Governorate. Since 2006, the castles of Krak des Chevaliers and Qal'at Salah El-Din have been recognised by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites. It was partially damaged in the Syrian civil war from shelling and recaptured by the Syrian government forces in 2014. Since then, reconstruction and conservation work on the site had begun. Reports by UNESCO and the Syrian government on the state of the site are produced yearly.

The castle sits atop a 650-metre-high (2,130 ft) hill east of Tartus, Syria, in the Homs Gap. On the other side of the gap, 27 kilometres (17 mi) away, was the 12th-century Gibelacar Castle (Hisn Ibn Akkar). The route through the strategically important

Homs Gap connects the cities of Tripoli and Homs. To the north of the castle lies the Jebel Ansariyah, and to the south Lebanon. The surrounding area is fertile, benefiting from streams and abundant rainfall. Compared to the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the other Crusader states had less land suitable for farming; however, the limestone peaks of Tripoli were well-suited to defensive sites.

Property in the County of Tripoli, granted to the Knights in the 1140s, included the Krak des Chevaliers, the towns of Rafanea and Montferrand, and the Beqa'a plain separating Homs and Tripoli. Homs was never under Crusader control, so the region around the Krak des Chevaliers was vulnerable to expeditions from the city. While its proximity caused the Knights problems with regard to defending their territory, it also meant Homs was close enough for them to raid. Because of the castle's command of the plain, it became the Knights' most important base in the area.

According to the 13th-century Arab historian Ibn Shaddad, in 1031, the Mirdasid emir of Aleppo and Homs, Shibl ad-Dawla Nasr, established a settlement of Kurdish tribesmen at the site of the castle, which was then known as "Ḥiṣn al-Safḥ". Nasr restored Hisn al-Safh to help reestablish the Mirdasids' access to the coast of Tripoli

after they lost nearby Hisn Ibn Akkar to the Fatimids in 1029. Due to Nasr's garrisoning of Kurdish troops at the site, the castle became known as "Ḥiṣn al-Akrād" (Fortress of the Kurds).[15][16] The castle was strategically located at the southern edge of the Jibal al-Alawiyin mountain range and dominated the road between Homs and Tripoli.[15] When building castles, engineers often chose elevated sites, such as hills and mountains, that provided natural obstacles.

In January 1099 on the journey to Jerusalem during the First Crusade, the company of Raymond IV of Toulouse came under attack from the garrison of Hisn al-Akrad, the forerunner of the Krak, who harried Raymond's foragers. The following day Raymond marched on the castle and found it deserted. The crusaders briefly occupied the castle in February of the same year but abandoned it when they continued their march towards Jerusalem. Permanent occupation began in 1110 when Tancred, Prince of Galilee took control of the site. The early castle was substantially different from the extant remains and no trace of this first castle survives at the site.

The origins of the order of the Knights Hospitaller are unclear, but it probably emerged around the 1070s in Jerusalem. It started as a religious order that cared for the sick, and later looked after pilgrims to the Holy Land. After the success of the First Crusade in capturing Jerusalem in 1099, many Crusaders donated their new property in the Levant to the Hospital of St John. Early donations were in the newly formed Kingdom of Jerusalem, but over time the order extended its holdings to the Crusader states of the County of Tripoli and the Principality of Antioch. Evidence suggests that in the 1130s the order became militarised when Fulk, King of Jerusalem, granted the newly built castle at Beth Gibelin to the order in 1136. A papal bull from between 1139 and 1143 may indicate the order hiring people to defend pilgrims. There were also other military orders, such as the Knights Templar, that offered protection to pilgrims.

Baibars ventured into the area around Krak des Chevaliers in 1270 and allowed his men to graze their animals on the fields around the castle. When he received news that year of the Eighth Crusade led by King Louis IX of France, Baibars left for Cairo to avoid a confrontation. After Louis died in 1271 Baibars returned to deal

with Krak des Chevaliers. Before he marched on the castle the Sultan captured the smaller castles in the area, including Chastel Blanc. On 3 March, Baibars' army arrived at Krak des Chevaliers. By the time the Sultan appeared on the scene, the castle may already have been blockaded by Mamluk forces for several days. Of the three Arabic accounts of the siege only one was contemporary, that of Ibn Shaddad, although he was not present at the siege. Peasants who lived in the area had fled to the castle for safety and were kept in the outer ward. As soon as Baibars arrived he erected mangonels, powerful siege weapons which he would later turn on the castle. In a probable reference to a walled suburb outside the castle's entrance, Ibn Shaddad records that two days later the first line of defences fell to the besiegers.

Despite its predominantly military character, the castle is one of the few sites where Crusader art (in the form of frescoes) has been preserved. In 1935, 1955, and 1978 medieval frescoes were discovered within Krak des Chevaliers after later plaster and white-wash had decayed. The frescos were painted on the interior and exterior of the main chapel and the chapel outside the main entrance, which no longer survives. Writing in 1982, historian Jaroslav Folda noted that at the time there had been little

investigation of Crusader frescoes that would provide a comparison for the fragmentary remains found at Krak des Chevaliers. Those in the chapel were painted on the masonry from the 1170–1202 rebuild. Mold, smoke, and moisture have made it difficult to preserve the frescoes. The fragmentary nature of the red and blue frescoes inside the chapel means they are difficult to assess. The one on the exterior of the chapel depicted the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple.

Cultural and Tourism Resources in Hama

Qalaat Sheizar is an impressive Arab castle located to the north of Hama overlooking a vital river crossing point on the Orontes. Here the river, after rushing around a bend through a confined gorge to the east, returns to the more leisurely pace of the plains. The settlement apparently has classical origins, with local legends recorded by Diodorus Siculus (first century BC) claiming its foundation by a regiment of Thessalonian cavalry from Alexander's forces.

In the early Arab period, a Fatimid castle stood on the site but was seized in 999 by the Byzantines in their effort to reassert their control in Syria against the Fatimids. As the Byzantine hold weakened, a local clan (the Banu Munqidh) seized Qalaat Sheizar in 1081. By the time the Crusaders had installed themselves briefly in Qalaat al-Madiq to the north, the clansmen used Qalaat Sheizar as a base to harass their presence. It formed a strongpoint of the Arab frontline against the Crusaders.

Qalaat Sheizar grew in importance as a center of Arab resistance, so much so that the Crusaders set up positions in the mountains on the opposite side of the plain to observe and contain Qalaat Sheizar. These included Qalaat Abu Qubeis and Qalaat

al-Mahalbeh. Tancred unsuccessfully sought to take it in 1108, and after another feint in 1110 was forced to settle for a treaty with the Emir of Sheizar agreeing to live and let live within existing spheres of influence.

The Byzantines attempted in 1134 and 1138 to take the castle, but also failed. Much of it was destroyed in 1157 by the severe earthquake which affected the greater part of Syria. The Crusaders tried to profit from the decimation of the clan owners in the destruction by moving on Qalaat Sheizar, occupying the lower citadel. But by then Nur al-Din was active in northern Syria. He expelled them, repaired the damage and installed his own governor.

In 1170 another earthquake did further damage. Salah al-Din's incorporation of northern Syria after 1174 brought it under his control. A new keep was constructed under the Ayyubids (1233). The first Mongol invasion of Syria in 1260 brought renewed destruction but Baibars (1260-1277), who did much to revive Syria after the Mongol wave had passed, garrisoned it. He and his successor, Qalaun, were probably responsible for a good deal of the castle as seen today (especially the northern defenses and the reconstruction of the keep). The castle subsequently fell

into disuse as a military post but came to shelter the village inhabitants whose building activities helped erode its fabric until they were moved out in recent decades.

The elongated (300 meter) crag on which it sits provides a natural setting for a fortress. As you pass the modern village, take a close look on the right at the south end of the crag where a great ditch has been drug out of the living rock to isolate the defenses from the connecting hill and give the main castle keep greater elevation. Similar arrangements were employed at Qalaat Salah al-Din and Qalaat al-Shaghur/Bakas.

Masyaf

Masyaf is a predominantly Ismaili town about 45 kilometers west of Hama. The primary attraction of Masyaf is the Ismaili castle, one of the best preserved in Syria. The town itself is also a pleasant place to explore, with an old section of town and a scenic location at the foothills of the coastal mountain range. The castle can easily be combined with other sites in the countrysides of Hama and Homs.

The site had been used during the Seleucid, Roman and Byzantine periods for defensive purposes, and the Crusaders seized the castle in 1103. The Crusaders lacked the resources to maintain a small castle so far inland from their coastal stronghold, however, and by 1141 it had been taken by the Ismailis. It became an important center for their sect, particularly under the leadership of Sinan.

After the Ismailis made two unsuccessful attempts to assassinate Salah al-Din, their base at Masyaf was threatened by attack from his forces. Salah al-Din laid siege to the castle in 1176, but called off his campaign under mysterious circumstances. At Salah al-Din's bedside were found cakes, a dagger, and a threatening note, likely left by an Ismaili agent within his ranks. In 1260 the castle fell to the Mongols, and Mamluk Sultan Baibars took control in 1270.

The remains of two Byzantine churches are located on opposite ends of this small Alawite village near Masya. The western church, the first as you approach Deir al-Salib, is in a far greater state of preservation and is well worth a visit if you're in the area. It is very lightly decorated, but the scale is impressive and the setting is

beautiful, particularly in the spring. While there is no inscription dating the church, it is estimated to have been built in the late 5th or early 6th century.

Ruins of a second church, beyond the village and about three kilometers from the first, are largely destroyed except for the foundations. After the 45 minute walk you may find it wasn't worth the effort to reach, unless you have a particular interest in Byzantine church architecture or a lot of time on your hands.

Qasr Ibn Wardan

Qasr Ibn Wardan is a fascinating Byzantine church and palace complex located at the edge of the desert to the northeast of Hama. Built during the reign of Justinian and completed in 564, the site supplemented other Byzantine fortifications such as Halabiyeh and al-Rasafeh in defense of the Persians to the east. The approach here was far more elegant in design, with significant attention paid to architectural details. High quality materials were utilized in the construction of Qasr Ibn Wardan.

The site originally consisted of a church, palace (or administrative building) and a military barracks. Practically nothing remains of the barracks, but the palace remains

relatively well preserved and the church is in excellent condition. The palace is the largest remaining structure and consists of several rooms on two floors surrounding a central courtyard. The building was dated by inscription to 564. South of the palace is where the barracks once stood, but aside from a small portion of surviving wall, nothing remains to be seen.

The church, to the west of the palace, is the most impressive structure at the site. Though the dome collapsed long ago, the church is otherwise excellently preserved. The building was largely constructed with brick and local basalt, though there are columns and capitals that may have been brought from Apamea as well as imported gypsum, limestone and marble. It was square in plan, with two floors and a high dome supported by arches. The stone carvings are somewhat crude compared to later Byzantine sites in the region, particularly in the limestone massif.

The remote Byzantine site of al-Andarin is spread over a vast area at the edges of the semi-desert, about twenty-five kilometers beyond the more well-known Byzantine site of Qasr Ibn Wardan. Once a massive settlement, much of the site remains unexcavated, but it is nonetheless a fascinating place to explore. The site is

perhaps most impressive for the surreal setting, with pieces of Byzantine masonry scattered around what is today a rather inhospitable countryside.

Most well-preserved of the structures at al-Andarin is what was apparently a barracks, with a church located in the center of the complex. There are remains of another church nearby, of which part of an arch remains standing. Much excavation work has been carried out here recently, and many well-preserved stone carvings have been uncovered around the outer walls of the barracks. There is still a significant amount of archaeological work to be done here, however.

Qalaat al-Shamamis

Qalaat al-Shamamis is a largely ruined Ayyubid-era castle located just a few kilometers northwest of Salamiyeh. The castle dates from 1231 and was built on the flattened top of an extinct volcanic cone by the Ayyubid Prince of Homs, al-Mujahid Assad al-Din Shirkuh II, who ruled between 1186 and 1240. The castle was destroyed by the Mongols in 1260 but restored by Baibars, having been incorporated in the province of Damascus. While the remains are not well-preserved, the setting of this castle is spectacular and makes it a worthwhile detour.

Salamiyeh

Salamiyeh is a predominantly Ismaili town located about forty kilometers east of Hama. The town has had a long history dating back to Roman times, and while there isn't much evidence of it today, it is worth spending some time to see what Salamiyeh has to offer.

The most interesting site in the city is the mosque and tomb of Imam Ismael, which was built using black basalt apparently recycled from an earlier Byzantine construction. The mosque is located a bit to the southeast of the city center, and is a place of pilgrimage for many Ismailis. Look for the fairly obvious black and white minaret which towers over the city center.

Elsewhere around the center of town you can find sparse remains of the ancient city walls, as well ruins of a hammam (public bath). Byzantine columns and capitals make for decoration in the center medians of many nearby streets.

Qalaat al-Madiq

Qalaat al-Madiq is a large village located on the main road that travels the length of the eastern side of the al-Ghab plain north of al-Suqeilbiyeh. While most well-known for the neighboring site of Apamea, Qalaat al-Madiq itself has a few attractions of note. Foremost is the castle that overlooks the town, which was largely constructed from remains of the nearby Roman and Byzantine site (though the position was originally fortified at least as early as the Seleucid period). The castle is still inhabited by villagers and is in an unfortunately poor state of preservation.

Below the castle is an attractive Ottoman-era mosque that dates from the 16th century. Additionally, an Ottoman-era khan in the south of the village, also dating to the 16th century, is now used as a museum. This museum houses many finds from Apamea, mostly mosaics and statuary, and is well worth a visit. It was originally used for pilgrims traveling on the route from Istanbul to Mecca, and is one of the more impressive khans in the country. The village is walking distance from Apamea, but several hours should be allowed for the exploration of both sites.

Great Mosque of Hama

Great Mosque of Hama is the most impressive religious site in the city, despite being almost entirely reconstructed after the 1982 conflict. Dating back to the 7th century, the mosque was converted from a Byzantine church under Abu Aabideh Bin al-Jarah during the Umayyad period. That 6th century church was converted from an even earlier Roman temple, originally constructed in the 3rd century and dedicated to Jupiter.

The northern entrance leads into a large courtyard, surrounded by vaulted porticos on three sides. The prayer hall is located to the south. There are pieces of Roman and Byzantine masonry utilized throughout the courtyard, the most noticeable being several columns and capitals. The courtyard features an elevated treasury similar to that of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. It is assumed to date back to the Umayyad period. To the west of the treasury is a domed chamber housing the tombs of two Ayyubid rulers of the city, al-Mansour II Mohammed and al-Mazafar III Mahmoud .

The prayer hall itself retains elements of the basilica plan, with three aisles topped by five domes. The interior side of the western wall features a Greek inscription,

while the eastern wall includes several reused Roman-era stones, some with carved decoration on the exterior. The mosque has two minarets. The eastern minaret was constructed in the Seljuq period and is dated by inscription to 1153. The square design features geometric patterns in black and white stone. On the northern end of the courtyard is a later minaret, constructed under Ibrahim al-Hashami in 1420. It follows an octagonal design typical to the Mamluk period, again reminiscent of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus but on a much more modest scale.

The Great Mosque of Hama was almost completely destroyed during the 1982 conflict between the Syrian government and the Muslim Brotherhood. The building was carefully restored in subsequent years, maintaining the original design. The successful restoration of the mosque should provide some optimism for the future of several historic mosques that have been damaged or destroyed in the ongoing conflict in Syria.

Qasr al-Azem of Hama

One of the most attractive residential buildings in Syria is Qasr al-Azem of Hama. It was constructed in 1740 as the residence of Assad Basha al-Azem, an Ottoman

governor of the city. Only three years later he was promoted to governor of Damascus, where he built the more well-known palace of the same name. While the building was significantly damaged during the 1982 conflict between the Syrian government and the Muslim Brotherhood, it has been carefully restored and today represents the most impressive historic residence in Hama.

The palace complex was built around three courtyards. The largest courtyard is shaded by several trees and features a sizable central fountain and an iwan on the southern side. On the eastern side, a staircase leads to second floor courtyard with the dramatic façade of the main reception hall, preceded by an arched portico. The reception hall features beautiful painted woodwork, patterned marble, alternating bands of black and white stone, and is topped by a large dome. The third courtyard, on the northwestern side of the residence, includes particularly detailed stone carved decoration. This was originally the haramlek, or the family quarters, and an impressive private hammam (bath) is attached to the south. Today, the palace houses the Museum of Popular Traditions and several rooms throughout the complex are

decorated with displays of traditional life in Syria. There is a modest entrance fee to visit.

Al-Nuri Mosque

al-Nuri Mosque was constructed in 1163 during the reign of Nur al-Din Mahmoud Zenki. Acknowledging the important role that Hama played in establishing his rule over both Aleppo and Damascus, Nur al-Din endowed the city this mosque. He also had several monuments damaged in 1157 earthquake rebuilt. The mosque was expanded during the rule of Abu al-Feda in the early Mamluk period. It suffered major damage during the 1982 conflict, but was subsequently restored.

The striking minaret, in the northwest corner of the mosque, features alternating bands of black basalt and yellow limestone. Numerous Roman-era blocks have been reused in the lower levels of the exterior walls, possibly originating from the nearby citadel mound. The northern façade of the building features a surprisingly large Arabic inscription that is particularly remarkable. The modest entrance, next to the inscription, leads into an open courtyard with a large central fountain. The prayer hall is located on the southern side of the courtyard, with a later Mamluk expansion

on the eastern side. The original carved wood minbar dated to 1164, but has been moved to the city's museum. The mosque is open during regular prayer times.

Apamea

The archaeological site of Apamea is located on the eastern edge of the Orontes plain, between the al-Saheliyeh mountains and the Limestone Massif. The ancient settlement grew around an imposing tell that overlooks the Ghab depression by about a hundred metres. The tell served as an acropolis in the Hellenistic period and was transformed into a citadel (Qal'at al-Mudiq) in the medieval period. Identified as the ancient city of Apamea since the middle of the 19th century, the site saw its first archaeological exploration in 1928, at the initiative of Franz Cumont, who convinced Belgium to conduct regular missions there, under the direction of Fernand Mayence and Henri Lacoste. Seven campaigns took place before the Second World War, followed by two short seasons in 1947 and 1953. From 1965, at the request of the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of Syria, Belgium resumed its archaeological campaigns and set up the Belgian Centre for Archaeological Research at Apamea in Syria, hosted by the Académie royale de Belgique and now

called "Belgian Archaeological Mission at Apamea in Syria". Jean Charles Balty was in charge of the excavations for many years until Didier Viviers succeeded him in 2001. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, field research has been suspended

The city of Apamea covers an area of about 260 hectares intra muros. Its defensive wall is 7 km long and seems to have been built, on at least part of its current layout, in the 2nd century BC. It underwent several modifications (plan, towers, repairs) until the end of the 6th century AD. The city follows an orthogonal plan divided into blocks with two large streets with gates, oriented North-South (Great Colonnade) and East-West (Theatre Street). The Great Colonnade, as it appears today, is part of a vast edilitarian programme implemented during the 2nd century AD. Inscriptions allow to date to the end of Trajan's reign a section of the colonnade located in the northern third of its length and associated with the Baths of L. Iulius Agrippa. While another section, located in the centre of the city and decorated with spiral-fluted columns, bears inscribed consoles dating to the reigns of Antoninus Pius, Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius.

Apart from the Great Colonnade, few remains uncovered in Apamea date to the 2nd century AD. Next to the Baths of L. Iulius Agrippa, let us mention those of the "North-East Quarter", which we will discuss below, the agora and the theatre, which with its 139 m diameter is one of the largest in the ancient world and the largest in Syria. Its construction probably dates back to the end of the 2nd century. As for the great temple of Zeus Bêlos, whose prestigious oracle attracted many visitors, including the Emperor Septimius Severus, it was destroyed in the 4th century, leaving only its foundations on a terrace overlooking the agora. Most of the private and public buildings visible today date back to the 5th and 6th centuries. Previous excavations uncovered luxurious patrician houses organised around one or more peristyle courts. Among them, let us mention the so-called "triclinos" building, which occupies two thirds of a block and whose mosaic floors are of outstanding quality, such as this delicate personification of the Earth, surrounded by the Seasons or the famous " Great Hunt Mosaic", now preserved at the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels. The building may have been the residence of one of the province high dignitaries, if not the governor himself.

About ten churches are also known so far, including the Eastern Cathedral, forming a complex of more than 12.000 m2 to the east of the so-called "triclinos" building. This building, which also included the Episcopal Palace, is one of the most important in the ancient East.

Between 2001 and 2011, the excavations carried out by the "Belgian Archaeological Mission at Apamea in Syria", with the support of the Université libre de Bruxelles (CReA-Patrimoine) and in collaboration with other research centres (Centre Ausonius UMR 5607, Université Michel-de-Montaigne Bordeaux 3, Institut des Études Anciennes, Université Laval - Québec), focused on the study of the "North-East Quarter", the "Tycheion" and its surroundings as well as the western part of the circuit wall. This work was financed by the Ministère de la Recherche scientifique de la Communauté française de Belgique (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles), the Fonds national belge de la Recherche scientifique (F.R.S-FNRS) and the Université libre de Bruxelles.

The objective of the excavation programme of the "North-East Quarter" was to understand the organisation of one of the first block to the north of the city and its

articulation with the circuit wall. The research first focused on the structures related to water supply, composed of several cisterns and of the aqueduct that enters the city at this point, passing through Tower III. The construction of the aqueduct dates back to the reign of Claudius (around 47/48), as witnessed by an inscription found near the North Gate. The hydraulic installations unearthed near Tower III and inside the city have however undergone several changes in layout over the following centuries. A portion of the wall and an adjacent street, as well as Tower II, were also excavated together with a bath complex, located directly against the street of the defensive wall.

The baths of the "North-East Quarter" were built in the 2nd century AD and remain partially in use until the 7th century. This complex of twenty rooms, covering a total surface area of 1200 m2, saw a series of changes over time in the function of its rooms and in the organisation of its circulation. A large part of this complex was then occupied as houses until the 14th century. Further south, three porticoes of a peristyle court that could belong to a palestra have been uncovered. An annex building located to the west of the palestra as well as a large Byzantine building with an undetermined function, located to the south of the complex, have also been

partially excavated. Finally, soundings were carried out on several sections of the second street (E2 street), perpendicular to the Great Colonnade, allowing to identify Roman levels of circulation that were later raised in the Byzantine period.

Finally, a western section of the defensive wall was also the subject of several excavation campaigns. Work showed the existence of two different segments, one from the Hellenistic period in the north-western/south-eastern direction, the other from the Roman period, partially resting on the first section. The wall appears to have been dismantled quite early (between the 6th/ 7th century and 10th/ 11th century), being in an area of the city that was now abandoned.

Next to the excavations, various projects of restoration, architectural analysis and material studies (ceramics, glass, iron objects, coins, fauna) have been carried out by Belgian and by international teams and are still ongoing research.

Cultural and Tourism Resources in Tartus

Tartus

Tartus is the second largest city on Syria's Mediterranean coast, a provincial capital, and home to an important seaport. It is most well-known for its important role during the Crusades, when it was called Tortosa, but its history dates back to the Phoenician period. It is a well-developed city that has numerous parks and a generally quiet, slow-paced atmosphere. Historic remains include the old town, occupying the interior of the former Crusader castle, and a cathedral from the same period that now houses the city museum. There are numerous hotels in town to suit all budgets, making it a convenient base for visiting other attractions in the region.

Arwad

Arwad is Syria's only inhabitable island, located 2.5 kilometers offshore from Tartus. The densely populated island has a long history dating back to the Phoenician period, but is more well known among Syrians for its numerous fish restaurants. While nothing from the Phoenicians remains, there are two small fortresses on the

island, one left by the Crusaders which is open to visitors. This was the final point held by the Crusaders until their withdrawal to Cyprus, and the population of the island has remained Sunni Muslim since their departure.

Apart from the island's historic sites, the tight maze of alleyways is fun to explore, and the lack of motor vehicles refreshing (though the hordes of children sometimes overwhelming). On the northwest and northeastern points of the island, local boat-builders can be observed. The island also has an unusually large number of public posters of the president and his late father. A fairly thorough visit of the island can be completed in a few hours, allow a bit more time if planning to dine at one of the seafood restaurants.

Amrit

Amrit was a Phoenician religious center, and in terms of the visible remains it is arguably the most impressive Phoenician site in Syria. The ruins include a temple complex and numerous tombs, though the site was also a continental port for the settlement on Arwad island. The architectural styles show Persian and Egyptian

influence, and the Romans built a stadium here in the 4th century. Amrit is definitely a worthwhile excursion from Tartus.

The ruins are spread out over a large area, the stadium and temple complex to the north, the tombs located about one kilometer to the south. Note that this is officially a military area. While the military personnel here are familiar with tourists coming through, do be careful not to wander off into their camps and, obviously, avoid taking photos of military buildings and equipment. You might be escorted around the site and/or have your photography restricted.

Burj al-Sebi

Burj al-Sebi is a single Crusader tower which now overlooks the main coastal highway. It is located on the southern edge of the town of Banias and southwest of Qalaat al-Marqab. Historically, Burj al-Sebi protected access to the port and coastal route of Qalaat al-Marqab. It is about 15 square meters and has two floors of accommodation and a basement, and was probably constructed around the same time as Qalaat al-Marqab itself, around the end of the 12th century or beginning of the

13th century. Built from the same black basalt stone as the castle above, the tower is in a fairly good state of preservation, and worth a stop if visiting the area.

Margat Castle

Margat Castle, locally known as Qalaat al-Marqab, lies on a spur of the Jebel al-Ansariye mountains, south of the city of Baniyas in Syria. Only 2 km from the Mediterranean coast, it controlled the coastal road between Tartus and Latakia and guarded the border of the Principality of Antioch with the County of Tripoli.

The first castle at this site was built in 1062 by a local landlord. This castle was taken in 1104 by Byzantine forces led by Admiral Kantakuzenos.

In 1116 the castle was given as a fief to Reynald Mazoir, a nobleman from Antioch, by Roger of Salerno, Regent of Antioch. He started to rebuild the castle in a formidable, elongated stronghold out of black basalt. In 1133 however, the castle fell into Muslim hands. But in 1140 Reynald II Mazoir regained ownership. In 1157, 1170 and 1186 the castle was struck by earthquakes which caused major damages. And although the Mazoir family had large financial means, maintaining Margat

Castle became too costly. So, in 1186 Margat Castle was sold to the Order of Saint John, a branch of the Knights Hospitaller.

Between 1186 and 1205 the Hospitallers rebuilt the castle into the mighty ship-like fortress we see today. After the Battle of Hattin in 1187, Saladin's army passed in the vicinity of the castle but did not attack it, leaving it one of the few remaining territories in Christian hands after Saladin's conquests.

By the beginning of the 13th century the Hospitallers controlled the surrounding land and roads from the castle and made a large profit from travelers and pilgrims passing through. Isaac Comnenus of Cyprus was imprisoned in the castle after Richard I of England took Cyprus from him during the Third Crusade. The bishop of nearby Valenia also used Margat Castle as his headquarters after around 1240. Margat was second in size and power only to the other Hospitaller fortress to the south, Krak des Chevaliers.

In 1269, 1270 and 1281 Margat Castle was unsuccessfully besieged by the Mamluk Sultan Baibars. In 1285 the castle was besieged again by a Mamluk army, this time under Sultan Al Mansur Qalawun using trebuchets. The castle held out for 5 weeks

but fell after sappers mined the north wall. Qalawun respected the size of the fortress and the courage of its defenders, and allowed the Hospitallers to leave with everything they could carry. Rather than destroy it as he did with other fortresses, Margat Castle was restored and occupied by a Mamluk garrison.

Up until the beginning of the 20th century the castle was occupied by soldiers, first from the Ottoman Empire and later Turkish, after which the dilapidated castle fell into ruin. Legend has it that a tunnel once connected Margat Castle to the Boy's Tower, a watchtower further down the hill, which would thus have been used to supply its occupants in the case of an attack.

Cultural and Tourism Resources in Lattakia

Lattakia

Lattakia is largest city on the coast, and the fourth largest in Syria overall. With a wide range of accommodation options, it is arguably the best base for exploring the coastal region. While most of the city is quite modern and developed, there are some interesting historic remains from the Roman period as well as some attractive older mosques. The city also has a small museum in an Ottoman-era khan.

Kassab

Kassab is one of the most attractive mountain resort towns in the whole of Syria. The town is predominantly Christian, mostly Armenian, and many from Lattakia and Aleppo maintain vacation homes here. During the summer, demographics can change considerably as Syrians from around the country come here for vacation.

Kassab has numerous hotels, though those on a budget would be better off staying in Lattakia. There are many restaurants and shops, and a couple fast food places in the center of town. The town itself, only developed as a resort in recent decades, has

some traditional rural stone architecture, a few examples of which have been beautifully restored. There are also numerous churches around the town. The countryside here is more densely forested than around Slenfeh, making it more attractive even if the views aren't as commanding. There are many lakes nearby, and a stunning beach on the Mediterranean accessible from the neighboring village of al-Samra. This is perhaps the most beautiful area in Syria for hiking.

Salah Ed-Din Castle

Salah Ed-Din Castle, also known as Saladin's Castle or Saône Castle and locally known as Qalaat Salah Ed-Din or Qalaat Sahyun, lies northeast of the city of Latakia in Syria. It is situated on a ridge between two deep ravines and surrounded by forest.

The first fortification at this site may have been built by the Phoenicians, who are said to have surrendered it to Alexander the Great around 334 BC. Nothing is known about what happened to it between this period and the 10th century, although it guarded an important route from the port of Latakia to Aleppo.

In 975 AD the site was taken from the Hamdanids of Aleppo by the Byzantine Emperor John I Tzimiskes. Under his reign the castle was considerably strengthened and the square Byzantine fortress on top of the castle hill was built.

In 1108 Salah Ed-Din Castle was taken by Tancred of Antioch, Prince of Galilee. In 1119 the castle was given as a fief by Roger of Salerno, Prince of Antioch, to Robert of Saône. Robert died that same year and the castle went to his son William. The Lordship of Saône became one of the most significant vassals of the Principality of Antioch. The large revenues of his lordship enabled William to rebuild and enlarge the castle. Most of what we see today dates back to that time; the massive keep which has walls of up to 5 meters thick, the curtain walls and the wall towers.

The dry moat, which separated the castle from the rest of the ridge, is one of the most notable features of Salah Ed-Din Castle. It was probably made by the Byzantines and completed by William of Saône. This dry moat was cut into living rock over a length of over 100 meters. It is 14 to 20 meters wide and has a lonely 28 meters high needle which supported the former drawbridge to one of the gates of the castle.

The castle was notable as being one of the few which were not entrusted to the major military orders of the Hospitaller or the Templars.

In 1188 Salah Ed-Din Castle was besieged by Saladin, the Ayyubid Sultan, with 6 large trebuchets. After 2 days of bombarding the castle walls, the walls were breached and Saladin's troops entered the castle. The Franks did not have a sufficient defending force and capitulated. It is from this victory that the castle takes its present name. Saladin next gave the castle to a family of local Emirs loyal to the Ayyubids, the Nasr al-Din Manguwiris. They restored the castle. In 1272 they ceded the castle to the Mamluk Sultan Baibars. From 1280 till 1287 the castle was kept by Sonqor al-Ashqar, governor of Damascus. In 1287 it was taken by the Mamluk Sultan Al Mansur Qalawun.

In 1840 Turkish troops fired at the castle, causing some damage. Also in the 19th century the castle was occupied by troops of Ibrahim Pasha, the Egyptian general and Governor of Syria, which also damaged the castle.

Jableh

Jableh is a major coastal town about twenty five kilometers south of Lattakia. Seldom visited by tourists, there is an impressive Roman amphitheater in the center of town along with one of the oldest mosques in the coastal region. On the outskirts of town, just north of the microbus station, is the bronze age archaeological site of Tel Tweini. Since Jableh is an important transit hub for the surrounding mountain villages, it makes for an easy stop and a visit can be combined with nearby sites such as Qalaat al-Maniqeh, Qalaat Bani Qahtan and/or al-Qardaha.

Jableh has been a port since Phoenician times and has had a long history. It was mentioned in Assyrian records as part of the Assyrian Empire, and during this time also received a Greek colony (8th century BC). During the Persian and Seleucid periods it formed part of the confederation of Phoenician states controlled by Arwad. Under Seleucid control, it was overlooked in favor of Lattakia. Pompey's conquest in 64BC brought Jableh under Roman control, and by the Christian period of the Byzantine empire it was important enough to serve as the seat of a bishop. Jableh was taken by the Arabs in 638.

After their capture of Antioch (modern day Antakya, now in Turkey) in 1098, the Crusaders, under Raymond, Count of Toulouse, began to force the local Muslim ruler of Jableh to pay tribute. He spent the next decade trying to find protection from among the Muslim leaders in Tripoli and Damascus, but Jableh was taken by the Crusaders in 1109 under Tancred. He incorporated it into the Principality of Antioch and renamed it Zibel. The Roman amphitheater was then turned into a Crusader castle.

The town held its own duke and bishop by the middle of the 12th century. It was recaptured by the Arabs under Salah al-Din during his sweep up the coast in 1188, but quickly returned to Crusader control after Salah al-Din's successors abandoned it. The Hospitallers took control, but their command was disputed by the Templars. In 1285, shortly after his successful siege of Qalaat al-Marqab, the Mamluk Sultan Qalaun captured Jableh. It since became a center for trade and religious pilgrimage for the surrounding mountain villages.

While Jableh has been a part of nearly every period of Syrian history, all that remains of that history to visit today is the small Roman amphitheater, located right in the

center of town. Built as a free-standing structure, the amphitheater probably held about 7,000 spectators and was 90 meters in diameter. While not in the same league as the amphitheater in Bosra, it is still one of the more impressive amphitheaters in the country, larger than those in Shahba and Tadmor/Palmyra, and better preserved than those in Afamia/Apamea and al-Nabi Houri/Cyrrhus. Currently undergoing some restoration, the grounds surrounding the amphitheater are also being excavated. There is a modest entrance fee to visit.

Nearby the amphitheater is a beautiful mosque housing the tomb of a local Muslim saint, Sidi Ibrahim Ben Adham (died 778). The mosque stands on the site of a church constructed by the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (ruled 610-641), whose effort to recover Syria from the Persians was foiled by the unexpected new threat from the Arabs. The mosque is often closed outside of prayer time, but if you ask around you should be able to find the caretaker and take a peek inside. Restoration of the mosque is being planned.

Ras Shamra/Ugarit

Ras Shamra/Ugarit is one of the most important bronze age archaeological sites in Syria, and was the capital of a large kingdom that controlled much of the eastern Mediterranean coast. The Ugaritic language was one of the first to develop an alphabet, at around 1400 BC. There is debate as to whether the Ugaritic or Phoenician alphabet came first, and there is likely some relation between the two. While the site itself is not in the most well-preserved state, it is nonetheless an interesting place to visit and only a short trip outside of Lattakia.

Ugaritic is an extinct Northwest Semitic language, classified by some as a dialect of the Amorite language. It is known through the Ugaritic texts discovered by French archaeologists in 1929 at Ugarit,including several major literary texts, notably the Baal cycle. It has been used by scholars of the Hebrew Bible to clarify Biblical Hebrew texts and has revealed ways in which the cultures of ancient Israel and Judah found parallels in the neighboring cultures.

The Ugaritic alphabet is a cuneiform script used beginning in the 15th century BC. Like most Semitic scripts, it is an abjad, where each symbol stands for a consonant, leaving the reader to supply the appropriate vowel.

Although it appears similar to Mesopotamian cuneiform (whose writing techniques it borrowed), its symbols and symbol meanings are unrelated. It is the oldest example of the family of West Semitic scripts such as the Phoenician, Paleo-Hebrew, and Aramaic alphabets (including the Hebrew alphabet). The so-called "long alphabet" has 30 letters while the "short alphabet" has 22. Other languages (particularly Hurrian) were occasionally written in the Ugarit area, although not elsewhere.

Clay tablets written in Ugaritic provide the earliest evidence of both the Levantine ordering of the alphabet, which gave rise to the alphabetic order of the Hebrew,Greek, and Latin alphabets; and the South Semitic order, which gave rise to the order of the Ge'ez script. The script was written from left to right.

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