

THE ARAB CASTLE IN PALMYRA

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The investigations of the Arab Castle began this year¹ after a preliminary prospection in 1989 which yielded encouraging results. The season was devoted to surveying and measuring the castle in order to prepare detailed plans and sections. Some limited clearing work was carried out, recovering evidence useful in establishing the date of the castle.

The castle was built on a rocky hill overlooking ancient Palmyra from the northwest. The building stands on an outcrop of rock at the top of the hill, falling steeply both to the southwest and southeast. The location of the stronghold on this irregular surface inevitably determined its plan and internal arrangement. The whole structure is surrounded by a moat, which was cut in the rock and made deeper by an embankment supported by a retaining wall.

The construction of the castle is commonly ascribed to the Druze emir Fakhr ed-Din Ibn Ma'an (1595-1634), but after last year's prospection it became obvious that at least two phases of construction could be discerned in the building, and that the pottery sherds found in several spots inside date back to the medieval period (13th-14th century). Further research this year fully confirmed this assumption. The castle underwent a number of extensions, reconstructions and repairs while in use. The earliest stronghold was roughly triangular in shape and remains the core of the building as it is seen today. New segments were added at least twice, and some of the earliest towers were engulfed. Doors and windows were closed by new walls, passages closed, and some of the machicolations, stripped of their original function, became level with new courts. In some

¹ The group working in the castle included Messrs Janusz Byliński, arabist and archaeologist, Jan Kempa, architect, and Ahmad Tana representing the Palmyra Museum.

towers new doors were pierced to facilitate communication with the new segments. Although, there is nothing that could help say how much time passed between these consecutive phases of construction, two different kinds of fabric can be easily distinguished: irregularly hewn stones laid in courses leveled with mortar (almost exclusive in the earliest phase), and regular blocks (at least some of them may have come from dismantled tombs or city walls), prevalent in the later phase. The exact delineation of the different phases has been left for the next season when appropriate soundings will be made.

Pottery samples were collected both inside the castle and on the slopes of the hill. Both sets of finds are homogenous, containing sherds of glazed vessels characteristic of the late 13th and 14th century and some pieces that might date back to the early 13th. Unfortunately, the fragments collected are too small to allow a full assessment of shapes and designs. Nonetheless, the variety of types is striking, although all of them seem to be Syrian products and no imported ware has yet been found. On the other hand, a number of clay pipes found all in one room of the castle are evident proof of occupation in the Ottoman period.

Measurements taken during this season are sufficient to draw a plan of the castle's perimeter and of the rooms and halls on the two floors of the northern part. Levels have been established and marked in the whole structure. Some architectural elements were cleared as, for instance, the flight of stairs leading to the central segment of the southern part and an outer draining channel parallel to the southeastern wall in the corridor leading to a large hall in the northwestern corner of the castle.

It is this hall that was chosen for a fuller excavation this season, mainly in view of the installations it contained, which were likely to determine its function and its relations to other parts of the castle. The floor was covered with a thick layer of dust, rubbish and animal dung, only an outline of two circular structures being vis-

ible on the surface. At first glance they seemed to be related to the processing and storage of food. Eventually, we uncovered a circular stone enclosure with a grooved stone in the center, which in all probability was a grain mill; it is in the southern corner of the hall. In the eastern corner we cleared the fill from a sunken circular silo and from another half-circular silo contiguous to it. Both containers were set within a roughly quadrangular structure made of stone, red baked bricks, mud-bricks and some reused parts of basalt grinding stones. The structure was partly destroyed. Under the highest floor there is another, on which the mill was built, and which was laid on top of a fill of crushed mortar, pebbles and rubbish (including pottery sherds) used for leveling the irregularly sloping bedrock. The two containers just mentioned were built lowest down, on an irregularly surfaced foundation made of several layers of lime mortar. This foundation is visible in the corridor adjacent to the mill, the floor of which is on the lower level.

The layer of animal dung and rubbish above the floor associated with the mill contained pottery sherds, clay pipes, fragments of cloth and leather shoes, wooden spoons and numerous fragments of broken grinding stones. Many sherds certainly belong to the 13th-14th century, but a fragment of an underglaze-painted, frit-body vessel of the Raqqa type may date back to the early 13th century.

Excavations were conducted also in the walled terrace of tower VII (part of the earliest structure, now inside the castle), where an arched imprint in the wall plaster suggested a possible place of worship. The dust and rubble removed, it became clear that the terrace had been resurfaced after blocking the stairca-