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The Castle of Safed: Architecture and Socio-Political Landscape in Thirteenth-Century Galilee

ABSTRACT: *This essay assesses the Castle of Safed's effect on the socio-political landscape of thirteenth-century Galilee on the basis of Frankish and Arabic period sources. It seeks to contextualize the castle's reconstruction in the 1240s, examines the relationship between Safed and Damascus, and determines the site's impact on the region's military, economic, and religious spheres.*

KEYWORDS: *medieval history; Galilee; Castle of Safed; Damascus; Franks; Templars; Sultan Saladin; Mamluks; Sultan Baybars; reconstruction*

Introduction

The Castle of Safed,¹ located in Galilee, played a pivotal role in establishing Mamluk dominance and hastening the decline of the Crusader States in the latter half of the thirteenth century. Situated strategically between Acre (a city in modern-day Israel) and Damascus (a city in modern-day Syria), Safed was a military stronghold, a center of regional power, and a hub for cultural integration. Although its construction was a costly endeavor, Safed proved to be a valuable asset for Franks and Mamluks alike, ultimately shaping the balance of power in the region. By assessing how the relationship between Safed and Damascus changed in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and how this impacted both the castle itself and the region's various religious groups, I argue that Safed's reconstruction influenced the socio-political landscape militarily, economically, and religiously.

The evidence employed in this essay derives from Frankish and Arabic period sources such as William of Tyre's *History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, completed in the early 1180s,² Ibn al-Furat's fourteenth-century work *Tarikh al-Duwal wa'l-Muluk* ("History of the Dynasties and Kingdoms"),³ and two translations of the anonymous 1260s treatise *De Constructione Castri Saphet* ("About Castle Safed's Construction"), one by Hugh Kennedy⁴ and the other by Malcolm Barber and Keith Bate.⁵ William of Tyre's chronicle offers a Frankish perspective on Safed's early history;⁶ Ibn al-Furat's text provides a Muslim account of the region in the thirteenth century;⁷ and *De Constructione Castri Saphet* outlines the castle's reconstruction, illustrates its impact on local residents, and highlights its purpose of deterring Muslims from

¹ While "Safed" is the spelling adopted in this essay, alternate spellings (such as "Safad" and "Saphet") have been retained in the verbatim quotations from various sources. All diacritics of the Arabica have been omitted.

² William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, vol. 2, trans. Emily Atwater Babcock and August C. Krey (Columbia University Press, 1943).

³ Ibn al-Furat, *Ayyubids, Mamluks and Crusaders: Selections from the Tarikh al-Duwal wa'l-Muluk of Ibn al-Furat*, ed. Ursula Lyons and Malcolm Cameron Lyons, vol. 2 (W. Heffer and Sons Ltd, 1971).

⁴ "Appendix: *De Constructione Castri Saphet* (Translation)," trans. Hugh Kennedy, in Hugh Kennedy, *Crusader Castles* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 190–198.

⁵ "*De Constructione Castri Saphet* (Translation with Annotations)," trans. Malcolm Barber and Keith Bate, in *The Templars: Selected Sources*, ed. Malcolm Barber and Keith Bate (Manchester University Press, 2002), 84–93.

⁶ William of Tyre, *History*.

⁷ Ibn al-Furat, *Ayyubids*.

preaching the “blasphemies of Muhammad,” thereby emphasizing the region’s religious divide.⁸ While historians usually explore *De Constructione Castri Saphet* for the information it contains about the history of Safed,⁹ I view the text in its greater socio-political context to explain why the castle’s reconstruction in the early 1240s was significant from military, economic, and religious standpoints.

Safed features in a wide range of scholarly works that have been utilized for this essay. A short article by Emmanuel Damati, Yosef Stepansky, and Hervé Barbé focuses on the site from an archaeological perspective.¹⁰ The Ayyubid Sultan Saladin’s twelfth-century campaign to take the castle is covered in Carole Hillenbrand’s monograph *Islam and the Crusades*.¹¹ Various aspects of Safed’s prominent role in the Templars’ regional administration are addressed in Jonathan Riley-Smith’s 1972 article, “Some Lesser Officials in Latin Syria,”¹² in Malcolm Barber’s and Keith Bate’s historical introduction to their collection of Templar sources;¹³ and in Kristian Molin’s 1997 article, “The Non-Military Functions of Crusader Fortifications, 1187–circa 1380.”¹⁴ Last but not least, Elizabeth J. Mylod’s doctoral dissertation, “Latin Christian Pilgrimage in the Holy Land, 1187–1291,” investigates how spiritual journeys to the Eastern Mediterranean lands were impacted by the ever-changing socio-political landscape of the time,¹⁵ for example, by Saladin’s 1187/1188 campaign against the Franks in the region, by the Templars’ repossession of Safed in the 1240s, and by the Mamluk Sultan Baybars’s siege and conquest of the castle in 1266.

Structured chronologically, my essay begins with the pre-reconstruction period (1157–1240), continues with the reconstruction period since the early 1240s (1240–1266), and concludes with the post-reconstruction period (1266–1268). Coverage of the pre-reconstruction period focuses on Safed’s origins and provides context for the rising political and religious tensions between the area’s Christians and the Muslim presence in Damascus. The reconstruction period reflects the tensions between Safed and Damascus in the 1240s and demonstrates why Safed was such a valuable site for both Christians and Muslims. Lastly, the post-reconstruction period offers insights into the conflict that led to the Mamluks’ repossession of Safed and how this impacted the area’s future relationship with Damascus.

⁸ “Appendix: *De Constructione*,” trans. Kennedy, 198.

⁹ See, for example, Uri Zvi Shachar, “Enshrined Fortification: A Trialogue on the Rise and Fall of Safed,” *The Medieval History Journal* 23, no. 2 (2020): 265–290.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Damati, Yosef Stepansky, and Hervé Barbé, “Safed,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern, vol. 4, [online](#).

¹¹ Carole Hillenbrand, *Islam and the Crusades: Collected Papers* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

¹² Jonathan Riley-Smith, “Some Lesser Officials in Latin Syria” (1972), in Jonathan Riley-Smith, *Crusaders and Settlers in the Latin East* (Ashgate Publishing, 2008), no. 10.

¹³ Malcolm Barber and Keith Bate, “Introduction,” in *The Templars*, ed. Malcolm Barber and Keith Bate (Manchester University Press, 2002), 11–12.

¹⁴ Kristian Molin, “The Non-Military Functions of Crusader Fortifications, 1187–circa 1380,” *Journal of Medieval History* 23, no. 4 (1997): 367–388.

¹⁵ Elizabeth J. Mylod, “Latin Christian Pilgrimage in the Holy Land, 1187–1291” (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2013).

1. Pre-Reconstruction: Rising Tensions (1157–1240)

During the first decade of his independent rule (1174–1184), the Ayyubid Sultan Saladin concentrated primarily on consolidating his authority by overcoming his Muslim rivals and solidifying his family's control over Egypt and Syria.¹⁶ The Franks in the Crusader States of the Eastern Mediterranean lands quickly realized that they needed to seize the moment and obstruct Saladin's plans to rally the Islamic forces of the Middle East in a *jihad* against the Christians.¹⁷ Consequently, the Templars fortified the Galilean crossing of the River Jordan at Jacob's Ford (Chastelet) in 1178–1179, but Saladin took the time out of his busy Ayyubid consolidation schedule to defeat them and destroyed the site.¹⁸ Repeatedly mentioned in the Qur'an as a spiritual struggle, *jihad* is occasionally called the "sixth pillar" of Islam; traditionally, there are two forms of *jihad*: while the "greater" *jihad* focuses on internal self-discipline against base desires, the "lesser" *jihad* involves military efforts to defend or expand the world of Islam.¹⁹ Thus, Saladin's campaigns against the Franks should be viewed as manifestations of the "lesser" *jihad*.

In 1185, Saladin turned his full attention against the Franks, thereby marking a strategic shift in his objectives.²⁰ It should be noted that Safed, by this time, had already been established as a secure and well-fortified site in Galilee. As early as 1157, King Baldwin III of Jerusalem had taken advantage of the location to retreat there during a campaign against Saladin's predecessor Nur ad-Din (d. 1174). William of Tyre described the events of 1157 as follows:

"The king [i.e., Baldwin III of Jerusalem] remained surrounded by a few knights who still clung to him. He perceived, however, that the lines were broken and that the army, disorganized, was everywhere exposed to the fury of the enemy. Moreover, the strength of the enemy was increasing from every direction while our ranks were giving way, as in fact had been the case from the beginning. Accordingly, he wisely withdrew to a hill nearby to provide for his own safety. From there, with great difficulty avoiding the enemy now on his right and again on his left, he succeeded, thanks to the horse which carried him, in reaching the fortress of Safed, which is on the same mountain."²¹

Like Imad al-Din Zengi (d. 1146) before him and Saladin after him, Nur ad-Din had endeavored to expand his territories in the Eastern Mediterranean lands at the expense of the Crusader States, thereby heightening tensions that routinely resulted in military conflicts throughout the region. During these campaigns, Safed was a place of refuge for the Franks and their allies among the locals in Galilee. In 1168, King Amalric of Jerusalem entrusted the site to the Templars who fortified and garrisoned it.²² Thus, Safed became a critical location both for defending Frankish interests and for symbolizing the larger religious and political struggles in the region, especially since the Templars had been founded in the 1120s to

¹⁶ Hillenbrand, *Islam and the Crusades*, 165.

¹⁷ Malcolm Barber and Keith Bate, eds., *The Templars* (Manchester University Press, 2002), 11.

¹⁸ Barber and Bate, *Templars*, 11.

¹⁹ Hillenbrand, *Islam and the Crusades*, 232.

²⁰ Hillenbrand, *Islam and the Crusades*, 165.

²¹ William of Tyre, *History*, 261.

²² Jochen Burgdorf, "The Templars and the Kings of Jerusalem," in *The Templars and Their Sources*, ed. Karl Borchardt, Karoline Döring, Philippe Josserand, Helen J. Nicholson (Routledge, 2017), 33.

protect pilgrims in the Holy Land from attacks by Muslim bandits.²³ In 1187, Saladin famously defeated the Kingdom of Jerusalem's army at the Battle of Hattin and recaptured Jerusalem for Islam. This led to the Third Crusade (1189–1192), which ended in a truce without a clear winner.²⁴ Although Saladin won major victories throughout the land, including his takeover of Safed in 1188, he was unable to fully expel the Franks from the Holy Land, and by the time he died in 1193, the Franks had regrouped in Acre.²⁵ While in control of several Mediterranean ports, the Franks managed to influence trade and pilgrimage movements, and they rebuilt the Kingdom of Jerusalem, albeit on a considerably smaller scale.²⁶

The resultant shift from Jaffa to Acre as the main port of entry for Christian pilgrims soon transformed travel to and in the Holy Land. What had once been a short overland journey from Jaffa to Jerusalem became a more varied and adventurous route.²⁷ Pilgrims arriving in Acre often traveled along the coast or ventured on a broader circuit that took them through Acre, Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Galilee.²⁸ Their freedom of movement was facilitated by military religious orders—like the Templars—who fortified key points, provided armed escorts, and ensured the overall safety on the pilgrimage routes. The Templars' efforts in particular turned a potentially dangerous journey into a much more secure and accessible expedition.

In the decades following Saladin's death, numerous raids were carried out against Safed, leaving the castle in a sorry state. Due to these incursions and a general fear of warfare, people vacated the area around Safed, which left the land virtually uninhabited. While the castle was still useful to some extent, both the Templars—who were now headquartered in Acre—and the Muslim rulers of Damascus were not keen on undertaking the enormous task of reconstructing the castle, so it fell into further disrepair. According to Ibn al-Furat,

"Safad remained a ruin with its lands being held by the rulers of Damascus, none of whom were concerned to rebuild it. Then al-Malik al-Salih 'Imad al-Din Isma'il [d. 1245], who had taken over Damascus, gave it to the Franks together with other places, so as to induce them to help him in his war against al-Malik al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub [d. 1249], the ruler of Egypt."²⁹

This explains why Safed was returned to the Franks in 1240. Following Saladin's death, his relatives had divided the Ayyubid empire among themselves, and by 1240 al-Salih Ismail of Damascus (Saladin's nephew) and al-Salih Ayyub of Egypt (Saladin's great-nephew) were engaged in full-scale dynastic warfare. I would argue that the decision to give Safed to the Franks was driven by political expediency, as al-Salih Ismail of Damascus sought to enlist Frankish support against his rival, al-Salih Ayyub of Egypt, while simultaneously neutralizing (or at least minimizing) the threat of a Frankish incursion into his own territories. This temporary alliance of Franks and Damascene Muslims against Egyptian Muslims reflects the shifting coalitions of the time and exemplifies the saying that "the enemy of my enemy is my

²³ Barber and Bate, "Introduction," 1–2.

²⁴ Hillenbrand, *Islam and the Crusades*, 165.

²⁵ Hillenbrand, *Islam and the Crusades*, 165–166.

²⁶ Hillenbrand, *Islam and the Crusades*, 166.

²⁷ Mylod, "Latin Christian Pilgrimage," 6.

²⁸ Mylod, "Latin Christian Pilgrimage," 6.

²⁹ Ibn al-Furat, *Ayyubids*, 88.

friend." In this new constellation of the early 1240s, Safed (now Frankish again) opposed Egypt on religious and political grounds, while Damascus opposed Egypt on dynastic and political grounds. After the so-called Barons' Crusade of 1239, the overall political climate was briefly shifting in favor of the Christians, and al-Salih Ismail of Damascus recognized Safed's potential as a formidable buffer between his own territories and those of his Egyptian antagonist; just as he envisioned, Safed became a magnificent Frankish fortress and a significant force to be reckoned with.

2. The Reconstruction: Assets and Ambitions (1240–1266)

Safed's location in Galilee was important for several reasons: it was surrounded by steep terrain, which rendered it more easily defensible, but also by fertile land, which ensured its supplies; it was situated near several pilgrimage sites, which made it attractive to Christian visitors; and it was located on a key trade route between Acre and Damascus, which turned it into a major draw for merchants and, even more importantly, facilitated the movement of workers from afar and the transporting of building materials from its hinterland. The reconstruction of Safed in the early 1240s marked a watershed moment in the history of the religious and political tensions between Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land. Materials for the castle's construction could be found in abundance nearby; however, the lack of people in the surrounding area was one of the biggest challenges the Templars had to take on, apart from the costs associated with the castle's long-term maintenance and garrisoning. According to the treatise *De Constructione Castri Saphet*,

"in the first two and a half years, the house of the Temple spent on building the Castle of Saphet, in addition to the revenues and income of the castle itself, eleven hundred thousand Saracen bezants, and in each following year more or less forty thousand Saracen bezants. Every day, victuals are dispensed to 1,700 or more, and in time of war, 2,200. For the daily establishment [*stablimento cotidiano*] of the castle, 50 knights, 30 serjeants brothers, and 50 Turcupoles are required with their horses and arms, and 300 crossbowmen, for the works and other offices, 820, and 400 slaves. There are used there every year on average more than 12,000 mule-loads of barley and corn apart from other victuals, in addition to payments to the paid soldiers and hired persons, and in addition to the horses and tack and arms and other necessities which are not easy to account."³⁰

Safed's location—with its fertile lands and abundant resources—made it not just eminently suited as a military stronghold; it also rendered it a profitable asset, at least in theory. However, Safed's potential for prosperity had been greatly reduced by the recurring raids against the castle itself and its surrounding areas during much of the earlier thirteenth century. While Safed's reconstruction in the 1240s was intended to counter these raids and create a climate of stability, it also highlighted the region's religious and territorial polarization and set the stage for further conflict in the coming years. In the beginning, the Christians viewed the rebuilding of Safed as a religious imperative, symbolized by the actions of Benedict of Alignan, the Bishop of Marseille (in office 1229–1267). According to the treatise *De Constructione Castri Saphet*, which, not surprisingly, interpreted the construction process at Safed from a decidedly Christian perspective,

³⁰ "Appendix: *De Constructione*," trans. Kennedy, 196.

"[t]he bishop of Marseilles himself came with those pilgrims he could bring and pitched his tents on the site of the synagogue of the Jews and the mosque of the Saracens so that by this he indicated and clearly showed that the Castle of Saphet would be rebuilt to weaken the unfaithfulness of the infidels and strengthen and defend the faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ."³¹

This demonstrative act of the visiting prelate underscored the polarized atmosphere in the region as the Christians sought to reaffirm their dominance. According to Ibn al-Furat, the Franks also forced Muslim prisoners to work at the site,³² which suggest that the latter may have contributed significantly to the reconstruction efforts. However, what transpired next highlighted the ongoing tension between the Franks, their forced laborers, the neighboring Muslim rulers, and the Franks' powerful ally, al-Salih Ismail of Damascus. Ibn al-Furat reported the events at Safed as follows:

"When the Franks got possession of it, they called in Muslim prisoners who were in their lands to build it up. There were a thousand of these prisoners, while the Franks there numbered less than two hundred. The prisoners made common cause and agreed on a resolve to attack them. Then they thought that they must have someone to give them shelter, on whom they could rely for defense. So they wrote to the emir Saif al-Din 'Alf b. Qilfj al-Nuri, who at that time was holding the Castle of 'Ajlun [in today's Jordan] on behalf of al-Malik al-Nasir Da'ud, the ruler of Kerak [also in today's Jordan], asking him to write to his master, requesting him to give them the order to attack the Franks and to send them someone to take over the fortress."³³

While the Franks had secured the manpower needed to reconstruct Safed, the numerical ratio between them and their forced laborers harbored explosive potential. However, the intended uprising did not materialize. The Muslim prisoners' plan was betrayed to the Franks' ally, al-Salih Ismail of Damascus; he informed the Templars; and the Templars seized the Muslim prisoners, took them to Acre, and executed them.³⁴ The events illustrate al-Salih Ismail's commitment to his delicate alliance with the Franks, and it is worth noting that the Templars, at least in this case, performed the punishment of their Muslim prisoners relatively far away from the actual building site and from any majority-Muslim political entities. This, however, did not stop the grim news from getting out and eventually entering the records that Ibn al-Furat used as his sources.

Economically speaking, Safed's greatest assets were the fertile lands, bountiful crops, ample fresh water supplies, and valuable stone quarries that surrounded it. These assets were, of course, also a major reason why both sides valued Safed so highly. The anonymous author of the treatise *De Constructione Castri Saphet* addressed the economic means by which Safed was able to sustain itself, as these things could be traded and boost local revenue while also keeping the castle's inhabitants from going hungry:

"To show the excellence of the castle so that so much work does not seem useless, burdensome, dispensable and insufficient, or unfit for habitation, it should be noted that the Castle of Saphet has a temperate and healthy climate, rich in gardens, vines, trees and grass, gentle and smiling, rich and abundant in the fertility and variety of fruit. There figs, pomegranates, almonds, and olives grow and flourish. God blesses it with rain from the sky and richness from the soil and abundance of corn, vines, oil, pulses, herbs, and choice fruits,

³¹ "Appendix: *De Constructione*," trans. Kennedy, 194.

³² Ibn al-Furat, *Ayyubids*, 88.

³³ Ibn al-Furat, *Ayyubids*, 88.

³⁴ Ibn al-Furat, *Ayyubids*, 89.

plenty of milk and honey, and pastures suitable for the feeding of animals, glades, trees, and woods for making lime-kilns and for cooking plentiful foods, very good stone quarries in the place for building work and irrigation from springs and large cisterns to water animals and irrigate plants, not only outside the castle, but even within where very good fresh water abounds and several great cisterns suitable for any purpose.”³⁵

Thus, while the land required a lot of maintenance, it was abundant in commodities, benefiting the local economies and bringing revenue to its inhabitants. This is why both Christians and Muslims placed such a high valuation on the castle and its surrounding areas. Things were quite different once one crossed the River Jordan and traveled east in the direction of Damascus. As the treatise *De Constructione Castri Saphet* explained,

“[b]etween the River Jordan and Damascus, on the other hand, the land remained uncultivated and like a desert for fear of the Castle of Saphet, whence great raids and depredations and layings waste are made as far as Damascus.”³⁶

It must be noted that the land to the east, the so-called Terre de Suète, was actually quite fertile. What the treatise’s anonymous author implied, though, was that the Frankish reconstruction of Safed rendered the Terre de Suète uninhabitable to its Muslim population “for fear” of Safed’s Templar garrison’s burning-and-pillaging incursions (commonly known as *chevauchées*). Thus, the Christian rebuilding efforts—while initially the result of an alliance between the Franks and al-Salih Ismail of Damascus—would ultimately fan the flames of war and heighten the tensions between the two sides. Meanwhile, the Templars’ presence at Safed made the local inhabitants of its surrounding areas (many of whom would have been Eastern Christians) feel safer because they could seek shelter in the castle during military campaigns.³⁷ Safed’s reconstruction in the early 1240s facilitated the return of approximately 10,000 (presumably Eastern Christians) peasants to 260 villages that had been either abandoned or controlled by Muslims ever since Saladin’s conquest of Galilee in 1187/1188.³⁸

Offering protection to pilgrims was one of the religious responsibilities of Christian strongholds, and Safed was no exception. In fact, the anonymous author of the treatise *De Constructione Castri Saphet* clearly emphasized the site’s religious significance:

“Likewise near there on a mountain toward Tiberias is the place where, with five barley loaves and twelve fishes Our Lord satisfied 5,000 men, with twelve baskets of pieces left over. Near there is the place where Jesus showed himself to His disciples and ate with them as is read in the Gospel for the fourth Sunday after Easter and that is the place commonly called the Table of the Lord [i.e., presumably, Tabgha] where there is a church and a solemn pilgrimage. Again nearby, by the Sea of Tiberias, is the village called Bethsaida, where Peter and Andrew, Philip, and James the Less were born and where Christ chose Peter and Andrew and the two sons of Zebedee to be Apostles. Again near there by the Sea of Tiberias toward Tiberias City is the place called Magdalon, where it is said Mary Magdalene was born. Places even more holy, like Nazareth, Mount Tabor, Cana of Galilee and many others can be visited more freely and securely because of the building of the Castle of Saphet. Because of this, it can be seen how much was diminished and carried off from the infidel Saracens and how much Christianity grew and expanded because of the construction and establishment of the Castle of Saphet, because it was done to confound, to weaken, and to hold back the infidel and to

³⁵ “Appendix: *De Constructione*,” trans. Kennedy, 196–197.

³⁶ “Appendix: *De Constructione*,” trans. Kennedy, 197.

³⁷ Molin, “Non-Military Functions,” 379.

³⁸ Molin, “Non-Military Functions,” 379.

expand, multiply, and comfort the faithful, to the honor of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the exaltation of the church of the Lord God."³⁹

This demonstrates how Safed's reconstruction benefited the Franks both economically and religiously. With so many pilgrimage sites surrounding Safed, its reconstruction was a strategic means to raise revenue, attract able-bodied workers, and provide security—as well as a refuge—for pilgrims.

Medieval castles controlled by the Templars and other military religious orders were more than just mighty fortresses. They served as administrative hubs for the surrounding territories, housing offices where revenues, taxes, and important documents were kept, and where daily operations were organized.⁴⁰ For example, the seven towers of the inner bailey at Safed contained numerous offices to handle the Templars' local estates and ensure the smooth governance of the nearby villages.⁴¹ This illustrates the dual role of castles as both defensive structures and centers of economic and administrative control. Supporting this system were officials known as *casaliers*, whose responsibilities included the management of relations between the Templars and the inhabitants of the local villages.⁴² *Casaliers* played a vital role in overseeing the economic activities of the villages, such as collecting revenues and ensuring compliance with the Templars' normative texts.⁴³ The presence of a Templar *casalier* at Safed illustrates that these officials were directly tied to the castle's administrative functions. Thus, castles and *casaliers* were features of governance that balanced military needs with economic administration. On a more tragic note, it was also a Templar *casalier*, an individual by the name of Brother Leo, who betrayed his own garrison when the Mamluk Sultan Baybars besieged and conquered the Castle of Safed in 1266.⁴⁴

3. Post-Reconstruction: Religious Repossession (1266–1268)

Safed's reconstruction in the 1240s was not just a strategic military undertaking with strong economic undertones. Its proximity to significant New Testament sites also secured the region of Galilee for Christian pilgrimages, promoted the Franks' economic endeavors, and raised considerable revenue. In short, according to the unknown author of *De Constructione Castri Saphet*, the castle's rebuilding was a means to "expand, multiply, and comfort the faithful."⁴⁵ The dynamics shifted dramatically, however, when Baybars and his Mamluks took Safed in 1266.⁴⁶ Ibn al-Furat described the scene as follows:

"In the morning, the Sultan took his seat, and the emirs and the leaders from the Egyptian and the Syrian forces came to pay their respects to him. He thanked them for their efforts and told them of his satisfaction with them. 'It may be,' he said, 'that I have blamed some individuals amongst you and issued rebukes or punishments. My only aim in that was to spur you on to this great victory, and from this moment we shall be

³⁹ "Appendix: *De Constructione*," trans. Kennedy, 198.

⁴⁰ Molin, "Non-Military Functions," 378.

⁴¹ Molin, "Non-Military Functions," 378.

⁴² Riley-Smith, "Some Lesser Officials," 12.

⁴³ Riley-Smith, "Some Lesser Officials," 12.

⁴⁴ *The Templar of Tyre*, trans. Paul Crawford (Ashgate, 2003), 51.

⁴⁵ "Appendix: *De Constructione*," trans. Kennedy, 198.

⁴⁶ Shachar, "Enshrined Fortification," 280; Mylod, "Latin Christian Pilgrimage," 10.

friends.' Then the Sultan informed the emirs that the prisoners from Safad had come out without a recognized safe-conduct. He told them how an arrangement had been made for them to leave without their armor, how they had broken it, and how they had not made him swear an oath. So he ordered them to behead the prisoners. They rode off and brought up the Templar and Hospitaller knights, together with all the Franks who had been taken out of Safad, and they were beheaded on a hill near Safad in a place where they had been used to behead Muslims. Only two of them were saved, of whom one was their messenger."⁴⁷

This rendition of the events underscores Sultan Baybars's sophistry and sheds some light on the circumstances that led to the Franks' ultimate loss of Safed and to the death of the Templars. It appears that the Templar garrison—ready to surrender—had left the castle "without a recognized safe-conduct," and that an "arrangement" for them "to leave without their armor" (presumably to vacate the area and relocate to Acre) had been broken. Since the Templars had "not made him [i.e., Baybars] swear an oath, he was under no obligation to honor any safe-conduct, which means that the Templars were doomed. The Templars' execution on a hill formerly used by them for the beheading of Muslims added an air of retribution. By sparing two Christian prisoners, including a "messenger" (presumably the Templar *casalier* Brother Leo, who had orchestrated the betrayal of his own garrison),⁴⁸ Baybars balanced retribution with an opportunity for diplomacy. According to Ibn al-Furat,

"[a]s for Sultan Baibars, when he had the Franks killed, as we have already shown, he entered the citadel of Safad and distributed amongst the emirs the equipment of the Franks and the slaves, female and male. The armory which he had brought with him was moved to the citadel, and he began carrying in there by himself a load of arrows on his shoulder. The people followed his example, and so the armory and the mangonels were moved there in the shortest possible time. He sought men to garrison it from Damascus, and the costs of this garrison were settled at eighty thousand dirhams a month. The emirs were employed to look after all the lands belonging to Safad; one mosque was built in the citadel there and another in the *rabad*."⁴⁹

Thus, in addition to annihilating the Templars, rewarding his entourage with the plunder gained, restocking Safed's armory, and garrisoning the castle as a Mamluk military stronghold, Baybars commemorated his victory by constructing two mosques, one in the castle itself and the other one in its suburb (*rabad*), thereby connecting Safed both architecturally and religiously to the world of Islam. Consolidating his Mamluks' control over Syria, Baybars severed Safed's ties to Acre and, instead, connected it to Damascus, its most significant urban neighbor to the east. Thus, Safed's history reflects the region's broader conflicts and cultural shifts. According to Ibn al-Furat, Baybars turned Safed into a major center and regular stopover for his military campaigns in Syria during the later 1260s, and he strengthened its defensive capabilities by further rebuilding it:

"When the Sultan reached Gaza [i.e., he was coming from Egypt], messengers came to him from the Franks, bringing a gift, together with a number of Muslim prisoners whom he dismissed after giving them clothes. Then he traveled to Safad (Saphet), and on his arrival there, he heard that the Tartars [i.e., the Mongols] were making for al-Rahba [i.e., the primary Mamluk fortress on the Euphrates]. He organized the rebuilding of Safad and then set off quickly for Damascus, which he reached on the 14th of Rajab (10 April). He concerned himself with the affair of al-Rahba, but he then heard that the Tartars there had been pursued by the people of the place who had killed some of them, taken prisoners, and routed them. One of the Tartar leaders was

⁴⁷ Ibn al-Furat, *Ayyubids*, 95.

⁴⁸ *Templar of Tyre*, trans. Crawford, 51. Leo apostatized and became a Muslim.

⁴⁹ Ibn al-Furat, *Ayyubids*, 96.

amongst the dead. When the Sultan verified this news, he returned toward Safad after having stayed at Damascus for five days."⁵⁰

After Baybars had conquered Safed in 1266, he transformed the castle and its surroundings into a military, administrative, urban, and religious center. For example, he fortified the castle by adding an outer defensive wall and constructing a massive round tower, which stood 120 cubits (approximately 60 meters) high and 70 cubits (approximately 35 meters) across.⁵¹ This tower featured a spiral ramp, which was most likely used to facilitate movement and defense. These and other enhancements solidified Safed's strategic importance, enabling its suburb to become a provincial capital and grow into one of Mamluk Syria's most prominent towns.⁵²

Conclusion

Safed's reconstruction in the early 1240s played a crucial role in shaping the socio-political landscape of the Holy Land. Strategically located between Frankish Acre and (first Ayyubid and later Mamluk) Damascus, its fortification served military, economic, and religious purposes. From the Frankish perspective, Safed protected the region of Galilee, secured abundant economic resources, and guarded Christian pilgrimage routes near significant New Testament sites. However, in doing so, it also intensified political, territorial, and religious tensions, particularly with the Mamluks who—from 1250 on—saw the castle as a symbol of Crusader defiance. When Baybars captured Safed in 1266, he refortified it and transformed it into a center of Mamluk military, administrative, and religious authority, thus signaling the end of Crusader influence in the region. Most importantly perhaps, this essay's study of Safed can serve as a paradigm to examine other sites—particularly those located in the Crusader States of the twelfth and thirteenth century—much more holistically, thereby enhancing our understanding of the entire region and its complex and ever-changing history.

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⁵⁰ Ibn al-Furat, *Ayyubids*, 101.

⁵¹ Damati, Stepansky, and Barbé, "Safed," [online](#).

⁵² Damati, Stepansky, and Barbé, "Safed," [online](#).