

Ajloun Castle

Contributed by Micah Key

From nearly anywhere in the northern town of Ajloun, the castle can be seen, dominating the settlement below from its 1250-meter perch on the top of Jebel Auf. It is the first thing most people think of when they hear the name "Ajloun," and other than a mosque dating back to the 14th century, it is the chief historical attraction in this medium-sized town tucked in the midst of the green hills of Gilead.

The castle's true name is Qala'at Rabadh, and its history begins sometime before the 12th century, when a Christian monastery headed by a monk named Ajloun was built on the summit of the highest hill overlooking the town below. By the end of the Second Crusade (1145-1149), the monastery had been abandoned. The Christian Crusader kingdoms were still reeling from their recent losses on the battlefield, especially their ill-advised siege on their former ally of Damascus, which had now fallen into the hands of their enemy, Nur ad-Din. Following the death of Nur ad-Din in 1174, his vizier in Egypt, Salah ad-Din (Saladin) began his rise to power by declaring himself sultan of Egypt and then taking control of Damascus, essentially creating a contiguous Muslim state that now bounded the Crusader states on three sides. In order to create a defensive network to protect this new state from its Christian Crusader neighbors to the west, Salah ad-Din's nephew, Izz ad-Din Usama, who was a commander in the army and an architect to boot, built a castle on the monastery's ruins. His choice of Jebel (Mount) Auf as the site of the new defensive fortress was by no means random. Just to the west was the Crusader fortress of Belvoir. To the south was the majestic Frankish castle called Crac des Moabites, or "Karak in Moab." The new castle on Jebel Auf served to strengthen Muslim interests in the area; protecting the iron mines in the hills as well as keeping message and trade routes open.

At that time, Qala'at Rabadh served as an important relay post for the network of carrier pigeons that delivered messages between Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad. As Izz ad-Din Usama began to serve as a governor representing the Ayyubids, a Sunni Muslim dynasty, ruled much of the Middle East from 1171 until 1250, holding on in some places until 1341. Of Kurdish origin, their most famous leader was Salah ad-Din (Saladin). Ayyubid dynasty in the region, he also needed the castle to show his strength among the unruly Bani Auf tribe who lived below.

According to local legend, just after the castle was completed, Usama invited the local leaders of the Bani Auf to the castle for a sumptuous feast. After the sheikhs had thoroughly enjoyed themselves, he threw them into his dungeons. He had little trouble from the Bani Auf after that.

Because of its location on Mount Auf, overlooking the passes through wadis Kufranjah, Rajeb and al-Yabes, Qala'at Rabadh was able to control much of the northern Jordan Valley. Though somewhat small in comparison to its Crusader rival at Karak, the Christians never took it. In 1187, only three years after the castle was finished, Salah ad-Din recaptured Jerusalem, with Karak falling that year. Belvoir surrendered after a siege of 18 months, with the result that Rabadh Castle became strategically less relevant.

The original core was a simple structure, consisting of four towers at the corners of a square enclosure, with arrow slits in the walls, and a 15-meter deep fosse, or dry moat. In 1260, Mongols invaded from the east, heavily damaging the structure. After defeating them in that year at [The site at the foot of Mt. Gilboa](#) where, according to Judges 7:1, Gideon had assembled his troops before attacking the Midianites [En Harod](#) (Ain Jalut), Baybars, the Mameluke Sultan of Egypt, repaired the fortress, clearing out the fosse and rebuilding the battlements. In the fourteenth century, the famous Moroccan Muslim traveler Ibn Batutta passed on his way from Nablus, recording: "From there I went on to the town of Ajloun which is a fine town possessing a large number of bazaars and an imposing castle and traversed by a river with sweet water."

The castle's history languished until the Ottoman period, when it was used to house a garrison of Ottoman troops during the 17th and 18th centuries. On his explorations of the Middle East, the Swiss-German explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt came here in 1812, finding only forty members of an Arab family living within its walls. Earthquakes in 1837 and 1927 caused much of the damage that can be seen today, and only partial restorative work has been done so far.

Exploring the castle, the traveler is confronted by a bewildering set of rooms and levels built during different eras. After crossing the moat and entering through the gatehouse, one comes to the older entrance of the original rectangular fortress. From here one can climb through various levels to the roof, which affords a breathtaking view of Syria and Lebanon to the north and Israel to the west. From this commanding height, it still feels as if Qala'at Rabadh - though old and broken - could still hold armies at bay.