

# BURĠ ʿARAB - A CRUSADER TOWER IN THE COUNTY OF TRIPOLI A PRELIMINARY REPORT AFTER THE FIRST SURVEY

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## Introduction

The northern part of the former County of Tripoli, which corresponds today to the southern littoral area of the Syrian Arab Republic, is exceptionally rich in Crusader monuments. These include the city of Ṭartūs (Crusader Tortosa) the former centre of the area, and such famous castles of the military orders as the Crac des Chevaliers or Šāfītā (Crusader Chastel Blanc). However the majority of the Crusader remains are lesser scale structures which testify the relatively dense rural settlement pattern of the Crusader times in this very fertile part of the Levant. The most significant feature of this type of Crusader monuments is the presence of a small tower or donjon. One of the best preserved and most sophisticated towers of its kind is the one standing in the village of Burġ al-ʿArab. The following short study tries to summarize the results of the first rapid survey done on the tower as part of a larger fieldwork project started on the summer of 2000, which aims to document the remains of the Crusader rural settlement of the area<sup>1</sup>.

## Geographical and Historical Setting

The village of Burġ ʿArab lies at a height of 170m above sea level (*Muʿġam* 1992: 272) in the Syrian part of the Plain of ʿAkkār, that lies to the north of the Nahr al-Kabīr, the main river dividing the plain on an east-west axis. Its being near to the intersection of three of the seven smaller geo-ecological regions of the area (Sapin 1989); the hill-country of Šāfītā, the Maštā and the basalt plateau of Tell Kalah, results in the varied geographical features of the territory. The village is situated on a basaltic plateau about 9.5 kms to the southeast of the town of Šāfītā as the crow flies. The only considerable river in the close vicinity is the Nahr al-ʿArūs, an important tributary of the Nahr al-Kabīr, which flows a few hundred metres to the west of the settlement. The sloping side of the deep riverbed that borders the village from the west is covered by large orchards and olive groves planted on the fertile soil. The next notable river, the Nahr al-Ḥalīfa, is more than 3 kms to the south.

The Plain of ʿAkkār forming part of the Gap of Homs, the important passage between the Mountains of Lebanon and the Anšāriyya Mountains and offering rich

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<sup>1</sup> The first report on the fieldwork undertaken on the Crusader rural structures of the region with the kind permission of the Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of the Syrian Arab Republic and the financial support of the Academy of the Hungarian Jesuits is forthcoming in *The Arabist* No. 24-25.

agricultural areas, started to attract human settlement at an early date, which is testified in the high number of tells scattered in the territory (Maqdissi 1989:99). Despite the erosion caused by continuous cultivation through the millennia, Burchard of Mount Sion writing in the 13<sup>th</sup> century still found the area "exceeding beautiful and fertile" containing "many villages, and beautiful groves of olive-tree, fig-trees, and other fruit trees of divers sorts, besides much timber" (Burchard, *Description* 18). It is no wonder that this prosperous territory was amongst the ones where considerable tracts of land were distributed amongst the vassals of the count of Tripoli, who built small towers, sometimes with subsidiary buildings such as enclosures or simple vaulted structures at the centres of their estates. The tower standing in the village of Burğ 'Arab is of this kind, and it is also similar to the majority of the rest of these structures in the region in the way that no written documentation survives on it. We do not even know its original Crusader name. In order to extract as much information on it as possible, one has to turn to the physical remains.

### Architectural Description

Unfortunately the well preserved tower did not get the attention it deserves in former works, which is partly understandable, being in the close proximity of the magnificent remains of the formerly mentioned Crusader centres. Until a short description in the work of Paul Deschamps<sup>2</sup>, the only thing mentioned in former works was the name of the place and the sole existence of a tower<sup>3</sup>.

The robust, two level tower with a house recently attached to it, stands on the western edge of the village overlooking the surrounding countryside. It measures 14 m northwest-southeast by 13.4 m northeast-southwest<sup>4</sup> with walls approximately 3m thick at ground-floor level. The walls were constructed by the typical 12<sup>th</sup> century Crusader method (Ellenblum 1992:171); the cone made of unhewn stone bounded by thick mortar with ashlar facing, the corner stones of which were marginally drafted. The majority of the stones used for the facing is of local basalt in the lower ranges, while in the upper ranges the limestone ashlars give the larger numbers. Nearly all the corner stones are rusticated, including some blocks, which were recycled from older buildings of the area. Some rusticated ashlars appear in the lower ranges of the facade as well. Most blocks in the lower parts are quite crudely cut with some

<sup>2</sup> The few sentences Deschamps devoted to the tower contained a general geographical positioning, gave the external dimensions of the structure and noted some observations concerning the spolia in its walls. (Deschamps 1973:327-328)

<sup>3</sup> Eg. Rey 1871:102; Renan 1874:126; Dussaud 1927:119. Though a short description of a tower appears under the name Burğ 'Arab in the work of Hugh Kennedy, the described tower is in fact the tower of Umm Hūš 4,5 kms to the northwest (Kennedy 1994:77-78).

<sup>4</sup> As the plan shows the tower is not directed exactly to the four main points of the compass, the deviation being 20°.

galletting of stone chips between them, but approaching higher, the size of the blocks decreases and their way of execution gets more elaborated.

There is a high number of spolia amongst the stones employed in the facades of the tower and the number of carved symbols is also quite high compared to other structures of the same category in the region. The most obvious ones are the cover of a basalt sarcophagus in the northwestern corner of the tower, the complete lintel of an antique building reused as the lintel over the medieval entrance of the tower, and two fragments of other lintels used as cornerstones in the higher ranges of the southeastern corner. The large and well cut limestone ashlar are quite probable to have been brought over from other sites and so do the neatly cut basalt stone slabs. The case of the reliefs is not as certain, though the ones carved into bossed masonry were in all probability executed in the Crusader times. These include a long basalt block in the southern edge of the northeastern facade with three circles, the two on the sides containing equal armed crosses and the one in the middle enclosing seven hemispheres, one in the centre with the others arranged evenly around it. Pierre Coupel has drawn a parallel between these crosses and a similar cross found in the church of St. Phocas in ʿAmyūn (also in the former County of Tripoli) dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century on architectural grounds (Coupel 1941-48:50). A very similar cross was observed during the survey on the lintel of the first floor entrance of the tower of Umm Ḥūš a few kms to the northwest. Other carvings of possible Crusader origin on the tower of Burġ ʿArab consist of a cross of similar kind to the ones mentioned above, but carved into an enormous limestone block of the northwestern facade and two crudely executed crosses on the same bossed basalt ashlar of the northwestern facade with straight lines closing their ends. The dating of two other carvings, both on neatly cut basalt slabs of the southeastern facade is more problematic. One is a cross formed by three wedge-like carvings, the other is an equal armed cross, its arms closed by small v-shapes. Both are on stones which might have come from former structures, and the use of the latter cross is quite widespread from Byzantine structures (eg. the pilgrimage crosses carved over the entrance of a *pandocheion* in Dayr Simʿān, the Byzantine Thelanisios in Northern Syria) to Crusader masonry marks (Pringle 1981: 187).

The entrance of the tower opened on the northwestern facade, higher than the ground level and so it could have been approached only by the help of a wooden stairway. The equally placed 0,35x0,35 m putlog holes can be the remains of this stairway. The now blocked up entrance was 2,05 m high and 0,97 m wide. The doorway is covered by a lintel transported from an antique site with a stilted relieving arch above it. The square-shaped limestone slab above the relieving arch, set among

the black basalt blocks might have once contained a crest of some kind, but is totally effaced now<sup>5</sup>.

Originally the raised entrance led on to a wooden mezzanine floor that divided the high interior of the ground floor horizontally<sup>6</sup>. The wooden floor lay on the 0,3m protrudal of the wall at the entrance level and on a row of wooden beams set in putlog holes along the southwestern and northeastern walls. Only the room above the mezzanine floor was lit by the light percolating through the arrowslits set in pointed-arched recesses in the middle of the southwestern, southeastern, and northeastern walls, one in each. The apparently unlit room under the mezzanine floor, measuring 7,5x7,4m could hardly have been used for anything else but storage. The ground floor is covered by a pointed barrel-vault with a northwest-southeast axis, which preserved some scanty traces of the plastering. The ground floor can only be entered today by a large door-like opening cut through the middle of the southeastern wall at ground level, which together with the similar, but now blocked opening in the southwestern wall testifies the efforts of the villagers to turn the ground floor into a shed for their livestock.

The first floor of the tower was reached by a stairway 0,77m wide in the thickness of the northwestern wall, which opened from the left side of the main doorway of the tower<sup>7</sup>. The now totally filled up tunnel was lit midway by an arrow slit piercing through the northwestern facade of the tower. The first floor room was approached after a right turn from the end of the stairway through an arch, of which only one of its springing survived, that on the northwestern wall. The first floor hall measuring 9,4m northwest-northeast by 8,8m northwest-southwest is covered by a pointed barrel-vault with a northeast-southwest axis. The axis of the barrel-vault of the ground floor and that of the first floor are at right angles to each other in order to diminish the downward thrust of the two vaults that would have otherwise been concentrated on two walls of the tower, seriously threatening the stability of the structure<sup>8</sup>. The vault was sturdily built with flattish stones bonded with mortar spreads preserving the remains of former plastering in some places. Several openings provide light and ventilation for the room. There was one loop-hole

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<sup>5</sup> The entrance of the enceinte of the Crusader Qal'at Yaḥmūr had a triple armed cross in a mandorla in a low relief above its lintel (Pringle 1986:18), and the traces of a coat-of-arms with the remains of a very elaborated cross on it can still be seen over the entrance of the Templar donjon of Ṣāfītā, both in the region.

<sup>6</sup> Crusader towers with wooden mezzanine floors can only be found in this region of the Holy Land (Pringle 1994:339), which had two recorded examples until now; the towers of Qal'at Yaḥmūr and Tuḥla.

<sup>7</sup> This arrangement which has a parallel in the great donjon of the Crusader Giblet, is very rare in towers of this size.

<sup>8</sup> Because of stability considerations it is rare to employ two barrel-vaults above each other, which is usually avoided by using a barrel-vault on the ground and a groin-vault on the first floor.

in the middle of the northeastern, northwestern and southeastern walls. The latter two was approached by a pointed-arched recess 2,2m high and 1,55m wide, with its upper part cutting through the curve of the vault. The loop-hole of the northeastern wall was largely destroyed by the new entrance cut through it, that could be approached from the stairway leading up to the first floor of the modern house attached to the northeastern side of the tower. The southwestern wall of the first floor contains a large window 0,9m wide, set in a pointed-arched passage 2m high and 1.17m wide through the wall. Though the lower part of the window fell out with a tract of the facade, the upper range preserved the rebates for a wooden door and the limestone jambs have conserved the holes of an iron grill. The limestone lintel of the window is held by two imposts cut from basalt. The existence of a window and its relatively big size strongly stresses the residential function of the first floor hall. Inserted into the same wall, to the right of the window is a recess 1,8m high, 1,06m wide and 0,83m deep. It is positioned 1,1m higher than the present-day level of the floor. The 0,75m wide stairway leading up to the top of the tower opens in the same wall, but to the left of the window. Its entrance is lit by a partly destroyed embrasure.

The top of the tower has no remains of its former defences. Even the original floor level of the top has eroded and the top of the vault covering the first floor juts out from the scanty soil covering the top of the tower. The width of the crenellation must have been around 1m thick as a line of stones forming the bases of its inner side indicate.

The tower of Burĝ °Arab has commanding view over the surrounding countryside. Several Crusader bases can also be seen in the distance. The most important is Šāfītā, the visual center of the region, the tower of Umm Ḥūš, the tower of Zārā and allegedly the tower in the village of Burĝ Maksūr can also be seen in good weather conditions.

### Neighbouring structures

The immediate vicinity of the tower seems to be devoid of considerable medieval remains. However, a villager showed an area called *ġidār* (wall), about 200 meters to the northwest of the tower with a vaulted structure called *sirdāb* (tunnel). The length of the vault, mostly buried, is about 5,4 m and the span of it at its widest point is around 4 meters. Due to the fragmentary nature of the structure the real dimensions of it cannot be determined without an excavation. The axis of the tunnel-vault is directed east-west. At most of the villages boasting a Crusader tower in the neighbourhood, the inhabitants gladly tell legends about tunnels leading from one place to the other, and this structure is not an exception to the rule. However this vault could not have been part of any tunnel as its eastern end is closed by a wall with a 0,68m deep recess covered by stones arranged to form a half round shape. The roughly

worked stones are bonded with mortar and there are clear traces of plastering on the vault.

### Conclusion

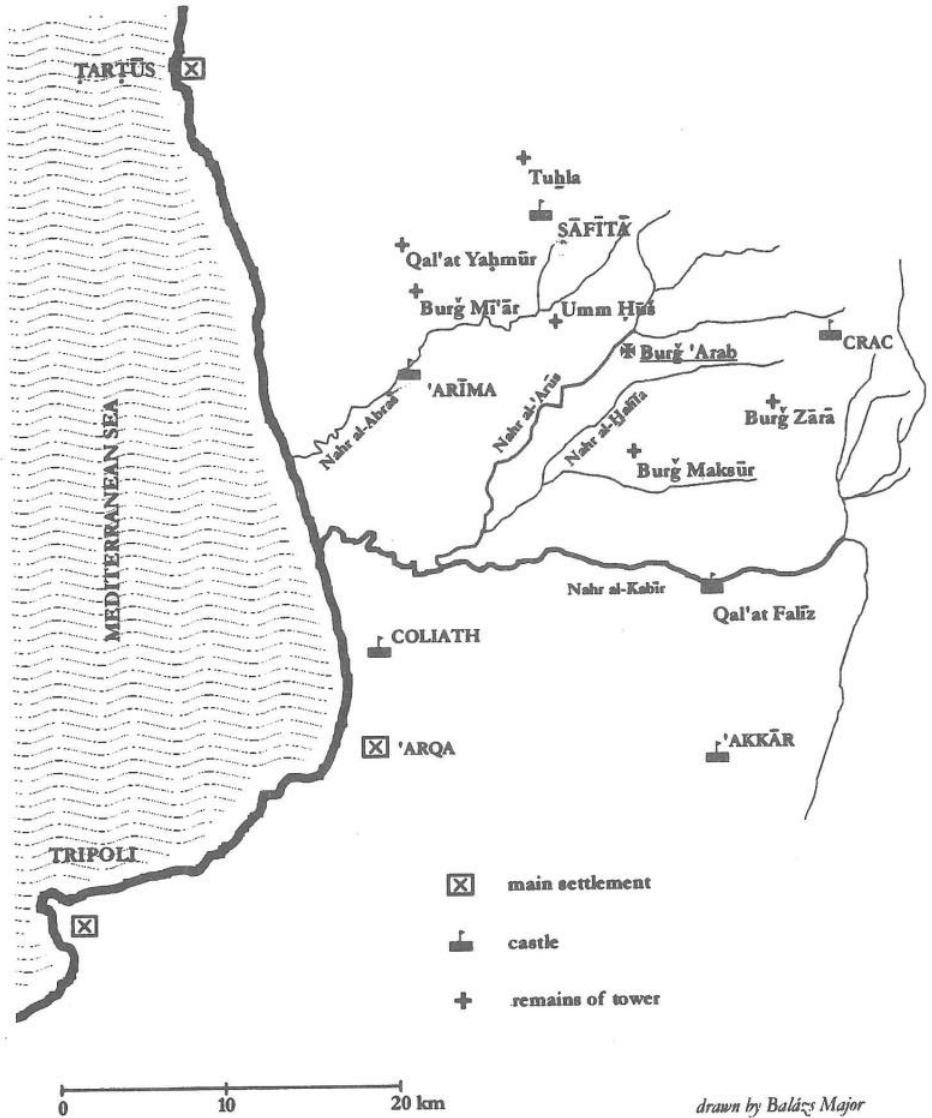
The tower in the village of Burg ʿArab fits well into the historical context of the region and the architectural characteristics of the same category of Crusader rural towers, though it employs some peculiar structural elements as well. Its outer appearance at first glance with its harsh execution suggests a builder with not great material resources, the complexity and durability of the structure seems to contradict it to some extent. The tower clearly reflects its most important functions in the Crusader rural settlement pattern, even without the subsidiary structures surviving at so many other towers. The ground floor room, especially its non-lit lower part must have fulfilled repository functions, which indicate the tower's administrative role in the area. The more spacious and better lit first floor hall might have functioned as the residence of the owner of the tower. This is further emphasised by the presence of the unusually large window, that is very rare in similar structures. Despite this more vulnerable large opening, the loopholes of the tower and the supposed crenellation enabled the structure to fulfil a defensive role as well. Though towers of this kind could only offer passive resistance, Burg ʿArab could be an active member of the Crusader signalling system of the region, thanks to its good positioning. The unfinished state of the survey and the finding of the vaulted structure still undated stresses the need of continuation, which after a more thorough research setting this tower into the larger network of the Crusader rural settlement of the region could tell much more of the structure of which no written documentation survived.

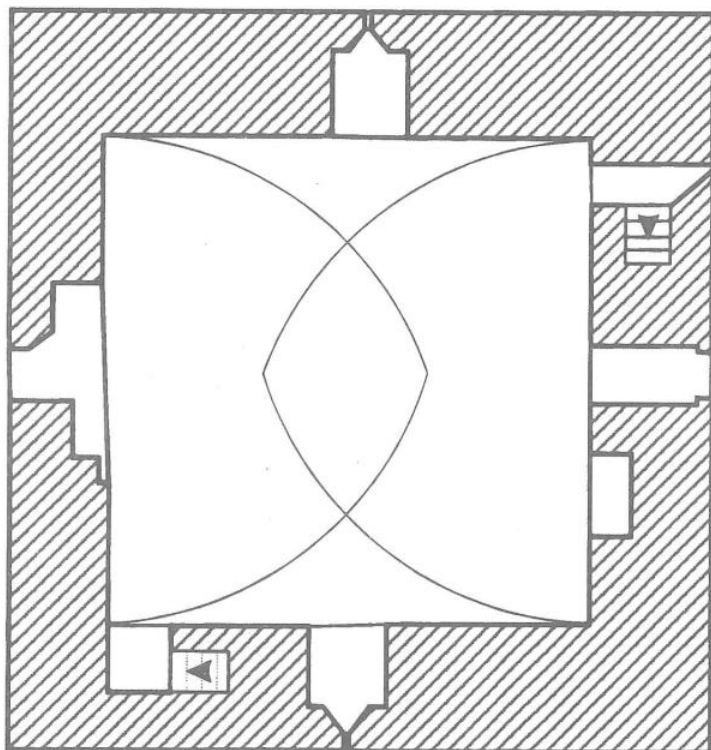
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# The Northern Part of the County of Tripoli

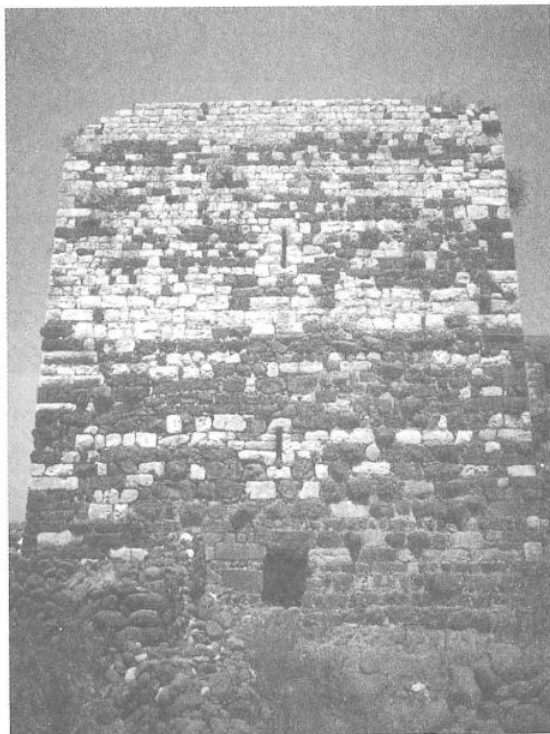




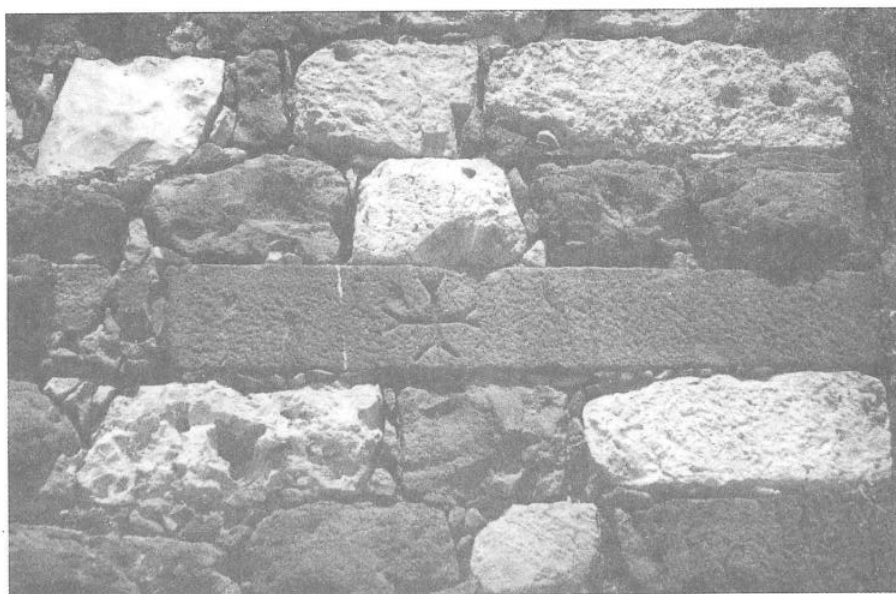
**BURĜ 'ARAB**  
First Floor



*drawn by Balázs Major*



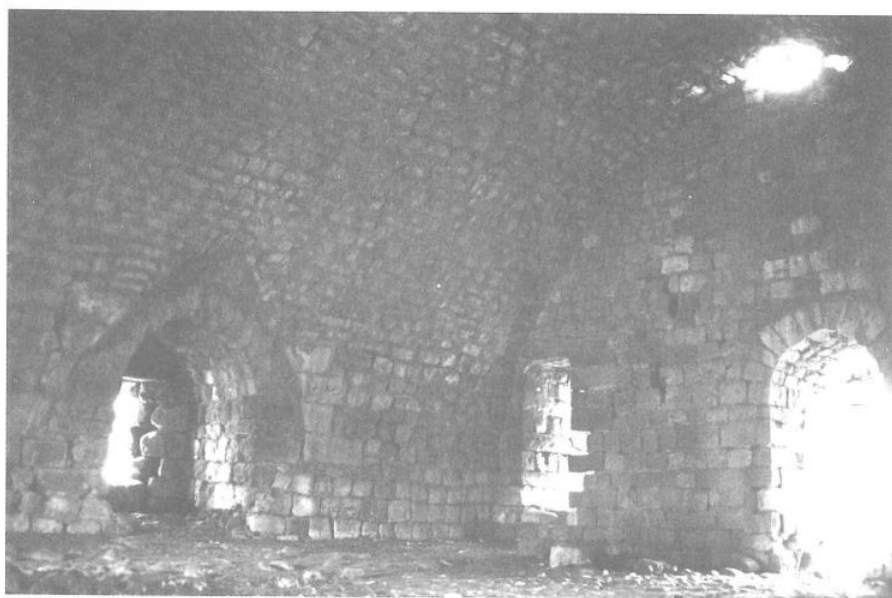
1. The southern facade of the tower



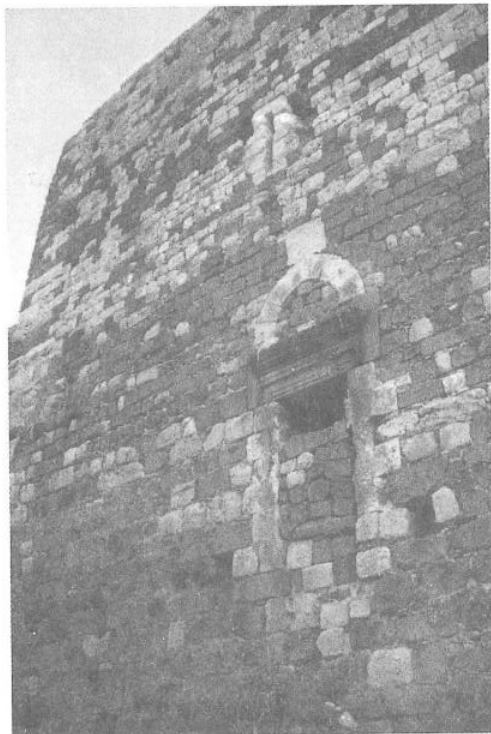
2. Cross carved on a stone slab of the southern facade



3. The ground floor room of the tower with blocked entrance and a loophole (looking west)



4. The first floor room of the tower (looking south)



5. The north-western facade of the tower with the original entrance



6. Remains of the vaulted structure from the west