

The Fortification of the Pilgrimage Route During the First Three Centuries of Ottoman Rule (1516-1757)

On 3rd October 1516, after much preparation, Selim the Grim rode into Damascus and proclaimed it part of the Ottoman Empire. For the next 400 years the entire area now comprising the modern countries of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan was known as the Ottoman province of Damascus. Historians regard the conquest as the beginning of the modern era. Dr. M. A. Bakhit wrote at the beginning of his history of the province, "The Ottoman period is distinguished from all those that preceded it in the Near East by the great abundance of archival materials provided by the state records... Here, as rarely in the history of Islamic lands, detailed research becomes possible". There have been several important historical studies dealing with the first three centuries of Ottoman rule in the region. Most notable amongst these works are the accounts of Bakhit (1982), Rafeq (1970) and Barbir (1980), all of which devote considerable attention to the Hajj.

Between them, these studies give a pretty detailed account of the development of Ottoman rule in the Province. However, there are significant gaps in our knowledge of this crucial period which cannot be dealt with adequately through historical sources. Firstly, there is the problem that the historical information is patchy, thus, for the al-Karak region the period from 1517-1840 is virtually unknown. Secondly, there is the problem that many of the historical sources are either governmental (e.g. tax records) or city based (usually Damascus, i.e. Ibn Ṭūlūn, sixteenth century) both of which provide only a partial and sometimes misleading view of the area.

In this study of the Hajj forts, it is proposed to combine historical material with that derived from archaeological survey to gain an accurate perspective of one aspect of Ottoman rule.

The organization and dispatch of the Hajj caravan was one of the main priorities of the Ottoman administration. Indeed, Barbir devotes over a third of his book to the Pilgrimage, which is described as the "Centrepiece of Ottoman Rule in Damascus". Although this gives a very full description of how the Hajj Caravan was organized and

defended, there are two significant aspects not dealt with, which are the design of the forts and their positioning in relation to the Hajj route and settled areas. Before discussing either of these in any detail, it may be worth giving a brief summary of the Hajj in Ottoman times.

The Hajj in Ottoman Times

The Hajj was perhaps the most important annual event in the province of Damascus. Barbir argues that in the eighteenth century, the governors of Damascus were excused from taking part in the Empire's wars so that they could concentrate on the organization of the Hajj. In this way the Hajj took on the status of an imperial campaign (Barbir 1980: 13). The organization of the Hajj caravan was in the hands of officials who after 1571 were chosen from within the province of Damascus (previously they had been sent from Istanbul, Bakhit 1982: 109). The most important post was *amīr al-Ḥajj* who was in charge of all aspects of the pilgrimage caravan and would appoint the other officials. Up to 1708 the *amīr al-Ḥajj* was chosen from amongst the notables of Damascus or one of the great Bedouin chiefs, after that date up until the end of the empire, the governor of Damascus was invariably chosen as the *amīr al-Ḥajj* (Barbir 1980: 51).

Other posts included *mir i akhur-i-Hajj* (official in charge of water supplies), *nāzīr al-Ḥajj* (deputy to the *amīr al-Ḥajj*) *amīr al-manzil* (in charge of camping places) *imām*, *mu'adhdhin*, *sanjaqdar*, *amīr al-mulāqāh* (in charge of the caravan's reception on its return to Damascus) and an official in charge of Awqāf for Makka and al-Madīna (Bakhit 1982: 112, 114, 137). In addition to these posts directly concerned with the Hajj there were many other positions which involved some responsibility for the Hajj. Thus the governors of 'Ajlūn and al-Karak/ash-Shawbak, were responsible for the maintenance of facilities in their areas. Because all these posts were fairly prestigious, there was considerable rivalry for them so that the organization and running of the Hajj became a subject of local politics. Thus opposition to the Governor of Damascus or Ottoman rule often took the form of an

attack on the pilgrimage (Bakhit 1982: 223).

Damascus was the official starting point of the pilgrimage and it was here that all the arrangements for the caravan were made. In Damascus itself, a huge complex for pilgrims was built. The complex, known as the *Tekkiye*, was commissioned by Suleyman the Magnificent and designed by his master architect Sinan to include a large mosque, kitchen, camping ground, *khān* and *bazaar* (Goodwin 1971: 225-257). The route north of Damascus to Istanbul was provided with a wide range of facilities including *khānāt*, mosques and *ḥammāmāt* (for an account of Ḥajj facilities in Syria, north of Damascus see Sauvaget 1937). Sauvaget makes the point that the Ḥajj route from Istanbul as far as Damascus was similar to other trading routes, whereas south of Damascus the road was subject to constant danger. It was this danger which prompted the construction of the Ḥajj forts (see FIG. 1).

The earliest forts built on the road were all placed within 100km of Damascus during the reign of Selim the Grim (1512-1520). These forts were at Şanamayn, Muzayrib and Tall Far'ūn. The earliest forts in the area of present day Jordan were Ma'ān and al-Qatrāna whilst further south in al-Ḥijāz forts were built at Dhāt al-Ḥajj, Tabūk, Ukhayḍir and al-'Ulā (Bakhit 1982: 97). During the 1570s forts were built at 'Unayza north of Ma'ān and at Hadiya, 42 hours north of al-Madina. During the seventeenth century no new forts were built, although extensive repairs were carried out to existing forts (Jaussen and Savignac 1909: 294). In the mid eighteenth century, more forts were built including those at al-Mudawwara, al-Ḥasā and Fāṣū'a (Barbir 1980: 140). The forts were built fairly rapidly thus the fort at Ukhayḍir was built in less than forty days according to the inscription above the gate (Jaussen and Savignac 1909: 294-296).

Fortification and Design of the Forts

The basic design of the Ḥajj forts is consistent throughout 1500 kilometres of the Ḥajj road and over the 250 years during which they were built. Essentially the forts are like small *khānāt*: that is square in plan ranged around a central courtyard (see FIG. 2). In the centre of the courtyard there is a cistern, whilst access to the first floor is provided by staircases located either side of the entrance. Outside each fort is one or more reservoirs and a cemetery containing the graves of pilgrims and the garrison.

The basic plan of these forts can be seen reproduced in thousands of *khānāt* throughout the Ottoman empire (for examples see Goodwin 1971; Cezar 1983). Although the forts are considerably smaller than most *khānāt*, they still appear to represent the same generic origins. There are examples of fortified Islamic buildings similar to the Ḥajj forts such as *al-Rabāt* of North Africa but these seem to be too remote in time to have directly influenced

the design of these forts. The reason for the resemblance of *khān* and fort can partly be explained by the similarity of function. Hütteroth and Abdulfattah (1977: 34) give the following definition of a *khān*:

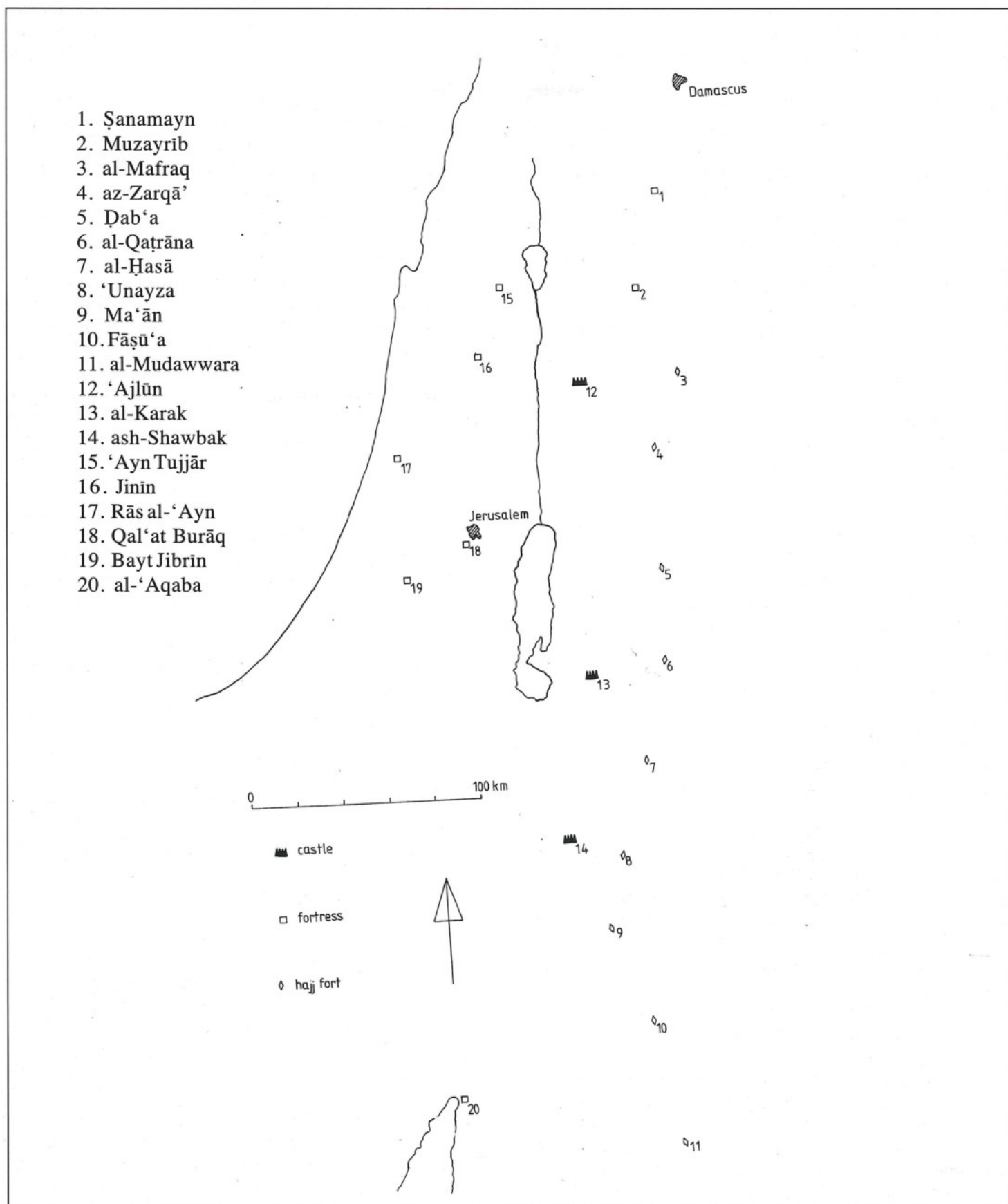
A *khan* (caravanserai) is known to be a large building of solid stone, erected for the purpose of providing travellers, merchants and pilgrims, as well as their animals with a resting place. The buildings therefore had to be sited at more or less regular intervals along the main roads ... The *khans* were usually more or less fortified and sometimes guarded by a small garrison.

The fortified Mamluk *khān* at al-'Aqaba is a good example of a transitional building, half *khān* and half fort. Despite their similarities it should be remembered that the forts were military buildings designed for the use of troops.

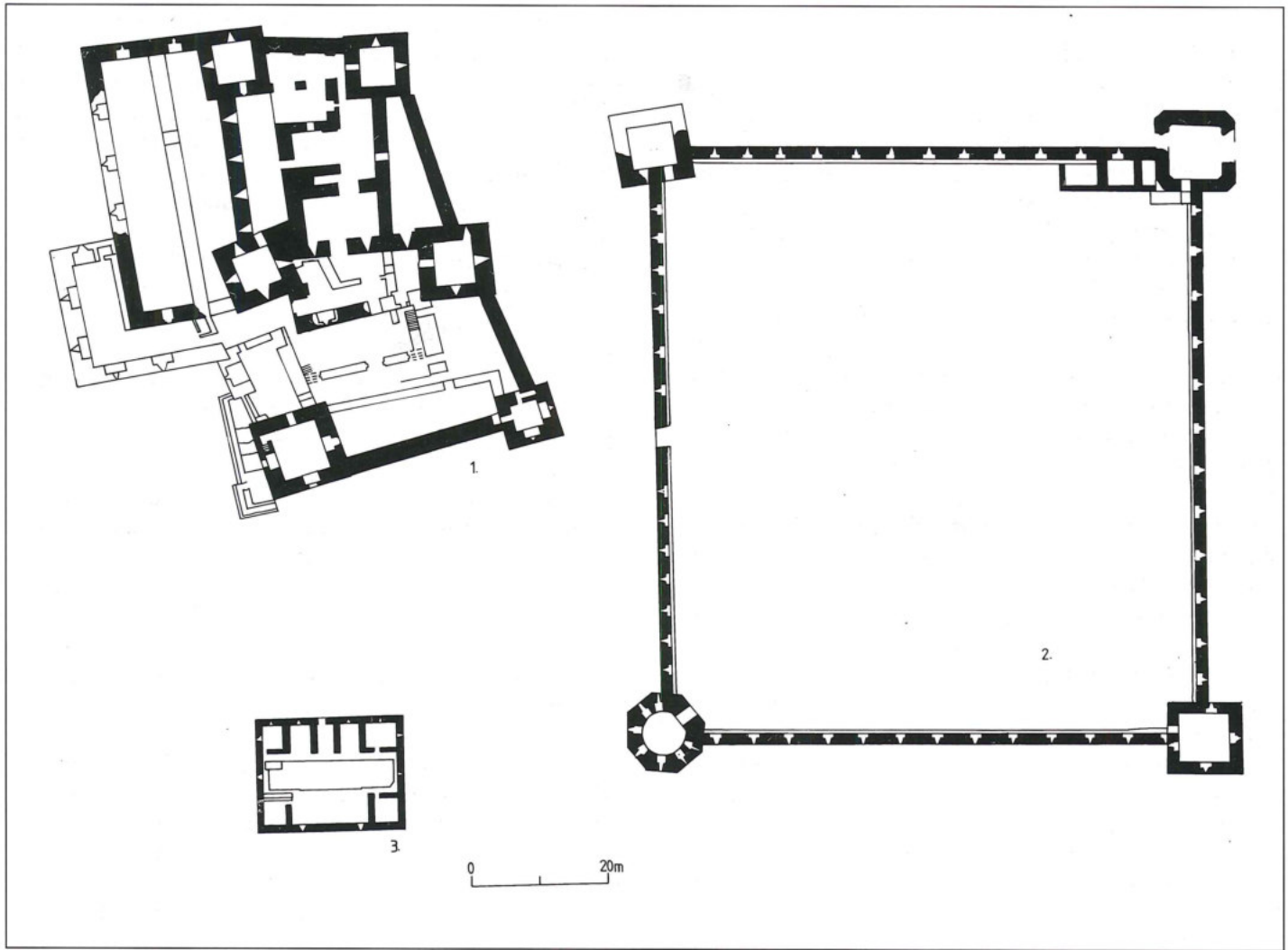
Although the Ottoman victory over the Mamluks was largely a result of their use of firearms (Ayalon 1956: 108-111), the Ottomans were slow to include artillery as a factor in their fortress design. European fortress builders had designed fortifications specifically for the use of artillery as early as the fourteenth century and by the early sixteenth century were producing quite sophisticated designs (see for example Fort Jesus, Kirkman 1974). In contrast Ottoman fortresses of this period tended to have fairly basic designs relying more on the strengths of their garrisons than on sophisticated fortifications. There is however some evidence that the design of the Ḥajj forts was modified in the eighteenth century in response to the increased use of firearms.

The usual modifications employed for firearms such as low thick walls and large bastions were neither practical nor desirable for use in the Ḥajj forts, where the use of heavy artillery was unlikely. Instead the forts had to be adapted to withstand lightning raids by mounted bedouins carrying guns. Two main areas of modification have been identified. These are (i) the openings in the walls (see FIG. 2) and (ii) the development of projecting towers from machicolations.

(i) The earlier forts had arrow-slits or loops generally one metre high and 15cm wide on the outside. The arrow-slits were "V" shaped openings with flat sills through walls about one metre thick. These arrow-slits were sometimes decorated with a carved border and were visible from a considerable distance. At the top of the walls along the parapet there were a number of smaller openings or embrasures (30cm high x 15cm wide) these were also made visible by the use of dressed stone. The top walls of each fort were crowned with distinctive step shaped crenellations. Like many of the other features these can be seen on a grander scale on the city walls of Jerusalem built by Sulayman the Magnificent between



1. The Ottoman fortress network.



2. 1) Ayyubid castle of 'Ajlūn; 2) sixteenth century fortress at Rās al-'Ayn; 3) sixteenth century Ḥajj fort at al-Qaṭrāna.

1538 and 1541.

In the eighteenth century forts arrow-slits were replaced by more numerous, less visible openings, more suitable for artillery. Because these are less visible from the outside, raiders would not so easily be able to tell where shots were coming from. The increased number of openings provided a greater field of fire, whilst their smaller size provided greater protection for the Ottoman gunners.

(ii) The other features subject to modification, were the projecting machicolations. These structures were located either symmetrically in the middle of each side of a fort. In some of the earlier forts there were also hidden machicolations directly above the entrance (this feature can be found at Ḍab'a and al-Qaṭrāna and is more characteristic of the Mamluk period, see for example Qaṣr Shabīb in az-Zarqā'). Projecting machicolations usually stand out a distance of 70-30cm from the face of the fort and

are supported by two or more sets of corbels, usually two courses high. There are openings between the corbel beams through which missiles and harmful substances may be poured onto an attacker. Like the crenellations, these box machicolations are characteristic of Ottoman architecture in the region and can be seen on the city walls of Jerusalem.

In the later forts there are structures resembling box machicolations which however have no downward openings. In some of the forts such as Qal'at al-Ḥasā these are still located at the sides of the fort, but in most of these later forts they are located at the corners forming projecting corner towers. The advantages of such features is that the entire area immediately outside the fort was now within the field of fire, whereas before the area directly beneath the walls, particularly the corners, were safe for attackers. This innovation made machicolations redundant particularly as such openings would have exposed the gunner to additional risk.

The Location of the Forts

The network of cities, towns and fortresses into which the Ḥajj forts had to fit was extremely complex and had developed over a long period (see FIG. 1).

With the Ottoman conquest Damascus replaced Cairo as the regional centre. Although Cairo continued to operate as a major administrative centre, its influence over Syria declined whilst the importance of Damascus increased in proportion. This shift in emphasis had important effects on the road and defence systems of the area, most notably with the increased importance of the Darb al-Ḥajj ash-Shāmi (Syrian Pilgrimage Route) (Barbir 1980: 109). Another important change after the Ottoman conquest was the eastward shift of the Ḥajj route. Before the Ottoman conquest the Ḥajj had usually taken the highland route via al-Karak and ash-Shawbak. It is said that soon after the conquest a daughter of the Ṣulṭān complained of bandits on the road so that Suleyman ordered that the Ḥajj follow a new route along the edge of the desert. (This is the same route as that later adopted for the Hījāz railway and now known as the Desert Highway). This eastward shift is of considerable significance when one considers the position of the Ḥajj forts in the fortress network.

There were three types of fortress (see FIG. 2) in the region during the early Ottoman period which may be characterized as:

- (i) Large fortress towns or citadels such as al-Karak, 'Ajlūn, ash-Shawbak and Bayt Jibrīn. These occupy the highland regions.
- (ii) Garrison forts located in the low lying regions of Palestine.
- (iii) Small roadside or police forts located along desert routes.

(i) The large fortresses were all built before the Ottoman period and most date back to Crusader times. Ottoman work at these castles was mostly limited to repair of damaged fortifications and there were few real modifications. Generally speaking the Ottomans avoided building large castles, preferring instead to re-use previous fortifications. The notable exceptions to this are the large fortresses in Eastern Anatolia built to control communications with Safavid Persia (Barbir 1980: 136; Nicole 1983: 23-24).

(ii) The most notable Ottoman contribution to the fortress network of the region were the large garrison fortresses in Palestine. Important surviving examples of this type are Rās al-'Ayn, al-Qaṭrāna and 'Ayn Tujjār. These fortresses simply consist of a large stone enclosure wall with corner towers and a gateway with very little in the centre. This was a characteristic feature of Ottoman for-

tification and can be seen on a grander scale at Rumeli Hisar just outside Istanbul. Here high stone walls run between huge towers overlooking the Bosphorous yet within there is nothing but a large open space (Goodwin 1971: 105). The open spaces in these fortresses would contain wooden barracks and storehouses (Nicole 1983: 23) and possibly a mosque (excavations at Rās al-'Ayn have uncovered the remains of a stone mosque near the entrance, Kochavi 1975: 35-37). The Turkish traveller Evliya Celebi gives a good description of the fortress of 'Ayn Tujjār which shows how this type of fortress would have functioned:

This fortress was constructed by Sinan Pasha, the conqueror of Yemen, between 1568 and 1589, in order to ensure the safety of the road between Damascus and Cairo. It is a perfect square fortress built of masonry in the midst of a large verdant meadow. It has a circumference of 600 paces. The garrison consists of a warden and 150 men. It has a double iron gate facing north. Inside the fortress are between forty and fifty rooms for the garrison. It is the seat of the police magistrate, situated on the borders of Safad, being also an administrative sub district (Stephan 1936: 84).

(iii) The philosophy of building the small forts was quite different to that involved in the larger fortifications. Small, often portable forts had been important elements in Ottoman strategy since early times, thus the standard method of taking a fortified town was to ravage the countryside around and impose a blockade with a series of small forts (Nicole 1983: 23). Such forts can be seen depicted in the illustrations of the Suleymanname where they are used in the siege of Belgrade (Atıl 1987: 12-13).

Small forts had been used to protect roads in the area before the Ottoman period, important examples on the Ḥajj route include Qaṣr Shabīb at az-Zarqa' and the fort at al-Jiza. Both of these forts are mentioned in the fourteenth century pilgrimage itinerary of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and continued to be used up until fairly recently (the fort at al-Jiza is still used by the Desert Police). The design of these buildings is considerably different from that of the Ottoman Ḥajj forts, most notably because they are not built around courtyards. In the sources these buildings are referred to as towers (sing. *burj*) as opposed to forts (sing. *qal'a*).

The Ḥajj forts were essentially housing for the garrison and were not designed to provide shelter for the pilgrims themselves who camped in front of the forts. Tresse (1937: 46, 229) gives a schematic plan of the Ḥajj caravan camped around a fort. The size of the garrisons varied but generally consisted of between twenty and thirty men (cf. 150 men at 'Ayn Tujjār). The troops were mostly jannisaries from the province of Damascus al-

though Ma'ān and al-Qaṭrāna were manned by imperial jannisaries. Many of the Ḥajj fort garrisons were supplied from other forts in the region, either from the garrison fortresses of Palestine or one of the castles on the old Ḥajj route (i.e. King's Highway).

The three types of fort are located in three zones which are, the coastal plain of Palestine, the highland region both sides of the Dead Sea and the desert littoral. The type of fort in each zone reflects the nature of Ottoman interest in the particular area. The large garrison forts (Type ii) such as 'Ayn Tujjār functioned as bases for tax collection and the maintenance of public order in the populous regions of Palestine. The older fortresses east of the Dead Sea served as secure population centres in areas often outside government control. In many ways these older fortresses served as a back-up for the Ḥajj forts both in terms of supply of manpower and as an alternative route when there were problems on the Ḥajj road. The Ḥajj forts were located in fairly exposed positions isolated from main population centres, their position on the edge of the desert meant they were exposed to frequent bedouin attacks.

The eastward shift of the Ḥajj route and the position of the Ḥajj forts imply that the Ottomans sought to make the Ḥajj road a physical demarcation between settled lands and the desert. This idea is corroborated by the siting of the Ḥajj forts along the same line as the Roman lines. Sometimes the Ḥajj forts even re-use Roman facilities, thus the forts at al-Jiza and al-Qaṭrāna are sited next to Roman reservoirs. Like the Romans, the Ottomans thought that their empire was capable of indefinite expansion and the desert presented a military dilemma. Whilst the desert was certainly not worth conquering it could not be left as a threat to settled life. The solution was to use the Ḥajj route which had to be defended anyway as a secure border.

In addition to fortification various other methods were adopted to increase security along the route. One of the most important of these was the *cerde* or military escort which accompanied the caravan to Makka and back. The size of the *cerde* varied but at the beginning of the sixteenth century it was composed of 200 jannisaries and one hundred sipahis (feudal cavalry). The armaments of the escort included hand held guns and cannon mounted on camels.

Whilst the *cerde* was capable of coping with isolated attacks it would not have been able to stand up to a full scale tribal raid. For this reason subsidies were paid out to tribes from a central fund (*surre* — literally purse). The distribution of the *surre* took place at Muzayrib and was given to all tribes who bordered the route. Sometimes the bedouins would cheat by allowing the caravan to pass safely through their own territory and then attack it in the area of another tribe. Failure to make payments

from the *surre* could result in serious consequences. Al-Jazirī (d. 1568) remarked that tribal attacks occurred when allowances had not been paid.

The Ottomans also employed economic sanctions against bedouins, thus in 1567 an order was sent out commanding the governor of Damascus to "collect from markets all large arrows with flat wide iron heads together with bows and daggers used by the bedouin and to distribute them among the various citadels on the route to Mecca." (Bakhit 1982: 220). A similar order made it illegal for merchants to trade with the bedouins (Bakhit 1982: 218).

Apart from sanctions against the bedouins, the Ottomans generally sought to promote trade in order to increase stability in the area. Barbir believes that the wages of the garrison were deliberately kept low as it was known that troops would supplement their incomes by trading with pilgrims and villagers (Barbir 1982: 150). Each fort would specialise in different products depending on its location (see Rafeq 1970: 115 for a table of the products sold at each fort). Generally speaking, the garrisons acted as middlemen selling local products to the pilgrims and imported goods from either Makka or Damascus to the local people. The tax free status of the route further encouraged trade, although merchants using the route were subject to taxation on their return to Damascus.

The effect of the Ḥajj route on trade in the area was probably quite considerable although it would be useful to test this through archaeological excavation. Hütteroth and Abdulfattah (1977: 891) suggest that the effects were less than might be expected when they state "... even the most frequently travelled hajj-route in the Ottoman empire which crossed the country did not initiate the development of market centres along its course." There is, however, some evidence that the Ottomans sought to promote settlement in marginal areas by offering tax exemptions and protection to settlers around the forts (Bakhit 1982: 220-221). Although it is fairly certain that settlements around forts did exist, little is known about their size and composition, their relationship to other settlements or their degree of permanence.

The Development of Fortification on the Ḥajj Route

For the moment, our understanding of settlement along the desert border is limited to the fortresses on the Ḥajj route. Two main phases of construction can be discerned, the first taking place in the mid sixteenth century and the second in the eighteenth century (there is no record of forts being built during the seventeenth century although repairs were carried out, Barbir 1980: 137). It is suggested that the first phase was concerned with the establishment of Ottoman rule in the area whilst the second phase was a response to increasingly successful bedouin

raids in the area. This difference is reflected in the appearance of the buildings. The earlier forts tend to be decorated with carved ornament such as the three balls above the gate at al-Qaṭrāna which are an Ottoman design derived from a Buddhist symbol for good fortune. However decoration at the later forts is limited to inscriptions naming the sultan of the time and the officials involved in its construction.

The first forts were built fairly soon after the Ottoman conquest at key positions along the Ḥajj route such as the oasis town of Ma'ān. The construction of these forts can be seen as a product of the same thinking which initiated major building programmes at the recently captured cities of Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem and Cairo. Such projects must be regarded as an attempt by the Ottomans to strengthen their claims to be successors to the early Arab caliphs (the titles of the Ottoman sultans included that of caliph). In this context, the forts at al-Qaṭrāna and Ma'ān may be seen as an attempt to advertise Ottoman supremacy to the thousands of pilgrims who passed them each year. It is perhaps significant that one of the other titles taken by the Ottoman sultans was that of "servant of the two sanctuaries". The building and maintenance of facilities on the route was one of the best ways of fulfilling the obligations inherent in such a title.

For the next 150 years such facilities seemed to be sufficient for the successful organization of the Ḥajj caravan. However, at the beginning of the eighteenth century the number of recorded bedouin attacks increased dramatically. Previously over a period of more than a hundred and eighty years from the Ottoman conquest up to 1700, only six major attacks had been recorded. From 1700 to 1757 the number of recorded attacks rose to nineteen, eleven of which were successful. This works out at an eight-fold increase in the frequency of attacks from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (Barbir 1980: 170). The building of new Ḥajj forts was an obvious response to provide increased protection for the pilgrims. The new forts were better designed and covered a much larger proportion of the route than the earlier forts. Other measures adopted included the granting of increased powers to the governor of Damascus and the introduction of a rota system for the fortress garrisons (Barbir 1980: 146). None of these measures were sufficient to prevent the catastrophe of 1757 when the entire caravan was destroyed at al-'Ulā, killing 20,000 pilgrims.

The reason for the increased ferocity and frequency of attacks has been the subject of much debate but the increased success of these raids must be attributed to the acquisition of firearms by the bedouins (for support of this idea see Ayalon 1956: 97). Now that the raiders possessed guns which could be fired from horseback, the slow moving Ḥajj caravan was easy prey. The recognition of the changing balance of power can be found in

the design of the new forts which had a much greater defensive capability, noticeable in the corner towers and gun openings. The positioning of the forts was now such that most forts were within a day's march of another fort. Generally, however, there was little the Ottomans could do to prevent the westward movement of the bedouins so that the forts became like "ships isolated in the immensity of the desert" rather than potent symbols of Ottoman power.

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