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A VISIT TO THE RUINED CASTLES OF THE TEUTONIC KNIGHTS.

By Dr. E. W. G. MASTERMAN.

THE Teutonic Knights, the latest established of the three military-religious orders of the Crusades, had their headquarters in a fertile and beautiful district some ten or twelve miles north-east of Akka. In 1229 their Grand Master acquired by purchase the stronghold of Montfort which the members of the Order rebuilt, made their headquarters, and renamed Starkenberg. This they held for forty-two years until the fortress was besieged, captured and destroyed by the great Moslem warrior Bibars in 1271. The ruins are now known as Kul'at el-Kurein. Three and a half miles south of this ruin is Kul'at Jeddin the remains of the castle, Castellum Judin. Between and around these fortresses the Teutonic Knights appear to have owned a great deal of land: an estate of unusual fertility and value, even for Northern Galilee.

In company with some friends I made an expedition there in July, 1907, the notes of which, fully written out at the time, may even now be of interest to readers of the *Quarterly Statement*. The district is quite off the ordinary tourist routes, and very few English people have visited it.

We left Safed July 12 at noon and, after passing Meron, entered the mountainous region of Jebel Jermak—the highest mountain in Palestine. About 3 p.m. we reached the isolated and lofty village of Beit Jinn, a stronghold of the Druzes and, like many such places, hard of access by horseback on every side. A mile beyond Beit Jinn we had a good view of the Bay of Akka with Carmel behind, and shortly afterwards we commenced an exceedingly rough descent into the isolated and fertile valley of el-Bukeiah. During the last half-hour of the descent we could see below us the little village of el-Bukeiah lying in an oasis of green trees and irrigated gardens. This place is peculiar, not only in its extremely mixed inhabitants—Christians, Moslems, Druzes and Jews, all in about equal numbers—but more especially in the fact that here the Jews have, apparently for centuries, been owners and tillers of the soil. As soon as we entered the village to water the horses at the copious village fountain,

old patients of mine appeared and were most insistent that we should visit their houses. Time however did not allow of this. We now proceeded down the wide valley—el-Bukeia, *i.e.*, the “little” Buk'a—passing some springs in the valley bottom. We left the village of Suhmāta on our east, crossed a wooded ridge to the west and soon entered the fertile district around Teirshiha. This is one of the largest villages in these parts and occupies some slightly raised ground on the southern end of a large plain. To its south it is dominated by a lofty hill crowned by the small village of Sheikh Mejāhed. The whole of this district appears to be given over to the cultivation of tobacco, and around Teirshiha itself are many acres of tobacco fields. The land is heavily manured with goats' dung and the tobacco is said to be of a specially fine quality. Here we arrived half-an-hour before sunset and were most courteously and hospitably entertained by the Greek-Catholic priest.

Next morning (July 13) we set off at about 6 a.m. to visit Kul'at Jeddin, an hour's ride westward down the well-wooded Khallet Mattilah. Thick mist at first obscured the distant prospect. Through this mist we saw to the south the village of Yānūh upon a hill 2,200 feet above sea level. Here was once situated one of the smaller castles of the Teutonic Knights. Now, though but three miles from Teirshiha, it belongs to the Sanjak of Akka, while Teirshiha is under the jurisdiction of Safed. Our first view of Jeddin as we approached it from the north-east was very striking. Two lofty towers, with many lower buildings encompassing them, crown the summit of a low hill, and a four-sided ruined wall with circular towers at intervals surrounds the whole collection of buildings. As we approached over level moorland the hopeless state of ruin and the utter desolation of the place became more apparent. We entered the broken embattlements and tethered our horses among the out-buildings. Many of these last are of post-Crusading times, being the work of the famous chieftain Dhaher el-Omer, but the massive central towers belonging to the keep are undoubtedly Crusading work as are, too, the great bulk of the foundations. Some of the stones of these buildings have apparently been taken from an earlier Roman building. Although not protected by any natural defences, except in the south where the descent to the wady bed is abrupt and steep, it is evident that this fortress was once a strong one capable of a stout defence. It was, too, within signalling distance of Akka where, as we know, the Teutonic Knights had

establishments and held out for twenty years after the loss of all their possessions in the mountains.

We now retraced our steps and when close to Teirshiha turned north to the Christian village of Mâlia on a hill 1,800 feet above sea level, about a mile and a quarter north of the former. Although this prosperous little village has extended beyond its first limits the main part occupies the site, and is built within the foundations of the Crusading "Château de Roi." Traces of the massive corner towers with embossed bevelled stones are clearly visible. This place was purchased, with its surrounding possessions, by the Teutonic Knights in 1220. The village is very picturesque. As one winds up the steep ascent to the entrance one almost expects to encounter the guardhouse, the moat and the drawbridge which must once have been there. The streets are clean and the houses apparently roomy and comfortable.

We left there at 9.30 a.m. and soon realized that we were following a carefully made ancient road: the rock had been elaborately cut away in places—a work ascribed to the Teutonic Knights. At about 10 a.m. we had a fine view of Jeddin some four miles to the south-west, and just afterwards we commenced to descend into the great Wady el-Kurn. To our west on the sea lay ez-Zib, the ancient Achzib (Josh. xix, 29, Judges i, 31), at the very mouth of Wady el-Kurn, whilst further north could be seen the commencement of the Râs en-Nakûrah—the famous "Ladder of Tyre." Our guide then led us off the direct path to show us what was, according to him, the quarry from which the Knights had drawn their supply of stone. In the midst of this quarry stood a most interesting small fort or watch tower. What remained was a solid block of rock about 15 feet high and perhaps 30 feet square. There were steps on one side and on the top, besides the remains of walls, there was an opening into a large and deep cistern hollowed out in the substance of the block of rock. From here a wide view of the surrounding country was obtainable, and far beneath us we could see the ruins of the ancient Montfort. Evidently, this is a surviving part of an outlying fort constructed partly to guard the highway and more particularly as a watch tower for the castle which was itself so shut in on all sides by hills that from its own walls it could receive no warning of the distant approach of hostile forces. Descending from here down a steep valley we soon turned aside into an exceedingly slippery though clearly artificially

constructed causeway running to the right of the highway towards the eastern extremity of the ruins. Our guide led us to a spot which, as he suggested, was not improbably the secret entrance to the castle. Here in the hillside was a deep fissure, originally perhaps partly natural, through which it was possible to ride on horseback in single file. The natural rocks meet above and there are two spots in this passage where guards might without difficulty be concealed. The path comes out on the north site of the hill where there is a semi-precipitous descent of 500 feet to the bottom of the Wady el-Kurn, and progress this way is now impossible. We now, therefore, retraced our steps into the side valley by which we had approached the castle, and leaving our horses with the muleteer some way down the hill, where an old but now long disused bridge crossed the valley, we made a very steep ascent on foot to the castle itself—a rough scramble up the bare hillside. The ruins occupy a narrow ridge running roughly from east to west: on the north and west sides is the deep Wady el-Kurn, and on the south is the deep side wady down which we had come, which joins the Wady el-Kurn at the foot of the castle hill. On all three sides the hill slopes are extraordinarily steep, indeed so much so that standing on some of the projecting ruins of the old battlements the descent looks perpendicular—a sheer drop. On the east side the castle hill was joined to the mountain ridge behind by a narrow neck of land, but this has been artificially cut away, leaving a deep fosse. (It may be added that this fosse is not the place referred to before. This ancient entrance is some 25 yards to the east of the fosse.) The natural strength of this site is great, and when the fortifications were complete may well have been considered impregnable. The highest point of the hill was occupied by the keep—the key of the castle—which stood immediately to the west of the great fosse; it was built of gigantic blocks of beautifully cut stone. This has been deliberately destroyed, the massive blocks strewing the hillside over a large area. It is said that here stood the Treasury of the Order and that the archives, now preserved in Berlin, were kept here. From the keep the castle stretched along the narrow ridge, its walls occupying the edges of the steep hillside. It is difficult from the existing ruins to make out anything definitely of the original plan, but it is clear that there were three successive defensive posts: the lower outworks, the great mass of the castle and the handsome inner keep. In the midst of the ruins is a curious octagonal

monolith column eight feet high, which appears to have been the centre of an octagonal hall. One of the side columns, sculptured like the centre, is still in site; the rest have all crumbled away as their foundations have subsided down the hill slope. This Gothic hall was probably the chapter house of the Order.

What a romantic site this is! One's mind travels back to those old Knights who with such dauntless bravery, though, as we now think, such mistaken zeal, clung to their last possessions in the "Holy Land." Jerusalem had long been lost when they took possession here, and during those closing years, as fortress after fortress fell to the ruthless onslaught of the great Egyptian Mameluk Bibars, it must have required a bravery and a tenacity of purpose, which we cannot but admire, to have hung on to that precipitous height. They were ever closer hemmed in. Akka was within easy reach, but they scorned to save their lives by a base retreat. The war was one without quarter and so here, as at Safed and many other such a spot, they were at last slaughtered to a man in the defence of a cause already hopelessly lost. To-day the high hillside, covered with green brushwood, shuts in the scene of this tragedy, and as one sits by the fresh running stream in the Wady el-Kurn and looks up at the ruins which rise tier above tier amidst the leafy green, one looks upon a picture of combined beauty and romance unequalled in Palestine. By this stream is a beautiful Gothic ruin, about 100 feet long, probably the remains of a chapel or convent built perhaps when the Knights at first enjoyed a somewhat peaceful possession of their estate. In a later age it was for a time used as a mill.

After a bathe and lunch at the stream, we started back to Safed. We ascended from the Wady el-Kurn to the plateau, 700 feet, in twenty-five minutes. Soon after 3 p.m. we passed Malia, traversed some valleys between chalky hills, crossed the valley of El-Bukeiah and ascended the steep hillside opposite to Suhmāta, which is said to have been once a Crusading site. Here, between two distinct portions of the village on opposite hillocks, we found a party of youngsters enjoying themselves in the filthy water of the village pool. A steep descent of half-an-hour brought us to the bottom of the deep Wady Habīs, one of the tributaries of the Wady el-Kurn. In another hour we passed Hurfaish and in an hour more, we passed Sūsā, and just as the setting sun was illuminating the long chalky hill of Safed, we caught sight of our destination, which we reached two hours after dark.