

1291: Retreat from the Last Crusader Castle Held in the Holy Land

A reconstruction model of Templar fortification Tartous, at 1:25



top: view of inner section of the massive donjon of Tartous castle

For the International Castle Research Society (ICRS) temporary inspection models (models meant to be dismantled after some weeks' use) continue to be of great importance just as ICR is looking for a permanent home to house its models. In 2012 ICRS offered such an inspection model presenting the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem that was to be included in a planned intercultural exhibition entitled "Pilgrims' Goal Jerusalem - Orient and Occident Meeting"; then, in 2013, this was followed by the reconstruction of the donjon of Castel Lucera in Apulia, Italy, of Hohenstauffen times; and recently ICRS presented an inspection model of the donjon of the Templar castle of Tartous, Syria.

Michael Siepen, trained carpenter and wood-worker and passionate about model construction as well as the preservation of ancient monuments, had created these models. More than 20,000 pieces of beech wood loosely joined to create an inspection model impressively bear witness to the solid strength of a construction that after centuries following its destruction by the Mamluk sultan in 1291 remained ruined, used as a quarry, later to be split up and reconverted into simple habitations used by the local population.

"Preservation of historical monuments" as a concept arose among concerned scholars in the late 19th century. The present-day vestiges of Tartous castle can hardly give a proper impression yet in Michael Siepen's reconstruction, long study and work have produced a model that although hypothetical, appears impressive, convincing, almost life-like, with its great array of 7-cm-tall figurines, all hand-made, that convey a vivid impression of the hustle and bustle that actually reigned in 1291 when crusaders, knights with their retinue, ordinary pilgrims, and locals, supported by sailors, scrambled to save themselves and their

belongings as they were trying to reach the waiting ships. They were all hoping to avail themselves of the last opportunity of fleeing to Cyprus after Akko, the second crusader town after Jerusalem, had fallen to the sultan's troops. Muslim heavy siege engines have been plying the castle and the last remaining refuge, the donjon, and the final, successful assault is near.

The impressive construction, its outer walls originally up to 4.80 m strong, in its reconstruction is presented as seen from two perspectives placed at 90 degrees, one of them facing the sea, with a "tarida" moored against the sea face of the building. This ship, along with another, "nave", was modelled by architect Bernhard Siepen and his team using plans drawn up by historian of technology and expert shipbuilder, Dr. Ulrich Alertz of Aachen. Both ships featured in the big model of 2008, "Crusader Ships in Akko Harbour", and both belong to the large Crusader fleet of French kings Saint Louis and Charles of Anjou.

The other side of the model presents the surprising view of the gigantic interior of the donjon, with its wide barrel-vaults. Here the Christians, longing to return home, are shown, some jostling on, some patiently waiting, sharing a last meal, while the sick and injured are being moved out. Above all this there is no mistaking the knights of all orders present painstakingly supervising the retreat, in ready defence.

This model, as well as the earlier ones, serves to show that models have not necessarily to be created by computer. Models such as the ones described here still attract young people as well as the not so young. Bernhard Siepen and his companions engaged in ICRS fervently hope there will be a museum which might be called "History Three-Dimensional - Orient and Occident Meeting". So far, this has not come true, and this in spite of the fact that in 2009 in a big Landes-Museum Bonn exhibition featuring all models and covering some 700 square meters 60,000 enthusiastic visitors proved the effectiveness of the concept.

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photos: by ICRS



the fortress as seen from the water, a tarida