

The Citadel of Aleppo

Introduction and description

The Citadel is located in the heart of the old city of Aleppo, and is the primary tourist attraction of Syria. Rising about 50 metres above the surrounding neighbourhoods, the entire oval cone of 170x295 metres is ringed by walls with many arrow slits and defensive towers. The towers and walls are of varying prominences, facades and individual heights, and present an attractive and stimulating architectural view from afar. Two advance towers stand outside the wall on the northern and southern slopes of the hill. The hill is surrounded by a moat dug deeper than the ground level of the surrounding area, and connects with several caves and underground passageways.

As an incredible example of an Arab defensive fortification, the citadel never fails to amaze on first sight. The citadel today has come to be a symbol for the city of Aleppo as a whole. Standing on any point or corner on its wall provides magical views of domes, minarets, and the architectural diversity that makes up the unique urban fabric of the old city of Aleppo.

History of the Citadel

The history of the citadel is an inextricable part of the history of the city of Aleppo. The citadel hill has possibly been used as a defensive site since the beginnings of the city's history thousands of years ago. One of the first builders of the citadel is reputed to be Seleucius Nicator, a Greek king and a general in Alexander the Great's army, of the Hellenistic (Eastern Greek) period. Ongoing discoveries in the citadel prove even older origins of the human habitation of the site. Recent excavations have discovered that citadel hill was home to a Hittite temple built during the second and first millennia BC.

The first sections of the wall were likely built during the Greek or Roman periods, followed by some restoration and improvement by the Byzantines, such as the placement of water cisterns and other facilities. With these improvements, the citadel became a powerful fortified centre, one which the Muslim Arabs required months to capture and oblige the Byzantines inside to surrender.

Most of the visible ruins in the citadel are of military, residential, or religious construction. The most important rulers who worked on the construction, fortification, and additions of the citadel are, and some of their notable actions (in chronological order):

Sayf ad-Dauleh al-Hamdani built some parts of the wall. His work was finished by his son, *Saad ad-Dauleh* and the citadel's inhabitants.

The next ruling family, the *Mardas*, renovated some of the walls, and constructed and populated residences inside the citadel. During this time the Citadel became the residence of the rulers.

The subsequent rulers of the Citadel, the Zengids, developed the citadel's defences and left behind many important remains, among them the two advance towers and the arsenal. In 1146, *al Adel Nur ad-Din Zengi* constructed many structures and added iron gates. He also established a grassy arena, and covered a section of the slope of the hill with stone cladding. Most of the amazing achievements in the citadel can be attributed to Nur ad-Din Zengi.

Nur ad-Din was followed by *al Malek an-Nasr Salah ad-Din al Ayyubi* (Saladin), who gave rule of the citadel to his brother *al Adil Sayf ad-Din*. *al Adil Sayf ad-Din* built a new tower and residences.

az-Zaher Ghazi, son of Salah ad-Din, was ruler of the citadel around 1186 AD, and modified and improved some of the fortification's defences. He also built a large water cistern and two large storage rooms for harvested crops. He tore down the external entrance tower in the citadel *bashura*, and rebuilt it with colossal stone blocks. He also raised the entrance gate to its present elevation. On top of the gate, he built two unique towers connected by a bridge leading to the entrance of the citadel. Inside the entrance, he made five vaulted halls with three iron gates, as well as sitting places for the soldiers and officials. Ghazi also built the *satura* or water-well, a mosque, and opened a vaulted passageway in the north of the citadel that could only be entered through a secret door in case of emergencies. He also deepened the moat and filled it with water. By digging into the solid rock, he created caves to use as a prison.

Ghazi constructed *dar al-izz*, a royal palace, on the same site as the previous residence of Nur ad-Din, and surrounded it with houses, rooms, hammams, gardens, and special places for soldiers and scribes. The arch of the palace's gate is especially sophisticated and notable.

Ghazi also continued coating part of the citadel's slope with stone cladding.

al Malek al Aziz built a residence next to the arsenal and weapon storage room.

*Some of the structures in the citadel have been exposed to fires and destruction. This and other types of destruction and disintegration occurred primarily during the Mongol invasion in 1259 AD. The Mongols destroyed the citadel's walls and most of its structures and burned the two mosques inside the citadel. The Mamluks returned and restored the citadel in 1290, and it became the headquarters of governance once again for the city. In 1440, however, Tamerlane and his troops destroyed most of what had been restored.

al Ashraf Khalil Bin Qalaoun, a Mamluk ruler, started renovating the citadel in 1291 and continued until the arrival of Emir *Sayf ad-Din*, a deputy of *al Malek an-Nasr bin Barquq*. Bin Barquq rebuilt what had been destroyed and added new elements as well. This was likely the time period when the most construction took place in the citadel.

The Mamluk Emir Jakam rebuilt the two advance towers which sit on the northern and southern slopes of the citadel hill. These were later strengthened by the last Mamluk Sultan, *Qanswah al Ghuri*. It is believed that both towers were connected to the citadel by secret underground vaulted passageways.

It is thought that Sultan Muaid ash-Sheikh first roofed the Throne Hall in 1417 AD. The walls of the Throne Hall were built by Jakam, and were strengthened under Sultan Qaitsbay. In the same way, Sultan Qanswah al Ghuri rebuilt the walls of the citadel and roofed the Throne Hall with nine domes. The roof was destroyed, however, by the earthquake of 1822 AD.

The Citadel lost its defensive importance during the Ottoman period, except when it was used briefly as a barracks. A group of residences was built in it to house some of the employees at the time. Some basic maintenance and repairs were undertaken during this time, but no new structures were added.

During his troops' occupation of the citadel of Aleppo in 1831, Ibrahim Pasha (son of Mohammad Ali the Great) built barracks on the northern surface of the citadel. The rectangular building is today known as the "Barracks of Ibrahim Pasha," and part of it currently houses a museum. The citadel continued to serve as a place of military significance to some extent under the French mandate, but afterwards fell into disuse.

The government of the Syrian Arab Republic has put a great effort into the restoration of the Citadel. Researchers, both Syrian and international, contributed through the archaeological excavations and discoveries.

The citadel now and the beginnings of the long-term rehabilitation projects.

Restoration projects have been occurring yearly, supported by the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, despite limited funding. The Citadel of Aleppo still has many structurally precarious buildings, and many others which lack adequate maintenance and services. Considering that the citadel is a significant tourist attraction, and draws visitors from many areas, the site requires much more care and interest. Levels of technical and financial assistance that do justice to the Citadel's archaeological importance and touristic function are also required.

At the end of 1999, an agreement of understanding was signed between the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture—Historic Cities Support Program on restoration support for three castles in Syria: the Citadel of Aleppo, the Citadel of Masyaf, and the Castle of Salah ad-Din. The most important of these three castles is likely the Citadel of Aleppo, as it has the longest known history and enjoys a prominent site in the middle of the old city of Aleppo, registered by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

The work of the Trust has focused on two main approaches to development in the Citadel:

The first approach was concerned with the buildings and palace present inside the citadel, and the careful development of a visitor centre and specialized museums. Buildings renovated inside the citadel include: the Ayyubid Palace, the Arsenal, the Royal Hammam, the Tawashi Palace, Tower 42, the courtyard in front of the entrance to the palace, the walkways required around the arsenal, the Barracks of Ibrahim Pasha, and, most recently, the Ayyubid Cistern.

The second approach has concentrated on the care, support, and restoration of the internal and external areas of walls and wall towers of the citadel, especially on the northern, western, and southern sites of the citadel. Other construction worked to improve the existing defense structures inside the citadel, the western surface area of the citadel stretching from the wall of the Big Mosque to the walls of the Throne Hall, the flanking tower, and the northern advance tower, the slope of the citadel and the gullies on the slope, the stone cladding in some areas of the slope, the entrance tower and the *satura* (the Ayyubid Well) structures, and, finally, the development of public restrooms.

PERIMETER AREA OF THE CITADEL OF ALEPPO

The future of the perimeter area of the Citadel is logically interconnected with the Citadel itself, and is considered to be one united entity with the Citadel. A comprehensive urban study of the Citadel perimeter area is currently being completed. As a result of the study, the following problems were found, among them: general traffic problems and the mixing of pedestrian and vehicular traffic. As a result, the goals for improving the area include the placement of a parking area, improvement of the facades of surrounding buildings in the perimeter area, and directing tourist activities in the direction most beneficial to other surrounding neighbourhoods. Full site development, in addition to the necessary activities, attractions, and services, requires attention to the importance of infrastructural improvements to area streets, creation of green spaces in the area, and so forth.

Also depending on the results of the survey is the implementation of international standards for the site, with tourist and cultural attractions appropriate both for the Citadel and its perimeter as an international monument, tourists, and, in particular, the residents of the surrounding neighbourhoods. Taking into account the importance of the Citadel of Aleppo and its perimeter, a group of individuals who appreciate the true value of the site founded a private non-profit society for investment in the Citadel and its perimeter. The scientific and cultural activities of the society are limited to the City of Aleppo. The goal of the society is the care of the Citadel of Aleppo and its perimeter.

Aleppo Citadel Friends is a domestic non-profit civil society dedicated to the scientific and human advancement of participation in the care of the Citadel of Aleppo and its perimeter, in addition to what the government provides for its upkeep and care.

The participation in the development of financial and cultural contributions to the Citadel of Aleppo and its perimeter cannot be achieved unless its previous planning and work is continued by specialized and qualified volunteers, who maintain the same scientific and methodological standards as previous work, and do so in cooperation with the concerned governmental entities for the care and protection of the Citadel of Aleppo and its perimeter