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A Formal Analysis on the Krak des Chevaliers's Latin Inscription

The Krak des Chevaliers is a castle located in present day Syria. Although it was originally built in 1031 CE for the Emir of Aleppo, Salah al-Din's grandson, the castle was taken by the Knights Hospitaller in the mid-twelfth century and extensively remodeled. From 1144 CE to 1271 CE, it was utilized for the defense of the Crusader's County of Tripoli from Muslim expansion. In April of 1271 CE, Mamluk leader Al-Zahir Baybars defeated the castle and its occupants, finally returning the Krak des Chevaliers to Muslim hands ("Krak"). The Krak des Chevaliers still stands today in its mostly original form. Located on a portico of the castle is a Latin inscription that serves as a mark of the Crusader hold. Because this inscription survived the following Muslim occupation unscathed, one can assume that its meaning holds significance to individuals of both Christianity and Islam. I will argue that this inscription has been able to survive because it served as a sort of scripture to live by for not only the Knights Hospitaller, but also the subsequent Muslim soldiers.

The Crusades were a series of battles led by Christian forces to regain the Holy Land from Muslim control. With the First Crusade being initiated by Pope Urban II, the wars were motivated by the growing anxieties of Christian empires toward the expansion of nearby Muslim empires. The First Crusade achieved its goal of reclaiming Jerusalem, the Holy Land, for Christians and resulted in the foundation of the Crusader States (Beveridge 39). The County of Edessa was established in 1098 CE by Baldwin of Boulogne, a leader of the First Crusade. In

payment for protecting Edessa from the Turks, King Thoros of Edessa adopted Baldwin, making him the next heir to the throne. The people of Edessa desired to have Baldwin as their new king, so they attacked King Thoros and killed him (Archer 61-62). The Principality of Antioch was also established in 1098, but by Bohemond of Taranto, another leader of the First Crusade. After nearly a year, Bohemond's siege of Antioch was successful, and he took control of the city for the Crusaders as Bohemond I of Antioch (Archer 65-69). The Kingdom of Jerusalem was founded in 1099 CE after the siege of Jerusalem, which lasted just over a month. The Crusaders attacked the city, slaughtering almost everyone inside. The Crusader soldiers were particularly brutal and beheaded, tortured, and burned the Jews and Muslims occupying the city before forcing the few remaining Muslims to remove the bodies from the city walls (Archer 84-92). The County of Tripoli was the last of the four Crusader States to be established. Count Raymond of Toulouse, a leader of the First Crusade who played a significant role in capturing both Antioch and Jerusalem, initiated the Siege of Tripoli in 1103 CE. However, Raymond died in 1105 CE before the eventual capture of Tripoli in 1109 CE (Lewis).

The Second Crusade took place in the mid twelfth century in response to the defeat of the city of Edessa by Muslim forces. It was a massive Crusader failure. The Third Crusade occurred between 1189 CE and 1193 CE. The Crusaders were sent to reclaim Jerusalem from Salah al-Din, who had conquered the city in 1187 CE. The Christian efforts were once again a failure and the Holy Land remained in Muslim hands. The Fourth Crusade began in 1201 CE and endured for three years. The primary event was the Sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders (Damen). The Fifth Crusade took place from 1217 CE to 1221 CE and was yet another effort to reclaim Jerusalem, but this time by starting in Egypt. Despite the Crusader effort to change their plan of attack, they failed once again. The Sixth Crusade began in 1228 CE, but ended a year

later after successful negotiation with Muslims to allow Christian access to Jerusalem. The Seventh Crusade started in 1248 CE to defeat Muslim Egypt. After taking the city of Damietta, the Crusader leader was captured in Cairo and the Christians failed once again. The Eighth and final Crusade was an effort to conquer Egypt and to regain lands in the Mediterranean coastal region that had recently fallen to Muslim control, including Jerusalem. Disease ravaged the Crusader forces and the Christian controlled city of Acre fell in 1291, ending the Crusades once and for all (“Christian”).

The Knights Hospitaller was established in Italy around 1080 CE (“Kraak”). The order was created at the Hospital of Saint John in Jerusalem and run by Roman Catholic monks to care for the poor and others in need. The group worked out of their personal infirmary, which is said to have been located near the Holy Church of the Sepulchre (Beveridge 41). After the First Crusade and encouragement from Crusader figureheads, the leader of the Knights Hospitaller decided to militarize the order. They dominated the hospitals in the Holy Land and gained great respect from both Christians and Muslims for their service. The Knights Hospitaller was a precursor to the Knights Templar, which was founded in 1119 CE for the purpose of protecting pilgrims traveling to holy sites (Beveridge 42). After the defeat of Crusader Jerusalem by Salah al-Din in 1187 CE, the Knights Hospitaller was allowed generous time to vacate the city safely. They soon became recognized as a strong group of Crusader knights who defended the Christian Crusader States. The Knights Hospitaller was given the castle of Krak des Chevalier in 1144 CE and remodeled it, allowing it to become one of the best defensive structures occupied by the Crusaders (“Knights”). The castle was vital for the protection of the County of Tripoli’s eastern border from pressures of Muslim expansion during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (“Kraak”).

During the Crusader occupation, a large hall was added to the castle and is now known as the Hall of the Knights. The hall leads to a portico, which bears two inscriptions (see fig. 1). The inscriptions were most likely carved by the Knights Hospitaller during their occupation of the structure. This can be deduced by the use of Latin as the language, which had previously diverged into the Romance dialects, ending the era of spoken Latin (Heller). Although the language was no longer spoken, it retained its importance in the Catholic Church (Birch). A version of the Latin Bible using Christian Latin was in circulation at the time and popular amongst Catholics (Persig). Furthermore, numerous Popes had voiced the importance of Latin in Catholicism and its role of connecting individuals of different languages. Catholics today are still encouraged to learn prayers and songs in Latin to preserve these traditions (Birch).

The inscription discussed in this paper is located on the northern pillar of the portico. Opposite of this pillar is a supplementary inscription on the southern pillar. The supplementary inscription reads, “This work was done in Brother Jorgi’s time.” However, there is no information on who this individual was. The distinct script of the inscriptions has led scholars to date them to the thirteenth century (“The Krak”). The inscription can also be compared to numerous burial inscriptions that have been definitively dated to the time of the Crusades (see fig. 2) (Ingrand-Varenne). When comparing the castle’s inscription to the Crusader funerary inscription, there are indisputable similarities. For example, the letter “T” has been inscribed in a way not seen in classical Latin inscriptions. Rather, there seems to have been an effort made to make the Crusader script more ornate. Because of the use of Latin in Catholic practices, the style of script, and similarity to Crusader burial inscriptions, it can be said with confidence that the castle’s inscriptions are from the Crusader occupation.

The inscription on the northern pillar reads:

sit tibi copia

sit sapiētia

formaq : det :

inōnat oia sola

sup̄bia si comi.

This inscription has several irregularities when compared to classical Latin inscriptions. In the second line, the “e” in “sapietia” has a macron, which I have taken as an indication of the omission of the following letter, “n.” The third line has shortened the proper endings for both “formaque” and “detur.” The form “inōnat” in the fourth line uses the macron over the “ō” to indicate the omission of its following letters “u” and “i.” “Oia” may have had a macron over the letter “i” that was lost to damage meant to indicate the omission of its following letters “m” and “n.” However, it has been suggested that “oia” is actually an abbreviation used for “omnia” (“Latin”). The macron over “p” in the last line indicates the omission of its following letters “e” and “r.” I also believe that “comi” is meant to be understood as “comitetur.” While there is no macron over the letter “i,” there is damage immediately beneath the line. This could have been where the remainder of the word was. The use of macrons to indicate the omission of letters is not characteristic of classical Latin and may be a feature drawn from other languages of the time or area.

My full interpretation of the line is, “sit tibi copia, sit sapie(n)tia, formaq(ue) det(ur), inq(ui)nat o(mn)ia sola sup(er)bia si comi(tetur).” The third through fifth lines of the inscription form a future less vivid conditional sentence structure with a present subjunctive verb in the protasis and a present indicative verb in the apodosis. With this being taken into account, my

translation of the inscription is, “may you have abundance, may you have wisdom, and may beauty be given to you, but pride alone spoils all things if it should accompany them.”

The translation of the inscription embodies the beliefs of the Knights Hospitaller. The knights were Catholic men and monks who emphasized the importance of chastity, morality, and faith. The repetition of “may” in the first three lines builds the readers’ suspense of what will follow. Thus, it emphasizes the danger of pride, one of the cardinal sins, and how it can destroy a man. Attention should be paid to the lack of a quantitative word, such as “too much,” modifying “pride.” I argue that this is imperative to the understanding of the inscription. Because pride is so destructive, any amount is dangerous to have. Close attention should also be paid to the inclusion of abundance, wisdom, and beauty. Abundance is representative of all things one may earn or accrue during their life. Wisdom represents all things that one may have that are not physically tangible. Beauty is a reference to all things that one is born with. These words form a tricolon with the purpose of elaborating on all of the things that pride is said to spoil. The primary message of this inscription is that pride is destructive to man in any quantity.

The meaning of this inscription is likely tied to the Christian beliefs of the Knights Hospitaller. The discussion surrounding the cardinal sins is extensive and seems to have always been a topic of interest to monks and theologians. Theologians prior to and during the Crusades firmly established that pride is the worst of the cardinal sins and great effort should be put forth to avoid it (Little). The Bible also discusses pride rather thoroughly. In Proverbs, it is declared that God hates evil, which includes “pride and arrogance, evil behavior and pervasive speech” (*Life Application Study Bible*, Prov. 8.13). This broad statement emphasizes that all evil is unacceptable in the eyes of the Lord, but notably lists pride first. Word order should not be overlooked, as it is intentional and places emphasis on pride over the following vices. This

importance of word order is further elaborated on in Lester Little's discussion of pride being the most severe of the cardinal sins (Little). In Romans it is said, "do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position" (Rom. 12.16). Proverbs also warns man, saying "the Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished" (Prov. 16.5). The foundation of the Knights Hospitaller itself aligns with the Bible's instruction regarding pride, as the group was established to care for the poor and ill (Beveridge 41).

With pride being of such focus for Christians, and likely the Knights Hospitaller, the meaning of the inscription makes perfect sense. Located in a portico, where knights likely gathered, at the end of a hall constructed by the Crusaders themselves, this inscription was intended to be seen on a routine basis by everyone. It served as a reminder of the original purpose of the Knights Hospitaller and guided the thoughts and behaviors of the knights occupying the castle. It reminded them that they may be intelligent and protected by a sturdy castle, but they must be wary of their pride because it will lead to their downfall. The knights had to be wary of their individual pride and the pride of the entire Order, as both controlled their fate.

In a way, this inscription is ironic. One can argue that the cause of the Crusades themselves was pride. The Christian Empire had been vastly successful in their previous expansions and had a stronghold in Europe. The idea of another empire of a different religion growing was seen as a threat to the existence of Christianity, so the Pope called for a war rather than coexistence. Furthermore, after the Crusaders lost control of Jerusalem to Salah al-Din in 1187 CE during the Battle of Hattin, they refused to accept defeat. Their pride was so great that they continued with five more Crusades, all with the ultimate goal of reclaiming Jerusalem. This pride destroyed any and all rationality of the Christian leaders, who were sending a seemingly endless stream of unprepared soldiers into battle. The Crusaders also deviated from their goal of

reclaiming Jerusalem. This led to the establishment of three other Crusader States in addition to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. By establishing these additional states, more manpower was required to maintain the Christian hold of them. Had the Crusaders concentrated their forces on Jerusalem alone, they may have been more successful in their initial goal. Further, the pride of Christians drove them to murder innocent and defenseless Jews and Muslims without a second thought in the name of regaining Jerusalem. These battles accrued over one million deaths that could have been avoided if pride had not consumed the Christian Empire.

Regardless of the irony, it must be questioned how the Crusader inscription was able to survive the Muslim occupation of the Krak des Chevaliers in the following centuries. Crusader inscriptions are rare, with the majority having been destroyed or removed from their original position and their materials repurposed. Many of the marks left behind by Crusaders are referred to as Crusader graffiti. Crusader graffiti was used for the purpose of marking Crusader presence and has been removed in several cases. In the case of the Krak des Chevaliers, I argue that the inscription in the castle is not a form of Crusader graffiti because it was not intended to be seen by anyone except the Crusaders. With the Krak des Chevaliers's defense being so successful and the Knights Hospitaller being so powerful, the knights likely thought that they would always maintain control of the castle. Further, the inscription is not a recognizable symbol or scripture emphasizing the superiority of Christianity. While the inscription has ties to Christianity, its meaning can be understood and respected outside of the scope of religion.

Therefore, I believe that the inscription not only survived, but was preserved by the later Muslim occupants. Pride is discussed more in the Qur'an than it is in the Bible. Allah says, "Enter ye the gates of Hell, abiding therein. And evil is the abode of the arrogant" (The Qur'an 39.73). This scripture emphasizes the contagiousness of pride, as it describes the home of the

proud as evil rather than the individual alone. This implies that those who visit or live in the home are also in danger of pride. In Chapter Four, Allah says that followers with good faith who do good deeds will be rewarded in Paradise, while those who do not believe and are too prideful will receive a painful punishment after death (The Qur'an 4.174). Similarly to the Bible, Allah seemingly declares his hatred for pride. He tells us that his followers should be the opposite of prideful. He warns that pride can deter one's faith, which will result in painful chastisement after death. In Chapter Two of the Qur'an, Allah says "and when it is said to him, 'Fear Allah,' pride incites him to further sin. So Hell shall be his sufficient reward; and surely, it is an evil place of rest" (The Qur'an 2.207). This scripture emphasizes that pride is already a severe sin in itself, but it also guides man to a life of more sin. Numerous hadith also warn followers of pride and its dangers. The Prophet Muhammad is rumored to have said that "he who has in his heart the weight of a mustard seed of pride shall not enter Paradise" ("The prohibition"). The danger of pride is arguably most stressed here, with the slightest amount said to be enough to keep one from entering Paradise.

When the Krak des Chevaliers returned to Muslim hands, the Crusader inscription was not seen as a sore reminder of the Christian occupation. Rather, it was seen as a reminder of Allah's teachings. Because of this, the inscription was not destroyed like the many other Crusader inscriptions. Instead, it was preserved for the same reason that the Crusaders placed it there: it served to guide the Muslim soldiers in their daily conduct. The inscription reminded the occupants that their own pride determines their entrance to Paradise and that actions driven by pride would result in punishment after death.

My opinion of the Muslim interpretation of the Krak des Chevaliers's inscription is complicated by the question of whether any of the Muslim occupants would have been able to

translate the inscription. The Latin language was primarily spoken by a small number of elite individuals who received high levels of education and so, it is thought to have “died” between the sixth and seventh centuries CE. Because of this, the likelihood of a Muslim soldier (and many of the Crusaders) being able to translate the inscription at the time of the Crusades is slim. It is possible that some of the knights translated the inscription into Italian, which would have been known by a larger percentage of Muslims because of trade. Another possibility is that the Muslims could have had a hostage taken during the Battle of Hattin translate the inscription for them. Regardless, the survival of the inscription is indicative of it holding some type of significance to the Muslim occupants.

It is impossible to ignore the parallels in the teachings of pride between Christianity and Islam. The similarities between the religions should be highlighted, as it is key to understanding the survival of the inscription. Both Christianity and Islam are monotheistic Abrahamic faiths. The religions share the same God, but Islam recognizes Muhammad as a prophet and believes that Jesus was not the son of God. However, the differences between the religions had no impact on their followers’ understanding of the Krak des Chevaliers inscription. The similarities between Islam and Christianity and the belief in the same God has protected the existence of the inscription since its creation in the thirteenth century. Both the Qur’an and Bible guide the understanding of this inscription and its importance in the eyes of believers. The word of God alone is enough for the message to be clear: pride destroys all things. Occupants of the Krak des Chevaliers looked up to this inscription on a daily basis and were reminded of the same message.

Images



Figure 1. "Hall of Knights, Crac des Chevaliers: Latin Inscription."



Figure 2. "Funerary inscription for Géraud of Aniane," 1223, Boussagues church. Picture by Jean Michaud.

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