CHAPTER TWO
DOMESTIC CONSTRUCTION

In constructing their houses the Frankish builders in the East were influenced by the methods used in the West as well as by those in use in the area that had now come under Frankish rule and in neighbouring lands.

A: Architectural Style

The period of Frankish settlement in the Levant falls neatly into the two major architectural styles current in medieval Europe: Romanesque which was the predominant style in use into the middle of the twelfth century and Gothic which immediately replaced it. That the Franks in the Latin East employed these styles aids us in identifying Frankish buildings and in distinguishing them from local, non-European architecture.

As the Frankish settlements were a rather distant outpost of European culture, their buildings occasionally display features not found in the West. The broad use of the pointed arch already in Romanesque buildings is a direct example of the Muslim influence on Frankish architecture in the Latin East. The comparatively early use of rib-vaulting is another innovation. On the other hand, Frankish buildings in the East often lack features that are typical of European Romanesque and Gothic buildings.

Such matters are by their nature less apparent in domestic buildings, where in comparison to churches and castles, there is little architectural decoration. The poor state of preservation of most domestic buildings makes architectural styles still more difficult to trace. As can be seen in surviving examples of domestic buildings in France and elsewhere, decoration was usually more extensive on the upper storey piano nobile. Because of the turbulent history of the region, in the towns and villages of the Near East it is very uncommon to find houses of the Frankish period that have survived above the basement/ground floor level and very few house façades survive at all. Consequently, there are few examples of distinctly Romanesque or Gothic features
in domestic buildings and when these are found they are usually fragmentary. Indeed, examples of carved features, of decorative elements from vaulting or even of the vaulting itself that could be clearly defined as belonging to one or other of these styles are exceptional. In Cyprus some Gothic houses have survived, mainly of fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth century date, but even these are in buildings that have largely been reconstructed. These examples have been discussed by Enlart in his 1899 publication of Gothic buildings.¹

B: Building Materials

In many regions of the West house construction was much less substantial than in the East. Wood or wattle and daub was still predominant throughout much of Europe, even when building stone was available. Not only rural houses but even urban houses were sometimes so flimsy that in a conflagration they could be knocked down in order to form a fire-break using nothing more than a hook and rope,² and robbers would occasionally prefer to break into a house via the wall rather than through the door, the former being a less formidable barrier. Le Roy Ladurie records that in single storey houses in the village of Montaillou in the Pyrenees, “you could lift the edge of a shingle roof with your head and look in to see what was going on in the kitchen.”³ In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries stone began to play a greater role in urban construction than it had previously. In most regions other than the south it was still too expensive for peasant houses, and in cities it was used mainly in the houses of merchants and money-changers such as Moyses Hall, Bury St Edmunds, and Jew’s House, Lincoln in England, and in the houses of Cluny in Burgundy.⁴

Stone

This is one of the principal differences between domestic construction in the East and West. Other than the large forest around Arsur, the

³ Le Roy Ladurie, p. 40.
⁴ Regarding the latter see Grandchamp et al., 1997.