Coin Finds (1926–2012) and the Use of Money at Montfort

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Introduction

Contrary to popular imagination, often fuelled by a potent mixture of European Romanticism and local lore, large Crusader castles have yielded disappointingly few material remains of money. Until now surveys and excavations of some of the largest fortifications in the Kingdom of Jerusalem and the northern Principalities, Beaufort, Safed, Château Pélerin, Belvoir, Jerusalem’s Citadel and Montreal (Shawbak) have produced little or no coin finds of significance.1

In contrast, it is often the smaller, lesser known castles and towers/castra in the Kingdom of Jerusalem like Arsur (Arsuf/Apollonia), Vadum Iacob or Bethgibelain (Bet Guvrin) that have yielded relative substantial coin finds, considering their smaller sizes.2

A number of obvious reasons explain the dearth of coin finds in large castles: pillaging of money and other valuables during hostilities;3 extensive rebuilding which took place within these castles during successive periods; widespread robbery of material from such high profile castle locations over hundreds of years; and “unfriendly” excavation methods, particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fieldwork methods used during this period in medieval castles in the Near East focused primarily on the exploration and study of larger architectural elements, often to the detriment of a systematic search of smaller artefacts like coins.

The medieval coin finds of the large spur castle of Montfort, as small as they are, take on a special significance in the light of the above. This is particularly so because most of the coins were excavated from within the castle’s central section, west of the keep which contained its domestic quarters and in a large ceremonial “Great Hall” built, used and destroyed between the 1227 and 1271.4 These finds thus are clearly connected to the daily business of the castle’s inhabitants intra muros.

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1 For Beaufort see Kennedy, 1994, pp. 5–7. As far as I know no coins were ever found here. The keep was surveyed in 1936 by Paul Deschamps and the architect Pierre Coupel together with 65 soldiers who cleared Beaufort’s inner enclosure. Their plans were published in Deschamps, 1939b. Later surveys which focus on architectural elements of the castle, like that of Gussemmeyer and Yasmine, 2003, do not mention any coin finds. For a good survey of past and more recent excavations at Safed Castle and its environment see Barbe, 2010. Here also we only have scattered references to medieval coins, mostly Mamluk. The only report of Crusader period coinage from Safed comes from an excavation of the adjacent medieval faubourg which was inhabited consecutively during the Ayyubid occupation of Safed (1188–1240) and its Frankish reoccupation (1240–1266). See Kool 2013. The Coins from Jerusalem Street, Safed (Zefat). ‘Atiqot Volume 81: 91–97. At Belvoir Castle some coins were found during excavation and clearing works, together with arrow heads and other metal objects, see Ben Dov, 1969, p. 27, but no details are provided of their context, nor were they ever published. The IAA archives contain an unpublished preliminary report of the first season of excavations at Belvoir (August-November 1963), inter alia of the fill and the remains of an Arab village intra muros, the Crusader donjon and inner castle. The finds included some 30 coins, mostly thirteenth century Ayyubid fulus of Al-Kamil Muhammad (1228–1238). At Montfort (le Crac de Montfort/Karak al Shawbak) where no Crusader period levels have been excavated, only later periods; a single coin was found which helped to date the palace. See Brown, 1989, pp. 287–304. In the coastal Templar fortress of Château Pélerin which was extensively excavated in 1930–1934, c. 300 Crusader period coins were recovered. However, almost none of them were found in the castle’s perimeter, but rather in the adjacent fortified burgus/faubourg, outside the castle’s walls. See Metcalf, Kool and Berman 1999, p. 91.

2 Excavations at Arsur (Apollonia/Arsuf) have already yielded hundreds of such medieval coin finds identified by the author. Most of them remain unpublished at present. For Vadum Iacob see Kool, 2001; 2002; 2006; 2008. For Bethgibelain see See Kool, 2007.

3 Helmut Nickel (1989, p. 36) put it succinctly in his article on the 1926 Montfort expedition: “Evidently the victors searched and sacked the castle before they put it to the torch. Of movable items, only seemingly worthless or unusable broken objects . . . were left behind . . . ” Often, ruins of the large castles were resettled, sometimes for hundreds of years by entire villages built within the castle’s perimeter and on its main walls. For a good example see the contemporary castle of Château Pélerin see http://www.iaa-archives.org.il/zoom/zoom.aspx?folder_id=193&type_id=20&id=19618 or Belvoir, above footnote 1.

4 For a discussion on when construction at Montfort began see above, Chapter 1.
muros, which extended over a brief period of barely 45 years. They are thus of crucial importance, not only for understanding the kind of money that circulated in the castle, but also within the kingdom at large during the mid-thirteenth century, a period which still demands considerable research.

Having said this, the sum total of traceable coins found in the surveys and excavations conducted in castle grounds since 1926 amounts to a mere 21 coins, a pitiful number by any standard. The presence of so little coinage stands in sharp contrast with the truly astronomical amounts of money the Teutonic brothers must have invested in the Montfort project. Castle building was by contemporary standards an extremely expensive project. Simply the acquisition of land for the castle and the surrounding estates was estimated at more than 101,000 gold bezants. No documents have survived that could shed light on the actual cost of Montfort’s construction and maintenance. However, we do have an almost contemporary account that gives concrete references to the enormous costs involved and the massive scale of available cash needed for such military projects.

This text, De constructione castri Saphet, detailed the construction of the nearby castle of Safed between 1240 and the 1260s. Its author, the bishop of Marseilles, Benoît d’Alignan, stated that in just the first two and half years of its construction (1240–1243) the Templar Order had to pay a sum equivalent to 1,100,000 gold bezants. This was in addition to the substantial revenues and income from its surrounding estates which included some 83 villages and settlements within its châtellenie. By comparison, the smaller castle of Montfort was supported by the revenues of an equally impressive network of some 40 villages. This sum seems huge but put in the context of the amounts invested in military expenditure in the East, not inconceivable. Almost a hundred years earlier Amaury of Jerusalem was to receive, after his invasion of Egypt in 1168, a one-time payment of 400,000 gold dinars to cover the expenses of his campaign, of which 200,000 dinars were paid immediately, the rest in instalments. It is possible that the total costs of Safed were much higher: most of the castle was not ready after two and a half years but was only completed after seven years in 1247. Above this, the Templars had to pay 40,000 gold bezants yearly for the upkeep of the castle and its inhabitants. Even if only a small part of these sums circulated in the form of bullion or cash, it adds up to enormous quantities of coins that must have circulated in such castle sites in the East. Presumably, in castles like these, including Montfort, most of the money that was actually used to pay the multitude of labourers (except slaves) or troops circulated in the form of smaller silver currency. The De constructionone text alludes in two instances to the importance of (smaller) silver coinage in the building of such castles: first, the seed money to jump-start the actual construction of the castle promised by Duke Thibaut IV of Champagne and his host consisted of 7,000 marcs of silver (1,617 kg of pure silver), even though in end they did not pay unum denarium (sic!) for its construction.

Secondly, on the occasion of the start of the construction, on 11 December 1240 following the celebration of a festive mass, Benoît d’Alignan ritually placed a plated silver chalice filled with money upon the first hewed stone, symbolizing the cash silver to be paid out to those working on the construction of the castle: “... Et super lapidem obtulit cupam unam argenteam plenam pecunia in subsidium operis subsequentis...”

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5 Prutz, 1877, p. 74.
8 There is no document mentioning this number, but it can be suggested that the fief of Castellum Regis, which contained 38 villages, in addition to few other settlements, were centered by Montfort. See Khamisy 2012, pp. 57–195.
9 William of Tyre, 1986, 194.19, “... decernunt domino regi quadrigenta aureorum milia, ducenta milia statim solven- tes, reliqua ducenta milia plactis temporibus sine dificul- tate soluturos se spondentes...”
11 Huygens 1981, pp. 41, 205–6, “... et singulis sequentibus annis secundum magis et minus XL milia bisantiorum Saracenorum...”
12 Ibid., pp. 36–7, 66–72: “Magister vero cum suspirio dixit: Domine episcopo, non est facillim edificatio Saphet. Nonne vos audivistis quod rex Navarre, dux Burgundiae, comites et barones exercitus promiserunt quod venirent apud Saphet ut securitus et citius edificaretur et starent ibi per duos meses et darent VII milia marcharum pro faciendo edificio, et tamen unum denarium pro edificio non dimiserunt...”
13 Ibid., pp. 41, 203–5: “in primis duobus annis et dimidio expendit domus Templi in edificando castro Saphet, preter redditus et obventiones dicti castri, undecies centum milia bisantiorum Saracenorum...”