

Claims to the Crac des Chevaliers during the French Mandate and Syrian Independence

Isabella D. Archer, Université de Poitiers - École du Louvre



Background

- The Crac des Chevaliers, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is a fortress in western Syria that has been subject to many **claims of ownership** over the centuries.
- The “Hosn al-Akrad” (“Castle of the Kurds”) was originally constructed by the Emir of Homs in the XI century to station a Kurdish garrison.
- In the 1142, the Count of Tripoli gave it to the Knights Hospitaller during the **Crusades**.
- It later became known as the “Crac des Chevaliers” in French and international parlance.



Left: The Crac des Chevaliers, August 1936. John D. Whiting (1882-1951). Library of Congress.

Research Topic

- This poster explores claims made by **France** and **Syria** to the “Crac” in the **1930s** and the **1940s**.
- Calls for restitution of cultural heritage frequently advocate for **returning objects** to their place of origin.
- However, as this poster illustrates, an **archaeological site can also be subject to divergent ownership claims and demands for restitution**.
- These claims provide useful insight into discussions of “**who owns heritage**” then and now.



Above: Exhibitions were (and are) a compelling way to establish or expand upon heritage narratives. In 2018-19, the history of the Crac and the 1931 model of the site were retraced in the exhibit “Le Crac des Chevaliers: Chroniques d’un rêve de pierre” at the Cité de l’architecture in Paris. Photo: I.Archer.

Background image: Le Crac des Chevaliers: vue du front ouest. Marcel Prud’homme, s.d.(1930-1931). Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac.

French Claims

- In the 1920s, French archaeologists, notably Paul Deschamps, are concerned about **damage and degradation** of the Crac des Chevaliers. They worried about the impact of a **local village** inhabiting the fortress and a lack of **regional government resources** to maintain the site.
- Deschamps and his contemporaries asserted that the due to numerous **changes of government** in the Western region of Syria post-World War I, the **identity** of the Crac should be tied to its (**Crusader**) **history** versus its **physical geography**.
- The **positioning** of the Crac des Chevaliers as a **French monument** is reaffirmed by the prominent display of a **model** of the site in two French exhibitions: a 1931 exhibition at the **National Museum of Comparative Sculpture** and the 1931 Colonial Exhibition.
- It is also promoted as a **tourism destination** for French travelers.
- Supporters contend an **1887 French law** for the protection of historic monuments **supports the acquisition** of the Crac as it is a site of **national and historic interest**.
- **November 16, 1933: France acquires the Crac des Chevaliers**
The site is ceded to the French government, which pays the local Lattakian government one million francs to evacuate and indemnify the villagers living in the fortress.

Conclusions

- The **use of a law** designed to protect heritage to justify the acquisition of a site can be understood to **legitimize its acquisition**.
- However, its **application** by a country in a territory it governs raises **questions about the applicability of the law** and the **agency of the governed territory to approve or deny a cession request**.
- **Balancing local history and agency** with the **history and connection of other countries and cultures** to a shared heritage is critical.
- Today, the **history of cession requests and restitution claims** should be assessed and addressed in **proposals or exhibitions** involving the **permanent or temporary movement** of cultural property or the **transfer of authority** over cultural property.

Syrian Claims

- World War II **slows visitors** from outside Syria to the Crac des Chevaliers. **Expenses** for its upkeep are also **reduced**.
- **Syria becomes independent** in 1946 and and the Crac des Chevaliers, among other sites and monuments acquired by France during the mandate, is the subject of **negotiation**.
- During diplomatic negotiations, France **suggests retaining ownership** of the site in order to contribute to its protection.
- This request is **refused** by Syria and the **legality** of the 1933 cession is also questioned.
- Beaux-Arts authorities agree to **cede** the Crac in 1948.
- **February 7, 1949: Restitution of the Crac des Chevaliers to an independent Syria.**
The Syrian Directorate-General for Antiquities and Museums, under Sélim Abdul-Hak, undertake projects to restore the Crac (Arabic: “Qala’at al-Hosn”) and valorize other cultural heritage.

And today?

- The UNESCO World Heritage designation affirms the outstanding universal value of a site.
- **2006:** The Crac des Chevaliers is added to the **World Heritage List**.
 - **2013:** Due to armed conflict in the region, the site is added to the **List of World Heritage in Danger**.