

The Stateliest Ruin on Earth

Nestled in a northern corner of the Golan Heights, the towering walls of Israel's best-preserved castle impressed even cynical Mark Twain // **Tamar Hayardeni**

 **Where To?**

Nimrod Fortress

National park including Israel's largest medieval castle

Route 989

Open Sunday through Thursday, 8 am to 5 pm, Friday 8 am to 4 pm

Entrance fee, (04) 694-9277



European travelers are hard to wow when it comes to castles. Accustomed to medieval fortresses complete with moats, towers, and keeps, they don't understand how Israelis get excited by the few stones remaining from an entire ancient city.

The bitter truth is that although a succession of civilizations erected imposing monuments in the Holy

Land, they also destroyed those of their predecessors. So despite our wealth of ruins, their preservation often leaves a lot to be desired – and a lot to the imagination.

One of the best descriptions of this frustrating phenomenon is Mark Twain's diary of his 19th-century visit to the Holy Land, which transformed him into a well-known author. Twain dismissed the land of Israel as "desolate and unlovely" (*The Innocents Abroad* [1869], ch. 56). Its faithful inhabitants were by turns noisy wretches, dusky hags, and ragged savages. But one thing that did thrill him was a huge castle in the northern Golan. "The stateliest ruin of that kind on earth" (*ibid.*, ch. 45), Twain called it, and for once he wasn't joking.

Crypts and Dungeons

The fortress stands on the foothills of Mount Hermon, along the peak of a high, narrow ridge. Mark Twain dubbed it "the crumbling castle of Baniyas" (*ibid.*), but today it's known as Nimrod's Fortress, or Qal'at Namrud in Arabic. Experts use its historic name, Qal'at al-Subeiba, meaning "Castle of the Large Cliff."

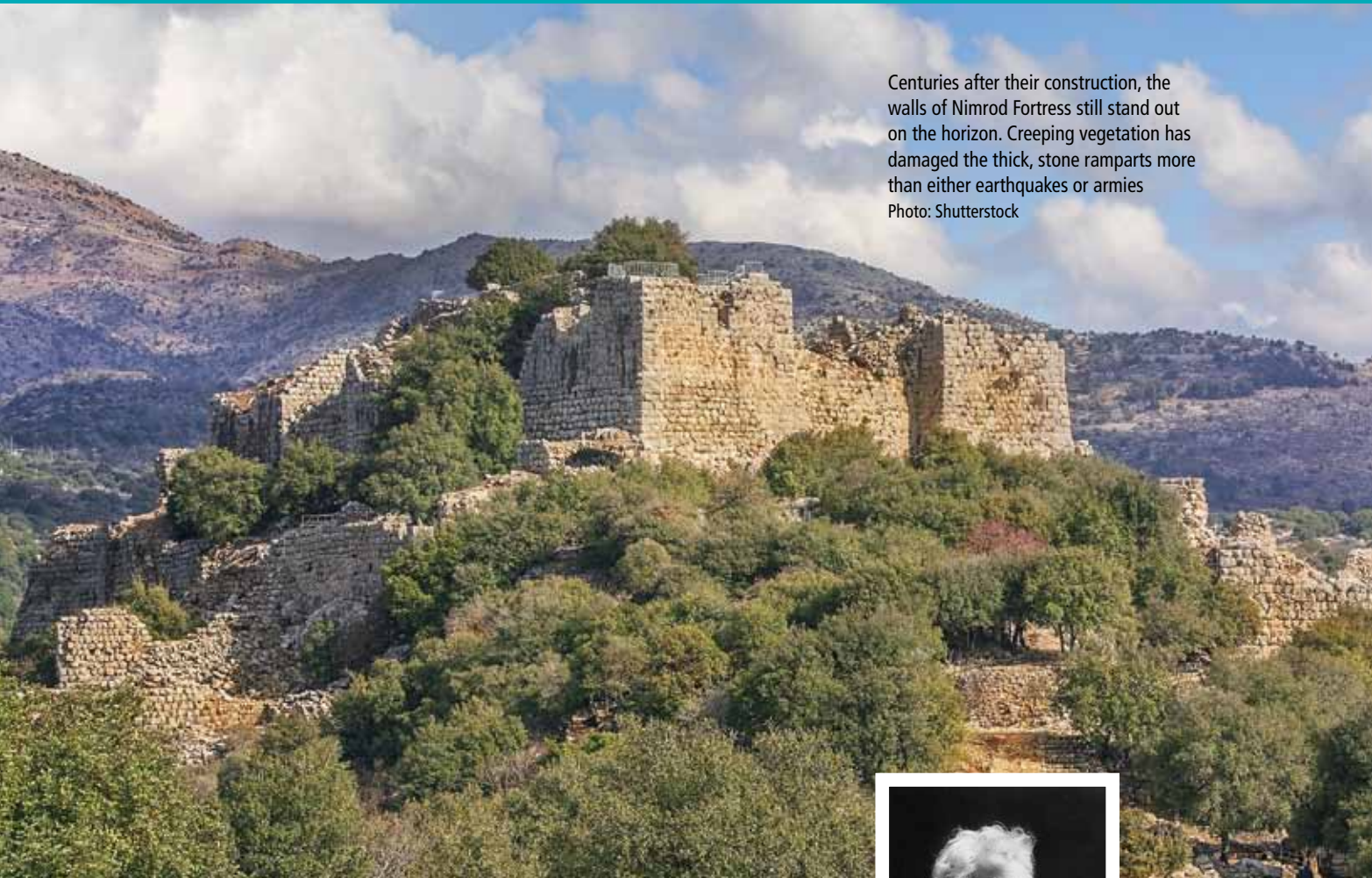
Twain was particularly taken with the symmetrical yet ponderous masonry and the massive towers and bastions, which he claimed

soared to a height of thirty feet, or ten meters. Wondering "what agency had made Baniyas a ruin," Twain was astonished to discover the cause:

Seeds had fallen in crevices in the vast walls; the seeds had sprouted; the tender, insignificant sprouts had hardened; they grew larger and larger, and by a steady, imperceptible pressure forced the great stones apart, and now are bringing sure destruction upon a giant work that has even mocked the earthquakes to scorn! Gnarled and twisted trees spring from the old walls everywhere, and beautify and overshadow the gray battlements with a wild luxuriance of foliage.

Twain's tour group spent three hours "among the chambers and crypts and dungeons of the fortress, and trod where the mailed heels of many a knightly Crusader had rang [*sic*], and where Phenician [*sic*] heroes had walked ages before them" (*ibid.*)

The group's tour guide had little real information, but – like his colleagues before and since – he embellished it with his imagination. In fact, neither Phoenicians nor Crusaders walked the halls of Nimrod Fortress (possibly named for the



Centuries after their construction, the walls of Nimrod Fortress still stand out on the horizon. Creeping vegetation has damaged the thick, stone ramparts more than either earthquakes or armies

Photo: Shutterstock

biblical “mighty hunter” whose supposed tomb near Damascus Twain also visited). The castle was built in 1227, by which time both ancients had been evicted from the region. The master builder was the legendary Saladin’s nephew, al-Aziz Uthman of the Ayyubid dynasty, governor of Banias. The idea, and the funding, came from al-Malik al-Mu’azzam ‘Isa, ruler of Damascus and the rest of Syria-Palestine, who happened to be al-Aziz Uthman’s older brother.

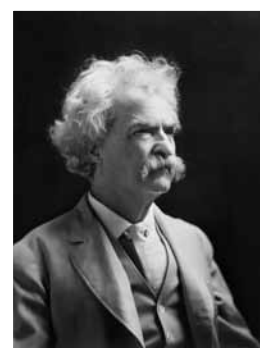
Family Business

It all started with a nasty plot hatched by yet another brother, al-Malik al-Kamil, who’d inherited control of Egypt. The Crusaders had been driven from most of the country by Uncle Saladin, and

al-Kamil had been trying to keep them from sneaking in via the south. Now, however, realizing that most of his inheritance was sand and camels, he decided to invade his brothers’ more fruitful territory.

Unfortunately, al-Kamil didn’t have much of an army, so he swallowed his pride and turned to the Crusaders for help. As a peace offering, he promised them Jerusalem – but only for ten years, and with no permission to touch the city’s fallen walls. That was enough to get the Crusaders onboard.

Learning of the planned attack, the northern brother angrily set about protecting his kingdom. The crowning glory of his fortification was Nimrod Fortress, then called Qal’at al-Subeiba, which



Though determined to demystify the Holy Land, Mark Twain couldn’t help but wonder at the mighty hilltop fortress. Twain, early 1900s

Library of Congress collection

Baibars’ dedicatory inscription is so full of superlatives that even the stonemason couldn’t resist his own three-word credit: “made by Yousouf”



A unique architectural feature – but why was it built this way? Seven-sided watchtower in Nimrod Fortress. The tower was originally octagonal, but an earthquake merged two walls into one
Photo: Amos Gal



By the By

- ▶ Al-Malik Al-Mu'azzam 'Isa, who ordered the construction of Nimrod Fortress, was a well-known castle aficionado. He added towers to strengthen the Ayyubid wall of Jerusalem in anticipation of a Crusader invasion, but later in life he concluded that there's not much point in building fortifications if your greatest military advantage is in battle in the open field. He then destroyed many of the walls he'd built, including that of Jerusalem.
- ▶ Baibars's "Beautiful Tower," as it's known, is hidden in the southern wall of Nimrod Fortress. Though it looks like any old tower from the outside, inside are seven walls, supporting vaults extending out from a seven-sided central pillar. This structure is worth a visit in its own right!

dominated the main road to Damascus.

To make a long story short, the untimely death of al-Malik al-Mu'azzam 'Isa made Crusader intervention unnecessary, as al-Kamil easily conquered his brothers' territory. He then labored to wriggle out of his now pointless contract with the Crusaders, but they called in Friedrich II, who'd arrived from Germany with an army for the Sixth Crusade. Al-Kamil was forced to keep his word and hand Jerusalem over to the Christians for a decade, until 1239.

Jail with a View

Getting back to Nimrod's Fortress, the place changed hands so frequently that it became something of a white elephant. Marauding Mongols held it briefly, but generally the castle walls gazed glumly at the surrounding valleys, wondering why it had been built. Then in 1260, Mamluk sultan

Baibars conquered the land of Israel, driving out the Ayyubids. He fell in love with the hilltop fortress, gave it an immediate face-lift, and gifted it to his second-in-command and heir, Bilik.

The whole story is engraved in a richly carved, six-meter-long stone building block discovered among the ruins, where it remains today.

As usual in Islamic dedicatory inscriptions, Baibars' is full of superlatives and flowery language, which modestly describes him as "the exalted, learned, upright lord, fighter of the holy war, soldier ever battle-ready to defend the border, held up by the hands of God [...], destroyer of unruly rebels, reviver of justice in both worlds." Bilik, by contrast, is merely "the generous master, the lord, the great commander [...] most magnificent, most happy, exalted, he who is served." Amid all this bravado, the stonemason, too, allowed himself a small credit



Sultan Baibar's monumental inscription, found among the rubble of the upper castle's gate fortifications
Photo: Gili Chupak

at the end: "made by Yousouf."

In addition to the renovation, Baibars made both the castle and nearby Banias into an independent province. Answerable only to Damascus, the regional capital, the town's ruler was appointed directly by the sultan in Cairo.

A portion of the fortifications was set aside as a prison for high-ranking rebels, such as army commanders and Mamluk nobles plotting (or suspected of plotting) to overthrow the sultan. These lucky fellows were rewarded with an open-ended luxury summer vacation behind bars – and even an option to stay on.

Late Developer

The fortress was abandoned when Mamluk rule ended in 1517 and the Ottomans conquered the Holy Land. Neglect set in; the new rulers had other routes to Damascus and were immune to the location's charm. With time, earthquakes,

and vegetation, stones split and crumbled, until the castle was no more than a shepherds' shelter – exactly as Mark Twain found it in the 19th century.

The site came into its own again only after the Six-Day War, when Israel annexed the Golan Heights and the Natural Parks Authority declared Nimrod Fortress a heritage site and a national park. There were even plans to connect it by cable car to Banias. In 1972, Route 989 finally made it accessible to hikers. And in 2006, Nimrod Fortress starred in Joseph Cedar's film *Beaufort*, about the war in Lebanon. The fortress stood in for the Beaufort, a Lebanese Crusader castle built a century earlier. □



Tamar Hayardeni

A licensed tour guide and research fellow at the Ben-Zvi Institute, Hayardeni has also authored several children's books

Handy Info

Where to Eat

► Yaeli

Artists' Village, Aniam
Kosher mehadrin, dairy, (04) 682-1855

► Ziegel

Artists' Village, Aniam
Kosher, meat, (04) 833-5533

► Cowboys' (Ha-bokrim) Restaurant

Merom Golan
Kosher, meat, (04) 696-0206

Don't Miss

► Banias Nature Reserve

Off Route 99
Open Sunday through Thursday,
8 am to 5 pm, Friday 8 am to 4 pm
Entrance fee, (04) 690-2577

► Tel Dan Nature Reserve

Off Route 99
Open Sunday through Thursday,
8 am to 5 pm, Friday 8 am to 4 pm
Entrance fee, (04) 695-1579

► Kfar Szold Sculpture Park

Off Route 918, at the entrance to
Kibbutz Kfar Szold
Open daily, free of charge