

Safed is found between and just below the Waters of Meron and the Sea of Galilee. In medieval times, pilgrims taking the "Sixth Route" to Jerusalem could rely on the protection of the Knights Templar, then in possession of the fortress. There was a chapel in the massive square keep, or tower, where Baybars saw the Big Idol. The Templars' last resistance was in the keep. Eighty knights captured by Baybars, refusing to deny Christ, were beheaded.

THE TEMPLAR IDOL AT SAFED

From *Archives de l'Orient Latin*, Paris 1884, Tome II, Chapter IV.

The 17th of May [1267], the sultan Baybars appeared before Acre, and four or five days later returned to Safed, then to Tyr. To assure the perpetual commemoration of the just-completed restoration of the Safed fortress, he commanded an inscription. Here are the terms of the inscription:

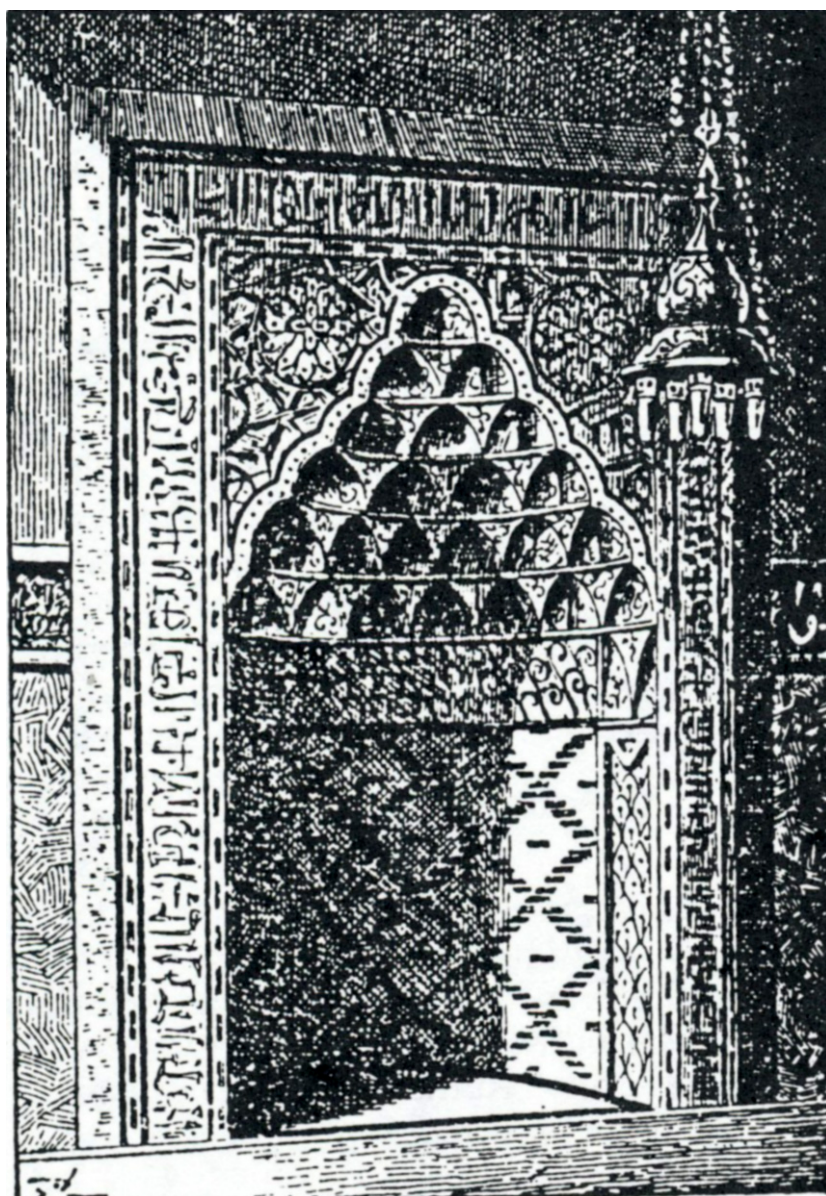
We wrote in the Psalms, after salutary counsel, that the earth would be the heritage of my virtuous servants: those are they who form the troop of God, and this troop will prosper always. This citadel has been rebuilt, fortified, embellished by the sultan Melik-Daher-Abou'l, *fatah* Bibars, after this prince delivered this place from the hands of the accursed Franks, and he returned it to the power of the mussulmans; he transferred it from the domain of the Templars to that of the true believers; he caused it to be restored to its original state, to the true faith, and thereby caused the infidels a very considerable loss and vexation. In consequence of his efforts, his combats, he put the true religion in place of error, the proclamation of prayers instead of the sound of bells, the Alcoran instead of the Gospel. He presided in person over the work, to the point that he and his intimate courtiers carried on their own heads the earth and stones from the ditches. May every prince of Islam who will possess this fortress, may every defender of the religion who will inhabit this place, accord the monarch the recompense due to him, and fail not to implore for him, in private and in public, the divine mercy. For everyone said, May God raise up this citadel! after having said, May God speed the capture! The true believers must triumph right up to the day of the last judgment.

After the reconstruction was completed, the sultan went up to the castle and in the tower he saw a big idol, under whose protection, according to the Franks, the fortress had been placed: [The Franks] named it (*here follows a word that is illegible because of the absence of diacriticals*). He ordered that it should be removed and that in its place should be constructed a mihrab.

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The inscription is given in a note accompanying an article entitled "Études sur les derniers temps du roy de Jérusalem". The author of the Études cites Makrizi, Weil, Defrémery and Nowairi for

the texts, and at the end of the note he asks: "Are we to understand that this was the idol of the Templars, or an image of Christ, or of a saint?" Our question might be couched in more specific, therefore more revealing terms: Was it one of those ugly head-reliquaries so luridly described by terrorized Templars during their trial? Or some other anatomical dissection encased in silver, such as the arm-hand reliquary of St. Pantaleon? But it was a big idol, in a niche big enough to be converted into a mihrab, so the best guess is that the illegible was a crucifix. Of course, we will never know. And of course it is not of the most minimal importance what the Big Idol was, so long as nobody ever hints that, in 1267, the Holy Shroud was in the Templar fortress of Safed in Galilee, witness to a blood-spattering battle and fated to be removed and destroyed by conquering Saracens.



A mihrab. It is a recess in the wall of a mosque wherein the imam stands, facing Mecca, while he leads the faithful in prayer.