

The Atabegs and Ayyubids

During the AH 5th / AD 11th century, fragmentation and instability marked the Levant region (comprising Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Jordan) as the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad was challenged by the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt. The Seljuqs, Turkish warriors from Central Asia, consolidated their power over the territory and brought about a new era of Islamic art and architecture while maintaining the religious authority of the Abbasid caliphate. Power was secured by the atabegs, the military teachers of princes appointed by the Seljuqs, who gradually became independent. One such atabeg, Nur al-Din Mahmud bin Zangi (d. 569 / 1174) performed the crucial task of ejecting the Crusaders from Edessa in 541 / 1146 and, by conquering Damascus in 549 / 1154, succeeded in uniting Syria. Al-Malik al-Nasir Salah al-Din Yusuf bin Ayyub (known as Saladin, r. 564–89 / 1169–93) after whom the dynasty is named, was one of Nur al-Din's lieutenants. He rose to power at the end of the 6th / 12th century, overthrowing the Fatimids in 566 / 1171 and the Latin hold on Jerusalem in 583 / 1187. The Atabegs and Ayyubids introduced far-reaching changes to their realm. They systematically attempted to re-educate their subjects through the formation of Islamic Sunni religious schools – madrasas. They rebuilt the Great Umayyad Mosque and thoroughly refortified the citadels and city walls of Damascus, Aleppo, and various other cities, including Cairo. Urban development was also profuse, producing hammams (bathhouses), bimaristans (hospitals), caravanserais, water distribution systems and sacred structures like mosques, mausoleums, turbes (tombs), and khanqahs (hostels). They brought from the east madrasas and bimaristans, educational institutions, featuring new architectural forms and decorative repertoires. Seljuq culture dominated Islamic art from the 5th–7th / 11th–13th centuries. Innovative artistic achievements were made in architecture, pottery, jewellery, metalwork and manuscript illumination. Contemporary with the early Gothic in the West and the Song Dynasty in China, the Ayyubid style was further elaborated by the Mamluks who succeeded them.



Ajlun Castle

Hegira 579–658 / AD 1184–1260
Ayyubid–Mamluk
Ajlun, Jordan



Door knocker

Hegira 589 / AD 1193
Ayyubid
National Museum of Damascus
Damascus, Syria