

The Crusader Jerusalem leprosarium and the modern Saint Louis Hospital

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Leprosy, referred to as *šāraʿat*, is repeatedly referred to in both the Old and New Testament indicating a probable high prevalence of chronic skin disorders in the region. Such individuals smitten by such dermatological conditions were considered impure and thus were expelled from the community [Leviticus 13:1-46]. In the New Testament, Jesus promoted a tolerant and supportive attitude towards these victims [see the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus – Luke 16:19-31]. The principles taught by Jesus were promoted and preached upon by the early Fathers of the Church who extended the principles of Christian tolerance and charity to actually providing hospices to care for the victims of this dreaded disease. Such leprosaria dedicated to the care and solace of these individuals were set up in Rome, Constantinople, Ptolemais (*modern-day Acre*), and outside the walls of Jerusalem in the fourth century A.D. The miraculous cures from leprosy described in the Old and New Testament encouraged pilgrims to travel to the Holy Land in the hope of obtaining a miraculous cure themselves. The anonymous Pilgrim of Piacenza in the early sixth century referred to the practice of lepers bathing in the hot-baths of Helias near Gadara (*modern-day Umm Qais in Jordan*) where a hospice was also extant, the hot-baths of Moses near Salamaida (*modern-day El Kefrein in Jordan*), the Dead Sea, and the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem.

The fourth century Jerusalem leprosarium established by Empress Aelia Eudocia Augusta (†460), wife of Emperor Theodosios II (reign 408-450), had a tremulous course throughout the subsequent centuries, especially after the Persian invasion in the 614 A.D. Common to the history of other Christian sites in Jerusalem, the edifice may have suffered repeated destruction and reestablishment throughout its history. It was definitely in existence just prior to the First Crusade and the establishment of the kingdom of Jerusalem in 1099. The Jerusalem leprosarium dedicated to Saint Lazarus was in 1073 being managed by Johannes Amorusius originally from Bari. Following the establishment of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the leprosarium was placed under the jurisdiction of the newly established Latin Patriarchy of Jerusalem. According to the anonymous travelogue *Work on Geography* written around 1128-1137, 'a dwelling of lepers' was to be found 'beyond the walls of Jerusalem between the Tower of Tancred (*modern-day: Jaffa Gate*) and the Gate of St Stephen' (*modern-day: Damascus Gate*).



Further evidence for the existence of the leprosarium in the 1130s is found in a contemporary plan of Jerusalem which depicts the *e[cclesia] s[ancti] Lazari* in the north-western point outside the walls of the city. The brethren caring for these unfortunates were to eventually organize themselves into the formal Order of Saint Lazarus emulating the Order of Saint John by assuming an added military role. The establishment was not a particularly large one, and the early statutes of the Order provides for the housing fifty-two sick *confrères* besides their carers. The inmates were managed by a master abbot and followed a monastic routine and code of practice. In line with the general monastic practice of the day, the establishment acquired a range of land holdings in the region and elsewhere in Christian Europe enabling a sustainable agricultural economic structure to provide the funds necessary to support the work of the Lazarite monks and knights in the Holy Land.

The establishment apparently expanded its Jerusalem holdings so that by 1187 there were two leprosaria in the region, one for males and one for females. Er-noul, the squire of the Latin leader Balian of Ibelin, reported that when Saladin besieged the Christian forces in Jerusalem, he directed his assault on the city in the region between the hospital for male lepers near St Stephen's Gate and that for women lepers behind David's Gate (*modern-day Jaffa Gate*). The region also apparently included a dedicated burial chamber to the east and the open reservoir known as the Pool of Saint Ladre to the north in the modern-day suburb of Morasha (now largely built over).

Following the fall of Jerusalem to Saladin's forces, the brethren of Saint Lazarus moved their base to St. Jean d'Acre which served as the last outpost of Christianity in the Holy Land until their expulsion by the Islamic forces led by Sultan Khalid in 1291. The edifice outside Jerusalem was left to the ravages of time and disappeared from the landscape. The area outside the two gates today hosts the forty-four bed St Louis Hospital, managed by the French Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition, which serves as a hospice for persons with advanced disease, and the international pilgrim centre of the Pontifical Institute of Notre Dame of Jerusalem.



Detail from 1130s map of Jerusalem showing the *e[cclesia] s[ancti] Lazari*

St Louis Hospital provides support and comfort to people in need of high quality comprehensive palliative care within a culturally and religiously diverse community. It serves as a beacon of Christian charity that is provided without any form of religious or economic bias to those in need irrespective of their religious beliefs. The hospital was founded in the Christian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem in 1851 by the Catholic Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition in response to the needs of the people of Jerusalem. It transferred its services in a newly built French renaissance-style building on the land originally hosting the Crusader-period Saint Lazarus leprosarium near the New Gate entrance leading the Old City. The land was purchased by Count Amédée de Piellat in 1878. Building started a year later and was completed sufficiently for the hospital to transfer its services by 1882, though fully structurally completed in 1895.

The hospital initially served as an all-purpose hospital for people from all religious communities. However, after 1950, it concentrated its services to providing palliative care to patients with advanced terminal cancer and other terminal disease states. The hospital has operated as a charitable institution by the French Sisters of St. Joseph since its conception, except for the short period in 1948-49 when the hospital found itself on the extremely hostile border between Jordan and Israel. During this period, patients-in-need were rerouted to St. Peter's Church on Mount Zion. It has in the last decades undertaken the necessary refurbishment to update its facilities and services to better serve its inmates with modern-day palliative care standards. The refurbishment process is still ongoing.



The Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem has repeatedly supported these refurbishment projects. In 2013, the Order adopted the hospital as its flagship international project encouraging its member jurisdictions throughout the world to support the necessary refurbishments required to bring the establishment to the new Israeli Hospital Code imposed in 2011. The Order committed itself to contribute the sum of €80,000 to renovate the kitchen as prescribed by law. This renovation allowed the kitchen to better cater for the varied meal choices of its multireligious inmates, be they Christian, Muslim or Jewish. It also could better cater for any special diets required by the patients' medical conditions. This project was completed in 2016. In 2024, the management of St Louis Hospital again approached the Order for renewed support for an ambitious refurbishment project updating the basic essential services. The Order committed itself to support the refurbishment project related to the electricity supply provision including the instalment of a generator with a donation amounting to €94,000.

The hospital is named after one of the most significant French Crusader kings – King Louis IX whose life was exemplified by support to the sick and needy, and whose life exemplified a particular religious fervour sufficient for him to be declared a saint. He was also a patron of the Crusader Order of Saint Lazarus providing the Order with a base at Boigny in France. Saint Louis Hospital is proud of its Crusader heritage and proudly displays paintings commissioned by Count Amédée de Piellat depicting Crusader towns in the Holy Land and painting of coat-of-arms belonging to several Crusader families.



Wall murals showing Crusader towns and Crusader families' coat-of-arms

Anybody wishing to support the refurbishment project of Saint Louis Hospital can directly contact the institution's manager for details by email on alex@hfsl.org