Barquq Castle



Barquq Castle in Khan Younis: 640 Years of History and Its Destruction in the Genocide War on Gaza

Barquq Castle (Qal'at Barquq), in the heart of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, was one of the most important Mamluk monuments in Palestine. Built in 789 AH (1387–1388 CE) by Emir Yunus al-Nawruzi on the orders of Sultan al-Zahir Barquq, it was a fortified caravanserai on the road between Cairo and Damascus, and the city of Khan Younis took its name from it. For more than six centuries it

survived wars, including Napoleon's campaign and the 1956 massacre in the city. But during the genocide war on Gaza, Israeli strikes and bulldozers destroyed large parts of its walls, its mosque's minaret and its entrance, and UNESCO has verified the damage. This guide tells the castle's story, from its foundation to its ruin, and what remains today.

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Quick Facts About Barquq Castle

Barquq Castle at a glance

Arabic name	قلعة برقوق / خان يونس النوروزي
Location	Centre of Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip, about 20 km from the Egyptian border
Built	789 AH (1387–1388 CE)
Builder	Emir Yunus ibn Abdullah al-Nawruzi, dawadar (secretary) of Sultan Barquq

Period	Circassian (Burji) Mamluk
Type	Fortified caravanserai (khan) with a mosque
Plan	Square, two floors, about 16 dunams; western façade about 80 m long
Facilities	Mosque and minaret, storerooms, stables, guest rooms, diwan, towers and arrow slits
War damage	Walls, minaret and entrance destroyed in 2024; verified by UNESCO
Status	Heavily damaged; partly standing

The Name: Barquq, Yunis and Khan Younis

The castle is named after **al-Zahir Barquq** (r. 1382–1399), founder of the Circassian Mamluk dynasty, in whose reign it was built. It was also known as the **Khan of Yunis al-Nawruzi**, after the emir who built it, and the town that grew around it took its name: **Khan Younis**, "the khan of Yunis". Some scholars have suggested the name refers instead to the prophet Jonah (Yunus), but the link to the emir is the more widely accepted. "Castle" (qal'a) describes its fortified character, while "khan" means caravanserai.

Location

The castle stands in the centre of Khan Younis, the main city of the southern Gaza Strip, in the Gaza district, about 20 km from the Egyptian border. It lay on the ancient coastal route between Egypt and the Levant, the Via Maris, and the city's main square and market grew around it.

The Foundation and the Inscription

An inscription above the main entrance recorded that the "blessed khan" was built by order of Emir Yunus al-Nawruzi, the *dawadar* (chief secretary) of Sultan al-Zahir Barquq, in the year **789 AH (1387–1388 CE)**. The emir built it to protect

merchants, pilgrims and travellers on the road between Cairo and Damascus, which was exposed to raids at this point on the edge of the Sinai desert.

Architecture

The castle was built on a **square plan** of two floors, over about 16 dunams. Its western façade, about 80 metres long, stood until the recent war, with Mamluk inscriptions and blazons on either side of the entrance. The ground floor held storerooms for goods, trading space and horse stables; the upper floor held guest rooms, the **mosque** and the diwan. It was equipped with defensive features, including towers, arrow slits, battlements and machicolations above the gates for pouring boiling oil on attackers, and it was this fortress-like character that led people to call it "the castle".

A Caravanserai on the Cairo–Damascus Road

Barquq Castle was more than a fortress. It was a **caravanserai** where caravans of merchants and pilgrims rested safely, and a station of the Mamluk **postal network (barid)**, where couriers changed horses on the route linking Cairo and Damascus. Around it, a market, houses and wells grew into the town of Khan Younis.

Six Centuries of History

- **Ottoman period:** Ahmad Pasha Al Radwan, governor of the sanjak of Gaza, restored it in the late 10th century AH (late 16th century CE). Egyptian guards were stationed there to protect travellers, and it was used for tax collection. Travellers praised it as the best khan on the old road between Egypt and Palestine.
- **1799:** The castle was damaged during Napoleon's campaign through Gaza towards Acre, according to Palestinian sources.

- **1956:** During the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt, Israeli forces occupied Khan Younis and carried out a massacre of its people in November 1956; the castle stood witness at the heart of the city.
- **2005:** The walls were restored, the minaret rebuilt and other exterior parts repaired.

The Castle Before the War

Before October 2023, what remained of Barquq Castle, its gateway, walls, mosque and minaret, was the symbol of Khan Younis. Its square was the city's beating heart, a meeting place for families and a destination for visitors from across the Gaza Strip, and for centuries Ramadan nights in Khan Younis were celebrated in its shadow.

Destruction in the Genocide War on Gaza

From December 2023, Israeli forces launched a months-long ground offensive in Khan Younis, reducing much of the city to ruins. Barquq Castle, which had survived six centuries of wars, was badly hit:

- **January 2024:** Residents report that Israeli forces destroyed part of the castle during the offensive.
- **April 2024:** After the Israeli withdrawal from Khan Younis in early April, residents and journalists returning to the city found that Israeli forces had **completely destroyed the southern section of the wall**, brought down large parts of the **eastern wall** with missile strikes, demolished parts of the **mosque's minaret**, **bulldozed the entrance**, piled rubble inside the castle and damaged its other features. Reports on 18 April 2024 described the castle as largely reduced to rubble. For the first time in centuries, Khan Younis spent Ramadan without its castle.
- **2024–2025:** Fighting and strikes in Khan Younis continued, causing

further damage. When the ceasefire took effect in October 2025, footage showed piles of rubble around the site and sections of its walls and towers reduced to debris, though parts of the castle still stood. Residents collected fallen stones and stored them for future restoration.
- **UNESCO:** UNESCO lists "Qal'at Barqouq, Khan Younis" among the sites in Gaza with damage verified by satellite imagery; it is one of 164 damaged sites recorded as of March 2026.

Local officials in Khan Younis accused Israeli forces of targeting the castle deliberately to erase Palestinian history, part of what Palestinians describe as a war on memory and identity alongside the war on people.

Part of the Wider Destruction of Gaza's Heritage

The destruction of Barquq Castle is part of an unprecedented assault on Gaza's cultural heritage:

- As of 24 March 2026, UNESCO had verified damage to **164 sites**: 14 religious sites, 128 buildings of historical or artistic interest, 9 monuments, 8 archaeological sites, 2 museums and 3 depositories of movable cultural property.
- The Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities counts **226 of 316** key archaeological and cultural sites in Gaza as destroyed or significantly damaged.
- The **Great Omari Mosque**, Gaza's oldest and largest, was almost completely destroyed on 8 December 2023, and the Mamluk **Qasr al-Basha** was struck and bulldozed.
- According to the PLO Negotiations Affairs Department, thousands of artefacts were looted or lost, including the Qasr al-Basha collection, and several local museums were destroyed or looted.

The Castle Today (2026)

Barquq Castle stands today as a wounded ruin in a devastated city. Parts of its walls and its south-western tower remain, surrounded by the rubble of Khan Younis. Palestinian heritage bodies have documented the damage, and Quds Press has reported the start of efforts to restore the castle, but full reconstruction depends on the entry of building materials and specialised expertise, which the blockade continues to restrict. The ceasefire of October 2025 set no timeline for reconstruction.

International Law and the Destruction of Heritage

The **1954 Hague Convention** for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict obliges parties to refrain from attacking historic monuments and from using them or their surroundings for military purposes. Under Article 8 of the **Rome Statute** of the International Criminal Court, intentionally directing attacks against historic monuments and buildings dedicated to religion is a war crime, and UN Security Council **Resolution 2347 (2017)** condemned the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage in armed conflict. The UN Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory has documented the destruction and looting of Gaza's cultural sites, and Palestinians regard the erasure of their heritage as part of the genocide war on Gaza.

Frequently Asked Questions About Barquq Castle

Where is Barquq Castle?

In the centre of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, about 20 km from the Egyptian border.

Who built Barquq Castle and when?

Emir Yunus al-Nawruzi, secretary of the Mamluk sultan al-Zahir Barquq, built it in 789 AH (1387–1388 CE) as a fortified caravanserai on the Cairo–Damascus road.

Is Khan Younis named after Barquq Castle?

Yes. The city takes its name from the castle, known as the khan (caravanserai) of Yunis al-Nawruzi, its builder.

Was Barquq Castle destroyed in the war on Gaza?

It was heavily damaged. Israeli forces destroyed the southern section of its wall, large parts of the eastern wall, parts of the mosque's minaret and its entrance during the 2023–2024 offensive in Khan Younis. Parts of the castle still stand, and UNESCO has verified the damage.

How many heritage sites have been damaged in Gaza?

UNESCO had verified damage to 164 sites as of March 2026, while the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities counts 226 of 316 key sites as destroyed or significantly damaged.

Conclusion

For more than six centuries, Barquq Castle gave Khan Younis its name, its centre and its memory. It sheltered caravans in the Mamluk age, survived Napoleon's army, and stood through the massacre of 1956. In the genocide war on Gaza it was struck and bulldozed along with the city around it. Its fallen stones, gathered by the people of Khan Younis, are kept for the day it can rise again, a reminder that the war on Gaza targeted not only its people but its history.

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