

# The Historical and Archaeological Heritage of Afrin, Syria: Significance and Contemporary Threats

## 1. Introduction

**Overview:** The Afrin region, situated in the northwestern corner of Syria within the Aleppo Governorate <sup>1</sup>, represents a landscape of profound, though often overlooked, historical and archaeological significance. Strategically positioned at a nexus connecting the Anatolian plateau, the Mesopotamian plains, and the Levantine coast <sup>1</sup>, Afrin has served as a crucial crossroads for human movement, trade, and cultural exchange for millennia. Its rich heritage reflects the diverse civilizations that have shaped the Near East.

**Cultural Periods:** The archaeological record of Afrin attests to a long and complex sequence of human occupation. Evidence stretches back to the Paleolithic period, most notably demonstrated by the significant Neanderthal discoveries at Dederiyeh Cave.<sup>4</sup> The region flourished during the Syro-Hittite and Iron Ages, exemplified by the monumental Ain Dara Temple.<sup>1</sup> The subsequent Hellenistic and Roman eras left indelible marks, particularly at the city of Cyrrhus (modern Nabi Huri).<sup>7</sup> The Byzantine period witnessed extensive settlement and religious activity, contributing numerous churches, monasteries, and settlements, including sites like Barad, which form part of the UNESCO World Heritage "Ancient Villages of Northern Syria".<sup>2</sup> Occupation and cultural development continued through various Islamic periods, adding further layers to the region's historical tapestry.<sup>7</sup>

**Impact of Conflict:** In recent years, this invaluable cultural heritage has faced unprecedented threats. The Syrian Civil War, ongoing since 2011, and particularly the events following the Turkish military intervention known as "Operation Olive Branch" in January 2018 <sup>12</sup>, have had a devastating impact. Numerous reports from international organizations, heritage bodies, news agencies, and local sources document extensive damage to archaeological sites through direct military action, widespread looting, illegal excavations often involving heavy machinery, the militarization of heritage locations, and deliberate vandalism.<sup>1</sup>

**Report Scope and Structure:** This report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the key historical and archaeological sites within the Afrin region. It will detail their historical context, cultural significance, architectural features, and the history of research conducted at these locations. Crucially, it will synthesize available information from multi-lingual sources regarding the current condition of these sites, focusing on the damage incurred during the recent conflict and any subsequent preservation efforts or lack thereof. The report follows a structure beginning with a general inventory of sites, followed by detailed analyses of the most prominent locations (Ain Dara Temple and Cyrrhus/Nabi Huri), an overview of other significant sites, an assessment of the contemporary threats, and concluding with a summary

and recommendations.

## 2. Major Historical and Archaeological Sites of the Afrin Region

**Geographical Context:** The Afrin region is geographically defined by the Afrin River valley, which flows southwards towards the Orontes River system.<sup>25</sup> The river and its fertile valley have historically supported agriculture and facilitated movement.<sup>8</sup> The landscape includes mountainous areas, such as Kurd Mountain (Jabal al-Akrad)<sup>27</sup>, and rolling hills characteristic of northwestern Syria. Administratively, the Afrin District is part of the Aleppo Governorate<sup>1</sup>, situated in the far northwest of the country, bordering Turkey to the north and west.<sup>7</sup> This proximity to the border has significantly influenced its recent history and the vulnerability of its heritage sites.

**Map Presentation:** Locating these historical sites precisely is crucial for understanding their distribution and context. Based on coordinates and location descriptions available in various sources<sup>1</sup>, a map indicating the positions of key archaeological and historical locations discussed in this report could be compiled. *(Note: The generation of a graphical map is beyond the scope of this text-based report, but its potential creation and the data sources for it are acknowledged).*

### Table: Inventory of Major Archaeological Sites in Afrin

The following table provides an inventory of significant historical and archaeological sites identified within the Afrin region, based on the available research material. It aims to offer a structured overview, acknowledging that this list is likely not exhaustive, particularly regarding smaller tells and undocumented locations.

Site Name (English/Arabic)	Dominant Period(s)	Brief Significance	Location/Subdist rict (if known)	Key Source(s)
<b>Ain Dara Temple</b> (معبد عين دارة)	Iron Age (Syro-Hittite), Late Bronze Age (ca. 1300-740 BC)	Monumental temple with unique features, parallels to Solomon's Temple	~5-7 km S of Afrin town, Afrin Subdistrict	<sup>1</sup>
<b>Cyrrhus / Nabi Huri</b> (/ النبي هوري قورش)	Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic	Major city, military base, pilgrimage center (Christian & Muslim), Roman theatre, tomb/mosque	~70 km NE of Aleppo, Sharran Subdistrict	<sup>7</sup>
<b>Dederiyeh Cave</b> (كهف دودري / مغارة الديدرية)	Middle Paleolithic (Mousterian)	Neanderthal occupation site, significant Neanderthal child	Mount Simeon area, Sharran/Shirawa Subdistrict	<sup>4</sup>

		burials		
<b>Barad (Brad)</b> (براد)	Roman, Byzantine (part of "Dead Cities")	Extensive Byzantine ruins, Julianos Church, Tomb of St. Maron	~15 km SE of Afrin town, Afrin/Shirawa Subdistrict	2
<b>Tell Dirsawan</b> (تل ديرصوان)	Unspecified Tell Site	Archaeological mound	Sharran Subdistrict	16
<b>Tell Kafrum</b> (تل كفروم)	Unspecified Tell Site	Archaeological mound	Sharran Subdistrict	16
<b>Tell Jandaris</b> (تل جنديرس)	Unspecified Tell Site	Archaeological mound, militarized	Jandaris Subdistrict	16
<b>Tell Burj Abdelo</b> (تل برج عبدالو)	Unspecified Tell Site	Archaeological mound, reported looting of large statues	Shirawa Subdistrict	16
<b>Tell Aster</b> (تل قرية أستير)	Unspecified Tell Site	Archaeological mound	Afrin Subdistrict	16
<b>Tell Simalak</b> (تل سيمالك)	Unspecified Tell Site	Archaeological mound	Rajo Subdistrict	16
<b>Tell Zarafka</b> (تل زرافكه)	Unspecified Tell Site	Archaeological mound	Mobata (Maabatli) Subdistrict	16
<b>Tell Katak</b> (تل كتخ)	Unspecified Tell Site	Archaeological mound	Mobata (Maabatli) Subdistrict	16
<b>Tell Darumiya</b> (تل درومية)	Unspecified Tell Site	Archaeological mound	Mobata (Maabatli) Subdistrict	16
<b>Tell Kamruka</b> (تل كمروكه)	Unspecified Tell Site	Archaeological mound	Mobata (Maabatli) Subdistrict	16
<b>Tell Abidan</b> (تل عبيدان)	Unspecified Tell Site	Archaeological mound	Bulbul Subdistrict	16
<b>Sheikh Hamid Shrine</b> (مزار شيخ حميد)	Shrine/Mazar	Religious site	Qastal Jandu, Sharran Subdistrict	16
<b>Pavlun Shrine</b> (مزار بافلون)	Shrine/Mazar	Religious site	Sharran Subdistrict	16
<b>Qara Jaran Shrine</b> (مزار قرة جرن)	Shrine/Mazar	Religious site, reportedly Yazidi	Sharran Subdistrict	16
<b>Sinka Village Shrine</b> (مزار قرية سينكا)	Shrine/Mazar	Religious site	Sharran Subdistrict	16
<b>Sheikh Hanan Shrine</b> (مزار الشيخ)	Shrine/Mazar	Religious site	Near Mashulah, Sharran	16

حنان)			Subdistrict	
<b>Sarah Qiza Shrine</b> (مزار سارة قيزة)	Shrine/Mazar	Religious site	Khalnira, Afrin Subdistrict	<sup>16</sup>
<b>Abdul Rahman Shrine</b> (مزار عبد الرحمن)	Shrine/Mazar	Religious site	Near Kani Kawurka, Jandaris road	<sup>16</sup>
<b>Iska Village Shrine</b> (مزار قرية ايسكا)	Shrine/Mazar	Religious site	Jandaris Subdistrict	<sup>16</sup>
<b>Sheikh Mus Shrine</b> (مزار شيخموس)	Shrine/Mazar	Religious site	Kawunda village, Rajo Subdistrict	<sup>16</sup>
<b>Yaghmur Dada Shrine</b> (مزار يغمور دادا)	Shrine/Mazar	Religious site	Bulbul Subdistrict	<sup>16</sup>
<b>Mount Barsa (Barṣāyā)</b> (جبل بارصا / برصايا)	Unspecified	Mountain area, potentially with sites	Sharran Subdistrict	<sup>16</sup>
<b>Hammam Village</b> (قرية حمام)	Unspecified	Village with mineral bath, reported removal of stones	Jandaris Subdistrict	<sup>16</sup>
<b>Kimar Ruins</b> (آثار قرية كيمار)	Unspecified	Village with archaeological remains	Shirawa Subdistrict	<sup>16</sup>
<b>Kharbat 'Alu</b> (خربة علو)	Unspecified	Ruined settlement	Jubana village, Jandaris Subdistrict	<sup>16</sup>
<b>'Arab Sheikhu</b> (عرب شيخو)	Unspecified	Archaeological site/area	Sharran Subdistrict	<sup>16</sup>

The extensive list of sites presented in the table, particularly drawing from Arabic-language sources documenting damage <sup>16</sup>, reveals an archaeological landscape in Afrin far richer and more complex than commonly acknowledged through focus solely on Ain Dara and Cyrrhus. Beyond these well-known centers, numerous smaller tells (archaeological mounds indicating ancient settlements), villages with ruins, caves, and religious shrines (Mazarat) attest to dense and continuous human occupation across various historical periods. This density underscores the potential scale of heritage loss when destruction occurs, suggesting that impacts reported at the major, internationally recognized sites may only represent a fraction of the total damage affecting the region's deep cultural fabric. Many of these less-studied sites hold valuable information about local settlement patterns, religious practices, and daily life through the ages, the loss of which impoverishes our understanding of Syrian and Near Eastern

history.

### 3. Detailed Site Analysis: Ain Dara Temple

The Ain Dara temple stands as one of the most significant archaeological monuments in the Afrin region, offering invaluable insights into the religious architecture and cultural connections of the Iron Age Levant.

Location, Discovery, and Excavation History:

The Ain Dara archaeological site is situated in northwestern Syria, within the Afrin District of the Aleppo Governorate.<sup>1</sup> It lies approximately 5 to 7 kilometers south of the town of Afrin and 67 kilometers northwest of Aleppo, near the Syrian-Turkish border.<sup>1</sup> The site occupies a prominent tell (archaeological mound) on the west bank of the Afrin River 25, overlooking the fertile valley which served as a crucial junction for ancient trade routes connecting Mesopotamia, Anatolia, the Levant, and the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> Its precise coordinates are recorded as approximately 36°27'33.7"N 36°51'7.5"E.<sup>1</sup> The site encompasses both an Upper City or acropolis, where the temple was located, rising about 25 meters above the plain, and an extensive Lower Town, covering a total area of roughly 25 hectares.<sup>1</sup>

The site first gained archaeological attention in 1954 or 1955 following the chance discovery of a colossal basalt lion sculpture.<sup>1</sup> This find prompted initial excavations led by Maurice Dunand and Feisal Seirafi in 1956, 1962, and 1964.<sup>1</sup> More systematic and extensive excavations were undertaken by the Syrian archaeologist Ali Abu Assaf, beginning in 1976 and continuing through several seasons until 1985.<sup>1</sup> These later excavations fully uncovered the temple structure and its associated features.

Historical Context and Chronology:

While the Ain Dara tell shows evidence of human occupation stretching back to the Chalcolithic period (fourth millennium BC) and continuing intermittently into the Ottoman era 1, the temple itself belongs primarily to the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age. Its construction and use spanned from approximately 1300 BC to 740 BC.<sup>1</sup> Excavations revealed three main construction phases for the temple: Phase 1 (ca. 1300-1000 BC), Phase 2 (ca. 1000-900 BC), and Phase 3 (ca. 900-740 BC).<sup>1</sup>

The temple is firmly associated with the Syro-Hittite cultural sphere, a term used to describe the patchwork of Neo-Hittite and Aramean kingdoms that emerged in northern Syria and southeastern Anatolia following the collapse of the Hittite Empire around 1200 BC.<sup>1</sup> The region, including the Afrin Valley, likely fell under the control of the Hittite Empire during its zenith, possibly administered through the viceroyalty based in Aleppo around 1350 BC under Suppiluliuma I.<sup>1</sup> The temple's architecture and iconography clearly reflect Hittite and North Syrian artistic traditions.<sup>26</sup> Evidence also suggests later occupation or influence during the Achaemenid Persian and Hellenistic-Seleucid periods <sup>7</sup>, although the site appears to have been largely abandoned during the subsequent Roman and Byzantine eras.<sup>36</sup> The historical name of the city at Ain Dara remains unknown.<sup>15</sup>

Architectural Description:

The Ain Dara temple is a remarkable example of monumental religious architecture from the

period. It follows a tripartite plan, a common layout for temples in the region, consisting of an entrance porch (portico), a main hall (antecella or middle room), and an innermost sanctuary (cella or sanctum sanctorum).<sup>1</sup> The entire structure measured approximately 30 meters long by 20 meters wide and faced southeast.<sup>1</sup> It was constructed primarily of large basalt blocks resting on limestone foundations; a superstructure of mudbrick, perhaps with timber framing or paneling, is conjectured but has not survived.<sup>1</sup>

The temple was approached via a large courtyard paved with sandstone flagstones, featuring a chalkstone basin likely used for ritual purification.<sup>1</sup> The entrance portico was flanked by two large basalt piers or columns and possibly colossal lion sculptures.<sup>1</sup> The middle room (antecella), measuring roughly 6 by 15.5 meters, and the square main sanctuary (cella), about 16 by 16 meters, formed the core of the temple.<sup>1</sup> A distinctive feature was a surrounding corridor or gallery, possibly multi-storied, that wrapped around the temple on three sides (west, north, east), accessible via at least one southern entrance.<sup>1</sup>

Decoration was elaborate. The lower exterior and interior walls were lined with basalt orthostats carved with reliefs depicting processions of lions, sphinxes (often interpreted as cherubim), mountain gods, and guilloché patterns.<sup>1</sup> The cella contained an elevated podium or platform at the rear, accessed by a ramp, where the cult statue likely stood within a niche.<sup>1</sup>

Carved sockets suggest a wooden screen may have once separated this sacred space.<sup>1</sup> Recessed panels resembling windows, some with figure-eight lattice patterns, were also carved into the walls.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most unique architectural feature of the Ain Dara temple was the presence of three colossal bare footprints carved into the stone thresholds.<sup>1</sup> A pair, each about one meter in length, marked the entrance to the portico, followed by a single right footprint at the threshold of the antecella, and a final single left footprint at the entrance to the cella itself.<sup>1</sup> These footprints are widely interpreted as representing the divine presence, the deity striding into their sanctuary.<sup>1</sup> No direct parallels for such monumental footprints are known from other Anatolian or North Syrian temples.<sup>26</sup>

#### Key Artifacts and Features:

Beyond the architecture itself, several key artifacts define the site:

- **Sculptures:** The most prominent were the colossal basalt lions and sphinxes that adorned the entrance and facades.<sup>1</sup> The lion discovered in 1955 became emblematic of the site.<sup>1</sup> These figures are stylistically characteristic of Syro-Hittite art.
- **Footprints:** The aforementioned carved footprints on the thresholds are a unique and defining feature.<sup>1</sup>
- **Steles:** Reliefs and at least one stele were found within the main hall.<sup>1</sup> A stele depicting the goddess Ishtar was found, though potentially in a secondary context, leading to initial interpretations about the temple's dedication.<sup>15</sup>
- **Podium:** The raised platform within the cella served as the focal point of the sanctuary.<sup>1</sup>

#### Cultural and Religious Significance:

The Ain Dara temple holds immense cultural significance for several reasons. It is one of the best-preserved examples of Syro-Hittite religious architecture from the crucial transitional

period between the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age.<sup>15</sup> Its intricate decoration provides valuable insights into the artistic styles and mythological repertoire of the Syro-Hittite kingdoms.

The temple's most discussed aspect is its striking resemblance to the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, as described in the Hebrew Bible (1 Kings 6-7, 2 Chronicles 3-4).<sup>1</sup> Numerous parallels have been drawn, including the tripartite long-room plan (portico, main chamber, inner shrine), the construction on an elevated platform overlooking a settlement, the use of flanking pillars (cf. Jachin and Boaz), the presence of side chambers or galleries, and similar decorative motifs such as cherubim (sphinxes) and lions.<sup>1</sup> Even the divine footprints have been compared to biblical descriptions of God's presence, such as Ezekiel 43:7 ("the place for the soles of My feet").<sup>1</sup> The fact that Ain Dara clearly predates the biblical temple<sup>1</sup> suggests that the design of Solomon's Temple likely drew upon existing architectural and religious traditions prevalent in the Syro-Palestinian region, exemplified by Ain Dara. This connection highlights shared cultural heritage and demonstrates the interconnectedness of religious ideas and temple-building practices across the ancient Levant, challenging notions of the Jerusalem temple's absolute uniqueness.

The specific deity to whom the Ain Dara temple was dedicated remains uncertain. Early suggestions favored Ishtar (or her Canaanite equivalent Astarte/ʿAttart), based partly on the discovered stele.<sup>15</sup> However, the prominent footprints strongly suggest a male deity, leading many scholars to propose the storm god Baal Hadad, a major figure in the Syrian pantheon.<sup>1</sup> The Mesopotamian goddess Inanna has also been considered.<sup>1</sup> The temple's location on a major trade route might also indicate a role as an oracle center.<sup>1</sup>

**Visual Documentation:** Numerous photographs taken before 2018 document the temple's ruins, including its layout, the basalt orthostat reliefs depicting lions and sphinxes, the colossal lion statue, and the unique footprints.<sup>1</sup> These images are now invaluable records of the site's pre-destruction state.

## 4. Detailed Site Analysis: Cyrrhus (Nabi Huri)

Cyrrhus, known locally as Nabi Huri, stands as another major archaeological site in the Afrin region, boasting a long and layered history from the Hellenistic period through Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic times.

Location, Founding, and Excavation History:

The ancient city of Cyrrhus is located in the northeastern part of the Afrin valley, approximately 70 kilometers northeast of Aleppo and close to the Syrian-Turkish border.<sup>8</sup> The site lies near the Afrin River (the ancient Marsyas).<sup>8</sup> Its coordinates are approximately 36°44'39"N 36°57'33"E.<sup>11</sup>

Cyrrhus was founded in the early third century BC (around 300 BC) by Seleucus I Nicator, one of Alexander the Great's successors and the founder of the Seleucid Empire.<sup>8</sup> It was strategically established in a fertile agricultural area along the important ancient route connecting Antioch (Antakya) on the Mediterranean coast with Zeugma, a major crossing point on the Euphrates River.<sup>8</sup> The city was named after the Macedonian city of Cyrrhus<sup>8</sup> and

served as the capital of the surrounding district, Cyrrhestica.<sup>14</sup>

Systematic archaeological investigation began relatively late. A French mission, led initially by Edmond Frézouls, conducted excavations intermittently between 1952 and 1995.<sup>14</sup> After a hiatus, a joint Syrian-Lebanese mission resumed work at the site in 2006.<sup>8</sup> This later mission notably discovered a Roman house adorned with mosaics and wall paintings following looting incidents in 2008.<sup>8</sup> Initial results from these excavations suggest a planned Hellenistic city layout with a grid system and a central colonnaded street, a plan that seems to have persisted into Islamic times.<sup>28</sup>

Historical Context and Chronology:

Cyrrhus experienced several distinct historical phases:

- **Hellenistic Period:** Founded by Seleucus I Nicator, it served as a Seleucid outpost.<sup>8</sup> It became a frontier city after the Seleucids lost territory in Asia Minor following the Treaty of Apamea in 188 BC.<sup>28</sup>
- **Roman Period:** The city was briefly taken by the Armenian Empire in the 1st century BC before being incorporated into the Roman province of Syria by Pompey the Great in 64 BC.<sup>8</sup> Under Roman rule, Cyrrhus flourished, particularly from the 1st century AD onwards. It became a vital administrative, military, and commercial center, strategically located on the Antioch-Zeugma trade route.<sup>8</sup> It served as the base for the Roman legion Legio X Fretensis<sup>28</sup> and minted its own coinage.<sup>28</sup> Its strategic importance grew following repeated Sassanid Persian attacks in the 3rd century AD, prompting the Romans to significantly develop and fortify the city.<sup>28</sup>
- **Byzantine Period:** The city, now often referred to as Hagiopolis ("Holy City")<sup>8</sup>, regained prominence during the Byzantine era. It became a major Christian pilgrimage destination due to the presence of relics believed to belong to Saints Cosmas and Damian, martyrs venerated in the region.<sup>8</sup> An episcopal see was established early on, initially as a suffragan bishopric under Hierapolis Bambyce, later becoming an autocephalous metropolis directly under the Patriarch of Antioch.<sup>28</sup> The most famous bishop was Theodoret of Cyrrhus (bishop 423–450 AD), a prolific writer and influential theologian involved in major Christological debates.<sup>28</sup> His writings indicate a densely populated diocese with numerous churches and monasteries, associated with many local saints and hermits, including Saint Maron, the traditional founder of the Maronite Church, whose tomb was later believed to be at nearby Barad.<sup>40</sup> In the 6th century, Emperor Justinian I further embellished the city and strengthened its fortifications against the Sassanid threat.<sup>28</sup>
- **Islamic Period:** Cyrrhus fell to Arab forces in 637 AD during the early Muslim conquests.<sup>28</sup> It became known as Qorosh or Khoros<sup>28</sup> and initially served as a military station.<sup>8</sup> The city was briefly held by Crusaders associated with the County of Edessa in the early 12th century (known as Coricié) before being recaptured by Nur ad-Din Zangi in 1150.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, its strategic importance waned, and the city entered a period of decline. Muslim travelers in the 13th and 14th centuries described it as a large but largely ruinous city.<sup>8</sup> However, the site regained some significance as a local Muslim



pilgrimage destination due to the Mamluk-era conversion of a Roman tomb into a shrine dedicated to Nebi Huri (Prophet Huri).<sup>8</sup>

Significance:

Cyrrhus derives its significance from its multifaceted roles throughout history:

- **Strategic Importance:** It served as a key military outpost for the Romans (against Armenia and Persia) and later Arab rulers, controlling a vital communication and trade route between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates.<sup>7</sup>
- **Religious Center:** It was a major center of Christian pilgrimage in the Byzantine era, associated with Saints Cosmas and Damian, and the influential Bishop Theodoret.<sup>8</sup> Its later association with the Muslim saint Nebi Huri continued its role as a sacred site.<sup>8</sup> The potential connection to Saint Maron further adds to its religious historical importance, particularly for the Maronite community.<sup>2</sup>

Description of Key Monuments:

The extensive ruins of Cyrrhus include several notable structures:

- **Roman Theatre:** A large and relatively well-preserved, though now dilapidated, Roman-era theatre located outside the main city walls [<sup>2</sup> (image)]. It is considered one of the most significant Roman theatres in Syria.<sup>42</sup>
- **Roman Bridges:** Two Roman-era bridges spanning nearby watercourses remain structurally sound and reportedly still usable.<sup>28</sup>
- **Fortifications:** Substantial remains of Roman and Byzantine city walls and fortifications are visible, including towers and gates. Ruins of the southern gate have been documented [<sup>28</sup> (image)].
- **Basilica Church:** The foundations of a large Byzantine basilica, likely the main cathedral that housed the relics of Saints Cosmas and Damian, are extant.<sup>8</sup>
- **Byzantine Citadel:** A citadel was constructed on the acropolis hill behind the theatre during the 6th century AD under Justinian.<sup>28</sup> It shows evidence of Greek and Egyptian design influences but remains largely unexcavated.<sup>28</sup>
- **Nebi Huri Mausoleum/Mosque:** This prominent structure originated as a Roman-era hexagonal tower tomb, likely dating to the 2nd or 3rd century AD, possibly built for a military commander [<sup>11</sup> (image)]. During the Mamluk period (1303 AD), it was converted into a Muslim shrine attributed to Nebi Huri (variously identified with the prophet Uriah or a local Sufi saint).<sup>11</sup> A mosque was built adjacent to it in 1314 (Mamluk period) and subsequently rebuilt in 1875 during the Ottoman era.<sup>11</sup>
- **Other Remains:** Excavations have suggested a colonnaded main street.<sup>28</sup> A Roman house with mosaics and wall paintings was uncovered.<sup>8</sup> The existence of a Temple of Zeus has been posited but not definitively located.<sup>28</sup> An extensive necropolis (cemetery) lies outside the city walls.<sup>14</sup>

The historical trajectory of Cyrrhus/Nabi Huri, transforming from a Hellenistic foundation to a Roman military and commercial center, then a prominent Byzantine pilgrimage destination, and ultimately incorporating an Islamic shrine<sup>8</sup>, vividly illustrates the region's enduring strategic and cultural significance through successive empires and faiths. The specific

repurposing of the Roman-era tower tomb into the Mamluk-era shrine of Nebi Huri <sup>11</sup> serves as a tangible example of cultural syncretism and the layering of religious meaning onto existing landscapes. This process, where pre-existing monumental structures accumulate new layers of significance within different cultural and religious contexts, reflects the complex, interwoven history of the region and the ways successive societies interact with the heritage of their predecessors.

**Visual Documentation:** Available visual documentation includes general views of the expansive site, photographs of the Roman theatre, the distinctive hexagonal tower tomb (now part of the mosque complex), the Roman bridges, and various other ruins.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. Other Notable Archaeological Sites in Afrin

Beyond the major centers of Ain Dara and Cyrrhus, the Afrin region hosts other archaeological sites of considerable importance, representing different periods and aspects of human history.

### Dederiyeh Cave:

- **Location and Significance:** Situated in the Mount Simeon range within the Afrin District, about 60 km northwest of Aleppo <sup>4</sup>, Dederiyeh Cave is a Paleolithic site of global significance. Its deposits, primarily dating to the Middle Paleolithic (Mousterian period, ca. 200,000 - 40,000 years ago), have yielded crucial evidence regarding Neanderthal populations in the Levant.<sup>4</sup> The cave itself is large, about 15m wide and 8-10m high at the entrance, extending 50-60m deep.<sup>5</sup>
- **Discoveries:** Excavations, primarily conducted by a joint Japanese-Syrian team led by Takeru Akazawa and Sultan Muhesen starting in the late 1980s <sup>4</sup>, uncovered skeletal remains belonging to approximately 10 to 15 Neanderthal individuals.<sup>5</sup> The most remarkable finds were the exceptionally well-preserved skeletons of two Neanderthal children, both estimated to be around two years old at death. "Dederiyeh 1," found in 1993, was discovered in an intentional burial pit.<sup>4</sup> The skeleton was found lying on its back, arms extended and legs flexed, with a limestone slab placed under its head and a flint point tool positioned near its chest, strongly suggesting deliberate burial with ritualistic elements.<sup>4</sup> This provides compelling evidence for complex cognitive and social behaviors among Neanderthals, including symbolic treatment of the dead.<sup>43</sup> "Dederiyeh 2," a partial skeleton, was found in another pit burial in 1997-1998.<sup>5</sup> The human remains are associated with a Levantine Mousterian lithic industry, comparable to Tabun B-type assemblages.<sup>4</sup> Abundant animal fossils (gazelle, deer, wild goat, etc.) found in the same layers provide context for the paleoenvironment, suggesting conditions similar to today, perhaps slightly drier.<sup>43</sup>
- **Damage:** Worryingly, Dederiyeh Cave is included in lists of archaeological sites reported as damaged or looted in the aftermath of the 2018 events in Afrin <sup>16</sup>, raising serious concerns about the preservation of this unique Paleolithic archive.

### Barad (Brad):

- **Location and Significance:** Located in the hilly terrain southeast of Afrin town (approx.

15 km)<sup>2</sup>, Barad is one of the most extensive archaeological sites belonging to the "Ancient Villages of Northern Syria," collectively inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2011.<sup>2</sup> These "Dead Cities" represent remarkably well-preserved rural and urban landscapes from Late Antiquity and the Byzantine period. Barad itself was a significant settlement during the Roman and especially Byzantine eras, notable for its impressive architecture and its association with early Christianity, including Saint Maron.<sup>2</sup> Its coordinates are approximately 36°23'8"N 36°53'57"E.<sup>2</sup>

- **Monuments:** The site encompasses a wide array of ruins dating primarily from the 2nd to 6th centuries AD. These include several churches, a monastery known as Qasr al-Barad, a large public bathhouse complex, warehouses, civic buildings (like a magistrate's residence and meeting house), a tetrapylon (a four-way arch), numerous tombs, and domestic structures.<sup>2</sup> The most important religious structure is the Julianos Church, a large three-aisled basilica built between 399 and 402 AD, considered one of the oldest and most significant churches in Syria.<sup>2</sup> A second, 6th-century church also exists at the site.<sup>2</sup> The tomb traditionally identified as that of Saint Maron, the 4th-5th century hermit monk revered as the spiritual father of the Maronite Church, is also located within the Barad complex.<sup>2</sup>
- **Damage:** Barad has suffered significant damage in the recent conflict. It is listed among the sites subjected to looting and destruction following the 2018 takeover.<sup>16</sup> More specifically, reports confirmed by the Syrian Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) and international sources indicate that Turkish aerial bombardment in March 2018 directly hit the site, causing severe damage to, or destruction of, key monuments including the Julianos Church and the Tomb of Saint Maron.<sup>2</sup> This destruction impacts not only Syrian heritage but also a component of a UNESCO World Heritage property and a site of major significance to the Maronite Christian community worldwide.

#### Brief Overview of Other Sites:

The lists compiled by local sources and news agencies reveal numerous other sites impacted since 2018.<sup>16</sup> While detailed information is often lacking, some specific examples illustrate the breadth of the affected heritage:

- **Tell Sites:** Several archaeological tells, representing ancient settlements, have been damaged. Tell Burj Abdelo in the Shirawa subdistrict was reportedly subjected to bulldozing, with large statues extracted and removed.<sup>17</sup> Tell Jandar is reportedly converted into a military base with a helicopter landing pad, involving extensive earthworks and likely destruction of archaeological layers.<sup>16</sup> Other tells like Tell Kafrum, Tell Dirsawan, and numerous others across different subdistricts (Rajo, Mobata/Maabatli, Bulbul) are listed as having been excavated or bulldozed.<sup>16</sup>
- **Shrines (Mazarat):** A large number of local shrines, often tombs of revered figures associated with Sufi, Alevi, Yazidi, or local traditions, have been reportedly damaged or destroyed.<sup>16</sup> Examples include Sheikh Hamid Shrine (Qastal Jandu), Pavlun Shrine (Sharran), Qara Jaran Shrine (Sharran, identified as Yazidi<sup>23</sup>), Sheikh Hanan Shrine

(near Mashulah), Sarah Qiza Shrine (Khalnira), Yaghmur Dada Shrine (Bulbul), and many others.<sup>16</sup> The destruction of the Bir Sadiq Yazidi shrine near Qatma has also been reported.<sup>22</sup>

- **Other Locations:** Ruins in villages like Kimar <sup>16</sup> and Kharbat 'Alu <sup>16</sup>, and sites like 'Arab Sheikhu <sup>16</sup> are also listed among those affected.

The destruction reported at Dederiyeh Cave and Barad demonstrates that the impact of the conflict extends well beyond the prominent Greco-Roman and Syro-Hittite remains, affecting globally significant Paleolithic heritage related to Neanderthal evolution and behavior, as well as internationally recognized Byzantine sites forming part of a UNESCO World Heritage property. Furthermore, the consistent reports of damage and destruction targeting numerous local shrines (Mazarat) <sup>16</sup>, including specifically identified Yazidi sites <sup>22</sup>, strongly suggest that motivations for destruction may extend beyond collateral damage or looting for profit. This pattern points towards a possible ideological dimension aimed at erasing the heritage and sacred places of minority religious communities, contributing to the broader pattern of cultural and demographic change reported in the region since 2018.<sup>13</sup>

## 6. The Contemporary Situation: Threats and Damage to Afrin's Cultural Heritage

The cultural heritage of the Afrin region, spanning millennia, has entered a period of acute crisis following the dramatic political and military shifts since the onset of the Syrian Civil War. **Conflict Context:** Following the withdrawal of Syrian government forces in the summer of 2012, the Afrin region came under the control of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).<sup>7</sup> While this period saw some militarization of archaeological sites used as observation posts <sup>14</sup>, the level of destruction remained relatively limited compared to other parts of Syria until 2018.<sup>14</sup> The situation changed drastically on January 20, 2018, with the launch of "Operation Olive Branch," a large-scale military offensive by Turkish armed forces and allied Syrian National Army (SNA) factions against the YPG.<sup>12</sup> By late March 2018, these forces had taken complete control of the Afrin region <sup>22</sup>, leading to significant displacement of the local population and establishing a new administrative and security reality.<sup>13</sup> Since this takeover, numerous credible sources have documented a sharp escalation in threats to and damage of Afrin's cultural heritage.<sup>13</sup>

Documented Damage to Key Sites:

The impact on Afrin's most prominent archaeological sites has been severe:

- **Ain Dara Temple:** This site suffered catastrophic damage early in the offensive. Turkish airstrikes, occurring between January 20 and 22, 2018, directly hit the temple.<sup>15</sup> Analysis by ASOR CHI using satellite imagery and ground reports confirmed heavy damage, particularly to the central and southeastern portions.<sup>15</sup> The entrance portico, the thresholds bearing the unique footprints, facade reliefs, and flanking lion and sphinx sculptures were largely destroyed or heavily damaged, with estimates suggesting around 60% of the structure was reduced to rubble.<sup>1</sup> Joint Direct Attack Munitions

(JDAMs), likely GBU-38s, were suspected based on recovered fragments.<sup>15</sup> Subsequent reports indicate extensive bulldozing of the tell surface and the lower city using heavy machinery in 2020, which destroyed surface layers but also uncovered some previously unknown basalt carvings.<sup>12</sup> In a significant act of looting in December 2019, the site's iconic colossal basalt lion, discovered in 1955, was stolen by members of the Hamza Division, an SNA faction.<sup>1</sup> The site has continued to suffer from neglect, weathering of damaged structures, and potential further damage from shelling originating from nearby military positions or training camps established on or near the hill.<sup>12</sup>

- **Cyrrhus/Nabi Huri:** While the site experienced some damage and looting prior to 2011 and limited impact from militarization between 2011-2017<sup>14</sup>, the situation deteriorated dramatically after 2018.<sup>14</sup> Reports describe widespread and disastrous looting and illegal excavations across the site, including the necropolis.<sup>14</sup> Heavy machinery, such as bulldozers, has been used extensively to scrape surface layers and dig deep pits in search of artifacts or tomb entrances, and breaches were reportedly made in the city walls to facilitate vehicle access.<sup>14</sup> The Roman house with mosaics, previously restored, suffered vandalism.<sup>14</sup> The Nebi Huri tower tomb/mausoleum was specifically targeted in 2018; fighters from the Free Syrian Army (part of the SNA coalition) were reported to have ransacked the tomb, overturned the cenotaph, and looted valuables.<sup>11</sup> In 2020, Turkish authorities undertook a reconstruction of the mausoleum and mosque complex.<sup>11</sup> However, this intervention proved controversial, with reports indicating that remaining historical artifacts were removed or destroyed during the process, and architectural changes (like a new Ottoman-style minbar) were introduced, leading to criticism that the renovation aimed to "Ottoman-nize" Syrian heritage rather than preserve its authentic layers.<sup>11</sup> Parts of the wider Cyrrhus site have also been subject to militarization.<sup>14</sup>
- **Barad (Brad):** As a component of the UNESCO World Heritage "Ancient Villages of Northern Syria," the damage at Barad is particularly alarming. The site was directly bombed by Turkish forces in March 2018.<sup>2</sup> Reports specifically mention the destruction or severe damage of the historically and religiously significant Tomb of Saint Maron and the ancient Julianos Church.<sup>2</sup> Barad is also included in general lists of sites subjected to looting and damage in the post-2018 period.<sup>16</sup>
- **Dederiyeh Cave:** This site, crucial for Neanderthal studies, appears on lists of archaeological locations damaged or looted since 2018<sup>16</sup>, although specific details of the damage are less documented in the available sources compared to Ain Dara or Cyrrhus.

#### Analysis of Threat Types:

The destruction of Afrin's cultural heritage since 2018 stems from a combination of factors, as evidenced across multiple sites:

- **Direct Military Action:** Airstrikes and shelling, primarily during the initial 2018 offensive, caused significant destruction at Ain Dara<sup>12</sup> and Barad.<sup>2</sup>
- **Looting & Illegal Excavation:** This appears to be the most widespread and ongoing

threat, reported at numerous locations.<sup>13</sup> It is often systematic, involving organized groups, sometimes linked to specific SNA factions (e.g., Hamza Division, Al-Shamye Front, Faylaq Al-Sham, Sultan Murad) <sup>1</sup>, and utilizes heavy machinery like bulldozers.<sup>12</sup> Artifacts are reportedly smuggled out, often towards or through Turkey.<sup>16</sup> This suggests both opportunistic looting and potentially more organized trafficking networks.

- **Militarization:** The use of archaeological sites for military purposes (building bases, observation posts, training camps, digging trenches, erecting roadblocks) has caused direct physical damage and restricted access at sites like Ain Dara, Cyrrhus, Tell Jandaris, and nearby Qalaat Semaan.<sup>12</sup>
- **Vandalism & Deliberate Destruction:** Beyond collateral damage and looting, there are indications of intentional destruction targeting specific types of heritage. The repeated damage to religious shrines (Yazidi, Sufi, local Mazarat) <sup>16</sup>, the destruction of Christian monuments at Barad <sup>2</sup>, the ransacking of the Nebi Huri tomb <sup>11</sup>, and the destruction of gravesites <sup>13</sup> suggest possible ideological motivations aimed at erasing cultural and religious diversity. This often occurs alongside broader violations, including the destruction of olive groves and property rights violations linked to forced displacement and demographic change.<sup>13</sup>
- **Neglect & Environmental Factors:** The conflict environment leads to a lack of basic maintenance and conservation. Existing damage from weathering is exacerbated by conflict impacts (e.g., crumbling walls at Ain Dara <sup>12</sup>). Natural events like the February 2023 earthquake further compound the vulnerability of already weakened structures.<sup>12</sup>

**Table: Summary of Reported Damage to Key Afrin Sites (Post-2018)**

Site Name	Type(s) of Damage Reported (Post-Jan 2018)	Key Source(s)
Ain Dara Temple	Severe airstrike damage (Jan 2018); Looting; Extensive illegal excavation/bulldozing of tell & lower city; Militarization/Use as training camp; Theft of colossal lion statue (Dec 2019); Continued damage from shelling/neglect; Earthquake exacerbation	<sup>1</sup>
Cyrrhus / Nabi Huri	Widespread looting & illegal excavation (using heavy machinery); Vandalism (Roman house mosaics); Militarization (observation posts, trenches); Ransacking/looting of Nebi Huri tomb (2018); Controversial reconstruction of	<sup>11</sup>

	mosque/tomb with removal/destruction of artifacts (2020)	
<b>Barad (Brad)</b>	Bombing/Airstrike damage (March 2018); Destruction/damage to Julianos Church & Tomb of St. Maron; Looting; General damage/destruction	<sup>2</sup>
<b>Dederiyeh Cave</b>	Looting; Damage (details unspecified)	<sup>16</sup>
<b>Tell Burj Abdelo</b>	Bulldozing; Illegal excavation; Extraction/theft of large statues	<sup>16</sup>
<b>Tell Jandaris</b>	Militarization (conversion to military base/helipad); Illegal excavation/bulldozing; Enclosure with wall	<sup>16</sup>
<b>Various Shrines (Mazarat)</b>	Destruction; Vandalism; Looting (Specific targeting of Yazidi shrines reported)	<sup>16</sup>

#### Preservation Challenges and Initiatives:

Protecting Afrin's heritage under the current circumstances faces immense challenges. Reports indicate a lack of effective protection measures or accountability from the controlling military and civil authorities.<sup>14</sup> A "culture of impunity" for violations against the local population and their property, including heritage sites, has been described.<sup>22</sup> Access for international heritage organizations like UNESCO and independent researchers for assessment or intervention has been severely restricted since 2018.<sup>63</sup>

Despite these obstacles, some limited efforts have been made. The most notable is the emergency intervention at the Ain Dara temple in 2023, undertaken by the local heritage organization Syrians for Heritage in cooperation with the Idlib Antiquities Center and funded by the Kaplan Fund.<sup>12</sup> This involved constructing a protective double-walled barrier filled with gravel and sand, along with a metal fence and sandbags, to shield the remaining temple facades from stray projectiles and prevent unauthorized access, military use, or grazing.<sup>12</sup> While acknowledged as a potentially controversial addition of modern structures, the implementers stressed it was a necessary, temporary, and reversible emergency measure to prevent further catastrophic loss until proper restoration is possible.<sup>12</sup> However, these measures are considered insufficient to address the structural damage, which requires urgent consolidation, especially after the 2023 earthquake.<sup>12</sup>

The destruction has drawn condemnation from various bodies. The Syrian government's DGAM has repeatedly denounced the attacks and destruction.<sup>21</sup> UNESCO representatives have called for an end to the violations, condemning the Turkish bombardment and

emphasizing the loss to world heritage.<sup>21</sup> Heritage monitoring groups like ASOR CHI<sup>15</sup> and Syrians for Heritage<sup>12</sup>, along with human rights organizations like Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights<sup>13</sup>, have published detailed reports documenting the damage. Questions regarding the destruction have also been raised in the European Parliament.<sup>51</sup>

The convergence of evidence strongly suggests a pattern of widespread, severe, and ongoing cultural heritage destruction in Afrin since January 2018, directly linked to the Turkish-led intervention and the subsequent actions of allied factions. This destruction appears multifaceted, involving not only direct conflict damage but also extensive, potentially organized looting for profit, deliberate militarization of sensitive sites, and possible ideologically motivated vandalism targeting minority heritage and contributing to broader demographic shifts. Amidst this, official protection mechanisms appear absent or ineffective, leaving preservation largely to reactive emergency measures by under-resourced local actors.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

**Recap:** The Afrin region of northwestern Syria possesses an exceptionally rich and diverse archaeological heritage, bearing witness to millennia of human history. From the unique Neanderthal burials of Dederiyeh Cave, through the monumental Syro-Hittite temple at Ain Dara, the layered Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine city of Cyrrhus/Nabi Huri, to the extensive Byzantine remains at Barad (part of a UNESCO World Heritage site), Afrin's past holds immense significance for understanding Syrian, Near Eastern, and indeed global human history.

**Summary of Impact:** This invaluable heritage has suffered devastating and largely irreversible damage since the Turkish military intervention and subsequent occupation began in January 2018. Credible reports consistently document a pattern of destruction encompassing: direct damage from airstrikes and shelling; widespread, systematic looting and illegal excavations often utilizing heavy machinery; the damaging militarization of archaeological sites; the theft of major artifacts; and the targeted destruction of specific monuments, including minority religious shrines and UNESCO-listed structures. This destruction represents a profound loss of tangible history and cultural identity.

**Significance of Loss:** The erasure of Afrin's archaeological sites and artifacts constitutes an irreplaceable loss not only for the people of Syria but for all humanity. It obliterates primary evidence needed to reconstruct the past, understand cultural interactions, trace religious developments, and appreciate the region's complex history as a cultural crossroads. The damage impacts heritage spanning from the Paleolithic era to the Islamic period, affecting sites of local, national, and international importance.

**Deeper Implications:** The post-2018 situation in Afrin presents a critical and disturbing case study of the multifaceted nature of cultural heritage destruction in contemporary conflict and occupation scenarios. The evidence points beyond collateral damage from hostilities. It strongly suggests the interplay of several destructive forces: systematic looting potentially linked to conflict financing and organized crime networks<sup>16</sup>; ideologically motivated destruction aimed at erasing cultural diversity and minority heritage<sup>22</sup>; the weaponization of heritage within broader strategies of demographic change and control over territory<sup>13</sup>; and



the imposition of external narratives through controversial reconstruction efforts.<sup>11</sup> Afrin exemplifies how heritage becomes a direct target and casualty when conflict intertwines with occupation, economic opportunism, ideological agendas, and social engineering.

Recommendations:

Addressing the ongoing crisis and mitigating further loss requires concerted action at multiple levels:

1. **Continued Monitoring and Documentation:** Sustained, independent monitoring is crucial. This includes continued remote sensing analysis via satellite imagery<sup>15</sup> and, where feasible and safe, ground-based documentation by trained professionals.<sup>12</sup> Supporting organizations like ASOR CHI, Syrians for Heritage, and local initiatives engaged in this vital work is paramount to maintaining an accurate record of site conditions and ongoing threats.
2. **International Accountability and Advocacy:** International bodies, particularly UNESCO<sup>21</sup> and the United Nations, along with concerned states, must persistently condemn the documented destruction and looting in Afrin. Efforts should be made to hold perpetrators accountable under international law, including the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its protocols. Diplomatic pressure should be applied to the controlling powers to halt destructive activities and allow access for independent assessment.
3. **Combatting Illicit Trafficking:** Increased vigilance is required by Turkey, neighboring countries, international law enforcement agencies, and the global art market to detect and intercept artifacts looted from Afrin. Raising awareness about the specific types of artifacts likely emerging from the region and strengthening due diligence procedures are essential steps, acknowledging reports of smuggling routes through Turkey.<sup>16</sup>
4. **Support for Local Heritage Professionals and Communities:** Empowering and supporting Syrian heritage professionals and local community members who remain committed to protecting their heritage is vital. Providing resources, training, and support for emergency stabilization measures (like the Ain Dara intervention<sup>12</sup>), documentation, and awareness-raising activities on the ground, where security permits, can help mitigate further loss.
5. **Future Planning for Conservation and Rehabilitation:** Comprehensive, independent, post-conflict damage assessments specific to Afrin's cultural heritage are needed as soon as security conditions allow. Based on these assessments, culturally sensitive, scientifically sound conservation and rehabilitation plans should be developed in close consultation with Syrian heritage experts and local communities. These plans must prioritize authenticity and avoid politically motivated reconstructions that could further distort the historical record. Existing assessment frameworks<sup>65</sup> may offer models, but require adaptation for heritage specifics.
6. **Raising Global Awareness:** Continued efforts are needed to disseminate factual information about the destruction of Afrin's heritage through academic publications, reports by heritage and human rights organizations, media coverage, and exhibitions.<sup>21</sup> Sustained global awareness is crucial for maintaining pressure for accountability and

supporting long-term preservation efforts.

The protection of Afrin's cultural heritage is intrinsically linked to the human rights and security situation in the region. Meaningful preservation will only be possible within a framework that respects international law, ensures accountability for violations, and empowers local communities to safeguard their past for future generations.

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