

# Archaeological Remnants of Hurrian and Hittite Civilizations in the Afrin Region, Syria

## I. Introduction: The Afrin Region in Ancient Near Eastern History

### A. Strategic Location and Historical Significance of the Afrin Valley (Kurd Dagh)

The Afrin region, encompassing the Afrin River valley and the mountainous area historically known in part as Kurd Dagh (Kurdish for "Kurd Mountain"), is situated in the northwestern part of modern Syria.<sup>1</sup> This geographical position has rendered it a critical corridor and zone of interaction between Anatolia to the north, the Levant to the south, and Upper Mesopotamia to the east throughout history.<sup>2</sup> The fertile valley, sustained by the Afrin River, has supported human settlement from as early as the Neolithic period, with continuous occupation through various historical epochs.<sup>1</sup> Its strategic importance is further highlighted by its location along ancient trade routes that connected these diverse cultural spheres.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the Afrin region has been a contested territory, described as "a competing battleground between the East and the West".<sup>2</sup> During classical antiquity, the area was part of administrative districts such as Cyrrhestica, centered around the city of Cyrrhus.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars suggest that the Kurd Dagh and the adjacent plain near Antioch were settled by Kurdish populations from antiquity, possibly serving as mercenaries and mounted archers during the Seleucid era.<sup>1</sup> Later, the Afrin Valley was incorporated into Roman Syria and subsequently became part of various Islamic caliphates and empires, including the Ottoman Empire.<sup>1</sup>

The enduring geopolitical significance of the Afrin region as a borderland and transit zone, evident from ancient times to contemporary conflicts, implies a continuous exposure to diverse cultural influences and shifting power dynamics. This historical trajectory makes the region a particularly fertile ground for studying processes of cultural syncretism, such as the interactions between the Hurrian and Hittite civilizations. The very nature of the Afrin Valley as a "crossroads" suggests that it would have been a locus for the meeting and mingling of different peoples and traditions, rather than a homogenous cultural enclave dominated by a single entity. Consequently, archaeological and historical remnants found here are likely to reflect this complex interplay.

The historical toponym "Kurd Dagh" itself points to a significant demographic layer in the region's past.<sup>1</sup> While this report focuses on the earlier Hurrian and Hittite periods,

acknowledging this later, albeit ancient, layer of identity is crucial for interpreting the region's multifaceted history. The Hurrians and Hittites predated the periods associated with this toponym by centuries, if not millennia. Any remnants of these Bronze and Iron Age civilizations would therefore have existed within a landscape later inhabited and named by populations that contributed to the "Kurd Dagħ" designation. This raises important questions regarding the continuity or discontinuity of settlement and how these ancient sites were perceived, utilized, or integrated by subsequent inhabitants.

**Table 1: Key Archaeological Sites and Finds in/near the Afrin Region with Potential Hurrian and/or Hittite Associations**

Site Name (Alternative Names)	Location (General, Proximity to Afrin City if known)	Primary Relevant Period(s) of Occupation/Significance	Attributed Cultural Affiliation(s)	Key Features / Finds / Claims	Key Source ID(s) for Reference
Ain Dara (Tell Ain Dara)	5 km south of Afrin city	c. 1300-740 BCE (Late Bronze Age - Iron Age II)	Syro-Hittite, "Hurrian-styled" elements, Aramean	Temple (tripartite plan, basalt reliefs of lions/sphinxes, colossal footprints), comparisons to Solomon's Temple, recently severely damaged.	<sup>17</sup>
Afrin Stele (findspot)	Field northwest of Afrin city	9th-8th century BCE (Iron Age II)	Luwian, Syro-Hittite	Fragmentary Luwian stele with relief of Teshub's kilt and inscription mentioning Tarhunzas.	<sup>5</sup>
Cyrrhus (Nebi Huri, Hagioupolis, Khoros)	Approx. 20 km from Azaz, near Afrin River	Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine (primary); unsubstantiated claims of 2500 BC Hurrian site.	Greek, Roman, Byzantine; (Claimed Hurrian)	Hellenistic city founding, Roman military base, theatre, Christian center. Claim of early Hurrian site lacks	<sup>19</sup> (Hellenistic/Roman); <sup>18</sup> (Hurrian claim)

				archaeological consensus.	
Tell Jindires (Gindaros)	Afrin district	Bronze Age through early Islamic periods	Not specified in detail for Bronze/Iron Age; general tell occupation.	Archaeological tell, military base transformation. Potential for Hurrian/Hittite layers.	<sup>21</sup>
Kolpe (Tell Kolpe?)	15 km southeast of Afrin	Claimed Mitanni period	(Claimed Mitanni/Hurrian)	Claim of "historic buildings from the Mitanni period," reportedly destroyed. Lacks detailed archaeological substantiation in provided sources.	<sup>18</sup>

## B. Introduction to Hurrians and Hittites in Northern Syria

The Hurrians were a prominent people of the Bronze Age (c. third to late second millennium BCE), inhabiting a wide arc of territory across northern Syria, Upper Mesopotamia, and southeastern Anatolia.<sup>7</sup> They spoke the Hurrian language, which is generally considered to be related to Urartian but not to Semitic or Indo-European languages.<sup>7</sup> The Khabur River valley, to the east of Afrin, was a core area of Hurrian settlement and cultural development.<sup>7</sup> The Hurrians established several kingdoms, the largest and most influential being the Kingdom of Mitanni (c. 1550-1260 BCE), which became a major power in the Near East.<sup>7</sup>

The Hittites, speakers of an Indo-European language, emerged as a dominant force in Anatolia, with their capital at Hattusa (modern Boğazköy).<sup>10</sup> Between approximately 1650 and 1200 BCE, the Hittites expanded their empire significantly, extending their control into northern Syria, where they established important administrative and military centers, such as Carchemish.<sup>10</sup>

The interaction between Hurrians and Hittites was complex and multifaceted, characterized by periods of conflict, alliance, and profound cultural exchange.<sup>7</sup> Early Hittite kings, such as Hattusilis I, contended with Hurrian-influenced kingdoms in Syria, like Yamhad, around 1600 BCE.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, the Hittite Empire incorporated a substantial Hurrian population, and Hittite culture, particularly in the realms of religion and mythology, was deeply influenced by Hurrian traditions.<sup>7</sup> This was not merely a case of conquest but involved a significant degree of cultural osmosis, with Hurrian elements often being adopted and adapted by the Hittites. This

symbiotic, and at times antagonistic, relationship means that "Hittite" cultural manifestations in Syria, especially in regions with a pre-existing Hurrian presence, are likely to exhibit features of this cultural fusion. Distinguishing purely "Hittite" from purely "Hurrian" elements can therefore be challenging, as the archaeological and textual records often point to a blended heritage.

### **C. Statement of Report Focus**

This report aims to synthesize and critically evaluate the available archaeological, epigraphic, and historical evidence pertaining to the remnants of Hurrian and Hittite civilizations within the specific geographical context of the Afrin region. It will examine site-specific data from locations such as Ain Dara, Cyrrhus, and the findspot of the Afrin Stele, alongside broader regional patterns, to delineate the nature and extent of Hurrian and Hittite presence and their cultural legacies in this historically significant area of northern Syria.

## **II. The Hurrian Presence in and around the Afrin Valley**

### **A. Hurrian Expansion and the Mitanni Kingdom's Western Reach**

The Hurrians are first documented in northern Mesopotamia, with early kingdoms such as Urkesh (modern Tell Mozan) emerging in the third millennium BCE.<sup>7</sup> Over time, Hurrian populations migrated further west, and by 1725 BCE, their presence is attested in parts of northern Syria, including the important city-state of Alalakh (Tell Atchana), located not far from the Afrin region.<sup>7</sup> The Khabur River valley remained a central Hurrian territory for a millennium.<sup>7</sup>

The apogee of Hurrian political power was realized with the rise of the Kingdom of Mitanni around 1550 BCE.<sup>7</sup> Mitanni, a confederation of Hurrian states and vassals with an Indo-Aryan ruling elite, became the dominant force in Upper Mesopotamia and northern Syria for approximately two centuries.<sup>13</sup> Its capital, Washukanni, though not definitively located, is thought to have been situated near the headwaters of the Khabur River.<sup>9</sup> At its maximum extent, the Mitanni Empire's sphere of influence stretched from Arraphe in the east to Kizzuwatna (Cilicia) in the west, and from Lake Van in the north to Tunip in the south.<sup>14</sup> Maps illustrating Mitanni's territorial control often depict its western boundaries encompassing or immediately adjacent to the Afrin region.<sup>15</sup> The kingdom of Mukiš, of which Alalakh was the capital, was under Mitannian suzerainty before being conquered by the Hittites.<sup>16</sup>

While Mitanni's broader sphere of influence clearly extended into northwestern Syria, the precise nature of its control over the more rugged, mountainous terrain of the Kurd Dagħ, which forms part of the Afrin region, is less certain from available textual and archaeological data. Major empires often exerted a more indirect form of control over peripheral or geographically challenging areas. It is plausible that the Afrin Valley was a vassal territory or a frontier zone within Mitanni's sphere of influence, rather than a directly administered core province. This distinction would have implications for the density and monumentality of "Mitannian" archaeological remnants one might expect to find; direct, intensive occupation

might be less pronounced than in the Mitannian heartlands. The proximity of Alalakh, a significant Mitannian vassal, suggests strong political and cultural currents would have reached Afrin, but the archaeological record within Afrin itself must provide the specific evidence for direct Mitannian settlement or administrative presence.

## **B. Evidence of Hurrian Material Culture and Influence in Northern Syria**

Knowledge of Hurrian culture is derived from archaeological excavations at key sites such as Nuzi (in modern Iraq), Alalakh, and Urkesh, as well as from cuneiform tablets, notably those discovered in the Hittite capital, Hattusa, which reveal significant Hurrian cultural features.<sup>7</sup> Distinctive elements of Hurrian material culture include specific types of wheel-made pottery, notably Khabur ware (characterized by painted geometric patterns) and Nuzi ware (known for its distinctive forms and painted decoration in brown or black).<sup>7</sup> Hurrian cylinder seals, often meticulously carved with mythological motifs, are another important diagnostic artifact category, providing insights into their artistic conventions and religious beliefs.<sup>7</sup> The Hurrians were also renowned for their skills in metallurgy, and it has been proposed that the Sumerian term for "coppersmith" (tabira/tibira) was borrowed from Hurrian, implying an early presence and technological reputation.<sup>7</sup>

The presence of Hurrian populations is also indicated by onomastic evidence – Hurrian personal names and place names found in texts from various sites across the Near East.<sup>7</sup> One source makes a broad assertion that nearly three-quarters of Kurdish clan names and about half of the topographical and urban names in the wider Kurdish-inhabited regions are of Hurrian origin.<sup>6</sup> While such claims highlight the potential depth of Hurrian linguistic legacy, specific, peer-reviewed linguistic analysis would be required to substantiate such connections for toponyms within the Afrin region itself, evidence not directly provided in the available materials.

Identifying purely Hurrian archaeological assemblages, particularly in culturally mixed zones like northern Syria, presents a significant challenge. Hurrians co-existed and interacted with various other groups, including Semitic-speaking Amorites in kingdoms like Yamhad<sup>7</sup> and later Arameans. The Mitanni state itself, while predominantly Hurrian, was a confederation that likely included diverse populations.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the profound Hurrian influence on Hittite culture means that distinguishing Hurrian elements from Hittite ones, or from local Syrian traditions that absorbed Hurrian traits, requires careful archaeological interpretation. In a region like Afrin, it is more probable to find "Hurrian influence" or "Hurrian-styled" elements within broader cultural contexts (e.g., Syro-Hittite) rather than distinct, isolated Hurrian settlements, especially from the Middle Bronze Age onwards, when interactions intensified.

## **C. Specific Archaeological Sites in/near Afrin with Potential Hurrian Connections**

Several archaeological sites within or near the Afrin region have been associated, either directly or speculatively, with Hurrian presence or influence:

- **Ain Dara Temple:** This significant Iron Age temple is described as "Syro-Hittite and Hurrian-styled" and was constructed around 1300 BCE.<sup>17</sup> This date places its initial construction after the peak of Mitanni's political power but within a period characterized by the strong persistence of Hurrian cultural traditions and their significant impact on Hittite and Syrian cultures. The specific "Hurrian-styled" architectural or iconographic elements are not explicitly detailed in the provided summaries of excavation reports<sup>4</sup>, necessitating reference to more specialized publications for clarification.
- **Kolpe (Tell Kolpe?):** A village located approximately 15 kilometers southeast of Afrin city is mentioned as having "historic buildings from the Mitanni period".<sup>18</sup> These structures were reportedly destroyed in recent conflicts. This claim is potentially very significant for understanding Mitannian reach into the Afrin area. However, the available sources lack specific archaeological substantiation for this assertion, such as excavation reports, descriptions of artifact types, or architectural details that would confirm a Mitanni period date and cultural affiliation.<sup>18</sup>
- **Nebi Huri (Cyrrhus):** One source makes the claim that Nebi Huri was a "Hurrian site...built in 2500 B.C.". <sup>18</sup> This very early dating for a major Hurrian urban center, and its identification as Cyrrhus at such an early date, starkly contrasts with the widely accepted scholarly consensus, based on historical and archaeological evidence, which dates the founding of Cyrrhus to the Hellenistic period (early 3rd century BCE) by Seleucus Nicator.<sup>19</sup> The claim of a 2500 BC Hurrian Cyrrhus requires robust, peer-reviewed archaeological evidence, which is absent in the provided materials; indeed, other sources explicitly state no pre-Hellenistic Hurrian or Hittite evidence has been documented for Cyrrhus.<sup>18</sup>
- **Tell Jindires (Gindaros):** This is an archaeological tell that was reportedly transformed into a military base in recent times.<sup>21</sup> An ASOR report indicates that the site has occupational layers dating from the Bronze Age through the early Islamic period.<sup>22</sup> While specific Hurrian or Hittite layers are not detailed, its attested Bronze Age and Iron Age occupation makes Tell Jindires a site of potential interest for uncovering remnants of these civilizations.

A critical examination of these site-specific claims reveals a recurring pattern: general statements or news reports sometimes assert significant Hurrian or Mitanni presence, or exceptionally early dates for certain sites. However, more detailed archaeological reports or scholarly summaries often indicate a lack of specific, published supporting evidence for these precise claims. This underscores a crucial methodological consideration in assessing ancient remnants: the necessity of prioritizing peer-reviewed archaeological data and scholarly consensus over unsubstantiated assertions. While local traditions or preliminary observations might hint at ancient connections, these require validation through systematic archaeological investigation and publication.

### III. The Hittite and Syro-Hittite Legacy in Afrin

## A. Hittite Imperial Expansion and Syro-Hittite States

The Hittite Old Kingdom, centered in Anatolia, began its expansionist phase in the mid-17th century BCE. Rulers such as Hattushili I (c. 1650-1620 BCE) led campaigns into northern Syria, challenging existing powers like the kingdom of Yamhad (Aleppo).<sup>7</sup> Later, during the New Kingdom or Empire period (c. 1400-1175 BCE), formidable emperors like Shuppiluliuma I (c. 1370-1330 BCE) decisively established Hittite dominance over much of northern Syria.<sup>10</sup> Shuppiluliuma I defeated the Mitanni kingdom, a major rival, and incorporated its western territories into the Hittite sphere.<sup>4</sup> He installed his sons as viceroys in key Syrian cities such as Aleppo and Carchemish, effectively making northern Syria a vital part of the Hittite Empire.<sup>4</sup> Historical reconstructions suggest that the territory of Aleppo, and by extension the Afrin Valley, fell under Hittite control during this period.<sup>4</sup> Hittite administration involved establishing garrisons, managing vassal kingdoms, and integrating Syrian territories into their economic and political system.<sup>10</sup>

The collapse of the Hittite Empire around 1200/1175 BCE, part of a wider series of disruptions across the Eastern Mediterranean known as the Late Bronze Age Collapse, did not signify the complete disappearance of Hittite cultural or political influence in Syria.<sup>10</sup> Instead, a new political landscape emerged, characterized by the rise of smaller successor states commonly referred to by scholars as "Neo-Hittite" or "Syro-Hittite" kingdoms.<sup>10</sup> These polities, such as Carchemish, Patina (possibly centered at Tell Tayinat), and Gurgum, flourished in northern Syria and southeastern Anatolia from the 12th to the 8th centuries BCE, until their eventual absorption by the Neo-Assyrian Empire.<sup>10</sup> These kingdoms maintained Hittite dynastic traditions, used the Luwian hieroglyphic script for monumental inscriptions, and continued many aspects of Hittite religious and artistic practices, albeit in a new Syrian context that also saw significant interaction with Aramean and local Semitic populations.<sup>12</sup>

The term "Syro-Hittite" is crucial for understanding the cultural landscape of Afrin during the Iron Age. It denotes not simply a continuation of Hittite imperial culture, but rather its adaptation, transformation, and fusion within a Syrian milieu. This involved the interplay of Hittite and Luwian linguistic and cultural elements with those of the Arameans, who were becoming increasingly prominent in Syria during this period, as well as with long-standing local Syrian traditions. Archaeological remnants in the Afrin region dating to the Iron Age are most likely to fall under this composite cultural designation, reflecting a synthesis rather than a "pure" Hittite imperial presence.

## B. The Ain Dara Temple: A Monumental Syro-Hittite Center

The most significant known archaeological site in the Afrin region with clear Hittite-era connections is the temple at Ain Dara.

- **Location and General Description:** The Ain Dara archaeological site is situated approximately 5 kilometers south of Afrin city, on a prominent tell (ancient settlement mound) that overlooks the Afrin River.<sup>4</sup> It is widely recognized as an Iron Age Syro-Hittite temple complex.<sup>4</sup>

- Dating and Phases:** Excavations, notably those conducted by Ali Abu Assaf, indicate that the temple was in existence from approximately 1300 BCE to 740 BCE.<sup>4</sup> Abu Assaf identified three principal structural phases for the temple: Phase 1 (c. 1300-1000 BCE), Phase 2 (c. 1000-900 BCE), and Phase 3 (c. 900-740 BCE).<sup>4</sup> This chronological span means its earliest phase dates to the Late Bronze Age, contemporary with the Hittite Empire, and it continued to function and evolve throughout much of the Iron Age, the era of the Syro-Hittite kingdoms.
- Architecture and Iconography:** The temple was a sophisticated structure built with limestone foundations and adorned with numerous basalt orthostats and sculptures.<sup>27</sup> The superstructure was likely made of mudbrick, possibly covered with wood paneling, which has not survived.<sup>27</sup> Architecturally, the temple featured a classic Syro-Anatolian tripartite plan: an entrance portico (porch), leading to an antechamber (middle room or pronaos), which in turn opened into the main hall (cella or naos), the innermost sanctuary.<sup>4</sup>

The temple was lavishly decorated with hundreds of finely carved reliefs on basalt blocks, depicting a range of figures including lions, sphinxes (often equated with biblical cherubim), various mythical creatures, mountain gods, palmettes, and elaborate geometric designs like the guilloché.<sup>27</sup> A monumental basalt lion statue, discovered in 1955, was a prominent feature; it likely formed one of a pair guarding an entrance and has been dated to the 9th or 8th century BCE.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the most distinctive features of the Ain Dara temple are the colossal footprints, each approximately one meter in length, carved into the stone thresholds of the portico and at the entrance to the cella.<sup>27</sup> These are widely interpreted as representing the deity to whom the temple was dedicated, striding into their sacred abode.<sup>4</sup> The temple was approached via an open courtyard paved with flagstones, which contained a large chalkstone basin, presumably for ceremonial ablutions or libations.<sup>4</sup> A monumental staircase, originally flanked by sculptures of sphinxes and lions, led up to the temple portico.<sup>27</sup>
- Religious Significance:** The specific deity to whom the Ain Dara temple was dedicated remains a subject of scholarly debate. Suggestions include Ishtar (a Mesopotamian goddess of fertility and war), Astarte (her West Semitic counterpart), or Ba'al Hadad (the prominent Levantine storm god).<sup>27</sup> The divine footprints are a powerful symbol of the god's immanence. The temple's plan, decorative motifs, and certain features (like the flanking pillars at the entrance, Jachin and Boaz-style) have drawn frequent comparisons to the biblical descriptions of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, making Ain Dara a key site for understanding regional temple architecture of the Iron Age.<sup>4</sup>
- Recent Damage:** Tragically, the Ain Dara temple suffered extensive damage in January 2018 due to aerial bombardment during military operations in the Afrin region.<sup>17</sup> Subsequent reports indicate further destruction from bulldozing and looting, including the theft of the iconic basalt lion statue in late 2019.<sup>4</sup> This has resulted in an irreversible loss of significant portions of this unique monument.

The Ain Dara temple serves as a microcosm of regional religious expression during the Late



Bronze and Iron Ages. Its architectural plan and iconographic repertoire (guardian creatures, divine procession symbolized by footprints, courtyard basins) are not isolated phenomena but are part of a shared symbolic and ritual language found across the Levant and northern Syria. This suggests that Ain Dara, while possessing unique characteristics, participated in a common cultural-religious koine. The debate over its dedication to deities like Ishtar or Ba'al Hadad further underscores the complex interplay of Mesopotamian, Anatolian, and Levantine divine concepts in the region.

The designation of Ain Dara as "Hurrian-styled" <sup>17</sup>, despite its primary construction phase (from c. 1300 BCE) post-dating the political zenith of Mitanni (which declined c. 1350 BCE), warrants careful consideration. This could imply several possibilities: the survival and adoption of Hurrian artistic traditions by the local Syro-Hittite builders; cultural influence from regions like Kizzuwatna (ancient Cilicia), which was a significant center of Hurro-Hittite cultural fusion and a conduit for Hurrian religious ideas into the Hittite world <sup>7</sup>; or perhaps an earlier, less prominent or unexcavated, Hurrian phase at the site or in its vicinity. The precise nature of these "Hurrian-styled" elements is not fully elucidated in the available summaries <sup>4</sup>, but their mention points to the deep and lasting impact of Hurrian culture in northern Syria, an influence that was clearly integrated into the subsequent Syro-Hittite cultural expressions.

### **C. The Afrin Stele: A Luwian Marker in the Landscape**

Further direct evidence of an Anatolian cultural presence in the Afrin region during the Iron Age comes from the Afrin Stele.

- **Discovery and Description:** This significant artifact is a Luwian stele dating to the 9th or 8th century BCE.<sup>5</sup> It was discovered in a field northwest of Afrin city. The stele is fragmentary, with only the middle section surviving, and this portion is also damaged.<sup>5</sup>
- **Iconography:** The front of the stele bears a relief depicting a short, fringed kilt. This type of garment is iconographically associated with the storm god Teshub, who was paramount in the Hurrian pantheon and subsequently adopted by the Hittites.<sup>5</sup> Teshub's Luwian equivalent was Tarhunzas.
- **Inscription:** The stele is inscribed with Luwian hieroglyphs, a script commonly used in the Syro-Hittite states.<sup>12</sup> A partial translation of the surviving text includes a reference to "tarhunzas," the Luwian storm god, and mentions "kings".<sup>5</sup>
- **Significance:** The Afrin Stele provides unequivocal evidence for the presence of Luwian-speaking people and their religious practices (specifically the worship of the storm god Tarhunzas/Teshub) in the Afrin region during the Iron Age II period. This aligns perfectly with the era of the Syro-Hittite kingdoms and demonstrates the persistence of Anatolian (Hittite/Luwian) and Hurrian-influenced cultural and religious elements in northern Syria long after the collapse of the Hittite Empire. It underscores that the end of Hittite imperial power did not equate to the disappearance of its cultural traditions, which continued to evolve and flourish in the successor states.

### **D. Other Sites with Potential Hittite/Syro-Hittite Links**

Beyond Ain Dara and the Afrin Stele, other sites in or near the Afrin region have been

mentioned in connection with these ancient periods, though often with less definitive evidence.

- **Cyrrhus (Nebi Huri):** This site is primarily known from historical and archaeological records as a city founded in the Hellenistic period by Seleucus Nicator (early 3rd century BCE) and later developed as a significant Roman military and commercial center, and subsequently an important Christian bishopric.<sup>5</sup> While one source<sup>18</sup> makes an unsubstantiated claim of Cyrrhus being a Hurrian site from 2500 BC, this is not supported by the archaeological consensus presented in other available materials.<sup>18</sup> Any pre-Hellenistic Hittite or Syro-Hittite occupation layers at Cyrrhus would need to be clearly demonstrated through systematic excavation and publication, which are not detailed for such early periods in the provided sources. However, the broader region around Kilis, near Cyrrhus, is known to have experienced Hurri-Mitanni and Hittite periods, with sites like Oylum Höyük showing continuous settlement from the Neolithic to Hellenistic times, including Late Bronze and Iron Age levels.<sup>30</sup> This regional context suggests that the area was certainly occupied during the periods of Hittite and Hurrian prominence.
- **Tell Jindires (Ancient Gindaros):** Located in the Afrin district, Tell Jindires is a significant ancient settlement mound.<sup>21</sup> Archaeological information indicates that the site was occupied from the Bronze Age through the early Islamic period.<sup>22</sup> Its attested Bronze Age and Iron Age strata make it a strong candidate for containing Hittite or Syro-Hittite material. However, specific findings related to these particular cultures from Tell Jindires are not detailed in the currently available information beyond its general chronological span. The site's transformation into a military base in recent years<sup>21</sup> may also have impacted its archaeological integrity.
- **Archaeological Surveys in the Afrin District / Kurd Dagħ:** While specific sites like Ain Dara have been excavated, comprehensive, published archaeological survey data covering the entire Afrin district or Kurd Dagħ specifically for Bronze and Iron Age settlement patterns related to Hurrians and Hittites is not explicitly detailed in the provided sources. The Dederiyeh Cave, located in the Afrin Valley, has yielded important Paleolithic remains (Neanderthal and Levantine Mousterian), attesting to very ancient human presence in the region but not directly relevant to the Hurrian and Hittite periods.<sup>31</sup> The absence of systematic regional survey publications makes it more challenging to reconstruct broader settlement patterns and the full extent of Hurrian and Hittite presence across the entire Afrin landscape.

The current state of archaeological knowledge regarding Hurrian and Hittite remnants in Afrin appears somewhat patchy. While Ain Dara and the Afrin Stele provide strong anchor points, information on other potentially relevant Bronze and Iron Age sites like Tell Jindires or Kolpe is less detailed or, in some cases, based on claims that lack robust archaeological substantiation. This suggests that our understanding is heavily reliant on a few key discoveries and that more comprehensive regional surveys and the publication of excavation results are necessary for a more complete picture of the Hurrian and Hittite presence in this part of Syria.

## **IV. Cultural Interplay: Hurro-Hittite Dynamics in the Afrin Region**

### **A. Hurrian Influence on Hittite Religion, Mythology, and Art**

The cultural interaction between Hurrians and Hittites led to a significant imprinting of Hurrian traditions onto Hittite civilization, a phenomenon well-documented in textual and archaeological sources.<sup>7</sup> This influence was particularly profound in the religious sphere. The Hittites incorporated numerous Hurrian deities into their own pantheon, which was already a syncretic blend of Anatolian and Mesopotamian gods. Prominent Hurrian deities such as Teshub, the powerful storm god, and his consort Hebat, a mother goddess figure, became major figures in Hittite state religion, often equated or merged with existing Anatolian divinities.<sup>7</sup> The Hurrian cult center at Kummanni, located in Kizzuwatna (a region in southeastern Anatolia, bordering Syria), is recognized as a key center for the transmission of Hurrian religious practices and beliefs to the Hittites.<sup>7</sup>

Hittite mythology also bears the indelible mark of Hurrian narrative traditions. Many important Hittite myths, including the "Kingship in Heaven" cycle (often referred to as the "Song of Kumarbi"), which details the succession of divine rulers, are direct adaptations or translations of Hurrian originals.<sup>7</sup> These myths provided cosmological frameworks and legitimized royal power. Beyond religion and mythology, Hurrian artistic motifs and stylistic conventions, evident in artifacts such as cylinder seals, are also thought to have influenced aspects of Hittite art.<sup>7</sup>

Given that Kizzuwatna was a region of intense Hurro-Hittite cultural fusion and a primary conduit for Hurrian religious ideas into the Hittite heartland<sup>7</sup>, its geographical proximity to northwestern Syria, including the Afrin region, is noteworthy. Kizzuwatna could have served as a significant source or pathway for the Hurrian cultural elements observed in the Syro-Hittite remnants of the Afrin area. This suggests that Hurrian influences in Afrin may not solely stem from an earlier Mitannian political presence but could also be the result of ongoing cultural exchange with or through Kizzuwatna during the Hittite Empire period and continuing into the subsequent Syro-Hittite era.

### **B. Manifestations in Afrin's Archaeological Record**

The archaeological record from the Afrin region provides tangible examples of this Hurro-Hittite cultural interplay. The description of the Ain Dara temple as "Hurrian-styled"<sup>17</sup>, if substantiated by detailed iconographic or architectural analysis (which goes beyond the scope of the provided summaries), would be a prime instance of this fusion. As discussed, this styling likely reflects the absorption of enduring Hurrian artistic and religious concepts by the local Syro-Hittite culture responsible for the temple's construction and embellishment. The iconography of the 9th-8th century BCE Afrin Stele offers another clear example. The depiction of a kilt typically worn by the storm god Teshub (a deity of Hurrian origin, later central to the Hittite state pantheon and identified with the Luwian storm god Tarhunzas) on a

Luwian inscription directly points to this religious syncretism.<sup>5</sup> The choice of Luwian hieroglyphs for the inscription further situates the stele within the Syro-Hittite cultural sphere, where Luwian was a common language for monumental expression.

The figure of the Storm God itself—whether named Teshub (Hurrian), Tarhunzas (Hittite/Luwian), or Ba'al Hadad (West Semitic)—appears to have been a particularly potent focal point for syncretism across these cultures in northern Syria. The Afrin Stele directly invokes Tarhunzas/Teshub.<sup>5</sup> The Ain Dara temple, while its dedication is debated, has been suggested as a center for Ba'al Hadad<sup>27</sup>, a deity with attributes very similar to Teshub and Tarhunzas. Storm gods held supreme or very high positions in most Ancient Near Eastern pantheons, as they controlled vital natural forces like rain, thunder, and lightning, essential for agricultural societies. The functional and iconographic similarities among these regional storm gods facilitated their identification with one another, fostering a climate of religious and cultural blending. The emphasis on storm god imagery in Afrin's remnants thus reflects a key domain where Hurrian, Hittite/Luwian, and local Syrian religious traditions converged, interacted, and mutually influenced each other. The broader Syro-Hittite cultural milieu, to which both the Ain Dara temple and the Afrin Stele belong, is inherently a product of the amalgamation of these diverse traditions.

## **V. Conclusion: Synthesizing the Remnants**

### **A. Summary of Key Findings**

The investigation into the remnants of Hurrian and Hittite civilizations in the Afrin region reveals a complex tapestry of cultural presence and influence, primarily dating to the Bronze and Iron Ages. Evidence for Hurrian connections is suggested by the region's proximity to the Mitanni kingdom's western sphere of influence and the persistence of Hurrian cultural traits in northern Syria. Specific, though not always archaeologically substantiated in detail, mentions include the "Hurrian-styled" elements of the Ain Dara temple<sup>17</sup> and a claimed Mitanni-period site at Kolpe.<sup>18</sup> The deep-rooted Hurrian cultural substrate in northern Syria undoubtedly contributed to the later Syro-Hittite cultural formations.

More direct and archaeologically visible is the Hittite and subsequent Syro-Hittite legacy. The Ain Dara temple stands as a major Syro-Hittite religious monument, with construction phases spanning the Late Bronze Age transition into the Iron Age (c. 1300-740 BCE).<sup>4</sup> Its architecture and rich iconography clearly place it within the Syro-Anatolian cultural sphere. The Luwian Afrin Stele, from the 9th-8th century BCE, provides explicit epigraphic and iconographic evidence of Luwian language use and the worship of the storm god Tarhunzas (Teshub) in the region during the Iron Age II period.<sup>5</sup> Other sites, such as Tell Jindires, with attested Bronze and Iron Age occupation<sup>22</sup>, hold potential for further discoveries related to these cultures, though specific findings are not yet widely published.

### **B. Nature and Extent of Hurrian and Hittite Impact**

The Hittite and, more prominently, the Syro-Hittite impact appears more architecturally and

epigraphically tangible in Afrin's currently documented archaeological record, primarily through the monumental remains at Ain Dara and the inscription on the Afrin Stele. This reflects the period when local kingdoms, heirs to Hittite traditions, flourished in northern Syria. Hurrian influence, while perhaps less evident in distinct monumental structures directly attributable to a Hurrian political entity like Mitanni (pending further evidence from sites like Kolpe), is likely more deeply interwoven within the fabric of the Syro-Hittite cultural synthesis. The "Hurrian-styled" aspects of Ain Dara, the iconography of Teshub on the Afrin Stele, and the general Hurrian cultural substratum in northern Syria attest to this enduring legacy. The Afrin region was undeniably part of the broader cultural landscape of northern Syria where Hurrian and Hittite/Luwian traditions interacted, merged, and were further syncretized with local Aramean and Syrian elements, particularly during the critical transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age.

### **C. Current State of Preservation and Future Research**

The study of these ancient remnants is tragically overshadowed by the recent conflicts in Syria, which have led to severe damage and looting at key archaeological sites, most notably Ain Dara.<sup>17</sup> This destruction represents not only a profound cultural loss but also an irreversible loss of primary historical data. Each damaged relief, each bulldozed layer, and each looted artifact removes irreplaceable information, significantly hindering the ability of future research to accurately reconstruct the Hurrian and Hittite past in Afrin and making interpretations increasingly reliant on already fragmentary evidence.

There is a clear need for further systematic archaeological survey and excavation in the Afrin region, conducted according to modern scientific standards, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of settlement patterns, cultural affiliations, and the chronological development of sites during the Bronze and Iron Ages. Such research would help to clarify the extent of Mitannian presence, further elucidate the nature of Hurrian cultural contributions, and map the Syro-Hittite landscape more fully. Furthermore, claims regarding very early occupations or specific cultural attributions for sites like Cyrrhus or Kolpe require critical assessment based on peer-reviewed archaeological evidence rather than unsubstantiated assertions. The protection and preservation of any remaining heritage are paramount for any future scholarly endeavor.

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