The Mountain of the Stylite: A Comprehensive History of Mount Lelun (Jabal Sim'an) Before 2010

Introduction: Defining the Mountain of Many Names

The historical landscape of northern Syria is dominated by a highland region known by many names, each a testament to the layers of culture, faith, and politics that have defined it for millennia. The initial query for "Mount Lelun" presents a toponymic challenge, as the name could refer to several geographically distinct locations, including Lulin Mountain in Taiwan, Leenaun Hill in Ireland, or Loon Mountain in the United States.[1] However, extensive analysis of historical, archaeological, and paleontological records definitively identifies "Lelun" as the Kurdish name for a prominent mountain in the Aleppo Governorate of northern Syria.[4] This highland is more widely known by its Arabic name,
Jabal Sim'an, and its historical Greco-Roman name, **Mount Simeon**.[5]
The etymology of "Lelun" itself offers a window into the region's indigenous culture and environment. The name may derive from the Kurdish "LeLun," referring to the bitter, unripe olive fruit; "LeyLan," meaning a mirage; or "Lulan," signifying a twisting or crescent shape, an apt description of the mountain's western form.[4] This intimate connection between the name, the landscape, and the region's primary agricultural product—the olive—underscores the deep cultural roots of the toponym. The name's significance is further cemented in the modern era through the establishment of the Lelun Association for Victims, an organization founded by displaced people from the Afrin region, and the scientific naming of an Eocene fossil turtle,
Syriemys lelunensis, in honor of the mountain where it was discovered.[6]
This report provides a comprehensive history of this multifaceted mountain before the year 2010. It traces its story from its geological formation and deep past through its rise as a center of ancient empires, its transformation into a global beacon of the Christian faith, its consolidation as a heartland of Kurdish culture, and its redefinition in the crucible of 20th-century geopolitics. To navigate this complex history, the following tables provide essential context on the mountain's nomenclature and a chronological overview of its key historical periods.
Table 1: Nomenclature of Mount Lelun/Simeon

Name	Language/Origin	Meaning/Significance	Historical Context/Period of Use
Mount Lelun / Laylūn	Kurdish	"Bitter olive," "mirage," or "crescent-shaped" [4]	Indigenous Kurdish name for the highland [4]
Jabal Sim'an	Arabic	"Mountain of Simeon" [5]	Dominant Arabic name, referencing the Christian saint
Mount Simeon	English / Greek	"Mountain of Simeon" [5]	Historical name used in Western and Byzantine sources
Kurd-Dagh	Turkish / Kurdish	"Kurd Mountain" [9]	Broader regional name used in Ottoman and modern contexts
Jabal al-`Uruba	Arabic	"Mountain of Arabism" [9]	Official name imposed by a 1977 Syrian government decree

Table 2: Chronological Timeline of the Mount Simeon Region (Pre-2010)

Period/Dates	Key Rulers/Powers	Major Events & Developments
Eocene Epoch	N/A	Formation of the Limestone Massif; habitat of *Syriemys lelunensis* [6]
Neolithic (c. 8000 BC)	N/A	Earliest known human settlement in the broader Aleppo region [10]
Bronze/Iron Age (c. 1300-740 BC)	Syro-Hittite Kingdoms, Assyrians	Construction and use of the Ain Dara Temple [12]; Luwian cultural presence evidenced by the Afrin Stele [13]
Hellenistic/Roman (333 BC - 395 AD)	Seleucid Empire, Roman Empire	Region named Beroea; period of stability and agricultural prosperity
Byzantine Era (395 - c. 637 AD)	Byzantine Empire	Life of Saint Simeon Stylites (c. 390-459 AD) [15]; Construction of the monumental Qala'at Semaan pilgrimage center (c. 476-491 AD) [16]
Early Islamic Era (c. 637 - 1100 AD)	Rashidun, Umayyad, Abbasid, Hamdanid, Seljuk Caliphates	Arab conquest of Syria [18]; decline of pilgrimage; fortification of Qala'at Semaan

		[19]
Ayyubid/Mamluk (c. 1183 - 1516)	Ayyubid Dynasty, Mamluk Sultanate	Rule under the Kurdish Ayyubid dynasty; Mongol invasions [10]
Ottoman Era (1516 - 1918)	Ottoman Empire	Region becomes part of the Vilayet of Aleppo; consolidation of the Kurd-Dagh as a semi-autonomous Kurdish tribal region [10]
French Mandate (1920 - 1946)	French Republic	Drawing of the Syria-Turkey border (1923), dividing the Kurd-Dagh and isolating Afrin [13]
Modern Syria (1946 - 2009)	Syrian Arab Republic	Arabization policies; official renaming of the mountain to Jabal al-`Uruba (1977) [9]; region remains a center of Kurdish culture and olive production

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Part I: The Deep Past - Land, Gods, and Early Empires

The history of Mount Simeon is written first in stone. Its geological foundation, tectonic setting, and paleontological record created the stage upon which all subsequent human drama would unfold. Long before it was the mountain of a saint, it was a landscape shaped by marine deposition and seismic forces, home to ancient life, and later, a vibrant nexus of Bronze and Iron Age civilizations. The physical characteristics of the land are not merely a backdrop to its history but a fundamental force that shaped its resources, its sacred sites, and its strategic importance.

Chapter 1: The Geological Foundation: A Landscape of Limestone and Faults

Mount Simeon is a prominent feature within the **Limestone Massif** of northwestern Syria, a sprawling highland region celebrated for its remarkable collection of well-preserved ancient settlements, often called the "Dead Cities".[5] The massif itself is a karst formation, defined by the native bluish-grey limestone that dominates its geology.[19] This stone was the essential resource for the region's inhabitants, an omnipresent and easily workable material that gave rise to the enduring architecture of both its pagan temples and its Christian monasteries.

The geological history of Syria is characterized by a thick sequence of marine sedimentary rocks, deposited over hundreds of millions of years when the region formed the northern passive continental margin of Gondwana, bordering the ancient Tethys Ocean.[25] The limestone that defines the massif was laid down during the Mesozoic and Cenozoic eras, with significant deposits occurring in the Jurassic, Cretaceous, Paleocene, and Eocene periods.[25] This long process of marine deposition created the raw material for the landscape seen today.
This landscape, however, is not static. The region is tectonically active, situated on the northern part of the Arabian Plate, a critical juncture defined by the convergence with the Eurasian Plate to the north and bounded by major, active fault systems.[27] The Dead Sea Fault System (DSFS) to the west and the East Anatolian Fault System (EAFS) to the north create a complex and dynamic tectonic environment.[27]
Directly impacting Mount Simeon is the **St. Simeon Fault (SSF)**, an active fault zone estimated to be between 80 and 114 kilometers long. This left-lateral strike-slip fault runs from the Al Ghab Depression in a northeasterly direction, linking the tectonic structures of the Levant with those of eastern Anatolia.[32] The Sim'an Ridge, the very ground upon which the famous monastery was built, is a block of land caught between two branches of this active fault. The physical evidence of this geological dynamism is etched into the historical structures themselves. Detailed archaeoseismological studies of the Church of Saint Simeon at Qala'at Semaan have revealed a curious architectural anomaly: the eastern wing of the cruciform church is deflected northward by an angle of 3 to 9 degrees. While this could be interpreted as an intentional design choice, the presence of the active fault suggests a more compelling explanation. This curvature is likely the result of seismic deformation—either a sudden co-seismic shift during an earthquake or a gradual post-seismic creep—within the intra-fault block.[32] This connection demonstrates a profound reality: the very ground beneath the mountain is an active participant in its history, its tectonic movements physically altering the monuments built upon it. The land has not just provided the stage for history; it has actively shaped it.

Chapter 2: Echoes of a Lost World: *Syriemys lelunensis*

The deep history of Mount Simeon is not only geological but also paleontological, preserved in the fossil record. A testament to this ancient past was unearthed in the Al-Zarefeh Quarry near the modern town of Afrin: a remarkably well-preserved inner cast of a turtle shell, along with associated bones.[6] This discovery led to the identification of a new genus and species of turtle that lived during the early Eocene epoch, approximately 50 million years ago.
In a move that powerfully bridges deep time with contemporary culture, the scientists who described the fossil named it ***Syriemys lelunensis***.[6] The species epithet, *lelunensis*, was explicitly chosen to honor "Lelun," the Kurdish name for the highland area—Mount Simeon—where the fossil was found.[4] This act of scientific nomenclature is profoundly significant. It formally inscribes an indigenous, local toponym into the permanent,

global lexicon of natural history, creating an unbreakable link between the modern Kurdish identity of the region and its most ancient biological heritage.
The discovery of *S. lelunensis* holds considerable scientific importance. It represents the first new species of extinct vertebrate ever described from Syria, highlighting the region's untapped paleontological potential. Furthermore, as a member of the pleurodiran clade Stereogenyini, its early Eocene age pushes back the known origin of this group of side-necked turtles, providing crucial evidence that supports a Mediterranean ancestral range for the clade.[6] In this single fossil, the mountain's identity as "Lelun" is projected back 50 million years, giving a profound historical resonance to the name and the people who use it.

Chapter 3: The Age of City-States and Empires: Ain Dara and the Luwians

While human settlement in the broader Afrin region dates back to the early Neolithic period [10], the area rose to prominence during the Bronze and Iron Ages as a vibrant center of Syro-Hittite civilization. Far from being a remote periphery, the foothills and valleys surrounding Mount Simeon were a vital part of a cultural corridor connecting the great powers of Anatolia and the Levant.
The most spectacular evidence of this era is the **Ain Dara Temple**, located approximately 8 kilometers south of the town of Afrin.[12] Discovered fortuitously in 1955 with the finding of a colossal basalt lion, the temple is one of the most significant archaeological sites in the region.[12] Excavations have revealed a long and complex history of use, with three main construction phases spanning from around 1300 BC to 740 BC.[12] This timeline establishes that the temple predates the famous Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, which was built in the 10th century BC.[37]
The temple's architecture is what makes it so remarkable. It features a classic tripartite plan common in the Levant: a porch with flanking pillars, a middle room (or Holy Place), and an inner sanctum (or Holy of Holies) where the cult statue would have resided.[35] The structure was adorned with magnificent basalt reliefs of lions and sphinxes, creatures comparable to the cherubim described in the biblical account of Solomon's Temple.[12] This striking resemblance in plan, scale, and decorative motifs suggests that the builders of both temples drew from a shared Syro-Phoenician architectural and religious tradition.[37] A unique and enigmatic feature of the Ain Dara Temple is a series of four giant footprints carved into the stone thresholds, each measuring about a meter in length.[33] These have been interpreted as a powerful symbolic representation of the resident deity—perhaps the storm god Ba'al Hadad or the goddess Ishtar/Astarte—striding into their sacred abode.[12]
The cultural connections of the Mount Simeon region extended not only south into the Levant but also north into Anatolia. This is demonstrated by the discovery of the **Afrin Stele**, a fragment of a Luwian stone monument dating to the 9th or 8th century BC.[13] Luwian was an Indo-European language, closely related to Hittite, that was spoken across southern Anatolia

and northern Syria in the centuries following the collapse of the Hittite Empire.[41] It was written in a distinctive hieroglyphic script, examples of which are found on the stele.[14] Though the inscription on the Afrin Stele is too damaged to be fully deciphered, the monument clearly depicts a relief of a storm god, likely the Hittite-Luwian deity Teshub, and uses the Hieroglyphic Luwian script.[13] This artifact provides direct, tangible proof that the Mount Simeon region was part of the Luwian-speaking world of the Neo-Hittite states, participating in the same cultural and linguistic traditions as kingdoms in modern-day Turkey.[45] The presence of both Levantine-style temple architecture and Anatolian-Luwian inscriptions confirms that the region was not an isolated backwater but a dynamic crossroads of ancient Near Eastern civilizations.

Following the era of the Syro-Hittite kingdoms, the region was incorporated into the great empires that successively dominated the Near East. It fell under the control of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, followed by the Neo-Babylonian and the Achaemenid Persian empires, before the conquests of Alexander the Great in 333 BC ushered in a new, Hellenistic age.[11]

Part II: The Classical and Byzantine Apex - Pillar of Faith

The arrival of Hellenistic and Roman power marked a new chapter for the Mount Simeon region. A long period of peace and agricultural prosperity laid the economic groundwork for what was to become the mountain's most famous historical epoch. During the Byzantine era, the radical asceticism of a single man, Simeon the Stylite, amplified by imperial patronage, transformed this prosperous rural landscape into one of the most renowned pilgrimage destinations in the Christian world. The mountain's identity was fundamentally and permanently reshaped, becoming inextricably linked with the pillar of faith that rose from its summit.

Chapter 4: From Beroea to Byzantium: The Roman Peace

Following its conquest by Alexander the Great, the region was integrated into the Hellenistic world. The nearby city of Aleppo was refounded as a Greek settlement named Beroea by Seleucus Nicator, one of Alexander's successors, and became a significant center in the Seleucid Empire.[11] When the region came under Roman control in 64 BC, it entered a long period of stability and prosperity known as the
Pax Romana.

As part of the Roman province of Coele Syria, governed from the great metropolis of Antioch, the area around Mount Simeon flourished.[10] The fertile lands stretching between Beroea (Aleppo) and Antioch were among the most productive and densely populated in the entire province. Archaeological surveys have revealed the remains of numerous large estate houses

and early churches, clear indicators of a wealthy, agrarian-based society of landowners. This accumulated wealth, combined with the political stability provided by the Roman Empire, created the necessary conditions for the massive investment in religious architecture that would define the subsequent Byzantine period. The prosperity of the Roman era set the stage for the mountain's spiritual transformation.

Chapter 5: The Stylite of Telanissa: Saint Simeon

The figure who would forever define the mountain's identity was **Simeon Stylites**, a Syrian Christian ascetic born around 390 AD.[15] The son of a shepherd, Simeon embraced a life of extreme religious austerity from a young age. His practices were so severe that he was eventually asked to leave the monastery he had joined, as his brethren found his self-denial incompatible with community life.[15] Seeking greater solitude for his devotions, he made his way to a rocky eminence on the slopes of the mountain that would one day bear his name.[15] However, his reputation for holiness attracted ever-growing crowds of pilgrims who sought his prayers, counsel, and healing. To escape these constant interruptions, Simeon adopted a novel and radical form of asceticism: he became a *stylite*, or pillar-dweller (from the Greek *stylos*, meaning pillar).[49] In the nearby ruins of a settlement called Telanissa (identified with modern Taladah or Deir Semaan), he found a surviving column, climbed atop it, and began his new life.[15] Over the course of approximately 37 years, he lived on a series of progressively taller pillars, with the last one reaching a height of over 15 meters (about 50 feet).[15] On this tiny platform, exposed to the heat of summer and the cold of winter, he spent his days and nights in prayer and prostration.[15]

This extreme physical isolation did not, however, remove him from the world. On the contrary, it amplified his influence immensely. His pillar became a new and powerful center of authority in the late antique world. He was accessible to visitors via a ladder and would spend his afternoons conversing with them.[15] He wrote letters, preached against usury and profanity, and offered counsel to all who sought it, from local peasants to the highest echelons of the Byzantine Empire, including the emperors Theodosius II and Leo I.[15] His fame spread across the known world, with pilgrims traveling from as far as Britain, Persia, and Gaul to witness his devotion.[52] In an era when traditional classical institutions were weakening, "holy men" like Simeon filled a societal void, acting as objective arbiters, powerful mediators, and spiritual intermediaries to a distant God.[53] Simeon's personal piety was not a retreat from society but a radical re-engagement with it, transforming his pillar on a remote Syrian mountain into a focal point of spiritual and social power for the entire Christian world.

Chapter 6: The Fortress of Simeon (Qala'at Semaan): An Imperial Pilgrimage Center

Upon Simeon's death in 459 AD, his sanctity was immediately commemorated on a monumental scale. A vast pilgrimage complex, known today as **Qala'at Semaan** ("the Fortress of Simeon"), was constructed on the site of his pillar.[15] The sheer scale and architectural sophistication of the complex strongly suggest it was built with imperial patronage, likely under the direction of Emperor Zeno, with construction taking place between approximately 476 and 491 AD.[17] This was not merely an act of religious devotion but a powerful statement of Byzantine imperial authority and theological orthodoxy. By funding such a magnificent complex in a strategic region near the Persian frontier, the emperor was cementing Byzantine cultural influence and promoting the Chalcedonian faith that Simeon himself had staunchly supported.[15]

Qala'at Semaan is an architectural masterpiece, considered unique in the history of Byzantine design.[17] The heart of the complex is a massive cruciform church, formed by four large basilicas radiating from a central, octagonal courtyard. At the precise center of this octagon stood the sacred pillar upon which Saint Simeon had lived and died.[16] The complex was far more than just a church; it was a self-contained sacred city. It included a large monastery with its own church, an elaborate baptistery, and extensive service buildings and hostels to accommodate the thousands of pilgrims who flocked to the site.[17] A ceremonial road, the *via sacra*, marked by a triumphal arch, connected the main sanctuary on the hill to the bustling support town of Deir Semaan below, which was filled with shops, inns, and additional monasteries.[17]

For centuries, Qala'at Semaan was one of the most important and celebrated pilgrimage destinations in the medieval world, its fame attested by the discovery of numerous pilgrim souvenirs (*eulogiai*) across the Byzantine Empire.[52] The site's history, however, mirrors the shifting fortunes of the region. It suffered damage from major earthquakes in 526 and 528 AD.[17] With the beginning of the Arab-Byzantine wars in the 7th century, northern Syria became a contested frontier zone, and the flow of Christian pilgrims dwindled.[18] The function of the site began to change. In the 10th century, as Byzantine forces sought to reclaim territory, the western part of the great martyrion was fortified, transforming the religious sanctuary into a military stronghold.[16] This militarization gave the site the martial appearance that led to its modern Arabic name,

Qala'at (citadel or fortress). After further conflict in the 11th century, the great pilgrimage center was finally abandoned, its magnificent ruins left to the elements.[17] The very name, "Fortress of Simeon," encapsulates the site's dual identity, a place that has cycled between being a beacon of faith and a bastion on a military frontier.

Part III: Medieval Transformations and Enduring Traditions

After the decline of Byzantine power and the end of the great Christian pilgrimage, the history

of Mount Simeon and its environs entered a new phase. The region was integrated into the successive Islamic empires that ruled the Near East. During this long period, the broader highland area became firmly established as a heartland of Kurdish settlement and culture, its identity shaped by a unique social structure and an economy deeply rooted in the cultivation of the olive tree.

Chapter 7: The Kurd-Dagh in the Islamic and Ottoman Eras

Following the Muslim conquests of the 7th century, the Mount Simeon region was incorporated into the Jund Qinnasrin, a military district of the Umayyad and later Abbasid Caliphates.[10] Over the subsequent centuries, it was ruled by a succession of regional and imperial powers. It fell under the control of the Hamdanid dynasty of Aleppo, the Seljuk Turks, and most notably, the Ayyubid dynasty, which was founded by the renowned Kurdish leader Salah al-Din (Saladin).[10] After the Ayyubids, the region was governed by the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt before being absorbed into the Ottoman Empire in 1516.[10]

It was during these centuries that the broader highland region, including Mount Simeon, became widely known as the **Kurd-Dagh**, or "Kurd Mountain." This name appears on Ottoman-era maps and in administrative documents as *Kurd Dağ*, signifying a formal recognition of the area's distinct ethnic character.[9] Under the long rule of the Ottoman Empire (1516-1918), the region was administered as part of the Vilayet (Province) of Aleppo.[10]

However, direct state control was often nominal. The Kurd-Dagh was effectively dominated by powerful, semi-autonomous Kurdish tribal confederations, such as the Reshwan and the Milli.[10] For a period in the late 16th and early 17th centuries (1591-1607), the Kurdish Janbulad dynasty even ruled the entire Aleppo region as Ottoman governors.[10] This long history of local tribal autonomy was instrumental in preserving and strengthening the region's unique Kurdish identity, distinguishing it from the surrounding Arab-majority plains.

Chapter 8: The People of the Mountain: A Tapestry of Tribes and Faiths

The history of Kurdish settlement in the Kurd-Dagh is ancient, with some scholars arguing for a presence dating back to antiquity, possibly as early as the Seleucid era when Kurds served as mercenaries in the region.[10] Historical records definitively confirm a substantial and dominant Kurdish population by at least the 16th to 18th centuries.[13] The people of the mountain predominantly speak the Kurmanji dialect of the Kurdish language and have historically been organized into numerous tribes and sub-tribes that formed the basis of the social and political structure.[9]

While the region is overwhelmingly Kurdish, it is not monolithic. The majority of the population adheres to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, a characteristic that distinguishes them from the

Kurds in other parts of Syria, who are typically of the Shafi'i school.[9] More significantly, the mountainous terrain and the semi-autonomous tribal structure of the Kurd-Dagh provided a degree of protection and tolerance that allowed religious minorities to thrive. The region became a historic haven for sizable communities of Yazidis and Alevis, groups that often faced persecution in more centralized states.[9] The geography of the mountain, with its relative isolation and defensible valleys, fostered a more pluralistic and diverse social fabric than was common in the surrounding lowlands. This combination of a strong, overarching Kurdish identity with significant internal religious diversity is a key feature of the mountain's unique cultural landscape.

Chapter 9: The Sacred Olive: The Green Gold of Afrin

The economy, culture, and very soul of the Mount Simeon region are inextricably linked to a single agricultural product: the olive. Syria is widely considered to be one of the cradles of olive domestication, with evidence of cultivation dating back to at least 2400 BC.[63] Within Syria, the Afrin district and the Kurd-Dagh are the heartland of this ancient tradition. The olive tree is not merely a crop; it is considered sacred in local tradition and is central to the region's identity.[65] This profound connection is reflected in the possible etymology of the mountain's Kurdish name, "Lelun," which may mean "bitter olive".[4]

The landscape is dominated by vast olive groves, with a modern-era estimate counting over 14 million trees in the Afrin area.[67] This agricultural wealth has long been the foundation of the region's prosperity. The local olive varieties, particularly the one known as the "Kurdish" olive, are renowned for producing high-quality oil.[66] This oil is not only a staple food but also the essential ingredient for making the world-famous Aleppo soap, a luxury good whose trade has been economically vital for centuries.[60] The entire life cycle of the community—its work, its trade, its heritage—has revolved around the cultivation of this "green gold." This powerful symbiosis between the Kurdish people of the mountain and the olive groves they tend is the defining characteristic of the region's enduring culture.

Part IV: The Modern Era - Rediscovery and Redefinition (to 2009)

The final century of the pre-2010 period was one of profound transformation for Mount Simeon and the Kurd-Dagh. It was an era marked by the "rediscovery" of its ancient past by Western explorers and scholars, and simultaneously, a period of radical political redefinition driven by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of modern nation-states. The drawing of new borders and the imposition of new national identities would fundamentally reshape the region's destiny, setting the stage for the conflicts of the 21st century.

Chapter 10: The European Gaze: Travelers and Archaeologists

After centuries of relative obscurity to the Western world, the magnificent ruins of Qala'at Semaan and the surrounding "Dead Cities" of the Limestone Massif began to capture the European imagination in the 18th and 19th centuries. Early travelers like the English clergyman Richard Pococke in the 1740s and the German explorer Ulrich Jasper Seetzen in the early 1800s were among the first to document these ancient wonders for a European audience.[19] More systematic study began in the 1860s with the work of the French diplomat and archaeologist Count Melchior de Vogüé, whose expeditions produced detailed architectural drawings and descriptions of the sites.[19] He was followed by an American mission from Princeton University, led by Howard Crosby Butler, which further expanded the scholarly understanding of the region's late antique and Byzantine heritage.[19]

At the turn of the 20th century, the famed British writer, traveler, archaeologist, and political officer **Gertrude Bell** journeyed extensively through Syria. Her travels took her through the Mount Simeon district, and her work provides an invaluable snapshot of the region and its people at a pivotal moment in history. A photograph from her archives, dated to circa 1899, explicitly documents a "Kurdish Yezidi Family of the Mount Simeon district" near Aleppo, offering rare visual evidence of the local population's identity and diversity at the time.[70] Bell's influential book,

Syria: The Desert and the Sown (1907), along with her other writings and photographs, introduced the landscapes, ancient ruins, and living cultures of the Kurd-Dagh to the English-speaking world.[72] This process of Western "discovery" was paradoxical. While it brought global attention to the region's immense historical value, ultimately leading to its preservation and UNESCO World Heritage designation, it also took place within an imperial context. These scholarly expeditions documented the past in stone even as the political future of the region's living inhabitants was being decided by external colonial powers.

Chapter 11: A Contested Frontier: Borders, States, and Identity (1918-2009)

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire following World War I and the imposition of the **French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon** inaugurated the most disruptive period in the region's modern history. The creation of modern nation-states and their borders tore through the historical fabric of the Kurd-Dagh. The drawing of the new **Syria-Turkey border in 1923** was a cataclysmic event for the region. This arbitrary line sliced the cohesive cultural and economic landscape of the Kurd-Dagh in two, separating the Afrin district from its traditional northern hinterland in the Kilis province of the new Turkish Republic.[13] This act severed centuries-old kinship networks, trade routes, and pastoral movements, leaving the Syrian portion of the Kurd-Dagh, centered on Afrin, almost entirely encircled by an international border and politically isolated.[13]

Under the French Mandate, the town of Afrin grew as a local market center.[13] However, after Syria gained its independence in 1946, the region and its predominantly Kurdish population faced new pressures from the centralizing, nationalist state in Damascus. Successive Syrian governments pursued policies of
Arabization aimed at suppressing non-Arab identities.[10] These policies included restrictions on the Kurdish language, culture, and property rights.
The campaign to erase the region's specific heritage reached its zenith in 1977, when the Syrian government issued Decree 15801. This decree officially banned Kurdish place names and renamed Mount Simeon/Jabal Sim'an to **Jabal al-`Uruba**, meaning the "Mountain of Arabism".[9] This was not a simple administrative change but a deliberate act of political and cultural negation, an attempt to superimpose a homogenous Arab nationalist identity over the mountain's rich and layered Christian and Kurdish past. The battle over what to call the mountain became a microcosm of the larger struggle over Syria's national identity.
Despite these state-led pressures, the Afrin region and the Kurd-Dagh maintained their resilient Kurdish character and their olive-based economy throughout the 20th century. Until the events that began after 2010, the region remained a relatively peaceful, if politically and economically marginalized, corner of Syria, defined by its unique culture, its enduring religious diversity, and the "green gold" of its ancient olive groves.[60]

Conclusion: A Palimpsest in Stone

The history of Mount Lelun, or Jabal Sim'an, before 2010 is that of a palimpsest—a landscape upon which successive eras have written, erased, and rewritten their stories, yet where traces of every layer remain visible. Its narrative is not a simple, linear progression but a complex tapestry woven from geology, faith, culture, and conflict.
The mountain's very foundation, a tectonically active limestone massif, provided the material for its temples and monasteries and physically shaped them through seismic force. Upon this geological canvas, the deep past left its mark with the fossilized remains of *Syriemys lelunensis*, a name that ties the region's modern Kurdish identity to a world 50 million years old. The Bronze and Iron Ages inscribed the mountain into the wider world of the ancient Near East, making it a nexus of Syro-Hittite and Luwian culture, as evidenced by the magnificent Ain Dara Temple and the Afrin Stele.
The Byzantine era wrote the mountain's most famous chapter, transforming it through the radical asceticism of Saint Simeon Stylites into a global center of Christian pilgrimage. The monumental architecture of Qala'at Semaan was an indelible statement of imperial faith and power, a legacy that endured even as the site itself cycled from monastery to military fortress. With the decline of Byzantium, a new layer was added as the region consolidated its identity as the Kurd-Dagh, a heartland of Kurdish tribes and a haven for religious minorities. This identity became deeply intertwined with the land itself, rooted in the sacred and life-sustaining cultivation of the olive tree. Finally, the 20th century violently overwrote much of this history. The creation of modern borders scarred the landscape, dividing a cohesive

cultural region and isolating its people. State-led policies attempted to erase its Kurdish and Christian heritage, renaming the mountain in an effort to impose a new, singular identity.
By the end of 2009, Mount Lelun stood as a testament to this layered history. It was a place where the ruins of a Byzantine saint's pillar overlooked the olive groves of Kurdish farmers, where the name "Lelun" coexisted with "Jabal Sim'an," and where a deep and resilient local culture had withstood centuries of imperial shifts and modern political pressures. This rich, complex, and often contested history provides the essential and inescapable context for understanding the tragic events that would engulf the mountain and its people in the decade to come.

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