The History of Nebi Hori / Cyrrhus: From Ancient Metropolis to Contested Heritage Site

I. Introduction: Identifying Nebi Hori and Ancient Cyrrhus

A. Defining the Site

The archaeological site known today by the local name Nebi Hori (also transcribed as Nebi Uri, Nebi Houri, Nabi Huri, or Nebî Hûrî) corresponds to the ancient city of Cyrrhus (Κύρρος/Kyrrhos).[1] This identification is widely accepted in archaeological and historical scholarship. The contemporary name, Nebi Hori, translates from Arabic as "Prophet Hori" [2], a designation linked to local traditions surrounding a venerated tomb at the site. Throughout its long history, the city bore other names reflecting its changing cultural and political affiliations, including Hagioupolis ("City of the Saints") during its Christian Byzantine zenith, and Coricium, Corice, Qorosh, or Khoros (Ḳūrus) following the Arab conquest.[3] The site itself encompasses the extensive ruins of this once-significant urban center, including remnants of fortifications, a large Roman theatre, bridges, civic buildings, churches, and, most prominently in local tradition, a well-preserved Roman-era mausoleum now functioning as a Muslim shrine.[2]

B. Geographical Location and Regional Context

Nebi Hori/Cyrrhus is situated in the north of modern Syria, within the Afrin region (or district) of the Aleppo Governorate.[2] Its precise location places it approximately 70 kilometers northwest of the city of Aleppo [1] and about 45 kilometers northeast of the town of Afrin.[2] The site lies near the town of Bulbul (around 10 km away) [2] and is positioned very close to the Syrian-Turkish border, only about 2 kilometers distant.[2] Some sources note its proximity to Kilis in Turkey, placing it roughly 20-24 km south or west of that city.[3]

The ancient city was strategically located near the Afrin River, known locally also as the Sabun River [2] and historically referred to as the Marsyas River, a tributary of the Orontes.[3] The ruins occupy a hilly terrain, described as encompassing two hillocks or a slope rising westward from the river.[2] This location placed it along significant ancient trade and military routes connecting Antioch on the Mediterranean coast with Zeugma, a major crossing point on the Euphrates River.[3]

C. Overview of Historical Significance

Cyrrhus/Nebi Hori boasts a multi-layered history spanning millennia. Founded as a Hellenistic city by one of Alexander the Great's successors [2], it rose to prominence under Roman rule as a vital military base and commercial hub.[3] During the Byzantine period, it transformed into a major Christian pilgrimage destination known as Hagiopolis.[7] Following the Arab conquest, its

role shifted again, eventually declining as a major urban center but retaining significance as a religious site centered on the mausoleum.[7] Its strategic position ensured its involvement in regional power struggles, including during the Crusades and, tragically, in the recent Syrian conflict.[8]

The very existence of multiple names for the site—Cyrrhus, Hagioupolis, Qorosh, Nebi Hori—is not merely a list of synonyms but serves as a linguistic palimpsest, reflecting the successive cultural, political, and religious hegemonies that shaped its identity over centuries. The Macedonian origins are recalled in "Cyrrhus," the Roman and Byzantine periods saw its flourishing under that name and later as "Hagioupolis," the Arab conquest introduced "Qorosh," and the enduring local name "Nebi Hori" signifies the persistence of local Islamic tradition intertwined with the ancient landscape.[2] Recognizing this terminological complexity is crucial for understanding the distinct phases of the site's history and the blending of formal archaeological identification with living local nomenclature.

Furthermore, the site's persistent geographical markers—its location near a major river crossing (Afrin/Sabun/Marsyas) and its proximity to what is now an international border—underscore an enduring strategic importance that transcends historical periods.[2] From facilitating Roman campaigns against eastern powers like Armenia and Parthia [7] and serving ancient trade routes [3], its location has continued to be relevant in modern conflicts, influencing troop movements, border control, and the tragic dynamics of displacement and heritage destruction.[2] This geographical constant has repeatedly drawn political and military interest to Cyrrhus, making it a perennial node in the control of regional movement and resources.

II. The Enigma of the Venerated Figure: Nebi Hori, Uriah, and Local Traditions

A. The Name "Nebi Hori": Potential Meanings and Origins

The name "Nebi Hori," the current local designation for the site and particularly its prominent mausoleum, literally translates to "Prophet Hori".[2] One local tradition explains this name by referencing a holy man named Hori, believed to have resided in an old monastery within the area, whose sanctity led to the location being named in his honor.[2]

An alternative, intriguing etymological possibility links the name "Hori" not to an individual prophet but to the ancient Hurrian people. The Hurrians were a significant non-Semitic group who inhabited mountainous regions like the Zagros and Taurus and spread across the Near East, particularly prominent during the third and second millennia BCE, eventually forming the Mitanni Empire.[5] Proponents of this connection point to the survival of the name "Huri" in other local toponyms within the Afrin region, such as caves and ruins near Juwaiq village referred to as "Hurrian" sites, and the nearby Mount Hawar, whose name bears phonetic resemblance to "Huri".[5] This theory suggests the name "Nebi Hori" might preserve a deep historical echo of the region's pre-Hellenistic inhabitants, perhaps through folk etymology or the assimilation of ancient place names into later traditions.

B. The Uriah Connection: Dominant Local Tradition

Despite the alternative explanations, the most widely cited local tradition identifies the figure venerated at Nebi Hori as Uriah.[2] Multiple sources specify this figure is understood locally to be Uriah the Hittite, a commander in the army of King David mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).[4] One Arabic source refers to him as "Uriah son of Hanan" (أوريا بن حنان, [6]) also identifying him as one of David's commanders.

The associated narrative, deeply ingrained in local belief, holds that Uriah was killed in battle and subsequently buried at this location.[2] Some accounts connect this to the period when the region of Aleppo may have briefly fallen under Davidic influence around the beginning of the first millennium BCE.[6] The well-known biblical story, in which King David engineers Uriah's death in battle to marry his wife, Bathsheba, forms the backdrop to this identification.[12] This tradition is strongly held by the local population, including Kurdish families who have historically tended the shrine complex.[12] The belief is potent enough that the site itself is often referred to simply as the tomb of Uriah.[4]

It is important to note, however, that attributions of ancient tombs are often subject to regional variations and competing claims. A distinct tradition recorded among the Jews of Iraqi Kurdistan places the tomb of Uriah the Hittite in the village of Shush, near Amadia, which also served as a pilgrimage site.[22] This highlights the fluid nature of such traditions and the tendency for prominent figures from religious history to be associated with multiple locations.

C. Archaeological Reality vs. Tradition: The Hexagonal Mausoleum

The physical focal point for the veneration of Nebi Hori is a distinctive hexagonal tower tomb featuring a pyramidal roof, situated outside the main city walls of ancient Cyrrhus, typically to the south.[3] Archaeological investigation and architectural analysis date this structure firmly to the Roman period, most likely the late second or early third century CE.[2] It is generally interpreted by scholars as the tomb of a Roman military figure, possibly a commander or centurion, reflecting Cyrrhus's importance as a Roman military garrison.[7]

The historical trajectory of this building reveals a process of reinterpretation and re-appropriation over centuries. Originally a Roman funerary monument, it may have been used by a Christian cleric at some point.[2] Its documented transformation occurred during the Mamluk era. In the year 1303 CE (corresponding to 703 AH), the mausoleum was formally converted into a Muslim shrine (maqam) and explicitly dedicated to the figure known locally as Nebi Hori.[5] At this time, the lower level of the structure became specifically identified as his grave.[16] A mosque was constructed adjacent to the mausoleum shortly thereafter, in 1314 CE, under the patronage of the Mamluk governor of Aleppo.[16]

D. Synthesis and Interpretation

A significant chronological discrepancy exists between the archaeological dating of the mausoleum (2nd-3rd century CE) and the historical period of Uriah the Hittite (circa 1000 BCE). This gap of over a millennium indicates that the association of the Roman tomb with the biblical figure is a later attribution, a common phenomenon in the development of sacred sites where existing prominent monuments are integrated into later religious narratives. The figure of Uriah, as depicted in biblical texts, was a soldier known for his loyalty, serving in King David's army despite his non-Israelite (Hittite) origins.[21] The Hittites were an ancient Anatolian

people whose influence extended into Syria [21], making Uriah's presence in the region plausible within the broader historical context, even if his burial at this specific Roman structure is anachronistic.

The veneration of Nebi Hori serves as a compelling case study in the layering of religious meaning onto enduring physical structures. A Roman-era tomb, likely built for a military official, transitioned through time, potentially acquiring Christian associations before being formally embraced within an Islamic framework during the Mamluk period.[2] This process appears to have absorbed and codified pre-existing local traditions, whether they centered on a figure named Hori, the biblical Uriah, or even fainter echoes of the ancient Hurrian past.[2] The formal conversion in 1303 CE represents a significant moment of Islamization, where Mamluk authorities likely recognized the sanctity the site already held for the local populace and integrated it into the region's Islamic devotional landscape, thereby legitimizing both the site and their own rule. This demonstrates how religious identity can be inscribed onto the landscape, repurposing older monuments to fit new narratives and devotional practices.

Furthermore, the ambiguity surrounding the precise identity of "Nebi Hori"—whether a distinct prophet Hori, a localized version of Uriah the Hittite (or Uriah bin Hanan), or a name echoing the ancient Hurrians—along with the existence of an alternative claimed tomb for Uriah in Iraq [22], highlights the inherent fluidity of oral tradition and hagiography. These variations suggest that the specific historical accuracy of the identification might be less critical to the tradition than the recognized sacredness of the location itself. The act of pilgrimage, prayer, and storytelling at the site reinforces its status as a holy place, a status that persists even amidst historical ambiguities and competing narratives. The power lies in the recognized locus of veneration, which anchors the tradition to the physical landscape.

III. A Journey Through Time: The History of Cyrrhus/Nebi Hori

A. Hellenistic Origins (c. 300 BCE - 64 BCE)

The city of Cyrrhus was established in northern Syria shortly after 300 BCE by Seleucus I Nicator, one of the Diadochi (successors) of Alexander the Great and the founder of the Seleucid Empire.[2] It was deliberately named after the city of Cyrrhus in Seleucus's Macedonian homeland.[8] From its inception, the city was laid out according to Hellenistic urban planning principles, featuring a Hippodamian grid plan with orthogonal streets centered on a primary north-south axis.[1] Early fortifications, constructed using polygonal masonry techniques, delineated the city's initial boundaries.[15]

During the Seleucid period, Cyrrhus functioned as an important military center, potentially operating with some degree of autonomy, and possessed the right to mint its own coinage.[2] Archaeological interpretations suggest the presence of temples, possibly dedicated to Greek deities like Athena Polias (protector of the city) and Zeus Keraunios (the thunderbolt-wielder), with the latter's temple potentially located on the city's acropolis or citadel hill.[2] Following the Treaty of Apamea in 188 BCE, which curtailed Seleucid power in Asia Minor, Cyrrhus found itself on the empire's frontier. This diminished its civic importance somewhat, but it remained

a strategic location for military recruitment and assembly.[2] In 83 BCE, the city briefly fell under the control of Tigranes the Great, king of Armenia, during his expansion into Syria, before being incorporated into the Roman sphere of influence.[2]

B. Roman Ascendancy (64 BCE - c. 395 CE)

In 64 BCE, the Roman general Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey the Great) annexed Syria, bringing Cyrrhus under Roman rule.[3] Under the Romans, the city experienced a period of significant prosperity and development. It evolved into a key administrative, military, and commercial center, strategically positioned on the vital trade route linking Antioch to the major Euphrates River crossing at Zeugma.[3] Its military importance was underscored by its role as a base for the Roman legion Legio X Fretensis.[3]

This era witnessed substantial construction activity. Notable monuments from the Roman period include a large and well-preserved theatre (with a diameter of 115 meters), at least two substantial Roman bridges facilitating communication and trade, the hexagonal mausoleum later associated with Nebi Hori (dated to the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE), a colonnaded main street, and potentially a Roman military camp situated at the western edge of the town.[3] Public amenities such as an aqueduct and baths were also present.[7] Excavations have uncovered residential structures as well, including a Roman house dating to the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE, notable for its mosaics and wall paintings.[13] The city also minted its own provincial coinage during Roman rule.[8]

Its strategic location meant that Cyrrhus often served as a staging point or stopover for Roman commanders and emperors involved in campaigns against eastern powers like Armenia and the Parthian Empire; visits by Germanicus, Trajan, and Caracalla are recorded.[7] However, this proximity to the eastern frontier also brought danger. During the turbulent 3rd century CE, the Sasanian Persian Empire launched several incursions into Roman Syria, and Cyrrhus was captured or sacked on at least two occasions (e.g., in 256 CE).[3] These attacks prompted the Romans to further invest in the city's fortifications.[3] Cyrrhus was also the birthplace of Avidius Cassius, a Roman general who briefly claimed the imperial throne in 175 CE.[14]

C. Byzantine Era (c. 395 CE - 637 CE)

Following the division of the Roman Empire, Cyrrhus became part of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire. It rose to prominence as a significant Christian center, eventually earning the honorific title Hagiopolis, meaning "City of the Saints".[6] It served as the capital of the province of Cyrrhestica and was an episcopal see, suffragan to the metropolitan bishop of Hierapolis Bambyke.[8]

The city's religious fame rested primarily on the veneration of the relics of Saints Cosmas and Damian. According to tradition, these twin brothers were physicians who offered free medical care and were martyred for their faith near Cyrrhus around 283 CE. Their remains were enshrined in a major basilica within the city, transforming Cyrrhus into a major pilgrimage destination that attracted devotees seeking healing and divine intercession.[7] The importance of the see is evidenced by the participation of its bishops in major ecumenical councils, including Nicaea in 325 CE and Constantinople in 381 CE.[7]

A particularly influential figure during this period was Theodoret (c. 393 – c. 458/466 CE), who served as Bishop of Cyrrhus from 423 CE.[4] A prolific theological writer and historian, Theodoret actively promoted the cult of Saints Cosmas and Damian and invested significantly in the city's infrastructure, using church funds to restore the aqueduct, baths, and Roman bridges.[7] Under Emperor Justinian I (reigned 527–565 CE), the city's defenses were further strengthened and expanded, reflecting its continued strategic importance on the empire's eastern frontier.[8] This included rebuilding the southern rampart and gate, effectively integrating the area around the later Nebi Hori mausoleum fully into the fortified urban space.[15] While the underlying Hellenistic grid plan was generally respected, Byzantine-era construction sometimes encroached upon the width of streets and porticoes.[9] Besides the main basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian, remains of other churches, including two basilicas near the north gate, have been noted.[14] One source also mentions a church built by Saint Simeon the Stylite, though this association is less commonly emphasized for Cyrrhus itself.[6]

D. Islamic Periods (637 CE - Ottoman Era)

The Byzantine chapter of Cyrrhus's history came to an end in 637 CE when the city was conquered by Arab armies during the early Islamic expansion.[7] Under Arab rule, the city became known as Qorosh [8] or Khoros.[3] Initially, it likely continued to function as a military station or garrison.[13] However, its prominence gradually declined. Some accounts suggest that stones from the renowned shrine of Saints Cosmas and Damian were transported to Aleppo for use in the construction of the Great Umayyad Mosque there.[7] Over time, the city appears to have shrunk significantly, losing its former urban vitality. By the 13th century, the geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi described Cyrrhus as essentially a "dead city".[13]

Despite this urban decline, the site experienced a revival of religious significance during the Mamluk period. As previously noted, in 1303 CE, the well-preserved Roman mausoleum south of the old city was officially converted into a Muslim shrine (maqam) dedicated to Nebi Hori.[16] A symbolic tomb marker within the mausoleum bears the date 703 AH (1303 CE).[5] The construction of a mosque next to the shrine in 1314 CE by the Mamluk governor of Aleppo further solidified its role as a center of local Islamic piety.[16] This development ensured the site's continued relevance as a pilgrimage destination, albeit on a more localized scale than during its Byzantine peak.[13]

During the subsequent Ottoman period, the religious complex continued to function. The Mamluk-era mosque adjacent to the shrine was demolished and replaced with a new structure in 1875 CE (1292 AH).[16] Another date associated with a mosque near the mausoleum is 1276 AH (1859/1860 CE).[5] This Ottoman-era mosque served the surrounding villages as a congregational mosque, particularly for Friday prayers and festival (Eid) prayers.[5]

E. Crusader Interlude (Early 12th C - 1150 CE)

During the era of the Crusades, Cyrrhus briefly came under Frankish control. Around 1117 CE, it was incorporated into the County of Edessa, one of the major Crusader states established in the Levant.[8] The Crusaders referred to the city as Coricie.[8] It appears to have held some importance within the county, possibly functioning as the seat of a suffragan archbishopric

under the Latin Archbishop of Edessa.[14] Several lords of Cyrrhus (Ernald, Baudouin, Barrigan, Theobald) are mentioned in records as significant vassals of the Counts of Edessa.[14]
This Crusader occupation was relatively short-lived. In June 1150 CE, the Zengid ruler Nur ad-Din Mahmud, Atabeg of Aleppo and a key figure in the Muslim counter-crusade, captured Cyrrhus from the Crusaders.[8] The conquest was reportedly accompanied by significant destruction, contributing further to the city's decline.[14] For a brief period between 1168 and 1170, Nur ad-Din granted the district of Cyrrhus to Mleh, an Armenian prince of the Rubenid dynasty who had allied with him.[14] After this, the site largely faded from major political and military history, remaining primarily significant for its religious shrine.

F. Chronological Overview Table

The following table summarizes the key periods and developments in the history of Cyrrhus/Nebi Hori:

Period	Approximate Dates	Key Rulers/Events	Major Constructions /Changes	Religious/Cultural Significance	Relevant Sources
Hellenistic	c. 300 BCE - 64 BCE	Seleucus I Nicator (founding); Treaty of Apamea (188 BCE); Tigranes the Great (83 BCE)	Grid plan city; Early polygonal fortifications; Temples (Athena, Zeus?); Coin minting	Hellenistic polis; Military center; Possible pagan cults	[2]
Roman Republic/Empire	64 BCE - c. 395 CE	Pompey (conquest); Legio X Fretensis based here; Imperial visits; Sasanian raids (3rd C)	Theatre; Bridges; Hexagonal Mausoleum; Colonnaded Street; Aqueduct; Baths; Fortifications enhanced; Roman house (mosaics)	Major administrative, military, commercial hub; Roman provincial life; Early Christian presence (Cosmas & Damian martyrdom c. 283)	[3]
Early Byzantine	c. 395 CE - 637 CE	Bishop Theodoret (c. 423-458); Emperor Justinian I (527-565)	Basilica of Saints Cosmas & Damian; Restoration of bridges, aqueduct,	Hagiopolis ("City of Saints"); Major Christian pilgrimage center (relics	[7]

			baths; Justinian fortifications (incl. southern sector)	of Cosmas & Damian); Important bishopric	
Early Islamic (Umayyad/Abbasid)	637 CE - c. 1100 CE	Arab conquest (637 CE)	Gradual decline; Possible reuse of materials (Saints' shrine stones?)	Military station; Declining urban center; Continued Christian presence?	[7]
Crusader	c. 1117 CE - 1150 CE	County of Edessa control; Lords Ernald, Baudouin, Barrigan, Theobald		Crusader lordship (Coricie); Possible Latin archbishopric	[8]
Zengid/Ayyubid/Mamluk	1150 CE - 1516 CE	Nur ad-Din (capture & destruction 1150); Mleh (briefly 1168-70); Yaqut (13th C); Mamluk Governor of Aleppo	Destruction (1150); Mausoleum converted to Nebi Hori shrine (1303); Mamluk mosque built (1314)	"Dead city" (Yaqut); Revival as local Muslim pilgrimage site (Nebi Hori shrine)	[8]
Ottoman	1516 CE - c. 1918 CE	Ottoman Empire rule	Mamluk mosque demolished; New Ottoman mosque built (1875 or 1859/60)	Continued local Muslim shrine and congregational mosque for surrounding villages	[5]
Modern Syrian	c. 1920 - 2011	French Mandate; Syrian Republic	Archaeological excavations (French 1952-80; Lebanese-Syrian later)	Archaeological site; Tourist attraction; Continued local religious significance	[9]
Post-2011 Conflict	2011 CE - Present	Syrian Civil War; Operation	Military use; Systematic	Contested heritage site;	[1]

		Olive Branch (2018); Turkish/SNA control	looting & damage (illegal excavation, bulldozing); Tomb damaged; Turkish restoration (2019-20)	Severe damage; Restricted access; Restoration controversies ("Ottoman-nization")	

The historical trajectory outlined above reveals a remarkable capacity for resilience and adaptation within Cyrrhus/Nebi Hori. Despite experiencing periods of significant decline, destructive conquests (by Sasanians, Nur ad-Din), and fundamental shifts in political and religious control, the site consistently found ways to retain relevance.[7] It transformed its primary function multiple times: from a Hellenistic polis to a Roman military and commercial powerhouse, then a celebrated Byzantine pilgrimage center, later an Islamic garrison, and ultimately, a localized but persistent Muslim shrine complex centered on the repurposed Roman mausoleum.[3] This enduring presence is likely rooted in its advantageous strategic location and the powerful layering of sacred significance attributed to it over centuries, allowing it to persist even when its broader urban functions diminished.

Observing the city's history also highlights the cyclical nature of imperial investment. The periods of greatest prosperity and large-scale architectural development at Cyrrhus clearly coincide with times when the site attracted direct imperial interest and resources. This includes the initial Seleucid foundation, the intensive development during the Roman Empire driven by military and trade needs, and the significant Byzantine investment in fortifications and religious infrastructure under figures like Bishop Theodoret and Emperor Justinian.[2] Conversely, periods of decline often followed the withdrawal of this imperial focus or resulted from destructive conquests that disrupted established networks and priorities.[7] This pattern underscores the dependence of provincial centers like Cyrrhus on the priorities and resources of larger imperial systems for their flourishing and major physical transformations.

IV. The Sacred Landscape: Religious and Cultural Significance

A. Pre-Christian Veneration

While direct evidence is limited, the Hellenistic foundation of Cyrrhus suggests the presence of associated pagan cults typical of the era. References to possible temples dedicated to Greek deities like Athena and Zeus point towards organized religious life during this period.[2] Furthermore, the potential etymological link between the name "Hori" and the ancient Hurrian people raises the possibility, albeit speculative, of even earlier, pre-Hellenistic indigenous beliefs or sacred associations connected to the location that may have subtly influenced later traditions.[5]

B. Christian Pilgrimage Center (Byzantine Era)

The Byzantine period marked the zenith of Cyrrhus's religious importance, transforming it into the renowned pilgrimage center known as Hagiopolis.[7] This fame was overwhelmingly centered on the venerated relics of Saints Cosmas and Damian, the "unmercenary physicians" believed to have been martyred nearby.[7] Their shrine, housed within a prominent basilica, attracted vast numbers of pilgrims seeking cures and blessings, making Cyrrhus one of the major sacred destinations in the Byzantine East.[7]

The city's religious status was further bolstered by the presence of influential bishops, most notably Theodoret, whose writings extensively documented the miracles attributed to the saints and who actively promoted the city's religious profile.[4] The early establishment of Christianity is confirmed by the attendance of a bishop from Cyrrhus at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE.[7] The city also served as a venue for ecclesiastical synods.[8]

C. Muslim Veneration (Mamluk Era - Present)

Following the decline of its Christian prominence after the Arab conquest, the focus of religious veneration at the site eventually shifted to the striking hexagonal Roman mausoleum. From the Mamluk period onwards (specifically after 1303 CE), this structure became identified as the tomb and shrine (maqam) of Nebi Hori, the figure locally equated primarily with the Prophet Uriah.[2]

The shrine and its adjacent mosque developed into an important center for local Muslim piety. It served as a destination for pilgrimage and prayer, particularly drawing worshippers from surrounding villages for Friday congregational prayers and major Islamic festivals (Eid).[5] Local traditions imbued the shrine with particular sanctity, with some beliefs attributing wish-granting powers to Nebi Hori for sincere visitors who made vows or sought intercession.[16]

D. Associated Communities and Traditions

The religious significance of Cyrrhus/Nebi Hori has been tied to different communities over time. During the Byzantine era, it was a site of major importance for Christians throughout the empire and particularly within Syria. In the Islamic period, and continuing into modern times until the recent conflict, the Nebi Hori shrine complex primarily served the local Muslim population of the Afrin region. Sources specifically mention the connection to Kurdish communities living in the area, including families who acted as caretakers for the shrine.[12] The mosque served as a central religious point for numerous nearby villages.[5]

The historical trajectory of Cyrrhus/Nebi Hori clearly demonstrates the phenomenon of the continuity of sacred space. The location transitioned from a likely pagan center in the Hellenistic period to a major Christian pilgrimage hub focused on Saints Cosmas and Damian, and subsequently evolved into a locally significant Muslim shrine centered on the figure of Nebi Hori/Uriah.[2] This persistence suggests that once a place acquires a reputation for sanctity or becomes a focal point for communal gathering, that sacred character can endure even as the specific religious doctrines, figures, and associated communities change over time, adapting the site to fit the prevailing cultural and religious landscape.

A noticeable shift occurred in the scale of the site's religious significance. While Cyrrhus as Hagiopolis enjoyed empire-wide renown within Byzantium, attracting pilgrims from distant regions [7], its importance during the Islamic periods appears to have become more localized.

The conversion of the Roman mausoleum into the Nebi Hori shrine during the Mamluk era revived its role as a pilgrimage destination [13], but primarily for the surrounding communities in the Afrin region.[5] Yaqut al-Hamawi's 13th-century description of Cyrrhus as a "dead city" [13], predating the formal shrine conversion, suggests its broader urban and political functions had already significantly faded, paving the way for its transformation into a more localized sacred center.

V. Unearthing the Past: Physical Characteristics and Archaeological Findings

A. Urban Layout and Fortifications

The archaeological remains of Cyrrhus reveal a well-planned ancient city. The site consists of a lower town spread across the slopes and plain near the river, and an upper city or acropolis situated on a higher elevation, which may have been the location of the Hellenistic Zeus temple.[2] The lower town was originally laid out on a Hippodamian grid plan, characteristic of Hellenistic urbanism, with streets intersecting at right angles, organized around a principal colonnaded street running roughly north-south.[1] This basic grid structure appears to have been largely maintained, albeit with modifications, throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods.[9]

The city was enclosed by substantial fortifications that evolved over time. Remnants of the earliest, likely Hellenistic, city walls built with polygonal masonry have been identified.[15] These were later superseded or incorporated into more extensive Roman and Byzantine defensive systems. Significant rebuilding and expansion of the walls occurred under Emperor Justinian I in the 6th century CE.[2] The circuit walls adapted to the natural contours of the terrain.[14] While four main gates corresponding to the cardinal directions are mentioned [2], detailed archaeological work has focused particularly on the southern gate complex. Excavations there revealed multiple phases of construction, including a Byzantine gate built with reused Roman-era stones, featuring flanking towers and a basalt-paved entrance way with limestone sidewalks.[15] Evidence for the original Hellenistic/Roman southern gate, located further north before the Byzantine expansion, has also been uncovered.[15]

B. Key Architectural Features

Several major structures define the archaeological landscape of Cyrrhus/Nebi Hori:

- **Hexagonal Mausoleum (Nebi Hori Tomb):** This is arguably the best-preserved ancient monument at the site. Dating to the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE, this Roman tomb stands outside the southern city walls. It is characterized by its unique six-sided tower structure topped with a pyramidal roof.[3] The interior features architectural details such as Corinthian capitals supporting the upper cornice.[14] The lower level houses the grave venerated as Nebi Hori's.[5] Adjacent to it stands the mosque complex, rebuilt in the Ottoman era and recently restored.[5]
- **Roman Theatre:** Cyrrhus possesses a large and remarkably well-preserved Roman theatre, built into the natural slope of the hill on the western side of the site.[4] With a

reported diameter of 115 meters and potentially 14 rows of seating, it ranks among the significant theatres of Roman Syria.[7]

- **Roman Bridges:** Two substantial Roman bridges, likely dating from the 2nd century CE, are extant near Cyrrhus.[4] These well-built structures were part of the extensive Roman road network that connected Cyrrhus to other major centers like Antioch and Zeugma and were later restored by Bishop Theodoret.[7]
- **Colonnaded Street:** The city's main north-south thoroughfare was a grand colonnaded street, paved with basalt slabs (some hexagonal in the southern section) and originally lined with porticoes supported by columns.[9] Evidence suggests that shops were later built along this street, particularly in the southern sector during the Islamic periods.[15]
- **Basilicas:** While the grand basilica dedicated to Saints Cosmas and Damian is no longer standing (its materials possibly reused elsewhere [7]), archaeological work has noted the scant remains of two other basilicas constructed of black basalt near the former north gate.[14] The reference to a church built by Simeon the Stylite also exists.[6]
- **Other Structures:** The urban fabric also included city gates (North, South, East, West mentioned) [2], an aqueduct and public baths (known to have been restored by Theodoret) [7], evidence suggesting a Roman military camp (castrum) at the western edge of the town [9], and a tetrapylon (a four-way monumental arch) located south of the main site, marking the road towards Zeugma.[15]

C. Notable Discoveries and Excavations

Significant archaeological investigation at Cyrrhus began with French missions led by Edmond Frézouls between 1952 and 1980.[14] More recently, a joint Lebanese-Syrian Archaeological Mission has conducted excavations and surveys.[9]

Key discoveries include the uncovering, following looting incidents in 2008, of a Roman house dating to the late 2nd or early 3rd century CE. This residence yielded important finds, including well-preserved mosaics and wall paintings.[13] Due to security concerns and for conservation purposes, two major mosaic panels from this house were temporarily transferred to the Archaeological Museum of Aleppo, with the intention of returning them once conditions permitted.[13]

Geophysical methods, such as magnetic surveys, have been employed to map subsurface structures, revealing the density of buildings along the main street and confirming the layout of the urban grid.[9] Various inscriptions have also been found at the site over the years, including building inscriptions from the Byzantine era [14] and, significantly, a Roman-era tombstone belonging to a soldier of the Legio X Fretensis, providing direct evidence of the legion's presence.[7] Christian inscriptions have also been noted.[7]

The archaeological evidence from Cyrrhus/Nebi Hori paints a picture of architectural hybridity, showcasing a fascinating blend of successive cultural influences. The foundational Hellenistic grid plan provides the urban skeleton.[9] Onto this framework, the Romans added monumental public structures embodying their engineering prowess and civic ideals – the theatre, bridges, mausoleum, and colonnaded streets.[7] The Byzantine era contributed major religious edifices like basilicas and invested heavily in sophisticated fortifications.[7] This layering of architectural

styles and functions within a single site vividly reflects Cyrrhus's position as a historical crossroads and its adaptation under different imperial regimes.
An interesting aspect of the site's preservation history relates to the hexagonal mausoleum. Its conversion into a Muslim shrine in the Mamluk period, and its continued veneration thereafter, ironically ensured its remarkable state of preservation compared to many other ancient structures at the site.[7] While temples were abandoned, basilicas fell into ruin or were dismantled for their materials (like the alleged fate of the Saints' shrine [7]), the mausoleum, imbued with new religious significance, received ongoing care and maintenance. This continuous sacred function acted as a powerful protective mechanism, shielding it from the neglect and quarrying that led to the decay of much of the rest of the ancient city.

VI. Nebi Hori in the Modern Era: Conflict, Damage, and Restoration

A. Pre-Conflict Status

Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Cyrrhus/Nebi Hori was recognized as a significant archaeological site. It also functioned as a tourist attraction, drawing visitors interested in its rich history and impressive Roman ruins.[10] Simultaneously, the Nebi Hori shrine complex retained its importance as a place of local Muslim pilgrimage and worship.[13] Archaeological research, including excavations and surveys by the Lebanese-Syrian mission, was actively ongoing.[9]

B. Impact of the Syrian Civil War and Turkish Intervention (Operation Olive Branch 2018)

The site's location in the Afrin region placed it directly in the path of the Syrian conflict and subsequent foreign interventions. Following Operation Olive Branch in early 2018, the area came under the control of the Turkish military and allied Syrian National Army (SNA) factions.[10]
Numerous reports emerged detailing severe damage and misuse of the archaeological site during and after this period. Sources indicate that parts of the site, including Cyrrhus/Nebi Hori, were transformed into military headquarters or bases for armed opposition groups.[10] More alarmingly, widespread and systematic destruction through illegal excavations and looting was documented.[1] These activities often involved the use of heavy machinery, such as bulldozers and excavators, causing extensive physical damage to archaeological layers in the search for artifacts and perceived "treasure".[11] Large mounds of excavated earth became a visible feature of the landscape.[20]
The Nebi Hori tomb/mausoleum itself was specifically targeted. Reports indicate it was damaged and looted by SNA fighters in 2018.[16] There were accounts of attempts to dig beneath the sarcophagus or cenotaph within the shrine.[20] Mosaics were reportedly looted from the Nebi Huri area [28], and allegations surfaced that artifacts were being illicitly transported across the border into Turkey.[11] This destruction wasn't limited to the shrine area; damage was reported in other parts of the ancient city, including the citadel area [20] and

potentially near surrounding villages like Meydan Ekbes.[17] Some reports suggest these destructive activities occurred openly, sometimes under the observation of Turkish forces, with access to the historical sites being restricted to prevent external scrutiny.[11]

C. Recent Restoration Efforts and Controversies

Amidst reports of widespread destruction, Turkish authorities initiated a restoration project focused on the Nebi Hori tomb and mosque complex. The Hatay Vakıflar Regional Directorate (Directorate General of Foundations) undertook this work starting in 2019 and completed it in 2020 or early 2021.[16]

The restoration process reportedly involved two stages: first, consolidating the structure by repairing deteriorated masonry joints and mortars; second, rehabilitating associated facilities like the imam's house, ablution areas, and shops to support the site's social and religious functions.[24] Utilities such as electricity and water were also provided to the complex.[24] The restored site is now actively promoted, sometimes referred to as the "Mosque of the Prophet Huri".[16]

However, this restoration project has not been without controversy. Criticisms have been raised regarding the methods and implications of the work. Some sources allege that the restoration process itself involved the destruction or removal of older artifacts and historical layers within the complex.[16] More broadly, the Turkish-led intervention has been interpreted by some observers, particularly Kurdish sources and heritage monitors, as an attempt to impose a specific historical narrative, potentially emphasizing Ottoman connections while downplaying or erasing other aspects of the site's multi-layered past, including its Roman, Byzantine, and local Syrian/Kurdish associations.[16] This has led to accusations of "Ottoman-nization" or Turkification of Syrian heritage in the occupied Afrin region.[16] These criticisms must be viewed alongside the documented context of extensive looting and destruction that occurred under the control of Turkish forces and their allies.[11]

D. Current Status and Accessibility

As of the latest available information, the Nebi Hori/Cyrrhus site remains within the area controlled by Turkish forces and affiliated SNA groups. Consequently, access for independent archaeological research, international heritage monitoring bodies, or the Syrian Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) is likely severely restricted or impossible.

The overall physical integrity of the vast archaeological site has been profoundly compromised by the years of conflict, military occupation, and particularly the intensive, mechanized looting and illegal excavation.[1] While the central mosque and tomb complex has been restored and is functional [24], it represents only one component of a much larger, heavily damaged ancient city. The restoration itself, while potentially stabilizing the structure, exists within a context of significant heritage loss and contested historical narratives.

The recent history of Nebi Hori serves as a stark illustration of how cultural heritage becomes entangled in modern conflict. Archaeological sites like Cyrrhus are vulnerable not only to collateral damage from fighting but also to deliberate exploitation and destruction. They can be looted for profit to fund armed groups, used strategically as military positions, and become arenas for asserting cultural and political dominance through acts of erasure or selective,

narrative-driven restoration.[10] The fate of Nebi Hori exemplifies heritage being caught in the crossfire, simultaneously a casualty of war and an instrument within it.
Furthermore, the controversy surrounding the Turkish restoration project underscores the inherently political nature of heritage conservation, especially in conflict and post-conflict situations. While presented as an act of preservation, the restoration of the Nebi Hori shrine is viewed critically by some stakeholders as potentially imposing an external narrative ("Ottoman-nization") that may obscure or marginalize the site's complex, multi-ethnic, and multi-layered history, including its deep Roman, Byzantine, and local Syrian/Kurdish connections.[12] This highlights how decisions about what to restore, how to restore it, and whose history to emphasize become focal points for competing claims over identity, memory, and control in contested territories.

VII. Conclusion: Synthesizing the History of Nebi Hori/Cyrrhus

A. Recap of Key Findings

The site known today as Nebi Hori is unequivocally identified with the ancient city of Cyrrhus, a settlement with a rich and complex history spanning over two millennia. Founded by the Seleucids around 300 BCE, it rose to prominence as a Roman military and commercial hub, famed for its theatre and bridges. In the Byzantine era, as Hagiopolis, it became a major Christian pilgrimage destination centered on the relics of Saints Cosmas and Damian. Following the Arab conquest, its urban importance declined, but the site retained religious significance, particularly after the Mamluk conversion of a striking Roman-era hexagonal mausoleum into the shrine of Nebi Hori in 1303 CE. This shrine, associated in local tradition primarily with the biblical figure Uriah the Hittite, continued to be a focus of piety through the Ottoman period and into modern times, serving the surrounding communities, including local Kurdish populations. The enigma surrounding the identity of "Nebi Hori" itself—whether a distinct prophet, Uriah, or an echo of the ancient Hurrians—reflects the complex layering of traditions and the common practice of re-appropriating prominent ancient monuments for later religious purposes.

B. Multi-Layered Identity and Enduring Significance

Cyrrhus/Nebi Hori stands as a microcosm of the broader historical currents that have shaped the Near East. Its ruins bear witness to the successive influences of Macedonian Hellenism, Roman imperial power, Byzantine Christianity, Armenian interactions, Arab conquests, Crusader interventions, Mamluk administration, and Ottoman rule, all overlaid upon a landscape inhabited by local Syrian and Kurdish communities. Its enduring significance stems from both its strategic geographical location and its remarkable capacity to maintain a sacred character through profound political and religious transformations. This ability to adapt and layer meaning allowed it to persist, in different forms, across vastly different historical epochs.

C. Precarious State and Heritage Concerns

Tragically, this long and layered history is now under severe threat. The Syrian Civil War and the subsequent Turkish intervention in Afrin have inflicted devastating damage upon the site.

Reports of military use, systematic looting, illegal excavation with heavy machinery, and the destruction or illicit removal of artifacts paint a grim picture of its current condition. While the central tomb/mosque complex has undergone restoration by Turkish authorities, this action is itself contested, viewed by some as potentially erasing historical layers and imposing a selective narrative. The site's physical integrity has been severely compromised, and its future remains deeply uncertain. There is an urgent need for independent, objective assessment of the damage, comprehensive documentation of what remains, and internationally recognized efforts towards protection, free from the political agendas that currently dominate the region. The story of Nebi Hori encompasses both tangible and intangible heritage. The tangible—the stones of the theatre, the structure of the mausoleum, the fragments of mosaics, the layout of the streets—provides physical evidence of its past. The intangible—the legends of Nebi Hori and Uriah, the traditions of pilgrimage, the local place names, the cultural memory held by the communities who lived alongside the ruins—gives the site its living meaning. The recent conflict has tragically endangered both dimensions. Physical destruction erases the material record, while displacement, political control, and narrative manipulation threaten the continuity of the intangible traditions and local connections that have shaped the site's identity for centuries. Acknowledging and safeguarding both the physical remains and the associated cultural practices and memories is crucial for any meaningful approach to the heritage of Cyrrhus/Nebi Hori.

Works cited

1. The tragic story of Aleppo, The destruction of cultural property at the time of conflict - Kermes, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.kermes-restauro.it/the-tragic-story-of-aleppo-the-destruction-of-cultural-property-at-the-time-of-conflict/
2. النبي هوري - ويكيبيديا, accessed April 14, 2025, https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%8A_%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A
3. Kirros - Vikipedi, accessed April 14, 2025, https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirros
4. Nebi Uri - Cyrrhus - Architecture and Asceticism - University of Exeter, accessed April 14, 2025, https://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk/items/browse?tags=Nebi+Uri
5. تيريج عفرين, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.tirejafrin.com/index.php?page=category&category_id=89&lang=ar
6. مدينة النبي هوري (سيروس) - منتدى أهلا بكم في سوريا Welcome To Syria, accessed April 14, 2025, https://welcome2syria.ahlamontada.com/t61-topic
7. Cyrrhus - Livius, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.livius.org/articles/place/cyrrhus/
8. Cyrrhus - Wikipedia, accessed April 14, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyrrhus
9. (PDF) First results on the city planning of Cyrrhus (Syria) - ResearchGate, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/41152730_First_results_on_the_city_planning_of_Cyrrhus_Syria

10. The Lion Statue of Ain Dara: Revealing the Fate of an Icon of Syrian ..., accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-cultural-property/article/lion-statue-of-ain-dara-revealing-the-fate-of-an-icon-of-syrian-archaeology-looted-during-the-conflict/E5C39A892C631F939AF0684EC91CCCED
11. Çekdarên ser bi Tirkîyê ve peykerê Şêrê Efrînê dizîn, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.rupelanu.com/cekdaren-ser-bi-tirkiye-ve-peykere-sere-efrine-dizin-8424h.htm
12. Syria's Afrin, a perennial battleground - dianadarke, accessed April 14, 2025, https://dianadarke.com/2018/02/28/syrias-afrin-a-perennial-battleground/
13. Cyrrhus (Nebi Houri) - World Monuments Fund, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.wmf.org/projects/cyrrhus-nebi-houri
14. Kyrrhos - Wikipedia, accessed April 14, 2025, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyrrhos
15. Développement et urbanisme du secteur méridional de Cyrrhus ..., accessed April 14, 2025, https://journals.openedition.org/syria/7565
16. Mosque of Prophet Huri - Wikipedia, accessed April 14, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosque_of_Prophet_Huri
17. Dagirker Li Efrînê Di Kiryarên Qirêj de Sînor Nasnakin - Lekolin, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.lekolin.org/dagirker-li-efrine-di-kiryaren-qirej-de-sinor-nasnakin/
18. Syrian Kurds | dianadarke, accessed April 14, 2025, https://dianadarke.com/tag/syrian-kurds/
19. Bir 'ada' kent: EFRÎN - Yeni Özgür Politika, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.ozgurpolitika.com/haberi-bir-ada-kent-efrin-32128
20. Geçmişi yok edilen ülke: Suriye - Son Dakika Haberleri - TRT Haber, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/gecmisi-yok-edilen-ulke-suriye-446730.html
21. Why Was David Killing Uriah the Hittite Darker than You Think? - Bible Study Tools, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/uriah-the-hittite-bathshebas-husband.html
22. Jewish community of Shush | Databases – ANU Museum of the Jewish People, accessed April 14, 2025, https://dbs.anumuseum.org.il/skn/en/c6/e139497/Place/Shush
23. What do we know about the Hittites? - Compelling Truth, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.compellingtruth.org/Hittites.html
24. Afrin'deki Ömer Bin Hattab Camii ve Nebi Huri Türbesi Restore ..., accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.elazigsonhaber.com/afrindeki-omer-bin-hattab-camii-ve-nebi-huri-turbesi-restore-edildi
25. Abdullah Ocalan - dianadarke, accessed April 14, 2025, https://dianadarke.com/tag/abdullah-ocalan/
26. The Lion Statue of Ain Dara: Revealing the Fate of an Icon of Syrian Archaeology Looted During the Conflict - ResearchGate, accessed April 14, 2025,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/387048103_The_Lion_Statue_of_Ain_Dara_Revealing_the_Fate_of_an_Icon_of_Syrian_Archaeology_Looted_During_the_Conflict
27. Asewarên dîrokî yên Efrînê bi awayekê plankirî tên jinavbirin - Rudaw, accessed April 14, 2025, https://www.rudaw.net/kurmanci/kurdistan/18072019
28. Di salvegera dagirkirina Efrînê de ... sûcên şer, siyaseta tirkkirinê û qirkirina çandî-2, accessed April 14, 2025, https://hawarnews.com/kr/161602764043965