

Comprehensive Inventory and Typological Analysis of the Shrines of Afrin, Syria

The Afrin region, historically referred to as Kurd Dagħ (Mountain of the Kurds) and located in the northwestern corner of the Aleppo Governorate, possesses a highly complex and deeply layered sacred geography¹. Its topography, defined by fertile agricultural plains, the Afrin River, and rugged mountainous terrain, has served as a repository for indigenous religious architecture for millennia. The region is densely populated with localized shrines, mausoleums (*maqams*), tombs (*türbes*), and ancient pilgrimage sites (*ziyarets*) that reflect a syncretic blend of Pre-Classical, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, Alawite, and Yazidi (Êzîdî) theological traditions⁴.

These sacred structures are critical socioreligious anchors. Historically, they have functioned as sites of communal gathering, agrarian rites, esoteric healing, and spiritual intercession.

However, the contemporary status of Afrin's shrines is characterized by severe architectural degradation. Following military interventions, particularly the 2018 military operations, a substantial percentage of these ancient and modern shrines have been subjected to systematic bulldozing, vandalization, illegal excavation, and looting³.

This report provides an exhaustive, granular inventory and spatial analysis of every documented shrine within the Afrin region. By synthesizing multi-lingual historical records, archaeological surveys, and contemporary damage assessments, the analysis categorizes these sanctuaries by their ethnoreligious affiliations, dissects their architectural and ritualistic utility, and evaluates their structural continuity.

Pre-Classical and Ancient Near Eastern Sanctuaries

The religious architecture of Afrin predates the Abrahamic traditions by millennia, with certain sites demonstrating continuity of sacred space from the Bronze Age to the modern era. The most prominent of these is the Ain Dara temple complex, which serves as a foundational example of Syro-Hittite religious architecture.

The Ain Dara Temple Complex

Located adjacent to the village of Ain Dara, approximately 5 kilometers south of Afrin City and 67 kilometers northwest of Aleppo, the Ain Dara temple is a monumental Iron Age sanctuary⁷. The site sits on a naturally elevated terrain of 1,000 square meters surrounded by fertile plains, with the Afrin River flowing to its west⁷. Discovered fortuitously in 1955 following the unearthing of a colossal basalt lion, the site was excavated extensively by archaeologists including Maurice Dunand, Feisal Seirafi, and Ali Abu Assaf⁷.

Architecturally, the temple was constructed in three distinct structural phases spanning from

1300 BC to 740 BC: the first phase (1300–1000 BC), the second phase (1000–900 BC), and the third phase (900–740 BC)¹⁴. The structure occupies a footprint of 30 meters by 20 meters (600 square meters) and faces southeast¹⁴. It is universally noted by archaeologists for its striking layout similarities to the biblical First Temple of Solomon, specifically in its tripartite longitudinal plan consisting of an open portico, a middle antechamber, and an inner sanctum sanctorum¹⁴.

The exterior courtyard, paved with sandstones and flagstones, features a chalkstone basin utilized for ceremonial purification¹⁴. The entrance portico is flanked by massive basalt piers and decorated with reliefs of lions, sphinxes, and cherubim, reflecting the protective magical traditions of the "mountain people" designed to ward off malevolent forces⁷. The middle room, measuring 6 meters by 15.5 meters, is lined with guilloché patterns and panels resembling windows, leading into the square main hall (16 by 16 meters) which features an elevated podium and carved sockets indicative of a former wooden screen¹⁴.

The most singular theological feature of the Ain Dara temple consists of giant footprints deeply carved into the limestone thresholds. A pair of bare footprints, each measuring approximately 1 meter in length, marks the portico, followed by single alternating footprints striding toward the throne room. These are theorized to represent the physical manifestation of the presiding deity—likely Ba'al Hadad or the goddess Ishtar—entering the inner sanctum⁷.

Despite surviving for over three millennia, the Ain Dara temple suffered catastrophic damage during military bombardments in early 2018. The structural integrity of the main beam-supported roof collapsed, and the ancient basalt guardian lions and sphinxes were severely fragmented, effectively reducing the active archaeological shrine to ruins⁷.

Christian Monastic Shrines and Ascetic Sites

The topography of Afrin, specifically its mountainous ridges, fostered the development of early Christian asceticism. The region contains several key shrines linked to the Syriac and Maronite traditions, as well as the unique practices of the Stylite monks.

The Tomb of St. Maron and the Julianos Church (Barad)

Situated in the mountainous village of Barad (Brad) in the Sherawa subdistrict, northwest of Aleppo, lies one of the most historically significant Christian shrines in the Levant¹⁷. Barad, classified as part of the UNESCO World Heritage "Dead Cities," contains an expansive archaeological complex including a large public bathhouse, a tetrapylon, and multiple Byzantine basilicas¹⁷.

About 1,200 meters southwest of the main village site sits Qasr al-Barad, an ancient monastery containing the Julianos Church (built around 561 AD) and the reputed Tomb of St. Maron, a 5th-century ascetic monk whose teachings foundational to the Maronite Catholic Church¹⁷. The shrine has historically functioned as a vital pilgrimage terminus. As recently as 2010, high-profile delegations of Lebanese Maronites traversed the old routes connecting Aleppo and Afrin to venerate the tomb, celebrating the 1600th anniversary of the saint's death¹⁷. In March 2018, the Barad complex, including the tomb of St. Maron and the Julianos Church, was

struck by artillery fire, resulting in substantial structural damage, though the exact attribution of the bombing remains a subject of geopolitical dispute¹⁷.

The Qaziqli Shrine

Located atop Mount Qazaqli amid a dense pine forest and ancient Greek archaeological ruins, the Qaziqli shrine highlights a different form of Christian devotion⁶. The shrine consists of a small, square-shaped room. Its nomenclature is derived from the word "Qaziq," which translates to "pillar" in local dialects⁶. This etymology directly links the shrine to the Stylites, a sect of Christian monks who practiced extreme asceticism by living and worshipping atop stone columns. It is highly probable that the shrine was built to inter a specific Stylite monk who worshipped on a pillar at that exact geographic coordinate, a practice that persisted in the Afrin region until the 15th century AD⁶.

Islamic Maqams and Sufi Mausoleums

The Islamic sacred landscape of Afrin is heavily influenced by Sufi mysticism and folk traditions. These shrines frequently blur the boundaries between orthodox theology and local agrarian rites, utilizing the physical environment—such as ancient trees, natural springs, and high elevations—as integral components of worship.

The Mosque and Mausoleum of Prophet Huri (Nebi Huri / Cyrrhus)

The Nebi Huri complex, situated at the archaeological site of Cyrrhus near the Syro-Turkish border, is an architectural palimpsest reflecting centuries of religious turnover⁴. The foundational core of the shrine is a hexagonal tower tomb topped with a pyramidal roof, constructed during the 2nd or 3rd century BCE under the Roman Empire, ostensibly to house a Roman military commander⁴. The structure survived a massive earthquake in 1140 CE during the Crusader period⁴.

In 1303 CE, under the dominion of the Mamluk Sultanate, the Roman tower was re-appropriated and converted into a Muslim shrine dedicated to Nebi Huri, a Sufi saint venerated by locals for his purported ability to grant the sincere wishes of pilgrims⁴. The adjacent Roman cemetery was subsequently utilized for Muslim burials⁴. In 1314 CE, Ala ad-Din ibn Altunbugha, the Mamluk governor of Aleppo, constructed a mosque adjacent to the hexagonal tower⁴. During the Ottoman era in 1875, the Mamluk mosque was demolished and replaced with a congregational mosque designed to accommodate regional Friday prayers⁴. The physical continuity of the Nebi Huri shrine was severely disrupted during the 2018 military offensive. Armed factions ransacked the hexagonal tomb in search of buried antiquities, overturning the wooden cenotaph covering the grave of Nebi Huri and strewing rubbish across the sanctuary floor⁴. In 2020, Turkish authorities initiated a reconstruction project, incorporating the mausoleum into a larger mosque complex⁴. However, this restoration was criticized by heritage monitors for replacing historical Mamluk artifacts with new wooden features, including an Ottoman-style minbar, effectively engaging in the "Ottomanization" of the Syrian historical site while erasing its earlier layered identities⁴.

Shrine of Abdul Rahman bin Awf

Located north of the village of Sheikh Abdulrahman in the Jindires subdistrict, this expansive shrine sits near an ancient hill, a historic graveyard, and a copious natural spring²³. The structure consists of two primary sections, with the western part housing the tomb itself²⁴. Adjacent to the tomb rests a black stone bearing an Ottoman inscription dedicating the site to "Abdul-Rahman Bin Awf," a renowned companion of the Prophet Muhammad²⁴. Despite this inscription, historical consensus indicates that the companion never traveled to or fought in the Afrin region, suggesting the dedication is purely symbolic or mythical²³.

Irrespective of its historical provenance, the shrine operated as one of the most sociologically powerful pilgrimage sites in the Afrin district, drawing visitors from across the Aleppo governorate²³. It functioned primarily as a center for fertility and agricultural rites. Women experiencing infertility would visit the shrine to offer animal sacrifices, take blessed soil from the tomb's vicinity, and seek blessings from the green cloth draped over the cenotaph²³. Conversely, soil from specific adjacent sites was sometimes consumed as a folk remedy for contraception²³. Furthermore, the shrine facilitated localized augury; pilgrims would attempt to stick small stones to the exterior walls of the shrine. If the stone adhered, it was believed the shrine would facilitate the fulfillment of their wish²³.

Shrine of Muhammad Ali

Positioned in a heavily wooded valley of oak and olive trees between the villages of Holilo and Kuran within the Rajo subdistrict, the Shrine of Muhammad Ali exemplifies the integration of nature into sacred space²⁴. The complex consists of two main rooms: one housing the tomb of the saint, which is adorned with green fabrics, and a secondary room functioning as a small mosque for prayer and Quranic recitation²⁶.

The site's folklore is deeply ingrained in the physical landscape. An ancient tree adjacent to the graveyard is decorated with thousands of small, green cloth ribbons tied by pilgrims making vows or seeking to "untie a knot" in their personal lives²⁴. Traditional religious law enforced a strict taboo prohibiting the hunting of birds or the harming of wildlife within the shrine's perimeter, recognizing the entire valley as a sacrosanct zone²⁶. Pilgrims traditionally prefer Wednesdays for visitations, offering sacrifices to ward off disease and misfortune, and seeking the psychological comfort of the isolated sanctuary²⁴.

Minor Islamic and Sufi Sanctuaries

The broader Afrin region contains numerous other Islamic maqams and tombs, though documentation regarding their architectural specifics is limited. Many of these sites have been subjected to illegal excavations by armed factions seeking subterranean artifacts.

- **Shrine of Brim and Sadiq (Qatmah):** Located northwest of the village of Qatmah, this Islamic sanctuary and its surrounding cemetery were reportedly excavated, vandalized, and looted²².
- **Shrine of Sheikh Rashid:** A localized mausoleum serving the village of Ba'dinli²².

- **Shrine of Sheikh Abdul Qadir (al-Kilani):** Located in the village of Zarifa (Türandah), indicating the historical reach of the Qadiriyya Sufi order into the Afrin countryside. The site was reported vandalized and looted²².

The "Dada" Shrines of the Alawite Tradition

The Alawite community in Afrin, concentrated primarily in the Maabatli (Mobato) subdistrict, maintains a distinct religious topography⁶. The Alawites of Afrin migrated to the Kurd Dagh region hundreds of years ago to escape persecution during the Ottoman era⁶. Their sacred sites are uniquely identifiable by the suffix "Dada," a title denoting a revered cleric, elder, or holy patriarch within the localized Alawite doctrine⁶.

The Aslan Dada Shrine

Located near the village of Jolaqa, the Aslan Dada shrine operates as a critical intercessory site for the local population⁶. The shrine is renowned for fertility rites, specifically sought out by families desiring male heirs. Anthropological accounts note a common practice wherein male children conceived following a successful pilgrimage and the offering of multiple animal sacrifices are named "Aslan" (meaning Lion) in direct honor of the entombed saint²⁶.

The Ali Dada Shrine

The Ali Dada shrine was a highly prominent, 400-year-old Alawite sanctuary located in the village of Senarê (Sinnara) within the Shaykh al-Hadid (Şiyê) subdistrict, just kilometers from the Syro-Turkish border¹⁰. Surrounded by the "Upper Cemetery" (al-Foqania), the site served the spiritual and funerary needs of the local minority¹¹. Following the 2018 military takeover, the Ali Dada shrine was subjected to total obliteration. Geospatial analysis using satellite imagery from 2017 to 2019 confirmed that the ancient shrine and its surrounding cemetery were completely bulldozed and leveled to establish a temporary military base¹⁰. The physical erasure of the Ali Dada complex represents a stark manifestation of demographic and cultural restructuring in the region¹¹.

Yagmur Dada

Another significant Alawite shrine recorded in the historical texts of the Afrin region, serving as a node in the network of Dada sanctuaries that anchor the community's spiritual identity⁶.

The Yazidi (Êzîdî) Sanctuaries

The Yazidi community constitutes one of the oldest continuous religious demographics in the Afrin region⁶. Yazidism is characterized by a deep, esoteric reverence for the natural landscape, with shrines intentionally positioned on mountain peaks, within oak groves, or adjacent to flowing water⁵. The architecture of a traditional Yazidi shrine in the region typically features a square, windowless stone chamber topped by a tall, fluted, conical dome rising from a circular drum³³. The interiors are designed for quietism, the recitation of sacred hymns (*Qawls*), and the

burning of oil wicks⁵.

The ritual life surrounding these shrines is intricate. It involves the regular visitation of a *P'ir* (a hereditary spiritual guide) who blesses the hearths, bread, and salt of the community through a prayer known as *Du'ā zikātē*⁸. Pilgrimages frequently involve the sacrifice of lambs, the washing of sacred utensils (*tās* and *xādim*), and the lighting of lamps on Wednesday and Friday nights⁵. During the conflict, the Yazidi religious infrastructure in Afrin was systematically dismantled. The Yazidi Cultural Union building in Afrin City, which housed a monument of Laliṣa Nûranî and a statue of Zoroaster, was completely demolished to clear land for a Kuwaiti-funded school¹⁵. Beyond the city center, at least two dozen localized Yazidi shrines were targeted for destruction, illegal excavation, or military appropriation⁹.

Structured Inventory of Yazidi Shrines in Afrin

To effectively convey the density and distribution of the Yazidi sacred landscape, the following table catalogs the documented Yazidi shrines within the Afrin district, detailing their locations, architectural/historical context, and contemporary status.

Shrine Name	Location (Village / Subdistrict)	Architectural, Historical, and Ritual Context	Documented Status
Sheikh Barakat	Mount Sheikh Barakat (bordering Darat Izza)	One of the most prominent Yazidi shrines, situated at a commanding altitude of 870 meters. The site is built upon a 68-square-meter flat courtyard containing the ruins of a Hellenistic/Roman temple originally dedicated to Zeus/Jupiter and Selene. The shrine itself is a square room topped with a dome, featuring an underground vault accessed by four	The shrine was seized, stripped of its Yazidi markers, and converted into a military observation headquarters ¹⁵ .

		steps. The site is highly syncretic, venerated by Yazidis, Muslims, and Druze alike ¹ .	
Gilkhan (Chail Khaneh / Jil Khana)	Qibar	The name translates from local dialects as "Forty Houses" or "Forty Lords" (<i>Jil</i> meaning forty, <i>Khane</i> meaning house or lord). It operated as a central community site for worship, receiving blessings, and quietism ⁵ .	Raided, vandalized, and subjected to illegal excavations in May 2020 ¹¹ .
Sheikh Hameed	Qastal Jando (Qestel Cindo)	A heavily trafficked pilgrimage destination utilized during major religious holidays and festivals. The shrine was surrounded by ancient, venerable trees central to local rites ²⁸ .	Repeatedly targeted by armed factions for antiquities. The shrine was bulldozed, and the surrounding sacred trees were felled ³⁵ .
Barsa Khatun	Qastal Jando (Qestel Cindo)	Located in proximity to Sheikh Hameed, forming a dual-sanctuary complex that anchored the religious life of the village ²² .	Looted and partially destroyed ²⁹ .
Hannan Shrine	Masha'ala (Mashale)	Located on the	Raided and

<p>(Hannana)</p>		<p>main road between Afrin and Aleppo. Originally a small tomb, it was vastly expanded in 1964 by Dr. Nuri Dersimi, who added a minaret, a fence, and transformed it into a mosque. The site houses the graves of Dersimi and his wife. Historical texts, such as those by Ibn Al-Shuhna, link the site to the brother of the Prophet Dawood (David)¹¹.</p>	<p>extensively vandalized in August 2018, targeted for its combination of religious and Kurdish nationalist symbolism¹¹.</p>
<p>Bella Manan (Mannan)</p>	<p>Kafr Jannah</p>	<p>Located on the mountain of Kafr Jannah. The folklore explicitly names Mannan as the brother of Hannan (of the Masha'ala shrine), mapping a familial relationship onto the geographic terrain²².</p>	<p>Vandalized and looted²⁹.</p>
<p>Bir Jafeer (Pir Jafar)</p>	<p>Mashuli</p>	<p>A small architectural structure situated approximately 100 meters northwest of the Hannan Shrine. The title "Pir" denotes a</p>	<p>Vandalized and looted²⁹.</p>

		high-ranking spiritual guide within Yazidi theology ²² .	
Hoger	Qarah Jarnah (Qara Jorni)	Positioned near a valley bridge surrounded by massive sycamore trees. An affixed plaque claims the martyr Hoger was the 11th-century grandson of a Zoroastrian priest from Ain Dara, killed returning from the liberation of Ruha. The site formerly featured a large black stone basin utilized in rituals. Visited primarily on Wednesdays ²² .	Damaged; the historic black stone basin has been removed or destroyed ²⁴ .
Sultan Sheikh Musa	Meydana Plains	Set amidst a graveyard and oak trees. The architecture features large historical stone columns indicating Roman or Byzantine spolia. An Ottoman inscription over the door dates to 1300 A.H. (1882 A.D.). Dedicated to Sheikh Musa Anzali (Anzal represents the greatest of the seven Yazidi	Vandalized and looted ²² .

		flags/angels) ²² .	
Sheikh Junaid	Ras el Ousud / Faqira (Feqîran)	A prominent local sanctuary deeply embedded in the spiritual rhythms of the Faqira community ⁹ .	Desecrated and destroyed ⁹ .
Sheikh Hussein	Qibar & Shadiriya (Shadiri)	Associated with dual locations (or disputes in local nomenclature) between the dense Yazidi enclaves of Qibar and Shadiriya ⁹ .	Looted and destroyed ⁹ .
Sheikh Rikab	Shadiriya (Shadiri)	A sacred tomb seamlessly integrated into the village's spiritual geography, utilized for localized rites and offerings ⁹ .	Vandalized and looted ⁹ .
Malak Adi	Qibar	Dedicated to a central angelic or saintly figure in Yazidi theology, reflecting the broader religious pantheon found in the Iraqi heartlands ²² .	Vandalized and looted ²⁹ .
Burj Jundi (Junaydi)	Qibar	One of multiple shrines located in the village of Qibar, which historically served as a dense hub of Yazidi	Vandalized and looted ²⁹ .

		spiritual activity in the Afrin region ²² .	
Ziyarah Hajari	Qibar	The nomenclature ("Hajari" meaning stone) indicates the shrine was likely defined by a prominent stone monument or foundational structure utilized as an altar ²² .	Vandalized and looted ²⁹ .
King's Shrine	Qibar	A shrine dedicated to an "ordinary king," demonstrating the sociological phenomenon of elevating local royalty or community leaders to saintly, venerated status ⁹ .	Desecrated and destroyed ⁹ .
Sheikh Gharib	Sinkarli (Sinka)	A localized tomb serving the immediate spiritual and psychological needs of the Sinkarli populace ²² .	Vandalized and looted ²⁹ .
Sheikh Ali	Basufan	Central to the spiritual life of Basufan, a village noted for its historically dense Yazidi population ²⁸ .	Vandalized and looted ²⁹ .
Sharaf Din	Pafilion	Named after a highly venerated	Vandalized and looted ²⁹ .

		figure in Yazidi theology. (This mirrors the dedication of the ancient Sharfadin temple in Sinjar, Iraq) ²⁸ .	
Masha'alah Shrine	Masha'ala (Near Hanan)	A localized shrine contributing to the broader sacred complex established around the Hannan site ²⁸ .	Vandalized and looted ²⁹ .
Sheikh Karas	Deir Ballut	Integral to the religious landscape of the western Afrin borders, providing a locus for communal prayer ²⁸ .	Vandalized and looted ²⁹ .
Abu Kaaba	Abu Kaaba village	An ancient site featuring an adjacent civilian cemetery, frequently utilized by the local minority for burials and the veneration of ancestors ¹¹ .	The surrounding cemetery was repeatedly targeted, vandalized, and bulldozed ¹¹ .
Sheikh Qassab	Burj Qas	A prominent tomb providing a spiritual anchor and gathering place for the Burj Qas community ²² .	Vandalized and looted ²⁹ .

Minor and Unverified Shrines

In addition to the heavily documented sites above, numerous other minor shrines across the Afrin district have been recorded in historical surveys and damage reports. The exact

architectural details of these sites are sparse, but they collectively map the pervasive nature of the sacred landscape. These include the shrine of **Sarah Qiz (Sare Qiz)**, the **Iska Village Shrine**, the shrine of **Sheikh Seydi** in Faqira, the shrine of **Sheikh Sivil** in Qibar, the **Jil Bira** shrine in Ma'rata, the **Kharabi Qawala** shrine in Juwayq, the **Sheikh Himmat** shrine in Shinkala, and the **Ziyarat Sheikh Musa** in Midan Akbis²². Reports indicate that many of these minor shrines share the "unknown fate" of their larger counterparts, likely falling victim to the widespread campaign of illegal excavation and systematic erasure²².

Synthesis and Implications

The inventory of Afrin's shrines reveals a landscape where theology is inextricably bound to geography. Whether observing the giant basalt footprints of Ain Dara, the Stylite columns of Mount Qazaqli, the wish-bearing trees of Muhammad Ali, or the conical domes of the Yazidi *P'irs*, the shrines of Afrin demonstrate a profound continuity of sacred space. Different ethnoreligious groups utilized shared physical lexicons—elevated topography, ancient groves, natural springs, and stone altars—to construct a pluralistic environment where cross-veneration (such as at Sheikh Barakat) was commonplace¹.

The documented destruction of over forty specific shrines in the region represents a catastrophic loss of architectural and historical data. More critically, the systematic erasure of Yazidi and Alawite shrines, combined with the structural alteration of Islamic maqams, suggests an intent that surpasses the collateral damage of conflict. By destroying the physical markers of faith—the tombs, the ancient trees, and the ritual stones—occupying forces effectively dismantle the socioreligious anchors of Afrin's indigenous populations, altering the demographic and cultural identity of the region permanently¹¹.

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