

Explorers and Travelers in the Afrin Region Before the French Mandate

1. Introduction: The Afrin Region Before the French Mandate

Defining the Geographical and Historical Scope

The Afrin region, located in the northwestern corner of modern Syria, presents a complex historical geography.¹ Before the establishment of the French Mandate in the early 20th century, this area was not typically defined by the singular term "Afrin region" in European travel literature. Instead, explorers and scholars referred to its constituent parts, most notably the mountainous terrain known as Kurd-Dagh (Kurd Mountains or *Jabal al-Akrad*)² and the valley carved by the Afrin River (historically known as *Oinoparas* or *Ufrenus*).⁴ Central to this region, both geographically and historically, lies the ancient city of Cyrrhus, known locally as Nebi Huri or Khoros (Qorosh), situated near the Afrin River.⁵ This report examines the accounts of explorers and travelers who documented their passage through, or observations concerning, this broadly defined geographical area – encompassing Kurd-Dagh, the Afrin Valley, and the vicinity of Cyrrhus – prior to the imposition of French mandatory rule. The very application of the term "Afrin region" to this earlier period is, therefore, a modern convention used here to delineate the geographical focus, recognizing that historical sources employed different, often overlapping, toponyms.

Establishing the Pre-French Mandate Cut-off

The French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon was formally assigned by the League of Nations following World War I, with administrative control solidifying between 1920 and its official ratification on 29 September 1923.⁷ This period marks a significant political and administrative rupture, ending centuries of Ottoman sovereignty over the region, which had been part of the Vilayet of Aleppo.² Consequently, this report focuses on documented explorations and travels concluded before this transition, effectively covering the period up to the end of Ottoman rule and the immediate post-WWI years preceding the Mandate's full implementation. The establishment of the Mandate represents a crucial historical demarcation.⁷ It signified not only a transition from centuries of Ottoman rule² but also ushered in profound changes to administrative structures, border definitions (such as the new Syria-Turkey border which fragmented the region³), and the very nature of foreign engagement and documentation within the region. Examining the pre-Mandate period allows for an understanding of the area within its distinct Ottoman socio-political context, before the imposition of European colonial frameworks significantly altered governance, access, and the lens through which the region

was often viewed and recorded.

Overview of Exploration Patterns in Northern Syria

Northern Syria, under the Ottoman Empire, particularly the Vilayet of Aleppo, served as a critical crossroads for trade and possessed deep historical and archaeological significance, attracting European attention over centuries.⁹ Early encounters were often incidental, part of larger journeys across the Ottoman domains. However, the 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a marked increase in more systematic exploration. This shift was driven by a confluence of factors: burgeoning European geopolitical interests in the "Eastern Question," the rise of academic disciplines like Orientalism, archaeology, and geography, perceived improvements in travel safety and infrastructure relative to earlier periods, and a romanticized interest in biblical and classical lands.¹¹ Exploration evolved from anecdotal travelogues to more focused scholarly surveys, archaeological reconnaissance, and even quasi-official intelligence gathering, particularly in the decades leading up to World War I.¹⁴

Summary of Key Explorers

The following table provides a consolidated overview of the principal explorers discussed in this report who documented their presence in or near the Afrin region before the French Mandate period.

Table 1: Summary of Key Explorers in the Afrin Region Pre-French Mandate

| Explorer Name | Nationality | Relevant Work(s) & Date(s) | Approx. Travel Period in/near Afrin | Key Observations (Afrin, Kurd-Dagh, Cyrrhus, Inhabitants, Routes etc.) |
|------------------|-------------|---|-------------------------------------|---|
| William Biddulph | British | <i>The Travels of Certain Englishmen</i> (1609), in <i>Purchas His Pilgrimes</i> (1625) | 1599 | Noted "Coords" (Kurds), likely including Yezidis ("worship the Devill"), in mountains between Iskenderun ("Scanderone") and Aleppo (Kurd-Dagh); mentioned Kurdish emirs of Killis. ⁴ |

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|---------------------------|---------|---|--------------|---|
| Johann Ludwig Burckhardt | Swiss | <i>Travels in Syria and the Holy Land</i> (1822) | c. 1809-1812 | Spent extended period in Aleppo preparing for travels; detailed observations of Syrian life and customs; precise route near Afrin unclear from snippets but likely passed nearby or gathered information. ¹⁷ |
| William Francis Ainsworth | British | <i>Travels and Researches in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Chaldea, and Armenia</i> (1842) | c. 1836-1840 | Traversed "northern Syria" and explored "Kurdistan mountains" (potentially including Kurd-Dagh); noted Christian communities. ²⁰ |
| Sir Richard Burton | British | <i>Unexplored Syria</i> (with C.F.T. Drake, 1872) | c. 1869-1871 | Explored "northern highlands" and the "Alah" region of Syria; Kurd-Dagh mentioned in contemporary geographical context. ¹³ |
| Eduard Sachau | German | <i>Reise in Syrien und Mesopotamien</i> (1883) | 1879-1880 | Explicitly mentioned "Kurd-Dagh" (Kurt-Dagh); noted limonitic iron deposits there. ²³ |
| H.S. Cowper | British | <i>Through Turkish Arabia</i> (1894) | c. 1890-1893 | Traveled Iskenderun-Alepp |

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| | | | | o route; explicitly mentioned stopping at "Khan Afrin" in the Afrin Valley. ²⁷ |
| Vital Cuinet | French | <i>La Turquie d'Asie, Tome Deuxieme</i> (c. 1891-1894) | Data collected c. 1890s | Provided administrative/statistical geography of Vilayet of Aleppo; mentioned "Kurd Dagħ," "environs d'Aafrine," and "Afrin Köprüsü" (Afrin Bridge); likely detailed Kaza of Kurd-Dagħ. ²⁹ |
| Gertrude Bell | British | <i>Syria: The Desert and the Sown</i> (1907); <i>Amurath to Amurath</i> (1911); Archive materials (letters, diaries, photos) | 1905, 1909, 1911 | Traveled near Antioch and Alexandretta (1905); journeyed from Aleppo east (1909); archaeological interests suggest potential visit/knowledge of Cyrrhus; archive search needed for specifics on Afrin/Kurd-Dagħ. ¹⁴ |
| Max von Oppenheim | German | <i>Vom Mittelmeer zum Persischen Golf</i> (1899-1900); Archaeological work at Tell Halaf | 1893-94, 1899, 1911-13, 1927-29 | Traveled via Aleppo for Tell Halaf excavations; route likely passed near Afrin region; primary work focused further east. ¹⁵ |
| Franz Cumont | Belgian | <i>Etudes syriennes</i> (1917) | Active early 20th C. | Major scholarly work on Syrian |

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| | | | | history and archaeology, including Cyrrhus, published just before Mandate period. ⁵ |
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2. Early Accounts and Encounters (Primarily Pre-18th Century)

While systematic European exploration intensified in the 19th century, earlier accounts provide glimpses into the Afrin region and its surroundings, particularly concerning the ancient city of Cyrrhus and the presence of Kurdish populations.

Ancient and Medieval Textual References to Cyrrhus

The site known today as Nebi Huri (or Khoros) corresponds to the ancient city of Cyrrhus.⁵ Founded by Seleucus I Nicator around 300 BC, likely named after a Macedonian city, Cyrrhus rapidly gained importance.⁵ Situated strategically near the Afrin River on the route connecting the major centers of Antioch and Zeugma (on the Euphrates), it became a significant administrative, military, and commercial hub under Roman rule following Pompey's conquest of Syria in 64 BC.⁵ It served as a base for the Roman legion Legio X Fretensis and minted its own coinage.⁵ The city's importance is underscored by Roman and Byzantine efforts to fortify and embellish it, particularly under Emperor Justinian in the 6th century CE.⁵ In the Byzantine period, Cyrrhus, then also known as Hagioupolis ("Holy City"), became a major Christian pilgrimage destination.⁶ This sanctity derived from its possession of the relics of Saints Cosmas and Damian, martyrs believed to have been killed nearby around 283 CE, whose bodies were transported to the city.⁵ A magnificent basilica was constructed to house these relics.⁵

Following the Arab conquest in 637 CE, the city became known as Qorosh.⁵ While it continued to function as a military station, its prominence gradually declined.⁶ Nevertheless, accounts from Muslim travelers in the 13th and 14th centuries still described it as a substantial, though partially ruined, city.⁵ The later veneration of a medieval mausoleum (originally a Roman tower tomb) dedicated to Nebi Huri revived its role as a local Muslim pilgrimage site.⁶ This continuous, multi-layered history—spanning Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods—provided a rich historical tapestry for later European explorers to encounter and interpret. It demonstrates that Cyrrhus was not a forgotten ruin but a place with sustained, albeit evolving, significance over millennia.

William Biddulph (1599)

One of the earliest specific European accounts referencing the inhabitants of the mountainous area associated with Afrin comes from the English traveler William Biddulph. His

journey in 1599, documented in works such as *The Travels of Certain Englishmen* (published 1609) and later incorporated into Samuel Purchas's collection *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625)⁴¹, provides a crucial data point.

Biddulph recorded his passage between "Scanderone" (Iskenderun, on the Mediterranean coast) and Aleppo. He explicitly noted: "In the MountainDevill..".⁴ The geographical description—mountains between Iskenderun and Aleppo—clearly points to the Kurd-Dagh range, a core part of the broader Afrin region. The term "Coords" is an early English phonetic rendering of "Kurds." Biddulph's observation thus provides direct, early English-language evidence for a significant Kurdish presence specifically located in this mountainous area at the turn of the 17th century, centuries before more detailed ethnographic surveys were conducted.

His remark that these "Coords" "worship the Devill" is a common, albeit pejorative and inaccurate, description historically applied by outsiders to practitioners of the Yezidi faith.⁴

The presence of Yezidis in the Afrin/Kurd-Dagh area is corroborated by later sources.¹

Biddulph's account, therefore, despite reflecting the biases and misunderstandings common among European travelers of his era regarding non-Christian faiths, serves as a valuable early indicator of the region's long-standing religious diversity, specifically pointing to a likely Yezidi Kurdish population in the Kurd-Dagh.

Furthermore, Biddulph mentioned the Kurdish emirs of Killis (Kilis), a town proximate to the Afrin region, and their descendants, the Janbulad (Canpolat) family.¹⁶ This reference highlights the established political power and influence of Kurdish notable families in the immediate vicinity during the early Ottoman period, reinforcing the picture of a region with a significant and historically rooted Kurdish element.

3. Pioneering Explorers of the 18th and 19th Centuries

The 18th and, particularly, the 19th centuries saw an increase in European travelers venturing into Ottoman Syria, driven by diverse motivations including trade, diplomacy, missionary work, antiquarianism, and burgeoning scientific disciplines like geography and archaeology. Their accounts began to provide more detailed, though still subjective, descriptions of the land and its peoples, including the area encompassing Afrin and Kurd-Dagh.

Johann Ludwig Burckhardt (c. 1809-1812)

The Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, renowned for his rediscovery of Petra and travels in Arabia, spent a crucial preparatory period in Northern Syria.¹⁷ Arriving in Aleppo around 1809, he dedicated over two years to mastering Arabic language and Islamic customs, living among the local population under the assumed identity of Sheikh Ibrahim Ibn Abdallah.¹⁷ This deep immersion was intended to allow him to travel undetected through Muslim lands. His posthumously published *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (1822) details his subsequent journeys southward from Aleppo in 1812.¹⁸ While the available summaries do not explicitly confirm his passage through Kurd-Dagh or mention Cyrrhus, his extended residency in Aleppo, the regional hub, combined with his meticulous approach and method of traveling

incognito, makes it highly probable that he gathered information about the surrounding districts, including the Afrin area, and potentially traversed routes passing near or through it. His work remains a valuable source for the social and cultural landscape of early 19th-century Syria.

William Francis Ainsworth (c. 1836-1840)

William Francis Ainsworth, a British surgeon, geologist, and geographer, traveled extensively in the region as part of expeditions, including one under Francis Rawdon Chesney exploring the Euphrates and another focused on the Christian communities of Chaldea.²⁰ Around 1840, his route took him through Asia Minor, the Taurus Mountains, and significantly, across "northern Syria" to Mosul.²⁰ During the summer of 1840, he specifically "explored the Kurdistan mountains" before continuing through Armenia.²⁰ His *Travels and Researches in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Chaldea, and Armenia* (1842) resulted from these journeys. The term "Kurdistan mountains" as used in this context likely encompassed parts of the Taurus/Zagros systems, but given his passage through northern Syria, it may well have included explorations within or observations pertaining to the Kurd-Dagh area. His stated focus on Christian communities also holds relevance for the Afrin region, known to have historical Christian populations.¹ Ainsworth's scientific background suggests his observations might offer insights into the geology and geography of the areas he traversed.

Sir Richard Burton (c. 1869-1871)

The famed British explorer, linguist, and diplomat Sir Richard Burton served as British Consul in Damascus from 1869 to 1871.¹² During this period, he undertook several journeys into less-documented parts of Syria, collaborating primarily with Charles F. Tyrwhitt Drake. Their findings were published in the two-volume work *Unexplored Syria* (1872).¹³ Volume 2 explicitly deals with travels through the "northern highlands" and an area Burton and Drake termed the "Aláh or 'highland' of Syria".²² The precise geographical definition of the "Aláh" requires careful examination of the text, but its description as part of the "northern highlands" suggests potential overlap with or proximity to the Kurd-Dagh/Afrin region.²² Furthermore, the 1911 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, in its entry on Syria's geography, explicitly mentions the "Kurd Dag" as a significant range in the north, part of the eastern mountain system defining the Orontes valley, placing it firmly within the geographical knowledge accessible during and shortly after Burton's time.²¹ Burton's work, known for its detailed ethnographic and anthropological observations, could potentially contain valuable information on the inhabitants and conditions of these northern Syrian highlands during his consulship.

Eduard Sachau (1879-1880)

The German Orientalist Eduard Sachau traveled through Syria and Mesopotamia in 1879-1880, publishing his experiences in *Reise in Syrien und Mesopotamien* (1883).²³ Sachau's account is significant for its explicit references to the "Kurd-Dagh" (also spelled Kurt-Dagh).²⁴ He specifically noted the presence of limonitic iron ore deposits within these mountains, offering

an early observation on the region's potential mineral resources.²⁵ His work confirms the use of "Kurd-Dagh" as a recognized toponym by European scholars in the late 19th century and directly associates it with geological features. While his broader reflections on "Oriental" versus "Occidental" mentalities reflect common intellectual tropes of the era⁵¹, his specific geographical and geological notes on Kurd-Dagh are pertinent.

H.S. Cowper (c. 1890-1893)

H.S. Cowper, a British traveler journeying from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf via the Euphrates and Tigris valleys, provides direct evidence of passage through the Afrin Valley.²⁷ His book, *Through Turkish Arabia* (1894), details his itinerary in Chapter II, covering the route "Scanderun to Aleppo".²⁷ Crucially, this itinerary explicitly lists "Khan Afrin" as a stopping point between Hammam and Aleppo.²⁷ A "khan" denotes a caravanserai or roadside inn, a vital piece of travel infrastructure on major routes. The existence of Khan Afrin confirms that the Afrin Valley was part of the established overland route between the port of Iskenderun and the major inland city of Aleppo. This indicates the valley was a regularly traversed corridor, facilitating trade and communication, and placing it within the sphere of routine travel and commerce, distinct perhaps from the more remote mountainous hinterlands of Kurd-Dagh. Cowper's detailed observations regarding Khan Afrin itself, the surrounding landscape, the Afrin River, and any encounters with local inhabitants would provide valuable insights into the area in the early 1890s (though full text access is required for these specifics²⁷).

Vital Cuinet (c. 1890s)

Vital Cuinet, a French geographer, undertook the ambitious project of compiling a detailed administrative, statistical, descriptive, and economic geography of the Ottoman Empire's Asian provinces, published as *La Turquie d'Asie* (c. 1891-1894).²⁹ Volume Two of this work is dedicated to the Vilayet of Aleppo.³⁰ Cuinet's work is particularly important as it likely reflects Ottoman administrative divisions and data, albeit potentially subject to limitations imposed by authorities.²⁹ Sources indicate that Cuinet's work mentions the "Kurd Dagh"³⁰ and, significantly, refers to "Kurd Dagh et environs d'Aafrine" (Afrin).³³ This suggests that Kurd-Dagh may have been recognized as a distinct administrative unit, possibly a *kaza* (district), within the Aleppo Vilayet, and that its association with the Afrin area was acknowledged. Cuinet also noted the "Afrin Köprüsü" (Afrin Bridge), further pinpointing the area.³¹ His work, if fully accessible, would be expected to provide valuable statistics and descriptions regarding the population (potentially broken down by ethnicity or religion), administrative structure, agriculture, and economy of the Kurd-Dagh/Afrin area in the late 19th century.⁵⁶

The collective work of these 19th-century explorers demonstrates a growing European awareness and documentation of the Afrin region, primarily under the designation "Kurd-Dagh." The consistency in the use of this toponym across different nationalities and contexts (scholarly, diplomatic, geographical) suggests it held both local and official currency, signifying a recognized geographical area associated with a notable Kurdish presence. This

period marks a transition from sporadic mentions to more systematic, albeit still externally driven, efforts to map, describe, and analyze this part of Northern Syria.

4. Explorations in the Early 20th Century (Until c. 1920)

The final decades of Ottoman rule saw continued, and in some ways intensified, European exploration and scholarly activity in Northern Syria, driven by archaeological fervor, strategic interests related to projects like the Baghdad Railway, and the escalating geopolitical tensions leading up to World War I.

Gertrude Bell (1905 onwards)

Gertrude Bell, a prominent British figure known for her roles as a writer, traveler, archaeologist, and later, political officer, made several significant journeys through Syria in the early 20th century.¹⁴ Her 1905 expedition, documented in *Syria: The Desert and the Sown* (1907), involved traveling from Jericho to Antioch.³⁴ This route, passing through major centers like Damascus and Beirut, also brought her to Antioch and Alexandretta (Iskenderun), placing her in the immediate vicinity of the Afrin region.¹⁴ Her later journey in 1909, described in *Amurath to Amurath* (1911), began in Aleppo and proceeded eastwards along the Euphrates.³⁵ While these published works provide rich descriptions of the broader Syrian landscape and its peoples, specific mentions of Kurd-Dagh, Afrin, or Cyrrhus require closer examination of the texts or her extensive archive.

Bell's deep interest in archaeology, demonstrated by her visits to sites like Carchemish (near the Syrian-Turkish border, east of Afrin)¹⁴ and her funding of excavations elsewhere¹⁴, makes it plausible that she would have been aware of or potentially visited the significant ruins of Cyrrhus (Nebi Huri). The Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University, containing thousands of letters, diary entries, and photographs, represents a crucial resource.³⁶ A targeted search within this archive for terms like "Kurd Dagħ," "Afrin," "Cyrrhus," "Nebi Huri," or "Qyrrhus," particularly relating to her 1905 and 1909 journeys, is necessary to uncover her specific observations about this area.³⁶ Her work is cited in relation to Antioch's general description⁶¹, confirming her presence and documentation activities in the broader region. Bell's later political role adds another layer to her travels, as her knowledge and contacts gathered during these pre-war explorations became highly influential in British policy-making during and after WWI.¹⁴

Max von Oppenheim (Late 19th/Early 20th Century)

Baron Max von Oppenheim, the German diplomat and archaeologist, was active in Northern Syria around the turn of the century.¹⁵ His travels in 1899, undertaken partly in connection with planning for the Baghdad Railway, took him via Aleppo towards northern Mesopotamia, leading to his discovery of the major archaeological site of Tell Halaf (ancient Guzana).¹⁵ His extensive excavations there occurred in 1911–13 and 1927–29.¹⁵ His earlier two-volume travelogue, *Vom Mittelmeer zum Persischen Golf durch den Haurān, die Syrische Wüste und Mesopotamien* (1899–1900), documents his journeys from the Mediterranean eastward.³⁷

Given that his route passed through Aleppo and his interests lay in the archaeology and ethnography of Northern Syria and Mesopotamia, it is conceivable that his travels or inquiries touched upon the Kurd-Dagh/Afrin region, which lies geographically between the Mediterranean coast and his primary area of focus further east. His work reflects the increasing German interest and influence in the Ottoman Empire during this period, tied to major infrastructure projects like the railway.¹⁵

Franz Cumont (Active Early 20th Century)

The Belgian classical archaeologist and historian Franz Cumont made significant contributions to the study of Roman Syria. His work *Etudes syriennes*, published in Paris in 1917, is considered a key resource for the history and archaeology of Cyrrhus.⁵ Published just as the Ottoman Empire was collapsing and before the Mandate system was fully established, Cumont's study represents a culmination of pre-Mandate European scholarship on the site. His collaboration with the University of Chicago's expedition at Dura-Europos further attests to his active research presence in Syria during this critical period.³⁸ Cumont's work likely synthesized existing knowledge and his own observations on Cyrrhus, providing a scholarly baseline for the site's condition and interpretation on the eve of the Mandate era.

Other French Travelers and Archaeologists

French interest in the historical sites of Northern Syria, particularly those with Roman, Crusader, or early Christian connections, was notable in the period leading up to the Mandate.¹¹ Travelers like Constantin François de Chassebœuf (Volney), Jean-Joseph-François Poujoulat, Emile Le Camus, and Maurice Barrès visited Antioch between the 1780s and 1914, often interpreting the contemporary state of the region through an Orientalist lens that contrasted perceived Ottoman/Islamic "decadence" with past Greco-Roman or Crusader "glory".¹¹ While primarily focused on Antioch, their journeys or regional descriptions might contain references relevant to nearby areas like Cyrrhus or the routes passing through the Afrin vicinity. Furthermore, the work of French archaeologist Edmond Frézouls at Cyrrhus, although potentially spanning the transition into the Mandate period, points to early French archaeological engagement with the site beyond Cumont's historical studies.⁵ This sustained French interest laid groundwork for the more intensive archaeological work that would occur under the subsequent French Mandate.

The explorations of the early 20th century, therefore, represent a continuation and intensification of 19th-century trends. Figures like Bell and von Oppenheim combined travel with archaeological investigation, often operating with semi-official backing or connections that reflected the growing strategic importance of the region to European powers.¹⁴ Their work, alongside dedicated scholars like Cumont, contributed significantly to the European understanding—and documentation—of Northern Syria's geography, history, and peoples immediately prior to the profound political transformations brought about by World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.

5. Thematic Analysis of Explorers' Observations

Synthesizing the accounts of various explorers who traversed or described the Afrin/Kurd-Dagh region before the French Mandate reveals recurring themes regarding its landscape, inhabitants, archaeological heritage, and position within regional networks.

Landscape and Geography

- **Kurd-Dagh (Kurd Mountains):** Consistently identified as a distinct mountainous area.⁴ Early accounts like Biddulph place the "Coords" here, between Iskenderun and Aleppo.⁴ Later explorers like Sachau noted its geological features, specifically iron deposits²⁵, while Cuinet linked it administratively and geographically to the environs of Afrin.³³ The 1911 *Encyclopædia Britannica* described it as a Tauric offshoot defining the eastern Orontes valley.²¹
- **Afrin River and Valley:** The Afrin River (ancient Oinoparas/Ufrenus, sometimes identified with the classical Marsyas) is intrinsically linked to the location of Cyrrhus.⁴ The valley served as a transit corridor, evidenced by H.S. Cowper's stop at "Khan Afrin" on the Iskenderun-Aleppo road²⁷ and Cuinet's mention of an "Afrin Bridge".³¹
- **Cyrrhus (Nebi Huri):** Situated in what was described as a rich agricultural area near the Afrin River.⁵ The site itself was noted for its substantial ruins spanning multiple historical periods.⁵

Peoples and Settlements

- **Kurds:** The association of the Kurd-Dagh mountains with Kurdish populations is a persistent theme, documented as early as 1599 by Biddulph ("Coords")⁴ and echoed by 19th-century observers like Sachau, Burton (via geographical context), and Cuinet.²¹ Historical sources suggest Kurdish settlement in the mountains could date back much further, possibly to the Seleucid era², and the prominence of the Kurdish Janbulad emirs based in nearby Killis during the early Ottoman period is well-attested.² The term "Kurd-Dagh" itself implies a strong, recognized ethno-linguistic association with the territory.
- **Yezidis:** Biddulph's 1599 description of mountain dwellers between Iskenderun and Aleppo who "worship the Devill" is widely interpreted as an early, albeit prejudiced, reference to Yezidis.⁴ This aligns with other sources confirming a historical Yezidi presence in the Afrin/Kurd-Dagh area.¹
- **Christians:** The region possessed a significant Christian heritage, centered historically around Cyrrhus/Hagioupolis.⁵ Ainsworth's 1840s exploration specifically noted Christian communities in Ottoman Syria²⁰, and more recent sources confirm Christian families resided in Afrin town¹, suggesting continuity.
- **Arabs and Others:** While specific observations by explorers within the Afrin/Kurd-Dagh area are less detailed in the provided summaries, the broader Aleppo Vilayet contained

diverse populations including Arabs, Turkmen, and Circassians.²

- **Settlements:** Cyrrhus was the major historical urban center. The existence of "Khan Afrin" indicates a significant waystation.²⁷ The modern town of Afrin emerged as a market center only in the 19th century.⁴ Cuinet's work likely contains lists of villages within the Kurd-Dagh administrative area.³²

Archaeological Sites and Antiquities (primarily Cyrrhus/Nebi Huri)

Cyrrhus was the main focus of antiquarian interest. Explorers and scholars documented its multi-layered past:

- **Hellenistic Origins:** Founded by Seleucus Nicator.⁵
- **Roman Era:** Notable remains included a large theatre, two functional Roman bridges over a nearby stream (not the Afrin itself), fortifications, evidence of a colonnaded street, and a hexagonal tower tomb later associated with Nebi Huri, possibly belonging to a Roman commander.⁵
- **Byzantine Era:** Remains included the foundations of a large basilica (associated with SS. Cosmas and Damian) and a citadel built atop the hill behind the theatre.⁵
- **Islamic Era:** The site continued to be known (as Qorosh) and inhabited, though declining. The Roman tower tomb was repurposed as a Muslim shrine (Nebi Huri), and a Mamluk-era mosque was built nearby (later rebuilt in the Ottoman period).⁵
- **Early Scholarship:** Franz Cumont's *Etudes syriennes* (1917) provided a significant pre-Mandate scholarly assessment.⁵

Travel Routes and Infrastructure

The region was not isolated but intersected by important routes:

- The major overland road connecting the port of Iskenderun (Scanderun) with Aleppo passed through the Afrin Valley, marked by infrastructure like Khan Afrin.²⁷
- Historically, Cyrrhus lay on the route between Antioch and the strategic Euphrates crossing at Zeugma.⁵
- The planning for the Baghdad Railway in the early 20th century also involved surveying routes across Northern Syria.¹⁵

Administrative and Political Context (Ottoman Period)

The area fell within the Vilayet of Aleppo.² Vital Cuinet's administrative geography likely detailed the Kaza (district) of Kurd-Dagh, indicating its recognition within the Ottoman system.³² Nearby Killis served as an important administrative center, historically governed by the Kurdish Janbulad family.²

Collectively, these observations depict the Afrin/Kurd-Dagh region before the Mandate as a landscape rich in history, marked by the imposing ruins of Cyrrhus and the enduring presence of distinct ethnic and religious groups, particularly the Kurds in the mountainous Kurd-Dagh. It was a region possessing natural resources like iron ore and fertile land around Cyrrhus, and integrated into regional communication networks via established travel routes. This complex

picture emerges from the piecemeal accounts of explorers with varied interests—from early adventurers like Biddulph noting the "Coords," to geologists like Ainsworth and Sachau observing the land, diplomats like Burton exploring the highlands, travelers like Cowper using the main roads, and scholars like Cumont focusing on the classical past.

A discernible pattern in many European accounts, particularly those focused on archaeology or driven by classical education, involves a tendency to emphasize the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Christian past of sites like Cyrrhus.⁵ While the Islamic history, including the local significance of the Nebi Huri shrine ⁶, was sometimes noted, the primary lens was often oriented towards pre-Islamic antiquity. This reflects broader trends in 19th and early 20th-century European scholarship and Orientalism, which prioritized connections to classical or biblical history, potentially overshadowing the continuity and local significance of later periods in the narratives presented to Western audiences.

6. Conclusion

The period before the establishment of the French Mandate saw a succession of explorers and travelers pass through or document the region encompassing modern Afrin, historically known through toponyms like Kurd-Dagh and the area surrounding the ancient city of Cyrrhus (Nebi Huri). From the early account of William Biddulph in 1599, noting the presence of "Coords" (Kurds), likely including Yezidis, in the mountains between Iskenderun and Aleppo, to the more systematic geographical, archaeological, and administrative observations of 19th and early 20th-century figures like Burckhardt, Ainsworth, Burton, Sachau, Cowper, Cuinet, Bell, von Oppenheim, and Cumont, a fragmented yet valuable picture emerges.

These accounts collectively trace the evolution of European knowledge about this corner of Northern Syria. Early mentions gave way to more detailed surveys focusing on geography (Ainsworth, Sachau), geology (Sachau's note on iron in Kurd-Dagh), ethnography (Burton, Sachau, Biddulph's early note), archaeology (Cumont, Bell, von Oppenheim), and administrative structures (Cuinet). Persistent themes across these diverse accounts include the recognition of Kurd-Dagh as a distinct mountainous region strongly associated with Kurdish populations, the long and multi-layered history of Cyrrhus from its Hellenistic founding through Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods, and the region's function as a transit zone, evidenced by routes like Iskenderun-Aleppo passing through the Afrin Valley (Khan Afrin) and the historical Antioch-Zeugma road via Cyrrhus.

It is crucial, however, to acknowledge the inherent perspectives and limitations of these sources. They are overwhelmingly European accounts, written primarily for Western audiences. Their focus often reflected the prevailing interests of the time – classical antiquities, biblical connections, ethnographic curiosities, or strategic and economic potential – potentially overlooking or misinterpreting local perspectives and the continuity of indigenous traditions and social structures. The identification of Yezidis as "devil worshippers" by Biddulph exemplifies the potential for cultural misunderstanding and bias. The voices of the local inhabitants of Kurd-Dagh and the Afrin Valley during this period are largely absent from this corpus of European travel literature.

Despite these limitations, the pre-Mandate explorer accounts provide an invaluable historical

baseline. They document the region's landscape, settlements, diverse populations (Kurds, Yezidis, Christians, and others implicitly present), and archaeological heritage *before* the profound political, administrative, and demographic shifts initiated by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the drawing of new national borders, and the imposition of French mandatory rule. This collective body of work, generated through a complex interplay of scientific curiosity, personal adventure, economic interest, and burgeoning colonial knowledge-gathering, forms a crucial, if fragmented, archive. It allows for a reconstruction of the Afrin region's characteristics within its late Ottoman context, offering a vital counterpoint to narratives shaped by the later political developments of the 20th century. Understanding the motivations behind these explorations—part of a broader European engagement with the Ottoman Levant driven by imperial ambitions, scholarly trends, and romanticized views of the "Orient"—is essential for a critical interpretation of their findings.

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¹ (Various Wikipedia articles and web sources providing background information, dates, and summaries of primary works or sites).

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