The Ancient Villages ("Dead Cities") of the Afrin Region, Syria: An Archaeological Assessment Before 2010

I. Introduction

A. Defining the "Dead Cities" (Al-Mudun al-Mayta / Al-Mudun al-Mansiya)

Northwestern Syria holds a unique concentration of abandoned settlements, collectively known as the "Dead Cities" (Arabic: المدن الميتة, *Al-Mudun al-Mayta*) or "Forgotten Cities" (المدن المنسية, *Al-Mudun al-Mansiya*).[1] This evocative designation, popularized by early modern travelers and researchers like Joseph Mattern following visits in the 1930s [4], refers to a vast archaeological landscape comprising approximately 700 to 820 formerly inhabited sites scattered between Aleppo and Idlib.[2] While termed "cities," many of these settlements were likely prosperous villages or rural centers rather than urban metropolises in the conventional sense, offering a rare window into agrarian life during antiquity.[2]

Geographically, these settlements are situated within the Limestone Massif (Massif Calcaire), an elevated plateau region characterized by its karst topography.[2] This massif stretches roughly 140 km north-south and 20-40 km east-west and includes several distinct highland areas such as Jebel Siman, Jebel Halaqa, Jebel Barisha, Jebel al-A'la, Jebel Wastani, and Jebel Zawiya.[2] The villages primarily flourished between the 1st and 7th centuries CE, a period spanning the late Roman and Byzantine eras.[2] Their subsequent abandonment occurred largely between the 8th and 10th centuries CE.[2]

A defining characteristic of the Dead Cities is their exceptional state of preservation.[5] This remarkable survival owes much to a confluence of factors. The relatively rapid and widespread abandonment during the early Islamic period meant that structures were not systematically dismantled or significantly altered by continuous later occupation.[5] Furthermore, the primary construction material was the locally abundant, durable limestone, expertly worked by ancient masons, which resisted centuries of natural weathering.[4] Compounding this, the region remained sparsely populated for over a millennium following the abandonment, preventing the large-scale quarrying or reuse of building materials that occurred at many other ancient sites.[7] This unique history resulted in an archaeological ensemble where entire village layouts, including dwellings, churches, temples, baths, cisterns, and tombs, remain remarkably intact, offering an unparalleled glimpse into a bygone era.[2]

B. Significance and UNESCO Recognition (Pre-2010 Context)

The archaeological significance of the Dead Cities was widely recognized well before 2010. They provide an extraordinarily coherent and broad insight into rural life, settlement patterns, agricultural practices, and architectural traditions during Late Antiquity and the Byzantine period.[2] This focus on the countryside offers a crucial counterpoint to the predominantly urban archaeological record typically preserved from this era.[5] The architectural remains, ranging from pagan temples to numerous churches and monasteries, vividly illustrate the profound cultural and religious transition from the Roman Empire's pagan world to the widespread adoption of Byzantine Christianity.[2]

Recognizing this exceptional value, efforts towards international protection began significantly before 2010. The Syrian Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) initiated studies, and international meetings were held starting in 2001, with preparatory assistance provided under a France-UNESCO Cooperation Agreement in 2005.[5] This sustained effort culminated in the inscription of the "Ancient Villages of Northern Syria" on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2011.[5] The nomination dossier defined the property as comprising approximately 40 villages grouped into eight distinct archaeological parks, chosen to represent the diversity and richness of the entire Limestone Massif.[3] The fact that the nomination process was well underway, based on the sites' condition and significance assessed *before* 2010, establishes this period as a critical baseline for understanding their heritage value prior to the subsequent Syrian Civil War, which led to their placement on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2013.[5]

C. Focus on the Afrin Region (Kurd Dagh / Jebel Siman)

This report specifically focuses on the Dead Cities located within the northern portion of the Limestone Massif, an area historically associated with the Afrin region and encompassing the mountain ranges known as Kurd Dagh (Jebel Kurd, or "Mountain of the Kurds") and Jebel Siman (Mount Simeon).[2] Defining precise historical boundaries can be complex, as geographical and administrative designations have shifted over time, and Kurd Dagh is often considered part of the broader Afrin cultural and geographical landscape.[15] The objective here is to synthesize the documented knowledge regarding the ancient villages within this northern zone as it existed and was understood before 2010, examining their specific archaeological characteristics, architectural features, and historical context based on available scholarly and survey data from that period.

II. The Limestone Massif Environment and Economy (Pre-2010 Understanding)

A. Geography and Environment

The setting for the Dead Cities is the Limestone Massif, an elevated karst landscape averaging 400 to 900 meters in altitude.[2] The geology is dominated by limestone bedrock, which weathers into a characteristic reddish soil (terra rossa).[7] A defining feature of the

environment, particularly evident before 2010, is its aridity and the general scarcity of surface water sources.[7] Consequently, settlements were heavily reliant on sophisticated water management techniques. Large cisterns, meticulously cut into the bedrock to capture and store winter rainfall, were essential for domestic use and agriculture, and their remains are ubiquitous across the sites.[2] Evidence points to a well-developed understanding of hydraulic engineering among the ancient inhabitants.[10]

The pre-2010 landscape was largely treeless, dominated by rocky outcrops and grassland, especially vibrant in spring.[7] While potentially different in antiquity, extensive deforestation likely occurred over the centuries. Some natural forest cover, primarily pine and cypress, existed, potentially supplemented by state-sponsored planting efforts in more recent times.[19] Soil erosion is a notable issue in the modern era, suggesting potential long-term environmental pressures.[19]

B. Economic Foundations

The prosperity of the Dead Cities during the Roman and Byzantine periods appears to have rested on a robust agricultural economy, particularly the cultivation of olive trees.[7] The region's Mediterranean climate, with hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters, is highly suitable for olive cultivation.[7] The archaeological record is replete with the remains of numerous stone olive presses, testifying to large-scale oil production.[7] This olive oil was likely a major export commodity, traded through nearby urban centers like Antioch, Aleppo (ancient Beroia), Apameia, and Cyrrhus, and potentially distributed throughout the wider Eastern Mediterranean.[2]

While olive oil was central, the economy was not monolithic. Evidence also exists for viticulture (wine production) and grain cultivation.[4] The presence of stone water troughs suggests that animal husbandry also played a significant role in the agricultural system.[7] The landscape itself, with preserved field boundaries (protective walls and Roman-era plot plans), indicates a high degree of agricultural organization and mastery.[3]

Beyond agriculture, the strategic location of the Limestone Massif was crucial. Situated at a crossroads of trade routes connecting major regional centers, the villages benefited from commerce.[2] Furthermore, the rise of major Christian pilgrimage sites, most notably the shrine of Saint Simeon Stylites at Qal'at Sim'an in the Jebel Siman area, created a significant pilgrimage economy.[3] Villages near these centers likely profited from providing services and lodging (pilgrim hostels) to the influx of visitors.[3] Therefore, the economic success underpinning the remarkable architectural investments seen in the Dead Cities likely stemmed from a combination of specialized agricultural output (especially olives), strategic trade positioning, and the economic stimulus provided by religious pilgrimage, creating a resilient and diversified rural economy.

C. Theories of Decline (Pre-Arab Conquest)

Scholarly understanding prior to 2010 indicated that the economic decline of the Dead Cities began *before* the Arab conquest of Syria in the 630s CE.[4] While the conquest and subsequent

shifts in political power and trade routes under the Umayyads undoubtedly played a role in the final abandonment [2], the initial downturn appears to have earlier roots. The precise reasons remain debated, but hypotheses include gradual environmental degradation, such as soil erosion impacting agricultural productivity [19], potential climatic shifts affecting yields, alterations in long-distance trade patterns predating the conquest, or complex internal socio-economic factors.[2] The nature of the settlements themselves is part of this debate, with some scholars viewing them as settlements of prosperous peasants whose fortunes waned [2], while others emphasize their dependence on trade routes that eventually bypassed them.[2]
The abandonment itself was not a sudden event but a gradual process unfolding over several generations, primarily between the 8th and 10th centuries.[2] This protracted decline suggests a complex interplay of factors rather than a single, abrupt cause like the Arab conquest alone.

III. Society and Religion in the Late Antique / Byzantine Period

A. Settlement Character: Villages or Cities?

A central point of discussion regarding the Dead Cities revolves around their fundamental character: were they truly "cities" or large, prosperous villages? UNESCO documentation and scholars like Chris Wickham emphasize their predominantly rural nature, highlighting their value in illuminating *village* life in Late Antiquity.[2] They represent an exceptional testimony to rural civilizations and settlement patterns.[3]
However, the archaeological evidence suggests a more complex picture. Some settlements possessed features indicative of functions beyond simple agricultural villages. The presence of large public bathhouses (thermae), warehouses, meeting halls (androns), and magistrate's residences in sites like Serjilla and Barad implies a degree of civic organization and potentially administrative or market functions.[2] Barad, for instance, is suggested to have been an administrative center for the Jebel Siman area.[4] The very term "Dead Cities," adopted by early European observers, reflects a perception of monumentality and complexity exceeding that of typical villages.[4] The social structure appears to have included prosperous landowners or peasants capable of investing significantly in durable, well-constructed stone architecture, including substantial villas and numerous churches.[2] Variations in house size and decorative elaboration likely reflect social stratification within these communities.[16]

B. Religious Transition and Christianization

The Dead Cities offer a compelling physical record of the religious transformation that swept through the Roman Near East. Evidence of the region's pagan past exists in the form of Roman temples, some of which were later converted into churches (e.g., Kafr Nabo) or stood alongside newly built Christian structures.[2] The widespread conversion to Christianity occurred primarily during the 4th century CE [3], and the landscape became densely populated with Christian monuments. The sites are considered a prime illustration of the transition from

the ancient pagan world of the Roman Empire to Byzantine Christianity.[2]
A defining feature of this period was the rise of asceticism and monasticism, deeply influencing the region's religious and social fabric. Figures like Saint Simeon Stylites (d. 459), who lived atop a pillar in the Jebel Siman, and Saint Maron (d. 410), the hermit monk associated with the origins of the Maronite Church, became immensely influential.[3] Their lives inspired followers and fueled a powerful monastic movement. This resulted in the construction of major pilgrimage centers, such as the vast complex dedicated to St. Simeon at Qal'at Sim'an, and numerous monasteries, including Deir Seman (the settlement that grew around St. Simeon's shrine) and Qasr al-Barad (associated with St. Maron).[2] The sheer density of churches – estimated at over 2000 in the broader Limestone Massif and reportedly 800 within the diocese of Cyrrhus alone – underscores the depth of Christianization.[6] This intense religious activity also had significant economic repercussions. The development of major pilgrimage cults generated substantial economic activity through the construction of religious edifices and hostels, the movement of pilgrims, and the provisioning of monastic communities, thereby complementing the region's agricultural base and contributing to its prosperity.[3]

IV. Key Archaeological Sites in the Afrin / Kurd Dagh / Jebel Siman Region (Pre-2010)

The northern part of the Limestone Massif, encompassing Jebel Siman and the Kurd Dagh area associated with Afrin, contains numerous significant Dead City sites documented before 2010.

A. Cyrrhus (Nabi Huri / Hagiopolis / Qorosh)

- **Location & History:** Situated approximately 65-70 km north/northeast of Aleppo near the Afrin River and the Turkish border, Cyrrhus was a city of considerable historical depth.[2] Founded around 300 BC by Seleucus I Nicator, it served as the capital of the Cyrrhestica region.[29] Under Roman rule from 64 BC, it became a vital military outpost (housing Legio X Fretensis) and a commercial hub on the route linking Antioch and the Euphrates crossing at Zeugma.[18] During the Byzantine period, known as Hagiopolis ("City of Saints"), it gained prominence as a major pilgrimage destination, housing relics of Saints Cosmas and Damian, and served as an important bishopric fortified by Emperor Justinian in the 6th century.[18] The city declined after the Arab conquest in 637 AD and subsequent capture by Nur ad-Din Zangi in 1150 AD, eventually becoming largely ruinous by the 13th century, though it retained significance as a Muslim pilgrimage site centered on the tomb of Nebi Houri.[29] This long history, from Seleucid foundation through Roman military and commercial importance to Byzantine religious center and later Muslim shrine, demonstrates remarkable continuity and adaptation over millennia.
- **Architecture (Pre-2010):** The site preserved substantial remains. The Hellenistic city plan featured a grid layout with a colonnaded main street (Cardo Maximus) paved with

basalt, running north-south between monumental gates.[29] The most imposing structure was the Roman theatre, dated to the mid-2nd century AD, with a diameter of 112-115 meters, making it one of Syria's largest.[11] Fortifications included Hellenistic walls and a 6th-century Byzantine citadel perched on the hill behind the theatre.[29] Foundations of a basilica near the Cardo were visible, and historical sources confirm a major basilica housed the relics of Sts. Cosmas and Damian.[29] Two Roman bridges, likely 2nd century AD, spanned nearby watercourses and remained functional before 2010.[11] Funerary monuments included a distinctive Roman-era hexagonal tower tomb (2nd/3rd century AD), later integrated into the Nebi Houri mosque complex, and a necropolis area outside the city walls.[34] A Roman house with mosaics and wall paintings (late 2nd/early 3rd century AD) was discovered in 2008 but suffered looting soon after; its valuable mosaics were transferred to the Aleppo Museum for safekeeping before 2010.[36]

- **Archaeological Work & Condition (Pre-2010):** Cyrrhus was the focus of significant archaeological investigation. A French mission, notably led by Edmond Frézouls, worked extensively at the site, particularly on the theatre, from 1952 to 1995.[37] A Syrian-Lebanese mission commenced work in 2006, continuing studies, undertaking restoration, and discovering the Roman house.[36] Key researchers associated with the site include Frézouls, Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais (inscriptions), Pierre-Louis Gatier, and Jeanine Abdul Massih.[38] Before 2010, the site presented extensive ruins. The theatre, though dilapidated, was a major monument, and the bridges were remarkably well-preserved and functional.[29] However, the site had suffered periods of neglect, agricultural encroachment, and some looting, particularly between the cessation of the French mission in 1995 and the start of the Syrian-Lebanese mission in 2006.[29]

B. Barad (Kaprobarada)

- **Location & History:** Located in the Jebel Siman mountains, 32 km west of Aleppo, Barad was a significant Byzantine settlement, listed among the Dead Cities and part of the UNESCO World Heritage property.[2] It is potentially identifiable with ancient Kaprobarada and served as an administrative center for the Jebel Siman region.[4] Its primary historical significance stems from its association with Saint Maron (d. 410), founder of the Maronite Church; the Monastery of Saint Julianus Maronites (399-402 AD), believed to house his tomb, was located here, making Barad a site of Maronite pilgrimage.[2] This connection was highlighted by a visit from Lebanese politician Michel Aoun in February 2010 to commemorate the 1600th anniversary of St. Maron's death.[32]
- **Architecture (Pre-2010):** Barad was noted as the most extensive ancient site in its immediate vicinity before 2010, boasting an important collection of Byzantine structures.[32] Remains included several churches, monasteries (including Qasr al-Barad, 1.2 km southwest), a large public bathhouse, five warehouses, a meeting house, a magistrate's residence, and a tetrapylon.[32] The standout monument was the Cathedral, known as the Church of Julianos, built between 399 and 402 AD.[2] This was a large, three-aisled basilica, one of the earliest of its scale in northern Syria, featuring a

prominent central *bema* (clergy platform).[32] A second large church was constructed in 561 AD.[2] Funerary architecture included a Roman-style tomb and a distinctive baldachin tomb.[4] The construction primarily used carefully cut local limestone, often without mortar.[50]

- **Archaeological Work & Condition (Pre-2010):** The site was documented by major early 20th-century expeditions led by Howard Crosby Butler (Princeton) and photographed by Gertrude Bell in 1905.[32] Georges Tchalenko also surveyed the site in the 1950s.[58] Before 2010, the ruins were generally well-preserved, although some structures showed earlier decay.[50] The modern village was inhabited (population 1,229 in 2004), coexisting with the extensive archaeological remains.[32] Photographs from 2009 confirm the standing ruins of the Julianos Church.[32] Barad's status as an administrative center and potential pilgrimage site suggests it served as a significant hub within the Jebel Siman settlement network, linking surrounding villages economically and religiously.[4]

C. Basufan

- **Location & History:** Situated southeast of Deir Seman in the Jebel Siman region, at an altitude of 632m.[2] The village, inhabited by Yezidi Kurds before 2010 (pop. 901 in 2004), contained Byzantine remains from the 5th-7th centuries.[52] Early 20th-century visitors Howard Crosby Butler and Gertrude Bell documented the site in 1905; Bell noted its use as a summer retreat for Aleppine Christians and Jews renting houses from Kurdish residents.[52]
- **Architecture (Pre-2010):** The primary surviving monument was the Church of St. Phocas, a three-aisled basilica dated by inscription to 491-492 AD.[4] It featured a semi-circular central apse flanked by rectangular side chambers (martyrium to the south) and showed architectural similarities to the nearby Qal'at Sim'an complex.[52] Butler suggested it was part of a monastic complex and also noted remains of an older, destroyed church and a large Islamic cemetery.[52]
- **Archaeological Work & Condition (Pre-2010):** Documented by Butler and Bell.[52] Likely included in Tchalenko's surveys.[58] Before 2010, the St. Phocas church was in ruins but identifiable, situated within the inhabited modern village.[52]

D. Kharab Shams

- **Location & History:** An early Byzantine settlement (4th-7th c.) in the southern Jebel Siman, about 26 km northwest of Aleppo.[24] Part of the Dead Cities UNESCO site.[64]
- **Architecture (Pre-2010):** Dominated by the ruins of a distinctive three-aisled columnar basilica, nicknamed the "Stilts Church" due to its appearance after earthquake damage.[4] Dated by Butler to the late 4th century with 6th-century rebuilding, it stylistically resembles the late 5th-century basilica at Mushabbak.[24] Key features included a round apse (destroyed), square side rooms, a *bema* in the nave (found by

Butler), high nave walls with extensive window openings, and a western narthex.[24] The "stilts" effect resulted from the collapse of the outer aisle walls, leaving the tall nave arcades standing on columns with mixed capital styles.[4]

- **Archaeological Work & Condition (Pre-2010):** Surveyed by Butler around 1900 [24] and likely Tchalenko.[58] Photos from 1999 and 2009 show the basilica in its partially ruined "stilts" state.[65] The settlement itself was in ruins.[24]

E. Ain Dara

- **Location & History:** Located 8 km south of Afrin town, on the Afrin River's east bank.[11] Ain Dara is primarily famed for its significant Iron Age Syro-Hittite temple (c. 1300-740 BC), often compared to the biblical Temple of Solomon.[18] While the site shows occupation from the Chalcolithic to the Ottoman periods, crucial archaeological reports indicate a long period of abandonment spanning roughly 600 years, from the 1st century BCE to the 7th century CE.[71] This timeframe covers the peak period of the Byzantine Dead Cities. A second phase of occupation occurred later, from the 7th to 14th centuries CE.[71]
- **Architecture & Archaeology (Pre-2010):** Pre-2010 documentation overwhelmingly focuses on the Iron Age temple, its basalt reliefs, unique carved footprints, and layout.[18] No specific Byzantine-era structures contemporary with the main Dead Cities period (e.g., churches, villas) are detailed in the available sources, consistent with the reported abandonment phase. Excavations by Seirafi and Assaf concentrated on the earlier temple.[71]
- **Condition (Pre-2010):** The Iron Age temple remains were a well-known archaeological site and a significant tourist attraction before 2010.[70] While geographically within the Afrin region, Ain Dara's main occupation phases and archaeological character differ significantly from the Byzantine settlements that constitute the core "Dead Cities" phenomenon, representing an important but distinct historical layer.

F. Other Sites in Jebel Siman / Kurd Dagh (Brief Mentions, Pre-2010 Status)

A high density of smaller settlements exists in this northern zone, many documented by Butler, Tchalenko, and later surveys. Based on pre-2010 knowledge from the sources:

- **Barjaka / Burj Suleiman:** Ruins include a 6th-century chapel and a monastic tower.[11]
- **Batuta:** Site features a 4th-century basilica with a later *bema*, a dwelling, and a smaller church.[11] Included in UNESCO Park Jebel Sem'an 3.[8]
- **Burj Heidar (Kaprokera):** Contains several churches and Christian structures from the 4th-6th centuries.[4]
- **Deir Amman:** Byzantine village ruins.[79] Site with churches mentioned.[11]
- **Deir Mishmish:** Church site noted.[11]
- **Deir Turmanin:** Site of a very large basilica (similar to Qalb Lozeh) with a double-tower

facade, mostly ruined by 1900.[2]

- **Fafertin:** Location of the oldest dated church (372 AD) in Northern Syria, a semi-ruined basilica.[4]
- **Kalota:** Contains a Roman temple converted to a church, 5th-6th century houses, and two basilicas, including a west church (c. 600 AD) showing signs of decline.[2] Nearby Qalaat Kaluta church complex.[83]
- **Kafr Nabo:** Roman temple converted to church, 5th-6th century houses.[2] Part of UNESCO Park Jebel Sem'an 2.[8]
- **Kimar:** Village near Barad with Byzantine church remains.[32]
- **Mushabbak:** Well-preserved, isolated late 5th-century column basilica.[4]
- **Qal'at Sim'an (St. Simeon Stylites Monastery):** The region's most famous monument and pilgrimage center (late 5th c.).[2] Part of UNESCO Park Jebel Sem'an 1.[8]
- **Refade:** Village with destroyed residences, nearby monastery (Sitt er-Rum), tower, and the oldest dated inscription (73/74 AD).[4]
- **Sheikh Suleiman:** Notable for three ancient churches: ruined central, well-preserved southern basilica (602 AD), and beautiful northern Virgin Mary church (late 5th c.).[2] Part of UNESCO Park Jebel Sem'an 3.[8]
- **Simkhar / Sinkhar:** Contains a 4th-century basilica and residences.[2] Part of UNESCO Park Jebel Sem'an 3.[8]
- **Sugane:** Village with two churches and an old reservoir.[11]
- **Surqaniya:** Byzantine settlement near Batuta.[76]
- **Taqla:** Small Byzantine site near Qal'at Sim'an.[83]

G. Synthesis Table: Key Dead City Sites in Afrin/Kurd Dagh/Jebel Siman (Pre-2010)

The following table summarizes key information for prominent Dead City sites within the geographical focus of this report, based on pre-2010 documentation.

Site Name (Ancient/Modern)	Location (Jebel/Area)	Primary Period (Focus Byzantine)	Key Architectural Features (Pre-2010)	Notable Researchers/Expeditions (Pre-2010)
Cyrrhus (Nabi Huri)	Kurd Dagh / Afrin	Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine	Roman Theatre (112-115m diam.), Hexagonal Tower Tomb, 2 Roman Bridges, Byzantine Citadel, Basilica Foundations, Cardo Maximus, Gates, Roman	E. Frézouls (French Mission), J-P. Rey-Coquais, Syrian-Lebanese Mission

			House (Mosaics)	
Barad (Kaprobarada)	Jebel Siman	Byzantine (Roman elements)	Church of Julianos (399-402 AD, basilica, bema), North Church (561 AD), Qasr al-Barad Monastery, Baths, Warehouses, Magistrate's Residence, Tombs (Roman, Baldachin)	H.C. Butler (Princeton), G. Bell (Photos), G. Tchalenko
Basufan	Jebel Siman	Byzantine (5th-7th c.)	Church of St. Phocas (491-92 AD, basilica, ruins), Older Church remains, possible Monastic Complex, Islamic Cemetery	H.C. Butler (Princeton), G. Bell (Photos)
Kharab Shams	Jebel Siman	Byzantine (Late 4th-6th c.)	Basilica ("Stilts Church", high nave walls, mixed capitals, bema), Narthex remains	H.C. Butler (Princeton)
Barjaka / Burj Suleiman	Jebel Siman	Byzantine (6th c.)	Chapel, Monastic Tower remains	Mentioned in surveys (e.g., Turkish Wiki based on sources)
Batuta	Jebel Siman	Byzantine (4th-5th c.)	Central Basilica (4th c., bema added 5th c.), Dwelling House, Smaller Church	Mentioned in surveys (e.g., Turkish Wiki based on sources), UNESCO Park Docs
Burj Heidar (Kaprokera)	Jebel Siman	Byzantine (4th-6th c.)	Several Churches, Christian structures, Bema Church	H.C. Butler (Princeton), G. Tchalenko (likely)
Deir Turmanin	Jebel Siman	Byzantine	Large Basilica (ruined by 1900),	H.C. Butler (Princeton), G.

			Double-Tower Facade	Tchalenko (likely)
Fafertin	Jebel Siman	Byzantine (Late 4th c.)	Oldest Dated Church (372 AD inscription), Semi-ruined Basilica	H.C. Butler (Princeton)
Kalota	Jebel Siman	Roman, Byzantine (to c. 600 AD)	Roman Temple (converted), 5th-6th c. Houses, 2 Basilicas (West Church shows decline)	Mentioned in surveys (e.g., Turkish Wiki based on sources)
Kafr Nabo	Jebel Siman	Roman, Byzantine (5th-6th c.)	Roman Temple (converted), 5th-6th c. Houses, Olive Press	Mentioned in surveys, UNESCO Park Docs
Sheikh Suleiman	Jebel Siman	Byzantine (Late 5th - 602 AD)	3 Churches (Ruined Central, South Basilica 602 AD, North Virgin Mary Church late 5th c.)	Mentioned in surveys, UNESCO Park Docs
Simkhar / Sinkhar	Jebel Siman	Byzantine (4th c.)	Basilica, Residences	Mentioned in surveys, UNESCO Park Docs

Note: Ain Dara is excluded from this table due to its primary occupation period (Iron Age) and long abandonment during the main Byzantine flourishing of the other Dead Cities.

V. Architectural Styles and Features (Regional Synthesis - Pre-2010)

The Dead Cities of Northern Syria, including those in the Jebel Siman and Kurd Dagh areas, exhibit a remarkably consistent yet evolving architectural repertoire, primarily executed in the readily available limestone. Documentation prior to 2010 reveals distinct characteristics across residential, religious, funerary, and utilitarian structures.

A. Residential Architecture

The standard dwelling was typically a robust, two-story house (occasionally three stories), built using skilled ashlar masonry techniques, often without mortar.[2] These rectangular structures were frequently oriented east-west, likely featured wooden gabled roofs (now

universally absent), and often included an open portico on the southern, sun-facing side.[4] More affluent inhabitants constructed larger villas, sometimes set within walled courtyards as part of agricultural estates, showcasing greater decorative effort on elements like doorways.[9] Examples of such high-status residences were documented at sites like Serjilla and Dellozeh.[16]

B. Religious Architecture: Churches and Monasteries

The region documents the evolution of Christian architecture from simple beginnings to sophisticated basilicas and monastic complexes.[4] The most prevalent church form was the three-aisled basilica, with numerous examples known across the Limestone Massif.[4] These typically featured arcades of columns or piers separating the nave from the side aisles, supporting the upper clerestory walls.[4] Most were single-story, though galleries existed in some.[4] A consistent eastward orientation for the sanctuary was standard practice.[4]

Apse designs evolved, with the semi-circular form being common early on (e.g., Basufan, Batuta, Kharab Shams) [24], while rectangular sanctuaries emerged in the later 5th century.[4] Distinctive features included the *bema*, a raised platform for clergy situated within the nave, found in several churches in the Jebel Siman area (e.g., Barad, Kharab Shams, Batuta, Burj Heidar).[4] Another notable development was the incorporation of twin towers flanking the western entrance facade, famously seen at Qalb Lozeh and also present at Deir Turmanin; this design is considered a precursor to later European Romanesque styles.[4] Architectural decoration, though sometimes restrained, could be elaborate, featuring carved mouldings, capitals (Corinthian, Ionic, Tuscan, and composite forms), decorated lintels, and Christian symbols like the chi-rho.[28]

Overall, the religious architecture displays a distinct regional Syrian character, prioritizing the basilica form and masterful stone construction over the dome-centric styles often associated with Constantinopolitan Byzantine architecture.[4] The influence of these Syrian designs on later European church architecture has been noted by scholars since the early 20th century.[28]

Monasteries formed integral parts of the religious landscape, often comprising churches, cells, and service buildings, as seen at major sites like Qal'at Sim'an and smaller complexes like Qasr al-Barad.[2]

C. Funerary Architecture

Burial practices resulted in a variety of tomb types, including simple sarcophagi, rock-cut chambers, and elaborate built mausolea.[15] Particularly striking are the pyramidal tombs found mainly in the southern parts of the massif (e.g., Al-Bara), possibly inspired by classical precedents like the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus.[3] Variations included pyramids raised on pillars or combined with subterranean chambers.[4] Roman-style tower tombs also existed (e.g., Cyrrhus), alongside enigmatic free-standing Byzantine towers found in villages or fields, some potentially serving as hermitages.[4]

D. Public and Utilitarian Structures

Larger settlements featured public amenities reflecting Roman and Byzantine urban

traditions. Public bathhouses (thermae) have been identified at sites like Serjilla and Barad.[2] Essential communal cisterns, often impressively large and rock-cut, underscore the importance of water management.[2] Structures identified as warehouses or meeting halls (*androns*) point to organized commercial or social activities.[16] The numerous stone presses for olives and likely grapes are direct evidence of the agricultural processing that underpinned the economy.[7]

These diverse architectural elements should not be viewed in isolation. They formed parts of integrated settlements embedded within a carefully managed agricultural landscape. The combination of residential buildings, religious centers, funerary monuments, public amenities, and agricultural infrastructure demonstrates a sophisticated adaptation to the limestone environment and reflects the complex socio-economic system that thrived in the region during Late Antiquity and the Byzantine era.[7]

VI. History of Research and Documentation (Pre-2010)

The study of the Dead Cities, including those in the Afrin/Kurd Dagh/Jebel Siman region, has a long history, with significant documentation compiled well before 2010.

A. Early Travelers and Rediscovery (19th - early 20th c.)

The rediscovery of these remarkably preserved settlements by Western travelers in the 19th century generated considerable academic interest and astonishment, leading to comparisons with Pompeii.[4] Early scholarly work was undertaken by figures such as the Marquis Melchior de Vogüé in the 1860s, whose publications provided initial architectural documentation.[16] Gertrude Bell, the renowned British explorer and archaeologist, traversed the region in the early 20th century (e.g., 1905), capturing invaluable photographs of sites like Basufan and Barad and recording observations about the landscape and its inhabitants.[28] Contemporaneously, Howard Crosby Butler led three major archaeological expeditions sponsored by Princeton University (American Expedition 1899-1900; Princeton Expeditions 1904-1905 and 1909).[55] These expeditions systematically documented numerous sites across northern and southern Syria, resulting in the multi-volume *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria*, including the seminal *Ancient Architecture in Syria*. This work provided detailed descriptions, plans, drawings, photographs, and epigraphic records for dozens of sites, including many in the Jebel Siman area like Fafertin (where Butler found the crucial 372 AD inscription), Barad, Basufan, and Kharab Shams.[4] Butler's archives, housed at Princeton, remain a fundamental resource.[91]

B. Mid-20th Century Surveys

Georges Tchalenko, a Russian architect working with the French Institute of Archaeology in Beirut (IFAPO, later IFPO), conducted extensive surveys primarily from the 1930s to the 1950s.[58] His research culminated in the landmark three-volume publication *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord: Le massif du Bélus à l'époque romaine* (1953-1958), which included detailed textual analysis, site plans, architectural drawings, and photographs.[16] Tchalenko's

work remains a standard reference for the study of the Dead Cities, covering numerous sites including those in the Jebel Siman area.[6]

C. Later 20th / Early 21st Century Work (Pre-2010)

Research continued through the later 20th and early 21st centuries. French missions associated with IFAPO/IFPO, led by scholars such as Georges Tate, Jean-Pierre Sodini, and Jean-Luc Biscop, conducted excavations and studies at key sites like Dehes, Qal'at Sim'an, and Sergilla, focusing on material culture, architecture, and settlement development.[16] Syrian institutions, particularly the DGAM, undertook studies crucial for the UNESCO World Heritage nomination.[5] A joint Syrian-Lebanese mission became active at Cyrrhus from 2006, continuing investigations and undertaking conservation work.[36] Specialized academic studies also advanced understanding, such as Christine Strube's work on architectural decoration and dating.[4]

D. Accessibility and State of Knowledge (Pre-2010)

By the years leading up to 2010, many of the Dead City sites had become more accessible due to improvements in local road infrastructure.[2] Their generally excellent state of preservation facilitated study, although some more remote locations remained challenging to access without guides.[2] Despite decades of research, the sheer number and extent of the sites meant that comprehensive study was an ongoing process, and not all earlier excavation results had been fully published.[4] While the foundational surveys by Butler and Tchalenko provided an immense corpus of data, including detailed plans and photographs, accessing digitized versions of this original material can be difficult, potentially creating a gap between the known historical documentation and its ready availability for contemporary research and comparative analysis.[91]

VII. Conclusion

Prior to 2010, the ancient villages or "Dead Cities" within the Afrin region, encompassing the Jebel Siman and Kurd Dagh areas of the Limestone Massif, were recognized as an archaeological landscape of global significance. Decades of research, from early travelers like Bell and Butler to the comprehensive surveys of Tchalenko and later missions, had documented hundreds of settlements dating primarily from the 1st to 7th centuries CE. These sites stood as exceptionally well-preserved testimonies to the vibrant rural life, sophisticated agricultural economy based largely on olive oil production, profound religious transition from paganism to Byzantine Christianity, and distinctive architectural developments of Late Antiquity in Northern Syria.

Key sites such as Cyrrhus, Barad, Basufan, Kharab Shams, and the numerous smaller villages documented in the Jebel Siman area provided concrete evidence of this historical period. Their architectural remains – including multi-story limestone houses, numerous basilicas displaying evolving styles, monastic complexes, unique funerary monuments, and essential infrastructure like baths and cisterns – offered unparalleled insights into the society, economy,

and beliefs of the time. The international recognition culminating in the UNESCO World Heritage nomination process, well underway before 2010, underscored the perceived value and relatively intact state of these villages. This pre-2010 baseline of knowledge and preservation serves as a crucial benchmark for understanding the rich cultural heritage of this region before the profound impacts of the conflict that began in the following decade.

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