Mount Lelun of Afrin: A Historical and Cultural Geography

I. Introduction: Defining Mount Lelun and its Context

A. Geographical Orientation

The Afrin region, situated in the northwestern corner of Syria adjacent to the Turkish border, constitutes a distinct geographical and cultural landscape.[1] Historically and locally known by various names including Kurd Dagh, Çiyayê Kurmênc, and Jabal al-Akrad, this area forms part of the northern highlands of Syria.[4] Before the establishment of modern national borders following World War I, the region was administratively linked to the town of Kilis, now within Turkey, highlighting its historical connections northward.[3]

Within this broader highland area lies Mount Lelun (Çiyayê Lêlûn), a specific massif located southeast of the city of Afrin and northwest of Aleppo.[9] Geographically, Mount Lelun is often associated with, or considered part of, the Mount Simeon (Jabal Sim'an) massif, forming a plateau-like upland that rises prominently near the Afrin River valley.[5] It represents a key topographical feature within the larger Kurd Dagh (Mountain of the Kurds) highland system.[5]

B. The Politics of Naming: Unraveling Ambiguities

The nomenclature surrounding Mount Lelun and the Afrin region is complex and politically charged, reflecting centuries of shifting power dynamics, cultural assertions, and deliberate state-driven agendas. The very names used to describe this landscape are not neutral geographical labels but carry significant historical and political weight. Names such as Kurd Dagh (an Ottoman Turkish term meaning "Mountain of the Kurds"), Çiyayê Kurmênc (Kurdish for "Mountain of the Kurmanj," referring to the local Kurdish dialect group), and Jabal al-Akrad (the Arabic translation) explicitly link the region to its long-standing Kurdish population.[2] These names, used historically and persisting in local and scholarly discourse, underscore the area's identity as a Kurdish cultural heartland.

However, this identity has been contested through official name changes. In Turkey, the term Kurd Dagh was distorted to Kurt Dağı, substituting "Kurd" (Kürt) with "wolf" (kurt), an apparent attempt to erase the Kurdish association.[5] Similarly, Syrian state policies, particularly during the Ba'athist era known for its Arabization efforts, sought to supplant Jabal al-Akrad. In 1977, under decree 15801 which banned Kurdish names, the mountain was officially renamed Jabal al-`Uruba ("Mountain of Arabism"), and later referred to as "Mount Aleppo" in some contexts, although Jabal al-Akrad continued to appear in some geographical texts.[2] These alterations were not mere administrative updates but deliberate political acts aimed at undermining Kurdish identity and asserting a different national narrative over the territory. The persistence of the Kurdish names among the local population and in independent scholarship

signifies a form of cultural resilience against these pressures.

Further complicating the picture is the distinction between the broader region and specific features. While Çiyayê Kurmênc or Kurd Dagh often refers to the entire Afrin region, in a stricter geographical sense, it designates the massif in the west and northwest extending into Turkey.[5] Mount Lelun, conversely, typically refers to the southeastern highland area associated with Jabal Sim'an.[5] Local usage, however, can sometimes be fluid.[4] A more recent local name, Jabal al-Ahlam ("Mountain of Dreams"), has emerged for a part of the Lelun area, particularly highlighting its strategic location overlooking Afrin city and marking conflict frontlines.[13]

Table 1: Naming Conventions for Mount Lelun and Associated Regions

Name	Language/Origin	Meaning/Context	Period of Use	Key Sources
Çiyayê Lêlûn	Kurdish	"Lelun Mountain"; Etymology debated (unripe olive or linked to god Nabu)	Historical/Current	[4]
Kurd Dagh	Ottoman Turkish/Kurdish	"Mountain of the Kurds"	Ottoman/Modern	[4]
Çiyayê Kurmênc	Kurdish	"Mountain of the Kurmanj" (local Kurdish dialect group)	Historical/Current	[4]
Jabal al-Akrad	Arabic	"Mountain of the Kurds" (translation of Kurd Dagh)	Historical/Modern	[1]
Mount Simeon / Jabal Sim'an	Historical/Arabic	Named after St. Simeon Stylites; often geographically linked/conflated with Lelun	Byzantine/Modern	[5]
Kurt Dağı	Modern Turkish	"Wolf Mountain" (deliberate distortion of Kurd Dagh)	Modern Turkish State	[5]
Jabal al-`Uruba	Arabic/Syrian state	"Mountain of Arabism" (official name under Arabization policy, 1977)	Modern Syrian State	[6]
Mount Aleppo	Arabic/Syrian state	Alternative official Syrian name	Modern Syrian State	[6]

Jabal al-Ahlam	Local Arabic (?)	"Mountain of Dreams" (local name for a strategic part of the area)	Contemporary	[13]

C. Report Scope and Structure

This report aims to synthesize the available historical, geographical, cultural, religious, and mythological information pertaining specifically to Mount Lelun, drawing upon diverse sources including historical accounts, archaeological findings, geographical descriptions, and contemporary reports on the region's recent transformations.[17] It will trace the mountain's story from antiquity to the present day, examining its physical characteristics, its rich archaeological heritage, its historical trajectory through various empires and political configurations, its significance within Kurdish culture and the broader religious landscape, the potential layers of associated folklore, and its current status as a site of conflict and profound change.

II. The Physical Landscape of Mount Lelun

A. Topography and Geology

Mount Lelun forms a distinct highland region within northwestern Syria, constituting part of the extensive Limestone Massif that characterizes the area.[6] It is generally described as a plateau or a low mountain range, marked by relatively moderate elevations compared to higher ranges further north.[5] Average altitudes range between 500 and 550 meters, with prominent peaks like Sheikh Barakat reaching approximately 870 meters.[5] While part of the broader Kurd Dagh system which includes higher basaltic peaks like Hawarê (over 1200m) further west [4], Lelun itself presents a more subdued, rolling topography.[5]
The geology is dominated by limestone formations [6], which have significantly shaped the landscape through dissolution processes. This results in characteristic karst topography, including the formation of caves, such as the Dudêrî Cave, potentially inhabited by Neanderthals [14], and features like the "Gelîkeft sor" or Red Cave Valley, named for the color of its rock.[9] The surface can exhibit a "pitted" or "perforated" appearance due to the prevalence of lapies, intricate patterns formed by water dissolving the limestone.[10] Tectonically, the mountain represents an uplifted block defined by fault lines, likely formed during the Alpine orogeny that shaped many of the world's mountain ranges.[10] The slopes display varied gradients: steep escarpments descend towards the west, facing the Afrin River valley and the valley of the Nahr al-Aswad (Black River), while the eastern flanks slope more gently, merging into the Aleppo plateau.[5] Numerous dry riverbeds, or wadis, dissect the mountain, channeling seasonal runoff.[9]

B. Hydrography and Climate

Mount Lelun is situated in close proximity to the Afrin River, a vital watercourse originating in the mountains of Turkey, flowing south through the Afrin region, and eventually emptying into the Orontes River (Nahr al-Asi) in Turkey's Hatay province.[4] The fertile plain associated with the river valley, known locally as the Cûmê plain, borders the mountain, particularly on its northern side near Qatma and Kafr Janneh, and along its western foot.[4] A significant hydrological feature is the presence of numerous springs emerging from the western base of the mountain, likely fed by water percolating through the limestone massif. Notable among these are the springs at Basuta, Ghazzawiya, Ain Dara, and Taranda, which have historically supported settlement and agriculture.[10]

The climate of Mount Lelun is typically Mediterranean, characterized by hot, dry summers and cool, wet winters.[1] Rainfall, primarily occurring between September and May, averages between 400mm and 550mm annually, placing the region within Syria's Zone 1 category for agricultural stability.[1] Precipitation often arrives with weather systems from the Mediterranean Sea, sometimes manifesting as thunderstorms in autumn and spring.[1] The region experiences prevailing northwesterly winds during the summer months. Winters can bring cold air masses from northern Europe or Siberia, occasionally leading to temperature inversions and severe frosts that can cause significant damage to agricultural crops, particularly olive and pomegranate trees, as documented in events during the late 20th century.[1]

C. Vegetation and Land Use

Historically, parts of Mount Lelun, especially its western slopes and valleys, supported significant forest cover composed of typical Mediterranean species. Dominant trees included various types of oak (Sindian/Balut), pine, wild olive, terebinth (Butm), hawthorn (Za'rur), and sumac.[10] Historical accounts also mention specific sacred groves, such as the Kimar forest and a notable grove of oak, fig, and carob near Kafr Nabu associated with the shrine of Sheikh Qassab.[12] The undergrowth consisted of shrubs and herbs like thyme and chamomile, along with various wildflowers including anemones.[10]

The olive tree is arguably the most iconic and economically crucial plant of the region, with extensive groves covering slopes and plains.[7] The mountain's reddish, relatively thin soils, found mainly in depressions and at the foot of slopes, are well-suited for olive cultivation, alongside cereals, figs, and grapes.[10] Pastoralism, involving sheep and cattle, is also practiced.[10]

In recent years, however, the natural vegetation of Mount Lelun and the wider Afrin region has come under severe pressure. Following the 2018 occupation, numerous reports have documented extensive and often illegal logging operations, leading to significant deforestation and degradation of remaining forest patches.[17] This includes the felling of valuable olive trees, often for timber or charcoal production, which are then sold in local markets or smuggled, severely impacting the local economy and environment.[16]

D. Strategic Significance

The physical geography of Mount Lelun inherently endows it with considerable strategic

importance, a factor that has shaped its history from antiquity to the present day. Its elevated terrain provides commanding views over the surrounding plains, including the vital Cûmê (Afrin valley) plain to the west and north, the Azaz plains to the east, and the approaches to the major city of Aleppo to the southeast.[5] This vantage point makes it a natural location for observation posts and defensive positions. The mountain acts as a natural barrier, channeling movement and controlling access between the coastal regions/Amanus mountains and the Syrian interior.

Throughout history, this strategic value has been recognized. The Romans established a military base at Cyrrhus on its northeastern edge to project power.[3] Its location often placed it on the frontier between competing powers, such as the Byzantine Empire and various Muslim caliphates or principalities.[21] Local accounts describe it as a natural fortress ("hisn manaia") offering protection.[23]

In the context of the Syrian civil war and subsequent Turkish intervention, Mount Lelun's strategic importance has been reasserted. Control of its peaks and slopes offers significant military advantages. During Operation Olive Branch in 2018, securing strategic high points in the Afrin region, such as Mount Barsaya (adjacent to Lelun), was a key objective and site of conflict.[24] More recently, the mountain, particularly the area dubbed Jabal al-Ahlam, serves as a demarcation line between territories controlled by Turkish-backed forces and those held by the Syrian government, Russian forces, or remnants of the SDF.[13] The construction of new settlements on its slopes further underscores its ongoing strategic relevance, potentially serving to consolidate control over this critical terrain.[13] The mountain's geography, therefore, continues to influence military calculations and the political configuration of northern Syria.

III. Echoes of Antiquity: Archaeological Heritage and Early History

A. Deep Settlement History

The landscape around Mount Lelun bears witness to a long and complex history of human settlement stretching back millennia. Archaeological evidence suggests human presence in the wider Afrin region dating back to the early Neolithic period.[8] The discovery of Neanderthal remains in the Dudêrî Cave points to even deeper Paleolithic occupation.[14] During the Bronze and Iron Ages, the area was situated within the sphere of influence of major ancient Near Eastern civilizations and kingdoms. Connections exist to the important city-state of Alalakh (Tell Atchana) in the nearby Amuq Valley, and the region saw the presence and influence of Hurrians, the Mitanni kingdom, and subsequently the Hittites.[3] A tangible link to this era is the Afrin Stele, a fragment of a Luwian inscription from the 9th or 8th century BC found near Afrin city, indicating Syro-Hittite cultural penetration.[3] The region later fell under the sway of successive empires, including the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, Achaemenid Persian, and Seleucid Greek kingdoms.[3]

B. Key Archaeological Sites in the Vicinity

Mount Lelun and its immediate surroundings are exceptionally rich in archaeological remains, particularly from the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods. Several major sites and numerous smaller settlements attest to the area's historical significance:

- **Ain Dara:** Located about 8 km south of Afrin city, this site features the impressive remains of a Syro-Hittite temple complex dating primarily to the Iron Age (c. 1300-740 BC). It is renowned for its unique architectural features, basalt reliefs, and colossal carved footprints at the entrance, possibly representing a deity.[3] The temple suffered significant damage from shelling during the 2018 military operation.[20]
- **Cyrrhus (Nabi Huri):** Situated northeast of Afrin near the Turkish border, Cyrrhus was a major city founded in the Seleucid period. It gained importance under the Romans as a military base for campaigns northward and as the center of the Cyrrhestica administrative district.[3] By the 4th century AD, it became a significant Christian center with its own bishop.[3] Archaeological remains include a Roman theatre, temples, fortifications, and evidence of Christian structures, possibly including a church dedicated to Saints Cosmas and Damian, and the tomb of St. Symeon the Stylite the Younger.[3] Its ancient Greek name, Cyrrhus, was later supplemented by Hagiopolis ("City of Saints").[29] The site has reportedly suffered from looting and damage since 2018.[29]
- **Qal'at Sim'an (Monastery of Saint Simeon Stylites):** Although technically on the southeastern edge of the Jabal Sim'an massif often associated with Lelun, this world-famous site is integral to the region's heritage. It comprises the vast ruins of a 5th-century Byzantine pilgrimage complex centered around the pillar of St. Simeon Stylites the Elder, one of the most influential figures of early Christian asceticism.[3] The complex included four basilicas radiating from the central pillar base, a monastery, baptistery, and associated buildings. In later Islamic periods, it was fortified and became known as Qal'at Sim'an (Simeon's Castle).[21]
- **The "Dead Cities" Zone:** Mount Lelun lies within or directly adjacent to the northern extent of the remarkable limestone hills known for hosting hundreds of well-preserved Late Antique settlements, often referred to as the "Dead Cities" of Syria. Several significant examples are located on or at the foot of Mount Lelun:
    - **Brad (Barad):** A large Byzantine town located southwest of Qal'at Sim'an, featuring the ruins of several churches, funerary monuments, houses, and possibly an administrative building or palace (qasr).[21]
    - **Kafr Nabu:** Situated near Brad, this site contains extensive ruins suggesting a complex history. There is speculation linking its name to the Mesopotamian god Nabu, possibly indicating a pre-Christian temple.[11] Christianization led to the construction of multiple churches, one dated to 398 AD (among the oldest in the region) and another to 525 AD, alongside a monastery tower, a large pilgrim hostel (pandocheion) dated 504 AD, domestic architecture from the 5th century, and an olive press bearing a date corresponding to 224 AD.[21] Medieval Arab geographer Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī mentioned Kafr Nabu, referencing its supposed link to Nabu and

a great dome possibly belonging to the idol's temple.[21] Distinctive headless statues of a seated couple were also found near the church.[21] The nearby shrine of Sheikh Qassab is associated with the site.[12]

- **Basufan:** A village located near Qal'at Sim'an on the slopes of Mount Lelun, containing notable Byzantine-era ruins including remnants of a church, market structures, rock-cut tombs, cisterns, and ancient olive presses.[30] It is also the site of the shrine (mazar) of Sheikh Ali.[30] In modern times, it has been identified as a Yezidi village and was targeted by attacks in 2015.[31]
- General references also point to the existence of numerous other "dead" or abandoned villages, ruins, and ancient olive and wine presses scattered across Mount Lelun, indicating dense settlement and agricultural activity during the Byzantine period.[10]

C. Significance of Archaeological Findings

The remarkable density and state of preservation of archaeological sites on and around Mount Lelun provide compelling evidence of its historical importance as a prosperous and culturally vibrant landscape. The findings span millennia, from the Syro-Hittite influences seen at Ain Dara and in the Afrin Stele, through the Hellenistic and Roman periods marked by urban centers like Cyrrhus, culminating in an extraordinary flourishing during Late Antiquity (4th-7th centuries AD). The numerous churches, monasteries, pilgrimage sites (especially Qal'at Sim'an), and sophisticated rural settlements ("Dead Cities") like Brad, Kafr Nabu, and Basufan demonstrate that this region was deeply integrated into the religious, economic, and social life of Byzantine Syria. The extensive evidence for olive cultivation (presses, groves) points to significant agricultural wealth underpinning this prosperity.[10] Furthermore, the potential traces of pre-Christian worship, such as the suggested Nabu connection at Kafr Nabu [11], hint at processes of religious syncretism and transformation as Christianity became dominant. This rich archaeological tapestry underscores Mount Lelun's position not as a remote backwater, but as a key area within the dynamic civilization of the ancient and late antique Near East. The subsequent abandonment or decline of many of these sites raises important historical questions about the transitions following the Byzantine era.

Table 2: Key Archaeological and Religious Sites near Mount Lelun

Site Name	Location Proximity	Key Period(s)	Significance (Archaeological/ Religious)	Key Sources
Ain Dara	S of Afrin city	Iron Age (Syro-Hittite)	Major temple complex, unique architecture, reliefs, footprints; damaged 2018	[3]
Cyrrhus / Nabi Huri	NE of Afrin city	Seleucid, Roman, Byzantine	Major city, military base, bishopric,	[3]

			theatre, temples, churches (Sts Cosmas & Damian?), St Simeon Younger tomb?	
Qal'at Sim'an	SE edge of Lelun/Jabal Sim'an area	Byzantine (5th C), Islamic	World-renowned pilgrimage center (St. Simeon Stylites), monastery, later fortress	[3]
Brad (Barad)	On Lelun/Jabal Sim'an, near Kafr Nabu	Byzantine	Large "Dead City" town, churches, tombs, possible palace	[21]
Kafr Nabu	On Lelun/Jabal Sim'an, near Brad	Roman?, Byzantine (4th-6th C)	"Dead City", possible Nabu temple link, early churches, monastery, hostel, olive press, statues	[11]
Basufan	On Lelun slopes, near Qal'at Sim'an	Byzantine, Modern	"Dead City" ruins (church, market, tombs, presses), Sheikh Ali shrine; modern Yezidi village	[30]
Dudêrî Cave	Afrin region (precise location unclear)	Paleolithic	Neanderthal remains found	[14]
Sheikh Barakat Shrine	Prominent peak on Lelun/Jabal Sim'an	Islamic?	Venerated Muslim shrine (ziyara) on high point (870m)	[12]
Sheikh Ali Shrine	Basufan village	Islamic?	Venerated Muslim shrine (mazar) within village with Byzantine ruins	[30]
Sheikh Qassab Shrine	Near Kafr Nabu	Islamic?	Venerated Muslim shrine associated with a sacred	[12]

			grove	

IV. A Mountain Through Time: Historical Trajectories

A. Roman and Byzantine Eras (c. 64 BC - 637 AD)

Following the Roman conquest of Syria in 64 BC, the region encompassing Mount Lelun was integrated into the Roman administrative system, initially as part of the province of Syria Coele, and later, its eastern sections may have fallen under Euphratensis province, established in the 4th century AD.[3] The city of Cyrrhus served not only as an urban center but also as a strategic military base for Roman legions conducting campaigns, particularly against the Armenian kingdom to the north.[3] This era likely saw the development of infrastructure, including roads, and the flourishing of agricultural estates (villae), evidenced by the prosperity of the later "Dead Cities."

The Roman and especially the subsequent Byzantine period witnessed the profound Christianization of the Mount Lelun area. Cyrrhus became an episcopal see by the 4th century.[3] More dramatically, the region became a major center for Christian monasticism and asceticism, epitomized by the figure of Saint Simeon Stylites the Elder (c. 390-459 AD), whose pillar near modern Qal'at Sim'an attracted vast numbers of pilgrims.[3] His influence, and that of figures like Saint Simeon the Younger (associated with Cyrrhus/Nabi Huri [29]), spurred the construction of numerous churches, monasteries, and pilgrimage facilities across the landscape, including those documented at Brad, Kafr Nabu, and Basufan.[21] Some accounts suggest figures like Mar Maron were active in converting local populations from pre-Christian beliefs, potentially linking the area to the origins of the Maronite community.[15] During this period, Mount Lelun and its surroundings were undeniably a vibrant and integral part of the Christian Near East, characterized by religious fervor, architectural achievements, and agricultural productivity.

B. Early Islamic to Mamluk Periods (c. 637 - 1516 AD)

The Muslim conquest of Syria reached the Afrin region around 637 AD. Forces under commanders like Abu Ubaidah ibn al-Jarrah and 'Iyad ibn Ghanm secured key locations including Cyrrhus (known as Qurus to the Arabs) and the Juma plain, integrating the area into the administrative district (Jund) of Qinnasrin.[3] The early Islamic period appears to have been relatively stable initially. A notable event during the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750 AD) was the reported resettlement of people known as the Jarajima (possibly related to the Mardaites or early Maronites) from the area of Marash (ancient Germanicia) onto Mount Lelun (Jabal Sim'an) and the nearby Hawar mountain around 707 AD, after their original stronghold was destroyed.[15] This suggests the mountain continued to be seen as a suitable area for settlement, perhaps even for groups with distinct identities.

Later centuries saw the region caught in the conflicts between the Byzantine Empire and local Muslim dynasties like the Hamdanids of Aleppo. Qal'at Sim'an, having been fortified, was reportedly damaged and temporarily captured by Byzantine forces in 983 AD and briefly

retaken by the Hamdanids in 985 AD.[21] While direct evidence is debated, some sources suggest Kurdish tribes may have been present in the Kurd Mountains from antiquity, possibly serving as mercenaries, and were certainly established by the time of the Crusades in the late 11th century.[8] The area likely remained populated throughout this period, though perhaps experiencing shifts in settlement patterns and economic importance compared to its Byzantine peak. It passed through the control of various regional powers before falling under Mamluk rule prior to the Ottoman conquest.

C. Ottoman Era (1516 - 1918 AD)

With the Ottoman conquest of Syria in 1516, the Mount Lelun area became part of the Ottoman Empire, administered within the Vilayet (province) of Aleppo, typically falling under the jurisdiction of the nearby town of Kilis.[3] This long period saw the consolidation and increased visibility of the Kurdish population in the region. It is during the Ottoman era that the name "Kurd Dagh" (Mountain of the Kurds) became firmly established as the designation for these highlands, reflecting the demographic reality.[4] Various Kurdish tribal groups were active in northern Syria, including the large Reshwan and Milli confederations, though their core areas may have been further east or north.[8] Locally, the Kurdish Janbulad (Canpolat) family rose to prominence, serving as Ottoman governors of the Aleppo/Kilis region in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, even attempting to establish a degree of autonomy before being suppressed by the Ottomans.[4] Specific Kurdish clans, such as the Robari, are traditionally associated with settling in villages on Mount Lelun itself (e.g., Jalbul, Baslîhaya, Abîn) and the adjacent Juma plain.[32] Furthermore, historical records confirm the presence of Yezidi Kurds in the mountains as early as 1599, noted by a British traveler.[3] The town of Afrin itself emerged as a market center only in the 19th century.[3] Throughout the Ottoman period, Mount Lelun and the surrounding Kurd Dagh solidified their character as a predominantly Kurdish-inhabited region within the diverse tapestry of the empire.

D. French Mandate and Modern Syria (1920s - 2011)

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the subsequent establishment of French Mandate rule brought profound changes to the Mount Lelun/Afrin region. The drawing of the new border between Syria and Turkey in 1923 was particularly consequential, as it severed the region from its traditional administrative and economic center, Kilis, and cut it off from the northern parts of the Kurd Dagh and the Amanus mountains.[3] The region became part of French-mandated Syria, initially within the short-lived State of Aleppo, then the State of Syria, and finally the Syrian Republic.[3] The annexation of the Hatay (Antakya) region by Turkey in 1939 further isolated Afrin geographically, leaving it almost entirely surrounded by the Turkish border except for its eastern and southeastern boundaries.[3]

Following Syria's independence in 1946, the Afrin region, including Mount Lelun, became part of the modern Syrian state. However, as a predominantly Kurdish area, it was subjected to assimilationist policies pursued by successive Syrian governments, particularly the Ba'ath regime from 1963 onwards. These policies, often described as Arabization, aimed to suppress

Kurdish identity and included measures such as changing Kurdish place names (including that of the mountain itself), restricting the use of the Kurdish language and cultural expression, and imposing limitations on property ownership and construction for Kurds.[2] This process of administrative bordering followed by state-driven cultural and political marginalization fundamentally shaped the modern experience of the inhabitants of Mount Lelun and Afrin. Despite these pressures, the region maintained its status as a significant center of Kurdish population and identity within Syria.[2] It also witnessed periods of political unrest linked to broader Kurdish demands or events, such as protests following the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 and tensions following the 2004 incidents in Qamishli.[3] The imposition of artificial borders and subsequent state policies created a dynamic where the region's distinct identity was both reinforced through resistance and rendered vulnerable to state control and demographic manipulation.

V. The Cultural and Religious Heartbeat of Mount Lelun

A. Centrality to Kurdish Identity

Mount Lelun and the surrounding highlands are deeply interwoven with Kurdish identity in Syria. The historical prevalence of names like "Kurd Dagh" and "Çiyayê Kurmênc" is a direct testament to this long-standing association.[2] The area has been consistently described as a Kurdish "heartland," historically constituting one of the most demographically homogeneous Kurdish regions within Syria's borders.[2] Over centuries, it has been home to numerous Kurdish tribes and clans, whose presence shaped the social fabric and landscape, from powerful confederations like the Reshwan and Milli operating in northern Syria to influential local families like the Janbulads and specific clans like the Robari or Shirawan associated with particular districts or villages.[4] For the Kurdish people of Syria, Mount Lelun and the broader Afrin region represent more than just territory; they are imbued with cultural memory, heritage, and a sense of belonging, making the mountain a potent symbol of their historical presence and identity in the country.

B. Religious Pluralism and Syncretism

Beyond its significance for Kurdish identity, the Mount Lelun area stands out for its remarkably rich and diverse religious history. The landscape serves as a palimpsest upon which different faiths and traditions have left their mark over millennia, often coexisting or influencing one another in complex ways. This history challenges any simplistic narrative of a monolithic religious identity for the region.

- **Pre-Abrahamic Echoes:** Hints of religious practices predating Judaism, Christianity, and Islam exist, most notably the potential connection of the site of Kafr Nabu to the ancient Mesopotamian god of wisdom and writing, Nabu.[11] While the evidence may be primarily based on the place name and interpretations of ruins, it suggests the integration or superseding of older Semitic or Syrian deities within the region's religious

evolution.

- **Christianity:** As detailed earlier, the Roman and particularly the Byzantine periods saw an extraordinary flourishing of Christianity on and around Mount Lelun. It became a major center for monasticism (St. Simeon Stylites) and pilgrimage, dotted with numerous churches, monasteries, and bishoprics (like Cyrrhus).[3] The sheer density of well-preserved Christian archaeological sites attests to the depth of Christianization and the region's importance within the early Church. Potential historical links to the origins of the Maronite tradition through figures like Mar Maron further highlight its significance in Christian history.[15]
- **Yezidism:** The mountains of Afrin have historically been home to communities of Yezidis, an ancient, syncretic religion with roots in Mesopotamia. Their presence was noted by European travelers as early as the late 16th century [3], and specific villages on or near Mount Lelun, such as Basufan and Beiye, have been identified as Yezidi centers in modern times.[30] Yezidi communities have often faced persecution, and those in Afrin have suffered attacks [31] and targeted property confiscation, particularly after 2018.[33]
- **Islam:** Islam arrived with the Arab conquests in the 7th century [15], and the region became part of successive Islamic caliphates and states.[3] While perhaps less architecturally dominant than the preceding Christian era in terms of surviving monuments, Islamic presence is evident through historical administration and, significantly, through the veneration of local saints and holy figures at numerous shrines (ziyarat or mazar). Prominent examples include the shrine of Sheikh Barakat situated on a high peak of Jabal Sim'an/Lelun [12], the shrine of Sheikh Ali in the village of Basufan [30], and the shrine of Sheikh Qassab near Kafr Nabu, which was historically associated with a sacred grove.[12] These shrines likely represent local Sufi traditions or the veneration of revered individuals, deeply embedded in the religious landscape.

The geographical proximity and historical layering of these diverse religious sites – Byzantine churches near Yezidi villages [30], Christian ruins adjacent to Muslim shrines [12] – vividly illustrate the mountain's history as a zone of religious encounter and coexistence. This complex religious heritage, a testament to centuries of pluralism, is now reported to be under severe threat due to the post-2018 occupation, with minorities facing intimidation, displacement, and restrictions on their practices.[22]

C. Sacred Geography

Beyond the formal structures of temples, churches, monasteries, and shrines, the very landscape of Mount Lelun likely held, and may still hold, sacred significance for its inhabitants. Specific peaks, such as the one crowned by the Sheikh Barakat shrine [12], often acquire sacred connotations. Natural features like springs, caves (like Dudêrî [14]), and distinctive rock formations can become loci of reverence or folklore. Sacred groves, like the one associated with Sheikh Qassab [12] or the forest of Kimar [12], represent another layer of interaction between nature and religious belief, where specific areas are set aside and protected due to their spiritual importance. This imbues the mountain itself with a sense of sacred geography, where

meaning is inscribed not just in buildings but in the land itself.

VI. Whispers of the Mountain: Mythology and Folklore

A. Exploring Potential Mythological Layers

While the available sources provide rich detail on the history, archaeology, and religious practices associated with Mount Lelun, they offer limited explicit information on specific myths or folkloric narratives directly attached to the mountain itself. However, several elements suggest potential layers of mythology and folklore woven into its cultural fabric:

- **Name Etymology:** The discussion around the origin of the name "Lelun" itself holds potential folkloric dimensions. One interpretation links it to the ancient Mesopotamian god Nabu, deity of wisdom and writing [11], connecting the mountain, even if etymologically, to a figure from ancient mythology. The alternative derivation from the Kurdish word for unripe olives [11] taps into themes of nature, fertility, and the agricultural lifeblood of the region, potentially reflecting local narratives about the mountain's character and bounty. These competing etymologies might represent different cultural memories or folk explanations for the mountain's identity.
- **Deity Associations:** The possible past presence of a temple dedicated to Nabu at Kafr Nabu [11], regardless of its historical certainty, places the mountain within the orbit of ancient Near Eastern mythologies and the complex processes of religious succession and syncretism.
- **Saints and Heroes:** Figures associated with Mount Lelun, particularly religious ones, often become subjects of legend and folklore that extend beyond formal hagiography. Saint Simeon Stylites the Elder, whose extreme ascetic practices took place on the mountain's edge, is a figure ripe for legendary embellishment.[3] The stories surrounding his life, miracles, and the very construction of the vast complex at Qal'at Sim'an likely generated a rich body of local folklore. Similarly, figures like Mar Maron, credited in some traditions with converting the mountain's inhabitants [21], could be central figures in local narratives.
- **Sacred Sites:** Local shrines dedicated to figures like Sheikh Barakat, Sheikh Ali, and Sheikh Qassab are almost certainly associated with oral traditions, miracle stories, foundation legends, and specific rituals passed down through generations within the communities that venerate them.[12] These narratives form a living layer of folklore connected to specific points on the mountain.

B. Challenges in Documentation

It is important to acknowledge the limitations in documenting the specific mythology and folklore of Mount Lelun based on the currently available information. Oral traditions, by their nature, are often unwritten and vulnerable. One source explicitly notes the reliance on stories from elders for reconstructing local history, while also cautioning about potential inaccuracies when compared to scientific historical methods.[35] The intense focus on political events,

conflict, and human rights abuses in much of the recent documentation concerning Afrin may have overshadowed efforts to record cultural folklore.
Furthermore, the massive displacement of the indigenous population since 2018 [16] poses a severe threat to the transmission and survival of oral traditions. When communities are fractured and dispersed, the continuity of storytelling and cultural memory is broken. Therefore, the apparent scarcity of detailed, specific myths about Mount Lelun in the reviewed materials might be a consequence of the types of sources available, the priorities of researchers and reporters in a conflict zone, or tragically, the result of the ongoing cultural disruption and erosion of oral heritage. The "mythology" of Mount Lelun may be less about grand narrative myths and more deeply embedded in the interpretation of its layered sacred landscape, the stories attached to its myriad historical and religious sites, and the collective cultural memory of its connection to Kurdish identity – a memory now under duress.

VII. Mount Lelun in the Contemporary Era: Conflict and Transformation

A. Pre-2018 Context: Relative Stability and Autonomous Administration

Following the withdrawal of Syrian government forces from the Afrin region in the summer of 2012 amidst the escalating Syrian civil war, control passed to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD).[3] In January 2014, the region, including the area around Mount Lelun, was formally declared Afrin Canton (later Afrin Region), one of the three original cantons of the self-proclaimed Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), often referred to as Rojava.[3]
During the period from 2012 to early 2018, Afrin, including Mount Lelun, was notable for being relatively stable and secure compared to most other parts of war-torn Syria.[5] This stability attracted a significant number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other conflict zones in Syria, who sought refuge in the region, causing its population to swell considerably.[7]
However, this period was not without tension. The region faced occasional artillery shelling and attacks from Turkish forces and various Syrian Islamist rebel groups operating in adjacent areas.[8] At one point, Russian military forces established a presence in Afrin, reportedly as part of an agreement to deter further Turkish attacks and mediate between the Kurdish administration and the Syrian government.[8] Despite external pressures, the AANES established administrative structures, managed daily life, and maintained security within the region.[33]

B. Operation Olive Branch (January-March 2018) and Occupation

The relative stability of Afrin was shattered in January 2018 when Turkey, alongside allied Syrian opposition factions organized under the banner of the Syrian National Army (SNA), launched a large-scale military offensive code-named "Operation Olive Branch".[2] The stated

rationale from Turkey centered on countering the influence of the YPG, which Ankara considers an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), designated a terrorist organization by Turkey and other countries.[5] Turkey viewed the Kurdish autonomous region on its border as a security threat, particularly objecting to US support for the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) elsewhere in Syria.[25]

The operation involved intense aerial bombardment by the Turkish air force and a ground invasion by Turkish troops and thousands of SNA fighters.[22] Fierce fighting occurred across the region, including battles for control of strategic high ground like Mount Barsaya, adjacent to the Lelun area.[26] Russian forces, who controlled the airspace, reportedly withdrew prior to the operation, effectively giving Turkey a green light.[25] By March 18, 2018, Afrin city had fallen, and by March 24, the entire region was declared under the control of Turkish and SNA forces.[5]

C. Post-2018: Occupation, Violations, and Demographic Change

The 2018 invasion marked a radical turning point for Mount Lelun and the entire Afrin region, ushering in an era of occupation and profound transformation. The Kurdish-led autonomous administration was dismantled and replaced by Turkish-backed administrative, judicial, and security structures, often staffed by individuals from outside the region.[2] Control on the ground was fragmented among numerous SNA factions, leading to internal rivalries and a chaotic, dangerous environment for the remaining civilian population.[22]

The consequences of the invasion and subsequent occupation have been devastating for the region's indigenous population and its unique cultural fabric. This period has been characterized by:

- **Mass Displacement and Demographic Engineering:** The offensive triggered the flight of hundreds of thousands of residents, overwhelmingly Kurds, from their homes.[7] Estimates suggest the Kurdish proportion of the population plummeted from around 95% before 2018 to as low as 35% afterwards.[16] Concurrently, there has been a systematic effort to resettle displaced people (primarily Sunni Arabs) from other parts of Syria, as well as families of SNA fighters, into the homes and lands vacated by or confiscated from the original inhabitants.[2] New housing settlements have been constructed, sometimes with funding from external organizations, on confiscated land, including strategically important locations on Mount Lelun itself (Jabal al-Ahlam area).[13] This process aligns with Turkish rhetoric about returning Afrin to its "rightful owners" [2] and constitutes a deliberate policy of demographic change aimed at altering the region's ethnic and political character.
- **Widespread Human Rights Violations:** Numerous independent local and international human rights organizations, as well as UN bodies, have extensively documented a pattern of grave violations perpetrated by SNA factions, often with Turkish oversight or acquiescence.[2] These include arbitrary arrests and detentions, often based on unsubstantiated accusations of affiliation with the former AANES [33], widespread use of torture and ill-treatment in detention facilities, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, kidnappings for ransom, extortion, and gender-based violence.[22] A climate of

fear and impunity prevails, particularly affecting the remaining Kurdish population.[2]

- **Systematic Property Confiscation:** The seizure of property belonging to displaced or remaining Kurdish residents, as well as other minorities like Yezidis, has become rampant.[2] Homes, shops, agricultural land, and especially valuable olive groves have been confiscated by SNA factions.[33] These properties are often used to house fighters' families, rented out to new settlers, converted into military bases, or their revenues (e.g., from olive harvests) are used to fund the factions' activities.[16] This systematic looting and appropriation further dispossesses the original population and undermines their potential return.
- **Cultural and Environmental Destruction:** The occupation has also witnessed significant damage to the region's rich cultural heritage. Archaeological sites like Ain Dara were damaged during the initial invasion [20], and reports indicate subsequent looting and illegal excavation at heritage sites.[22] Yezidi shrines and properties have been targeted [33], and minority religious practices face intimidation and restrictions.[34] Environmentally, the systematic and large-scale logging of forests and ancient olive groves represents not only an economic catastrophe for the region but also the destruction of a defining feature of its landscape and cultural identity.[17]
- **Security Instability:** Despite the overarching Turkish control, the region suffers from ongoing insecurity due to infighting between various SNA factions vying for power and resources.[22] The presence of extremist groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) at various times has further complicated the security landscape.[33]

The post-2018 reality on Mount Lelun reflects a coercive transformation driven by the occupying powers, fundamentally altering the region's demography, society, economy, and cultural landscape, replacing Kurdish self-rule with a system characterized by violations and demographic shifts.

D. Enduring Strategic Importance

Despite, or perhaps because of, these dramatic changes, Mount Lelun retains its strategic importance in the complex geopolitical map of northern Syria. It remains a contested frontier zone, physically separating areas under Turkish/SNA control from territories held by the Syrian government, Russian forces, and SDF remnants further south and east.[13] Control over Mount Lelun and the broader Afrin region is crucial for Turkey's strategic objectives in Syria, including maintaining a buffer zone against perceived Kurdish threats, managing Syrian refugee populations, and projecting influence in the ongoing conflict.[25] Its commanding terrain continues to make it a valuable military asset and a key piece in the regional power puzzle.

VIII. Synthesis and Conclusion

A. Recapitulation

Mount Lelun emerges from this analysis not simply as a geographical feature in northwestern Syria, but as a complex, multi-layered entity embodying centuries of history, culture, and

conflict. It is:

- A distinct topographical unit, a limestone plateau within the Kurd Dagh highlands, characterized by moderate elevations, karst features, and strategic positioning overlooking key plains and routes.
- A historical crossroads bearing the deep imprint of millennia of human activity, from potential Neanderthal presence and Syro-Hittite influences to the heights of Roman and Byzantine civilization, followed by Islamic rule and Ottoman consolidation.
- A potent symbol of Kurdish identity in Syria, intrinsically linked through name (Kurd Dagh/Çiyayê Kurmênc) and demography to the Kurdish people, serving as a cultural heartland.
- A sacred landscape marked by the layered presence of diverse religious traditions – potential pre-Abrahamic echoes, a profound Christian heritage (especially Byzantine monasticism), long-standing Yezidi communities, and Islamic shrines – testifying to historical pluralism.
- A contemporary zone of intense conflict, occupation, and forced transformation, where its enduring strategic location continues to shape its destiny and that of its inhabitants, subjected to systematic human rights violations, demographic engineering, and cultural erosion since 2018.

B. History and Mythology Interwoven

While specific, detailed myths comparable to classical mythology may not be readily apparent in the documented sources for Mount Lelun, its history is deeply interwoven with elements that function mythically within the cultural consciousness. Legendary figures like Saint Simeon Stylites performed extraordinary feats upon its slopes, becoming subjects of veneration and storytelling that transcend simple historical record. The mountain's very name, Lelun, carries competing etymological narratives linking it either to ancient deities (Nabu) or the lifeblood of the land (olives), reflecting different layers of cultural meaning. The numerous sacred sites – shrines, groves, perhaps even caves and springs – are imbued with local traditions, miracle stories, and foundation legends that constitute a living folklore. In this context, the "mythology" of Mount Lelun is perhaps best understood not as a set of discrete ancient tales, but as the collective meaning, memory, and sacred significance ascribed to the mountain and its features by its diverse inhabitants across time – a significance now violently contested and threatened. The competing narratives surrounding its identity, ownership, and rightful name are themselves part of a modern myth-making process driven by political agendas.

C. Concluding Thoughts

Mount Lelun stands as a poignant microcosm of the broader Syrian tragedy and the specific, ongoing ordeal of the Afrin region. Its rich tapestry of history, culture, and religious diversity, woven over centuries, faces existential threats under the current conditions of occupation. The documented evidence points towards deliberate policies aimed at altering the demographic fabric of the region, suppressing Kurdish identity, and erasing or appropriating its unique cultural and religious heritage. The widespread human rights violations, property

confiscations, and environmental destruction compound the human tragedy and undermine the foundations of the region's historical identity and economy.
Understanding the deep history and complex cultural geography of Mount Lelun is crucial not only for academic knowledge but also for appreciating the profound loss occurring and the challenges facing any future efforts towards justice, accountability, reconciliation, or cultural preservation in Afrin. The mountain, scarred but resilient, remains a powerful symbol – of ancient civilizations, of Kurdish heritage, of religious coexistence, and now, tragically, of the devastating consequences of modern conflict and occupation. Its future, like that of its displaced and remaining inhabitants, remains uncertain, precariously balanced amidst the volatile geopolitical dynamics of northern Syria.

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