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Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Doctoral School of History

Maaloula, the Aramaic village Documentary and analytical study

Ph.D Dissertation of

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Abstract

The dissertation presents a general historical description of the village of Maaloula and illustrates the traditional features and architecture of the old village. Moreover, I include a focused study of the ancient village, which is a rock-cut settlement. I aim to document its architecture and preserve the vernacular heritage of both the ancient and old village, as Maaloula represents a unique settlement within its geographical and cultural context.

In this framework, the historical background outlines the main events that demonstrate Maaloula's significant role and highlight the importance of its architecture and sites in achieving my research objectives. To accomplish these aims, I analyse the village's characteristics while considering established approaches commonly adopted in academic and professional practice. I studied travellers' accounts and descriptions written during their visits to Maaloula. The findings emphasize the considerable loss the village has suffered over time, particularly during the Syrian crisis, which accelerated the process of deterioration. The vernacular architectural tradition continued to be used until the mid-twentieth century, when residents began replacing traditional houses with structures built from cement blocks.

In this context, I propose detailed documentation, particularly to present the traditional building methods, the main elements of the Maaloulian house, and a general typology of the principal house types in the old village. In addition, I examine the Syrian restoration approach applied in Maaloula, identifying its strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, I present a case study of an urban conservation project that demonstrates the importance of place identity and addresses the challenges and opportunities that need to be considered within the Syrian context.

The village of Maaloula comprises not only the well-known old settlement but also an ancient part consisting of rock-cut dwellings that have never been systematically studied before. Accordingly, I document and analyse the caves in the ancient village and present their plans. This part of the study aims to reveal Maaloula's significance even before the advent of Christianity, when the area was already inhabited. Rock-hewn dwellings were widely used; therefore, I present the different local types that exist in the village, their defining features, and the variations among them, as well as the Roman influence on local architecture. Finally, I propose **usage-zone plans** for the village, which demonstrate that even the seemingly irregular settlement follows an underlying order.

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I would also like to take a moment to remember the victims of the tragedy of 3 July 2025 on the Syrian coast. May their memory remain a reminder of the fragility of life and the enduring strength of the Syrian people.

To my little angel, Sophia.

In memory of the Alawite victims of the Syrian coast massacre on 7 March 2025, may your memory endure.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1.Overview

A place's meaning is derived from its memories, which constitute civilization. As long as culture exists, humanity endures; eliminating this historical identity would mean eliminating what makes us unique. Culture inspires and fosters inquiry, which makes it indispensable to humanity's quest for civilization in all its diversity and uniqueness. Culture mobilises change. The world's responses to cultural loss in many events, such as the collapse of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan (2001), the theft of the most valuable artefacts from Ancient Mesopotamia from the National Museum of Iraq (2003), the deliberate bombing of religious buildings in the former Yugoslavia (1991), or even through neglect. It is imperative to act in order to prevent further harm and the loss of global culture.

The question arises: when people urgently need shelter, food, and healthcare, why should we attempt to preserve works of art? Why do people spend money on culture when they die? These unavoidable questions may be answered in three ways. Firstly, the destruction of cultural heritage constitutes a profound loss. A nation's cultural history depends on creating and preserving its cultural legacy, which gives people and communities a reason to exist and provides a sense of belonging, value, and identity. Secondly, saving a monument or building of cultural and social significance for a community significantly enhances social cohesiveness and mental healing during a disaster. Protecting heritage sites contributes not only to preserving local, national, or global heritage, but also gives communities facing critical circumstances hope and support, promoting the maintenance of human dignity and continuity. Thirdly, it is essential to save people and things, not just one or the other. Thus, rather than an approach, an ‘and-and’ strategy must prevail. Such complementarities must be represented in the delivery of cultural emergency assistance, which requires close coordination between emergency relief and heritage organisations and the inclusion of heritage in local humanitarian aid programmes (Frerks & Goldewijk, 2011).

Maaloula is a Christian village of exceptional architectural and geographical character. It has a world reputation for its linguistic heritage, as its inhabitants speak and write in the Aramaic language. It is one of the Qalamoun's three villages, with Bakhaa and Jabaden still using Aramaic. Consequently, the village has attracted linguists worldwide; moreover, it has been the goal of many travellers over time. Like many traditional sites, Maaloula was affected by

modern lifestyles and changing needs in addition to the Syrian crisis. These factors altered the village's architecture and construction techniques.

It is a secluded village on the Qalamoun mountain range that stretches between the plain of Damascus and Anti-Lebanon. It is located about 40 kilometers northeast of Damascus city at an altitude of 1600 meters away from major roads. The village site is enclosed by two narrow defiles surmounted by two high rocks; the eastern rock reaches 1664m, and the western rock, known as *Ras Alros,* rises to 1685 m. The name Maaloula is derived from Aramaic, meaning "the entrance" or "the strait." In particular, it describes the narrow roads that lead to it. The scholar Basilios Issa mentioned that the name Maaloula is the source or participle of the Syriac verb عال, إيليو, معلو, معلتو. Additionally, patriarch Basilius Issa, based on his knowledge of the Syriac Aramaic language, explained that the name Maaloula could be derived from another Syriac verb, Alaya, which means "from high or lofty."

The village's location has a defensive aspect, with two narrow gorges flanking the village, the eastern and western Faj, while two high hills guard the main entrance on the way to Damascus. The ancient village is situated on the middle hill, known as St. Sergius Hill. The hill's slope ranges between approximately 40% and 50%, with the lowest height being 1318 m. The region's geological formations exhibit occasional outcrops of flint in the Upper Cretaceous limestones and sandstones of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains and the Nabk Anticline. The Maaloula-Jabb'adeen bedrock host ancient shelters and caves along the Oligocene cliff line. At Baaz Rock Shelter and Kaus Kozah Cave, stratified deposits were found containing prints from the Epipaleolithic and Neolithic eras. The artesian springs had been discovered near the base of the main cliff line and ran through the region, encouraging Palaeolithic settlement (Sattout, 2020, p. 137). Kaus Kozah cave has yielded significant results regarding the settlement at the time of transition from a foraging economy to one based on agriculture and sedentism.

The ancient village has hewn shelters, has one space and, in many examples, has an annex. This rock-cut village features residential spaces, chapels, presses, stables, and various other functions. In the Byzantine era, people fled to the eastern Fag, under St. Thecla monasteries, to be closer to their irrigated farmlands. This part of the village had a defensive wall, the remains of which still exist in some parts. In addition, the houses were built amphitheatrically on the escarpment walls. Furthermore, a Byzantine church was built next to the wall and the Faj. In 1925, columns and mosaics were excavated in the Church of St. Elias, dating back to the 4th century. Over time, the settlement expanded, and the ancient caves were gradually

abandoned, being used only for storage. The old village retained its Byzantine heritage, and they continued to build their houses on the cliff.

This environment has affected the settlement in various ways. Many studies show that individuals resided in the Maaloula area in the early Middle Pleistocene. The site has many specifications that attract people to settle there over time; this location provides protection, water and farmland. Initially, inhabitants lived in caves and later adapted them to meet evolving needs. Furthermore, even in the current village, people have retained this character, where most houses were built over caves and incorporated into the structure of the house. Establishing security and religious stability helped create a good atmosphere for urban and architectural growth, improve its cave house and the spaces added to it, and then identify the architectural and urban means prevalent in the region. The housing models varied in the town of Maaloula in successive eras. In all cases, the use of local materials, environmental orientation, and the functional needs of these models. With the advent of modern materials, many residents resorted to adopting new housing models far from the traditional foundations in the structural system and openings, with harmony in volumes and masses remaining until a particular historical stage (before the advent of concrete).

1.2. The importance of Maaloula

The question of how a village like Maaloula managed to maintain its Christian faith and preserve both the oral and written forms of Aramaic arose at a time when the surrounding villages had converted to Islam and had gradually lost the language. The explanation lies in the village's geographical setting, a secluded site nestled between two gorges, concealed from view and protected from danger, where travellers could easily pass without noticing its presence. In addition to the bravery of its inhabitants, the location and the geographic features helped limit external contact and influence, allowing the community to remain relatively isolated from outside forces. Like many other minority sects in the region, people take the mountain areas as home, seeking refuge or isolation from the majority. Aramaic and Christian identities distinguish Maaloula, both of which are vividly expressed in its festive traditions. Hence, Maaloula is an excellent example of the transition from paganism to Christianity, where many churches were built over pagan temples. Furthermore, the community reinvented its Christian festival traditions, aiming to sustain and celebrate elements that still belong to Syria's popular culture. These festivals stand among the last of their kind, intended to preserve the village's 'authentic' cultural and religious character.

1.3.Research Objectives and Contributions

Due to the increasing change in vernacular architecture every year, people have stopped using the traditional way and design. They replaced their houses with cement blocks, which are easier maintenance and lower cost. Furthermore, the Maaloula settlement is exposed to constant destruction due to the lack of protective measures and regulations. The village is seriously affected by the new materials, the absence of artisans and the conservation approach. Thus, this effect was illustrated clearly in comparison with the middle of the last century. Therefore, modern documentation of the main plateau and the caves was urgently needed.

This work could be part of a big project to document the village, where Maaloula is a treasure in each part. The thesis highlights the main characteristics that identify Maaloula and contribute to its reputation. It will cover various traditional features and the typology of the main houses that are starting to disappear, in addition to the traditional parts that used to exist in each house in the old village. Many studies at Damascus University have focused on specific parts of the village or a single issue or building; in contrast, this work is more comprehensive and encompasses multiple aspects that have been previously studied and expanded upon in this work. In addition, the section presents the difficulties that Maaloula faced before, during and after the Syrian crisis. Moreover, the legal framework that the Syrian government follow to save the village illustrates the weakness and strength of this approach; on the other hand, it introduces the world vision toward urban conservation.

The ancient village in Maaloula, Blota Ollo, has never been studied. A sophisticated historical study is presented, demonstrating the region's successive eras, its influence on the village, and the expression of this change in the architecture. Hence, the caves in the ancient village are presented and drawn; moreover, a typology expresses their type and design. This work led us to identify the main character of the ancient village, which at first glance appears to have an irregular plan; however, the result reveals the opposite.

1.4.Methodology

The methodological approach adopted in this research is qualitative, analytical-descriptive, deductive, and practical. The writings of travellers' books, reports, and papers about Maaloula constitute a primary source for identifying their perceptions and the aspects they described during their visits. Accordingly, travellers’ accounts from the fourteenth century until 2015 were examined. These sources consistently highlight Maaloula’s unique location, architecture,

and language. In this context, both the historical framework and architectural characteristics were considered as results of multiple parallel connections converging toward a single objective: achieving a comprehensive understanding of the village. The analytical and descriptive process aimed to define the physical form of the village and its structures. In particular, the ancient part of the settlement was analysed by comparing similar examples, leading to inferential insights regarding its development and morphology.

It is essential to note that studying a place begins with identifying how to access information, or, in other words, by defining the research keywords. In the case of Maaloula, locating relevant sources posed a challenge because the village's name appears in various spellings and forms. There is no single standardized version found across sources. Variants include *Maaloula, Maloula, Maʿlula, Ma'lûla, Malula, Maʿlûla,* and *Maʿlūlah,* as well as ancient references such as *Magluda* and *Magludon.* In Arabic, it is written as معلولاand معلولة. Therefore, the first stage of the research involved compiling all known variations of the name and investigating the historical context of the surrounding region. Consequently, the historical investigation resembled a process of collecting fragments, as Maaloula had never been studied as a unified site. Within this framework, the village was mentioned in connection with neighbouring regions such as Ibruda, Baalbek, Anti-Lebanon, and Lebanon. However, a comprehensive and chronological approach to Maaloula had not been presented before, posing one of the key challenges of this study. While many researchers have shown interest in Maaloula, very few written studies have existed.

The second stage of the research consisted of fieldwork, conducted along two main lines. The first focused on the old, superimposed town, including its architectural and religious buildings. Data collection in this phase relied on direct observation and documentation through site visits, photography, and architectural analysis of elements such as windows, doors, lanes, facades, interiors, and construction techniques. Many of these features were visible due to the deterioration and partial collapse of several houses. The theoretical background for this phase was supplemented by additional resources, including consultations with architects and researchers from the town, master's theses from Damascus University, and a documentation project conducted with the university during my master's studies. As a result, the vernacular architecture of the old town was documented and analysed. All drawings were prepared using AutoCAD, and photo corrections were made with Adobe Photoshop.

The second part of the fieldwork focused on the ancient village area surrounding St. Sergius Church. This section posed several challenges: there were no prior plans or data for the site, and the total number of caves in the area was unknown. Furthermore, identifying cave entrances, accessible only from above, was difficult due to the defensive architectural design of the area. Consequently, documentation proceeded in several stages. In the first stage, the area was explored, and all caves were identified and numbered. The second stage involved visiting each cave to photograph, measure, and produce draft plans. Particular attention was given to interior features, recurring characteristics, and detailed field observations. The final stage of this work examined the spatial connections and relationships between caves.

Various tools were used during this phase, including measuring tapes, laser distance meters, and laser levels. All plans and sections were prepared in AutoCAD, and photographs were edited in Adobe Photoshop. The locations of the caves were determined using Google satellite imagery captured at different times, which helped identify entrances through shadow patterns, complemented by on-site photographic evidence.

Ultimately, achieving the main objectives of this research required an extended stay in Maaloula, primarily to complete the field documentation and to observe changes over time by comparing contemporary photographs with historical ones from the last century. The outcome is a comprehensive study that describes Maaloula's diverse aspects, its geography, architecture, and cultural identity. Maaloula remains an exceptional place: the more one investigates, the deeper the appreciation grows, and the stronger the motivation becomes to document and preserve every part of it, ancient, old, and new.

1.5.Dissertation structure

This dissertation is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 outlines the historical framework and Maaloula's role throughout successive historical periods: the Prehistoric Period, Aramean Period, Hellenistic Period, Roman Period, Byzantine Era, Early Islamic Period, Crusader Period, Mamluk Period, Ottoman Period, French Mandate Period, the Period of Independence, and the Post-War Period (Contemporary Era).

Chapter 3 provides an introduction to the site, including a general description and a review of early travellers' accounts. It examines the evolution of the name *Maaloula* over time and discusses its religious significance, expressed through the figures of St. Thecla and St. Sergius, as well as through the main celebrations and feasts associated with them.

Chapter 4 presents the site documentation, illustrating the public monuments and religious buildings of the village.

Chapter 5 constitutes the practical component of the research, focusing on the traditional architecture of the old village. It presents the village survey, describing the residential characteristics, vernacular architecture, and traditional construction methods. This chapter also analyses architectural elements, decorative features, and the urban pattern that defines Maaloula's built environment.

Chapter 6 presents the rock-cut village in three sub-chapters. The first subchapter presents case studies from around the world, including Syria. In addition to a presentation of the caves' features, distribution, and a general detailed description of all the studied caves.

Sub-chapter 6-2 presents the architectural and functional features of the ancient village *Blota Ollo*. In this section, a more detailed study is presented, where all the interior features are investigated for a better understanding of the ancient civilisation that lived there.

Sub-chapter 6-3 concerns the analysis of ancient architecture and the identification of patterns and typologies in the caves, based on various features and the patterns observed in Bloto Ollo. Although the zone maps were a very important outcome of this chapter, it is notable that, despite their simplicity, the ancient village has a plan that reflects the thinking and planning of its inhabitants.

It begins with comparative case studies from similar archaeological sites, followed by the documentation of Area 1, an analysis of rock-cut architectural features, cave typology, and investigations from the Roman period. The chapter further examines the Roman colony, the Sun cult, and the field study outline, including the standard house types, typology, and site analysis. The chapter concludes with plans that identify cave locations and their functional zones.

Chapter 7 examines the concept of place identity and its role within the field of conservation. It explores key conservation principles and objectives through selected international case studies whose experiences may inform the situation in Maaloula. The primary outcome of this chapter is the definition of Maaloula's place identity, alongside an overview of the conservation projects and measures undertaken by the Syrian government.

The chapter further analyzes Syrian heritage legislation and the restoration approaches applied in Maaloula's old village. This is followed by a discussion of urban conservation principles

guided by the Burra Charter, presented as a comparative case study that highlights the critical importance of urban conservation in such contexts.

Finally, the chapter presents a focused case study of Maaloula, considering both the ancient settlement and the historic old town

Chapter 2 – Historical Frame

2.1.Overview

Syria is among the most resource-rich regions in terms of the diversity and appeal of its archaeological heritage. Cultural and material remains from major historical periods, ranging from the Early Bronze Age to the Ottoman era, have been remarkably preserved. Owing to its strategic location, Syria attracted numerous civilizations over the centuries. This location afforded the region considerable advantages in agriculture, commerce, and socio-political development, making its strategic position of unparalleled importance.

Over millennia, Syria played a central role in shaping key historical trajectories. Archaeological and historical evidence reveals a dense network of caravan routes, Roman roads, and pilgrimage paths, underscoring its longstanding function as a vital conduit for trade and cultural exchange between the East and the West. Periods of relative stability enabled expansive trade networks to flourish, particularly when the fertile Euphrates Valley was integrated into broader transregional systems that extended toward the Mediterranean. Goods originating from as far as China and India passed through Syria, further solidifying its significance as a crossroads of civilizations.

As a result, Syria became a focal point for successive empires seeking to establish universal dominion. Despite its lack of natural borders and openness to external influences, the control of this territory was essential for any power aspiring to dominate historical trade and cultural arteries. However, this very openness made its defence inherently difficult. Rather than adopting a fortress-like stance, Syria historically relied on strategies of diplomacy and trade to ensure its survival and influence. Its people embraced transmission over isolation, facilitating the flow of ideas, religions, and cultural expressions between East and West.

The region’s capacity to absorb successive waves of migration, from both plains and deserts, helped establish a shared cultural and religious foundation that withstood centuries of transformation. This chapter examines the major historical shifts and patterns of occupation that have defined Syria’s past. It focuses on broader regional developments while giving specific attention to the case study of Maaloula, which offers unique insights into these broader historical processes.

2.2.Prehistoric period

Syria presents an exceptional archaeological record of early human occupation. Analysis of the spatial distribution of Palaeolithic and Neolithic sites reveals that human activity varied in response to environmental conditions, as well as prevailing economic and technological systems. Although Palaeolithic humans inhabited Syria for extended periods, no stratified deposits containing human remains or continuous cultural sequences have been found. Numerous studies suggest the presence of caves or rock shelters along the slopes of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range. During the early Middle Pleistocene, human communities occupied the Maaloula region. Surveys conducted in the Maaloula–Jaba'aden area have revealed archaeological materials dating to the Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic periods. These sites have contributed significantly to understanding the shift from a foraging economy to one based on agriculture and sedentism. The availability of permanent water sources, such as springs in the Jaba'aden and Maaloula areas, likely supported early settlement. In addition, raw materials like flint for toolmaking were readily available in the area(Dodonov, et al., 2007).

Excavations at Kaus Kozah Cave in 2004 yielded substantial artefact assemblages from the Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic periods. Located in the highland hills above Maaloula, the cave shows evidence of human activity beginning in the Middle Palaeolithic, with the most culturally rich deposits dating from the Late Natufian to the Early Neolithic. Evidence for grinding activities is provided by two bedrock mortars situated beneath the western part of the cave roof(Kanjou & Tsuneki, 2016, p. 27).

The finds from within the cave include flint tools, animal bones, charcoal, small quantities of ceramic, shell beads and other artefacts. A steep decline in limestone debris characterises one deposited layer. Epipalaeolithic materials are abundant throughout the deposits, although some stratigraphic mixing is evident, such as the presence of an isolated piece of ancient glass and a small bronze ring. Early layers at the site include low densities of thin Levallois flakes. The Levallois debitage also yielded several juvenile human teeth and fragmentary postcranial bones, which may prove significant if they can be identified as belonging to either anatomically modern or archaic humans. The stratigraphic position of these remains, particularly near the top of Middle Palaeolithic deposits, may help reconstruct aspects of social and cultural life during the transition from the late Middle Palaeolithic and the early Upper Palaeolithic. As such, Kaus Kozah offers valuable insight into shifts in human behaviour toward the end of the Pleistocene, particularly in relation to the economic and social transformations associated with the rise of agriculture (Conard, et al., 2005).

2.3.Aramean period

The Aramean people played a pivotal role in reshaping the chronology of the ancient Near East. Originating from the regions of northwest Mesopotamia and the middle Euphrates, they gradually migrated toward the frontiers of established kingdoms such as the Assyrians, Amorites, and Canaanites in the Levant. As a result, the development of their political system, particularly the formation of organised kingdoms, emerged relatively late. Aramean history unfolded across three major millennia:

- The first millennium (2500–1500 BC) marked the formation of tribal structures and the establishment of the earliest Aramean settlements.
- The second millennium (1500–500 BC) was characterized by territorial expansion into the Levant, southern Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), and the northern Arabian Peninsula.
- The third millennium (500 BC–AD 500) represents a period of cultural consolidation and civilizational flourishing. During this era, key features of Aramean civilization emerged, including language, religion, writing systems, and artistic traditions. These cultural expressions often blended with local traditions, creating a broader cultural synthesis.

Aramaic became the official written and spoken language across a vast region extending from Persia to Egypt and from Asia Minor to Yemen. The era of Aramean kingdoms spanned approximately from 1000 to 539 BC, and these polities were distributed primarily across two regions: ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Syria. The Syrian territories were further divided into three sub-regions: the northern, middle, and southern Aramean kingdoms.

The Middle Kingdoms, while mentioned in biblical sources such as the Old Testament (Torah), lack definitive archaeological evidence to confirm their historical existence. One of these, Aram Soba, is believed to have encompassed the northwestern area of Damascus, stretching from the Beqaa Valley in the west to the Al-Badiyah desert in the east. Damascus was originally part of Aram Soba but became an independent kingdom during the reign of King Hadad-Ezer (Had Iz) (Al-Majdi, 2000, p. 40). During this period, Maaloula and its surrounding district were incorporated into the territory of Aram Soba and were regarded as part of the Aramean cultural domain as early as the first century BC.

2.4.Hellenistic Period (333-64 BC)

During the Late Hellenistic and early Roman periods, the regions of Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon were inhabited by the Ituraeans, tribal principalities whose ethnic identity remains a subject of scholarly debate. While many scholars identify the Ituraeans as Arabs, others suggest they may have been of Aramean origin (Wilson , 2004, p. 7). Described in historical sources as unruly and prone to brigandage, the Ituraeans posed a sufficient threat that Alexander the Great abandoned the siege of Tyre to launch a retaliatory campaign against them. Following this military action, the Ituraeans disappear from the historical record until 115 BC, when a local prince received formal recognition from the Seleucid Empire. From that year forward, his successors dated their coinage using this event as a founding era.

The Ituraean princes wielded both religious and secular authority. Their official title was high priest, and their principality maintained both religious and administrative capitals. Baalbek, known for its monumental Temple of the Sun, served as the religious center. Under the rule of the Hellenized monarch Mennaeus and his son Ptolemy in the early first century BC, the Ituraeans achieved significant territorial expansion. They successfully conquered Batanea, Tarchonitis, and Auranitis to the southeast, and extended their control over large areas of eastern Anti-Lebanon, including the towns of Maglula, Iabruda, and Abila, nearly surrounding Damascus (Jones, 1937, p. 255).

An inscription from the reign of Agrippa II was discovered at Iabruda in the north. During the Byzantine period, the two climata (administrative districts) of Maglula and Iabruda, along with the city of Abila, were administratively separated. The term *climata* likely refers to local governance structures. Interestingly, Abila, despite having minted no coins during the Ituraean royal era, may have functioned as an independent administrative unit at that time (Jones, 1937, p. 283).

2.5.Roman Period (64 BC-AD 395)

In 64 BC, Pompey's creation of the Roman province of Syria inaugurated the formation of a territory administered by Rome, with its principal city at Antioch. From this date, the Romans undertook to delimit the regions and redefine the legal status of local communities. The Lebanese mountains theoretically became the property of the Roman people. However, the ancient cities retained their own territories, and several districts remained under the control of

the Iturean and Herodian families until the end of the first century AD (Aliquot, 2012, p. 129). Qalamoun was one of the isolated regions on the Roman limes, far from the major cities where Latin culture flourished and developed. No philosopher or historian emerged from Qalamoun; no ecclesiastical writer was associated with the region. Roman historians were likely unaware of its existence. Aramaic remained the vernacular language of the population, while Greek and Latin were limited to a privileged elite.

It is not clear at what precise date Christianity reached Qalamoun. While Damascus embraced the new religion early, establishing an organised community with a defined hierarchy as early as the first century, it can be affirmed that Christianity had become deeply rooted in Qalamoun by the beginning of the fourth century. The earliest Christian missionaries primarily addressed urban centres, especially Roman colonies and Hellenized populations. The extensive Roman road network facilitated their mission, allowing them to reach distant communities safely and efficiently. Yabroud, Qara, Thelsea, Danaba, Palmyra, Roman legionary camps, and major centres along imperial roadways were among the first to hear the Gospel and soon became regional hubs of Christian influence and episcopal authority (Nasrallah, 1956, p. 47).

The spread of Christianity inland, particularly in mountainous regions, was relatively slow. Christian penetration began on the lower plateau of Qalamoun, which was more densely populated and frequently traversed than the higher elevations. Christianity may also have been present on the second and third plateaus, where Maaloula is situated. After AD 313, when Constantine proclaimed freedom of Christian worship and endorsed Christianity as the empire's official religion, local worship shifted from private house-churches to more formal places of worship. Most churches were constructed over former pagan temples, Maaloula serving as a notable example. The strength and deep roots of Christianity in the region are evidenced by a wealth of inscriptions and numerous church ruins. For instance, Saidnaya contained at least 23 churches, Maaloula 14, and Yabroud 10 (Nasrallah, 1940, p. 83).

Two significant developments occurred in the empire following Constantine's accession: the establishment of Constantinople as the new imperial capital, and the formal declaration of Christianity as the state religion. Prior to this, many Christian communities had already been established across the provinces, including a prominent church in Damascus. The city had served as a refuge for the Ebionite sect and other displaced groups. Metropolitan Magnus of Damascus was present at the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325, alongside seven suffragan bishops. While it is unlikely that all diocesan representatives were present, several episcopal cities were recorded, including Heliopolis (Baalbek), Emesa (Homs), Jabruda (Yabrud),

Danaba (Saidnaya), Alalis, Khomokara (Karah), and Seleucia (Maaloula). By a slightly later period, Damascus oversaw fifteen dioceses. The cathedral, consecrated in the fourth century, exemplifies the prominence, prosperity, and spiritual significance of the Christian Church in the city (Porter, 1870, p. 107).

2.6.Byzantine Era (AD 395 -636)

This era began under Constantine's rule, marked by the selection of Byzantium as the second capital of the Empire, later renamed Constantinople. The definitive transfer of the Roman capital to the East occurred in 395 AD, a date recognised as the beginning of the Byzantine era. Under Theodosius II, a century of peace with the Sasanians offered temporary relief from debilitating eastern conflicts; however, instability resurfaced by the mid-sixth century. The legal and administrative frameworks remained largely unchanged from those established under Roman rule. Nevertheless, the empire faced widespread anarchy and crisis in the third century, fuelled by authoritarian rule and oppressive tax levies, which incited discontent and persecution among the population.

The empire's distant provinces, increasingly detached from the central authority, harboured resentment towards the Greeks. Their political and military weakness rendered them incapable of challenging the government, despite their discontent. From the fifth century until the Arab occupation, tensions persisted between the Syrians and the Byzantine administration, culminating in the population's total disillusionment and their perception of any external invader as a potential liberator. By the early sixth century, approximately thirty years before the Arab occupation, the region of Phoenicia Libanensis had become fragmented. According to *Synecdémos*, the province was reduced to only six districts, and Qalamoun had begun forming its own administrative subdivisions. The villages of Yabroud and Maaloula emerged as principal districts, with rural communities forming tribal and village associations. As noted by George of Cyprus, these entities were designated through the *Klima* formula. Yabroud and Maaloula, along with Qara, remained key centres of the Qalamoun region. Due to its growing importance, Yabroud was designated as the seat of a bishopric (Nasrallah, 1956, p. 79).

During the Roman era, the inhabitants of Maaloula resided in the village's older section, known as *Blota Ollo*, where spacious mansions, measuring approximately 5 to 8 meters in length and 3 to 4 meters in width, were hewn directly into the rock. A local tradition recounts that King Belos decreed that young men must carve a cave-dwelling before being permitted to marry. However, this does not imply that all residents of Maaloula were troglodytes. During the

Byzantine period, the population gradually expanded beyond *Blota Ollo* into the western gorge and even onto the steep slopes of the central ridge, eventually reaching downstream from the route of the Oriental processions. Another part of the village extended across the southern-facing slopes. This movement was driven by demographic growth and the need for proximity to arable land. A protective wall encircled the village, within which several chapels and churches were constructed. Nonetheless, the original caves continued to serve as storage areas and stables.

One cave bears an inscription dedicated to "Sahem, the son of Diodorus, the son of Felebion," dated to the year 509 of the Seleucid era; Sahem was identified as a prince. Another cave features an inscription in Greek proclaiming the name of Christ and celebrating His triumph over paganism. Adjacent to it, a chronicle dated to the year 494 of the Seleucid calendar records the name of their king, Smsegramos (Joud Allah, 1999, p. 692).

2.7.Early Islamic period (636-1516 CE)

The rise of Makkah occurred between 610 and 630 CE, during the final war between Byzantium and Persia. The prolonged conflict and instability created a political vacuum in central Arabia. In the absence of stabilising power, trade routes between Makkah and other cities were jeopardised. During this same period, Muhammad ibn Abd Allah, a Qurayshi merchant, introduced a new religion. Islam entered the Levant between 634 and 641 CE. Damascus came under Islamic rule in 636 CE. However, much of the Levantine population retained their Christian faith for an extended period. For Aramean cities and villages, long under Roman rule, the Arab presence was viewed as a new occupation and the spread of the new religion. initially held little significance for them. In contrast, many Jewish communities welcomed the Arabs, having endured extended periods of Roman persecution. They viewed the new rulers as potential agents of improved living conditions.

A significant portion of the original Levantine population, including Arab clans and tribal peasants, converted to Islam during the initial wave of occupation. In contrast, many landowners, peasants, and urban dwellers retained their Christian faith and paid the *jizya* and other Islamic taxes. Initially, when the Islamic state was only the invaders' tribes, much of the tax revenue collected from non-Muslims was distributed among Muslim Arabs. This system was disrupted as increasing numbers of previously non-Muslim populations converted to Islam and began demanding the tax privileges accorded to Muslims. Consequently, state income from tribute, particularly the *kharja*, declined, while the number of individuals eligible for a share

of public funds rose beyond expectations. By the end of the Umayyad period, *kharaj* was levied on both Muslim and non-Muslim landowners. The Islamic occupation accelerated the Arabization of the region. Within one or two generations, the Aramaic language, which had been spoken for over a millennium, was largely forgotten, surviving only in Christian liturgy and ecclesiastical contexts. For many centuries, the vast majority of Christians continued to reside in rural villages. The mechanisms behind the survival of Christianity in the Levant, Iraq, and Egypt under Islamic rule remain a matter of scholarly debate. The continued existence of Byzantium as a Christian superpower after the seventh century contributed to the preservation of Christianity within Islamic territories. The early Umayyad caliphs, who adhered to moderate Islamic principles, often showed favour towards Christians. Prominent Christians were appointed to high administrative positions (Salibi, 2013, pp. 43-48).

Muslim-Christian relations had deteriorated significantly by the time the Ottomans arrived in the Arab lands. During the Mamluk period, the sultans launched both ideological and military campaigns against Christians, largely in response to the Crusades, resulting in the destruction of churches and monasteries. Additionally, bureaucratic measures further curtailed Christian civil life.

2.8.Crusade Period (1090-1291)

The Crusaders reached the Levant in 1090. At that time, the Fatimid authorities controlled only the southern coastal strip of Lebanon, while the Seljuk Turks had seized vast areas of Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon. Following their decisive victory over the Byzantine army at Manzikert in 1071, the Seljuks precipitated the First Crusade by disrupting Christian pilgrimage routes to Jerusalem through their conquest of Asia Minor, northern Syria, and Palestine. In response to the continuous pleas for assistance from the captured Byzantine emperor, the Christian West mobilised in 1097. Subsequently, around 150,000 Franks and Normans departed from Europe to reclaim the Holy Land from Muslim control. The Crusaders achieved a series of victories and, in 1099, captured Jerusalem, slaughtering much of its population. The Fatimid caliphate in Egypt, however, remained intact (Gabriel, 1978, p. 20). The First Crusade was the most successful, culminating in the dramatic conquest of Jerusalem. The Crusaders regarded themselves as pilgrims (Smail, 1974, p. 9),

The Crusader states established along the Levantine coast represented an early form of European colonialism. The region from northern Lebanon down to Byblos became part of the County of Tripoli, while Beirut and southern Lebanon were incorporated into the Kingdom of

Jerusalem under the rule of the French nobleman Baldwin. The Bekaa Valley and Anti-Lebanon regions remained under Muslim control. This fragmented empire, administered by only a few thousand Franks, began to deteriorate soon after its formation. The inland cities that remained under Muslim control became strongholds for Muslim reconquest (Gabriel, 1978, p. 21). The Franks held only small enclaves scattered across their territories, which remained predominantly Islamic, and their position was inherently unstable.

During this period, the Crusaders constructed forts along the Lebanese coast to defend strategic ports from Muslim counterattacks. They posed little threat to major Muslim population centres and received limited support from local Christians, particularly the Greek Orthodox. Their efforts to consolidate power were minimal. As Sunni Muslim power centres consolidated in Damascus and Aleppo, the Crusaders' influence steadily declined (Burns, 1999, p. 152).

The cultural impact of the Franks on the indigenous population of Lebanon was minimal; the East contributed more to the West than the reverse. Social interaction between the Franks and local Lebanese communities remained limited. The Maronites, despite actively supporting the Crusaders, were separated by significant religious and linguistic differences that hindered meaningful communication. The influence of the Crusaders is primarily visible in the forts, castles, and churches they built. Lebanese cities benefited modestly from increased trade and communication brought about by the expanding economy between East and West (Gabriel, 1978, p. 23).

The Christians of Qalamoun lived on the periphery of the transformative events that swept across the Levant. Located between Damascus and the Crusader states, they experienced the consequences of political and socio-economic changes, including both their benefits and disruptions. From 970 CE onward, Damascus fell under the authority of the Fatimids in Cairo. The establishment of the Latin states around 1100 did not immediately endanger the Emirate of Damascus. Nur ad-Din succeeded where the Crusaders had failed, taking Damascus in 1158. In 1187, Saladin recaptured Jerusalem. The loss of rural areas in the Kingdom of Jerusalem led to a certain détente between the warring factions. Under the Ayyubid dynasty (1174–1249), commerce and cultural exchange flourished. Damascus became a key trade link between the Islamic world and the Crusader states, from which the indigenous Christian population clearly benefited (Immerzeel, 2009, p. 87). Each year, thousands of European pilgrims were drawn to the biblical lands, particularly the holy sites described in Western European historical writings of the 12th and 13th centuries. By 1100, Western Christians widely regarded the newly founded Christian kingdom with its capital in Jerusalem as a major success (Smail, 1974, p. 15).

2.9.Mamluk (1250-1516)

The Mamluk institution was established in the early ninth century to train elite cavalry regiments, mostly made up of mounted archers who had been reared as soldiers after being sold into slavery as young boys. Mamluk is an Arabic word that means "one who is owned." In the medieval Islamic world, being raised as a soldier after enslavement was not considered degrading; mamluks filled essential roles for the monarch. During the ninth to eleventh centuries, becoming a Mamluk was regarded as a position of privilege, when those who attained such high levels did not necessarily need to be manumitted. They were not as common as it was (Lindsay, 2005, p. 71).

In the mid-thirteenth century, the Mongol invasions significantly disrupted Syria's political and military balance. In February 1260, General Kitbuqa led the Mongol army into Damascus with the help of the Latin Prince of Antioch and the Armenian monarch as allies. The Mongols sometimes protected Christians from the captured cities because many were followers of the East Syrian Church. Damascene Christians rejoiced in the streets on August 31 due to their improved situation. However, their joy was short-lived; only three days later, in Ain Jalut, the Mamluks defeated the Mongols. In retaliation for the Christians' perceived allegiance to the Mongols, Muslim forces destroyed the cathedral and the Syrian Orthodox churches.

The Damascene Christians' favourable reception of the Mongols during the Middle Ages, the Mamluks launched a series of attacks against the Crusaders that culminated in the fall of Tripoli in 1289 and Acre in 1291. The new rulers had good reason to doubt the local Christians' loyalty to their Western and Eastern brethren. The attack on Qara in 1266 indicates the worsening situation and signals the end of West Syria's thriving Christian Renaissance (Immerzeel, 2009, p. 78). The Mamluk era in Lebanon was characterised by cultural repression, economic exploitation, religious intolerance, and coerced political subservience. As represented by local fiefdoms, a small amount of political autonomy did endure in Lebanon, but these fiefdoms were ultimately ruled from Cairo (Gabriel, 1978, p. 23).

The turning point came in 1250. A rebellion by the dependable battalions of Turkish slaves known as mamluks led to the toppling of the sultan of Egypt, a descendant of Saladin, in that year. The Mamluks consolidated power, captured Damascus in 1260, and ruled over all Muslim Syria. By 1291, the Crusaders were expelled from Syria and the broader Holy Land thanks to their foot attack on the crusader nations (Smail, 1974, p. 14).

Qalamoun remained outside the main invasion routes and was not directly affected by the Arab military advances. Consequently, Islam did not enter as a conquering force but instead infiltrated gradually; it had to enter there only by infiltration. This slower but more effective method continued its work for many centuries, and it was only through numerous annoyances and harassment that the Christian population abandoned its beliefs. The widespread apostasy of Qalamoun's Christian population occurred relatively late, at the end of the 17th century; again, at the beginning of this century, it was divided into four dioceses: Yabroud, Kara, Ma'loula and Saidnaya. In 1647, Patriarch Macaire Zaim visited his flock in Ain-Tiné and Bakh'a. Christianity persisted in key centres such as Saidnaya, Maaloula, Yabroud, Nébeck, Kara and Deir-Atyé. The other villages only retained vestiges: ruins of churches or monasteries and remains of manuscripts.

Qalamoun held a prominent role in manuscript production and preservation. Thus, to cite just one example of the 190 Syriac manuscripts reported by C. Charon in his learned work History of the Melkite Patriarchates, 77 are of known provenance; among these 77, 31 were written in villages of Qalamoun. Moreover, again, at the end of his nomenclature, the erudite historian adds: "A fairly large number of Syro-Melkite books are said to be found in Maaloula" (Nasrallah, 1940, p. 84).

2.10. Ottoman (1516-1918)

In 1516, Sultan Selim I led his army eastward to occupy Tabriz, the Safavid imperial capital. However, he redirected his campaign to neutralise the threat posed by the Mamluk Empire, centred in Egypt, which also controlled Syria and parts of southern Anatolia. In 1517, the Ottoman forces effectively expelled the Mamluks from Syria and captured Cairo. Consequently, the sultans declared themselves the supreme authorities of the global Islamic community. They adopted the customs of Islamic tradition, which became one of the defining features of the Empire. The Ottomans enforced the Shariʿa (Islamic legal system) throughout the Empire; the goal of *ghazw* in Islam was to expand the realms of Islam at the expense of non-Muslim territories. The invention and widespread use of gunpowder weaponry enabled the Ottoman army to achieve victories over European and Middle Eastern forces. Upon conquering Jerusalem, Damascus, and Baghdad, alongside Mecca and Medina, the Ottomans assumed the role of guardians of the entire Islamic community.

Due to Islamic principles of tolerance and pragmatic governance, the sultans granted *millet* status to Greek Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Armenian Christians. These religious

communities were governed by their own officials, who managed tax collection, education, judicial matters, and internal religious affairs, including the administration of their main churches. Through this system, the Ottomans managed to govern the population with little resistance. Regardless of their wealth or prominence, non-Muslims were never regarded as equals to Muslims. They faced social discrimination that excluded them from the Ottoman military and ruling elite.

Social boundaries varied across the Empire; what was tolerated in one town might not be accepted in another, and even within the same place, conditions could change over time. These differences were rooted in prevailing attitudes and everyday social practices. Jews and Christians could become targets of financial extortion by regional Ottoman authorities. Wealthy Muslims, however, also experienced these burdens. Otherwise, the state did not restrict how non-Muslims could earn a livelihood. As a result, some non-Muslims achieved economic prosperity. By the end of the Ottoman era, many of the wealthiest citizens in Ottoman Arab cities were non-Muslims. Because non-Muslim testimony was invalid in cases involving Muslims and criminal penalties, murders or public abuses against non-Muslims were rarely prosecuted in court. Additionally, by the seventeenth century, the term *Ahl al-Dhimma* was used in court instead of *kafir* to designate Christians or Jews, typically referred to as *Millet al-Nasara* ("Christians") (Cleveland & Bunton, 2000, p. 38).

In 1774, under the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, the Ottoman sultan granted Russia the right to build a Greek Orthodox church in Istanbul—an agreement considered among the most humiliating for the Ottomans. Under these terms, Russia became the official protector of the entire Greek Orthodox population within the Ottoman Empire (Cleveland & Bunton, 2000, pp. 40-55). Extending *millet* policies into the nineteenth century enabled Christian elites to pursue political influence by emphasising and refining their religious identities. Moreover, it helped secure formal recognition for their respective *millets* and boosted their confidence in interactions with other sects and both central and provincial authorities. Sectarian tensions emerged in the nineteenth century; before that, emotional norms largely governed inter-communal relations. A sense of loss and fear of impending change sparked a wave of violent outbursts by Muslims against their Christian neighbours. The 1860 civil war in Lebanon and the Damascus riot were among the most devastating in terms of loss of life. Violence targeted both foreign and local Christians. These events were not confined to Damascus or Lebanon but also occurred in Aleppo (1850), Mosul (1854), Nablus (1856), Jeddah (1858), and Egypt (1882). Muslim hostility also extended to Jews, as seen in the Mosul riot and in Baghdad in

1889. Such sectarian violence further deepened divisions between Muslims and Christians across the region (Masters, 2004, pp. 17,100).

Like other parts of the Empire, Maaloula was affected by these events. On 16 October (or 16 November) 1850, in connection with the Battle of Harfouche in Baalbek, Prince Mohamed Al-Harfouche and his rebels revolted against Ottoman General Mustapha Pasha and his loyal troops. After the rebels were defeated, their leaders fled to Damascus and sought refuge in Maaloula. Ottoman soldiers entered Maaloula and committed violent abuses against the local population. Some attacked the Monastery of St. Thecla, where Bishop Zacharie, several monks, and part of the village's refugee population were massacred. The Ottoman troops reportedly knocked on the Monastery's door, requesting hospitality and promising no harm to its occupants. Bishop Zacharie opened the door, after which the soldiers killed and robbed the Monastery. This event marks a tragic episode in the monastery's history, still recounted by the villagers and the monastic community of St. Thecla (Poujean, 2007, p. 100). Again, during the 1860 riot, the village was attacked and besieged, forcing its inhabitants to seek refuge in Maaloula's carved rock fortifications (Ayalon, 1986, pp. 308-309) (Rabbath & François, 1910, p. 178).

2.11. French Mandate

Amir Faysal led a revolt in favour of the British that erupted in the Hijaz region between 1914 and 1918, and the rebels subsequently invaded Damascus alongside British forces. During this period, the Ottoman Empire was weakened and ultimately defeated. Britain had promised the rebels an Arab state stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean. However, Britain simultaneously entered into several covert agreements. In March 1920, Amir Faysal was proclaimed the new monarch of Syria. In July 1920, as Britain withdrew its support, France invaded the country against the will of most of its citizens. Later, in 1922, when Syria had only recently been established, France declared itself the country's mandatory government. The prosperous European nations then negotiated and delineated the borders that now define the former Arab Ottoman regions.

The conquest and pacification of Syria were completed by 1925. The authorities administering the Syrian mandate regarded the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama as centres of anti-colonial nationalism. They prohibited prominent nationalist leaders from holding any administrative office. By establishing internal boundaries and autonomous "statelets," the French deliberately separated sects and divided rural from urban areas. They sought to prevent

inter-sectarian coalitions from forming and to contain nationalist agitation within the cities. The grain trade served as the core of the revolution. The 1925 uprising began in the southern, grain-producing region of Jabal Hawran and quickly spread to the Meydan district of Damascus. Mandate administrators claimed the revolution was sectarian, responding to Druze leaders who believed the reforms threatened their authority. Beyond sectarian, regional, and social divisions, the movement also included uprisings in Aleppo Province, led by Ibrahim Hananu, and in the Alawi region east of Latakia, led by Salih Al-Ali. The commanders of the Damascene insurrection organised groups to fight within and beyond the city. However, only days after the bombing, they realised how severe French retaliation would be. Therefore, they shifted their battles to more open terrain before attacking French fortifications in the southern Anti-Lebanon Mountains.

The Greek Orthodox Christians of Damascus were ordered by Hassan Al-Kharat, the head of the Mujahidin in Ghuta, to deliver 800 Ottoman gold pounds within twenty-four hours or, alternatively, to provide thirty armed men and fifty weapons with ammunition. As he outlined the personnel requirements, Kharat assumed that the demand for men and weapons would be taken seriously. He insisted that they must be Patriarchal, that is, Greek Orthodox. "*Reassure their families that they will be safe (with us)*," he said*," but if you fail to pay this levy, you and your families will be killed, and your houses destroyed*." By asserting that similar requests would be made of Muslims and Jews, he sought to convince the addressees that this was not a religious issue. However, it is evident that Kharat sought men rather than money and aimed to include Christians among his rebels.

With limited external supplies, the insurgents took from villagers and residents whatever they needed to survive. They referred to their levies as "revolt taxes". French sources described these levies as pillage. Villagers often willingly supported the resistance to the extent their means allowed, by passing information to insurgents, sheltering them, providing food, or joining their ranks. Insurgents compelled uncooperative villages to provide money and supplies. French troops indiscriminately pillaged and destroyed villages and executed inhabitants who resisted mandate rule, even if their only offence was refusing to pay taxes or sheltering rebels, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. There was no effective authority in Ghuta and the northern mountains of Damascus from November 1925 until the following summer. Conversely, in regions under governmental control, mandate officials supplied weapons to pro-mandate villages to fight against the insurgents. The revolutionary leaders knew of this policy and sought to seize these weapons. The mandate administration reinforced Greek Catholic and

Maronite peasants against their neighbours throughout the Anti-Lebanon mountain region between Homs and the border with Palestine.

In November 1925, Ramadan Shalash, the son of a Bedouin shaykh from Dayr al-Zur, arrived in Damascus with many of his men and joined the revolt. He wrote a letter to the inhabitants of Maaloula demanding:

Ottoman gold pounds, 140 rifles, 10 cases of rifle cartridges, 10 sacks of rice, 100 sheep, 5 revolvers

100 grenades, 20 sacks of flour, 20 sacks of cracked wheat, 10 flasks of ?!, 5 mules.

Under normal circumstances, these demands would have been reasonable for Maaloula, a medium-sized village in a semi-arid area. Maaloula faced significant insurgent pressures, as many villagers joined the revolt, while others, particularly Uniate villagers, sought French protection. A British consular record from November 1925 indicates that French authorities had supplied rifles and ammunition to Christian men in several mountain villages. The British consul in Beirut wrote of this policy. "*At best, it was a confession of weakness. It laid the mandatory power open to the dangerous suggestion that, perhaps without realizing the consequences, they had encouraged civil and a sectarian war*." Mandate authorities recognized the dangers of inciting one religious community against another, yet they actively sought to deepen sectarian divisions. They argued that sectarian divisions were endemic and that only France could protect the Christians of the East from their neighbours. Christian villages were often divided between those who supported the revolt and those who supported the mandate. Many Syrian elders have stated that Orthodox Christians generally supported the revolt and nationalist causes, while Catholic Christians tended to support the French government (Provence, 2005, pp. 121-122).

A rebel ultimatum reached Maaloula on October 14, 1925, demanding that the villagers provide the required supplies. When the locals refused, the Convent of Saint Sarkis was looted, and the community was attacked the following day. The rebels withdrew temporarily before returning on the 26th. Early that morning, the local Catholic school and its adjacent chapel were set on fire by the rebels, many of them from neighbouring towns, under the leadership of Ramadan Shallash and Jumʿa Sawsaq. The nuns, startled by the fire, fled with other women and children to the caves in the rock face behind the town. " Even some Muslims, men and women, though few in number, “the nuns reported, joined them in the caves. Meanwhile, the men of the town repelled the attackers by firing from behind rocks and caves, inflicting severe casualties. The

villagers surmised that the rebels carried away the bodies of identifiable locals while leaving behind those of "strangers, Druze, or others."

After the siege began on the morning of the 15th, a priest secretly left Maaloula to travel to Damascus and request French assistance. After the Damascus rebellion was temporarily suppressed on the 28th, General Maurice Gamelin met with a Greek Catholic bishop to discuss Maaloula's situation. Although he claimed to have no troops to spare, Gamelin provided Father Basilios Issa with sixty rifles and six thousand cartridges to take back. Shallash continued to threaten the settlement, raising the ransom and demanding that the attackers' bodies, held by the town's defenders, be buried according to Muslim customs. The townspeople refused, and the siege persisted throughout the winter.

A French column arrived in late March 1926 to end the siege. However, rebel forces launched another offensive on June 3. The rebels, composed of individuals from several nearby towns, were led by Fawzi al-Qawuqji, leader of the unsuccessful Hama rebellion, and Mohammad Mahmoud Diyab, a Muslim resident of Maaloula. During the seven-day siege, three women and two girls were killed by rebel fire directed at the settlement's entry points, enraging the town's young men. Through intermediaries from the nearby Christian town of Saydnayya, which was largely pro-uprising, al-Qawuqji offered the town terms of surrender. Essentially, Maaloula was to provide the rebels with twenty guns and twenty fighters, significantly fewer than Shallash had demanded nine months earlier, and to appoint a local rebel leader as Maaloula's administrator. Even so, the villagers refused (Al-Ma'arrat, 1926, p. 423).

The rebel army, having been repelled, withdrew from Maaloula on June 6 and marched on the nearby town of Yabroud, where they attacked the Convent of the Sisters of the Two Holy Hearts, looted Christian homes, killed several families, burned six houses, and attempted—unsuccessfully—to breach the Christian quarter before retreating under fire and suffering heavy casualties from the town's defenders. The rebel force returned and besieged Maaloula again from June 8 to June 10. However, a French column eventually arrived, forcing the rebels to flee and inflicting severe retribution on the villages that supported the insurrection. The French forces sold the loot they had taken from these villages in the Christian district of Qasaʿa when they got back to Damascus (Veldkamp , 2016, pp. 42-45).

2.12. Independence era

During the administration of President Shukri Al-Quwatly, Syria officially declared its independence and embarked on a challenging path ahead. It soon encountered several complex

internal and external challenges. The first concerned its relationship with Lebanon, a neighbouring state. Lastly, there was the Zionist issue, which had expanded beyond its initial scope and had become a matter of global significance.

The most pressing concern was Zionism, as the Palestinian crisis was rapidly spiralling out of control. Additionally, the domestic situation in Syria was deteriorating (Hitti, 1959, p. 251). Under the mandate, public expenditure had focused primarily on security and administration, leaving little for transport, infrastructure, education, or social services. The neglect of education also disadvantaged the Sunni and other Muslim communities. These communities had relatively few schools of their own compared with those established by Christian churches for their congregations, which were often supported and funded by missionaries (McHugo, 2015, p. 118)

Political takeovers were common; in March 1947, Husni al-Zaʿim seized power and began implementing drastic reforms. He granted voting rights to women with only primary education and placed the privately funded charitable institution known as *waqf* under government authority. Sami al-Hinawi carried out a second military coup in August. On December 19, Colonel Adib al-Shishakli orchestrated a third coup, which resulted in the reinstatement of Hashim al-Atasi, who had recently been elected as the republic's acting president. Al-Shishakli eventually assumed complete control of the executive branch. Under the new government, Syria's situation did not improve. With the border with Lebanon closed, Syria sought to develop the port of Latakia. Following the Zaʿim coup, Shukri al-Quwatly fled to Egypt and later returned to power on September 6, 1955, (Hitti, 1959, p. 254). Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser became president of the United Arab Republic when Syria and Egypt united in 1958. However, the union failed to achieve its goals and was dissolved in 1961. After the French withdrawal, the Syrian people faced the challenge of governing their country effectively. Although Syrians had united in opposition to the French, many remained more devoted to their respective religious or ethnic identities than to a unified Syrian nation. Moreover, there was a significant divide between the wealthy and the poor, and between urban and rural populations (Dougherty, 2004, p. 35). Syria's Christian, Circassian, Druze, Ismaili, and Shiʿite minorities viewed the Baʿath Party as a path to liberation and empowerment when it came to power through a military coup in March 1963. Secularism under the Baʿath regime provided a theoretical buffer against traditional Islam (Tabler, 2011, p. 30).

Syria came under the rule of Hafez al-Assad in 1970, supported by the military forces. His first internal challenge was to reform the Baʿath Party and ensure it could not oppose his authority.

In stark contrast to its founding principles, the Baʿath Party had evolved into a movement that supported the leader unconditionally. He expanded the army immediately upon taking office. Most Syrians respected Assad's policies, and the government quickly stabilised. It was the first time in Syrian history that a leader's authority was unchallenged. He consolidated the Baʿathist revolution that had begun in 1963, effectively providing the entire country with access to electricity, piped water, and education for the first time. Life expectancy rose, while infant mortality declined (McHugo, 2015, p. 200). After the death of Hafez al-Assad, President Bashar al-Assad promised to reform Syria. The thirty-four-year-old ophthalmologist had reigned power in Syria (Tabler, 2011, p. 36).

2.13. Post-War Period (current State)

The Syrian crisis began in March 2011. Until that time, Maaloula had been a popular destination; however, in 2013 it came under the control of military militias. During this period, fighters from Al-Nusra kidnapped thirteen nuns for several months before releasing them as part of a prisoner exchange with opposition fighters detained by the regime. In mid-April 2014, government forces recaptured the town. However, most residents who had fled to Damascus or sought refuge abroad did not return, and the town's current population is estimated at only around two thousand. Approximately 80% of Maaloula's residents today no longer speak Aramaic, while most of those who still do are over sixty years of age (A.F.B, 2019, p. 14). In addition to efforts in Aramaic documentation and historiography, an institute was established in Maaloula in 2006 to teach the language as part of Damascus University; however, it closed its doors with the onset of the conflict (Nasr Allah, 2013, p. 44).

2.14. Maaloula on the maps

Figures 1, 2, and 3 present maps of Syria across different periods, under the Ottoman Empire and the French Mandate. These maps reveal significant changes over time, particularly in the road networks, where the main routes recognized by the Ottoman authorities evolved considerably, as demonstrated below. Figure1 shows a map from 1844, depicting Maaloula located on the main road extending from Damascus, passing through Maʿarra, Maaloula, and Yabrud, and continuing toward al-Nabk. Figure 2, drawn in 1893, depicts Maaloula without any road crossing the village. This may indicate that no major routes passed through Maaloula at that time or that the map represented only the principal roads. The map key, however, includes symbols for railways, trunk roads, and daily routes. Furthermore, Maaloula, Yabrud, and Saydnaya are not shown as settlements connected by roads on this map, even though the

latter two towns were important regional centres within the district. Figure 3, dated 1942 and produced under the French Mandate, classifies the roads into four categories. Maaloula appears on a second-class track that connects it to Yabrud, whereas ʿAin et-Tineh, the nearest village before Maaloula, lies on a first-class route. However, the map shows no direct connection between the two villages.

These cartographic changes clearly illustrate the shifting importance of Maaloula over time. During the Ottoman era, the village held a crucial role, serving as a refuge for rebels.

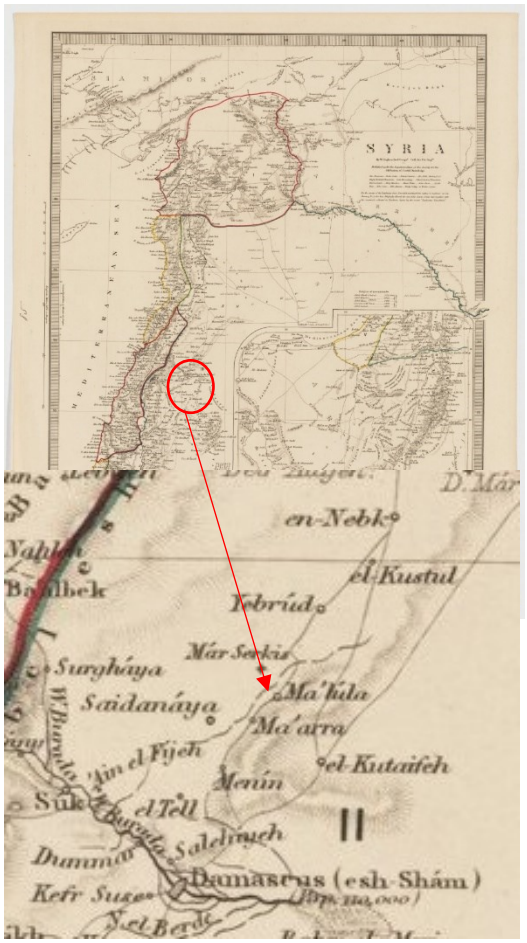


Figure 2: This map references the usual division of Syria under the Turkish government. It shows the road that passed through Maaloula, London,1853 (Hughes & Prof. Geogry, 1844).

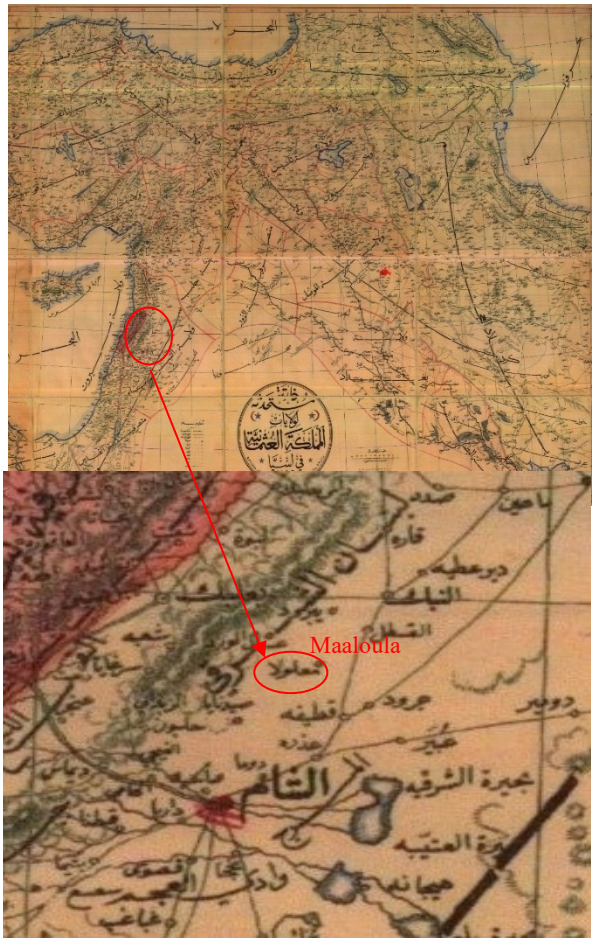


Figure 3:The Ottoman Empire in Asia; this map shows that in 1893, no main road was passed in Maaloula (Wikipedia, 1893).

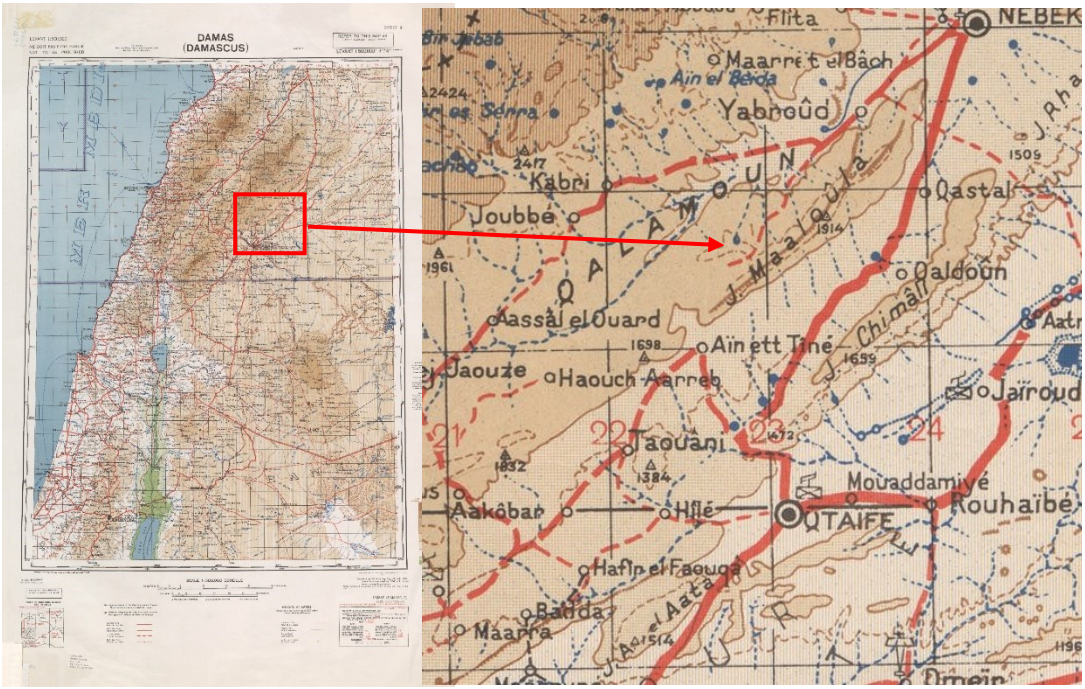


Figure 1:A map of Damascus under the French mandatory government 1942, It shows the secondary road to Maaloula (University of Texas Libraries, 1942).

Chapter 3- Introduction to the Site

3.1. General description

Maaloula is a secluded Syrian village located in the Qalamoun region, a mountain range that stretches between the Damascus Plain and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. It is situated at an altitude of 1,600 meters, far from major roads. The village is enclosed by two narrow gorges, surmounted by high rock formations, and built amphitheatrically along the escarpment walls. This environment influences the settlement in various ways depending on its geographical location (Figure 4). This site gives Maaloula its distinctive character: the houses in the old village are superimposed and partially carved into the rock. Narrow alleyways and irregular stairways connect the houses, forming a labyrinth known only to the locals. The roads were designed for pedestrians and animals (donkeys and horses), which played an essential role in the daily life of Maaloulans, particularly the peasants.

Maaloula is distinguished by its exceptional mountainous landscape featuring *Al-Faj* (Figure 5). Numerous caves and rock-cut shelters testify to continuous human occupation from prehistoric times to the present, contributing to the creation of many legends and beliefs preserved in the collective memory.

One of Maaloula's main characteristics is preserving the Aramaic language. This language belongs to the Syriac family. It was spoken in the region during the time of Christ and has survived in dialectal forms in certain parts of Syria, particularly in the far northeast and in three Qalamoun villages: *Jubaadin*, *Bakha*, and *Maaloula*. The first two villages are now predominantly Muslim, whereas Maaloula remains Christian mainly. The continued use of



Figure 4: An aerial photo of Maaloula shows the Geographical site (Wikimedia, 2012).



Figure 5: Photo of the eastern Al-Faj by Author.

Aramaic has been a primary factor contributing to the village's renown. Maaloula is supplied with water from numerous springs that irrigate the valley extending southward, where the cultivation of fruit trees, such as apricots and vines, predominates. Like many areas in Syria, Maaloula suffers from drought, yet it continues to enjoy a reputation as a pleasant mountain garden with healthy high-altitude air. Most Maaloulans now live in Damascus or abroad, and few young people remain in the village year-round compared to the old (Escher & Pfaffenbach, 2004). However, Maaloulans living outside the village often maintain either an ancestral home or a recently built one, where they spend their summers and holidays, thereby fostering the preservation of family ties.

3.2. Maaloula in the research and travellers' paper

Many travellers visited Maaloula and either wrote about it or at least mentioned it in their publications. These travellers either visited the village on their way to other locations or had their aim from the beginning to study mainly its language. The following, Table *1*, presents the names, nationalities, and dates of the travellers' visits, in addition to researchers who wrote about Maaloula without visiting it, and a brief of their publication. For some travellers, their work was reachable to read. Otherwise, some of them were mentioned here according to other travellers who wrote about them in their work.

Table 1: The travellers who visited Maaloula.

The writer's name	**Nationality**	**Date**	**The outcomes**
Aḥmad Ibn faḍl Allah Alʿomary	Syrian from Damascus	At the beginning of the fourteenth century	He wrote the Book *Masalk Alabṣar fy Mamalek Alamṣar*, which is considered one of the most important works of the Mamluk era. In this book, he described the Monastery of St. Thekla, referring to it as the monastery of the Maaloula gorge (Alʿomary, 2010, p. 386).

Sir John Mandeville	English	At the end of the fourteenth century	Sir John mentioned the caves of *Maaloula* as a hermit's nest, as Oliphant mentioned in his book (Oliphant, 1881, p. 369).
Abd Alghany Al-Nabilsy	Syrian	1693	In 1698, he finished his book, *Al-Haqiqa wa Almajaz fy Al-Rehla Ela Belad Al-Sham wa Meser wa Al-Hejaz*. He visited the village and wrote a small poem about the place and the air there. Moreover, he mentioned the shrine of St. Thekla and its spring, which was used as medical water (Alnabelsy, 1698, p. 26).
Richard Pococke	English	1745	During his journey to the east, he mentioned many places during his visit to Damascus; he mentioned a village called *Malouca* (Pococke, 1745, p. 131). This village, with all the detailed descriptions, is Maaloula, where he mentioned the location, St. Thekla, and St. Sergius. Moreover, he described the ancient village and presented details about the carved village. He said the ancient presses were used as wine presses at that time. He assumed that stonecutters inhabited the town in addition to the workers in vineyards. Josiah Conder used the same name in his book, *The Modern Traveller*, who represented the travel of Pococke (Conder, 1824, p. 65).
William George Browne	English	1792-1798	He travelled through Egypt and the Near East and mentioned *Maʿlula* in his book as an Aramaic-speaking village in Antilebanon (Browne, 1801, p. 405) (Browne, 1799, p. 405).
John Fuller	English	December-1829	He visited Maaloula and mentioned this trip in his book, *Narrative of a Tour through some*

			Parts of the Turkish Empire. He mentioned that only one Muslim family was in the village and wrote a brief description of the village's architecture. (Fuller, 1829, pp. 403-420)
E. Robinson and E. Smith		1834	They wrote Biblical research in Palestine, Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea. Ma'lula[1] was mentioned for its language; the two travellers passed the village on their way to Homs, and they described the villages on their way (Robinson & Smith, 1838, pp. 171-172).
Josias Leslie Porter, in company with the Rev.S. Robson and the Rev. J, Bamett	Irish	20 October, 1852	In 1855, he published a book called *Five Years in Damascus*. In this book, he did not mention the Aramaic dialect, but in 1854, he published *Syriac*, where he mentioned the dialect. The travellers are determined to examine its topography and antiquities. Josias described the rock site of *M'alûla*, the St Sergius church and the east Faj. Moreover, he mentioned that he found a full operation win-press in the same establishment, which was a *dibs* manufactory with no inscription (Porter, 1870, pp. 134-135) (Porter, et al., 1855).
Jules Ferrette	French	1861 Spring	The first orientalist who studied the dialect of *Ma'lula*. He published a paper about the Syriac language of the village. Moreover, he

[1] The name of Maaloula is mentioned in this table in a different spelling due to the way it is written in the source.

			described in general the village and mentioned that at the foot of the Thekla monastery, under a large tree near the mill, he pitched his tent, where the mill now does not exist (Ferrette, 1863, pp. 431-436).
Theodor Noldeke	German	Never visited	He wrote about Maaloula's Aramaic dialect; his 1862 article put *Maaloula* in the light, and the German orientalist who was interested in the Aramaic language could not avoid this village (Nöldeke, 1868) (Bliss, 1890, p. 86).
Eugen Prym	Swiss	1869 Mid-September to late October	He directed interviews and collected folk texts from villagers. Collections of tales collected during their journey among the populations of the confines of Asia Minor, the Syriacs of Tur-Abdîn, the Kurds and Assyrians of Urmia, and much more (Prym & Socin, 1890) (Pichon, 2010, p. 31).
Dr. Albert Socin	Swiss	4 September till 17 October 1869	He spent two months in *Ma'lula* studying the dialect. In the "*Unexplored Syria*" (vol. ii, pp. 264-271) (Bliss, 1890), there is a short description of *Ma'lula*, He directed interviews and collected folk texts from villagers. These materials, collected from the villagers, were not published. But be used later by Gotthelf Bergsträsser (Pichon, 2010, p. 31).
Richard F. Burton	British	September, 1870	He was consul in Damascus; He explored Palestine and Lebanon with Charles Drake,

			who was the representative of the Palestine Exploration Fund. *Ma'alulah* takes some pages of his publication and presents the bones and skeletons that he found in the village (Burton & Drake, 1872, p. 264).
William Wright	Irish	the end of May,1874	He spent one night in *Mâloula*; he wrote about the agricultural production (Wright, 1895, p. 50) (Pichon, 2010, p. 31).
Clement Huart	French	October, November, and December 1878	His contribution is a short dictionary of Aramaic words and expressions from the Maaloula peasants, with a French translation (Huart, 1878, p. 487).
Rubens Duval	French	In 1879, an article was published.	In 1879, He wrote an article about the Aramaic dialect of Maaloula under the title "*Maʿloula*". This article is a landmark in the history of European linguistics' opinion at Maaloula (Duval, 1879, pp. 456-475).
Laurence Oliphant	British	1879	In 1881, he wrote a book about his visit to Syria, describing the places he visited. *Malula* was mentioned during his visit; he described the road to the village, the language, and the demography. Moreover, he drew a sketch of *Malula* where the arched façades existed. At that time, only two Muslim families were in Maaloula (Oliphant, 1881, pp. 366-370)

Frederic Jones Bliss	American	First visit in March 1888. 1889- June	In 1890, he published an article in the Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement, it is presented as "*Ma'lula and its dialect*", he presented a description of the village, in some lines he said, "*The houses are built of libin or unburnt brick, rough unhewn stones, and mud. A few arches appear. Many of the flat roof's project, and are supported by posts, thus forming a sort of balcony*". He added," The *mud and scant whitewash give the town an appearance of white and brown*". This description gives a perspective of the village view, and it was his first visit in 1888. At the second visit, he estimated the population to be 2000 inhabitants; two-thirds are Greek Catholics, the remaining are Orthodox Greeks and about twenty Muslim families. Moreover, he wrote the Aramaic alphabet and presented the language (Bliss, 1890, p. 74).
Hans Stumme	German	In 1889, visited	In 1915, he published some interviews with the Maaloulan inhabitants in Aramaic (Bergsträsser, 1915).
George E Post	American	1890, April 4th	He made a trip to Palmyra in April 1890, starting from Damascus. During this trip, he visited *Ma'lûlah* and presented a general description of the town and its inhabitants. Moreover, he emphasised the actuality of what Bliss described in his article (Post, 1891).

E.V. Starck	German	1894	In 1894, he wrote a dictionary of the old place names in Syria and Palestine, taking into account the Greek and Roman classics, Flavius Josephus, the Talmud and the Byzantines. (Starck, 1894, pp. 45,116,164)
Sisters Lewis and Gibson	Scottish	1895, April 20	The article describes the visit to *Maaloula* and the Aramaic language in the village; moreover, it negotiates the reason for using Arabic as a second language, related to the language of the Muslims (Lewis, 1898, pp. 129-142) .
Iqlymys Yousuf Dawod	Iraqi	Never visited	He is a scholar and researcher, born in Amadiyah, close to Mosul; he completed his education in Mosul, Lebanon, and finally in Rome. In 1855, he went back to Mosul and engaged in teaching. He was chosen as the community's bishop by the Damascus Syriac Catholics. He arrived in 1878 and passed away there. He wrote a book about the Aramaic language and the area used in it; in addition to presenting the grammar of the language and the difference between the dialects, Maaloula was part of this study due to the importance of its dialect (Dawod, 1896).
Jean Parisot	French	Between October 1896 and March 1897.	He published in 1898 a study about the historical, linguistic, and musicological aspects of *Maaloula* (Parisot, 1898, pp. 239-321).

Habib Alzayat	Syrian	Before 1900	He travelled to Sednaya, Maaloula and Yabroud to study the books in their monasteries' libraries. He described each town and important events. He wrote about Maaloula, its language, the churches and monasteries, and its books and inscriptions (Alzayat, 1902, pp. 121-154)
Karl Baedeker	German		In 1906, he published *Palestine and Syria with the chief routes through Mesopotamia and Babylonia, and* he mentioned his visit to *Ma'lula* (Baedeker , 1906, p. 389).
John Kelman	English	Before 1908	He wrote about his journey to Palmyra, and during that, he visited *Ma'loula* and described it. He took two photos of the rocky village and the yards (Kelman, 1908, pp. 88,132-134).
Joseph Segall		1910	He spent only a few hours in the village and was fascinated by the fabulous village. The article contains the village's photo and pages about the neighbouring localities (Pichon, 2010).
Gertrude Lowthian Bell		Around 1915	She visited the village during her trip to Palmyra. In 1907, she wrote a book, *Syria, the Desert and the Sown*, in which she mentioned her visit to *Ma'alula* (Bell, 1919, p. 209)
Gotthelf Bergsträsser	German	1915	He was interested in the Aramaic language of Maaloula.In 1932, he collected traditional stories and tales of the town, and later, he collected the grammar, a glossary and phonogram recordings (Bergsträsser, 1915).

L.Valentine		1915	He wrote the book, *Palestine Past and Present*, in which he described the pilgrimage road and mentioned the village of *Maaloula* with a brief description. There is no information about whether he visited the village, or it is only a description from other visitors (Valentine, 1915, pp. 356-366).
Aḥmad Waṣfy Zakarya	Syrian	1926-1933 1344-1352 AH	During his work as Property inspector of the Levant State in 1344-1352 AH, he visited the different parts of Syria. He described the cities, nature, agriculture, and architecture. In addition, he translated the travel of *Ewliya Celebi,* the Turkish traveller who visited the Ottoman land for 40 years, starting in 1630 AD. In his book, he described Maaloula, its location, houses, and the view, in addition to its monasteries (Zakarya, 1984, p. 383).
Mary Berenson	American	28/April 1929	An Art Historian visited *Maloula* with her husband for one day and wrote about that in her book *A Modern Pilgrimage* (Berenson, 1933, pp. 175-178).
Sigismund Sussia Reich	British	Between April and November 1936	In 1937, he published a complete work about the linguistic and ethnological on the Aramean villages of Qalamoun *Bakhaa, Jubbaadin and Maaloula* (Reich, 1937) (Pichon, 2010).
Anton Spitaler	German	Once for days in 1950	In 1938, he published a grammar work about the Aramaic language of Maaloula. In 1957, he published another article*, Neue Materialien zum neuaramäischen Dialekt von Ma'lûla*

			His articles were based on the work of his teacher Bergsträsser (Spitaler, 1957, pp. 299-339)
Peter Bamm	German	1952-1953	He wrote the book, *Early Sites of Christianity*, which explains the beginnings and development of this significant religion by looking at the history and archaeology of early Christian locations in the Middle East. Scholars have chosen this work because it is significant to culture and contributes to our understanding of civilisation. He visited the village of *Maʿlulah* during his study, as an important site that still speaks Aramaic (Bamm, 1957)
Jean-François Fourcade	French	1965-1966	In 1967, he wrote a short article in the newsletter of the Linguistic group, and he also made 11 hours of recording that collected (stories, tales, lives of saints) (Fourcade, 1967).
Joëlle Chabert and François Mourvillier	French	1988	They wrote a book about the Christians in the Arabic world, and they had an interview with Bishop François Abou Mokh. The bishop is from *Maaloula*, so he mentioned the town many times and described occasions from the Ottoman and French occupation periods (Chabert & Mourvillier, 1991).

Warwick Ball	Australian	1991	He wrote a book after his visit to Syria; he described the village in his book, *Syria: A Historical and Architectural Guide.* (Ball, 2007, pp. 83-84)
Werner Arnold	German	From 1985 to 1987, He lived in Maaloula with his family. And again in 1993-1994-1997.	His postgraduate thesis is about "*The Western Neo-Aramaic dialect*". in 2004, with two geographers, he published a book containing interviews and stories collected from Maaloula's inhabitants (Arnold, 2018) (Arnold, 2000).
Maliha Masood		2000-2001	She wrote a book about her visit to Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Turkey. She visited *Maaloula* during her journey and mentioned it and its Aramaic (Masood, 2006, p. 139).
Sylvia Chiffoleau	French	She spent time from 2002-2004.	She writes Chiffoleau, S. (2006*). Fêtes et processions de Maaloula: une mise en scène des identités dans l'espace d'un village chrétien. Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (Chiffoleau, 2006)
Diana Darke		2005	She studied the Arabic language, lived in Syria, and published a guidebook about visiting Syria, based on her visit (Darke, 2008).

Marie Eve Martel	Canadian	Summer 2007	She visited Syria in the summer of 2007 and spent a couple of days in Maaloula. She described the village, the important buildings and churches; moreover, she wrote about the daily life of the inhabitants (Martel, 2009)
Andreas Bandak	Denmark	Visited Syria many times between 2004-2010	During his field work in Syria to study Christians in Damascus, he visited Maaloula and published a paper (Bandak, 2012).
Bill S. Ashley		2010	He was journeying around Syria and visited St. Thekla in Maaloula on his way to Palmyra. He mentioned that in his book, *The Diary of a Compulsive World Traveller* (Ashley, 2011).
Xavier Odul	French	2010	In 2011, he published a book about his visit to the Silk Route sites. He visited *Maaloula* with a friend during his travels and described the village and its churches (Odul, 2011, p. 74).
Janine Di Giovanni	American	June-November 2012	She visited the village and wrote about her interviews with people there; moreover, she wrote generally about its history and the situation of the village during the recent Syrian crisis (Di Giovanni, 2016, pp. 37-59).

Rafik Schami	German with Maaloula roots.	He was born in 1946 in Damascus/Syria. In 1971, he emigrated to the Federal Republic.	He was inspired by Bergsträsser's work; he took on his side the tales collected by the linguist. Rafik Schami does not know the Aramaic dialect of Maaloula; for this reason, his work has no historical or linguistic claim. Most of his publications are largely inspired by Bergsträsser's stories, but some are directly taken from his childhood in Damascus and narratives of village elders.
Ilyas Antoun Nasrallah	Syrian		He tried to collect the families' names in Maaloula. The importance of this work is that it is the only Syrian monograph mainly of local sources (Nasrallah & Nasrallah, 2003).
John Eibner	American	2014	He visited Maaloula at the end of 2014, and he wrote about the village after the jihadists occupied the village (Eibner, 2017, p. 200).
Joe Edd Morris		2015	An archaeologist and ancient manuscript expert, he was on a research expedition to Maaloula (Morris, 2015).

3.3. The Name of Maaloula

It is logical that a town founded in an ancient era should reappear in later periods after a time of oblivion. This phenomenon is most evident when a town retains the same name throughout history, but it is even more significant when, as often occurred, it bore a Greek name during the classical period and later reverted to its original name after the Arab conquest. This occurred quite frequently; for example, *Hamath*, after being known for eight hundred years as *Epiphaneia*, eventually became Hama once again. It has generally been regarded as a basic rule that Semitic names tend to outlast Greek ones. However, this tendency has not been universal. The four cities of the North Syrian Tetrapolis were all known to early Arab geographers by their Greek names, and the two that still exist retain the names Antakya and Lattakia. In such cases, the survival of the Greek names is natural, as these cities were newly founded on

previously unoccupied sites or on insignificant villages whose original names had been forgotten or remembered only in classical sources.

The old names of villages survived only when the settlements and their populations remained largely unchanged. Newcomers and the Hellenized upper classes of a town might use the official name, while the lower classes and neighbouring peasants typically ignored the new designation and continued using the old one. Conversely, when major new foundations and populations were introduced, all social groups adopted the new name, and the old one disappeared from use. The survival of an ancient name into the Middle Ages, even after a temporary disappearance, demonstrates not only that the town existed continuously from antiquity through the classical period but also that it was of some importance and underwent no substantial refoundation during the classical age (Jones, 1937, pp. 229-233).

In the Aramaic language, Maaloula is written "ܡܥܠܘܠܐ"; Some attribute the name *Maaloula* to its cool air. In the Syriac dictionary, "معليا" "Maʿlia" means high, sublime, or exalted, whereas "معلولي," "Maʿlouli" means the strait, referring to the narrow road leading to the town. The word *Maaloula* in Aramaic is derived from the verbs "أعَلْ""aʿl", which means to enter and "عَلَخّ""ʿalakh" meaning "we entered." The memetic infinitive form "معلولا" (*Maaloula*), in which the letter "و" (*waw*) is pronounced like the English "o" in *Mihlola*, means "entrance" or "passage," referring to the two mountain outlets that lead to the town (Khawand, 1997).

A similar cycle of name variations occurred in Maaloula; it appeared in documents and travellers' accounts under different names over time. These names changed across historical periods: *Magluda* in Ptolemy's records (Huart, 1878, p. 308), *Calamona* in the ancient period, and *Maalloula* in the Byzantine era (Burns, 1999, p. 152) (Dussaud, 2015, p. 250), *Calamona* was also mentioned as a medieval equivalent of the Arabic name *Maaloula* (Zacour & Hazard, 1985, p. 526). George of Cyprus also referred to it as *Magloula*, identifying it as part of the Lebanese Phoenicia (Ayalon, 1986, pp. 308-309). The name *Magloula* appeared on Roman maps, while *Bencrapolis* and *Saloqia* of Qalamoun were among the names used during the Hellenistic period (Joud Allah, 1999, p. 690).

In 1896, the French government sent Patriarch Parisot, who visited Maaloula and wrote about its dialect, noting that it had also been referred to as *Saloqia* and *Salfakia*. However, he found no ancient source describing a town named *Saloqia* that shared Maaloula's characteristics. Nevertheless, this title is still used by the Greek Orthodox and their bishop in Zahle, where it is still known among them as Salfakia's bishop. In the seventeenth century, the deacon Bolos

al-Halaby, one of the Greek Orthodox writers, mentioned in his book *Tarykh Albṭareka Al-Anṭakyyn* that *Saloqia* was well known before his time. In his work, he cited two letters from Jerusalem: one referring to an ancient Roman text and the other listing the Phoenician parish churches in Lebanon. Among them, *Slokiat al-Sham*—also called *Afela*—is identified with Maaloula. He added a note about the first diocese of Syria: *"I know that four cities have the same name as Salfakia. The first is Antioch's Salfakia on the coast. The second before Antioch in the region of Tarsus is still called Salfakia. The third is next to Babel, built by Salokos, the son of Antiochus, the king who built Antioch, and now it is ruined. The fourth is in the Levant, called Salfakyat Al-Sham, and now it is called Maaloula*". The second letter from Jerusalem listed the bishoprics of Damascus but did not mention *Salfakia*, as it was then attached to the Church of Yabrud, as noted by bishop Makarios Al-Antaqi. On 15 February 1647, bishop Ibrahim Al-Der Atany was elected Bishop of Yabrud and Maaloula; however, Maaloula later gained its own bishopric (Alzayat, 1902, pp. 121-124). The village served as the chief town of the district *Klima Magloulon*, a name possibly denoting a district or tribe (Dussaud, 2015, p. 255), thus, Calamona became Maaloula. This substitution likely occurred between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Yaqût and the author of Marâsid al-Ittilâ are the only resources that define Maaloula as the name of a district containing several villages (Al-Hamwy, 1995, p. 158) (Nasrallah, 1956, p. 72). Maaloula was mentioned again under a different name, *Malouca*, by Richard Pococke during his travels in Syria(Pococke, 1745, p. 131), According to the history of the town name, this name is far away from the name's roots; it could be a mistake in the name hearing. This name was mentioned in two different dictionaries as a Syrian twon which has two churches, 20 miles N.N.E Damasucs Syria (Rees, 1819, p. 203), the second source mentioned it as a village to the north of Damascus, the dictionary written by Jacobus Roelandszoon in 1823, but it is not evident if it is the same as Maaloula or not due to the shortage of description; it was mentioned as MaLouca, Turk. Asian. Village, 7 miles N. N. E. of Damascus (Roelandszoon, 1823, p. 463). Toynbee and Myers introduce *Maʿlūlah* as a village in the Antilebanon range in their Historical Atlas (Toynbee & Myers, 1959, p. 45)

3.4. The Aramaic Language

The Aramaic Language era extended from the 6th century BC to the 7th century AD, ending with the fall of the Aramaean kingdoms to the Assyrians; however, this did not mark the end of their civilisation. It represented only the political end. The cultural, religious, and linguistic influence of Aramaic civilisation extended from the fall of Babylon until the emergence of Islam. This period is often referred to as the Aramaic Peacetime, or the Aramaic Era,

particularly during the final century of their presence in Asia Minor. Aramaic served as both the written and spoken official language and became the unifying language across Persia, Asia Minor, Iraq, the Levant, and the northern Arabian Peninsula. Aramaic was the language that united these regions despite the existence of Persian, Macedonian, Hellenistic, and Roman kingdoms. Moreover, it remained the mother tongue of the indigenous peoples of this region. Arabic took its place after the Islamic era; however, Aramaic is still used today in several regions of Iraq and the Levant.

The endurance and widespread use of Aramaic were reinforced by the Achaemenid Persian Empire. The empire promoted its use after adopting a simplified script of 22 letters, which facilitated communication and administration across Iraq and the Levant. This step consolidated the Aramaic language for the following centuries, so the Greek and Roman languages could not displace it from usage (Al-Majdi, 2000, p. 45).

A historical review of the successive eras of Syria as a whole, and of the targeted village in particular, raises an important question: **How could a village like Maaloula preserve its Christianity and maintain both its oral and written Aramaic?**

This question becomes more compelling when we observe that the surrounding villages converted to Islam and began to lose their language. Bakhaʿa, Jabaʿaden, and ʿAin al-Tina are the closest villages to Maaloula. Bakhaʿa and Jabaʿaden, like Maaloula, were well known for their use of Aramaic. Nevertheless, many linguists have noted that their dialects of Aramaic differ from that of Maaloula and that their use of the language is primarily oral rather than written. The inhabitants of ʿAin al-Tina spoke Aramaic in the past, but today, many only understand it due to its close location to Maaloula. According to the priest Mosa Al-Karam of Maaloula, ʿAin al-Tina converted to Islam around 1800, while Bakhaʿa and Jabaʿaden converted around 1750; other sources, however, suggest the conversion occurred around 1650 (Hutchinson, 1890, p. 74). As Habib Alzayat noted in his book, the reason the language has survived until today lies in the village's location, nestled between two gorges and naturally protected from external threats, so that travellers unaware of it could pass without even noticing its existence. Due to their people's bravery, Maaloula remained isolated from external influences. Like many other minority communities, the people of Maaloula sought refuge in the mountains, using the area as a natural shelter to remain apart from the majority population. This isolation was the primary reason for preserving their religion; in the case of Maaloula, it also enabled the preservation of their language (Provence, 2005, p. 6)

3.5. Maaloula dialect in the researchers' eyes

The world's attention to the survival of an Aramaic dialect in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains was first drawn by C. Niebuhr, whose knowledge was based on hearsay (Niebuhr, 1772, p. 92). The names of Maaloula, in which this dialect was still spoken, were reported by two other travellers of the 18th century, W. G. Browne (Browne, 1799, p. 405) and C. F. Ch. Volney (Volney, 1790, p. 332). In 1852, H. Petermann wanted to study the dialect in Maaloula during his trip to the Orient, where it was spoken and in the nearby smaller villages of Bakhaa and Gabaadin. However, his visit was deterred (Rosenthal, 1964, p. 160).

The first traveller to bring samples of this dialect to Europe was missionary J. Ferrette. In 1861, while passing through, he spent a few hours in Maaloula, asking about several words and verb forms, and, seeking a text he could easily comprehend, translated the Lord's Prayer into Aramaic. His attempt to translate the colloquial language, an endeavour that understandably caused astonishment, particularly among the clergy and the general public, could only be achieved with considerable effort and not without errors (Ferrette, 1863, pp. 431-436).

Ferrette recorded the resulting material in Syriac letters, usually accompanied by a transcription in the Arabic alphabet. His evaluation was carried out by Nöldeke, who managed to accurately describe the consonants and classify the few facts of the theory of forms despite the lack of a suitable transcription of the information. However, due to the lack of an accent designation, he could not understand the relationship between â and ô, which is particularly important for plural formation. In contrast, he once and for all established the position of this dialect among the other Aramaic dialects by recognising it as a "westaram" language (Nöldeke, 1868, pp. 183-200).

A.Socin and E.Prym visited Maaloula in 1869 and repeated their visit many times, writing many Aramaic texts, though their work was not published. In 1889, H.Stumme visited Maaloula and gathered texts for the dialect. The works of the three researchers were published by the German researcher G.Bergsträsser after a quarter century in 1915 (Bergsträsser, 1915).

F. J. Bliss's work during his visit to Maaloula in 1889 was important because he managed to identify the essential components of the theory of forms. He brought a correct paradigm for the suffixes on nouns and a mostly correct one for the verb forms. As a sample text, he only offered a translation of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) (Bliss, 1890). His attempt, which was very worthwhile, received little attention. The reason was probably the non-use of a scientific transcription, making his information appear unreliable (Rosenthal, 1964, p. 162).

G. Bergsträsser was a researcher whose achievements dominated all research in this field in the years to come and who was prevented from completing his work by his untimely death. On a study trip to Syria in 1914, at the instigation of H. Stumme, he received the material collected by A. Socin and E. Prym for review. In Damascus, he found a young man from Maaloula who worked as a baker, like most villagers from Maaloula. He reviewed the texts with him, had him and other residents of Ma'lüla dictate further texts, and made phonographic recordings. As the first result of his investigations, he published, together with short, valuable comments on phonetic theory, the 28 texts of Socin and Prym and the five texts notated by Stumme, as well as nine texts of his recording, the first of which are almost exclusively fairy tales and stories of essential significance stories contained (Rosenthal, 1964, p. 166).

G. Bergsträsser returned to Damascus in the spring of 1918; he documented new Aramaic texts, mentioning marriage, birth, death, hunting, and work; all those issues were recorded after the baker man. Bergsträsser wrote an Aramaic dictionary with all the words mentioned in his works. In 1928, he wrote a brief on Maaloula Aramaic, and in 1930, he returned to Damascus, recorded Aramaic dialogues about daily life, and published the work in 1933 (Fawzy ،1980 ،p. 623).

Anton Spitaler was Bergsträsser's student; he wrote a grammar book for the Maaloula dialect, published in 1938 (Spitaler, 1938). In 1957, he published new and contemporary Aramaic texts of the Maaloula dialect (Spitaler, 1957). Moreover, he contributed a paper about the dialect in the (An Aramaic Handbook) published in 1967 under the supervision of Rosenthal (Spitaler , 1967).

The contribution of S. Reich was significant in this field because he was the first to collect data in Maaloula and the neighbouring villages of Bakhaʿa and Jabaʿaden. The work was published in 1937 in his *Etudes sur les villages araméens de l'Anti-Liban* as the primary text for a beautiful folkloristic study. Essential here is the first extensive publication of texts from the other two places Reich lived in, Maaloula, where he was called Abo Elkhair (Reich, 1937).

Werner Arnold, a German researcher, lived in Maaloula from 1985 to 1987 with his family and visited again in 1993, 1994, and 1997. He had a local name, Abo Ibrahim. In 2004, he co-authored a book with two geographers, including tales and interviews gathered from the people living in Maaloula. His postgraduate thesis focuses on the "Western Neo-Aramaic dialect". He lived in Maaloula, where he recorded the daily dialect, studied the dialects of Ba'aa and Jaba'adin, and compared them with Maaloula's dialect. Moreover, he visited the Arabic village

in the Qalamoun region and studied the influence of Aramaic on the daily Arabic dialect (Werner, et al., 2004).

3.6. Religious Importance

Ancient sources present a very different definition of death, particularly the decision to die violently rather than renounce one's convictions. Roman intellectuals esteemed not only a glorious death on the battlefield or in the arena but also the deliberate act of suicide in the tradition of Socrates' famous death. The concept of a "noble death in antiquity" or "martyrdom in Christianity," an idiom older than both Christian and Jewish terminology, represents the functional definition of martyrdom found in Jewish sources, which shares the same root. For instance, *martyr* became a common term for those executed because they remained steadfast in their Christian faith and identity; moreover, they refused to grant privileges to the Roman authorities. This appeared for the first time in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (155–160 CE*): "Bishop of Smyrna, one of the most prominent figures in the Church of the 2nd century. Polycarp was born of Christian parents; the account relates that his martyrdom was the final act of a great persecution and took place on the occasion of games held at Smyrna"* (Wace, 1911, pp. 1373,1376). The feature of testimony or confession is frequently cited as a key element of the martyr's conduct in academic definitions of martyrdom. The starting point was the semantic development of the Greek word *martys* ("witness") and the related verb *martyrein*, which evolved into the early Christian titles "*martyr*" and "*to die a martyr's death*." There is general agreement that the specific definition of "martyr" appears only in Christian literature from around 150 CE or later. Conversely, pagans were rarely willing to sacrifice their lives for religious motives, as Christian and Jewish martyrs did (Henten, et al., 2002, p. 2) .

The essential feature of martyrdom is that it presents martyrs as exemplars whose lives serve as an ideal model to follow. Such characteristics were viewed as crucial by believers, even though this involved a form of pious imitation, as individuals endured tremendous suffering for their beliefs and ideals. Ordinary Christians believed they could access the power of Christ, as manifested in the lives of the saints, by imitating them.

3.6.1. Thekla

Thekla, acknowledged as the disciple of the Apostle Paul, became one of the most prominent female saints and martyrs of early Christianity. She was recognised as the first female martyr in the apostolic lists, but her fame initially arose from oral tradition. It was later recorded in the *Acts of Paul and Thekla* (APT) in the second century. The cult of Thekla flourished in Asia

Minor during the fourth and fifth centuries, spreading from Constantinople to Syria, with its principal shrine located at Hagia Thekla in Seleucia (Davis, 2001, pp. 5-7).

According to the narrative, Thekla, a noblewoman from Iconium, rejected her fiancé Thamyris after hearing Paul's teachings on chastity. Condemned to death by fire, she was miraculously saved by divine intervention. Later, in Antioch, she resisted an attempted assault by Alexander and was sentenced to face wild beasts. Surviving multiple ordeals, including self-baptism among seals, she continued to preach and heal until her disappearance near Seleucia, where tradition holds, she "slept a noble sleep" (Muzur & Skrobonja, 2002, p. 328)(Davis, 2001, pp. 44,46).

Two primary sources recount her life: the *Acts of Paul and Thekla* (APT) and *The Life and Miracles of Saint Thekla* (LM). The latter, composed in Greek around AD 470, expands the earlier text tenfold and describes Thekla's "living disappearance" into the earth, from where she continues to perform miracles, healing the sick and protecting the region around Seleucia (Mehmet & Arslan , 2013, p. 120) (Johnson, 2006, pp. 2-10).

Parallel hagiographies reflect regional adaptations. The Coptic version recounts St. Thekla's mission from Iconium to Tyre. At the same time, the Orthodox tradition locates her final years in Maaloula, Syria, where she lived in a cave as a healer opposed by local physicians (Collegiate Committee for the ritual, 2013, p. 83) (Baytar, 1992). These variations suggest the transference of her cult across regions. Pederson notes three principal sites claiming her relics: Meryemlik (Seleucia), Maaloula, and Rome (Pederson, 2006, p. 68).

The diffusion of Thekla's veneration beyond Asia Minor illustrates how her cult was "translated" into diverse cultural contexts through narrative transmission rather than physical relics (Davis, 2001, p. 46). This phenomenon reflects broader late antique practices in which Christian cults of saints absorbed and reinterpreted pagan traditions of honouring the dead. The exchange of domestic practices between pagans and Christianity is clearly expressed in the archaeological material, where Christian rituals adopted Roman architectural elements, such as niches, sacristies, and dining areas. Likewise, they have the same style for fresco paintings; otherwise, the domestic gods were replaced by saints and martyrs' figures who may be represented physically by relics or other tangible items, like oils and tomb dust (Brown, 2014, p. 5) (MacIntosh, 2019, p. 13).

There is an assumption among people in Maaloula that St. Thekla is buried there. Moreover, her corpse exists in the grave there. However, as the previous study shows, it is far-fetched to

assume that the relic's location is known; besides, St. Thekla has shrines worldwide, and all these shrines share similar features, as shown in Table *2*.

Table 2 Comparison between the St. Thekla shrine in Seleucia and Maaloula

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Both sites have cells where Saint Thekla spent her life and worshipped. The cell is located as a cave in the Maaloula mountain and underground in Seleucia.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Maaloula</td><td>Seleucia</td></tr>
<tr><td> 
Figure 6: St. Thekla shrine in the mountain (Haddad, 2019)</td><td> 
Figure 7: Saint Thekla - the entrance to the Underground Church, Silifke, Mersin (Iza, 2017).</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">During St. Thekla's escape, she disappeared into the rock in Seleucia, but in Maaloula, the mountain opened for Thekla to escape.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Healing water springs are related to St.Thekla's healing ability, and each site has a water spring.</td></tr>
</table>

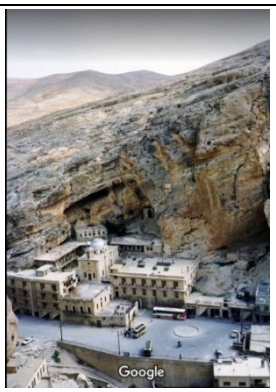


Figure 8: The church and the Monastery under the shrine, Google earth.



Figure 9: Saint Thekla - Basilica Church erected by Zeno the Isaurian, Silifke, Mersin (Iza, 2017).

The cell switched to an underground church dated c.444/8 C.E. Later in the fifth century, the magnificent basilica was built by Emperor Zeno.



Figure 10: St. Thekla gorge, by the author.



Figure 11: Saint Thekla - Underground Church, Silifke, Mersin Province (Iza, 2017).

3.6.2. Sergius and Bacchus

Sergius and Bacchus were Roman soldiers serving as officers in the emperor's household, though probably under Maximinus Daia. Sergius was *primicerius scholae gentilium*, the highest-ranking junior officer in the cavalry and preferred to the emperor Maximianus. Moreover, he had a unique bond with the emperor as a Kinsman, while Bacchus was a minor officer. Both officers were martyred in 309 CE (Voobus, 1958, p. 233). After refusing to participate in sacrifices to Jupiter's temple, they were stripped of their military insignia and paraded in disgrace through Cappadocia before being sent in chains to Antiochus, dux of

Augusta Euphratensis. Maximinus wrote that if they repented, they would be reinstated; if not, executed.

Bacchus was tortured to death near the Saracen frontier, his body buried by monks from nearby caves. That night, he appeared to Sergius in a vision, urging him to endure martyrdom with courage (Dennis O'Neill, 2010, p. 28). The next day, Sergius again refused to sacrifice. He was forced to run nine miles wearing nailed boots between fortresses and was later executed by beheading at Rusafa. His burial site soon became a place of veneration. (Fowden, 1999, pp. 10-11).

As Christianity spread, churches across the East were dedicated to the two saints, whom Severus of Antioch declared inseparable: "*we should not divide in discourse those who were linked in life*" Severus of Antioch maintained that he must mention Bacchus and Sergius together (Dennis O'Neill, 2010, p. 28).

Sergius' tomb gained international fame and became a major pilgrimage site. Bishop Alexander of Hierapolis dedicated a splendid church to the martyr in 431. Augusta Euphratasiae was promoted to the status of an episcopal see in 434 and given the new name Sergiopolis. St. Sergius was considered too significant to be left in his original grave. Anastasius, the emperor, ordered the removal of a martyr's thumb relic from the Sergiopolis Basilica and its transport to Constantinople. The two martyrs' remains were then extensively scattered to the countless churches built in their honour in Syria, Arabia, Iraq, Iran, the Peloponnesus, Crete, Caria, Isuria, and other places. Numerous churches in Syria were named in honour of Sergius and Bacchus, who came to be seen as the country's patrons on an individual level.

A Greek-Catholic monastery is still dedicated to St. Sergius in Maaloula, Syria. The church was built on an Apollo temple in the fourth century (Honey, 2011, p. 33), when a bishopric was added to its name. It was known as Seliocopolis during that time, and the church was most likely constructed between 313 and 325. The first Nicaean Council took place in the year mentioned, and among the attendees was Bishop Eutichius of St. Sergius in Maaloula. Maaloula may have already been a Christian centre during the lives of the two martyrs and afterwards dedicated to them, one of the very early dedications after AD 750 (Fowden, 1999, p. xxi). The altar has been carbon-tested for age and dates to 300 CE (Dennis O'Neill, 2010, p. 30).

3.6.3. Main Celebrations / Feats

The Christian identity of Maaloula is clearly reflected in its festive sequence, yet it is not the only identity expressed there. The religious festivals form part of a broader "reinvention of tradition" aimed at promoting and renewing what remains of Syria's popular culture. The local community is conscious that their celebrations are among the last of their kind and consciously strives to preserve their authentic character. Although the precise origins of these events remain uncertain due to a lack of written sources, their close link with the agrarian calendar suggests considerable antiquity.

For instance, the Feast of the Holy Cross marks the beginning of the grape-drying season, while the entire festive sequence coincides with the family preparation of preserved foods, known as mouné, at the end of summer. This seasonal activity enhances the village's visual and cultural appeal, as roofs and terraces become covered with carpets of red peppers and clusters of white and red grapes left to dry Figure 12 and Figure 13. For both visitors and natives, being present in Maaloula during this holiday period represents a symbolic return to the village's communal life and ancestral customs. Beyond its Christian character, Maaloula thus serves as a living conservatory of rural traditions (Escher & Pfaffenbach, 2004, p. 45).

The village celebrates a succession of Christian religious festivals that attract visitors from across Syria and abroad. These festivities, beginning on 13 September and continuing until early October, are marked by distinctive local practices and traditional forms of celebration.

- The first and most significant celebration is the Feast of the Cross. This feast commemorates the discovery of the True Cross in Jerusalem in the fourth century by St. Helena. According to tradition, the news of this discovery was conveyed to Constantinople by a chain of beacon fires ignited on mountain peaks linking the two cities. The celebration begins on September 13 in the afternoon, when two processions (*'arada'*) are formed. One procession assembles at the Catholic Convent of Saint George, situated below the village near the roundabout on the road from Damascus; the other departs from the Saint Elias Orthodox Church at the eastern edge of the village. At the head of each procession walks a young boy bearing a large wooden cross, followed by torchbearers. Behind them, the leader of the procession, lifted onto the shoulders of a companion (*Sheikh al-Shabab*), chants through a loudspeaker as the crowd responds with songs and ovations. A group of priests follows, accompanied by several hundred participants moving joyfully amid the festive atmosphere Figure 14.

- On September 23, the village's eastern part comes alive again. Visitors arrive in Maaloula in the evening to attend Mass in the Orthodox Convent of Saint Thekla cave. Afterwards, they gather in small groups on the terraces, preparing to spend another festive evening. Groups of young people assemble in the church courtyard to perform the traditional dance, dabké. Participants share drinks and meals during the celebration. On the following day, after Mass, a procession forms at the entrance of the Church of Saint Barbara. The procession follows a three-hour route east of the village, during which each family receives greetings and applause from the participants. The destination is Saint Thekla's Convent, where the pilgrims are welcomed by visitors who spend the night there. After lunch is served to the young members of the procession, the final dabké is performed before the visitors depart from the village. Thus, the Orthodox community celebrates the patronal feast of Saint Thekla for over two days Figure 15.
- The final festival honours Saint Sergius, the patron saint of the eponymous Catholic Convent, marking the beginning of celebrations in the western part of the village. On the evening of October 6, Vespers are celebrated in the convent church. Afterwards, the inhabitants proceed to Saint George’s Church, where a short dabké is performed before the start of a torchlight procession. The procession continues uphill to the Convent of Saint Sergius, where a large dabké dance lasts late into the night Figure 16.

  On the following day, after Mass, a new procession forms and passes through the western quarters of the village, with ovations offered to the residents along the way. It ends again at Saint Sergius, where the clergy host a communal meal. In the evening, the procession is re-formed and passes through a narrow gorge to reach the Convent of Saint Thekla, where the Orthodox clergy receive the participants. It then proceeds to Saint George’s Church, where visitors and villagers gather.

  This third celebration concludes a 25-day festive sequence, during which both Christian communities observed a shared feast, the Feast of the Cross, followed by their respective patronal celebrations. The diversity of these traditions reinforces Maaloula’s role as both a Christian village and a living reflection of Syrian history and identity (Chiffoleau, 2006, pp. 173-189).



Figure 12: *Drying Grapes, (Haddad, 2019)*



Figure 13: *Semaq season (Haddad, 2019).*

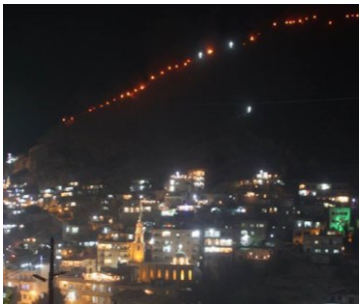


Figure 14: *The fire on the mountain during the cross festival (Haddad, 2019).*

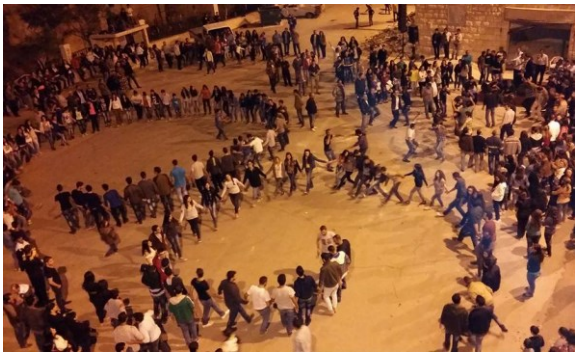


Figure 15: *The Debke at St. Thekla square (Haddad, 2019)*



Figure 16: *Dabke at St. Sergius monastery 1936 (Haddad, 2019).*

Chapter 4- Description of the Main Monuments

4.1. Public monuments

4.1.1. The South and North Forts

Maaloula has two rock forts and large rock chambers, one on the southern cliff and one on the northern cliff of the massive natural amphitheatre Figure *17*, Figure *18*. These cliffs are about 45.72 meters high. They served as safe places for people during difficult periods. Bliss wrote the following description of the forts during his visit to the village in 1890. The description below refers to the forts at that time; thus, the interior parts could be the same, while the exterior parts and the paths leading to them have certainly changed, especially the southern one, where the gorge was widened during the last century to create a broad street. The two forts and their ladders still exist, and the local people request that they be preserved:

Above the ground of the South Cliff, nearly 10.5 meters high, a cave opens in the façade of the rock; the entrance is approximately 6 meters long. A rough ladder is supported by two branches or trunks of walnut trees. To the left of the door, a square window is cut into the rock face about 12 meters from the entrance. A rough masonry structure forms a parapet at the entrance of the cave, which is partly made of stones and large wooden blocks. Inside the cave are two or three plastered walls built of mud and straw that are somewhat ruined. These walls form small passages and close off the main part of the cave, which extends for about 15 m behind the cliff's edge, sloping upward. Accordingly, this gives 22 m as the face length and the 6-meter entrance. The cave then curves and ascends for a further 21 m. The width is relatively broad in this section. The height ranges between 3 and 4.5 m.



Figure 17: The South Fort by the author.



Figure 18: The North fort (Haddad, 2019)

A low, artificial path runs off at a right angle from the cave's entrance into a tiny room, from which a similar gallery extends to the interior cavern. This passage must be crawled through to pass. There are apparent chisel or pick marks everywhere, making it difficult to determine how much the existing cavern may have been extended. The cliff's square window has a drainage hole below the parapet to the right and a 1 - 1.2 m embrasure. Below this hole lies a discoloured cliff. Side sockets and holes indicate the window may have been blocked or fastened with a bolt. There are remnants of an old inscription in prominent Greek characters at the cave's entrance, following the rough surface of the ledge in an irregular style.

North Fort is situated on the northern cliff, opening into the rock face approximately 30 meters above the ground. Reaching the cave required climbing the sloping ledges, crawling through a small tunnel on hands and knees, and descending a narrow crack with notched holes to hold a short ladder, which dropped into the cave. The descent from the tunnel above measured 9–10 m or more. The view from the cave was breathtaking, showing the magnificently colored cliffs, the lush green gardens, the town's white houses far below, and the brush-covered roofs that people walked over. The dome of St. Sergius could also be seen, along with the green of the vines on the upper hills, shaded in yellow, saffron, brown, white, and maize.

A parapet made of mud and stones was in front, and the floor was very slanted inside the fort. The cave measured 15 by 6 m along the face. It curled into the mountain at one end and descended another 7.5 m. The cave appeared natural, but two holes in the ceiling were artificial and seemed to have been drilled from above. There was also a large hole in the wall that quickly split into two funnels. This may have been related to water availability (Bliss, 1890, pp. 78-81).

4.1.2. Al-Faj

Maaloula has two gorges flanking the old village and defining its outline. The gorges are called Al-Faj in the local dialect: Faj Mar Thecla, the eastern one, was dedicated to St. Thecla, whose shrine lies at the end of the gorge and is associated with her story of fleeing. The other, the western gorge, ends at the monastery of St. Sergius. These two gorges once served as the main connections between Maaloula, the neighbouring villages, and Lebanon. The eastern Faj has largely preserved its natural form, while the western one was lost after a street was opened through it in the middle of the last century.

The curves and projections in the eastern Faj demonstrate a remarkable correspondence between the two sides, a resemblance that is clearly visible in many areas. This physical

harmony supports the theory that the Faj may have been formed by an earthquake. Considering the link between the gorge and St. Thecla's story, this assumption may place the origin of the gorge before the fourth century, when the Acts of St. Thecla flourished in Asia Minor. Otherwise, St. Thecla's flight is generally believed to have taken place in the second century.

Maaloula lies in a tectonically active region, where earthquakes may cause significant topological changes over long periods. Numerous examples show that seismic activity can produce surface displacements of up to 110 cm in some locations, although such distances rarely result from a single event (Ambraseys, 2009, pp. 31-32)

The difficulty lies in the fact that historical sources tend to record only major surface ruptures, while minor cracks and small-scale disturbances often went unnoticed. Moreover, the historical record of surface faulting is not always clear: for several earthquakes in the first half of the twentieth century, the evidence for surface rupture is poor and sometimes inconclusive. Even by the end of the nineteenth century, few historical cases offered more than basic information about faulting, and neither the length nor the orientation of the ruptures can be established with certainty.

Historical accounts confirm repeated seismic activity across the region. In 198 BC, a series of earthquakes destroyed a town near Sidon, whose name was not recorded. The event devastated two-thirds of Sidon and extended throughout Phoenicia, though with less intensity. An early first-century BC writer also mentioned this earthquake, which likely affected Syria with moderate strength, considering that Maaloula lies approximately 114 km from Sidon.

On 28 February 92 BC, a large earthquake with an epicentre southeast of Cyprus (Ms 7.1) struck the Levantine cities, causing shocks throughout Syria and Israel. The tremor was also strongly felt in Egypt and significantly impacted Cyprus and Syria.

Between AD 41–54, Antioch sustained significant damage. One assumption proposes that the same earthquake also affected Smyrna, Ephesus, and other cities in Caria and Lycia, which lie roughly 900 km away, implying a particularly powerful event. Maaloula, located approximately 265 km from Antioch, would therefore have been within the area affected by this earthquake (Ambraseys, 2009, pp. 93-112).

On 13 December AD 115, a major earthquake struck the Orontes Valley, devastating Antioch, Daphne, and four other cities, including Apamea on the Orontes, located 90 km south of Antioch. The records do not list all the affected towns, but the damage appears to have extended further south. Ground settlement, the emergence of freshwater springs, and the drying up of

streams were observed in unnamed areas. Rockfalls from Mount Cassius and landslides along the Orontes River intensified the destruction. Aftershocks continued for several days, although there is no firm evidence of a surface rupture. Apamea lies about 173 km from Maaloula.

Between AD 216–245, an earthquake in Thelseae (Dumeir) opened the doors of the Temple of Zeus Hypsistus and moved statues across the floor, leaving visible marks observed by the temple staff. In May 233, Palmyra was also struck by an earthquake.

On 2 April AD 303, a powerful earthquake destroyed Sidon and Tyre on the Lebanese coast, causing numerous building collapses. The event may also have affected Byblus, though it probably did not reach Gush Halav. Caesarea, although undamaged, reportedly felt the tremor, which may have been accompanied by a seismic sea wave of uncertain origin.

In September AD 347, a destructive earthquake struck Beirut, reportedly driving many pagans to seek baptism. Later, on 19 May AD 363, two successive earthquakes occurring six hours apart devastated 22 towns across Palestine and Syria, causing major loss of life. The effects of these events, one likely felt in Antioch, were later conflated by ancient writers with those of the great earthquake in the Hellenic Arc in AD 365 (Ambraseys, 2009, pp. 135, 140, 144, 149).

Taken together, these earthquakes, repeated across centuries, may have contributed to the formation of the gorges of Maaloula. The cumulative effect of multiple seismic events, rather than a single catastrophic shock, likely shaped the distinct geological features that define the village today.

4.2. Religious Building

The village has ten churches going back in time to different eras, and each has different traces. Most of these churches were bult over a began temples, where their traces still exist. The churches are distributed in the old village in different parts. The churches have valuable icons, during the crisis these icons were stolen, part of them returned, while some are still lost. These churches were severely affected during the last war. Indigenous in Maaloula till now has many tales and legends about their village. For instance, people believe a tunnel connects the eastern gorge and the western one next to St. Sergius. Moreover, an enormous snake was engraved as a mascot to protect it. Figure 19, Figure 20 are presenting the churches' location in the old village.

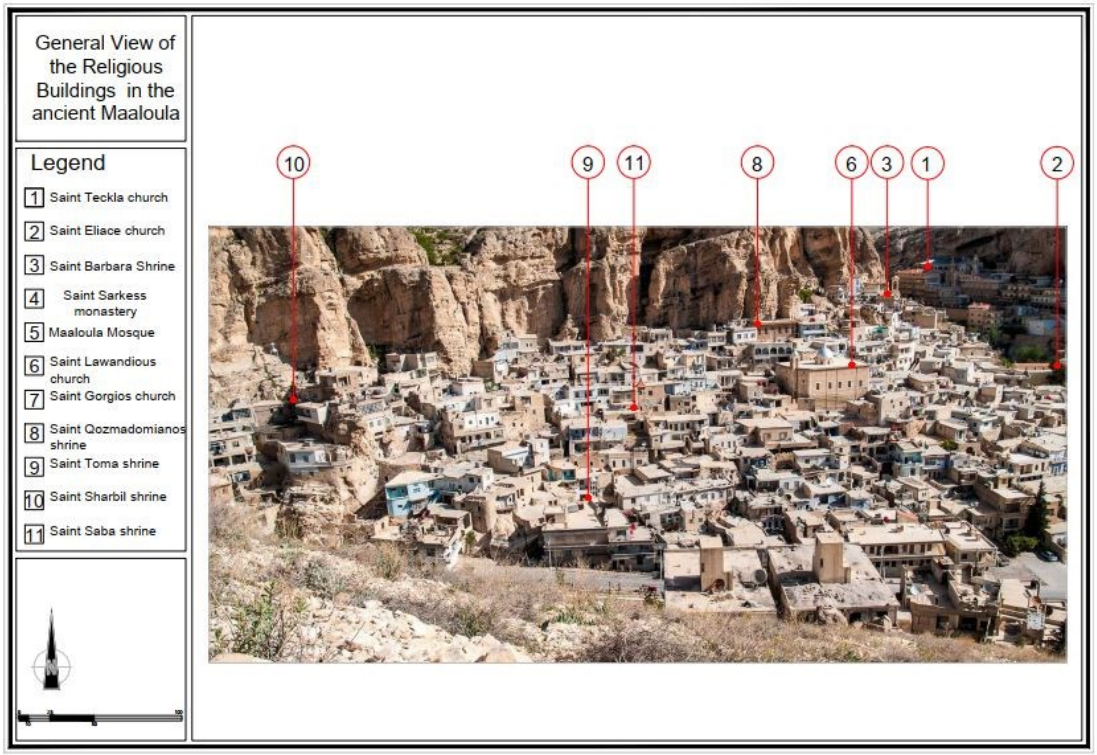


Figure 19:Panoramic photo of Maaloula shows the locations of religious buildings, by the author.

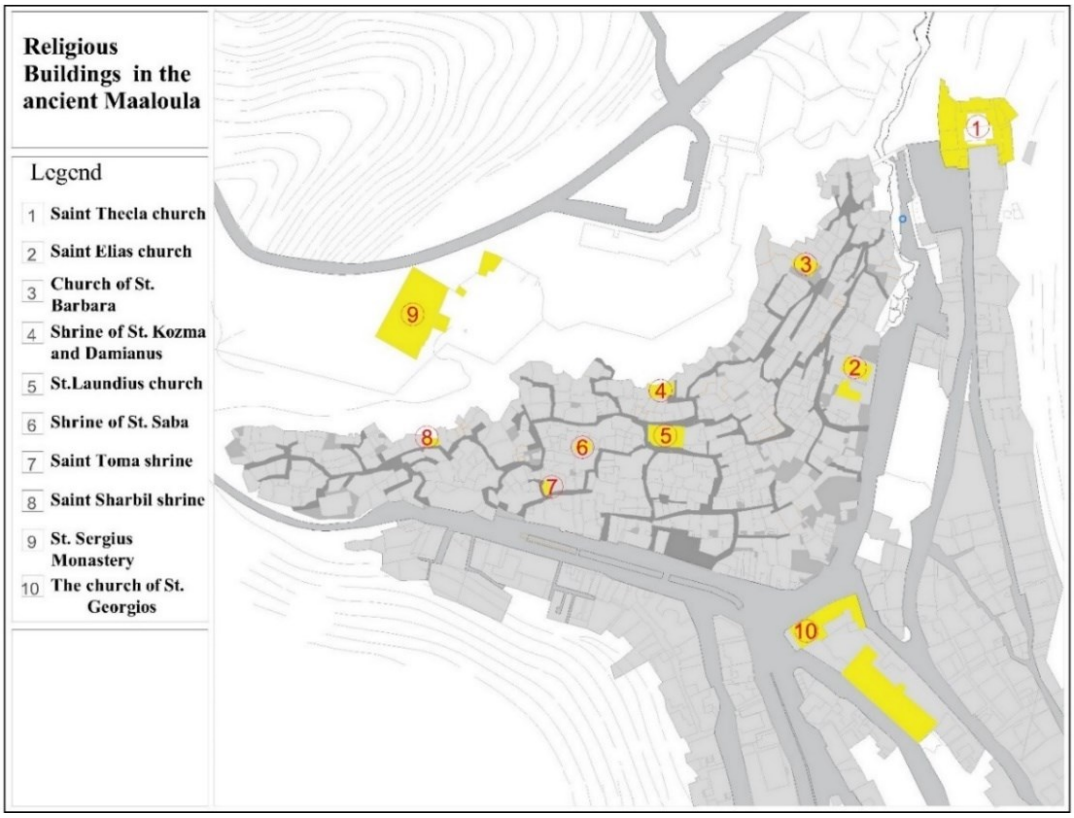


Figure 20: Churches' location in the old village, by the author.

4.2.1. Thecla Monastery

This monastery belongs to the Orthodox denomination and dates back to the fourth century (Hanish, 2014, p. 65). The compound includes a monastery, an orphanage, a church, a library, and the shrine of St. Thecla. Inside the shrine, there is a spring from which visitors drink, believing in its healing power. In 1693, ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī visited the village and described the shrine and its healing water, which he noted was especially beneficial for children. The gorge Al-Faj, located next to the monastery, is named after St. Thecla (Alnabelsy, 1698). The library contains valuable religious books and manuscripts, including the Four Gospels, church melodies, and interpretations of the Bible. Some of these volumes date back to around 1600 A.D., while others are even older. However, in several cases, the dates, introductions, and conclusions are no longer legible and require further examination.

Most of these works are manuscripts, such as the Leklos Script, which explains the calculation of Easter dates up to the year 7202 from Adam. The Afkholoji Script was translated from Greek in 1633 by Bishop Mlatios of Aleppo, alongside many other books from both the Old and New Testaments of different periods, some printed and others handwritten (Joud Allah, 1999, p. 694).

The monastery has been renovated many times and has also endured numerous disasters, the most recent occurring in 2015. In 1851, Prince Harfoushe sought refuge in the monastery with his men but was pursued by the Ottoman minister Mustafa Pasha, who captured the prince inside St. Thecla Monastery. Subsequently, the Ottoman troops destroyed and looted both monasteries, St. Thecla and St. Sergius (Alzayat, 1902, p. 138).

The church is laid on a clear east–west axis Figure *21*, a, a convention deeply rooted in early Christian architecture across the Levant (Krautheimer, 1986, p. 82). The main entrance opens on the western side, leading directly into a single rectangular nave that terminates to the east in a semicircular apse, reflecting the fundamental organization of the early basilica plan so typical of the Syrian countryside (Butler, 1929, pp. 44-47).

Measuring roughly 16 meters in total length and 7 meters in width, the church is divided into two principal parts: an 11 × 7-meter nave forming the main congregational area, and a 4 × 7-meter sanctuary enclosed within the apse. The arrangement is strictly axial inside the nave, with benches placed symmetrically along both sides, leaving a narrow processional passage through the center. The visual and spatial emphasis leads naturally toward the sanctuary, enhancing the liturgical focus on the altar (Lassus, 1947, pp. 83-84).

The sanctuary is slightly elevated and separated from the nave, by a chancel barrier, as was customary in Syrian-Byzantine churches of the fifth and sixth centuries. Within the apse, the altar would have stood against the curved eastern wall, a layout also seen in the churches of Ruweiha and Kharab Shams (Butler, 1929, pp. 56-57).

The walls are exceptionally thick, built from local masonry, which is abundant in this region. This heavy construction, often strengthened by pilaster strips or shallow buttresses, is a hallmark of the Syrian provincial style (Tate, 1992, pp. 155-160).

In typological terms, the building belongs to the single-nave basilica or aisleless church type, which became widespread in rural and monastic Syria between the 5th and 6th centuries AD. Its design expresses practical economy and theological simplicity, an architecture intended for modest communities that valued unity and clarity of worship (Ousterhout, 2008, pp. 37-39).

Altogether, the church reflects the essence of the Syrian-Byzantine provincial style: a restrained, well-proportioned structure oriented toward the east, built with durable local materials, and guided by the liturgical symbolism of light and resurrection. Its modest form and solid craftsmanship evoke the spiritual austerity of early Byzantine monastic life, where architectural simplicity served as an expression of devotion and continuity with the earliest Christian traditions (Krautheimer, 1986, p. 94).

4.2.2. St. Sergius Monastery

The monastery belongs to the Catholic denomination and was built over the remains of a pagan temple, traces of which are still visible today. The church, dating to the Byzantine period, contains fresco decorations on its interior walls, and the column capitals are of the Ionic order. Beneath the church lies a tank used for collecting rainwater.

The icons preserved inside the church are unique and of great artistic and theological interest. The Icon of Christ depicts Him seated at the end of the table during the Last Supper, rather than in the center. Another icon shows the crucifixion wound on the right side instead of the left. The Icon of the Virgin Mary with Christ, believed to be around 700 years old, is one of the oldest in the region. There is also an icon of John the Baptist that unusually reveals his legs, a rare feature in Christian iconography. The altar is decorated with icons painted by Michael Al-Krety in 1813, alongside two Polish icons dating to the seventeenth century.

Cemeteries and caves are found around the monastery, reflecting the continuity of its sacred function. Until 1724, the monastery had its own bishop and was affiliated with the monastic order in Lebanon. Later, it was attached to the Archdiocese of Sednaya, and in 1894, it became

part of the Episcopal See of Yabrud. The monks built residential rooms around the church and purchased properties for the monastery with their own funds (Joud Allah, 1999, p. 694).

During his visit, Al-Zayat (Alzayat, 1902, p. 137)described the monastery as being in an exceptional location, with beautiful views and pure air. He noted that the monastery possessed sufficient real estate and endowments to provide for its needs and maintenance, provided that these resources were properly managed. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the monastery was in poor condition due to the mismanagement of its properties. The current structure, including the rooms surrounding the church, was built by Priest Khoury Botros Qloumah, who was ordained in 1800.

The church, Figure *21*, b, constitutes the core of the monastic complex and follows a three-aisled basilical plan oriented along the east–west axis, conforming to the canonical liturgical orientation of Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture (Krautheimer, 1986, pp. 79-83). The total width of the building measures approximately 12 meters, while the central nave extends about 11 meters in length. The church is directly connected to the adjacent monastic structures on its northern side, integrating the sacred space into the broader functional layout of the monastery, as is typical in the Syrian monastic tradition (Lassus, 1947, pp. 171-175).

Internally, the space is divided into three aisles by two rows of pillars, creating a central nave flanked by two narrower side aisles. The eastern end terminates in a triple-apse arrangement, with the main semicircular apse of the nave accompanied by two smaller apses belonging to the side aisles. This composition is characteristic of Byzantine basilical churches of the fifth and sixth centuries, especially those associated with monastic and pilgrimage centers in Syria, such as Qalat Simʿān and Ruweiha (Butler, 1929, pp. 44-52).

The carved entrance is situated on the western façade, opening into a narthex-like vestibule that precedes the central nave. The axial alignment of the plan organizes visual and processional movement from west to east, leading toward the sanctuary and reinforcing the liturgical symbolism of the rising sun and resurrection. The central apse contained the altar and possibly, while the side apses may have served as the prothesis and diaconicon, used for preparing and storing the Eucharistic elements (Lassus, 1947, pp. 137-139).

The construction appears to have employed thick masonry walls, likely composed of local limestone, a material common in Syrian ecclesiastical buildings (Tate, 1992, p. 155). The colonnades supporting the arcade divisions have carried timber trusses and hold the dome. The

floor plan reveals a clear hierarchical division between the nave and the sanctuary, marked by iconostasis, in accordance with Byzantine liturgical norms (Sodini, 1986, p. 333).

Beneath the church lies a cistern used for collecting rainwater, a feature found in numerous monastic sites in Syria and Palestine. Such water systems provided both practical self-sufficiency and symbolic associations with baptism and purification (Krautheimer, 1986, p. 122). The integration of a cistern below the sacred structure demonstrates the adaptation of monastic architecture to the arid climate and reflects the practical ingenuity of Byzantine builders working in the Syrian landscape.

4.2.3. Al-Toba Church

The church no longer exists, except for a few ruins located beneath St. Georgios Church, where several columns were discovered. Historical sources indicate that it was a large church, serving as a pilgrimage station for travelers on their way to Jerusalem. In addition, there were other churches, now completely lost, such as those dedicated to St. Nikolas and St. Sharbeen, which together attest to the historical importance of Maaloula as a regional Christian center (Alzayat, 1902, p. 139).

4.2.4. Laundius Church

This Catholic church dates to the fifth century and is located in the heart of old Maaloula. Originally constructed as a shrine, it was later renovated, carved into the rock, and built of limestone (Joud Allah, 1999, p. 694). In 1867, Bishop ʿAṭā demolished the old structure and rebuilt it, extending it eastward, while placing the women's section on a higher level at the west end. Contemporary observers considered this reconstruction a destruction of the original church due to the loss of its earlier architectural character (Alzayat, 1902, p. 140), Figure *21*, c.

4.2.5. Church of St. Elias

This Orthodox church yielded columns and mosaic fragments during excavations conducted in 1925, which date back to the fourth century (Bosworth, et al., 1991, p. 308). One of the mosaic pieces depicts a dove, while another, now lost, famously represented the Ark of the Covenant (Immerzeel & Kleiterp, 2011, p. 96). The church also contains a baptismal font and several icons of liturgical and historical value (Joud Allah, 1999, p. 694).

4.2.6. Church of St. Barbara

This church was originally a pagan temple, as indicated by its altar, which is oriented toward the west, in contrast to the typical eastward orientation of Christian sanctuaries. The building

was once larger than its current size. At its center lies a circular motif carved in stone, symbolizing the sun, further supporting the theory of its pre-Christian origin, Figure *21*, d.

4.2.7. The church of St. Georgios

Originally constructed as a pagan temple during the Roman period, the site was later converted into a shrine in the Byzantine era, and eventually, a church was built adjacent to the ancient sanctuary. The architectural layout resembles that of the Yabrud Cathedral, suggesting shared regional influences. In the courtyard, an ancient altar supported by four columns still stands. In addition, two other churches are known to have existed in Maaloula: the Church of St. Nikolaos and the Church of St. Sherbin.

4.2.8. Shrine of St. Kozma and Damianus

This shrine was recently renovated and is situated at the base of a mountain. It contains a rock-cut cave approximately 20 meters in height. Above the entrance is an inscribed Greek text, although the writing has become illegible due to erosion and age.

4.2.9. Shrine of St. Saba

This site was also originally a pagan temple, later transformed into a Christian shrine. During restoration works, Roman columns with decorated bases and capitals were uncovered. Maaloula also contains several other smaller shrines, including those of St. Toma Figure *21*, e, St. Simeon, and St. Charbel, all located within the old village (Joud Allah, 1999, p. 694).

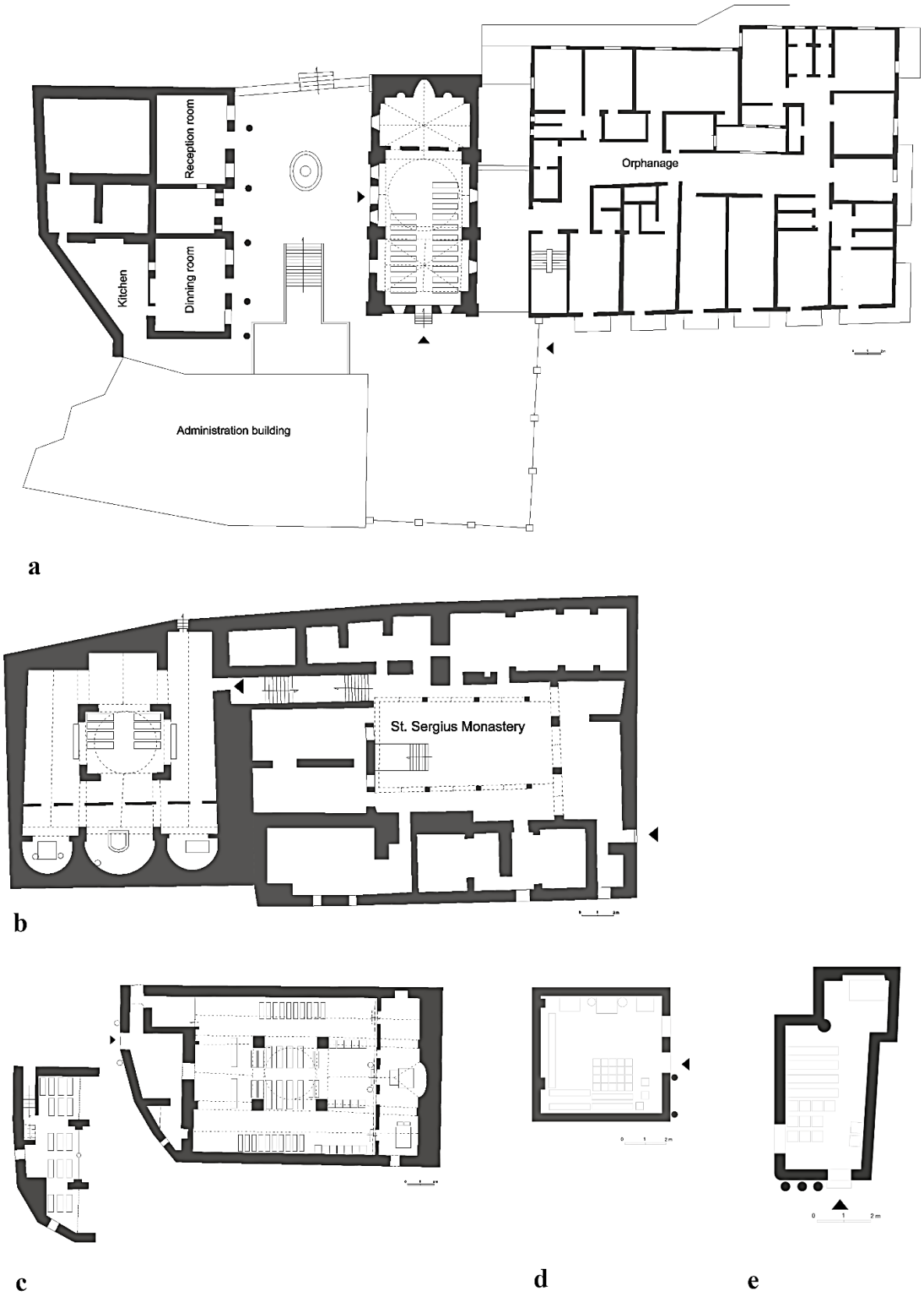


Figure 21: This figure presents the plans of St. Thecla and St. Sergius monasteries, and St. Laundius church in addition to the shrines of St. Barbara and St. Thomas, the plans from (Werner, Escher, & Pfaffenbach, 2004) and redrawn edited by the author.

Chapter 5 – The vernacular Architecture in the old Maaloula

5.1. Introduction

The natural environment significantly influences the village's architecture. This influence is clearly reflected in the types of buildings and the construction materials, which depend on feasibility and local availability. These combined factors have shaped the culture and society, affecting the inhabitants' lifestyle, as the natural environment permeates daily activities. Nowadays, modern materials have largely replaced traditional ones. Therefore, it is essential to understand the importance of vernacular architecture, which meets sustainability requirements and adapts harmoniously to the climate.

The unique setting gives Maaloula its distinctive character. In the old village, houses are superimposed and partially carved into the rock, forming a network of narrow alleyways. Irregular steps connect the dwellings, creating a labyrinth known only to the locals. Within the old village, there are two types of axes: the main axes lead from the surrounding area to the central courtyard, where they intersect, while the auxiliary lanes form a cross-linked network that provides access to the houses. These pathways are intended for both pedestrians and animals. Several springs supply the village with water, irrigating the valley that extends southward, where fruit cultivation, particularly apricot and vine, dominates (see Figure 22). Like much of Syria, Maaloula suffers from drought; nonetheless, it remains a pleasant oasis renowned for its healthy atmosphere. Today, most Maaloulans live in Damascus or abroad, and only a few young people stay in the village year-round compared to the elderly (Escher & Pfaffenbach, 2004). However, those living outside the village often maintain either an old family house or a recently built one, where they return during the summer and holiday seasons, an enduring tradition that helps preserve strong family bonds.

5.2. The Residential Features of Maaloula

The rural house, regardless of its form, possesses essential components that make it fundamentally different from an urban dwelling. These components are directly linked to the rural lifestyle, which revolves around agriculture, livestock breeding, and related activities. Consequently, such houses typically include three main zones: the living space for humans, the space for animals, and an area for food storage. The configuration and relationship among these spaces depend on climatic conditions and seasonal variations (Alsali & Shahin, 2016).

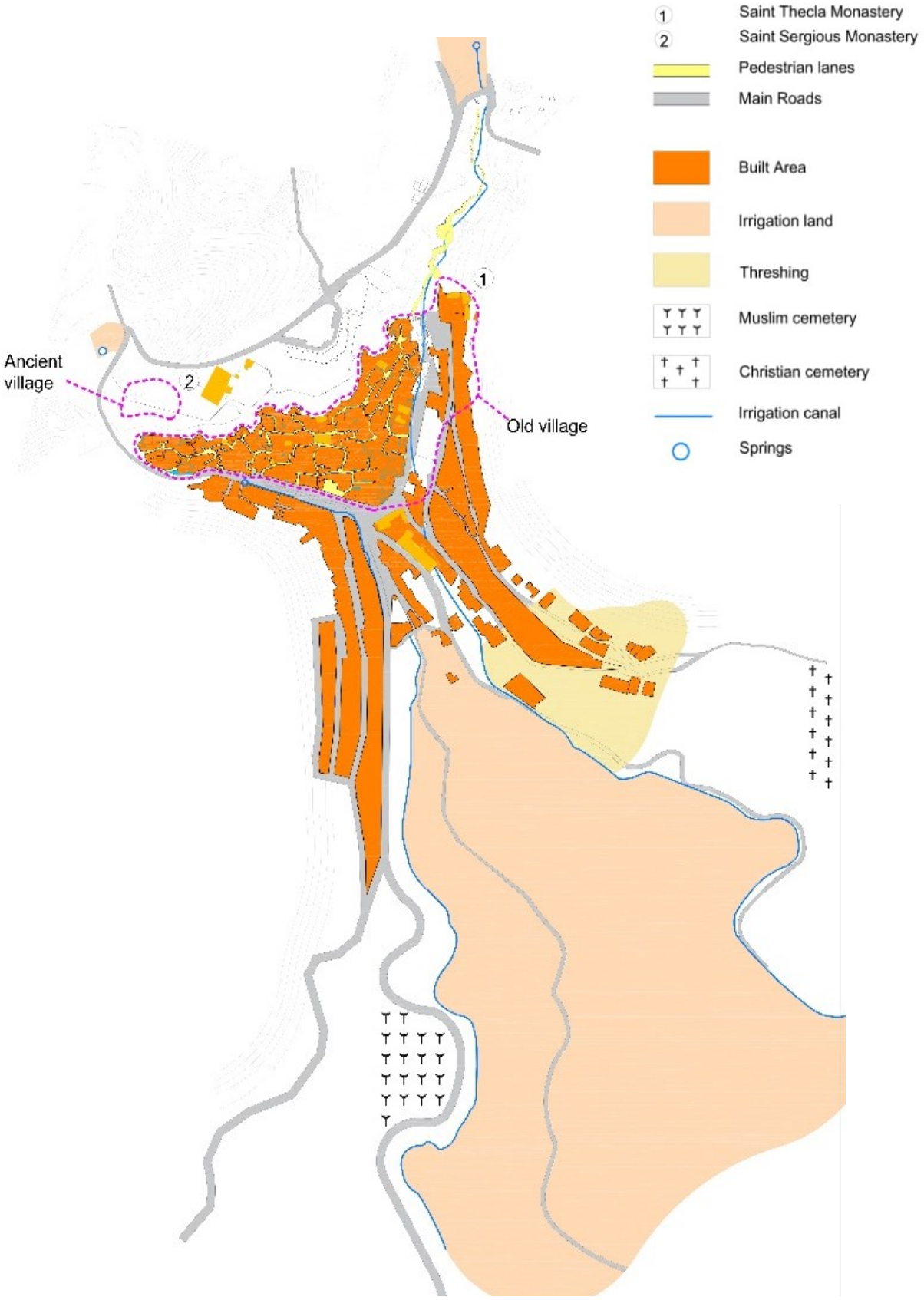


Figure 22: The plan of Maaloula presents the different parts of the town, water supply, and the irrigation field (Escher & Pfaffenbach, 2004)

The residential typology of Maaloula is particularly distinctive, shaped by the irregular and free forms imposed by the rocky terrain. The classification of these houses is based on their ground plans, which evolved over time, resulting in the following typologies:

5.2.1. The Simple House

The simplest and most common form consists of a living unit combined with areas for food storage and animal shelter. The house is constructed using locally available materials. In its simplest version, the walls usually lack large openings, except for small ones that provide ventilation and allow smoke to escape. The interior layout includes different levels, each serving a specific function: livestock are kept on the lower level, while the bedrooms and living areas occupy the upper level.

This type of house often incorporates a natural cave into its design, using it primarily as a storage space for food. Several domestic activities, such as cooking, baking, summer sleeping, and processing agricultural products, are traditionally carried out outdoors, on the balcony or the roof. There are no standardized building method or fixed dimensions; this form is irregular and entirely defined by the site conditions, as shown in Figure 23, Figure 24.

5.2.2. The Arcade House

This form is typically found in the lower part of the old village. It features a long arcade that spans the entire façade of the house, located either on the ground floor or on the first floor, accessible by external stairs. The arcade differs from the bench or porch of a typical house, as it serves as a fundamental architectural element rather than a simple addition, as shown in Figure 25 .

5.2.3. The Courtyard House

The structure lies along the boundaries of the property and encloses an internal courtyard to which all windows open. The courtyard serves as the main outdoor area for daily activities, with part of it occasionally allocated for keeping animals. In some cases, the courtyard is bordered by an external wall on one side, forming what is locally known as a *Hosh.* In such cases, the *Hosh* is shared among several houses belonging to relatives, arranged around the common courtyard. This shared courtyard provides an outdoor space for various activities and fosters social interaction and bonding among families, as shown in Figure 26.

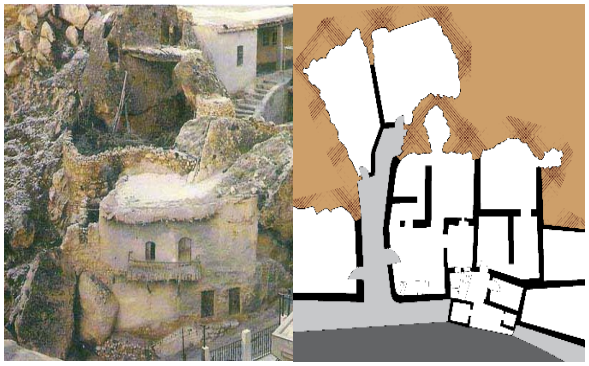


Figure 24: The left photo shows a simple house with livestock at the bottom level. The right photo shows different houses that take the cave as part of its plan (Hadad, 2011).

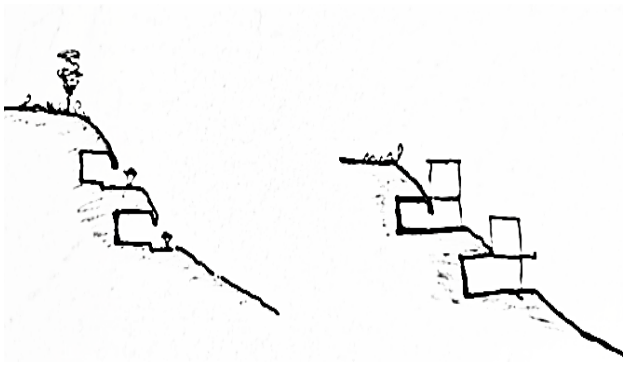


Figure 23: This figure shows how people moved from the ancient village [carved houses] to the next type, which takes the caves as part of it, this type is the common one in the old village by the author.



Figure 25: The perspective of the arcade house in the old town during the 30s of the last centuries (Moaaz, 2022).



Figure 26: Plan shows types of the courtyard houses, where this residence zone represents different forms related to the place of the court by the author.

5.3. Traditional Building Methods

Geographical, climatic, and religious factors exert distinct influences on architectural and cultural development. These factors have naturally shaped the architecture, customs, and lifestyles of local communities. Lifestyles vary from one place to another, and building materials differ according to local availability, resulting in diverse architectural typologies. The materials available in each region determine not only the building typology but also the form and overall appearance of the structures.

According to (Fathy, 1986), people must take the environment into account and remember that they do not build in isolation or on a blank slate. Rather, they are introducing a new element into an environment that has maintained its balance for a very long time. People, therefore, bear responsibility for the surrounding environment. Ignoring this responsibility and building without consideration constitutes, as Fathy states, a crime against both architecture and civilisation.

Traditional architecture relied on craftsmanship and building materials derived from natural resources. This is evident in the style, colour, and proportions of the buildings, all adapted to local lifestyles and needs. Some of these characteristics have endured over time, while others have changed or been modified to adapt to modern styles. These features are clearly evident in the architecture of Maaloula, which retains its distinctive appearance and characteristic details.

5.3.1. Rough Stone Walls

This type of construction is common in rural areas, where stone is used to build various walls of various shapes and sizes. The foundation supporting these walls generally reaches a depth of about 50 cm and a width of up to 100 cm. Typically, the foundation consists of large, uncut stones with rubble tightly packed between them (Levant, 2004, p. 22). However, due to the rocky terrain, the walls are built directly on the natural rock surface in Maaloula.

Several types of wall construction can be observed in the village. In general, limestone is the principal material used in traditional buildings. Local craftsmen mastered the procurement, carving, and cutting of limestone, taking advantage of its abundance in the region. These walls were constructed using several techniques (Hadad, 2011):

1- **Double-faced grouted cavity wall** consists of two stone faces, each about 25 cm wide. The core is usually filled with rubble and earth mixed with straw. The total wall thickness, about 60–70 cm, provides excellent thermal insulation.

2- Thick carved stone wall built from cut stones joined with mud mortar, which is also used for pointing and filling gaps in the external surfaces.

3- **Single-faced wall:** constructed with one layer of carved stones.

4- **Thick uncut stone wall** built using roughly shaped or uncut stones.

5- **Mixed wall (partly carved, partly built):** In this type, the natural cliff rock forms part of the wall, while additional built sections complete and refine the structure.

6- **Carved wall:** found in houses that incorporate caves as part of their structure Figure *27*.

The average wall thickness ranges between 40 and 60 cm, while rubble-stone walls can reach up to 70 cm. Lime mortar was traditionally used as a binder, but it was later replaced by cement mortar for easier handling and greater durability.

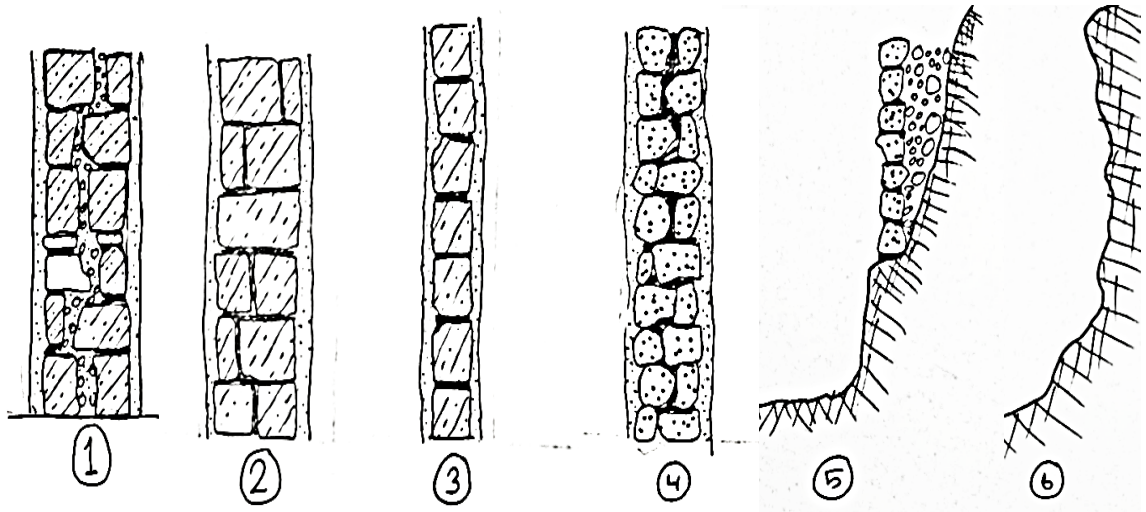


Figure 27: Different types of stone wall in Maaloula (Haddad, 2019)

5.3.2. Lime plaster

Lime rendering remains a finishing material for stone walls in cities and towns throughout Syria. It serves both as a decorative element and as a protective layer that shields the walls from external factors that may affect their durability and structural stability over time. Lime rendering is typically applied in three successive layers:

First, the *Bismar* layer consists of dust mixed with hydrated lime and sand in water.

Second, the *Bitaneh* layer is made of lime, coarse sand, dust, and hemp fibres combined with water.

Third, the *Dahara* layer, composed of lime, fine sand, dust, and water.

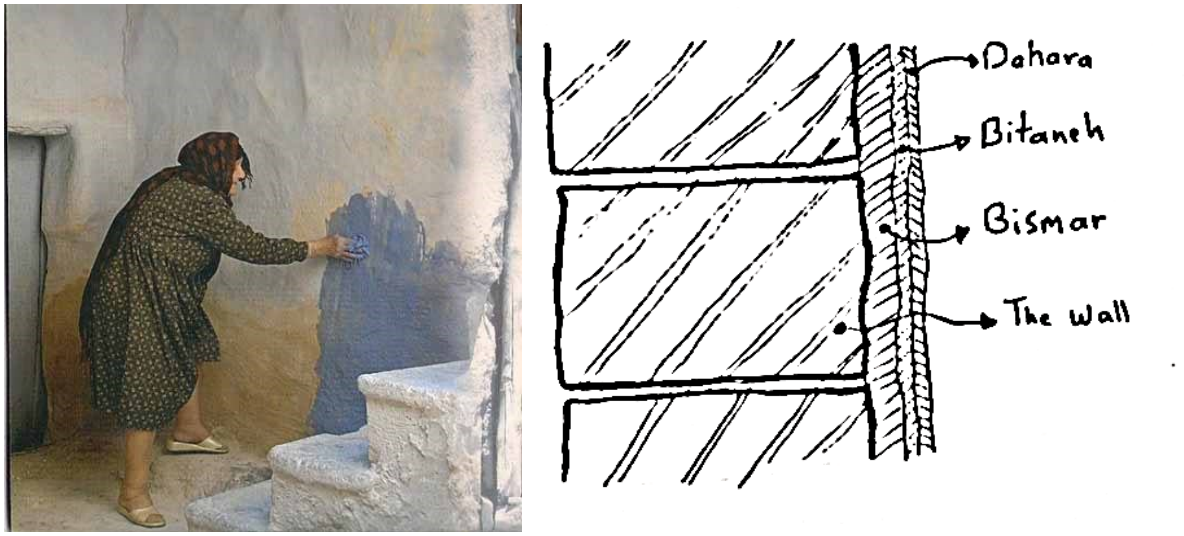


Figure 28The left photo shows a woman applying the Hwarah (Haddad, 2019). The right photo shows details of the lime plaster, by the author.

Lime rendering must be prepared according to specific standards to ensure cohesion and effectiveness. The interval between the application of each layer must be carefully observed. The quality of the surface on which the rendering is applied is a key factor in achieving a durable and uniform finish. Therefore, dampening the wall prior to coating is essential to prevent the wall from absorbing the render's moisture and avoid cracking.

Lime rendering is generally sensitive to environmental conditions and requires regular maintenance and renewal. A blue wash is also applied to stone and mud walls, a liquid mixture made from limestone soaked in water for several days until ready for use. This wash is applied in a single layer and produces a distinctive bright blue colour called *Hwarah*. It is applied with a lattice brush called *Molsha* in the Aramaic language and is traditionally used instead of painting on interior walls, as shown in Figure 28.

5.3.3. Thatched Roofing Covered with Mud

This type of roofing is commonly found in the Damascus region, appearing in various shapes and styles depending on the availability of raw materials. It can also be observed in some parts of the Latakia region and surrounding areas. The roof construction in Maaloula relies on a central beam made of lazab or ash wood, typically 25–30 cm in diameter. Perpendicularly placed above it, and arranged parallel to one another, are secondary beams made from poplar branches with a diameter of 12–15 cm.

The covering layers, straw, reeds, and leaves, are then applied above these beams and collectively known as *Rakz*. The roof span can reach up to 6 m. A layer of coarse, wet earth called Bellah is applied on top, with a thickness ranging from 15–30 cm, as shown in Figure 29.

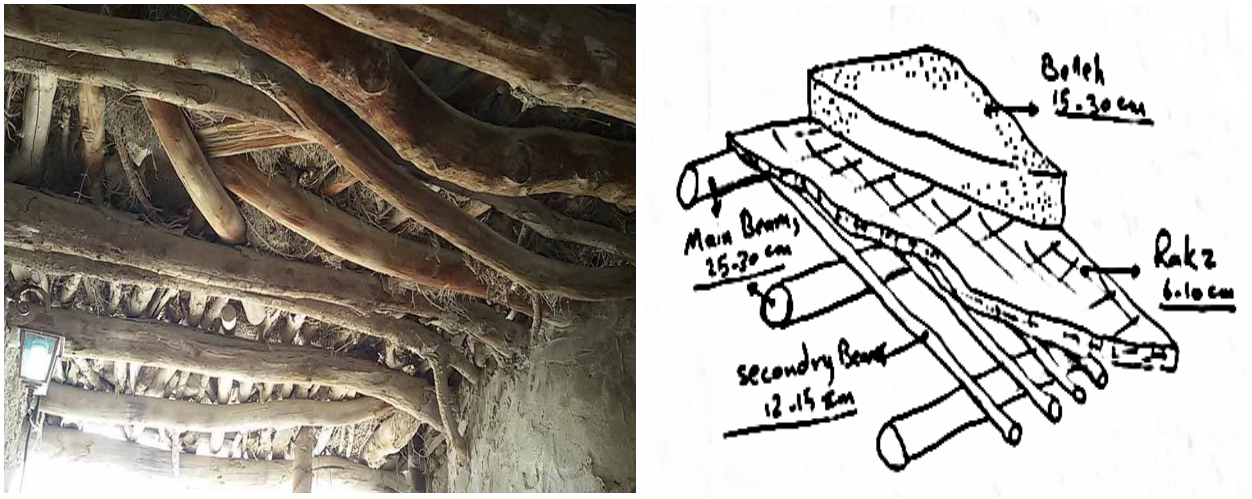


Figure 29:The left photo shows a traditional roof in Maaloula. The right photo presents details of the thatched roof, by the author.

The roof is slightly sloped to allow rainwater to flow smoothly toward the gutter, the junction between the wall and the roof, which is often curved to ensure proper cohesion and drainage.

In many cases, a wooden column is installed at the hall's centre to provide additional support for the roof (Levant, 2004, p. 26). There are two main types of roofs, which vary according to the family's economic status: in poor and middle-income families, the *Rakz* consists of straw, reeds, and leaves, while wealthier families use wooden panels placed above the secondary beams (Hadad, 2011).

5.4. Maaloula Over Time

Traditional housing always requires considerable care and professional effort to achieve an appropriate level of restoration. In addition, significant attention should be devoted to rehabilitation programs, especially as the development progresses.

In this context, traditional architecture in rural Syrian areas suffers from neglect, damage, and a shortage of artisans and technicians. This issue is mainly due to the spread of new construction techniques that neither use nor support traditional crafts. Furthermore, there is a growing tendency to replace traditional building materials with newer, more durable ones that are faster and easier to apply. Residents sometimes choose not to use traditional architecture because they prefer modern materials or wish to reduce the high renovation cost. Consequently, people have begun to replace vernacular architecture with cement bricks, which affects not only the visual character but also the inhabitants and the environmental balance.

As a result, most villages risk losing one of the key characteristics of sustainable, or “green,” building, its reliance on efficient use of land and energy. Wall insulation is a primary means of improving a building’s energy efficiency (Howe & Gerrard, 2010, p. 4). The traditional stone wall, with a width of up to 70 cm, provides much better insulation than the alternative cement wall, which typically reaches only 25 cm. Moreover, many experienced builders and artisans skilled in traditional forms have either left Syria or changed their professions for various reasons. This point has posed a significant setback to the continuity of traditional crafts.

Maaloula faced this situation even before the Syrian crisis, as its general architectural character had already begun to fade. Cement blocks replaced mud bricks, and consequently, the essential factor of Maaloula’s significance, its distinctive visual and cultural perspective, was compromised, as depicted in Figure 30.



Figure 30: The change of architecture over time. Where the cement blocks occupied most of the view in the right picture. while the left photo shows the same view in the 50s of the last century (Hadad, 2011).

The first official concern regarding Maaloula was raised in 1966 when the Syrian government recognised the village's exceptional value. That year, the site was officially registered for the first time under Decision No. 2/a, dated 09/01/1966, which stipulated the registration of the ancient village *Blota Ollo* and the two gorges *Al-Faj* as archaeological sites. Later, encroachments upon the old city and its urban fabric became increasingly evident, prompting the authorities to reconsider the initial registration. Committees representing various governmental bodies were formed to study the situation, leading to Decision No. 243/a, dated 13/10/1976. This decision outlined the reasons for registration (DGAM, 1976):

- 60% of the old district consists of ancient buildings with a minimum age of 200 years.
- 20–25% are composite houses that have been partially deformed through renovations, for example, a cement roof built over stone walls, or a concrete balcony attached to a traditional stone house.
- 10–15% are newly built cement houses.

International attention followed when Maaloula was added to the UNESCO Tentative List on 8 June 1999, under Criteria V–VI. Article 77 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (February 2005) states that a property is considered of exceptional universal value if it meets one or more specified criteria.

Selection criteria (UNESCO, 1999):

V. To be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land use, or sea use that is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment, especially when it has become vulnerable under irreversible change.

VI. To be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, ideas, beliefs, or artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. *(The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria.)*

Despite the municipality's attempts to control the construction system, violations continue. The benefit of Maaloula's registration lies in preserving the general structure of the village, although much of it now consists predominantly of modern constructions.

However, according to (UNDP, 2015) reports, Maaloula was severely affected by the Syrian crisis, with at least 60% of its buildings damaged to varying degrees, from severe to mild. This situation introduced a new transformation factor that the village continues to face. Out of approximately 5,000 inhabitants, only about 1,500 still live in the village, while most of the population has emigrated. Even before the crisis, Maaloula was losing its traditional identity; however, the conflict significantly accelerated this loss, especially in the absence of clear rehabilitation standards to guide reconstruction efforts.

5.5. Urban Pattern and Architectural Features

5.5.1. Openings, Windows, and Doors

Vernacular architecture developed appropriate methods to maximise interior ventilation through technical solutions that minimised the adverse effects of climatic extremes. Therefore, the location of openings was crucial for achieving adequate natural ventilation and maintaining acceptable comfort inside homes. Rooms and verandas facilitated cross-ventilation, while in some houses, additional ventilation holes were created in the upper half of the walls, small rectangular or circular openings without frames (Noro, 2001, p. 25).

During his visit to the village, Bliss described one of the houses and mentioned ventilation openings in the upper part of the wall (Bliss, 1890, p. 77). In winter, families gathered around the fireplace for cooking and warmth, and the smoke was released through these high wall openings (Alamuddin, 1996, p. 5). Existing ventilation examples in the village are mostly rectangular in shape. However, as cement blocks increasingly replaced traditional materials, these small windows disappeared, although some old houses still retain them.

The construction of houses in the village varied according to the inhabitants' wealth. Generally, two main opening frames can be observed in the old village.

Regarding windows, several designs can be identified. The simplest type is rectangular, with the window lintel formed by a wooden beam supported either by irregularly cut stones or a

well-carved stone frame. Both examples often have irregular-cut thresholds. It was also common for lintels to be made of stone or wood (Dipasquale, et al., 2009, p. 278). The second type features a rectangular opening framed entirely with well-carved stones. Other window types include arched openings paired within the same frame or standing alone. Typically, traditional house lintels are constructed from several shaped stones or, in some cases, from a single large lintel stone with a triangular, rectangular, or semi-spherical profile (Mecca & Dipasquale, 2009, p. 82). These variations can be classified according to their stone formation (see Table 3, Figure 32).

Doors share similar features and can be categorised similarly to windows. The simplest type uses a wooden beam as a lintel, supported by either a well-carved frame or irregularly cut stones. More sophisticated types can be distinguished by the shapes and compositions of their stone lintels. For instance, rectangular doors may feature a single stone lintel, while other designs include arches or slightly curved upper corners. Arched door lintels typically comprise several finely carved stones, whereas slightly curved doors are made from a single piece or incorporate a keystone design.

A distinctive example is the door surmounted by an arched window. This type reflects the high quality of carving once characteristic of the village's craftsmanship: the frame consists of two small columns flanking the door and a cornice supporting the lintel. The upper arch mirrors the lower design, composed of several stones with a prominent keystone (see Table 3, Figure 31). Typically, when the wall adjoining the door lacks well-carved stones, a plaster layer is applied to conceal the masonry. These types of openings, especially the various lintel designs, were standard features of traditional stone architecture throughout the Middle East (Jäger, et al., 2012, p. 44).

5.5.2. Niches

Lyoka is the Aramaic word for a niche in Maaloula (Hadad, 2011). Niches are recesses in the inner layer of the wall that function as built-in furniture and storage spaces (Jäger, 2012, p. 16). A niche appears in various forms: it may be created using half the wall thickness, designed as untreated openings or framed with wood, with or without shutters and shelves, or sometimes screened with ornamented fabrics.

Flat lintels made of stone blocks or wooden beams were commonly used, while segmental or semi-circular arches were also employed to span the openings. Typically, small niches served as bookshelves, closets, or depositories for household goods, as well as storage spaces for food

and other domestic items. The largest niche in the house was usually used for keeping mattresses and other bedding supplies.

Segmental or semi-circular arches were frequently used to cover these openings. Occasionally, small niches functioned as lantern stands or purely decorative elements (Jäger, 2012, p. 28), see Table 4, Figure 35.

5.5.3. Beehives

The earliest evidence of human interaction with bees dates back approximately 8,000 years, as indicated by a Mesolithic cliff painting that depicts a human figure collecting honey from a wild bee colony. Honeycomb stealing was likely the reason for our ancestors' first intentional contact with bees, and honey hunting was a logical next step, motivated by the search for colonies to harvest. Although the intermediate stages between hive robbing and organised beekeeping remain unknown, historical evidence suggests that the ancient Egyptians were the first to practice true apiculture.

The earliest evidence of beekeeping dates to the era of the pyramid builders. Four small scenes illustrating the removal of combs from hives and the extraction and preservation of honey are preserved in the Museum of Berlin. Bees held great significance in Egyptian society and appeared prominently in their mythology. Honey was used as food, medicine, and an offering to the gods; numerous tombs have been discovered containing gifts of honeycomb or sealed jars of honey. Honey also played a vital role in the Egyptian economy, and from the Middle Kingdom onward, beekeeping was placed under state supervision.

Much of our knowledge about Egyptian beekeeping derives from a painting in the tomb of Rehkmere, which depicts in detail the practice of apiculture during the Eighteenth Dynasty. In this scene, two beekeepers work with three hives: one holds a censer, a pottery bowl used for burning incense, to calm the bees with smoke, while the other bends down to remove rounded honeycombs and place them into bowls. The painting also illustrates the appearance of early hives, which were horizontal in form, a type still found in Upper Egypt today. This horizontal ground design likely originated from the natural nesting habits of honeybees in Egypt, which commonly inhabit the hollows between rocks in the Nile Delta. Clay or mud tubes were thus artificial imitations of these natural cavities.

Egyptian-style hives later spread throughout the Fertile Crescent. In 2008, archaeologists discovered beehives nearly 3,000 years old in the ruins of Tel Rehov in Palestine. Traditional hives were made of straw mixed with unbaked clay and were often arranged in horizontal stacks

of cylindrical units, similar to those used in ancient Egypt and Tel Rehov. The ancient Greeks also employed horizontal hives made of baked clay, while the Romans adopted and adapted this design to suit local environments. Comparable types have been found across Asia, in Japan, China, India, and Thailand, where the materials varied according to regional availability (Kritsky, 2010, p. 15).

This system was also used in the Syrian regions. In the Syrian desert, beehives were often collected inside shelters, whereas in the central region, stacked hives were common and remained in use until the 1970s. Maaloula likewise adopted this traditional type, and abandoned hives can still be found in old houses today. The design proved highly efficient in regulating the interior climate: the mud maintained a moderate temperature, cooling the space in summer and retaining warmth in winter (Table 4, Figure 34).

5.5.4. Grains Storages

The ancestors of wheat and barley resembled wild wheat species in the mountainous regions of Palestine and Syria around 6,000 years ago. It is assumed that wheat cultivation began in these regions and later spread westward and southward to Egypt. The long-term preservation of grain began approximately 4,500 years ago, driven by irregular or poor harvests. Grain collected during years of abundance was stored for periods of scarcity, serving as food reserves and seeds for future planting. The arid climate of Egypt was particularly suitable for maintaining seed viability over long periods, which may explain the early establishment of granaries in this part of the world.

The design and function of ancient granaries suggest that the primary type of storage chamber was tower- or dome-shaped. The general structure remained consistent throughout the dynasties, consisting of one or more rows of dome-shaped storage chambers, each approximately 5 meters in height and 2 meters in diameter at the base. Each chamber had two openings: one at the top, used for filling, and another near the bottom, used for withdrawing grain. Workers ascended ladders or staircases to access the upper openings, while the lower shutters or doors were used for removal. Mudbrick was the principal construction material, offering excellent insulation against heat and cold, resistance to fire and humidity, and sufficient air permeability. These properties made mudbrick particularly suitable for construction in hot and arid climates (Levinson & Levinson, 1985, pp. 330-335).

Traditional grain bins in later periods imitated the dome-shaped storage chambers of ancient Egypt. This imitation extended beyond large communal granaries to smaller domestic storage

units designed for household use. Such dwelling bins were widespread throughout Syria, bearing different local names depending on the region. In Maaloula, the construction of granaries was traditionally the responsibility of women, who managed household needs and determined storage capacities.

In Maaloula, the vernacular grain bin is called *Cwara*. Its functionality depends on the pressure of the stored content, and its structure reflects a difference in wall thickness between the upper and lower parts, which enables it to withstand the stress of the grain's weight. The *Cwara* has an upper opening for filling and a lower one for daily use. These design features closely resemble ancient Egyptian storage systems (see Table 4, Figure 33).

5.5.5. Fireplace

Mauqed, Dfeeh, and Kanun are several names used for fireplaces in Syria. Typically, the fireplace is located either in the middle of a mud room or in one of its corners. In kitchens, there is often a simple open *Mauqed* used for cooking (Dello & Mecca, 2022, p. 248). In Maaloula, the Aramaic term for the fireplace is *Theftha*. The local inhabitants traditionally build it in the corner of the room (Hadad, 2011), (see Table 4, Figure 37).

5.5.6. Ornaments

The inhabitants of Maaloula traditionally decorated their homes by adding wooden shelves adorned with ornaments. These shelves were made of wood and supported by additional wooden elements placed underneath. Decorative plant motifs were then modelled from mud, and finally, a layer of plaster was applied to give the surface its finished appearance.

Decoration in the old village was not limited to shelves and plant motifs. Residents also embellished their fireplaces by adding shelves around the chimney and above the hearth to store household items. Some smaller shelves were added as needed, providing convenient spaces to place matches, lamps, photographs, and other personal objects (see Table 4, Figure 36).

5.6. Conclusion

In principle, it is possible to create a new standard that follows the framework dictated by traditional architecture, while avoiding distortions of environmental, cultural, and traditional factors. Continuous maintenance is essential to prevent abandonment and deterioration. As Fathy (Fathy, 1986) emphasised, *"Every injunction of the tradition must be strictly observed. Thus, if one element were changed in a traditional method, that change, though small, could*

*destroy the entire validity of the building as a satisfactory solution to the local climate problems."*In this sense, both the material and the manner of its use are crucial.

Similarly, (HABITAT, 2001) argues that traditional architecture requires continuous maintenance, which can be costly. Therefore, designers should propose solutions that mitigate these disadvantages while preserving authenticity and originality.

A village should be a place where people desire to stay, live, and work. It must provide the necessary conditions to sustain a harmonious lifestyle with local culture and traditions, ensuring psychological comfort and adequate well-being. The spatial pattern of any settlement arises from the logical organisation of daily needs and climatic requirements; altering any part of this structure risks the loss of the settlement's distinctive character.

As a result, greater attention must be directed toward the preservation and revitalisation of traditional architecture in both urban and rural areas, as it forms a fundamental component of regional identity. Skilled teams should be designated and trained to maintain and rehabilitate traditional buildings using appropriate and context-sensitive restoration techniques.

Table 3: The vernacular openings in the old town.



Figure 31: Sketches and photos of the door types in the old village, by the author.

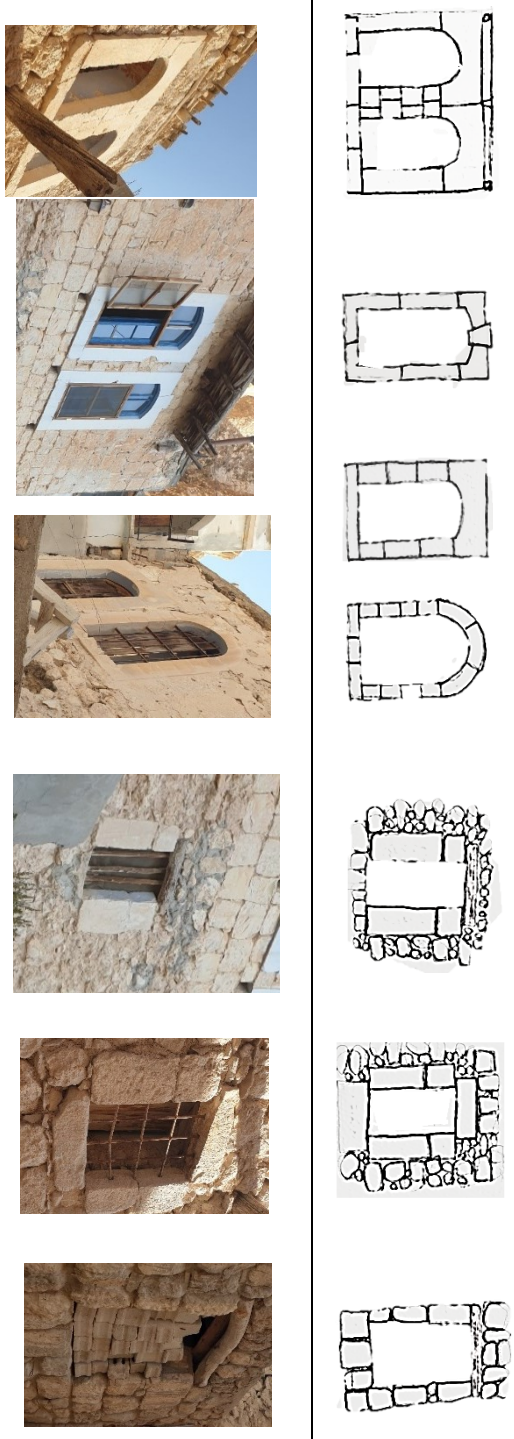


Figure 32: Sketches and photos of the window types in the old village, by the author.

Table 4: The vernacular features in the old town





Figure 33: The grain storage (Haddad, 2019).

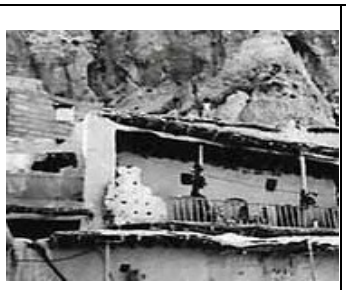






Figure 34: Maaloulans Beehives set in the balcony, (Haddad, 2019)





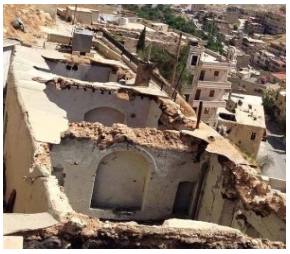


Figure 35: Diverse types of niches in the old town, by the author.







Figure 36: The typical type of ornaments (Haddad, 2019).





Figure 37: The typical type of fireplace (Haddad, 2019).

Chapter 6- Bloto Ollo, Rock-Cut Village

6.1. International Case Studies and Local Documentation

6.1.1. Introduction

It is always worth emphasising that houses tell the story of those living there. Public structures represent a community's collective rituals and customs, while houses, more than any other type of building, reflect the personal taste of their owners and their families. However, the architects and artisans of the time interpreted this taste and were somewhat bound by the prevailing social conventions. Comparing Maaloula with other sites should therefore be based on the assumption of like-minded owners; in this regard, a unique house may represent an individual mind or may simply be the only preserved example. Of course, late antique houses cannot be understood merely through their physical remains; thus, the analysis begins with the physical evidence and then develops interpretations through other sources. Consequently, the Bloto Ollo supports such a view, although it would seem premature to regard this as more than a theory that still requires further archaeological confirmation.

The troglodytes, or cave dwellers, were the first to attempt an underground mode of life. Hmankind's earliest exposure to building began with its first homes-caves. It is, however, important to distinguish between natural and manufactured caves. After various modifications, many natural caves were used for habitation and defence because of their advantageous locations. Man's earliest architectural experiments were these modifications and artificial caves, allowing individuals to design their living spaces with a unique and unrestrained sense of expression. The difference between hand-dug or rock-cut troglodytic dwellings and traditional construction lies in the limitation that the type and quality of materials cannot be chosen freely. The cliff must be chiselled and shaped, or the mound excavated; therefore, the freedom present in conventional architecture is absent here. The layout of the underground structure, including its lighting, ventilation, and access points, is determined by site-specific factors such as topography, location, and the quality of available rock. The overall suitability of underground construction depends on climatic conditions, while geological features, rainfall, and defensive requirements determine the relative viability of such developments. In addition, cultural aspects also play a role in the evolution of these dwellings, as evidenced by decorative features and community interaction patterns.

Only in the modern world have houses become purely or almost entirely residential spaces; in ancient times, the house functioned more as a place of business than merely as a household.

Reception areas in homes served commercial and social purposes, helping to form political and economic networks. In the ancient world, there was no separate "office" outside the home. Merchants, landlords, and other professionals worked from their houses or met clients in public spaces, in cities and in the countryside. Considering this, it becomes clear how late antique residential buildings could be adapted for non-domestic functions (Lavan, et al., 2005, p. 8).

Geographically, caves used as dwellings are widespread. Cave habitation extends along a range beginning in China and continuing through India, Asia Minor, and Arabia, reaching as far as the Canary Islands, the West Indies, Mexico, and North and South America. It also follows both coastlines of the Mediterranean. The ruins of stone structures are frequently discovered (Walter Fewkes, 1910, p. 394).

The research approach adopted here is qualitative, analytically descriptive, and deductive. The analytical description outlines the physical form of existing cave structures, leading to inferential conclusions drawn by comparison with similar examples. The criteria applied to the hewn dwellings consider their use as residential and functional spaces, depending on need and circumstance. Some of these structures served as houses, presses, or places of worship. In the past, people utilised the natural and distinctive shapes of the landscape to create their own spaces, another remarkable feature of the cultural landscape and evidence of a deep understanding of and interaction with nature. The central theme in Bloto Ollo's architectural corpus is a minimalist approach to creating living environments. At first glance, the landscape appears untouched; only upon closer inspection does the viewer perceive the subtle human intervention along the mountain slopes.

The ancient village of Maaloula, called *Bloto Ollo* in Aramaic, means "the high village." The settlement lies in a hot and arid climate. Forty-nine earth-sheltered structures of the underground type are hewn into the mountain or hill slopes, generally oriented toward the west and south. Large cavities were carved into the horizontal rock surfaces to serve as dwellings, presses, storage areas, stables, or other functional spaces. These were created through human effort against the rock to provide adequate interior space. Field observations of the caves in their ancient form indicate that only a few have been destroyed, and their durability continues to contribute valuable data for studying ancient civilisation.

Understanding the architecture of Maaloula is challenging due to the scarcity of comparable studies or surviving examples from the same period. For this reason, examining well-studied sites is crucial for contextual understanding. In this respect, the analysis of Roman houses,

together with those in Cappadocia and Meymand, provides excellent comparative examples despite the chronological differences between them and Maaloula.

6.1.2. Case studies

6.1.2.1. Housing in late antiquity

The structure of residences was directly influenced by the changing socio-political relations of Late Antiquity. In particular, the adaptation of large reception spaces and dining facilities became increasingly important in Late Antique aristocratic houses to accommodate 'public' functions within a domestic context. It is essential to emphasise that spaces often served multiple purposes; at different times of the day, a single room might have functioned as a venue for diverse activities. Moreover, certain rooms, such as triclinia, may have been used only seasonally, depending on climatic conditions.

The Late Antique "middle classes" comprised fewer wealthy aristocrats, artisans, shopkeepers, small landowners, and peasants. According to Ellis, there are three defining features of a "middle-class house": the absence of elaborate or "aristocratic" architectural elements, particularly a peristyle; the occupation of a more confined area; and the modest decorative quality, which often included inferior imitations of aristocratic styles and trends. However, Ellis notes that members of the "upper-middle class" aspired to live in peristyle mansions similar to those of the aristocracy (Ellis, 2006, p. 421).

There were typical design principles and details characteristic of Late Antique houses; these elements differed according to the social class of the family, yet they largely shared a similar structural organization. The following sections outline the principal components of domestic architecture, which provide a comparative framework for understanding the studied village of Maaloula.

Reception and dining rooms played an essential role in private life and frequently served public and political purposes in the Early Roman period. They continued to be central features of domestic architecture in Late Antiquity. The earlier U-shaped triclinia evolved further, giving rise to apsidal and polygonal dining and reception rooms, distinctive features of Late Antique aristocratic residences.

Bedrooms, or the cellular spaces identified as such, were the most private areas of the house. Their seclusion reflected their restricted accessibility, as they were typically located in hidden parts of the dwelling not open to visitors. Plain mosaic panels help identify Late Antique

sleeping chambers, indicating the former positions of couches once found in these rooms. These spaces likely accommodated various private activities beyond sleeping.

The bathroom became a common domestic feature in many provincial areas. Large houses in Italy and the provinces were frequently equipped with private bathing complexes throughout the Roman period. In Late Antiquity, bathing remained an important social and recreational practice. Residential baths, much like those of earlier times, fulfilled a semi-public role within the domestic environment, providing spaces where householders could entertain friends and business associates. Consequently, bathing complexes were often constructed near main entrances or reception areas.

Kitchens were traditionally considered service spaces in Early Roman homes, used exclusively by servants and enslaved individuals. Although most kitchen studies have focused on the Imperial period, the characteristics they describe were almost certainly present in Late Antique houses, where dining remained a key social activity. Ovens have been identified in the “Palace of the Dux” at Apollonia and in a large urban mansion in Sardis; however, only a few kitchens have been securely identified in domestic contexts. S. P. Ellis suggests that food may have been brought in from external kitchens, bars, or taverns, which would explain the scarcity of kitchens within the house (Ellis, 2000).

The latrinae was a private toilet facility, usually situated near the service area of the house, where water could be supplied or connected directly to the sewer system. Understanding the latrinae of Late Antiquity largely relies on comparisons with examples from the Imperial period uncovered in Italian sites such as Pompeii, Ostia, and Tivoli, as well as in North African buildings. Although toilets have been excavated in several Late Antique contexts, they have seldom been published in detail.

A private shrine functioned as a domestic space that could serve as a gathering place for Christians during the Early Christian period. Late Antique dwellings often included spaces for Christian devotion, paralleling Early Roman houses that contained pagan shrines. The presence of Christian symbols in domestic settings illustrates the increasing influence of Christianity, even though pagan elements continued to prevail.

Archaeologists have identified Christian design elements in several cases, allowing for the tracing of the Christianization of property owners. The religious function of Late Antique villas has been examined in numerous studies addressing different regions of the empire. In large

mansions, rooms dedicated solely to religious practices were constructed (Uytterhoeven, 2005, p. 58).

6.1.2.2. The Carved Sheltered Complexes in Cappadocia, Turkey

Cappadocia was a centre of activity for many emperors; it was a key station along their route across Asia Minor. The region benefited from the oscillation between Constantinople and Antioch and the tension between the newly founded capital and the eastern frontier. However, once the imperial presence was established in Constantinople, emperors ceased visiting Cappadocia. None resided in the region from the last quarter of the fourth century until the beginning of Heraclius' campaign against the Persians in the early seventh century. Nothing indicates the continued importance of the imperial institution in Cappadocia, not even the brief residences of Constantius II, Julian, Jovian, and Valens in the province up to the early 370s (Métivier, 2005, pp. 129-130).

Rock-cut courtyard dwellings are documented examples that extend far beyond the Byzantine era. The double-courtyard house at Selime Kalesi represents the largest and most elaborate example in terms of design and decoration, demonstrating an advanced understanding of Byzantine domestic architecture. These houses belong to a Middle Byzantine settlement dating from the tenth to the eleventh centuries. They contribute to understanding the material culture and daily life of Byzantium's Anatolian aristocracy.

In the ninth century, the political situation in the region was unstable. The northern Arab emirates of Syria raided Byzantine territories through Cappadocia and twice besieged Constantinople, the empire's capital. Responding to these continuous incursions, Byzantium reorganised its military administration and regained much of its eastern territories through counter-offensives. Within this ensuing period of security and prosperity, inhabitants carved their dwellings and communal spaces throughout Cappadocia during the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Veronica Kalas provides a detailed example of such complexes. House 7 presents an above-average courtyard dwelling, comprising several rooms around two courtyards extending approximately 70 meters along the landscape. The rooms, courtyards, and surrounding terrain occupy about 1,000 m². House 7 measures roughly one-third the size of Selime Kalesi, the most prominent residence at the site. The first courtyard (1) forms an open space between rooms carved into the naturally occurring volcanic formations. Ascending the hill toward this first courtyard, one encounters the stable (2), a rectangular room with five mangers carved into a

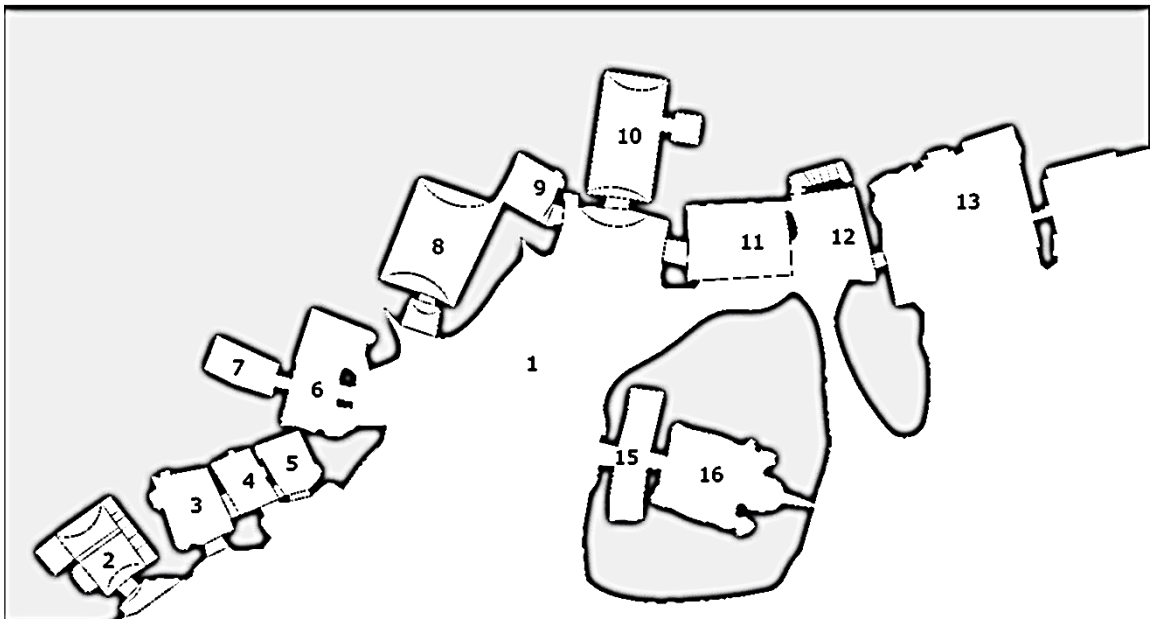


Figure 38: House 7, (Kalas, 2005)

high ledge along one wall. Following the stable are three small rooms (3–5), likely used for storage, and beyond them lies the kitchen (6). The kitchen is a square chamber with a conical ceiling that terminates in a ventilation opening at the top, and it features a semicircular hearth carved into one wall, a typical form.

Directly across the courtyard from the kitchen lies the church (16). Finally, two barrel-vaulted halls occupy the upper part of the courtyard. Hall (8) adjoins the kitchen and may have served a related function, while the other room (10), facing the courtyard, may have functioned as the daily living area, Figure 38 (Kalas, 2005, p. 399).

According to the plan and description, typical Cappadocian houses consist of carved spaces flanking an open courtyard. The relationship between these rooms reflects integrated functionality: although there are no fences or direct structural connections, the functions of each room complement one another. This interdependence explains why a complex of approximately fifteen rooms is considered a single house. Despite the chronological gap between the two sites, Cappadocia and Bloto Ollo, the concept observed in the former helps in understanding the latter, particularly regarding the spatial connections between dwellings and the ideology underlying such forms of habitation.

In the Roman rock-cut site of Maaloula, complex exterior treatments are not evident. The chronological distance between Maaloula and Cappadocia is clearly reflected in the carving quality: Cappadocian examples display a highly refined level of craft comparable to constructed architecture, with exteriors expressed in three dimensions. In contrast, the

minimalist approach of Maaloula does not necessarily imply a lack of skill among its carvers. Instead, they carved sufficiently to define interiors as dwellings or workspaces, while keeping the exteriors limited to entrances, undoubtedly for defensive reasons, demonstrating their capacity for abstract architectural thinking.

6.1.2.3. Meymand the carved Settlement, Iran

Meymand is a small valley located within the arid mountain chain of central Iran. Its inhabitants are agro-pastoralists who practice a distinctive three-phase regional transhumance adapted to the dry environment. It represents an instance in which humans created and constructed dwellings within mountain ranges and hills without provision for windows, ventilation systems, or external ornamentation (Hashemi, 2019, p. 73). Throughout the year, farmers migrate with their livestock to specific seasonal settlements, traditionally four in number, including fortified cave dwellings used during winter. In three of these settlements, the houses are temporary, while the cave houses are permanent in the fourth.

The Meymand settlements can be categorised as follows:

- Sar-e-Āghol: used from the end of winter until late spring.
- Sar-e-Bāgh: located near seasonal rivers and occupied during summer and early autumn.
- Winter Village: consisting of approximately 400 Kīchehs (houses), carved into the soft rock in tiers up to five stories high. Each house contains between one and seven rooms traditionally used for living and storage.

In this arid climate, water is collected from multiple sources, rivers, springs, and subterranean pools, and stored in underground reservoirs or channelled by animals, orchards, and small vegetable plots. The community maintains a deep bond with its natural environment, expressed through social practices, cultural ceremonies, and religious beliefs (UNESCO, 2015).

The residential units carved into the mountains are fortified, with no entry except through a solid main door. They provide secure shelter from heat and cold and are positioned within the mountains to protect them from wind and water erosion. Moreover, their thermal regulation is efficient due to minimal heat exchange with the surroundings. The carved dwellings on the slopes of the valleys are called Kīchehs.

The Kīchehs exhibit a regular arrangement, positioned in alternating rows and columns. This method provides several structural advantages, such as optimal roof thickness that enhances stability. Additionally, each dwelling has sufficient surrounding space for expansion through

further excavation. Various village features have evolved in response to changing needs and local specialisation.

A distinctive element in Meymand is the Kāshkor, a network of notable topographically formed routes. The Kāshkors are grooves that channel rainwater away from the Kīchehs toward either side. These narrow pathways allow passage for only one person at a time. Due to the village's topography, stone steps known as Pellehchīn are used to reach certain houses. The construction method employs large, flat-faced stones to form these steps.

The Kīchehs exhibit typical architectural characteristics. Most houses include a narrow corridor or passageway cut along the slope; the corridor's length depends on the depth required to carve a room with a vertical entrance. The steeper the mountain incline, the shorter the Kīcheh becomes, making such dwellings less visible and more challenging to locate.

The principal room of each dwelling is called the Otāq, which serves as the main living space, particularly at night and during cold days. Each house may contain one or more such rooms. A clear spatial hierarchy exists from the entrance to the rear of the room: cooking utensils are typically located near the entrance, while the sides are reserved for seating guests, and the back of the room serves as the bedding area. A Dīdān (fireplace) is usually found inside the room as well. Generally, these rooms have no external openings. Most spaces contain only the main door; however, some include skylights in the ceiling or walls to provide ventilation. Certain dwellings contain an additional room behind the main chamber or at the end of the Kīcheh, used for storing bedding and household items.

A distinctive architectural feature of Meymand is the Jowbat, a stone arm carved into a wall or ceiling, used to tie animals or suspend objects. Jowbats are carved at varying heights: the lower ones are for tethering livestock, while the higher ones, often on ceilings, are for hanging items such as lanterns or food bags to keep them out of reach.

Significant pictographs in Meymand include cup marks, a series of shallow carvings on rocks near the troglodytic dwellings. One rock in front of the caves bears fifteen closely spaced carvings. These cup marks likely had multiple functions, such as grinding dried leaves and seeds, extracting sacred plant oils, or collecting liquids for ritual and religious ceremonies. They may also symbolise constellations, as certain groupings resemble stellar formations (ICHHTO, 2012). The tools traditionally used in carving the village structures included a chisel, hammer, and pickaxe, standard instruments for excavation throughout the site's history.

These implements were historically the primary tools employed in constructing the rock-cut dwellings (Mangeli, et al., 2022, p. 64).

6.1.2.4. The Eski Kermen Settlement, Ukraine

The limestone plateau of Eski Kermen is located approximately six kilometres south of the village of Krasny Mak, in the southwestern part of the second ridge of the Crimean Mountains. This elevated plateau features a high concentration of man-made caves and is one of approximately a dozen similar settlements that dominate southwestern Crimea's highlands. The architecture on this plateau reflects the lifestyles and living cultures of several successive and often conflicting population groups that have left their mark over the centuries. These influences are clearly visible in the expansion and modification of the caves, resulting in significant functional transformations. The area's topography was skillfully utilised: fortifications protected the easily accessible, gentler sections of the slopes, while caves cut into the rock mass on the eastern and western sides, used as watchtowers or casemates, played a crucial role in the defensive system.

According to current research, the settlement flourished between the second half of the sixth century and the late thirteenth century. However, there is no solid evidence to confirm an earlier occupation of the site. Nonetheless, a burial ground on the southeastern slope dates to the fifth century, and a Corinthian pillar capital made of marble, found in the basilica area, dates to the second or third centuries(Aufschnaiter & Tobias, 2013, p. 233). Between 1924 and 1927, it was hypothesised that the cave city had been founded by Byzantine emigrants from Asia Minor in the twelfth century. From 1931 to 1937, large-scale excavations were conducted, during which fortifications, basilicas, churches, and dwellings were uncovered. On the plateau's southern edge, a road carved into the rock leading to the main gate was also revealed. As a result, the architectural remains and cave complexes of Eski Kermen were classified into three significant periods: the Early Byzantine, Khazarian, and Late Byzantine periods (Ajbabin, 2013, p. 168).

Six hundred seven caves have been recorded on the Eski Kermen plateau and its immediate surroundings. It should be noted that a single cave may consist of several rooms; therefore, a total of 757 cave chambers were counted. Some caves marked on older maps can no longer be located, as they may have been buried under soil layers or have become inaccessible over time. The southern and central parts of the plateau appear to have been particularly densely populated, as recent excavations in these areas have uncovered several structures, courtyards, and cellars carved into the rock.

To properly understand the functions and fittings of the caves, it is necessary to examine their furnishings and tool marks. Many caves contain troughs with stone arms, indicating use as stables. Stone arms on ceilings, shelf marks, and niches for large storage jars (pithoi) suggest that several caves served as storage spaces. Numerous basins corresponding in form and location to skylights, likely used as cisterns, have also been found, along with small round openings near entrances interpreted as chimneys for kitchens or living areas.

Caves with characteristic sacred features, such as built-in crosses, shaft graves, altar niches, or distinctive floor plans, are easier to interpret functionally than others. In addition, numerous granaries with stone lids were carved directly into the rock as large pithoi, capable of storing several tons of grain. Wine presses were also discovered.

It is common to observe that a cave with a well-finished wall was later interrupted by a roughly cut niche, reflecting the numerous phases of use and functional changes that occurred over the centuries. The cave plans vary in shape, round, oval, or rectangular, and their size, location, fittings, and archaeological context contribute to understanding their purpose.

A typological study that considered cave access as the principal classification criterion identified two main types: those accessible through an opening in the ceiling and those with a lateral entrance. Caves with ceiling access were generally limited in function and may have served as cellars, cisterns, or stables. Long human bones were found in some caves with two ceiling openings, raising the question of whether they were intended as burial sites from the outset (Aufschnaiter & Tobias, 2013, p. 237).

6.1.2.5. Wadi Martahun site, Ancient Villages of Northern Syria

Wadi Martahun is part of the Ancient Villages sites of Northern Syria. This site comprises 40 villages grouped in eight parks, situated in north-western Syria, and provides a remarkable testimony to rural life in late Antiquity and the Byzantine period. The villages were abandoned in the 8th to 10th centuries; they date back to the 1st to 7th centuries. The features in these sites include a remarkably well-preserved landscape and the architectural remains of dwellings, pagan temples, churches, cisterns, bathhouses, and other structures. The village's cultural landscape serves as a significant example of the transition from the ancient pagan world of the Roman Empire to Byzantine Christianity.

Outstanding Universal Value of the Dead Cities Region

The site reflects the transformation of rural society during late Antiquity and the rise of Christianity in the East. It meets UNESCO criteria for its testimony to rural life (Criterion iii),

the evolution of Byzantine architecture (Criterion iv), and sustainable settlement patterns (Criterion v). The integrity and authenticity of the region are exceptionally high, due to minimal modern interference, though recent rural resettlement poses emerging risks.

The area is under the legal protection of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM), with future management planned through eight archaeological parks and dedicated conservation centres, ensuring both preservation and sustainable development aligned with its cultural significance (UNESCO, 2011).

The 'Dead Cities" are among the world's most significant archaeological treasures. Comprising over 700 Roman and Byzantine-era settlements, these ancient villages, often enclosed by stone walls that formed part of Roman cadastral networks, represent a unique form of urban civilisation rooted in rural life. While rural areas of this period are poorly documented elsewhere, northern Syria offers exceptional preservation of village ruins, often found in fully integrated groups. Wadi Murtahun is located approximately three kilometres west of the site of al-Bara. It is considered a small-sized archaeological site, stretching along both sides of a deep valley rich in fertile agricultural soil. The surrounding natural landscape is stunning and picturesque, and its ancient scenery has remained untouched by modern habitation or other forms of disturbance. Within the village, there are two remarkably well-preserved houses, along with several rock-cut structures on the valley slope. Additionally, remnants indicate a pagan settlement from the Roman period. Figure 39 and Figure 40 present similar features in the Maaloula settlement, which dates back to the same period as the Maaloula settlement. Research indicates that traces dating back to the pre-Byzantine era have been found at the Al Bara site. (Abdulkarim & Charpentier, 2016).



Figure 39: Presents a general view of the caves at the Martahun site, Dr Abdullkarim Archive.



Figure 40: Presents the manger in a cave at the Martahun site, Dr Abdullkarim Archive.

6.1.2.6. The Rock-Cut Shelters in the Qalamoun Region, Syria

The Qalamoun Mountains were historically known as Snyr, a name mentioned in the Torah and later used by Arabic poets and geographers. Most of the villages in this region were famous for cultivating sumac, which was used in leather tanning. The Qalamoun region includes forty-nine settlements that share similarities in urban structure but differ in dialect (Zakarya, 1984, p. 381). Geographically, it forms a well-defined natural unit, one of the countless compartments that nature has multiplied across Syria. It is bordered to the east by the Syrian Desert, to the west by the peaks of Anti-Lebanon, and to the south by the mountain range separating it from the Ghouta plain. To the north and northeast, it merges into the vast plain between Homs and Qaryatayn.

The region consists of plateaus extending from the desert toward the Anti-Lebanon range, arranged in layers. Numerous small settlements are scattered across its rugged terrain, making communication difficult. This orographic system prevents the development of large watercourses but encourages the formation of natural springs, which are abundant throughout the Qalamoun. Since water is essential for life, humans have long settled near these sources, creating their habitats around them. Despite the region's harsh environment, many communities have emerged here; at least thirty-one are known. Some, such as Yabroud and Nebek, developed into large towns with 8,000–9,000 inhabitants, while others, such as Ras al-Ain and Bakhʿa, had only about 300 (Nasrallah, 1940, p. 83).

Like the eastern slopes of Mount Hermon, the Qalamoun region was governed from Damascus from the end of the first century AD. Inscriptions of Agrippa II found at Halboun and Yabroud confirm that these locations were part of the last Herodian king's domain. Similarly, notes by George of Cyprus imply the presence of imperial estates at Maaloula and Yabroud, mentioned at the end of the sixth century AD (Aliquot, 2012, p. 50). The area witnessed the early spread of Christianity, as evidenced by numerous church ruins and inscriptions dating from the fourth century. For instance, Saidnaya had twenty-three churches, Maaloula fourteen, and Yabroud ten.

The region's rugged topography and distance from major thoroughfares helped preserve Christianity. The Arab conquests did not immediately reach Qalamoun, as it lay beyond the main invasion routes. Consequently, Islam spread gradually through infiltration rather than conquest. Over several centuries, persistent pressures and harassment led many Christian communities to convert. The late seventeenth century marked the beginning of widespread apostasy in Qalamoun, after which the region was divided into four dioceses: Yabroud, Kara,

Maaloula, and Saidnaya. Nevertheless, Christianity endured in major centres such as Saidnaya, Maaloula, Yabroud, Nebek, Kara, and Deir Atiyeh. In other settlements, only ruins of churches, monasteries, or manuscripts remain (Nasrallah, 1940, p. 84).

Despite the historical and cultural richness of Qalamoun, few studies have examined its rock-cut settlements. Most existing research focuses on individual monasteries carved into rock in various localities. Naturally, the geological characteristics of a given area determine the feasibility of cave monasteries or rock-cut churches. In Syria, only certain regions are suitable for such monuments, as defined in historical sources.

A typical lavra configuration can be found at Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi in Nebek, where the earliest monastic inhabitants lived in caves surrounding a central complex that included a chapel, refectory, and library built on an east-facing limestone spur. By the late seventh century, a monastic library or scriptorium was active at the site, as indicated by a manuscript preserved in the British Museum. Archaeological evidence suggests that the location may originally have been a Roman fort overlooking the limes valley, later converted for monastic use in Late Antiquity.

In Saidnaya, to the south, several churches were adapted from earlier structures, some adjacent to caves. Dayr Mar Elias, for example, was constructed over a cave that still contains medieval frescoes, with caves forming an integral part of its Christian landscape (Leeming, 2018, pp. 169-173).

Deir Mar Tuma, situated approximately two kilometres north of Saidnaya at an altitude of 1,670 meters, is located near a modern monastery. The complex includes a walled courtyard with the temple-church at its centre and several rock-cut chambers. The walls enclose a lozenge-shaped area measuring 35 × 45 meters. The temple measures 24.75 × 7.80 meters, faces south, and stands on a small pedestal with a rock-carved platform in front of the pronaos. Large, uniform stones were used in the original walls. Although few inscriptions were found, they include a marble slab with part of a dedicatory inscription on the eastern exterior wall, a block with a Greek inscription in the ancient pronaos, and a stone with an Aramaic inscription.

Several rock-cut shelters surround the church and monastery Figure 41, Figure 42, possibly dating back to pre-Christian or even pre-Roman times. Some have been restored and repurposed as storage or rainwater reservoirs, while others may have served as tombs or housing for labourers, temple staff, or later monks (Immerzeel & Kleiterp, 2011, p. 87). Portions of a rocky hill originally intended for burials show evidence of later reuse; the so-called “house-type” or “temple-type” tombs, structures resembling temples used for interment, are common throughout Syria (Çetinkaya , 2017, p. 192). Traces of quarrying are visible in several areas, particularly in the northeastern part of the compound, where smooth rock surfaces and roughly worked stones remain in front of a large cavern. Southeast of the complex lies a monumental chamber, approximately 14.60 meters long, 6.20 meters wide, and 3.20 meters high, renovated with benches and carved piers. The Franciscan study team refers to this chamber as a diwan (council chamber). It likely served as a refectory or triclinium, a central gathering space connected to the temple, which retained a similar purpose after the site’s conversion into a monastery.

The most notable of these monastic sites is the Cherubim Monastery, located high above Saidnaya on the tallest peak north of Deir Mar Tuma, also known as Deir as-Sherubim. Like Deir Mar Tuma, the complex shows evidence of significant quarrying and rock-cut chambers. Rebuilt in 1982 from its earlier remains, the structure described by Pococke as “the same kind of building as that of Saint Thomas” appears to be a creative re-interpretation of its ancient temple form (Immerzeel & Kleiterp, 2011, p. 98).

The above examples represent only a portion of the carved Christian heritage in the Qalamoun region. Many other settlements in the area contain ancient churches and cave structures, which have been mentioned in historical investigations.



Figure 42:Deir Mar Toma rock shelters around the church, (Major, 2020)



Figure 41: Deir Mar Toma rock shelters around the church, (Major, 2020).

Yabroud (Iebrouda) is one of the oldest cities in the Qalamoun region. Yaqut al-Hamawi and Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi described it. Archaeological evidence indicates that Yabroud has been inhabited since at least the Mesolithic era (10,000–7,500 BC). During the Roman period, it was likely part of Agrippa II's domain. An altar discovered in Rome dedicated to Malekiobrudis (Jupiter Malek of Yabroud) confirms this connection. The large Greek Catholic Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helen, located in the town centre, is believed to stand on the site of an ancient Temple of Jupiter. The remains of another early church are found on the outskirts, along with numerous caves, some of which were used for burial (Mannheim & Winter, 1998, p. 197). Maʿarrat el-Bash, a village 12 km north of Yabroud, contains Roman remains including a church, channels, and molasses presses (Studies, 1992, p. 442). A large cave with carved chambers resembling those of Maaloula is also present; although uninhabited, it is used for storage (Post, 1891, p. 231).

Most villages and towns in Qalamoun feature either rock-hewn residences or carved tombs. Due to the lack of comprehensive research, many of these structures are classified as "carved tombs," similar to those in Maaloula, where Bloto Ollo was traditionally identified as monastic cells.

For example, Qara contains rock-hewn tombs on Mar Sophia's hill and was of significant importance during the Roman era. Al-Sahel features elaborately carved funerary caves within the fort, as well as remnants of walls, pottery shards, enamelled glassware, and coins, all indicating the site's historical value. Al-Mesherfah, formerly known as Flita before 1952, features remnants of ancient roads, scattered cave tombs, and rock-cut presses. Bakhʿa (al-Sarkhah) and Jubʿadin, villages noted for their continued use of Aramaic, have rock-carved chambers and presses similar to those in Maaloula.

Ain al-Tinah, situated between Maaloula and al-Qutayfah, was historically a Christian and Aramaic-speaking community. It contains burial caves and Roman-era presses. Minin, situated on the middle plateau of Qalamoun, about 10 km from Saidnaya, includes many carved mountain caves. Notably, one chamber features a decorated doorframe and arcaded remains known as the Marya Palace. Talfyta, a small village 5 km from Saidnaya, includes a two-level rock-hewn house, each containing a single room, with an adjacent carved tomb. Hafyr al-Foqa, in the central plateau of Qalamoun, contains sixty-one sarcophagi (each measuring approximately 3 × 3 meters) and several rock-cut presses. Finally, Rankous, a town on the high Qalamoun plateau, features artificial caves, remnants of a wall known as "the monastery," and ancient water channels (Dyab, 2004, pp. 35-178).

All the sites are part of the Qalamoun region and share the same historical development. Many of these settlements, cemeteries, and caves remain unstudied and undocumented. Therefore, it is plausible that they exhibit the same characteristics as Bloto Ollo in Maaloula, both in architectural concept and functional typology.

6.1.3. Bloto Ollo

From the 4th century A.D., changing political and social relations—caused by the concentration of wealth and power in a few principals and typified by the growing importance of patronage in determining social relations, led to increased spending on impressive, richly decorated private dwellings. Late antique nobles used their villas to demonstrate their position and wealth, especially to their lower-class patrons who were economically, politically, and socially bound to them. These changes resulted in luxurious complexes replete with reception and dining facilities, such as private audience chambers and large, formally articulated triclinia, which have been studied over time (Ellis, 1991, p. 134). On the other hand, the middle classes of late antiquity are less visible in the archaeological record than the elite. This class consisted of the less wealthy aristocracy, merchants and shopkeepers, small landowners, and peasants. Nonetheless, artisans and peasants must have represented most of the population in rural regions. According to some studies, they likely resided in villages or small clusters of dwellings (Ellis, 2006, p. 419).

The caves in the studied area display various types. Generally, compared to Roman houses, they can be considered more similar to middle-class dwellings. These houses differ from Roman ones, being composed of a single-space area. Nevertheless, typical Roman features can be observed in some examples, despite their small dimensions. Compared to the Cappadocian houses, which resemble villas, the example of Cappadocia helps to clarify the spatial relationships, where even in Maaloula, the spaces could fulfil their intended functions. The case of Meymand is another important example, where many interior features are shared between the two sites, thus helping clarify or correct certain elements' functions.

The caves can be classified into two general categories according to their shapes. The first type has a platform, whereas the second lacks a specific shape and varies according to function. For a more precise understanding, such classification facilitates analysis. Consequently, the platform caves can be divided into simple and complex forms. Moreover, many caves include an attached room beside the main space; typically, this room is smaller than the central one. Complex caves are organised according to their configuration; sometimes, two caves are connected.

The studied area is divided into three parts to simplify the analysis and understanding of the ancient village's plan. Area A1 is the major part, containing forty-two caves with different functions or units. In comparison, both A2 (three caves) and A3 (four caves) can be considered working areas (Figure 43), as both contain only presses. Area A1 extends beneath the cliff of the Church of St. Sergius, formerly a pagan temple with an altar dating back to around 300 A.D (Honey, 2011, p. 33). These caves are difficult to observe from the top of the mountain.

Area A1 is divided into Plateau 1 and Plateau 2. This section presents the main features and preliminary assessment of these caves. All the studied caves share the same primary characteristics: they were carved in the rock, share the same orientation, and mostly contain similar interior parts and divisions. The main form consists of a central unit, approximately 4 × 5 m, with some additions or variations depending on the space's function. Certain caves include a smaller room attached to the central unit.

Typically, the interior space is divided into two levels by a raised stage about 70 cm high, defining functional zones. This type of division probably reflects a separation between animals and humans, a distinction that remained typical in rural Syria until the mid-20th century. Each cave has a single opening, the door, in the middle of the wall facing the raised platform. To the left of the entrance, a manger is carved partly into the wall. This design can be regarded as the simplest type of cave and was likely used for residential purposes. In general, the houses in Bloto Ollo do not follow the familiar layout of Roman houses with separated spaces and rooms. Nonetheless, certain features that show similarities to the typical Roman house can be identified.



Figure 43: The studied areas in Bloto Ollo, considering the old village location, Google Map.

6.1.3.1. Documentation of Area 1

6.1.3.1.1. Simple type

Figure 44 presents the simple type found in the village. A11 and B05 represent the simplest forms: a single room with a platform and a few simple niches. Despite being classified as simple forms, these caves are not identical. A11 includes a bench in the lower part, whereas B05 lacks one. Additional elements can be observed in B02, B08, and A12; these examples represent the simple type with modifications according to functional needs. For instance, B02 has grooves on the platform; in the lower part, these grooves terminate in a semi-circular basin on the floor. A12 features a rectangular basin to the left of the entrance, where the grooves from the platform also end.

In comparison, B08 contains a circular basin on the platform. Moreover, a bench flanks the lower part on three sides. It is difficult to determine whether such grooves originally existed in all caves and were later lost through erosion.

A02 is a notable example within this group, containing a carved manger (60 × 135 × 93 cm in height and 10 cm in depth) located on the wall to the left of the entrance. These mangers were generally carved into the wall, with the cut section curved. A circular basin (76.5 cm in diameter and 20 cm in depth) lies on the floor to the left of the space. Furthermore, on the bench, there is a carved U-shaped feature, which is assumed to have served as a seat.

A04 is a simple cave composed of a single space with a platform. It also includes a carved manger to the left of the entrance. Most of the main façade has been lost; in its current state, there is evidence of an opening at the corner to the right of the entrance, an uncommon feature on the site. Therefore, whether this opening is original or the result of erosion cannot be confirmed. Likewise, a carved arm appears at a low level beside the opening, whereas such arms are generally positioned higher. The entrance steps are ruined, and the floor is covered with earth. Both A02 and A04 include arched niches.

B12 is also considered a simple cave with a platform; however, its distinguishing feature is the location of the manger. B12 is the only cave with the carved element (assumed to be a manger) situated on the platform itself. In addition, this unit has a small room opening into the main lower space and an unfinished arch facing the entrance.

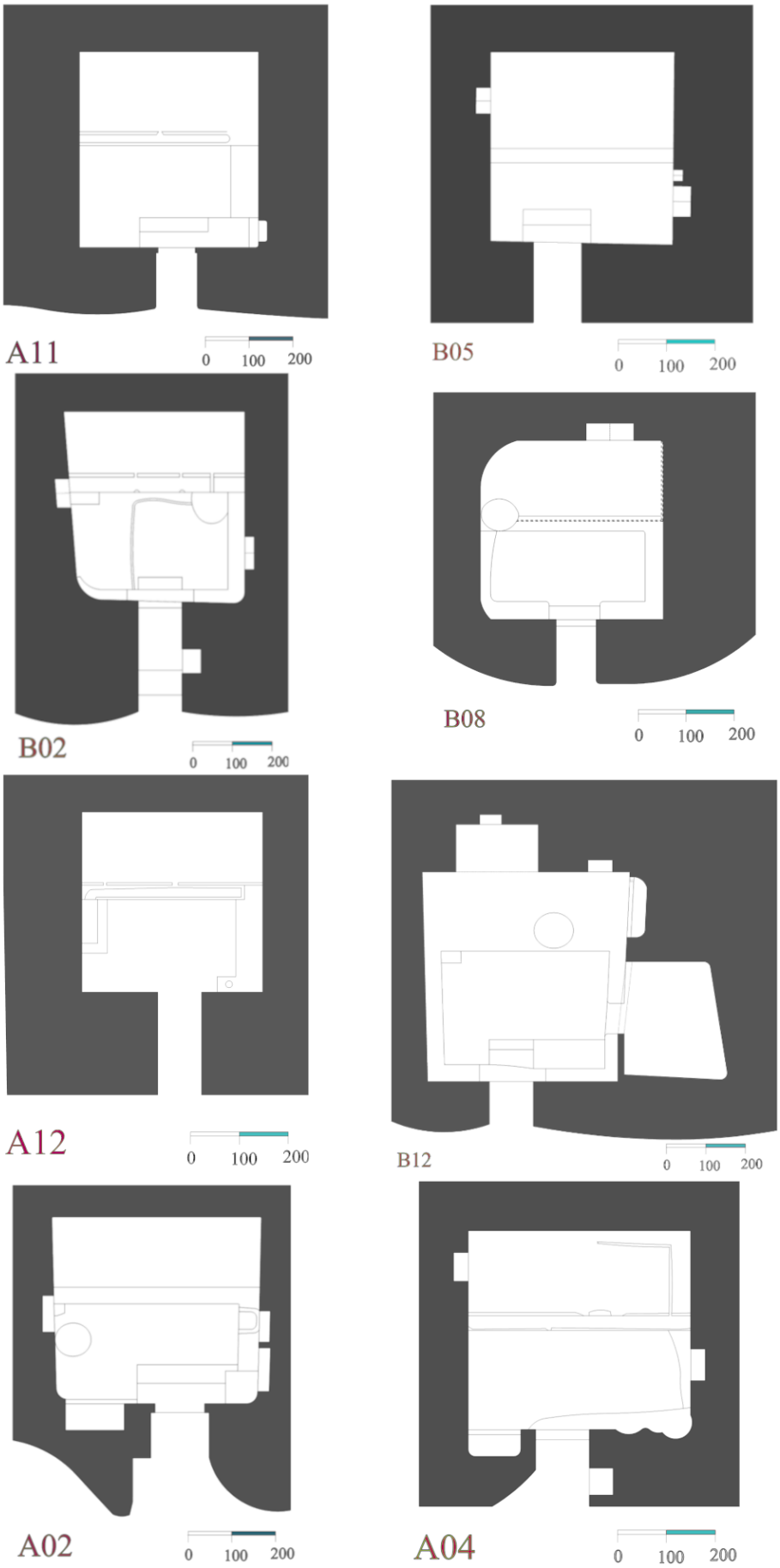


Figure 44: Simple type caves, by the author.

6.1.3.1.2. Complex type

The complex types of caves display specific plans by which the unique role of these houses can be traced. This group of caves does not deviate from the simple type, since, as Figure 45 shows, these examples share the main features of the simple type, such as platforms, niches, mangers, and seats. Nevertheless, what distinguishes this group are their exceptional subdivisions.

For instance, cave A07 consists of two caves connected by a carved tunnel; both have annexed rooms. What makes this example unique begins with its exterior: it is the only one with carved benches in front of the entrance. It is also the only example connected by a carved arched tunnel, 403 cm in length.

The right cave has extraordinary features that cannot be observed elsewhere. Its dimensions are 450 × 419 cm. Two carved benches are in front of the door, 255 cm to the left, 247 cm to the right, and 200 cm deep. The entrance is two steps higher than the interior. As in typical units, this space includes a platform; however, a semi-circle is carved in the middle, and six small holes (10 × 5 cm deep), possibly used for ritual purposes. The annexed room, approximately 267 × 194 cm, lies at the lower part of the space, connected to the platform, while the manger is to the left of the door.

The particular features that make this cave unique include the presence of an arched ornamental niche, most probably used as a private shrine. An arched nook (107 × 168 × 184 cm in height) is located in the lower section, which does not appear elsewhere. Furthermore, on the right side of the door is an arched niche with a slightly irregular opening to the outside and a circular skylight above it.

The left cave (400 × 468 cm) has a platform with a central basin (70 cm deep) and two grooves. Typically, the entrance is two steps higher than the interior. The manger is positioned to the left of the door, while a carved bench (35 cm in height) stands on the right. The bench has a U-shaped seat and a hole in front of the tunnel, probably used as a mortar. The main façade contains an arched nook flanked by two niches: the one on the left is an arch with three holes in its base. Moreover, the annexed room is joined with the main space in the lower part.

Consequently, this combination of several distinct elements in one complex indicates the significance of this place. Furthermore, the sculpting quality, comparing the nook in the right cave with that in the left, shows considerable differences between them. While the right cave

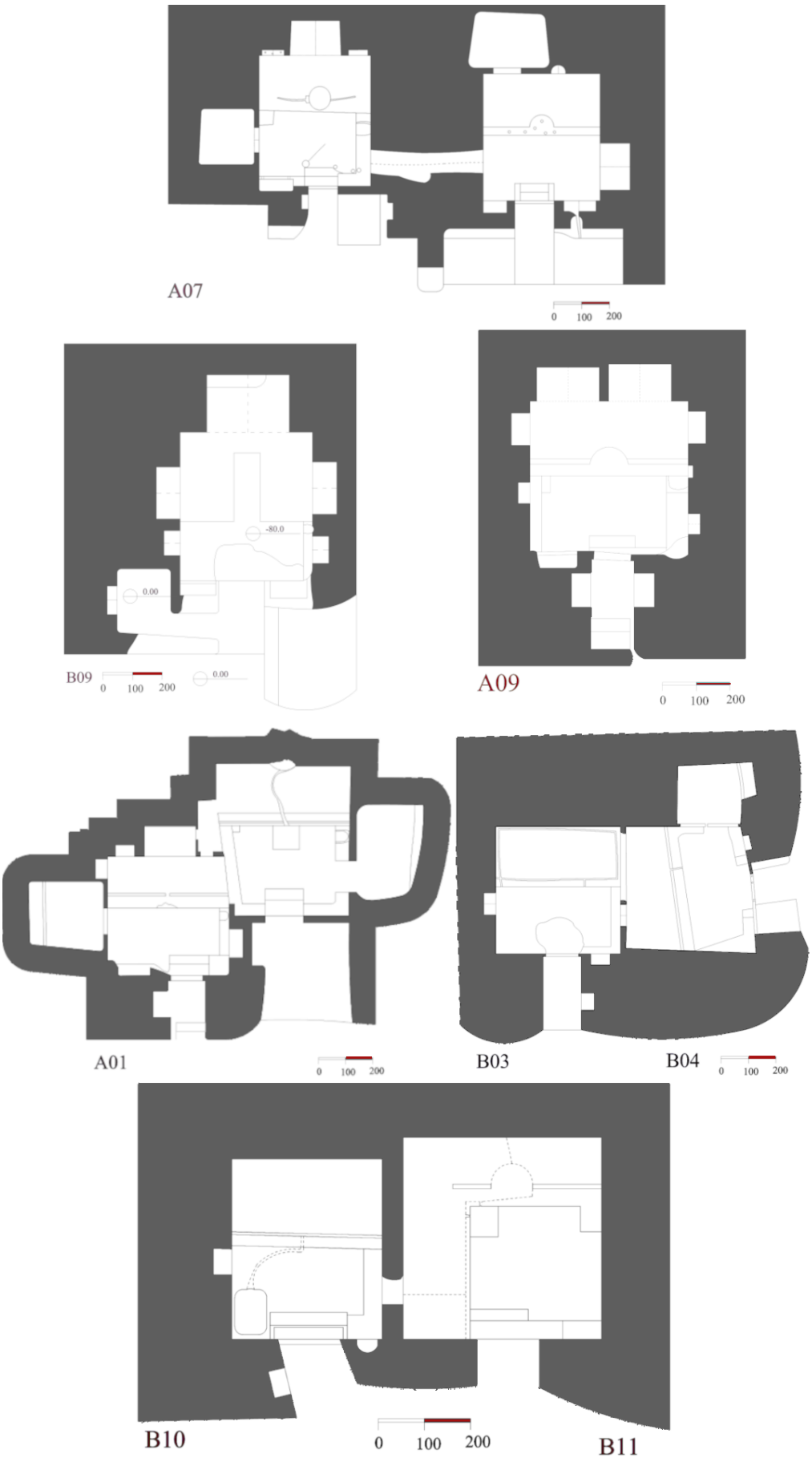


Figure 45: The complex type caves, by the author.

has a well-carved nook and ornamental niche; the left is less refined. Thus, either the right nook and shrine were added later, or the entire right cave was carved in a subsequent period in response to the need for expansion or a new function.

Cave B09 (500 × 445 cm) is unique in a different way. It is the only cave with a U-shaped platform and a symmetrical plan, where the niches on the left wall have identical counterparts on the opposite façade. The entrance and door details are unclear due to the ruined façade. The side arches are one step higher than the platform, and shelf traces can be noticed in the small niches as grooves on several levels, probably used to hold shelves made of wood, depending on the depth of the grooves (approximately 5 cm). Contrary to all other houses, the annexed room here is located before the main entrance, outside the cave space, and at a higher level (80 cm).

A comparison between the quality of carving in the central arch and the side arches reveals clear differences, which could indicate different carving phases. In addition, a carved cross appears on the left interior façade. Whether this cross is a later addition or dates to one of the earlier phases of the cave's use remains unclear.

Cave A09 (453 × 468 cm) is a platform type; the platform, 80 cm in height, has a semi-circle carved into it. The manger is located to the left of the door, while a carved U-shape feature appears on the right. The U-shaped seat in this cave is carved separately; typically, it forms part of the bench, but here it is independent, with a slight curvature in the wall that gives it the appearance of a complete seat.

The main façade contains two well-carved arched nooks; three niches are on the right side, one arched and two rectangular, while two rectangular niches lie on the left. Cave A09 also provides an example of simple ornamentation: two prominent friezes on the side walls protrude about 20 cm. The arched niche on the right has an arched frame projecting about 5 cm, while the rectangular niche on the left is framed by two simple carved columns supporting the frieze above. The frieze has four circular projections directly above the niche. The entrance descends three steps to a 170 cm passage flanked by two niches, followed by two additional steps leading into the cave.

Examples A01 and B03–04 are two platform houses opening into each other. However, whether this connection existed or resulted from later erosion is unclear. Given the context, most of the openings were probably caused by erosion, since the thin walls between the caves made them more vulnerable to collapse.

Cave A01 consists of two platform caves with annexed rooms. The left cave (443 × 453 × 265 cm in height) has an annexed room (280 × 245 × 175 cm) to its left, containing a manger.

This unit has a well-carved nook and niches, with shelf traces visible in the right niche. Typically, the manger is located to the left of the door, and traces of it remain here, though the basin edges are eroded, the carved part in the wall survives. The height is approximately 35 cm, while that of the annexed manger is 77 cm. The right cave (560 × 470 × 229 cm in height) has an annexed room (243 × 356 × 170 cm in height) to the right of the main space. This cave features a hole in the ceiling connected to grooves in the central wall and platform floor, directing water to a rectangular basin. The annex contains a bench 25 cm in height and two holes on the side frame of the door at a height of 77 cm; however, this part is not skillfully carved. Both caves share a carved seat on the right bench, and the wall's curvature enhances the impression of a complete seat.

The final examples of this type are caves B10 (390 × 326 cm) and B11 (437 × 430 cm). Both are platform types, although B11 is the only example in the village with an L-shaped platform. They are otherwise simple, lacking mangers, but both contain a basin in the lower part of the space. The connection between the two spaces is a small window-like niche, whose originality remains uncertain; it may have been opened later during another period.

6.1.3.1.3. Functional caves

The previous samples introduced residential and social spaces. According to their design, the typical types correspond to the same functions they served. Figure 46 presents different sorts of caves; based on their plans, these examples have no similarity. Each space has its own design according to its function, and the internal division allows an initial assumption about its possible roles. Each example is a unique unit reflecting spatial creation driven by specific needs.

Cave A10 consists of two interconnected spaces. The left space (455 × 520 × 260 cm in height) has two well-carved arches and an old script between them on the main façade. The main entrance is built of stone with a cement plaster coating, and the door has a wooden frame. This wall was added later, probably in the 1950s, based on construction techniques and the wooden frame. However, whether this space was originally open in a U shape remains unclear.

The right part (approximately 460 × 560 × 190 cm in height) has two different levels, with a height difference of about 20 cm. The connection between the two caves is partially closed by a wall built of stone. The opening is most likely original, as the arch in the left cave does not

extend to the floor, while the left one ends at floor level. In this example, the doors are on the same level as the entrance, in contrast to the previous cases. At the door of the right cave, there is a groove on the ground that ends in a hole at the corner of the door frame, which leads to another hole located outside in a concealed position. Apparently, this technique was intended to prevent rainwater from entering the cave and to direct it elsewhere, probably to a cistern. However, the location or opening of this cistern is not visible, particularly since another cave exists beneath this one, now filled with earth, making it difficult to determine whether a connection once existed between them.

B06–07 form a group of three caves adjacent to one another. The most remarkable feature of this group is the path leading to them: a series of clearly carved steps facilitates access to the caves and guides visitors to a podium in front, overlooking the lower caves (B13–14–15–16). The left cave is difficult to observe because peasants currently use it as a storage space.

Cave B06, the middle cave, is a typical platform cave (477 × 586 × 249 cm in height). The platform is raised about 70 cm, and an annexe (258 × 265 × 165 cm in height) opens to the main space. A manger, 67 cm in height, and a bench, 30 cm in height, are also present. The separation between the annexe and the main space consists of a low wall, 40 cm high, with an 85 cm opening serving as a doorway. On the other hand, it opens to an exterior space resembling a terrace. Despite the earth covering the ground, it is evident that the terrace is a shallow basin designed to collect rainwater. It opens at one end into a rectangular ground tank (89 × 149 × 152 cm deep), which is the only exterior basin identified in the village.

The last cave in this group, **B07**, is a simple platform cave without annexed rooms or nooks. The main façade is ruined, but what makes this space distinctive is its connection with the previous one, B06, where traces of two doors are visible. The main door, which includes stairs, is centrally positioned on the wall, while another door in the corner opens to the shared terrace with B06. Furthermore, a bump on the ground resembles a doorstep and traces of a carved projecting frame can be observed.

B13–14–15–16 form another group of caves with a unique function, evident from their connections and design. Starting from the left, B13 (364 × 452 × 200 cm high) is a typical simple platform cave. The main façade is lost; however, the carved path at the entrance still exists, and a stone wall was recently added. The space was once open to the adjacent cave, but a new stone wall has also blocked the opening. Moreover, this cave is roughly carved.

Cave **B14** is a large space, approximately 1015 × 470 × 231 cm in height. It has two entrances, or traces of two doors, in the ruined façade, suggesting that it might once have been divided into two spaces. The left part has an entrance facing a manger carved into the wall, raised 57 cm, and another one to the right, positioned vertically to the previous one, 35 cm high. This section is about 30 cm lower than the other. The right part has a door opening to the outside and remains of a pillar separating the two areas. A platform facing the right entrance, raised about 65 cm, differs from the typical type. In this example, the platform is smaller. It includes three basins distributed in a triangular layout: the right basin (179 × 154 cm, 35 cm deep), the left basin (129 × 133 cm, 45 cm deep), and a third one located in the middle of a carved arch (50 × 100 cm, 20 cm deep), with grooves connecting them.

The right door opens into a rectangular carved yard (239 × 300 cm), enclosed by walls around 50 cm high. The yard wall facing the door has a groove leading to two circular basins located below the yard level (90 and 105 cm in diameter, 40 cm deep). The second yard (210 × 275 cm) opens into the previous one and is about 50 cm higher. It remains unclear whether these yards were originally complete spaces with walls and ceilings that disappeared due to erosion, or whether they were intentionally designed as open areas, as in their current state. Since two basins exist on the exterior part of the B14 façade, they may have been used to collect water from above.

Cave **B15** (396 × 400 cm) is raised 75 cm above the yard. Its central space is a typical platform cave with a central arch, but the platform's height is uncertain due to accumulated rubble and dust. The uniqueness of this cave lies in its annex, which projects outward from the main cave and has a circular plan. Currently, it has three exterior openings: an arched door leading to the main space and a bench with a circular opening above it. The windows in this annex are unclear; it is uncertain whether they resulted from erosion over time or originally existed and later changed.

Cave **B16** (410 × 497 cm) is the last in this group and is severely ruined. The entire ceiling and most interior elements are lost. The remaining traces indicate a platform 182 cm wide and a bench to the right of the main area. The altered layout suggests the probable existence of an annex, possibly containing a manger similar to those found in the other caves.

This group of caves shows traces of outdoor yards, which might have served as annexed rooms in earlier times but were later ruined. Nevertheless, the remaining steps indicate that this small



Figure 46: The Functional Caves, by the author.

settlement had a rudimentary form of urban planning, facilitating movement within the rugged terrain.

Caves **B17, B18, and A06** represent another example of interconnected caves. These three caves are linked and display functional spaces with different schemes, distinct from the platform caves, indicating diverse roles beyond social or residential use.

Cave **B17** (approximately 500 × 470 × 213 cm in height) has the typical type of manger to the right of the entrance, 75 cm high. The central area contains two basins: a large rectangular one (218 × 358 cm), raised 54 cm from the cave floor and 30 cm deep, and a smaller circular basin (83 cm in diameter, 31 cm deep) opening into the first.

Cave **B18**, the middle cave in the group, has no precisely defined shape (approximately 525 × 350 cm). The front part lacks a ceiling, with walls rising about 80 cm, and has an entrance. The back part includes a carved manger without a drainage channel like the earlier examples; it rises 60 cm and is 30 cm deep. Next to the manger is an arched niche 138 cm in height. The floor is covered with dust and dry weeds, making determining the original foundation level difficult. The connection between B17 and B18 is a hole in the ground to the left of the entrance, opening into B17 through a niche that rises 83 cm above the floor. The level difference between B17 and B18 is approximately 187 cm.

Cave **A06** is a large, nearly rectangular space (830 × 650 × 240 cm in height) divided into three parts. Two large basins are on the sides: the right (420 × 305 cm, 37 cm deep) and the left (420 × 380 cm, 30 cm deep). The middle part includes two smaller basins, one rectangular and one circular, with dimensions (155 × 112 × 90 cm deep) and (100 cm in diameter, 190 cm deep), respectively. There is no connection between these basins. A small annexed room exists to the left of the main space (160 × 130 × 170 cm in height), connecting B18 and A06. Traces of the door show that it was massive, about 242 cm in height, as indicated by the remaining holes in the ceiling.

6.1.3.1.4. Different caves

Figure 47 presents individual examples with unique functions that differ from the previously identified types.

B19 is a typical platform cave (440 × 430 cm) with a manger to the left of the entrance. On the left wall are two arched niches that open into B20. Cave **B20** contains traces of a carved unit;

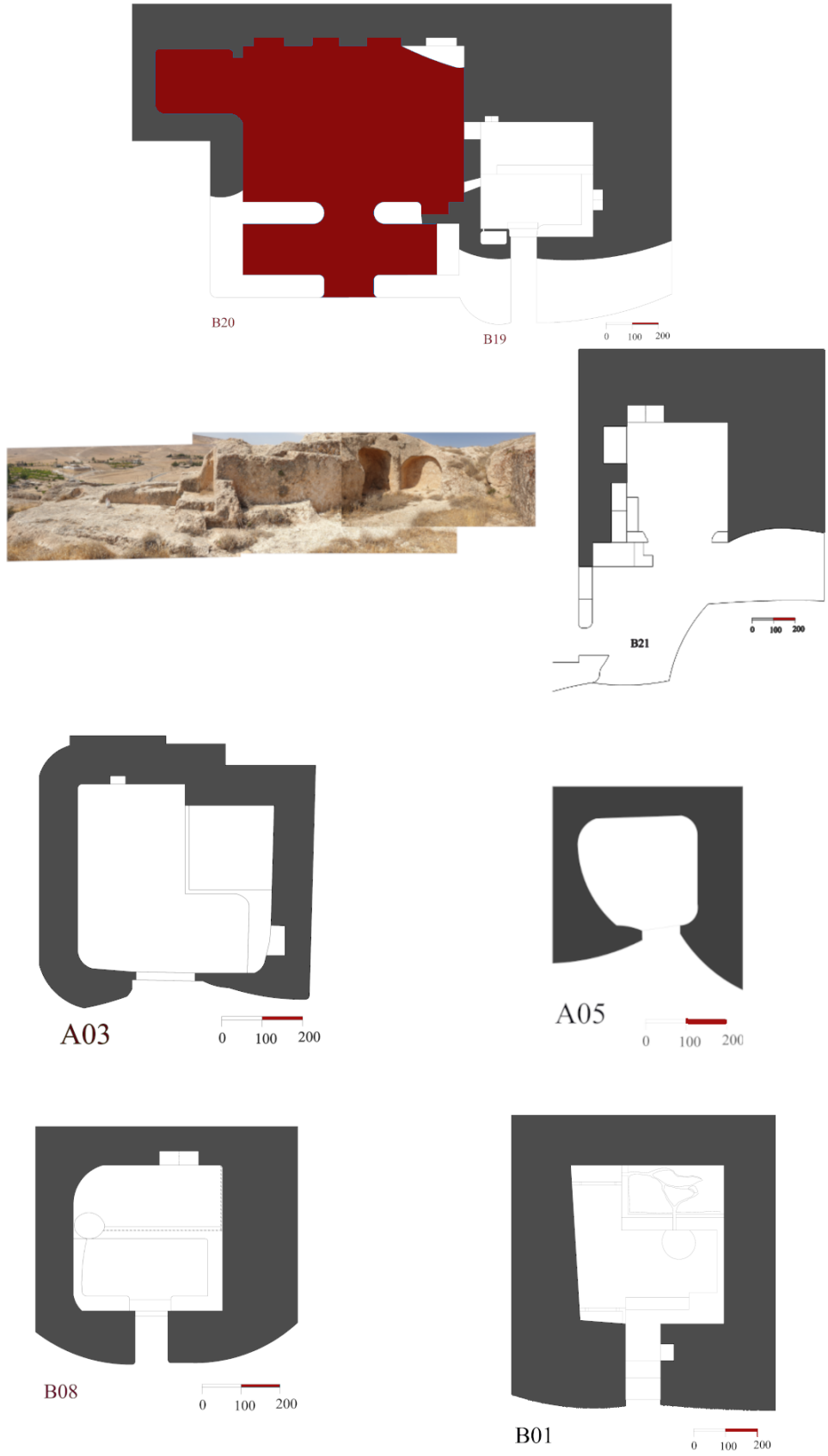


Figure 47: The Different Types of Caves, by the author.

its ceiling has collapsed over time, leaving only remnants in the corners. This space is considerably larger than the others (850 × 600 cm). Furthermore, it retains traces of an elaborate entrance, not merely a doorway but a hall, with two rooms flanking it (each approximately 200 × 320 cm). The right room has a bench along the central wall, though the precise height is unclear due to earth filling the floor. In the left corner of the main space is an annex (300 × 250 cm) with ceiling traces. This cave is among the most distinguished in the village, notable for its entrance, its large size, and the four arched niches carved into the central wall. It remains uncertain whether the openings to B19 are original or resulted from later erosion.

B21 is an open carved space. The surviving traces indicate an entrance on the left, opening into an area of approximately 400 × 280 cm. The carved portion measures 472 × 560 cm and consists of three sides with no ceiling remains. The left wall is well-carved, suggesting that either the room was originally open or had a roof constructed from different materials. The space includes a bench on the left side and two semi-arched niches on the left and central walls, measuring 175 × 110 cm and 175 × 80 cm, respectively.

A03 is a cave (480 × 400 cm) featuring a basin raised 45 cm above the floor, with an interior depth of 35 cm; the basin's edge has eroded over time. A bench stands to the right of the entrance, and the cave contains several irregular niches. Unlike other examples, this cave has no steps at the doorway.

A05 is irregular in shape, with approximate dimensions of 300 × 270 × 160 cm in height. Due to its poor preservation and the absence of details in the entrance, walls, and interior, it appears to represent an unfinished carving. This example provides insight into the method of carving new caves.

A08 is a small, nearly square cave (330 × 310 × 200 cm height). It contains a long manger on the right wall (320 × 50 cm, 15 cm deep), raised 90 cm above the floor and featuring three drainage holes. Opposite the door, a carved rectangular stone (136 × 35 × 35 cm in height) stands about 20 cm away from the wall. The probable function of this space is for stabling animals, making it the only example of this type in the village.

B01, the final cave, measures approximately 483 × 500 × 246 cm in height. It is the only example where the platform occupies part of the main wall (322 × 200 cm). A network of grooves is carved on the platform, leading to two basins. The first, located to the left of the platform, resembles a regular manger with two drainage holes; it measures 150 × 52 × 30 cm in depth and is at the same height as the platform (54 cm). The second basin is circular, about

60 cm in diameter, and carved into the floor; its depth cannot be measured due to earth filling the cave. In addition, a carved manger to the left of the door (116 × 50 × 17 cm deep, 50 cm above the floor) is still visible.

6.1.3.2. Documentation of Area 2 and 3

The studied area was divided into three locations according to the density of caves. Area 1 contains the highest concentration, while Areas 2 and 3 include only a few examples, as these caves exhibit interior arrangements different from those previously discussed.

The main issue in Area 2 is that it extends into the location of the Maaloula Hotel, constructed in the 1970s. The hotel presents several challenges. Most notably, its inclusion on the 1966 list of recognised heritage sites in the Rif Dimashq Governorate is significant. The site violates Article 10 of the Syrian Antiquities Law, encompassing hewn caves that predate Christianity, several of which lie within the hotel's buffer zone. Furthermore, the western gorge was destroyed to create a road providing vehicular access to the hotel, and additional roads were later constructed, altering the town's topography and relationship with the surrounding landscape.

Because of the hotel's location and the lack of documentation for this area, it is unknown whether any caves were covered or demolished during construction. Evidence suggests an important cave was obliterated along the ring road near the hotel entrance, while another lies beneath the hotel's fence. This separation illustrates the difficulties in identifying connections among the caves and defining functional zones within the village.

Cave 21 lies beneath the hotel fence, outside the property boundary, Figure 48. The cave measures 600 × 500 cm and is connected to an annex accessed through a separate entrance beside the main chamber; the annex (300 × 250 cm) is roughly carved. The main cave, also roughly carved, measures 600 × 500 cm with a height of 265 cm. Three uneven steps lead down into the entrance. To the left of the entrance is a rectangular basin (115 × 165 cm, 77 cm deep), while on the right a carved bench projects 45 cm from the wall and is raised 66 cm above the floor. The main interior area is divided into two shallow basins, 324 × 229 cm and 275 × 200 cm, each 38 cm deep. Both open in the corner into a deep, circular cistern (100 × 100 cm, 230 cm deep). To the left of the cistern is a smaller, shallow basin (179 × 80 cm, 36 cm deep), which also connects to the cistern through a small hole.

The cave's configuration suggests its use as a pressing installation, indicated by the basins and the deep cistern. However, there is no direct evidence of the exact pressing technique

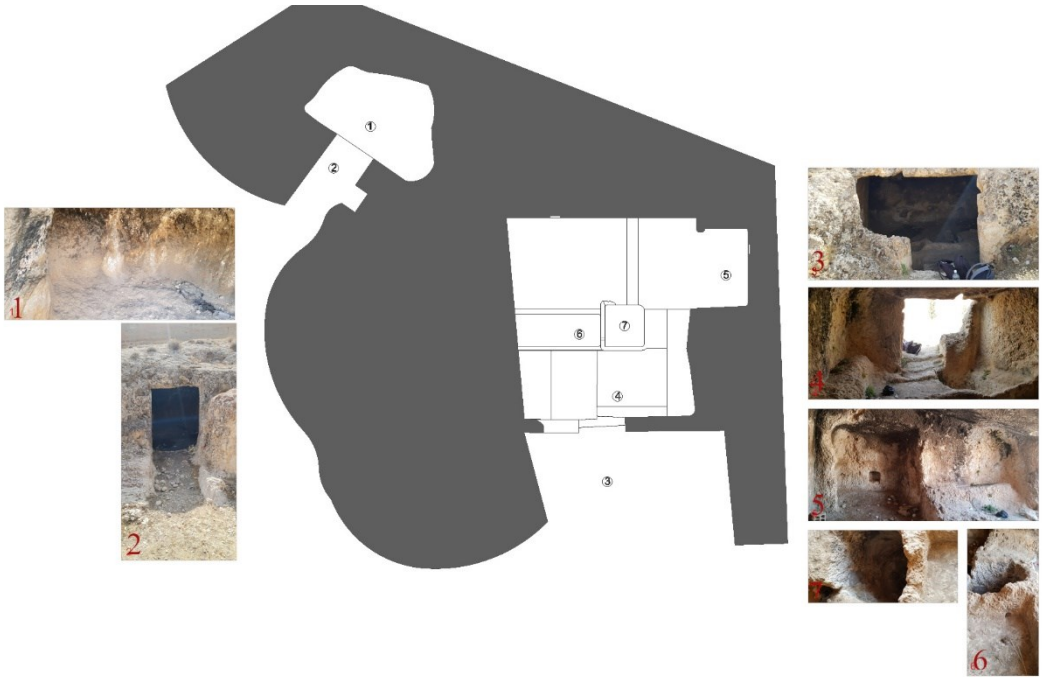


Figure 48: Cave 21 exists in the Maaloula Hotel zone, by the author.

employed. On the main wall, a T-shaped carved projection (50 × 30 cm) may have supported a wooden beam fixed at one end to this feature and at the other to the opposite basin edge. This beam may have formed part of the pressing mechanism or served as a bridge allowing workers to cross the basins and reach the far corners for stirring without stepping into the processed material.

Area 3, located above St. Thekla Gorge, contains four caves opening to the east. Their interior arrangements differ significantly from those in Area 1.

The first cave (C1) measures 1,150 × 600 cm, with its main wall completely vanished. Inside are three carved holes in the ground, unconnected to one another and varying in depth between 42 and 55 cm, along with three circular traces on the floor about 10 cm deep. The interior façade has four niches, two small (22 cm wide, 45 cm high) and two larger (183 × 75 cm and 160 × 70 cm), all roughly carved. A small projecting partition, located 528 cm from the right wall (67 × 38 cm), suggests a previous internal division for functional separation.

This cave has two notable features. In the right section lies a broken millstone, 90 cm in diameter. In the left section, the ceiling contains two open holes above the carved pit in the left corner, while another carved opening, 30 cm deep but not penetrating to the outside, appears above the small partition on the right. As this is the only cave with ceiling openings, it may have served as a communal kitchen at some point, with the ceiling holes functioning as ventilation shafts (Fig. 58).

The following two caves, C2 and C3, are smaller than the previous example.

C2 measures 560 × 470 cm and 267 cm in height. Although the interior is largely debris-filled, floor traces and features around the cistern indicate two shallow basins at the rear (360 × 272 cm and 122 × 247 cm), separated by a 20 cm-wide, 38 cm-high edge. Both basins open into a circular cistern (100 cm in diameter, 190 cm deep) in the corner. A second cylindrical cistern of the same dimensions lies adjacent to the first, and the two are currently interconnected. It is unclear whether this opening resulted from later erosion or was intentional, as the surrounding carving is irregular. To the left of the entrance is a basin (100 × 180 cm) of unknown depth. The grooves on the floor converge toward the second deep cistern, a configuration unusual for installations used to store wine or oil. Figure 49.

C3 measures 750 × 460 cm and 260 cm in height. To the left of the door is an L-shaped basin (230 × 300 cm), though its depth is uncertain due to debris. A projecting edge (50 cm high) separates this basin from the rear part, which includes a carved seat-like element. The cave contains three cisterns: two cylindrical ones (approximately 100 cm in diameter), one 100 cm deep with a 10 cm sedimentation pit near the opening to the second, 190 cm-deep cistern. To the left is a square pit (100 × 100 × 100 cm) and two smaller circular pits (30 cm and 50 cm in diameter, 25 cm deep). All cisterns and pits lie on the same level. There is no direct connection between the square and small pits and the large cisterns, except for two grooves linking the square pit to the 100 cm-deep cistern. Unlike the previous caves, this example lacks shallow basins connected to the cisterns, possibly due to differences in the material processed here (Fig. 58).

Cave C4 is unique within both this group and the entire village, owing to its spaciousness and distinct interior design. The eastern façade has deteriorated over time. Traces show a carved doorway on the south façade leading to a carved yard (350 × 160 cm) raised one step (15 cm) above the surrounding surface. The exterior south façade includes a carved basin (148 × 103 cm, 60 cm deep) to the left of the door and two rectangular holes (50 × 65 cm, 30 cm deep) to the right.

The interior measures 850 × 490 cm and 260 cm in height. Two steps follow the carved doorway (154 cm wide, 200 cm high). The most distinctive feature of this cave is the massive central basin (180 × 600 cm), with a depth of 67 cm on one side and 100 cm on the other, sloping about 20 cm toward the right. Two small square holes (15 cm) are carved at both ends of the basin. Behind it, the room divides into three sections: two shallow basins on the sides

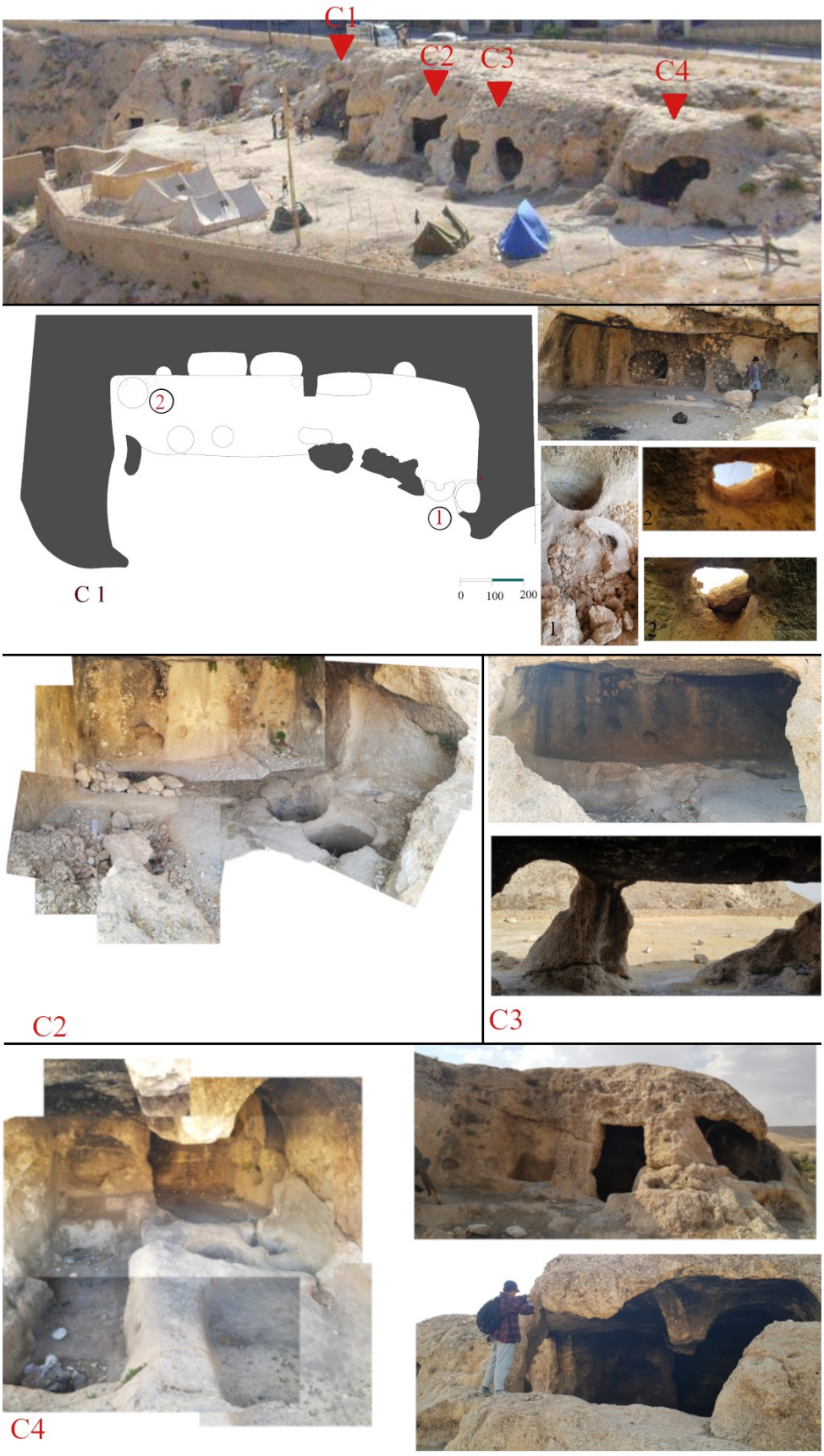


Figure 49: Presses caves in area 3, by the author.

and three deeper ones in the central part. The left shallow basin measures 334 × 217 cm, the right 216 × 230 cm, both about 30 cm deep. Each has sedimentation holes that open via grooves into deeper rectangular basins (117 × 187 cm and 189 × 100 cm, 100 cm deep). Adjacent to these is a cylindrical cistern (135 cm in diameter, 214 cm deep), now connected to one rectangular basin, likely a later modification.

The deep cistern includes a circular protrusion about 5 cm high, suggesting that others once existed but have eroded over time. These protrusions likely supported a tightly sealed lid, transforming the cistern into an underground carved *Pithos* used for fermentation and storage. Three carved wall cavities surround the main basin, one to the right of the door and two on the short sides, each 60 cm deep. The right-side cavity has two remarkable features: a carved stone arm, probably for tying tools or buckets, and a hole opening to another cavity on the exterior façade. The latter, now partly eroded, measures 60 × 110 × 85 cm and is positioned 65 cm higher than the interior one.

The cave also contains two square fallen pillars projecting 90 cm from the ceiling but not reaching the floor, forming arches. The ceiling follows the internal spatial organisation and is divided into two roughly carved, parallel vaults: the first covering the main basin, and the second spanning the inner part, itself subdivided into three sections interconnected by carved arches (Fig. 58).

6.2. Architectural and Functional Features of the Rock-Cut Structures

6.2.1. Introduction

Bloto Ollo is generally interpreted as a residential landscape, although no previous studies have directly investigated the site. Houses are indeed present within the landscape, but not necessarily in greater proportion than other functional structures. They are easily identifiable because they imitate the architectural plan types of built examples, albeit on a smaller scale.

To understand the hewn architecture of Maaloula comprehensively, it is essential to examine comparable examples that share similar methods and cultural roots. The function of many carved features within the spaces cannot always be easily identified. Some can be recognised through analogies with other sites or by comparing elements preserved in houses from the same period. However, numerous components still lack clear functional interpretation, and only hypotheses can be proposed regarding their roles. Certain elements may have had no practical purpose but were instead created for symbolic reasons.

Robert Ousterhout discusses this phenomenon in relation to the small carved churches of Cappadocia, referring to the symbolism behind the excessive multiplication of structurally unnecessary architectural forms. Freed from structural constraints, the carvers reused and combined architectural and liturgical elements in varied ways. Given their size and articulation, these features often represented faux structural elements, functioning symbolically rather than practically (Ousterhout, 2017, p. 30).

Cappadocian rock-cut architecture may not have produced distinct regional typologies; rather, it resulted from adaptations of built forms known elsewhere in Byzantium and neighbouring regions. Nevertheless, the interpretation of this pre-existing architectural vocabulary displays certain regional idiosyncrasies. As Ozttirk notes, the study of rock-cut architecture remains early and requires more extensive documentation before regional variations can be meaningfully defined (Ozttirk, 2017, p. 148).

6.2.2. Carving Techniques and Process

Understanding the nature and archaeology of hewn architecture requires a thorough comprehension of its material substance and the carving process. Dating a quarry is particularly challenging because extraction tools and techniques remained largely similar across the ancient world, from Egypt to Persia, Greece, and Rome. The Romans, however, distinguished a complete utilisation chain and introduced a few new tools, such as the double-pick hammer

(Coli, et al., 2011, p. 2699). In the case of Cappadocia, an outstanding example of rock-cut architecture provides insight into quarrying methods that can, in turn, illuminate the techniques used at Bloto Ollo. Presumably, both sites employed comparable methods, though the tools likely differed due to the chronological gap between them.

The process typically began with carving a series of steps into a plateau to facilitate the removal of stone blocks. Work proceeded from top to bottom in successive phases: blocks were isolated by carving channels in the rock, then separated from the parent mass using wedges hammered into these shallow grooves. Given the smaller scale of Byzantine quarrying and the reduced size of individual stone blocks, the process must have been simpler in the Byzantine period than during Late Antiquity (Ousterhout, 2008, pp. 137-139).

Before the extraction of stones, a grid was laid out on the surface of the area to guide the masons as they began cutting individual stones. Chisel-cut indentations marked the grid; ancient Egyptian quarrymen used either this method or painted lines to create grids (Keimer, et al., 2015, p. 112). The traditional technique of carving rock-cut spaces was the consecutive removal of large stone blocks measuring 1–2 m^3. A worker's excavating capacity was approximately ½ m^3 per day, under favourable conditions where the rock was neither too hard nor too soft; in the best cases, a worker could cut up to 1 m^3 per day. This means that a maximum of 30 m^3 per month was possible, roughly the size of a room with an average height of 3.65 m × 3.65 m.

A local carver in Cappadocia claims that, since most hewn spaces have narrow doorways, it takes about 2½–3 months for a carver to create enough space for three to four workers to operate simultaneously. Generally, unexpected characteristics in the rock mass confront carvers, often forcing them to improvise, even changing the direction or dimensions of the space during the carving operation.

Traditionally, the rock block was separated from the living rock by engraving a deep canal around it using pickaxes of varying weights and lengths. After carving the surrounding rock mass, wedges were inserted into the canal along one side and struck with a sledgehammer until the block broke away. The removed block was then cut into smaller pieces to be taken out of the cavity. Most excavated stones were typically reused on-site in different ways, either as cut stones in masonry extensions or as inlays to construct agricultural terraces along the slopes.

A worker could carve up to 2.25 m in height without a platform; work was carried out from the top down for higher spaces. After creating the rough space, fine work on the architectural

details began. Until recently, a light-levelling method was used to smooth rough surfaces: a light source was positioned in a small niche in the wall to illuminate the rough edges projecting from the surface that required additional smoothing (Ozttirk, 2017, p. 148).

After understanding the carving procedures, it is essential to comprehend the design techniques. Presumably, the people of that time had a preconception of the design before beginning the engraving; this can be concluded from the typical and recurring interior components. For instance, most caves in Bloto Ollo have interior steps immediately after the doorway, which provides insight into their design logic. The first step in the design process was to define the main dimensions of the space. After the main space was completed, in the case of a platform unit, they would engrave the lower part of the cave, considering that in most caves, the platform was at the same level as the door.

In other cases, where the function differed, basins were engraved above the floor level. Moreover, most functional caves have no interior steps after the door. In these examples, a primary platform was carved above the entrance level, then further shaped according to its intended function. Other parts of the cave, such as annexed rooms, niches, and nooks, were added as needed. Depending on necessity, these additions could belong either to the original phase of the cave's creation or to later modifications. This explains the variations in carving quality among the elements, even within the same cave.

Carving traces are not easily visible in Maaloula, as the village has lost much over time due to neglect, adverse weather effects, and agricultural reuse by peasants. Nevertheless, many features can still be observed, showing traces of the cutting and finishing methods. Evidence of quarrying techniques was found in several unfinished units: spaces were formed to isolate stone blocks that could then be removed as large pieces. As previously mentioned, Cave 05 is an unfinished cave; on its wall, surrounding channels can be seen (Figure 50 a–b). An example of an unfinished entrance carving provides a unique source of information concerning the stonework (Figure 50c–d).

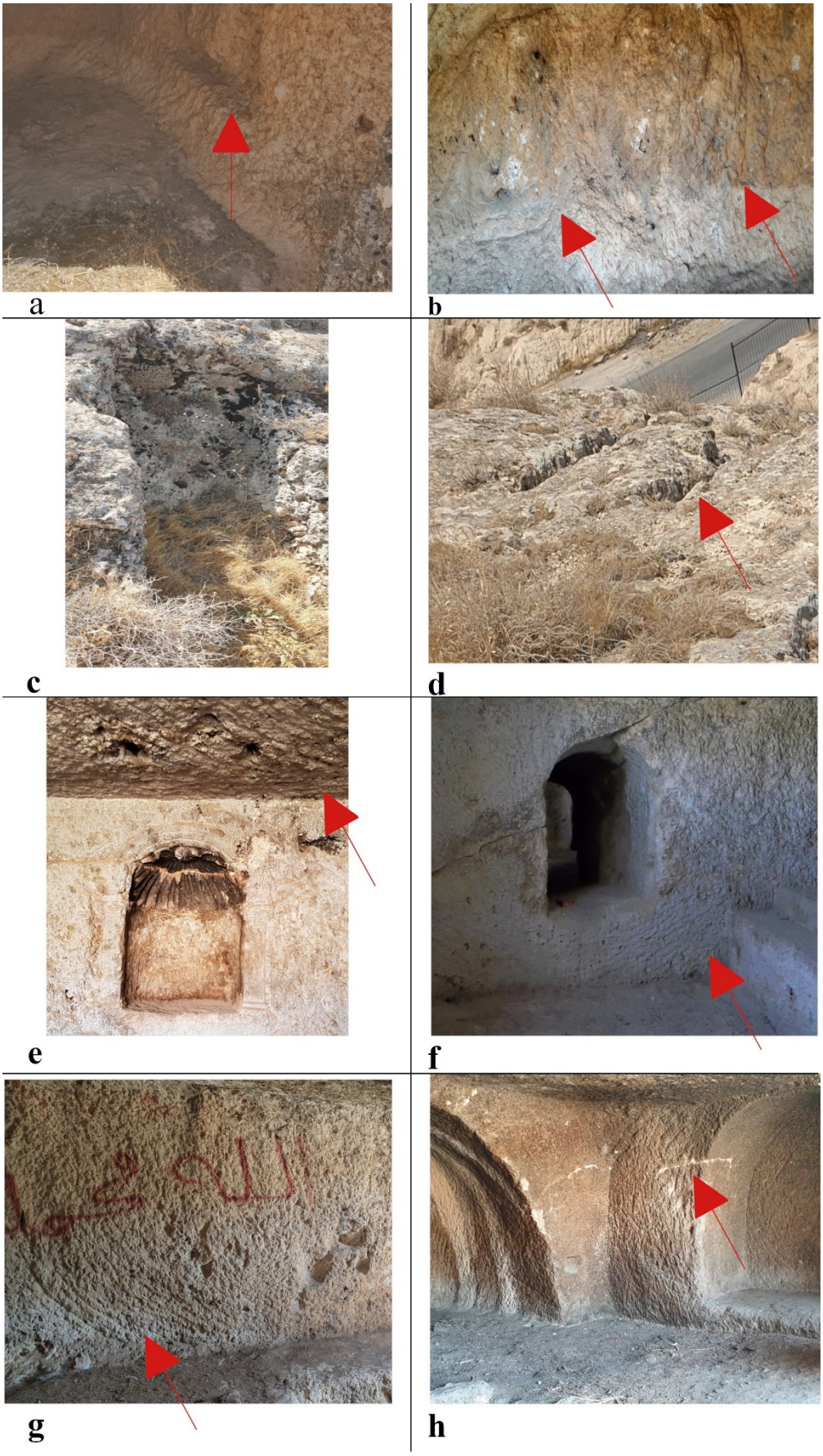


Figure 50: Carving techniques and quarrying traces in the caves, by the author.

Although stone is challenging to work with, its finished textures preserve surprisingly reliable evidence of the process. A close look reveals that most units are marked with patterns of dents and grooves made by stone-cutting tools. Like other historical construction traces, these can be interpreted as a kind of code. Their forms and arrangements, though often overlooked, are stable and easy to recognise. The challenge lies in translating the information they convey.

Technologically, these marks present precise historical data about the finishing techniques applied to the stone. The movements of the stonecutter when using his tools are permanently recorded in the disposition of the marks, and their character indicates the shapes and sizes of the tools that produced them (Higgins, 1979, p. 11).

Currently, stones in the quarry are cut with a pick, a hammer with a steel head weighing about five pounds and two pointed ends, with a handle length varying from one to two feet. This hammer is held with both hands, and the stone is struck with relatively soft blows. The marks left on the stone face after extraction using this tool closely resemble those left by ancient quarrymen. Mason's pick work leaves cuts that follow a somewhat curved pattern, whereas those made by a chisel and mallet are generally straight or irregular (Clarke & Engelbach, 1990, p. 43). Most spaces in Maaloula still show quarrying traces, curves and lines; in many examples, these traces appear as cross lines. Figures 50e, f, show the different traces in Cave A07, where the ceiling bears linear marks in uniform directions. The tunnel walls, however, display traces in multiple directions. (Figure 50, g) shows curved traces, indicating that different tools were used in that area. In Cave 09, many traces form crossed lines, which are uncommon elsewhere (Figure 50, h); this may be due to multiple workers operating simultaneously.

6.2.3. Water and Drainage System

Like religion and ideology, water has the power to move millions of people. Since the birth of human civilisation, people have been forced to settle close to it. They flee when there is too much of it. They write, sing, dance, and fight over it (Miller, 2015, p. 70). Water was essential to ancient Roman life, from providing necessary drinking water and supplying bath complexes to flowing in large-scale public fountains.

Around 3500 BC, Neolithic communities were transformed into Bronze Age towns through the emergence of a relatively new water management technology. Alternatively, this transformation may have resulted from urbanisation, which allowed towns to develop into cities and populations to grow into civilisations (Mithen, 2012, p. 25). The Roman water culture

was evident throughout the Roman Empire. However, it was certainly not monolithic; it appeared in diverse scales and forms, depending on each area's climatic and social conditions. The culture of water can be seen as an expression of strength, aesthetics, and spectacle. Furthermore, there was a shared water experience across the empire that can be described through religion, landscape, and the role of water in the cultures of consumption and pleasure (Rogers, 2018, p. 4).

Settlement and the choice of water supply began with analysing the relationship between the city and water as the primary factor. Hence, water played an essential role in determining where to settle. Traditionally, other aspects were also valued; a whole series of features related to the characteristics of the city were considered, such as easy defence, access to commercial routes, and the use of a nearby river. Without a doubt, the land's characteristics were fundamental in choosing the settlement location and selecting appropriate land required prior knowledge of its nature for the city's future development and to ensure that the settlement's basic needs were secured from the beginning (Buxó, 2008, p. 10).

The interruption of the natural water cycle undertaken by society is what defines water management (Scarborough , 1991, p. 50). The term *water management* was used in ancient times to refer to various methods, as each society perceived water according to the physical nature of its environment, its cultural resources, and its social needs. This definition presents three essential factors of water management:

1. **Water availability in nature.** The primary source is rainfall and the pools, groundwater, or runoff it generates.
2. **Water technology by redirection and collection** refers to all technical measures of water management.
3. **Social organisation** refers to how individuals or groups distribute, supply, and use water.

Water and its management have multiple dimensions; it can be organised and analysed regarding its function and purpose. Water management can thus be viewed as evidence of the level of development of any civilisation (Berking, 2019, p. 44).

As a factor of Settlement selection, Roman always studied the water types in the site, whether the water flowed continuously or intermittently, copiously, or feebly, sweet, salty, or sulfurous. Furthermore, the suitability for all purposes. Over time, the information about water accrued, becoming the foundation of a living tradition that formed the city founders' and engineers'

decisions and actions. In each region, water was managed, not passively accepted. Therefore, many actions were taken on this issue, and individual homes achieved water supply security by building cisterns or excavating wells. Due to the hot and dry summer, without rain for more than six months, security and survival depended on a reliable water source. The domestic cistern was undoubtedly the model for the municipal reservoir, similar to the rock-hewn tanks at Petra, which harvest runoff from the rocky cliffs of the site rather than from rooftops. Since conditions remained the same, this solution was utilised not for centuries but millennia (Crouch, 1993, p. 22).

Since Maaloula Basin is wealthy, with many well-documented springs and lakes that have attracted civilisation since the Pleistocene era (Canard, et al., 1999;2005, p. 195). Likewise, the village site is away from the main roads and has a problematic nature; Maaloula's situation and geographical features have kept it safe for a long time. On the other hand, literary texts mention that healthy water must be moving. Physicians know running water is more beneficial for drinking because of the current water agitation than stagnant water (stagnates), where water pollutants are removed through movement. The importance of running water further expands its portability; the water used in religious practice in purifying rituals must also be moving. Thus, the importance of moving water over stagnant water was stressed in various aspects (Rogers, 2018, p. 8). Consequently, there is no doubt that the inhabitants of the Maaloula area had access to well-supplied water at that time, where there was no need for sizable collecting items.

COLLIC'LÆ or COLLIQ'ULÆ, is a term which means "*open drains or gutters in the country to carry away the rainwater, whether clean or dirty, from the lands into the ditches*" (Huart, 1878, p. 186). Since underground water and runoff are the central dilemmas in Maaloula, the drainage system at the site is simple. The different shapes and distributions indicate that drainage is not a standard element; its existence refers to its use under need. Otherwise, there are no traces of a comprehensive sanitation system or water supply, likely due to the excellent nearby springs that are readily available. Additionally, the absence of sewage can be attributed to the village's rate, where Maaloula is a middle-class village located in a rural area. Despite these conditions, residents continue to think about how to solve their problems.

Observations and studies of the site indicate the village's main drainage patterns. The following features present the site's simple system. The initial feature is the rainwater and the runoff response, as the village is carved on a cliff, and there are no traces of roof protection over the

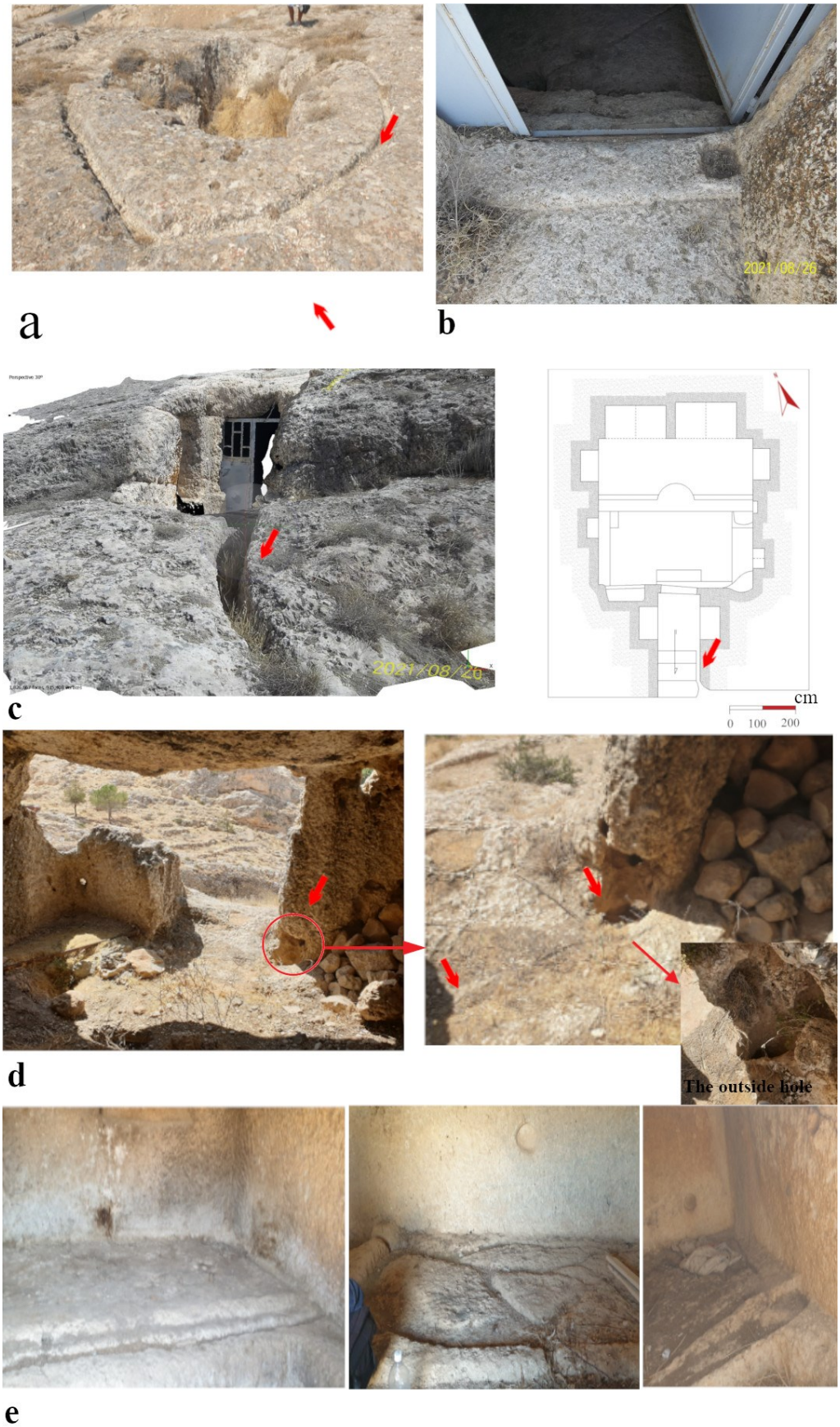


Figure 51: Examples from the hewn village in Maaloula present the different drainage responses for interior and exterior water, by the author.



Figure 52: Groove flaks the platform and drives the water to a carved basin to gather the water, by the author.

doors. Inhabitants carved a groove on the part over the door to change the waterway and laid it away. The primary purpose of these grooves is to stop the water from gathering in front of the doors, though they do not direct water to a tank or cistern. This feature is based on the cave location; hence, not all caves have this groove over the door. Moreover, the existing grooves are different in depth and shape, probably related to the abundance of runoff water. Figure 51,a.

Changing the waterway was insufficient to prevent the exterior water from reaching the door; a threshold raised about 10 cm exists at the door to keep the water outside Figure 51, b. Another solution is presented for the exterior water Figure 51, c, where the door is 75 cm lower than the surrounding area. The water is easily gathered there; the solution was to divert the water outside the entrance by carving a small canal to channel it out.

Case d, Figure 51, the door has no threshold since a groove at the door guides the water to a hole in the door frame that opens to a hole in the ground outside the cave. This way was typical for draining water to natural underground holes or cracks. Numerous small-scale constructions existed in other sites, such as wells for groundwater exploitation and cisterns receiving rainwater from roofs (Koutsoyiannis & Patrikiou, 2013, p. 17). Maaloula has no traces of enormous cisterns to save water.

The seeping water is a major problem at the site, where these houses are hewn from the rock. The underground water leaching from the walls was a concern, especially in the upper part (the platform), where the caves are divided into human and animal parts. In response to this issue, they carved grooves flanking the walls, guiding the leaching water from the wall to the lower part to keep the central (human) part dry, Figure 51, e. Sometimes, the water is guided to a

basin engraved inside the space. In some cases, the platform features a grooved net that extends to two basins located in different areas; the net covers the entire platform. These examples show an evident development response to the leaching problems. According to the water amount, the response was a web of grooves that terminates in a basin in the heavy-leaching caves. Within this context, merely grooves lead the water to the lower area in the medium-level leaching area, and there is no drain net where there is no leaching Figure *52*.

6.2.3.1. Basins

IMPLUV'IUM is " a large square basin sunk in the floor of the atrium in private houses, intended as a receptacle for the rainwater which flowed in through the compluvium or opening in the roof of the same" (Rich, 1873, p. 347). The studied site of Maaloula adopted a similar idea of reusing water, albeit on a smaller scale. The basins in the houses are smaller than those found at other sites, and due to the area's permanent springs, there was no need for massive reservoirs. Moreover, in some cases, the leaching water from the walls served as an additional water source, though not all caves contain basins.

Nine basins were found inside Maaloula's houses, differing in shape and location according to their intended use. Only two caves have basins on the platform, while the rest are positioned on the lower level of the house (Figure 53, a). The first example features a rectangular basin in the lower part of the cave (110 × 52 cm) and is 20 cm deep, though its depth is uncertain due to dust accumulation. The distinctive feature of this basin is its raised edges, about 20 cm wide and rising 5–10 cm high, clearly designed to prevent water from entering the lower part. The water was guided into the basin through a groove on the platform, forming a small open canal that slopes downward to terminate in the basin (Figure 53,b).

The second example has an irregular elliptical shape (79 × 90 cm), with an unclear depth because of the debris inside. Grooves lead from both the platform and the lower level into the basin (Figure 53, c). Another example, shown in (Figure 53, d), is carved into the corner of the platform, where the adjacent wall is roughly hewn. This basin is rectangular (80 × 67 cm), with an unclear depth due to earth collected inside. Generally, the basins collected the leaching water in caves where grooves flanked the walls, guiding the moisture away to keep the platform dry.

The example in (Figure 53, e) features a distinctive basin located in the middle of the platform, where two main grooves converge. The basin is circular, 95 cm in diameter and 70 cm deep. Several factors distinguish this basin: its location, depth, and the position of the grooves, which

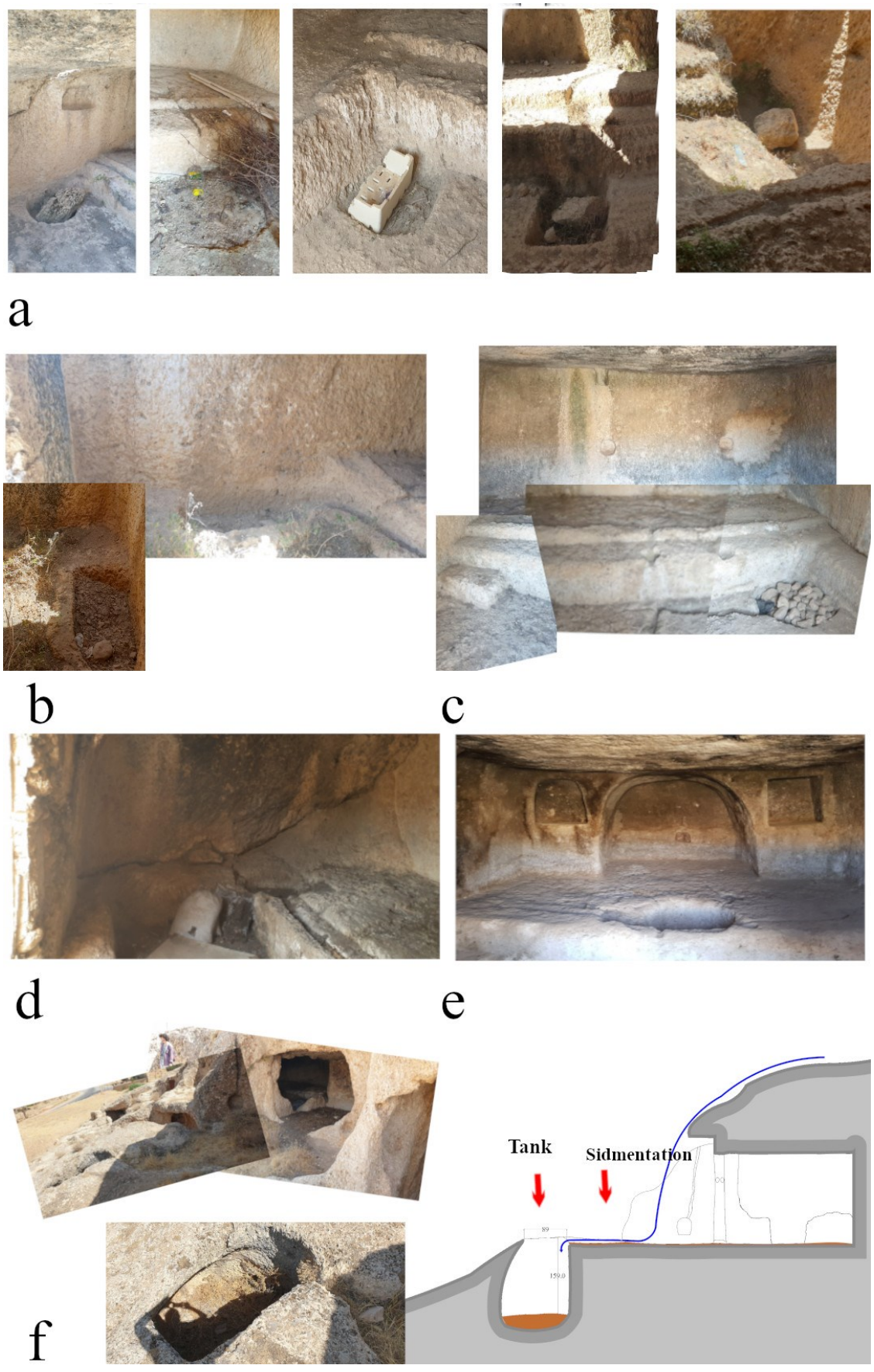


Figure 53: Presents the various types and locations of the basins in the hewn village of Maaloula, Bloto Ollo, by the author.

are set away from the walls rather than flanking them. The unique design of this cave suggests that the basin might have been used for sacrificial practices, possibly to collect the blood of animals for ritual purposes, rather than as a simple water-gathering feature.

Rainwater harvesting was another common method of water collection, especially in regions where groundwater sources were inadequate or absent. Surface and bedrock runoff supported rain-harvesting systems wherever appropriate surfaces existed for collection (Boyer, 2019, p. 66). Harvesting rainwater from open courtyards into cisterns was a well-known technique, particularly during the Hellenistic period. Examples of hewn and well-waterproof cisterns from the early 4th century BC have been discovered in Olynthus. These cisterns employed a water-treatment system that included smaller sedimentation tanks connected to the main cistern. They were typically flask-shaped, with narrow mouths and long necks, their walls gradually widening toward the bottom, which sloped into a bowl-like depression to collect mud and debris (Yannopoulos, et al., 2016, p. 1026).

A similar small-scale water-harvesting installation exists in one of the caves (Figure 53, f). The stage in front of the annex has edges raised about 20 cm, forming a shallow sink. This stage opens into a hewn basin with drainage. The stage measures approximately 200 × 280 cm. The tank itself is bottle-shaped, widening toward the lower part. Its rectangular opening measures 89 × 149 cm and is 158 cm deep. Although modest in size, this example shows how the stage

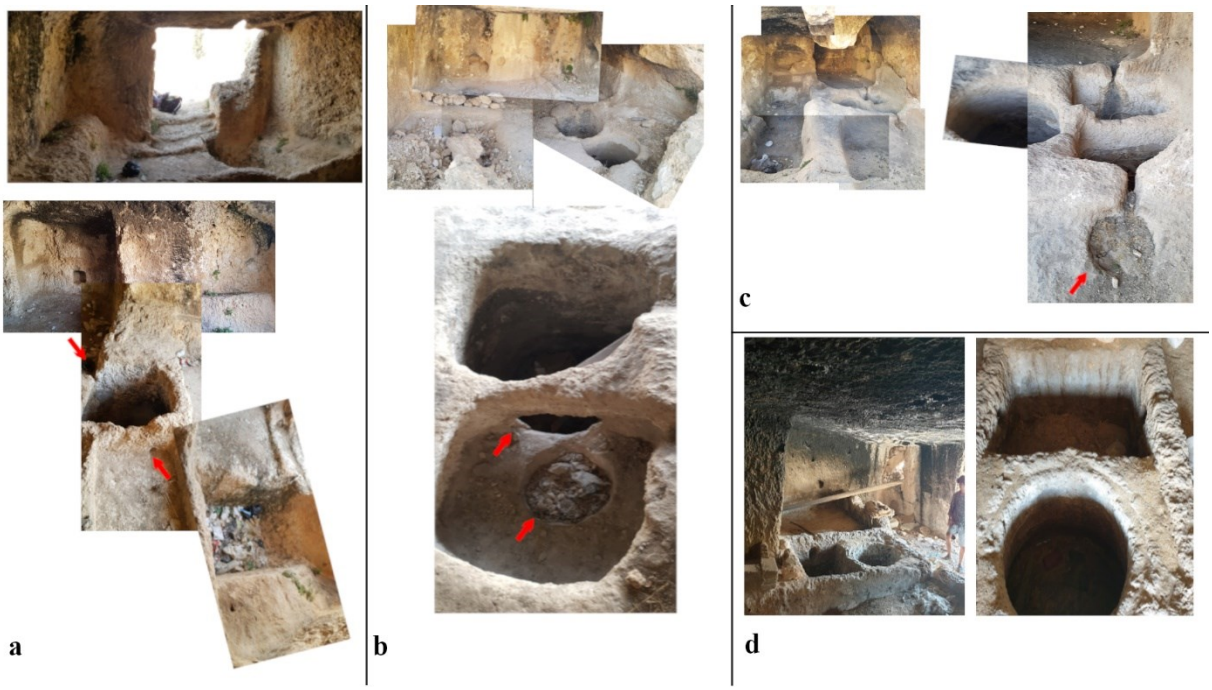


Figure 54: shows the various designs and shapes of the presses' basins, the connection between them and the precipitation and fermentation Pithio in Bloto Ollo, by the author

functioned as a sedimentation area, allowing runoff to settle before entering the cistern. The bottom is currently unclear due to the accumulation of earth over time.

Because of the varied functions within the village, other types of basins were used for purposes beyond collecting water. These basins are larger and differently shaped. Blota Ollo features several presses distributed across various parts of the site. The design and dimensions of the basins identify the function of these caves. Their lengths range between 100 and 160 cm, and widths vary according to use.

Figure 54 presents examples of presses in the village. The presses generally have two types of basins: large open basins, shallow, about 30–50 cm deep, connected through drainage holes to deeper basins (Figure 54,a). The basins occur in two shapes: square or rectangular, and cylindrical wine-storage vessels carved for fermentation. The connection between these basins and their sizes supports the interpretation of these caves as pressing installations, particularly in the example shown in (Figure 54,c), which illustrates the stages of this process.

Fresh grapes were likely pressed with bare feet during winemaking. The juice was first collected in the shallow basin and then flowed by gravity into the cylindrical vessel (214 cm deep, with a capacity of roughly 3,000 litres), where it was fermented and stored in rock-carved *pithoi*. The grape juice was poured into the main fermentation cistern carved into the rock, while grape skins, seeds, and stems were collected in sedimentation pits next to the open basins (Figure 54 b, c). This design represents an improved type of wine press found throughout the South Caucasus and the Levant from the 9th century BC to the 8th century AD. In contrast, the absence of sedimentation pits characterises simpler press designs (Harutyunyan & Ferreira, 2022, p. 8).

6.2.4. Interior Hewn Elements

6.2.4.1. Mangers

Wild and domesticated animals played an essential and diverse role in the lives of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The connection between people and animals began with economic necessities and gradually expanded beyond purely practical concerns (Keller & Band, 1910, p. 357). Food production and preparation, as well as animal-husbandry practices, were deeply influenced by culture. As a result, faunal assemblages are particularly valuable for identifying cultural change, since they provide large quantities of measurable data across time and space (Albarella, et al., 2008, p. 1828).

. The origins and spread of animal husbandry are of particular interest in the context of early food-producing economies. Archaeological investigations during the 1970s and 1980s revealed that the PPNB populations of the northern Levant participated in this process (Peters, et al., 1999, p. 28). The domestication of goats probably occurred between 9000 and 8000 BP, followed by the domestication of the other three primary food animals, cattle, sheep, and pigs, sometime thereafter. Archaeological studies across the Near East indicate that agriculture and animal domestication originated on the steep, grassy, and open-forested slopes of the Zagros, Lebanese, and Palestinian mountains (Reed, 1959, p. 1635).

Empathy toward animals developed under certain circumstances. Breeders and farmers were instructed to pay particular attention to the health of the animals they raised and used, to protect them from harsh weather, provide sufficient food, and prevent unnecessary suffering (Bodson, 1983, p. 316).

EQUI'LE (or equile) refers to a stable for horses. An ancient stable on the Bay of Centorbi in Sicily is the only remaining example of such a structure. It is built of masonry with a vaulted roof. The interior space is not divided into stalls; each animal could be isolated from its neighbour by a swinging bar when necessary. The manger, recessed gradually inward from the top, is also of masonry and divided into separate cribs, one for each horse, rather than being constructed as a single continuous trough. The headstall’s string passed through a small aperture in front of each crib (Rich, 1873, p. 265). In El-'Amarnah, mangers dating to the period 1351–1323 BC were discovered in a domestic context. Eight square mangers, attached to the wall and separated from one another, were found within a single house (Newton, 1924, p. 296). A large limestone block depicting the lower half of an ox in sunk relief has also been identified as part of a stone feeding trough, representing a manger carved from a single piece of stone (Peirce, 2019, p. 150).

The dimensions of a stable or an individual stall depend on the size of the horse. According to contemporary practice, a space of approximately 3 × 1.8 m is considered adequate (Ewer, 1982, p. 30). The estimated area allocated to each horse in Roman military stables likely varied between 4–5 m² and 6–7 m².

At the Roman villa of Boscoreale in Italy, three horse skeletons were discovered within a farm stable measuring 3.1 m in width. Estimating three horses per cubicle may not be unreasonable, although this would have provided each animal with a space of only about 1 m in width, far too narrow by modern standards. Nevertheless, possible evidence for such restricted spacing

exists at other civilian stables, including those at Tebessa in Algeria and several sites in Roman North Africa (Dixon & Southern, 1997, p. 181).

Other examples include a sizeable aisled building at Tebessa, where the space between the midpoints of each trough measures about 1 m. This example resembles the 1 m distance between the possible mangers set into the walls, three to a chamber, at the late Roman fort of Qasr Bshir in central Jordan. Similar arrangements were also noted at the military post of Umm el-Jimal (Parker, 1987, p. 60).

Wells (1977) introduced two key points for consideration regarding these reconstructions. First, the distance between the center points of the worn areas on the floor was only about 1 m, implying that the animals were relatively small. Second, it has been hypothesised that these stables were intended for pack or luggage animals rather than large horse riding. Regarding the role of animals in the ancient period, cohabitation with humans was a common practice (Wells, 1977, p. 44).

In Maaloula, the caves display a consistent architectural pattern: the residential cave typically features a platform raised 60–70 cm above the entrance level, dividing the space into two levels. The manger in Maaloula's caves is a standard feature, carved in relief and as a recessed sink. It slopes gradually inward from the top, leaving a space between 65–100 cm in width and 15–30 cm in depth, with two holes positioned at 60–70 cm above the floor.

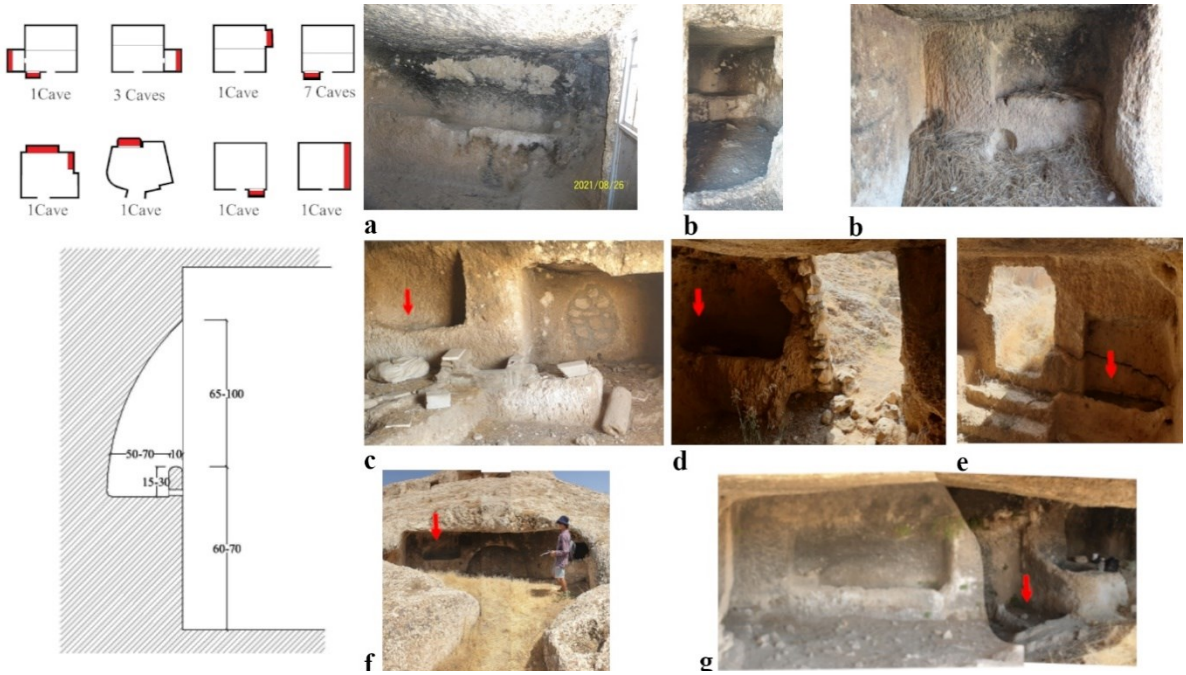


Figure 55: presents the mangers' locations in the caves and the main dimensions of the carved manger; moreover, different examples from the residential and functional caves in the rock-cut of village Maaloula, by the author.

When the manager is located in the main space, its length ranges between 100 and 120 cm. When placed in an annex room, it measures 130–290 cm, sufficient for two animals (Figure 55). Of the 42 caves identified on the site, only fifteen contain mangers. Seven caves have mangers positioned to the left of the doorway, while three have them in annex rooms. Only one cave features two mangers: one to the left of the door (a common location) and another inside an annex room, suggesting that the annex may have been added later.

A unique example appears in one cave where the manger is on the platform. This feature suggests an alternative function; its use as a manger seems improbable due to the platform's height (approximately 60 cm). According to local oral tradition, this element was used as a baby cradle. However, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed, as only one cave exhibits a manger-like feature on the platform, the human living area, while all others have them near the entrance. This variation may also reflect a transformation in use over time (Figure 55, c).

The average space available for an animal in front of its manger measures approximately 120 × 200 cm, corresponding to the manger's width and the cave's lower section. The annex spaces generally measure about 200 × 180 cm. Thus mangers in annex rooms provide more space than those in the main chamber. When compared with established stable dimensions, these measures could accommodate a horse, and the height of the mangers offers further clues about the types of animals housed, smaller animals requiring lower troughs, and larger ones, higher ones.

The functional caves, by contrast, lack platforms and were designed for specific utilitarian purposes. One cave served as a stable, where the manger occupies an entire wall. The cave measures 323 × 330 cm, and the manger runs along the wall of 323 cm in length. It stands 105 cm high, 50 cm wide, and 15 cm deep, with three carved holes (Figure 55, a). Another functional cave contains two mangers of different heights: the one on the right is raised about 35 cm, with a depth of 15 cm, a width of 53 cm, and a length of 157 cm; the other is longer and higher, 57 cm in height, 26 cm in depth, 60 cm in width, and 235 cm in length. The main space containing both mangers measures 486 × 157 cm (Figure 55, g).

All these mangers occupy the same general location as those in the residential caves and feature two holes for tying the animals. Only the smaller mangers in Cave G (Figure 55) lack holes, as were likely intended for small animals.

6.2.4.2. Niches and nooks

In its most basic form, a niche is a square or rectangular recess built into a room's wall and covered with the same plaster as the rest of the wall. Some niches were used as shrines;

however, a simple design is uncommon, as almost every shrine has some decoration to distinguish it. The less severe rectangular form, generally an arch, is frequently used instead, and the arch itself can take on several shapes(Boyce, 1937).

The *lararia* or household shrines in Pompei form the basis for the domestic cult. Thus, Pompeii is considered an essential collection of physical evidence for the Roman household cult. Fortuitously, Pompeii has preserved these shrines, which date back to the late Republican and early Imperial periods. It is regarded as a reference point for the Roman world, as no other town can compare with it in terms of quality, preservation, and diversity. Boyce categorised the shrines into three main divisions: the niche type, the *aedicula*, and the wall-painting types; other variations, of course, also exist (Orr, 1978). It is essential to define technical diction to identify the types of household shrines, altars, and cult rooms. These types include the *aediculae,* small-scale temples, niches, and frames carved into walls. It is also important to note that such wall elements might have served as cupboards or held various items, such as lamps for illumination and religious rituals (MacIntosh, 2019).

In systematically exploring Bloto Ollo for each house shrine, the caves with ornamental shrines exhibit the same shape as many ancient shrines in locations such as Pompeii and Amman. Most of these are undoubtedly *lararia*, whereas some simpler ones, especially wall niches, are uncertain; they may once have had a stucco coating that was lost over time. It is impossible to determine whether they served domestic or religious functions, especially since their character cannot be judged solely by their position within the house or by the presence or absence of another shrine in the same dwelling. Such criteria are unreliable, as the site contains only houses with a single space. Nevertheless, compared to those with a religious function, these features are fewer and less significant, so all that can be stated about them is that they are niches.

Many niches can be found in the caves, of various sizes, irregular, well-carved or clumsily carved. The examples in Maaloula demonstrate the wide range of niche dimensions and forms. There was no standard or model for the niche; each one was carved according to the whims of the carver or the constraints of the available unit.

As shown in Figure 56, many cases include a large nook. According to the village's architectural characteristics, these nooks could serve as extra space within a room, as carving a separate chamber was considered expensive and labour-intensive. The examples reveal different niche shapes: rectangular and arched niches can even be found in the same space. Not

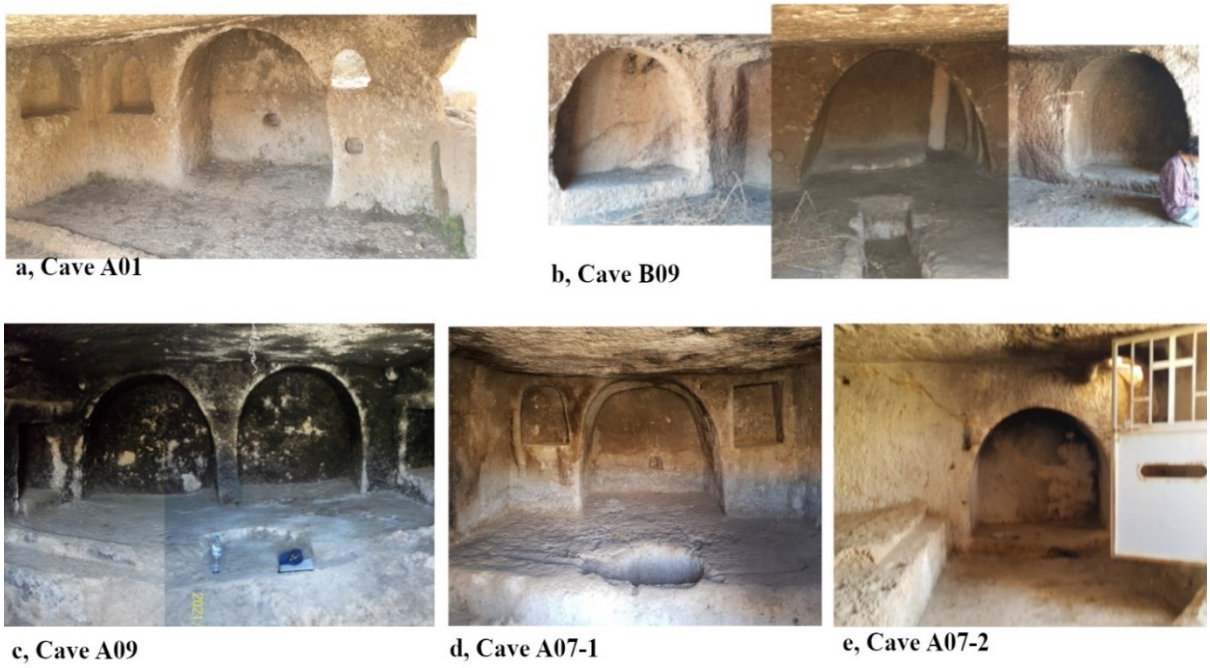
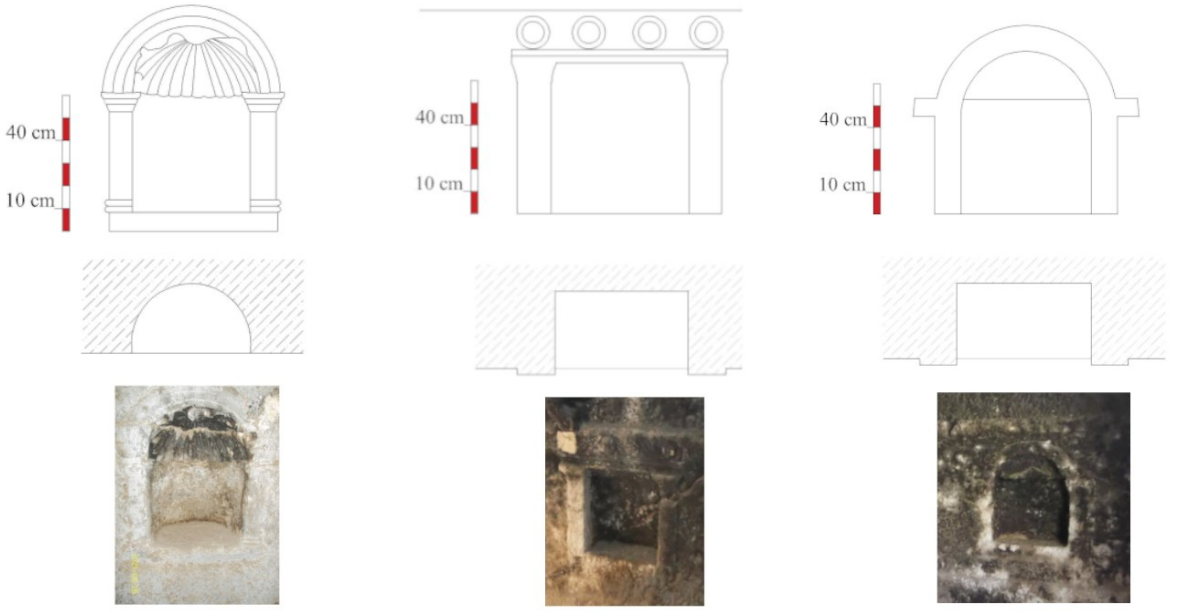


Figure 56: Different examples in the village for nooks, by the author.

all caves contain niches; many have only a small hole in the wall, likely intended to hold a lantern. The niches in the village are similar to those presented by Boyce in his study of Pompeii, where there is no evidence that simple niches functioned as *lararia*.

Two caves, however, contain examples of ornamented niches. In Cave A07, one niche features decoration. It is 52 cm wide, 82 cm high, and 30 cm deep, with a semicircular plan carved into the wall. The niche has a carved frame formed by two columns standing on a rectangular base, supporting an arched frame (Figure 57, a). The interior part of the arch includes a shell motif, similar to the decoration on the walls of the Amman Citadel's Temenos architecture, which was adorned with gigantic stones and *aediculae* carved with shell motifs. Some monuments display more ambiguous iconography, using motifs alluding to altars to decorate architectural features (Lichtenberger & Raja, 2015).

The second example of an ornamented niche is found in Cave A09. The cave was burned, and its walls and ceiling are now blackened. It contains two large niches and a smaller one, each with projecting frames. One of the large niches on the left wall is rectangular, 61.7 cm wide, 35 cm deep, and 75 cm high. The frame consists of two projecting columns supporting a frieze that extends across the entire wall, with four carved circles along the frieze. The other niche, on the right wall, is arched, 60 cm wide, 35 cm deep, and 75 cm high. Due to the black layer covering this cave, it is unclear whether the niche bears traces of a shell motif (Figure 57, b).



a, Niche A07 b, Niche A09 on the left c, Niche A09 on the right

Figure 57: The ornamented niches in caves A07 and A09, by the author.

Next to this niche is a small rectangular one with a projecting frame surrounding it; it measures 36 cm in width, 14 cm in depth, and 53 cm in height.

Another niche type exists in the village: niches with grooves. This type appears in four caves: one niche in Cave B16, one in Cave A01, one in Cave A04, and two in Cave B09. This niche form, with grooves, was also found in Masada, where five niches provided clear evidence that the space functioned as a library. These grooves undoubtedly served to hold wooden shelves, two for each niche. The grooves are approximately 3 cm deep, 3–5 cm high, and about 48 cm long. Since the reign of Augustus, such niches were typically equipped with wooden shelving *armaria* for storing scrolls (Hirschfeld, 2004).

In Cave B09, two facing niches were found. The niche on the right has two parallel grooves. Its base is 81 cm above the floor; it measures 90 cm in width, 122 cm in height, and 55 cm in depth. The grooves inside the wall are approximately 5 cm deep and 4 cm wide. The space between the shelves is 34.6 cm, equal to the distance between the lower shelf and the base (Figure 58, a). The left niche shows only one remaining groove, with the space between the shelf and the base approximately 40 cm (Figure 58, b). In the other examples, the niches have only one groove. The niche in Cave A01 is 107 cm wide, 124 cm high, and 51 cm deep, with the shelf positioned midway up. The groove depth is approximately 7.5 cm, and its width ranges between 2.5 and 3 cm; all the shelf niches are arched (Figure 58, c). The niche in Cave

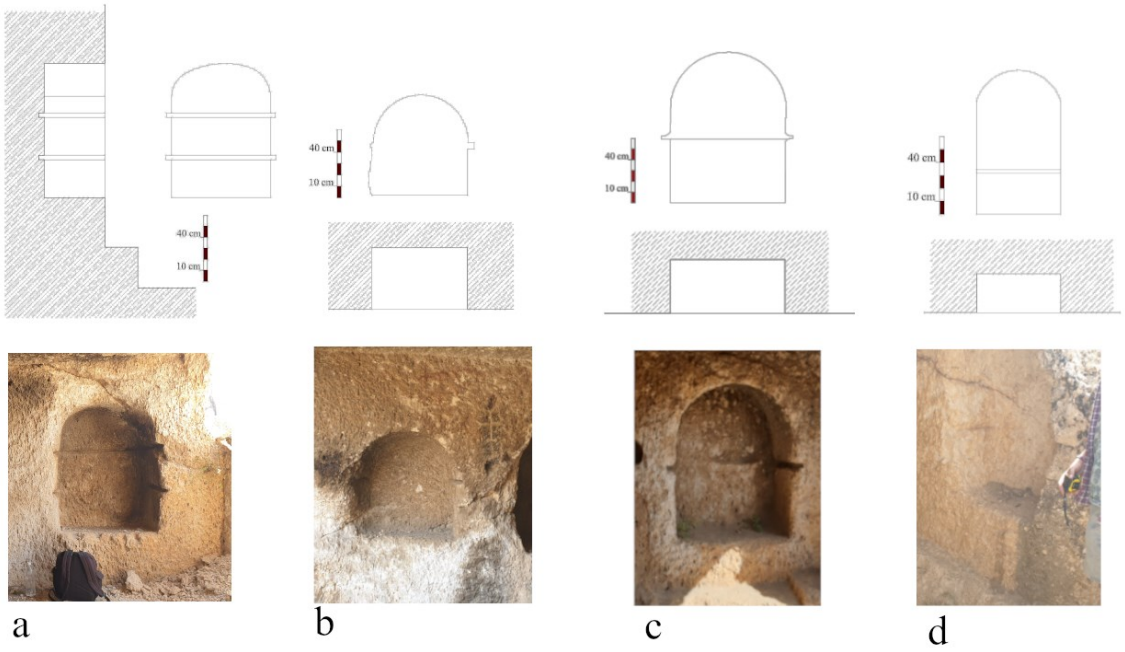


Figure 58: The niches have grooves in the village, by the author.

A04 measures 111 cm in height, 65 cm in width, and 30 cm in depth. The shelf is 32 cm above the base, and the shelf thickness is approximately 3 cm (Figure 58, d). These differences among the shelf niches may relate to varying functions, depending on the type and purpose of stored materials.

Bloto Ollo is a village on a hill, with the temple, now St. Sergius Monastery, occupying the summit. Caves A07 and A09, which contain *lararia*, surround the temple, while the niches with grooves are located near the functional caves. Caves B09, A01-1, and A04 hypothetically lie along the line dividing the village into two sectors: the functional part on the left, where presses, storage spaces, and other facilities are found, and the residential part on the right, containing the typical staged caves. Moreover, Cave B16 is located next to Caves B13, B14, and B15, which include carved courtyards. It is therefore hypothesised that the niches with shelves existed only in caves serving administrative roles, where important correspondence or official village records were stored (Figure 59).



Figure 59: The plan of the village shows the caves' distribution, and the location of caves with niches; the caves' plans and photos are provided by the author.

6.2.4.3. Seats

Another significant feature was recorded in six different village caves: a piece of rock-cut furniture taking the shape of a chair. The six seats display the following similarities:

- All seats were set on the right wall of the units, carved on a bench.
- Their shape is semicircles on the bench carved inside the rock; in some examples, it has a prominent frame of about 5-7 cm. Generally, the seat dimensions are approximately 40 wide and 35-40 deep.
- The wall behind this part is concave in five examples, complementing the chair's shape.
- There are holes in the wall carved behind the seat in three caves, while there is only one hole in the rest.
- There is a space (20- 35cm) left on the right side of the seat.

Two hypotheses can be proposed for this element. The first suggests that it served as a seat used by high-ranking individuals. This assumption considers both the element's shape, which includes a back part resembling a chair, and the cave's design. The hierarchy of the caves in the village can be classified according to their interior design and subdivisions; therefore, high-quality carving is found in the higher-ranked caves. Based on this, three seats are found in distinguished caves featuring niches and ornaments, two in larger caves, and one in a smaller cave. Consequently, this distribution weakens the hypothesis that the seats were reserved for high-ranking individuals.

Furthermore, all examples contain holes in the wall beside the seat, positioned on the left. Three examples feature three holes in different locations, while the others have only one. These holes, together with the space to the seat's left, could have served to install a tool. Therefore, this feature may be identified as a **weaver's seat**, approximating an example from Cappadocia associated with a pit loom (Kalas, 2006, p. 275). The similarity in the shape of the carved seat supports the theory that the village of Maaloula used ground looms (Figure 60).

Since the Neolithic era, loom weights have been discovered throughout Europe and the northern Mediterranean. However, they were not found in the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, Syria, and Canaan until the Bronze or Iron Ages, when they were reportedly introduced by waves of immigrants or invaders from the north (Seevers & Winslow, 2019, p. 22). In much of Europe, the Near East, and North Africa, households producing textiles regularly used one or

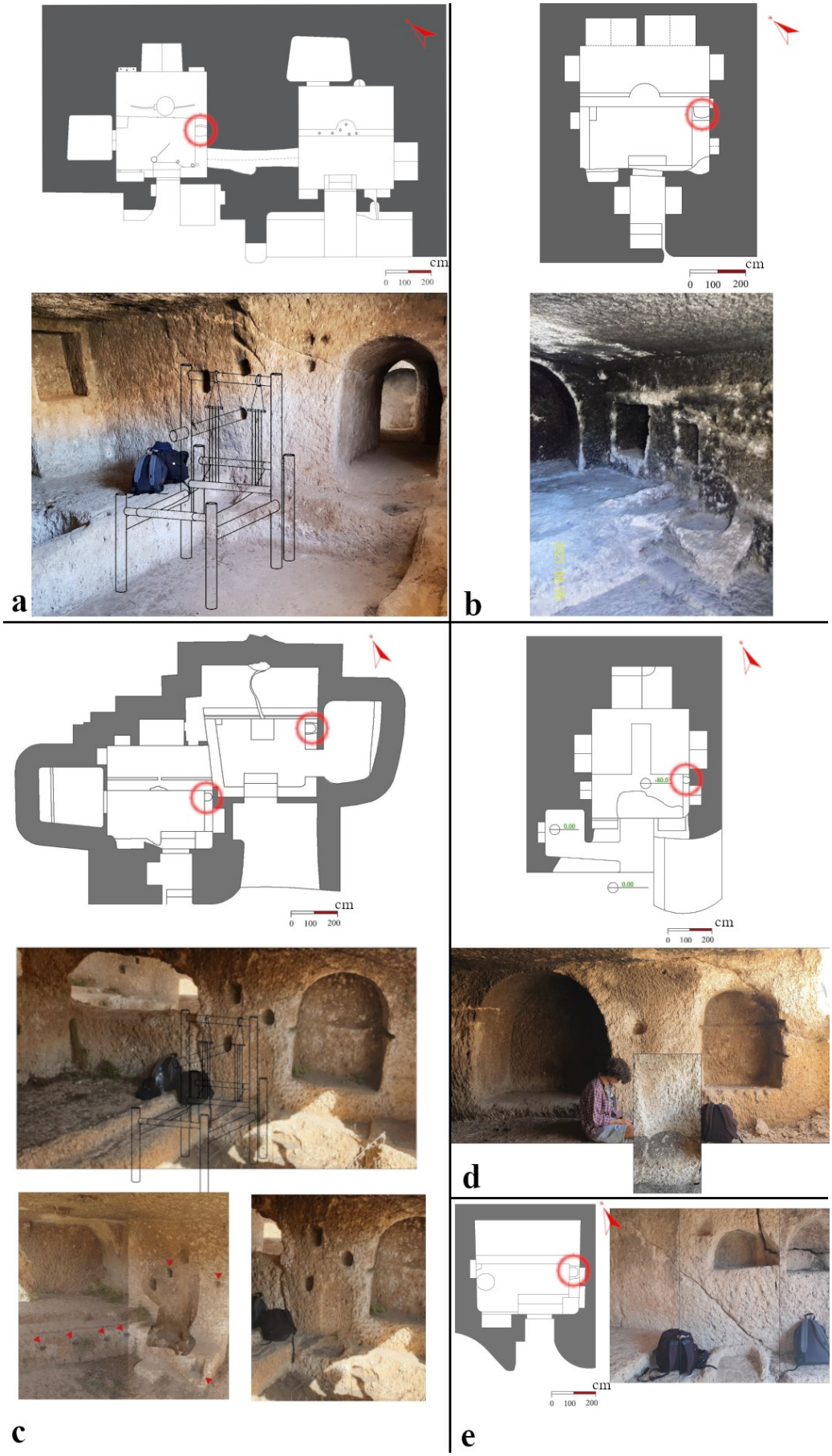


Figure 60: presents the six caves that have the seat elements, moreover, shows the location of the seat inside the caves and the different designs and ranks of the caves in the ancient village of Maaloula. Example (a) illustrates an imagined suggestion for the loom position and its relationship with the seat by the author.

both types of vertical loom, the warp-weighted loom and the two-beam loom, throughout antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

During the Roman era, most citizens were farmers who produced the raw materials that women used for spinning. Girls were taught to spin with a hanging spindle from a young age, regardless of social standing. Widows are often depicted on tombstones with a workbasket filled with balls of yarn or new spindles, as spinning symbolised a devoted wife (Wild, 2003, p. 20).

According to the weaver's seat hypothesis, the loom would have been placed vertically against the wall, and the weaver would sit between the wall and the frame while weaving. The wall would thus serve as a backrest and provide additional frame support. Figure 60, c presents an abundant example of carved details in the seat area. This example shows a step leading to the seat and a rectangular cut on the right side that may have served as a beam bed. Two holes at the same level are carved into the wall behind the seat; this is the only example with two holes. On the left side, four holes appear along the stage, and a stone arm extends from the ceiling above the tool space. These details provide evidence supporting the interpretation of the seat as a tool chair.

6.2.4.4. Doors and Entrances

The building technique was primarily based on Roman architecture and even earlier traditions that continued until the Byzantine era. The same situation occurs with the doors and windows, which often follow earlier styles rather than being limited to Roman, Hellenistic, or Classical forms.

The simplest and arguably earliest door type was a plain aperture in the wall, with reveals parallel to the wall faces. The second type, which appeared predominantly during the Classical and Hellenistic periods, differed from the first, whether made of stone or wood, by being narrower than the full wall width and leaving a shallow recess on the interior. The door folds fit into this recess and rotate just over 90 degrees to stand perpendicular to the inner wall face. The third door style had the door folds concealed behind a small projection surrounding the outer aperture. This type evolved considerably earlier, as far back as the Mycenaean period. The projection formed an inset stone or wooden frame or was an integral part of the door frame (Figure 61, a)(Mamaloukos, 2012).

The traces at door locations help indicate the doors' form, technique, and component parts. For instance, socket holes at the top and bottom corners of the entrance's rectangular side reveal that two large beams were inserted horizontally across it, while the holes on the side rock

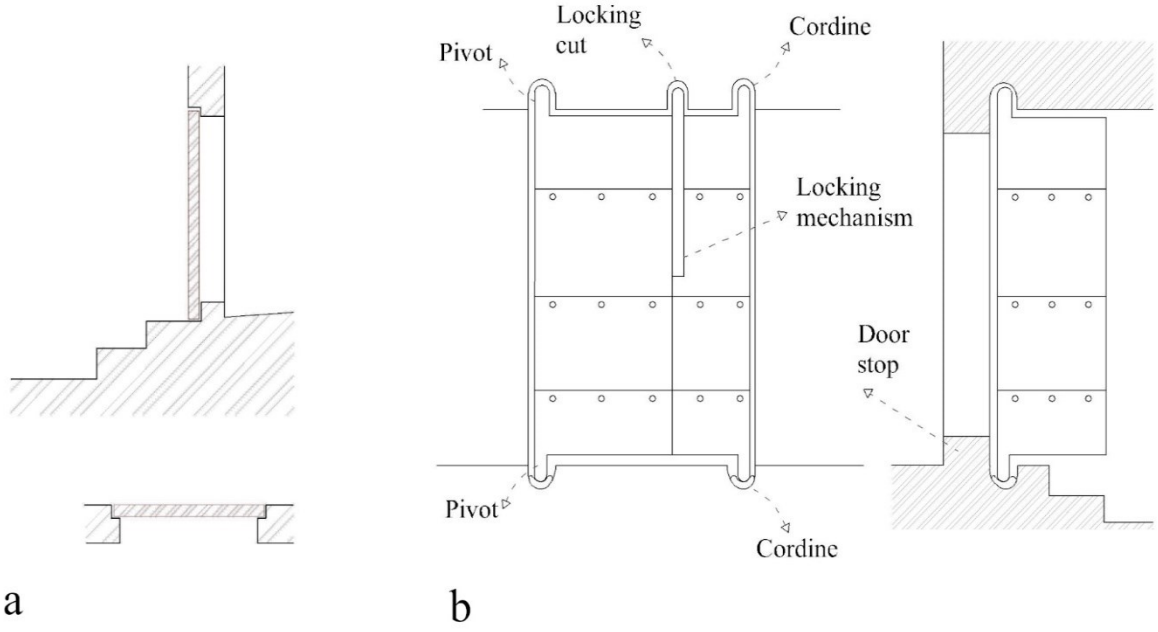


Figure 61: Photo (a) presents the protrusion of the door, photo (b) presents traces of locking mechanisms, by the author.

surface where the door closed show that a third beam was used to bolt the door shut (Kalas, 2006) and, (Bogdanović, 2016).

Vitruvius describes the rotating pivot in the *cardines*. The pivot of the leaf, whether engaged in a metal pin or left bare, turned within a socket plate cut into the threshold and lintel. The cavity in the lintel was much deeper than that in the sill to allow installation without touching the masonry. From the outside, the joint was hidden by a rabbit. This system had a disadvantage: a violent push could cause the pivots to dislodge from their plates, or the leaf could be lifted. Dwelling doors were always made of wood; other materials, such as iron or bronze, were not typically used in private architecture (Bouet, 1994). The pivot technique allowed the door to swing freely. Typically, *cardines* existed in two forms: a circular base and a larger square base. Built-in doorstops were also found in the thresholds of many narrow doorways, determining the direction of opening. The stop was formed by lowering the threshold level on the opening side, preventing the door from swinging in both directions.

In some cases, thresholds also show traces of locking mechanisms. Small cuts in the middle of the threshold are the clearest indicators of a locking door; these traces suggest that the door was secured by a vertical beam sliding into these cuts, often connected to a handle in the centre of the door. This method allowed closure but was not intended to provide substantial security (Figure 61, b) (Lauritsen, 2011).

In Maaloula, most door frames have been ruined by erosion and corrosion over time, although several examples remain sufficiently preserved to indicate the technique and design of the doors, or at least one of the door types used. Comparative examples and earlier studies assist in understanding and reconstructing the doors in the village.

Traces in the thresholds and lintels of Maaloula show that the pivot-door type was used. Generally, the traces in Bloto Ollo are more evident in the lintels than in the thresholds; thus, the presented interpretation relies primarily on lintel evidence, supported by a few preserved threshold examples. Two door types can be distinguished.

The first type shows five holes in the lintel. The outer two indicate that large wooden beams were inserted vertically across it, while the next two served as *cardines*, and the central hole functioned as the lock. These traces suggest a locking mechanism where a vertical beam latches the door by sliding into these cuts. The door of Cave B03, for example, shows five holes in the lintel: the outer holes, 10 cm in diameter, illustrate that two vertical wooden beams were used as decorative frames; the next two holes, 7 cm in diameter, were used as *cardines* to hold the door leaves; and the fifth hole served as the lock (Figure 62, a). The frame has a carved rabbet approximately 10 cm deep with a 10 cm projection. Two holes exist on the side-rock frame, possibly for a third horizontal beam to shut the door.

The second type found in the village has only three holes in the lintel, indicating that no vertical wooden frame was used. These holes served solely as *cardines* and for the lock (Figure 62, b). Interior door frames exist in annex rooms that open into the main spaces. These frames have

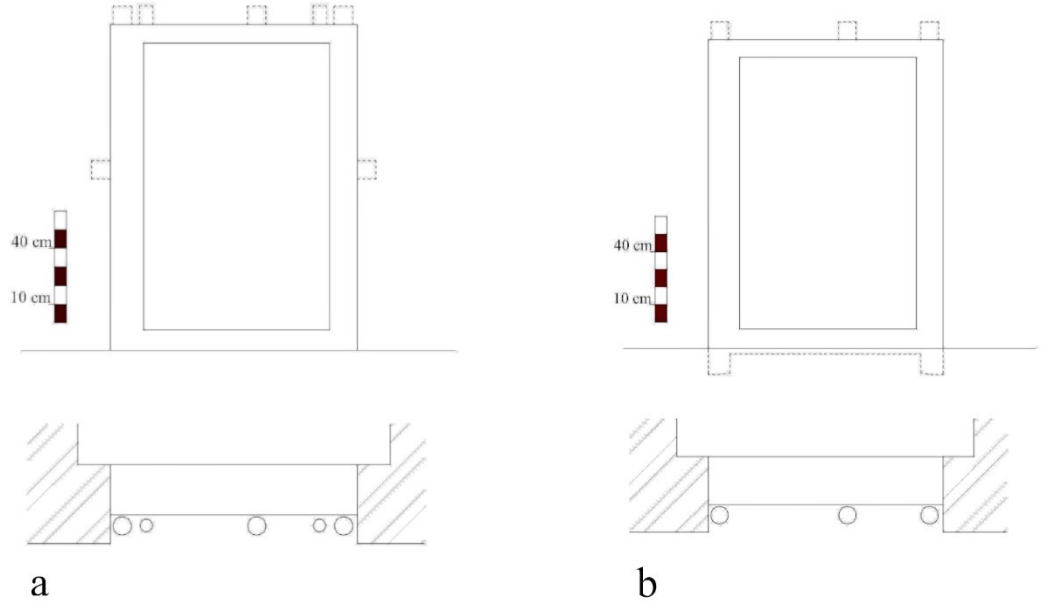


Figure 62: Door types in Maaloula, show the holes in the lintels, by the author.

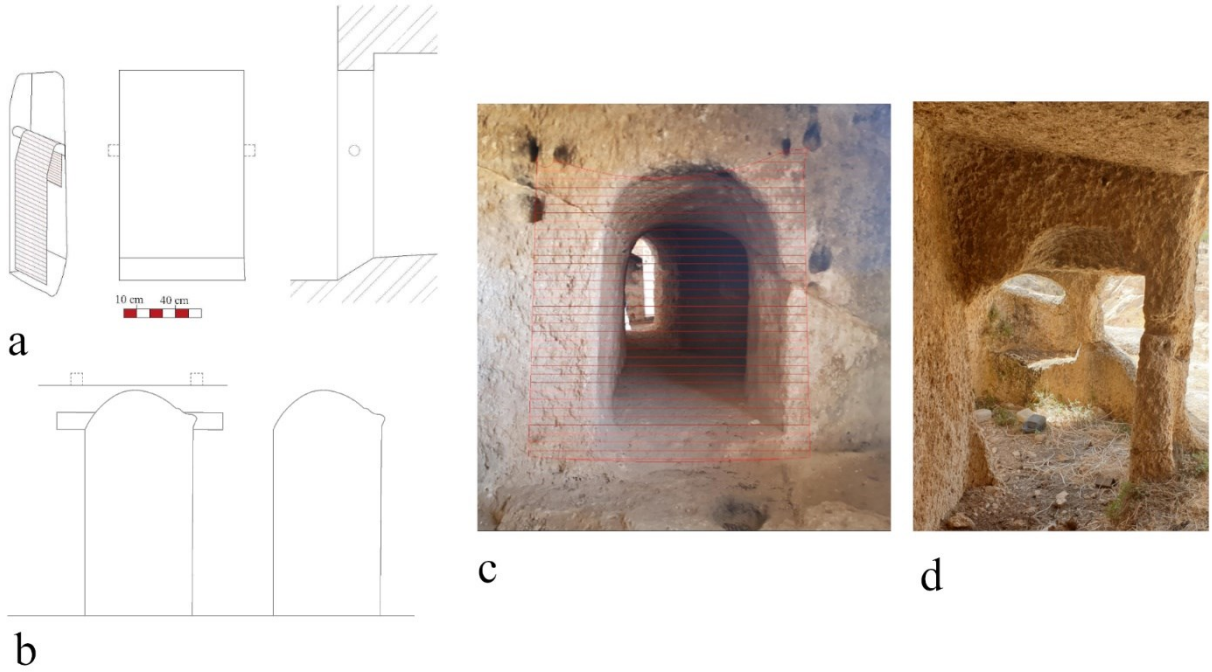


Figure 63: The different types of interior doors, by the author.

various forms. The first is rectangular: the door of Cave A01 has two holes on the side frame, with no traces in the lintel (Figure 63, a). A similar type is found in Meymand, which is still used today. In that region, a wooden beam is placed horizontally in the holes, and a cloth is hung to prevent cold, heat, and dust from entering the space (ICHHTO, 2012). It is unclear whether the example in Maaloula served the same function, but this type exists only in that cave.

The second type appears in Cave A07, which has an arched frame. Its uniqueness lies in the back part, where a trace of a rectangular horizontal wooden beam is preserved. Additionally, holes exist in the ceiling, possibly indicating a door structure (Figure 63, b).

The last type, found in Cave B15, is partly ruined. The upper part forms a half-dome, and on the right pillar, there is a trace of a beam (Figure 63, d). These examples show that the doors between interior spaces were also closed. In Cave A07, the tunnel connecting two caves on one side was covered by a piece of cloth, with two stone arms flanking the frame (Figure 63, c), supporting the theory that curtains were used to provide privacy within space.

6.2.4.5. Stony arm

The stone arms carved into the ceiling and walls were used for tying objects or cattle. Generally, they were cut at various points across the ceiling and walls. The higher ones on the ceiling were used to hang items that needed to be kept out of reach, such as lanterns or food bags (ICHHTO, 2012, p. 91), Figure 64, a.

6.2.4.6. Inscription

The village contains two inscriptions inside the caves, one in Area A1 and the other in Area A2 (Figure 64, b and c). The cave in Area A1 is functional based on its interior features, and the inscription is located in the middle of the main façade, between two arches. The second inscription is found in Area A2, in a cave known as Father Youssef Cave, beneath a carving of the sun god. The texts are unclear due to erosion, and it appears that a fire was once set inside the unit in Area A1, as the walls are covered with soot and coal deposits.

During his visit to Maaloula, Bliss (1890) described several caves in the ancient village. According to his account, three inscriptions existed in the settlement, and he provided copies of them in his article. The first inscription was discovered in a room with an arch on the back wall, where the text was located beside the arch. When comparing the inscription found in 2021 with that reported in 1888, it appears that both were found on walls adjacent to arches; however, it remains unclear whether they are indeed the same inscription (see Figure 64, d) (Bliss, 1890, pp. 78-79).

Only two inscriptions were observed during the recent fieldwork, whereas Bliss mentioned a third inscription found in another ancient dwelling. According to Bliss, this cave contained two rooms; in one, there was an elevated platform used as a divan or seat. The inscription was carved on a rock hanging down over the inner door lintel. The letters were roughly executed, and some were indistinct. Bliss also referred to a longer inscription consisting of nine lines, which was difficult to read. Given the current condition of the village, where most caves have been either ruined or vandalised, the other inscriptions are no longer traceable.

The long text was interpreted as follows:

" *In the year 418 of the Seleucids (then it was corrected to 518, equating to 106/107 AD), the sons of Cyrillus Patroclus created this niche, shared equally, for the god Malachedas*."

Possible interpretations of Malachedas: the divine name *Μαλαchdαs* has the vocalisation Malec, which appears to indicate a Palmyrene origin and excludes the Phoenician component

Malak or *Mal'ak*, meaning "King" or "Messenger" in Semitic languages (Mouterde, 1959, pp. 55-57).

The second text reads:

ΕΤΟΥΣ ΗΟ ΥΑΥΔ ΝΕΟΥΓΧΕΙΛΟΣ

ΖΑΒΔΕΟΣ ΑΒΙ ΣΑΛΥΛ ΣΕΡΜΟΥ

No available sources provide a full translation of this text. Similar to the previous example, the first word *ΕΤΟΥΣ* typically translates as "year" or "in the year of," suggesting that the inscription marks a specific event or dedication (Meimaris & Nikolaropoulou, 2005, p. 47). The name *ΖΑΒΔΕΟΣ* derives from the Aramaic root *zbd*, meaning "gift." It is a personal name used in several Semitic dialects, reflecting the idea of a child as a "gift of God." This name frequently appears in Palmyrene and Nabataean inscriptions (Meimaris & Nikolaropoulou, 2005, p. 121). Consequently. This inscription likely commemorates or records an event related to *Zabdeos*. It could be a dedication to a structure or public space, marking the date and honouring a significant individual from a distinguished family.



Figure 64: A is a photo that presents the arm stone on the ceilings and the current inscriptions in Bloto Ollo, and d is the inscriptions from the travelers' book who visited Maaloula in 1890 by the author.

6.3. Typological and Analytical Study of the Caves in Area A1

6.3.1. Introduction

Public buildings reflect the daily habits and customs of a society. However, more than any other type of structure, domestic architecture reveals the individuality of its owner and family. Likewise, settlements embody their inhabitants' narratives, routines, and ways of thinking. The artisans and builders of the time expressed these tendencies, although the prevailing social conventions constrained them. Late antique dwellings cannot be fully understood solely through their material remains; therefore, this chapter outlines the historical context of the village's construction phase. Understanding the period's circumstances and the village's role within it is essential for interpreting the available archaeological evidence. Recognising the instability of the era and the typology of its spatial forms helps to explain the fusion of Roman characteristics with local architectural traditions in the village. The spatial typology presented in this chapter clarifies the relationship and distribution of spaces, thereby illustrating the layout pattern of the ancient settlement. Consequently, this study advances a hypothesis that requires further archaeological verification. Moreover, Maaloula is referred to in most sources addressing the Roman period as *Maglula*, and in some as *Maglouden. This distinction* is crucial for determining the appropriate starting point of the research.

6.3.2. Historical introduction

Coele-Syria was the region bounded by the mountain chains of Syria, Lebanon, and Anti-Lebanon, encompassing the valleys between them. The name gained prominence under the Seleucids. Initially part of the Damascus kingdom, the area later belonged to the Palestinian kingdom during the Davidic era, and from Cyrus to Alexander the Great, it formed part of the Persian monarchy. Under Roman rule, the term gradually disappeared after merging with Phoenicia Libanesia into a single province.

Damascus served as the central city and capital of Coele-Syria under the Romans until the fourth century. Nearby Abila (or Abella) was the residence of local princes such as Lysanias during the Roman period, hence the name *Abila Lysanias* to distinguish it from *Abila* in Peraea (Laurent, 1830). Aphaca (Apaza; Afka), located between Heliopolis and Byblos, was famed for its temple and oracle of Aphrodite Aphacitis. Heliopolis (Hiourolig; Baalbek), identified in Hebrew as *Baalath*, was one of the chief centres of Baal worship, near the source of the Leontes River. The Greeks equated Baal with Helios, or the Sun, which gave rise to the city’s Greek

name. Positioned along the main trade route from the Red Sea to the north, Baalbek flourished commercially and became a Roman colony under Augustus. Later Roman emperors referred to the region as *Phoenice Libanesia*, and its mixed population, Syrians, Phoenicians, and Greeks, were called *Syrophoenices* (Schmitz, 1857).

A Latin inscription records the campaign of Q. Aemilius Secundus, an Augustan officer sent by Quirinius around AD 6 against the Mount Lebanon Ituraeans, where he captured one of their *castella*. For nearly seventy years thereafter, military operations continued, marking the distinction between Roman-controlled territory in the Orontes Valley and the still-defiant mountain zones. The Ituraeans and Arabians of these regions were often described as brigands who raided the agrarian communities of the plains and fortified themselves in mountain strongholds, caves, and coastal defences such as Theuprosopon (Millar, 1993, p. 35).

The royal territories of Judaea and southern Syria were equally complex. Upon his accession, Claudius granted Judaea and Samaria to Agrippa I in recognition of his support, thereby restoring Herod's former kingdom and suspending direct Roman governance. Agrippa's dominion included the tetrarchy of Lysanias, encompassing lands along the Anti-Lebanon. This area, often termed the tetrarchy of Abilene, was an Ituraean principality ruled by descendants of Lysanias and extended northward as far as Maglula and Iabruda, where an inscription of Agrippa's son was discovered (Jones, 1938, p. 208).

The Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon ranges remained zones of persistent conflict between the Romans and the local populations. Under Ptolemy and his father, the Ituraeans expanded east of the Anti-Lebanon, conquering Maglula, Iabruda, and Abila, and extending southeast into Batanaea, Trachonitis, and Auranitis. The tetrarchy of Abilene, ruled by Lysanias in AD 37, was larger than those of Arca or Chalcis (Schürer, 1891, p. 373). An inscription of Agrippa II discovered north of Iabruda shows that, by the Byzantine period, Abilene was divided into the city of Abila and two *climata*, Maglula and Iabruda, likely corresponding to *toparchies*, since Abila itself did not issue coinage (Jones, 1937, p. 282).

In AD 53, Claudius granted Agrippa the former tetrarchies of Philip, Gaulanitis, Batanaea, Trachonitis, and Auranitis, along with the tetrarchy of Lysanias and that of Varus. These territories, incorporated into the Roman provincial system by the early second century, were divided among Syria, Arabia, and Judaea, though geographically discontinuous (Millar, 1993).

Beyond the mountains and river valleys, the Syrian interior comprised arid steppe and semi-desert lands, forming Rome's eastern frontier. Nevertheless, parts of this zone contained arable

land between Lebanon to the west and Anti-Lebanon to the east (Butcher, 2003, p. 33). Archaeological evidence from Mount Hermon and the southwestern Anti-Lebanon reveals traces of cultivation and settlement, indicating an inhabited inner frontier. Literary and documentary sources mention raids by the Ituraeans during the early Roman era and Roman expeditions against them under Augustus. Roman control was firmly established only in the north; troops likely travelled either through Emesa or along the coastal road via Berytus and Tyre to Ptolemais. The interaction of Roman and local forces across Mount Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley, Anti-Lebanon, Mount Hermon, and southern Damascus was therefore highly complex (Millar, 1993).

By the fourth century, Lake Thelsee lay along a Roman road between Geroda (modern Jyrod) and Damascus, serving as a station for a border garrison and earning the designation *Metrokome*. Thelsee and its neighbouring forts formed key nodes of the Roman *limes* system. Continuous military presence profoundly influenced civilian life, as the occupation evolved into a semi-agricultural border colony. Administratively, the region was treated as a separate unit composed of non-urbanised districts along the eastern Anti-Lebanon, including the *climata* of Maglula (Ma'lula), Jabruda (Jebrud), and the territory of Danaba (Schubart, 1950).

6.3.3. Between Empire and Tradition: Roman Colonial Policy and the Sun Cult

The early second century CE marked the height of the Roman Empire, which spanned over six million square kilometres across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, maintaining authority for more than seven centuries. Scholars have emphasised the significance of Rome's early conquest and assimilation strategies for understanding later imperial developments (Keay & Terrenato, 2009) (Dench, 2005) (Eckstein, 2006). Recent research has challenged the rigid view of Roman colonisation as uniform and urban-centric, suggesting a flexible system adapted to diverse ecological and sociocultural contexts instead. By moving beyond the town-centric model, new interpretations reveal that Roman colonial policies reflected multiple expansionist strategies to exploit local resources and engage with indigenous populations (Stek, 2018).

Colonial foundations, long regarded as military outposts or miniature Romes, were highly variable. Earlier studies framed colonies as strategic instruments of conquest, "the tree rings of the empire" (Reid, 1913), linking colonisation directly to military campaigns and elite ambitions for wealth and prestige (Rich, 1993). Nevertheless, archaeological and epigraphic evidence indicates that many colonies developed within pre-existing urban centres and accommodated mixed populations rather than purely Roman settlers (Sewell, 2014).

The traditional tripartite model, military base, agrarian settlement, and Roman culture symbol have thus been reconsidered. Adaptation, not imitation, characterised the formation of colonial towns; pre-Roman cults and local traditions often persisted alongside Roman institutions. Consequently, the perception of colonisation as a uniform process of Romanisation has shifted toward recognition of its heterogeneity and negotiated nature (Brown, 1980)(Stek, 2018). This revisionist perspective aligns with broader debates about imperial governance, which now stress local agency, elite collaboration, and the pragmatic integration of conquered territories rather than centralised control. Roman colonisation in Syria and Mesopotamia illustrates this flexibility: the army influenced urbanisation by stationing troops near existing cities and, to a lesser extent, through veteran settlements (Pollard, 2018, p. 39). Hence, variability rather than uniformity defines Roman colonial practice.

Under Roman rule, before Christianity emerged, many sanctuaries in Syria and Phoenicia reflected this cultural syncretism. The great sanctuary at Emesa (modern Homs) was dedicated to Shams, the sun god, whose cult symbol, a black conical stone, likely volcanic or meteoric, contrasted with the anthropomorphic deities of Roman religion (Darke, 2018).The Emesene rulers served both as kings and high priests, merging tribal and religious authority. The ruler's name, Shamsigeramus, derived from shamsi ("of the sun") and geram ("to revere"), reflects deep-rooted Semitic traditions (Jackson, 1908).

Inscriptions from Homs (A.D. 78) and Maaloula (A.D. 182) confirm the enduring presence of this priestly lineage (Clermont-Ganneau, 1906). Sun worship permeated Aramaea, Syria, and Canaanite regions, visible in toponyms, personal names (e.g., Shamash), and iconography combining a ray-star and crescent. Temples were typically situated on elevated terrain, mountains, hilltops, or near springs, integrating natural features such as water, trees, and stones into sacred landscapes (Butcher, 2003, p. 325) (Colledge, 1986, p. 221). These practices demonstrate indigenous cults' resilience and adaptation within the Roman imperial framework, where local religious identities continued to coexist with the imperial ideology of expansion and cultural integration.

6.3.4. The ancient village

There are various types of caves in the village. The sizes of these caves range from less than 8 square meters to more than 43.50 square meters. It is characteristic of the settlement that multiple cave types exist within the same village. At the same time, certain standard features can be observed in many of them. This study investigates the rock-cut units in Maaloula village,

identifies their typical types, and analyses the relationship between the caves to reveal the village's main spatial plan.

Maaloula possesses unique characteristics as an urban settlement, representing a superimposed community model. The ancient inhabitants utilised the distinctive and natural shapes of the land to create their dwellings, another defining marker of the cultural landscape and evidence of a profound understanding and interaction between people and nature. The essence of Blota Ollo's architecture lies in its minimalist approach to creating living spaces. At first sight, the visitor perceives untouched nature, only later recognising the subtle human modifications along the mountain slopes. This characteristic also reflects a defensive feature, corresponding to the village's historical context, an unstable period when Maaloula was a contested area between the Itureans (locals) and the Romans.

Blota Ollo is contemporaneous with the village of Meymand in Iran, which dates back to the 3rd century AD (ICHHTO, 2012). The characteristics of Meymand contribute to a better understanding of the studied site. Much can be learned from Meymand's experience to draw greater attention to the ancient village of Maaloula. However, Meymand provides only a general comparative framework and does not offer development projects. This work aims to describe the main types of caves, focusing on the components and functional aspects of space within the dwelling units.

6.3.4.1. The Outline of the Field Study

There are several reasons for selecting the site of Blota Ollo. One of the primary reasons is that its architectural method represents a unique experience in community housing development. Large cavities were carved into the horizontal rocky surface to serve as dwelling units, presses, storage rooms, stables, or other functional spaces. These were achieved through a human struggle against the rock to create suitable living environments.

On the other hand, this type of late antique domestic architecture is less perceptible in the archaeological record than elite structures. This social class comprised less wealthy aristocrats,

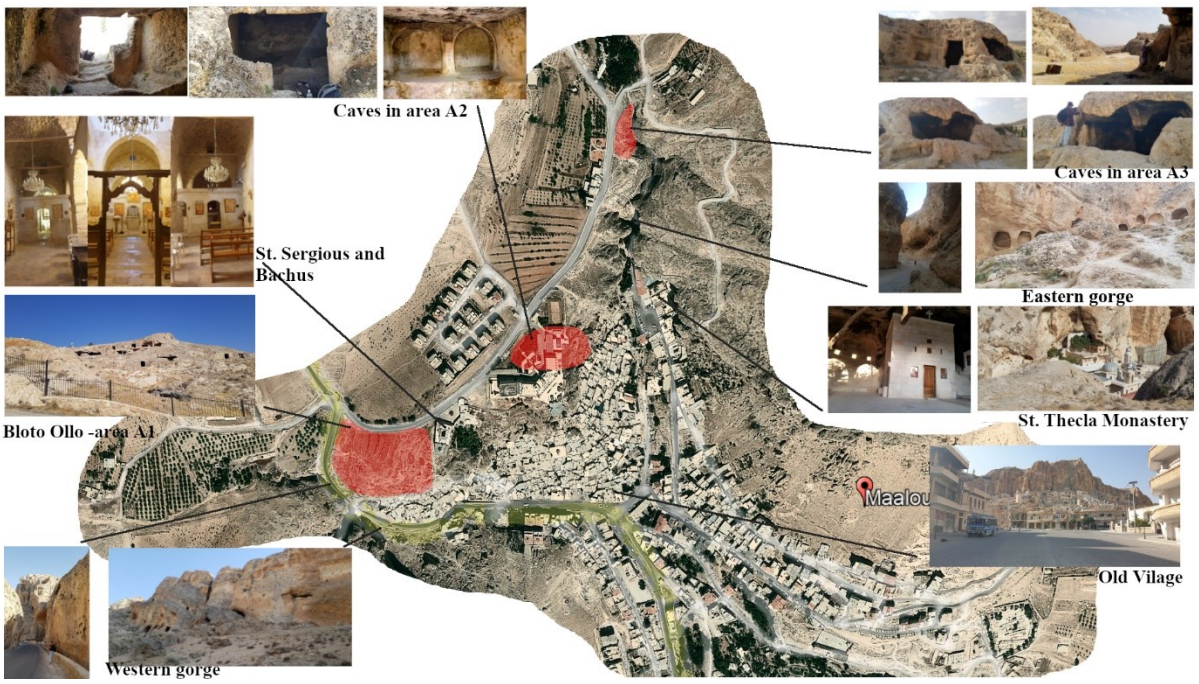


Figure 65: An aerial photo of Maaloula town presets many important sites in the town, by the author.

merchants and shopkeepers, small landowners, and peasants. Nonetheless, artisans and peasants likely represented the majority of the populations in most rural regions (Ellis, 2006). The first stage of this study involved dividing the area into three parts to facilitate analysis and understanding of the ancient village plan. Area A1 constitutes the major section, containing forty-two caves with various functions. In contrast, both A2 (three caves) and A3 (four caves) can be regarded as working zones, as they primarily include presses (Figure 65). This chapter mainly focuses on Area A1, located on the cliff of the Church of St. Sergius. All caves in this area were measured and drawn to conduct an intensive study to identify the dwelling components that define the main classifications.

The cave profiles in Area A1 share common characteristics: all were carved into the rock, have similar orientations, and most contain comparable interior elements and divisions. The main form consists of a single central unit, with an average size of approximately 4 × 5 m. Certain variations occur according to the space's function; some caves include an additional room attached to the central unit. Field observations indicate that only a few caves have suffered damage; otherwise, their durability significantly contributes to the historical study of this ancient civilisation.

Typically, the interior space is divided into two levels by a raised platform about 70 cm high, distinguishing different functional zones. Each cave generally has a single opening, the doorway, positioned at the centre of the wall facing the raised platform. To the left of the

entrance, a manger is carved partly into the wall. This layout represents the simplest cave design and most likely served residential purposes. The houses in Blota Ollo do not generally follow the well-known Roman domestic plan, which features separated spaces and rooms. Nevertheless, certain architectural features can be identified compared to the typical Roman house.

Understanding the architecture of Maaloula is challenging due to the scarcity of comparable studies or examples from the same period. For this reason, examining other well-documented sites helps to illuminate this one. In this regard, analyses of Roman houses, as well as the settlements of Cappadocia and Meymand, provide valuable parallels despite the chronological gaps separating them from Maaloula. Furthermore, the village was a local settlement during the Iturean era, and tribes that some sources describe as robbers lived in mountain caves. Due to its strategic location, the site was frequently contested. When the Romans ultimately gained control, they introduced architectural modifications, which were evident in certain caves displaying more refined carving techniques. After the Roman occupation, Maaloula became a Roman colony while retaining local characteristics. This theory may explain the variations in sculptural quality and the simplicity observed in the village's current architectural remains.

6.3.4.2. Typological Classification of Standard House Forms

It is crucial to understand the system of spatial formation as a whole by analysing the different space types. This section presents the typology of caves, analyses the identified types, and discusses the relationships between them to reveal the village's components. The following typology criteria apply to the hewn dwellings serving residential and functional spaces according to needs at different periods.

Similar house types can be identified without much difficulty. It is first apparent that all houses have only one opening, a doorway located in the middle of the wall. The spatial formations generally resemble each other: in most caves, the interior space is divided into two levels by a raised platform that defines functional usage. To the left of the entrance, a manger is carved partly into the wall. This design is the simplest cave form, most likely used for residential purposes. Consequently, the interior platform becomes the primary element for classifying the cave types, based on its presence or absence.

The first typology considers the platform shape as the main criterion. Type A is the most common form in the village (Figure 66). In this type, the platform is rectangular and located along the wall opposite the door, raised 50–70 cm above the lower floor level. This type is the

principal and most numerous, comprising 36 caves. The unit dimensions vary slightly, but the basic form remains consistent, aside from some minor additions.

Type B features a U-shaped platform; only one cave has this configuration, making it unique due to its form. This cave can be compared to an early U-shaped *triclinium,* the main reception and dining room that played an essential role in private life and, frequently, in public and political gatherings during the Early Roman period. It continued to be a significant feature in Late Antiquity (Uytterhoeven, 2005). The individuality of this type lies in its exclusivity: only one example exists in the village. Moreover, the cave exhibits two carving styles, one more refined than the other, indicating possible later modification by new occupants.

The standard type of house was not built according to a fixed pre-schema but was generally completed gradually through additions based on need. Niches or annex rooms were added to serve specific purposes. Types C and D are also single examples. In Type C, the platform has an L-shape, suggesting that the space may have served a special purpose, perhaps as accommodation for specific individuals or as a shop. Type D includes a small platform insufficient for residential use and features two mangers, suggesting a stable function, although no definitive evidence supports this assumption.

The final type, Type E, lacks a platform. Generally, caves of this type have different plans and interior configurations, reflecting varied purposes and functions such as presses, stables, laundries, or kitchens. These are typically the largest caves in the village. Some functions are

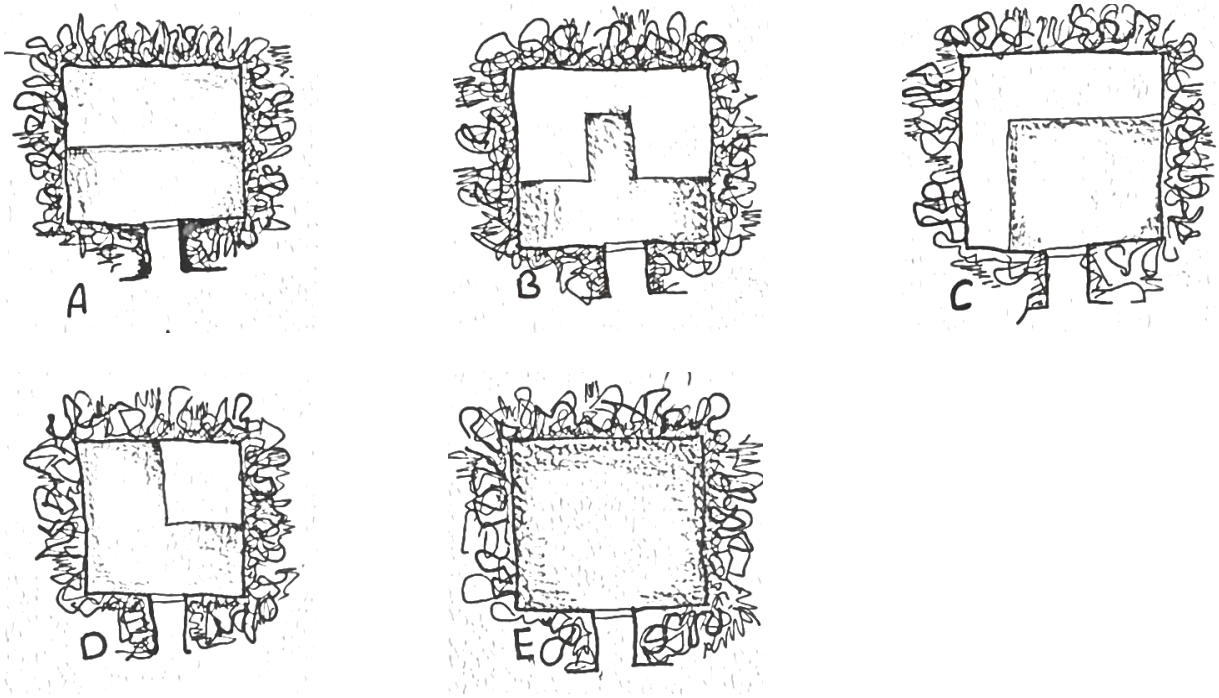


Figure 66: Cave typology due to the platform criterion by the author

easily identifiable, while others require further investigation. Nevertheless, in Late Antique domestic architecture, only a few kitchens have been identified in home settings. Food was often prepared in external kitchens, taverns, or cafés, which explains the rarity of kitchens (Ellis, 2000).

This classification takes the platform as the primary feature, regardless of unit size, annexes, or other details, since these aspects are determined after defining the space's function. Thus, the platform helps identify the intended use: its presence usually indicates accommodation. Shared human-animal spaces were not uncommon; the raised platform separated the living area from the animals. Hence, this first classification provides an initial impression of the village by introducing the proportional distribution of cave functions. Platform types A, B, C, and D account for 67% of the cave units, regardless of platform shape, while Type E represents 33% (fourteen caves) with varying interior features and functions.

Although this first classification simplifies the existing types, the platform caves also vary internally according to the number of annexes, their dimensions, and the quality of carving. The more features present in a cave, the higher its implied status; a spacious cave with multiple niches indicates greater wealth than a small one without niches. Type A forms a substantial part of the village and shares the common feature of a platform, yet exhibits diverse interior components. Cave A07 exemplifies spatial expansion, where a tunnel connects two platform caves. This connection likely responded to special needs, as a ritual, since one niche appears to have served as a shrine. A new room was typically added when additional space was needed, as carving an entire new unit was difficult. This process created hierarchical variations among platform houses, reflecting local conditions and social standing.

Platform types can also be classified according to the existence and location of annex rooms. The typology considers the annex a main feature, examining its position relative to the central unit. The physical formation of the village was primarily regulated by the rock-carving construction system, which had to adapt to the hard stone, access paths, and sometimes neighbouring caves. As mentioned above, each Blota Ollo house typically consisted of a single

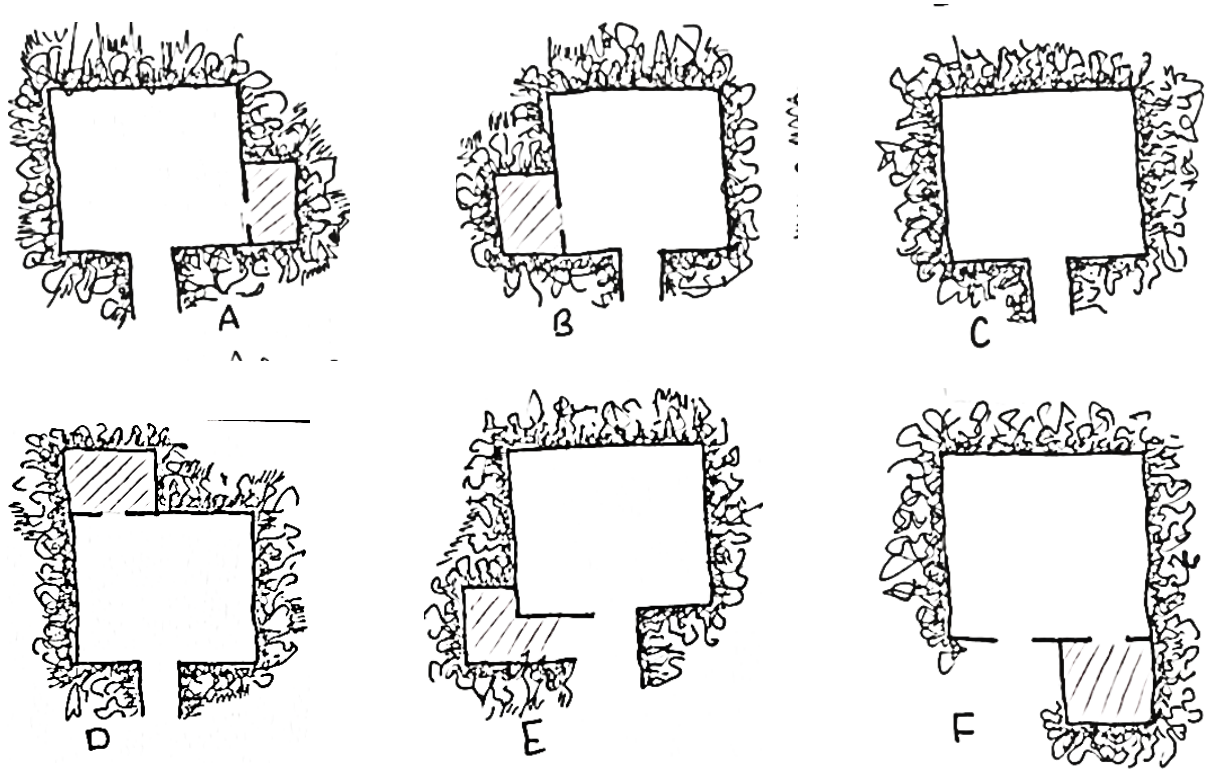


Figure 67: The platform cave typology, using the annex as a criterion, by the author.

main space, so expansion by adding a room was the primary solution. Annex rooms are smaller than the main space, though their dimensions and relative positions differ.

Based on the location of annexes, the houses can be classified as follows (Figure 67):

- **Type A:** Platform house with an annex to the right of the main space, connected to the lower level (two caves).
- **Type B:** Platform house with an annex to the left of the main space, connected to the lower level (four caves).
- **Type C:** Platform house without an annex room (nineteen caves).
- **Type D:** Platform house with an annex behind the main space, connected to the platform part (one cave).
- **Type E:** Platform house with an annex outside the main space, opening to the main entrance (one cave).
- **Type F:** Platform house with an annex in front of the main space, opening to the lower part (one cave).

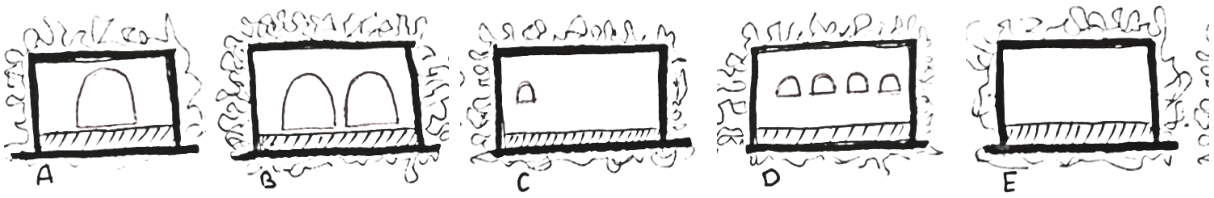


Figure 68: Facades typology, by the author.

The last three types are unique in the village due to their singular examples. Type D is the cave that includes a shrine, where the annex could have served as a *naos*; Type E corresponds to the room within the *triclinium*; Type F's configuration likely resulted from spatial constraints, as two adjacent caves prevented sideward extension.

The uniqueness of each unit does not depend on a single feature; instead, several characteristics combined in one space determine its significance. Beyond interior dimensions and the presence of annexes, the main façade also contributes to the spatial typology, as many units display features on the main wall opposite the entrance. Accordingly, the façade typology can be defined as follows (Figure 68):

- **Type A:** Single niche in the middle of the façade (five caves).
- **Type B:** Two niches in the façade (one cave).
- **Type C:** One decorated niche (one cave), indicating higher importance, since decoration is rare in the village and found in only two cases.
- **Type D:** Four well-carved niches evenly spaced across the main façade (one cave), notable for both its plan and elaborate façade.
- **Type E:** Façade either undecorated or with a poorly carved niche (twenty-one caves).

6.3.4.3. Site Analysis

The first phase of this chapter involved studying the caves individually and presenting the various types to understand the site's local features and specific characteristics. This initial phase forms the foundation of the analytical process, which aims to reveal the relationships between the caves and, consequently, to reconstruct the overall plan of the village.

The site lies on the western cliff of St. Sergius Monastery, where a former pagan temple once stood. The temple contained an altar that can be traced back to around 300 AD (Honey, 2011, p. 33). The methodology applied here combined on-site survey and observation with a cadastral plan, which was corrected and verified through comparison with satellite imagery and historical photographs of the site. This approach enabled the creation of both general and analytical plans.

Furthermore, these plans represent the first comprehensive study that maps and identifies the caves in their precise topographic context.

The site is bordered by two roads on the west and north sides. The old village lies to the south, while the eastern side marks the extension of the settlement, where several presses are located. Currently, a fence surrounds the area, and access is only possible through a door next to the monastery, which remains locked and requires special permission for entry. The area was divided into three parts to facilitate analysis, as shown in Plan 1 (Figure 69). The three sections, P1, P2, and P3, follow the natural topography: P1 forms the uppermost zone directly beneath the monastery, while P2 and P3 occupy the lower parts of the cliff.

P1 is the highest area, directly below the monastery, and its caves are easily observable. Descending the cliff, the lower zones P2 and P3 become visible. Both P1 and P3 are clearly seen from the western road, whereas the caves in P3 are more difficult to identify during a site visit, and their distribution pattern is irregular, giving an initial impression of a non-systematic layout.

Plan 2 presents the first area of the study (Figure 70), P1, which includes the ancient temple and a group of distinctive caves: B20, located at the highest point, and A09, A07, A08, and A15. These caves' elevated position and sophisticated design reflect their importance, suggesting that this part of the village served ritual and social functions. Ceremonies were held in the temple, while Cave A07 represents a small sanctuary where sacrifices were offered, as indicated by the presence of a shrine and a deep basin on the platform. Cave A08, located nearby, is a small stable that likely housed sacrificial animals. Cave B19 is a typical platform-type dwelling with no unique features apart from its proximity to B20, which stands out due to its scale, spatial organisation, and elaborate entrance, reflecting a higher social significance.

P2 and P3 occupy the lower parts of the cliff beneath P1. These two sections have been more public and less prestigious. As shown in Plan 3 (Figure 71), P2 contains mostly standard platform-type caves, each with a single unit and minimal decoration, only small niches for lanterns. The southern part of the site is steeper, and the terrain becomes more challenging toward the east, making the caves in this area difficult to access. Based on interior layouts, topography, and spatial context, P2 is assumed to have been primarily residential. The rank of the dwellings decreases with distance from the village centre, which lies roughly along the line separating P2 and P3.

P3 represents the lowest part of Blota Ollo, located near the modern road. The caves here are closely spaced, flanking each other and sharing a common path in front of their entrances. This section has served a pivotal role within the settlement. As illustrated in Plan 4, (Figure 72), B17, B18, and A06 are interlinked at the lowest level. All three caves display functional features, each with distinct internal layouts suggesting specific roles. Cave B18, located in the middle, appears to have served as a station for unloading animals. This assumption is supported by its open design, presence of a manger, and physical connections to the adjacent caves, A06 on the right and B17 on the left, via a small room and a tunnel cut through the floor of B18 that opens as a window in B17. A10, located along the same alignment as A06, exhibits a functional role. These four caves occupy the lower section of the village, close to the road, enabling easy access for animals carrying loads.

The next level above includes B13, B14, B15, and B16. B13 and B14 are connected functional caves. B14 features a carved courtyard in front, suggesting outdoor activities. B15 and B16, positioned along the same line beyond B14, are simple platform-type caves. Notably, B15 has a small annex opening toward B14's courtyard, which might have served as an administrative or "office" space associated with the functional activities of the preceding caves.

The following group comprises B06 and B07. B06 opens onto a corridor accessible from the left via stairs, while B06 and B07 share a common balcony with a collecting basin. These caves are typical platform-type units and likely served residential purposes. B01, B02, B03, and B05 are also residential in the upper part of section P3. The U-shaped *triclinium* cave lies between P2 and P3, at the centre of the residential zone.

Understanding the spatial relationships between the caves provides a clearer perspective of the village structure. The spatial analysis, illustrated in Plans 5 and 6(Figure 73, and Figure 74), outlines a coherent village layout shaped by local environmental and social factors. As in many ancient settlements, the temple occupied the highest point, symbolically closer to the sky, surrounded by ritual buildings within its precinct. The remaining areas of the village were divided into two main functional zones: residential and productive. Within these zones, practical considerations influenced cave placement: functional caves near the main road to minimise the climb for pack animals, whereas residential caves were positioned farther away, hidden from direct access. This layout also provided a defensive advantage, as the dwellings were less visible, harder to reach, and spatially separated from the temple area.

Ultimately, the analytical plans define both the cave locations and the functional zoning of the village, confirming that Blota Ollo followed a coherent, though simple, settlement plan. Furthermore, the results indicate that the current eastern road was constructed along the path of the ancient one.

6.3.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of Blota Ollo, through field study, typological classification, and spatial interpretation, demonstrates that the village represents a complex and adaptive settlement within the broader historical context of the Maaloula region. Despite the scarcity of detailed studies on Maaloula, its development can be better understood as part of the historical and cultural framework of the Qalamoun region. Maaloula is frequently mentioned in Roman sources as belonging to the Abilene–Lysanias district, which indicates its administrative and cultural integration into the wider Roman provincial system. Examining the Qalamoun region, therefore, provides valuable insights into Maaloula's historical situation and evolution.

The area was marked by instability during the Roman period, as new populations arrived and the region often became a contested frontier zone. The archaeological evidence suggests that Maaloula was inhabited by Iturean groups who lived in caves across the mountainous terrain. Positioned along the interior limes within the third defensive zone of Syria, Maaloula likely served as a minor Roman colony, functioning as part of the empire's interior defence network designed to secure the border against neighbouring incursions.

Architectural and spatial evidence support this interpretation. Although Maaloula was originally a local settlement, its environment reveals a blend of indigenous and Roman architectural influences. Recent studies on Roman colonisation have demonstrated that colonial settlements did not necessarily replicate the urban model of Rome but often integrated local forms within a Roman framework. The caves of Blota Ollo reflect precisely this hybrid character. Many caves display traces of two distinct carving phases: while most are modest and functional, others exhibit refined artistry and decorative detail, reflecting both social differentiation and adaptation to changing needs. These patterns strengthen the argument that Maaloula functioned as a Roman colony infused with local cultural and architectural traditions.

At first glance, the site may appear irregular and lacking formal planning. However, the analytical maps and spatial studies reveal an underlying order reflecting Roman planning principles and local adaptation. The ancient village follows a distinctive, context-sensitive layout that harmonises topographic constraints, defensive needs, and practical functions. The temple occupies the highest and most dominant position, surrounded by ritual and communal

structures, while the residential and productive areas are organised below according to function, accessibility, and security.

Ultimately, the study of Blota Ollo demonstrates that Maaloula was not an isolated or rudimentary settlement but a structured, hybrid community shaped by continuous interaction between Roman imperial influence and local tradition. This synthesis produced a unique cultural and architectural identity, one that illustrates how frontier settlements could both assimilate and reinterpret Roman forms while preserving their indigenous character.

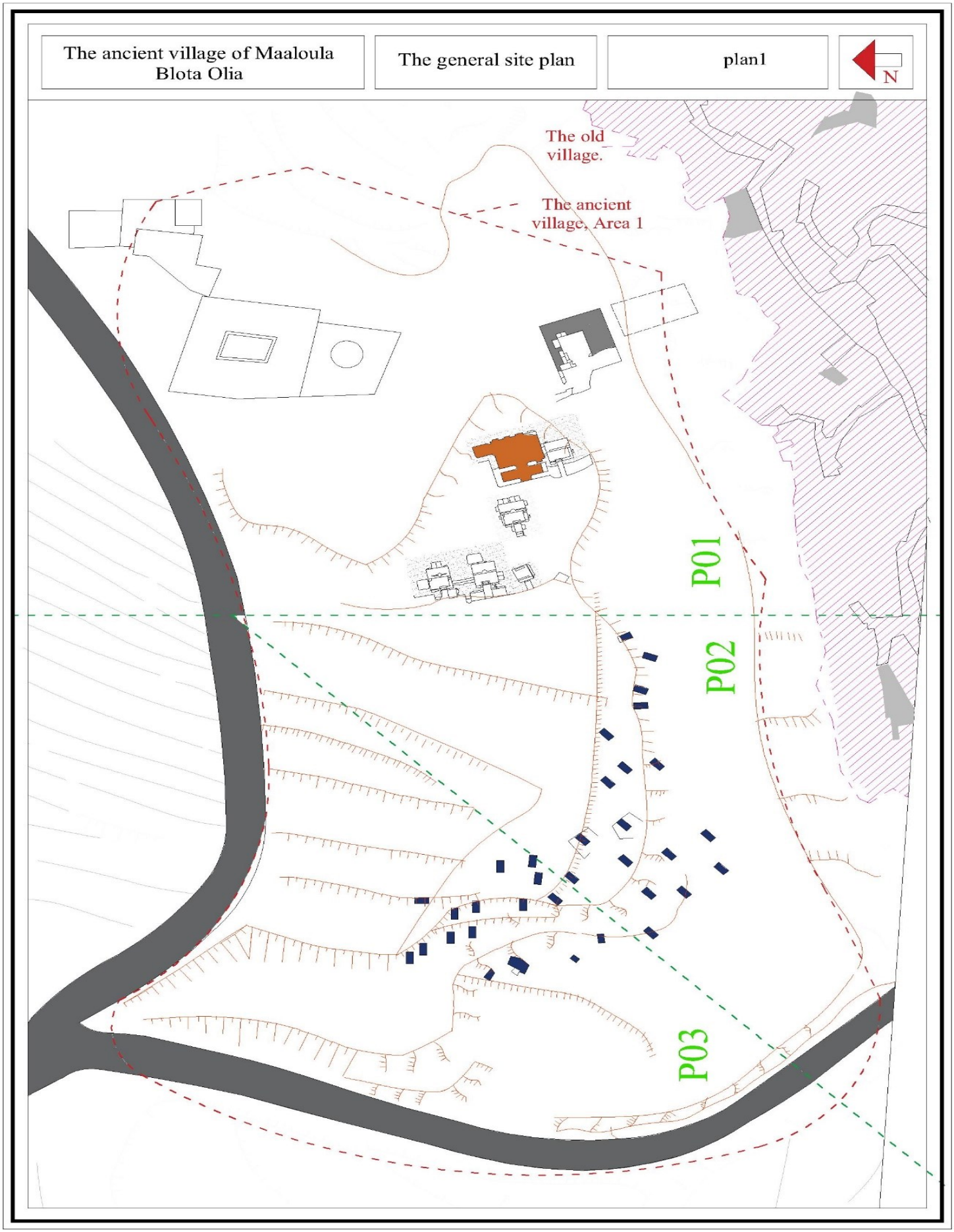


Figure 69: Plan 1, The general site plan defining the caves' locations, by the author.

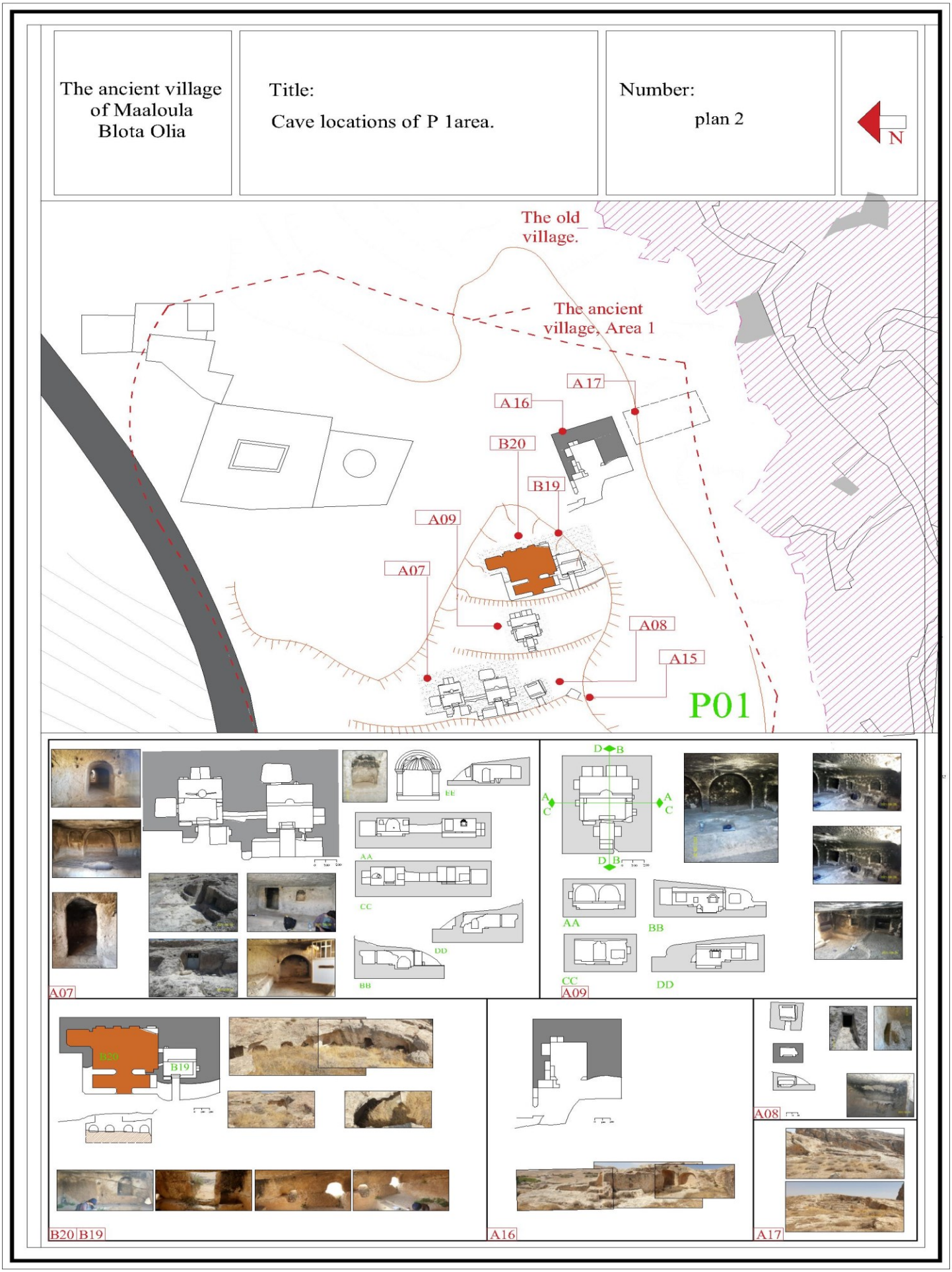


Figure 70: Plan 2, P1 area, caves' location, by the author.

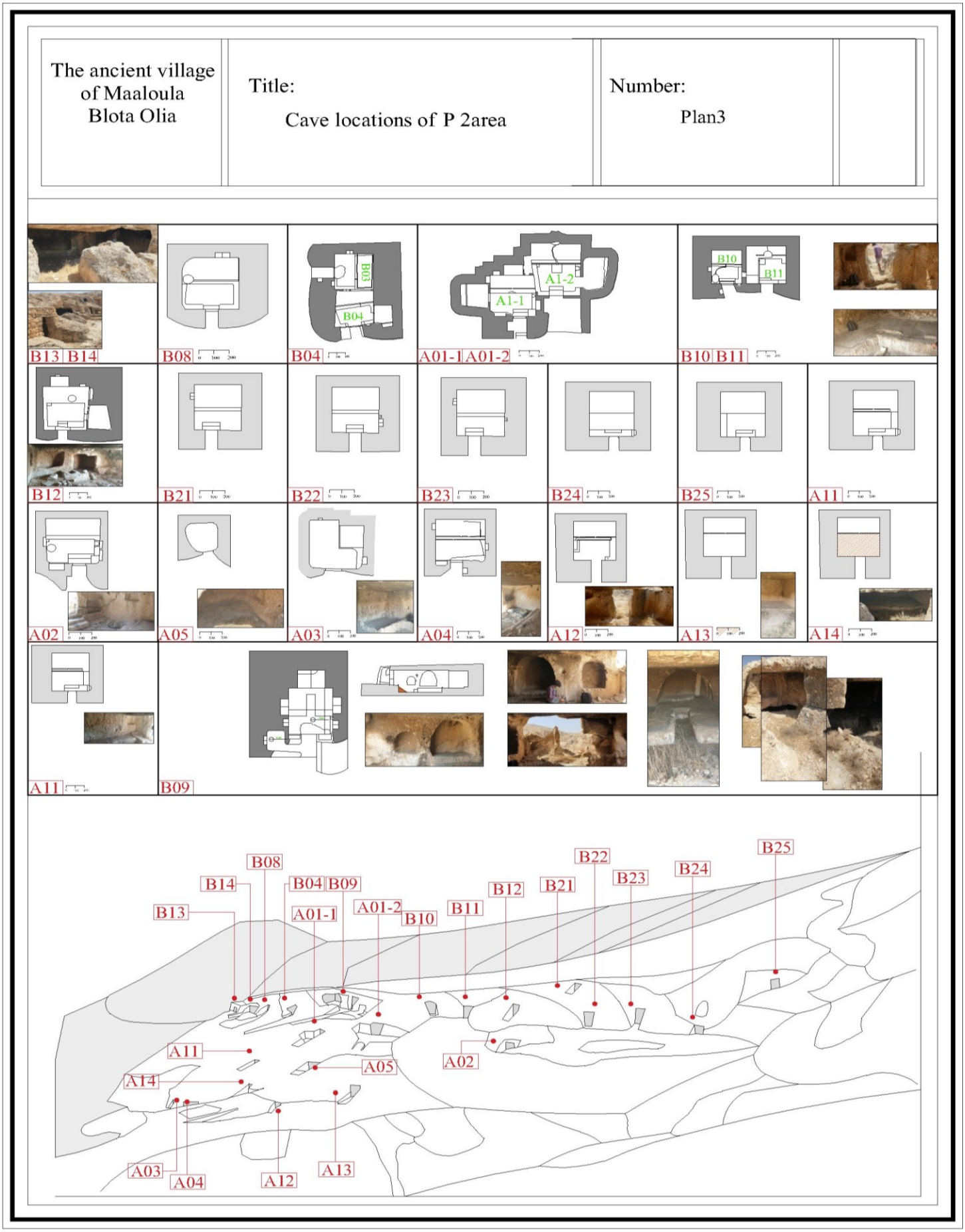


Figure 71: Plan 3, Area P2, caves location, by the author.

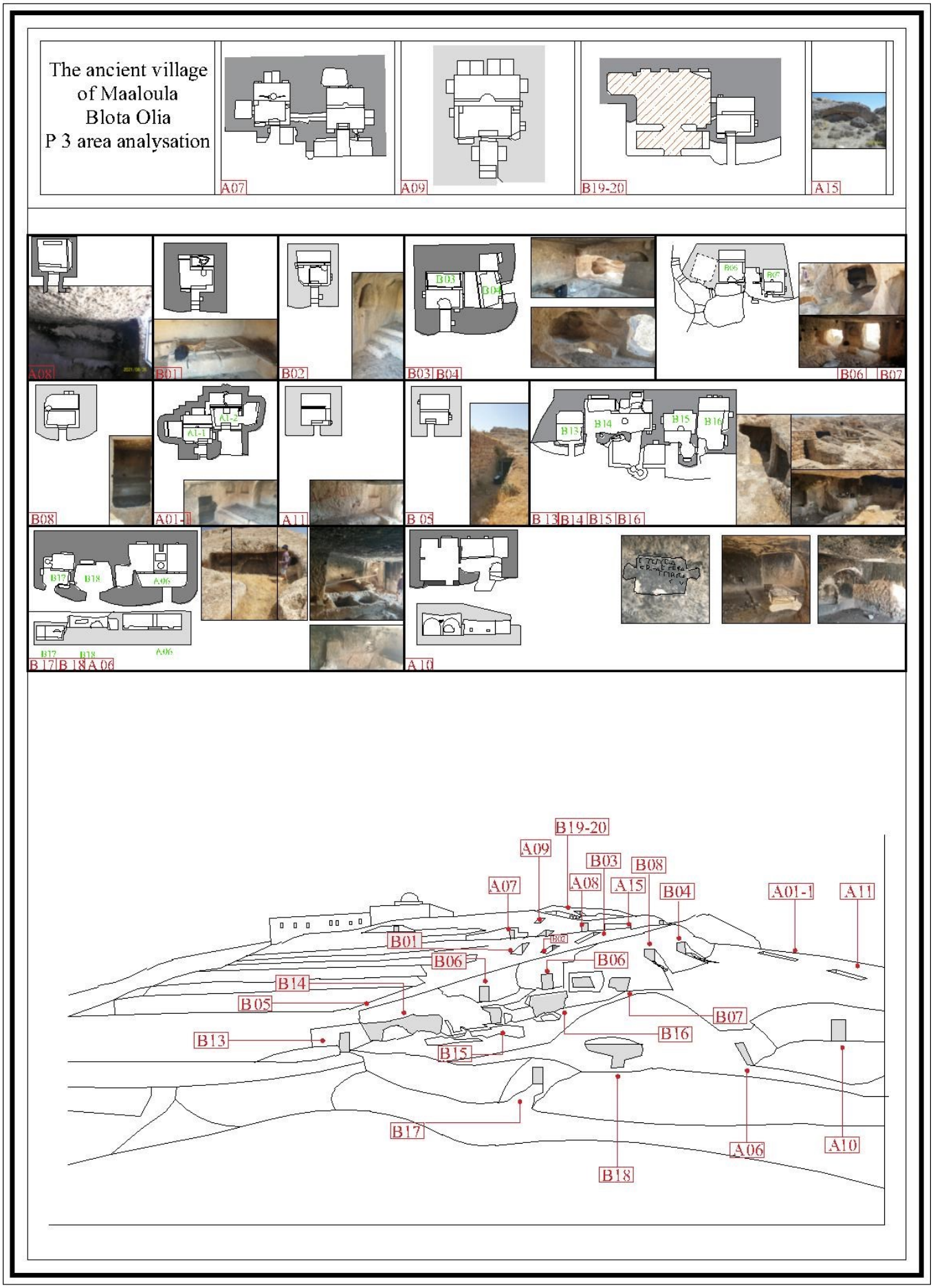


Figure 72: Plan 4, Area P3 analysis, by the author.

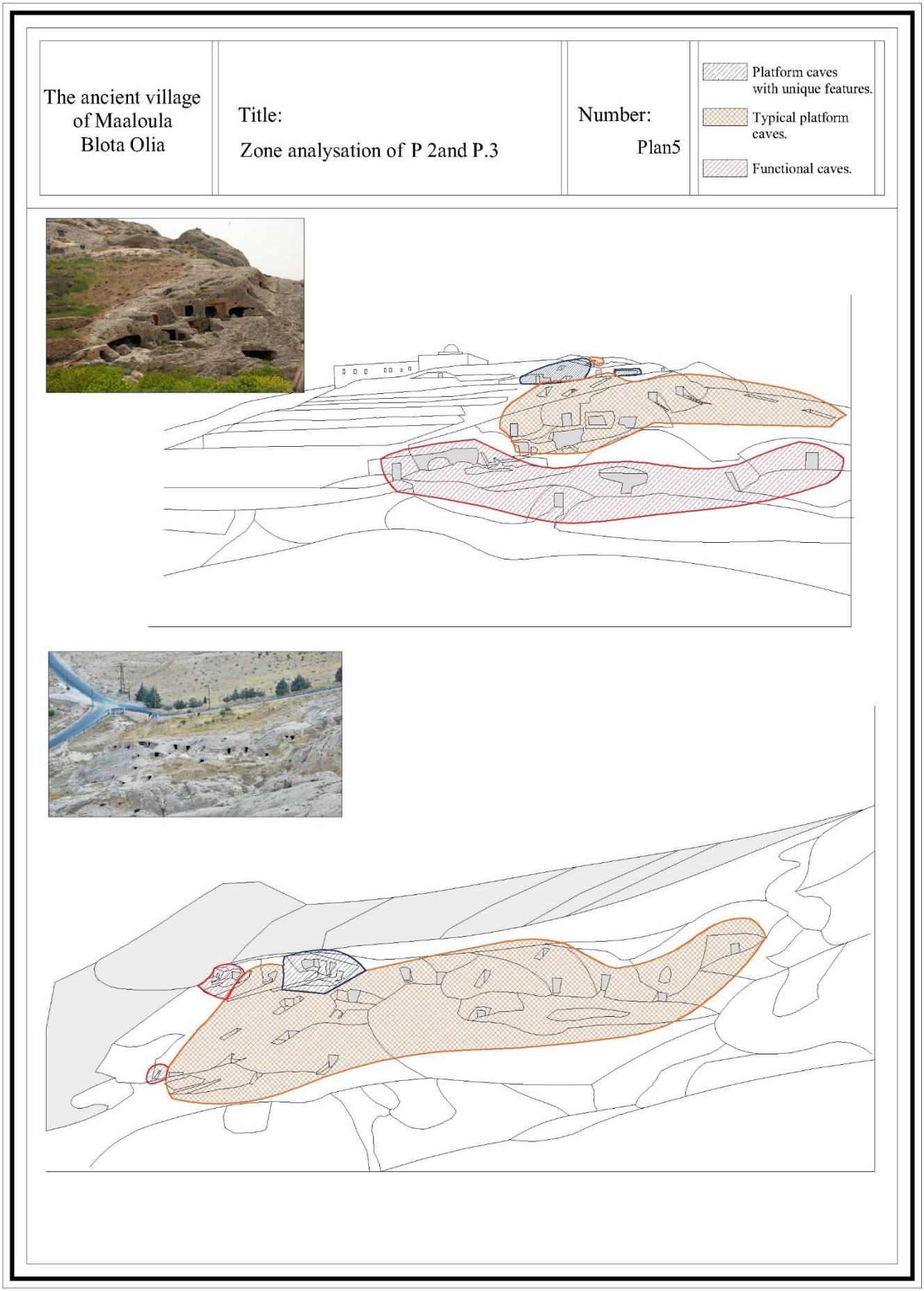


Figure 73: Plan 5 presents the Zone analysis of the P2 and P3 area by the author.

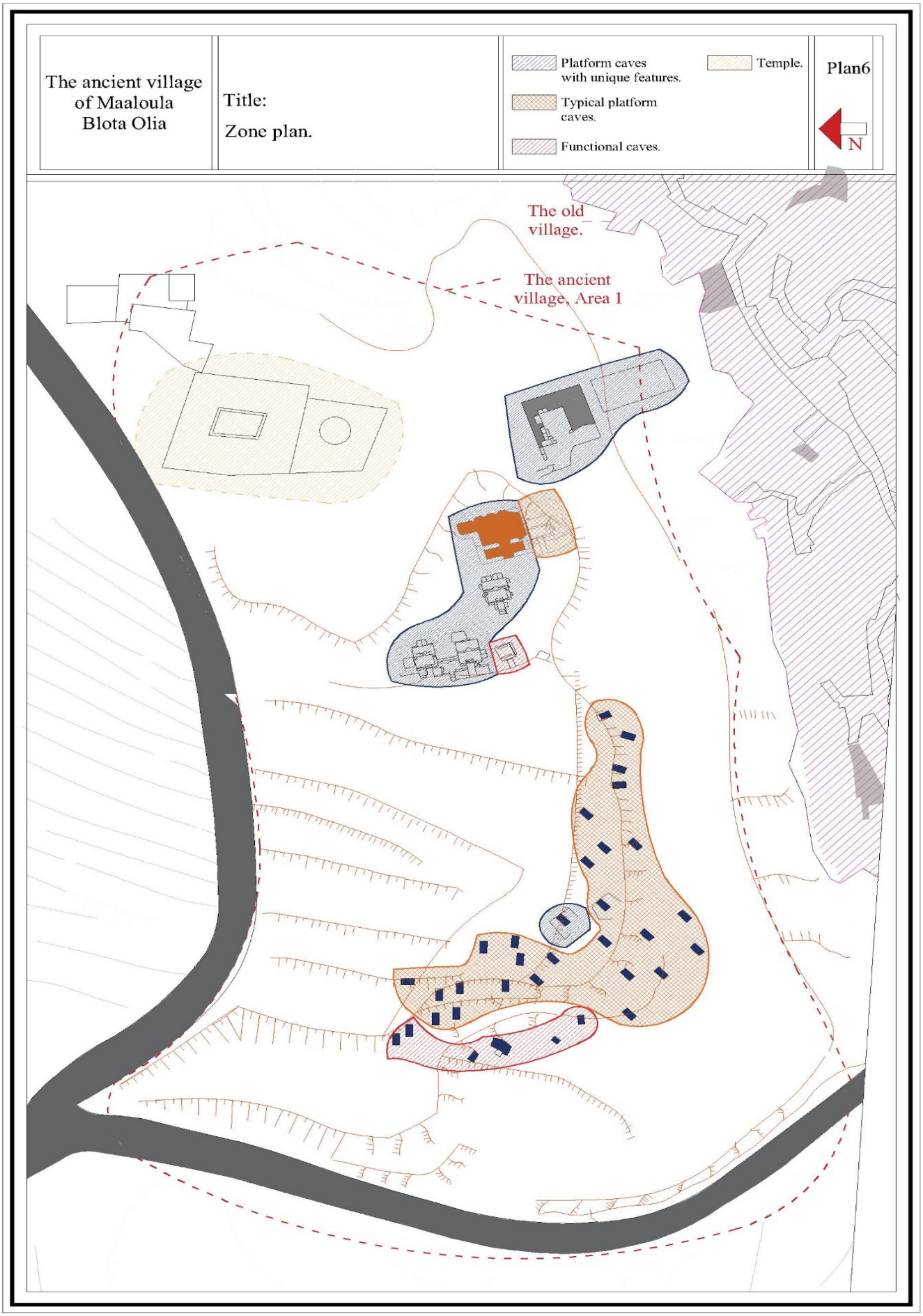


Figure 74: Plan 6, Zone plan, by the author.

Chapter 7 - Heritage Identity and Conservation Strategies for Maaloula

7.1. Introduction

Whether they have developed progressively over time or been created intentionally, all urban settlements express the societies' diversity throughout history. This article concerns Maaloula as a historic urban area, an ancient town, and its old centres, as well as its natural and artificial environments. Further, in their part as historical documents, these components represent the values of traditional urban cultures. Many of these locations are currently in danger of becoming physically degenerated, damaged, or even destroyed due to urbanisation, which accompanies industrialisation in many countries, as well as the effects of conflict, in the case of Syria.

Maaloula is a hidden Syrian town located in the Qalamoun Mountains, situated between the Damascus Plain and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. It is located 1600 meters above sea level, far from the main roads. The town is surrounded by two narrow gorges and built amphitheatrically on the cliff's edge. This environment gives Maaloula its unique character, where old townhouses are superimposed and partially carved out of the rock. Narrow lanes and irregular stairs connect the houses, creating a labyrinth only locals know. There are two kinds of axes in the ancient town. The main axes lead from the neighbourhood to the court, crossing in the centre near the Saint Lawandious church. At the same time, the auxiliary lanes are a crossing net that reaches the houses. The roads were established for pedestrians and animals (donkeys and horses) since they were crucial to people's way of life, mainly peasants. Many caves are excavated in the rock, primarily Roman-Byzantine tombs, but others served as habitats from prehistoric times. Persecuted Christians and the widely disseminated monasticism found sanctuary in these caverns.

The settlement receives water from several springs that enable irrigation of the south-facing valley. Maaloula experiences drought like the rest of Syria, although it maintains its image as a pleasant garden with healthy air quality. Nowadays, most Maaloulties reside in Damascus or abroad, and few young people visit the town year-round, contrary to the elderly. However, the Maaloula individuals who live there have either a new or an old house where they spend their summers and vacations, which is ideal for bringing the family closer together (Aldaher, 2021, p. 146).

The town faces numerous issues, including the deterioration of heritage structures and gaps in urban patterns resulting from urban evolution and inappropriate interventions. Additionally, the deterioration of the historic structure and the implementation of restoration and maintenance distort the old town's perspective.

Despite the town's importance to researchers, Christian pilgrims, and visitors, it needs to be equipped with specific services and tourism paths. Due to the current situation and the lack of information about the town's sites, most visitors only visit the two monasteries, missing the opportunity to explore the old town. Although the old town in Maaloula has attractive structures, the absence of tourist signs makes it difficult to visit, despite its numerous attractions and important buildings. Furthermore, more public transportation is needed in frequency and variety from outside the village. Additionally, there is a lack of transportation within the town to move between the sites.

7.2. The place identity

The identity of a distinct town is an evolving concept that develops over time, encompassing various factors, including its architecture, history, environment, and socio-cultural context. Therefore, understanding the local identity of any unique town is essential for conserving its character. Traditionally, monument preservation was regarded as the primary focus of conservation, leading to an emphasis on individual buildings and, at times, an arbitrary selection of protected elements within older urban structures. However, the planning tradition's tendency to prioritise technical and quantitative aspects has hindered a comprehensive understanding of urban conservation (Larkham, 1996).

The notion of identity entered urban studies in the 1960s (Rifaioğlu & Güçhan, 2007, p. 1102). As a result, many scholars began to refer to the concept of *genius loci*, the idea of place identity, a tangible and intangible quality perceived and acknowledged by people. *Genius loci* reflect the intangible value that connects individuals to a specific place. Rather than defining *genius loci* at the scale of an entire town, Worskett emphasised that each place requires a distinctive strategy, aiming to preserve the personality and individuality of towns (Worskett, 1969, p. 8). Similarly, Conzen noted that every landscape develops a distinctive *genius locus*, whether in a large area like a country or a small community like a market village (Conzen, 1966, p. 68).

Aldo Rossi introduced a new perspective to the discussion of character and identity. According to Rossi, decisions regarding interventions should be based on local circumstances and the inherent characteristics of the place. Consequently, *locus solus* cannot be determined through

general criteria for urban planning interventions applied uniformly across a city (Rossi, 1982, p. 29). The evolution of a settlement's identity combines human lives, cultures, materials, and the settlement's physical environment. Furthermore, linkages between buildings and their functions help to distinguish one location from another and forge a sense of local identity (Jiven & Larkham, 2003, pp. 68-70).

As a result, place identity defines a specific location through its physical characteristics, such as position, layout, form, and texture, as well as intangible aspects, including memory, emotions, and meanings.

7.3. International charters concerning the location's spirit

The International organisations were motivated to develop international charters for historic towns and urban areas. That defines the principles, purposes, and techniques necessary for conserving historic settlements and urban areas in these dramatic circumstances, frequently resulting in irreversible cultural, social, and even economic losses. Additionally, it aims to enhance the harmony of both private and social life in these places and promote preservation of cultural properties, no matter how insignificant in scope, which preserve humanity's memory.

As stipulated in the UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas (UNESCO, 1976), and also in many other international implements, 'The Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas' (ICOMOS, 1987). These charters outline the necessary actions for protecting, conserving, and restoring cities and settlements, as well as promoting their growth and harmonious adaptation to contemporary life.

Parallel to urban morphologists, international organisations that deal with cultural heritage protection have concentrated on the identity principle and declared their aims through charters and declarations. In this context, the Athens Charter (1933) is one of the premature documents emphasising that restoration work should respect the historical or artistic buildings' character (CIAM, 1946).

International papers were created in the mid-1970s to establish essential standards for codifying all physical and intangible representations of human action that, having gained value, need to be safeguarded. Numerous texts supported the inclination to broaden the protected property types while preserving their cultural identity, such as the Palermo Charter 1990, the Tlaxala Declaration 1982, Paris Recommendation 1989, and the Oaxaca Declaration 1993 (Vecco, 2010).

The Charter for the Protection of Historic Cities, Washington Charter 1987, emphasises the preservation of historic cities, as they serve as vital historical records and represent the ideals of traditional urban culture, encompassing both material and spiritual qualities. The connections between the city and its neighbourhoods also represent these ideals. This agreement is novel since it identifies tangible and intangible values as the subject of protection (ICOMOS, 1987).

The Burra Charter (ICOMOS, 2013) is one of the vital texts that seek to preserve the protection of a site's cultural importance owing to its aesthetic, historical, scientific, or social worth. This charter advocates preserving the tangible and intangible heritage that promotes understanding of specific human values. The inherent worth of the item, which was the foundation for this decision for more than a century, has to be replaced by the capacity to perceive its aesthetic, historical, scientific, and social values.

Consequently, identity is the primary factor presenting distinctive qualities to a settlement or a local region. Therefore, conserving local identity is the primary barrier to implementing effective conservation measures in a historical context. As a result, when a settlement draws attention from around the world, such as Maaloula, the conservation project's first step should be to determine its identity in terms of protecting its unique characteristics.

7.4. The importance of urban conservation and sustainability

The urban conservation approach has become vital in response to the destruction of historical areas in many Syrian cities and the ongoing threats of further damage. However, the current preservation approach has lacked firm legislation and clear limits. Consequently, there has been a significant risk of improper restoration and redevelopment.

Moreover, the urban conservation approach must remain cautious toward change, introducing only the necessary interventions required to make an area usable, while minimising alterations to preserve its cultural significance. This principle forms the core of any approach that safeguards heritage sites.

Heritage tourism has emerged as one of the most popular tourism categories due to the global trend toward cultural tourism (Chen & Chen, 2010, p. 33). A transitional phase can now be identified, moving from product-led historic attraction development, focused on exhibitions and education, to more visitor-oriented development emphasising consumer choice and personal experiential quality (Apostolakis & Jaffry, 2005). The economic contribution of heritage resources represents one of the most effective means of achieving sustainable tourism

development. Accordingly, a thorough understanding of heritage tourist behaviour, particularly regarding heritage service attributes and tourist preferences, can provide valuable insights that enable heritage managers to formulate effective, sustainable development strategies (Chen & Chen, 2012). Heritage tourism is categorised into three groups: natural, cultural, and built tourism (Nicholls, et al., 2004). Tourists are drawn to all these categories; therefore, it is imperative to protect every type of heritage resource, both for present enjoyment and future generations, to ensure the sustainability of tourism in any country (Perera, 2015).

UNESCO has consistently addressed two crucial issues regarding the relationship between its World Heritage system and sustainability. It has expressed concern about the long-term viability of heritage sites, artefacts in public or private collections, or intangible heritage, amid increasing developmental pressures. For over a decade, UNESCO has emphasised the importance of local participation and commitment in conserving traditional cultural sites. It has encouraged the meaningful involvement of local communities and indigenous peoples in the nomination, designation, and management of sites for the World Heritage List, recognising their historical role as custodians of these places (Logan, 2017).

To develop more effective strategies for urban conservation, it is crucial to evaluate past and present experiences. Since Maaloula encompasses all three categories of heritage tourism, this significantly increases the importance of its conservation. It is therefore crucial to consider how methods and ideas developed elsewhere might be effectively adapted and applied in Maaloula for its long-term benefit.

7.5. Burra charter strategy

The Burra Charter can be applied to all places of cultural significance, including historic, natural, and Indigenous sites of cultural importance. The definition of Indigenous heritage encompasses both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Initially established in 1979, the Charter has undergone several revisions to reflect advancements in the theory and practice of cultural heritage management. It outlines the procedures for assessing, preparing, and managing places of cultural value and was last adopted in its current form in 2013.

The Australian Natural Heritage Charter aims to engage local communities in rehabilitation projects; hence, its first step is *to 'Ask First'*. This principle emphasises respect for original heritage places, their values, and their significance. Furthermore, it involves assessing the significance of collections and encourages consultation with residents and stakeholders when new activities may affect Indigenous heritage places. The *Ask First* approach ensures that

Indigenous peoples receive the necessary information to make informed decisions regarding managing their heritage, whether they are traditional owners or interested community members (Collett, & Pocock , 2012, 6). The primary objective is to strengthen the relationship between people and their heritage sites, as this connection forms a fundamental aspect of heritage conservation.

The second step is the **survey**, similar to the methods employed in conservation projects within historical urban contexts in many countries. This comprehensive approach involves surveying, analysing, and conserving historic towns and areas. The methodology is restructured to reflect the local identity of a region, considering its socio-cultural, economic, historical, administrative, physical, and environmental characteristics, as well as the study area and building scales (Rifaioğlu & Güçhan, 2007).

The documentation phase is an essential initial step in any urban conservation project, enabling a better understanding and recognition of local identity. This phase comprises both the pre-survey and the survey stages. The pre-survey includes extensive research that gathers all available photographic, historical, oral, and written documentation illustrating the diverse characteristics of the site. Subsequently, maps at various scales and questionnaire sheets related to buildings and social groups are prepared to facilitate data collection during fieldwork. As a result, the maps and data sheets form a comprehensive database that contains essential information about the site's characteristics, serving as the foundation for subsequent project phases.

In the survey stage, survey sheets and social questionnaires are employed to collect data on the settlement. This method guides observers in documenting the numerous dimensions and components of the urban context, including architectural details vital for understanding materials, structural and building methods, and residents' attitudes toward the site and its historic structures. Following the data collection phase, the information accumulated from both the pre-survey and survey stages should be systematically analysed and evaluated in the subsequent stages.

The Charter emphasises the importance of distinguishing between different types of site works and defining the appropriate intervention for each case. The Burra Charter introduces several key definitions, such as *conservation*, *maintenance*, and *repair,* each of which is essential in guiding urban conservation projects. In addition to structural elements, interior features are also considered fundamental. Their removal is prohibited unless necessary for temporary

preservation and security during treatment or exhibition, for cultural reasons, for health and safety purposes, or to protect the site (ICOMOS, 2013).

Finally, not all elements within a conservation area necessarily contribute to its overall significance. The loss of any building or element that provides positive enrichment to the conservation area should be addressed with a carefully considered approach, considering the relative importance of the affected element and its contribution to the area as a whole (England, 2011).

7.5.1. Yangzhou/ China case study

China is progressing very quickly. There has been a tremendous amount of building activity, including the development of new urban districts, demolition, and inner-city reconstruction, due to rapid economic expansion and urbanisation. Historic neighbourhoods are disappearing from many cities, causing a loss of cultural heritage. Yangzhou has a significant historical area of 5.1 km², with approximately 110,000 inhabitants, characterised by 1- to 2-storey courtyard houses and narrow roads and alleys. The municipality has long taken great care to maintain the ancient city area after realising the historical and economic worth of the old inner city. The municipal government, supported by GTZ and German Technical Cooperation, preserved the historic district and introduced the concept of "Sustainable Urban Conservation" to restore the old city. This concept aims to improve the quality of life for people who live in traditional urban neighbourhoods by redeveloping these spaces and fostering self-help projects (Zhu & Goethert, 2015). Table 5 presents the main points of the project.

Table 5: Yangzhou sustainable urban conservation project

Size of the city	4,414,681	Duration	2004-2007
Size of the project	110000, 5.1 km2		
The principal function of the city	Communist Party Chief and Mayor	Main actors	Local Government, Supranational/ Intergovernmental Institutions, Private Sector, NGO / Philanthropy
Diagnosis status	In 5.1 km², Yangzhou's Old City has approximately 117 sites of cultural significance. The Old City structures are conserved and safeguarded,		

Problems	Yangzhou's urban and commercial growth raises concerns about erroneous expansion near and perhaps within the Old City, where new construction is being established adjacent to the Old City's border. Redevelopment initiatives frequently result in the displacement of most of the population in many Chinese cities. Hence, many citizens have relocated to newer structures in the "New City" due to the deteriorating structures in the Old City.
objectives	This project aims to provide a sustainable urban conservation model that links historical preservation to improving people's quality of life via neighbourhood redevelopment and support for self-help initiatives. Moreover, a long-term strategy has been developed and evaluated using a collaborative and process-focused technique. A community action plan must provide a guarantee that indigenous people participate in renovating the Old City. The difficulty of this issue is developing a strategy to attain the original inhabitants' comprehension and promote their involvement as "investment partners" in the restoration process.
Implementation	The first method employed was the Community Action Planning (CAP) technique, which involves connecting local government decision-makers, technical personnel, and community members in planning, decision-making, and agreement on priorities for action. By considering all stakeholders' opinions, they establish sustainable concepts for improvement and define priorities for short, medium, and long-term actions. Secondly, workshops for community action planning provide participants with a sense of "ownership" over the development process, promoting a sense of shared responsibility and mobilising the resources that are already available from both the public and private sectors.
Management and tools	Increasing knowledge of the Old City was achieved through workshops; residents and representatives from various institutions with an interest

	in the area attended the sessions. The questions: "What would you be proud to show visiting relatives or tourists? What characteristics would you wish to impart to your children?" were the core of the session. A lane survey was conducted to update information on the surface conditions and roadway, in preparation for a thorough inventory. Examining the problems, all workshop attendees reviewed the challenges that needed to be addressed and made recommendations for what should be done, who should be held accountable, what financial resources might be available, and what policies should support them. The recommended upgrading guidelines formed the basis of the pilot neighbourhood improvement project. The rules have been clarified and condensed into a concise and approachable structure that will serve as the standard for the ancient city. The guideline is a straightforward visual matrix that aims to provide clear, understandable models for experts and laypeople during an upgrade procedure. They offer a model for updating standards and calculating related expenditures.
funding	Yangzhou Municipal Government supplied costs for infrastructure refinement. GIZ provided local subsidies, and community members paid for the renovation of their houses.

Result and impact	Raise the residents' awareness about the Old City and cultural heritage conservation and reach a consensus about the community's current challenges. The municipal authority paid close attention to the locals' comments, embraced and approved the ideas and participation approach, and has worked to expand and utilise it throughout the entire Old City. The homes of the locals have been renovated, and the open areas and infrastructure of the older communities have been enhanced. Moreover, the participative method in Yangzhou has been adopted as a model throughout China. By the end of 2007, when the pilot area had been upgraded, individuals had chosen to stay in the region because of the higher quality of life (Schmidt, 2007).

This project was chosen as a case study for many reasons. First, the shared points with the town of Maaloula. Regardless of the project size, people in Yangzhou, before the project, abandoned the old neighbourhoods for the new districts due to low living standards for those of low income, which is a similar issue in Maaloula. Furthermore, the adaptation of the sustainable urban conservation project is an essential issue in terms of global vision. Moreover, the project assumed the main point of the Burra Charter: that stakeholders are the base of the project. Due to these factors, Yangzhou's sustainable urban conservation plan is an excellent example to observe in Maaloula, considering its successful consequences on the site.

7.5.2. Hermoupolis, Greece

Hermoupolis is the capital of Syros and the insular complex of the Cyclades. It has a neoclassical romantic ambience that artfully blends Western European and ancient Greek influences. In addition to its historical importance, the town's architecture makes it an open-air museum worth navigating from side to side. It is a multicultural town with a unique character, boasting excellent tourism infrastructure and facilities. The island's cultural festival constitutes one of its main cultural institutions and a benchmark for its guests. It is a festival held annually during the summer, adding even more cultural significance to the island. (Cultural Heritage in Action institution, 2010). Table 6 presents the main points of the 100 buildings =100 stories.

Table 6: Hermoupolis 100 buildings=100 stories project

Size of the city	13,737 inhabitants	Duration	Ongoing since 2010
Size of the project	110000, 11.2km2		
The principal function of the city	Hermoupolis is the chief port of the island of Syros.		
Diagnosis status	The 100 Building: 100 Stories initiative seeks to preserve the architectural and cultural significance of historic structures. A building's qualitative worth, or its story, may be preserved by the local community in addition to its technical preservation.		
Problems	Hermoupolis, a historic city, boasts a rich architectural legacy, much of which is in danger of being lost or deteriorating.		
Objectives	The project aims to transform the conservation management plan from a sterile process by professionals and public authorities to an interactive, creative, and participatory approach. Foster locals' sense of community and encourage tourists to learn about Hermopolis' past.		
Implementation Management and tools	The city combined the contributory digital tool into its system for local digital heritage. The tool allows citizens to share their memories and tales about a building. Users are prompted to either contribute a story, suggest a building for the list, or do both using the web portal. Additionally, users may submit music, video, and images. The accounts are recorded and kept on a website. The related building is then marked with a QR symbol. Visitors may scan the sign with their smartphones to learn the building's history as seen by the neighbourhood. A new outreach strategy aims to raise citizens' awareness of their contribution to the city's collective memory, complemented by public events and participatory workshops that enable them to learn about, evaluate, and improve the initiative.		

Funding	90% of the funds from the European Union and the Council of Europe's call for stories for European Heritage Days. The HERMES NGO funded 10% of the project in cooperation with municipalities, cultural organisations, and institutions.
Result and impact	It encourages residents' interest in learning about the histories of Hermopolis' structures, promotes awareness of the fragility of the community's legacy, and enables it to be acknowledged. The project increases a sense of place belonging and fosters a sense of community heritage ownership. Additionally, it enables the community to form its own opinions on the conservation management strategy moving forward. Furthermore, it fosters cooperation among people, public schools, universities, and cultural groups.

This project seeks to conserve the architectural and cultural significance of heritage buildings. Moreover, it connects the building's qualitative value and the narrative it conveys, which the local community can preserve. This case can be expressed in Maaloula; hence, it has many important buildings and places with stories connected to its history, and the people there continue to narrate them, which is essential for expressing Maaloula in the eyes of the indigenous people.

7.5.3. Göreme National Park and the Rock Sites of Cappadocia (Turkey)

Göreme National Park and the Rock Sites of Cappadocia, situated in central Anatolia, represent one of the most extraordinary cultural landscapes in the world, where geological formations and human creativity have formed an inseparable unity. The region is characterised by its unique volcanic topography, tuff cones, pillars, and so-called “fairy chimneys”, formed through millennia of erosion. From prehistoric times to the Byzantine era, inhabitants carved dwellings, churches, and entire monastic complexes into the soft volcanic rock, creating a living testament to the adaptation of human settlement to its natural environment. Table 7 presents the main points of the Göreme National Park and the Rock Sites of Cappadocia.

Table 7: Göreme National Park and the Rock Sites of Cappadocia (Turkey)

Size of the city	consists of six sites Mixed (Cultural & Natural)	Duration	
Size of the project	Total Area: 9,884 ha Buffer Zone: 9,29 ha		
The principal function of the city	1. Göreme National Park: the core area, including the Göreme Valley and monastic complexes. 2. Derinkuyu Underground City: an extensive subterranean settlement used for refuge and habitation. 3. Kaymaklı Underground City: another large multi-level underground city with ventilation shafts and stables. 4. Karlık Church Area: a small monastic group with carved churches and frescoes. 5. Yeşilöz Theodoro Church Area: an isolated rock-cut church and settlement remains. 6. Soğanlı Archaeological Site: a valley with numerous churches, pigeon houses, and rock-cut dwellings.		
Diagnosis status	The site was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1985 under criteria (i), (iii), (v), and (vii) as a mixed property, recognised for its outstanding universal value combining cultural and natural heritage (UNESCO, 1985). More than two hundred rock-hewn churches decorated with frescoes, underground cities, and troglodyte villages illustrate continuous human occupation from the Hittite period through the Christian monastic era.		
Objectives	The conservation approach focuses on safeguarding the fragile tuff formations and the authenticity of the rock-cut monuments. Restoration works on churches, dwellings, or façades must stick to the conservation guidelines approved by the councils. All projects require comprehensive documentation before implementation.		

	The management plan prohibits activities that could endanger the geological integrity of the landscape, such as quarrying, large-scale excavations, or unregulated vehicle access within valleys.
Implementation Management and tools	- The conservation plan integrates tourism within a sustainable development framework to manage this intense visitation. - Zoning regulations limit the location and capacity of hotels and other tourist facilities. - Large new structures are banned within the core conservation area, and traditional cave dwellings are encouraged to be reused as small-scale guesthouses or cultural centres. - The aim is to combine heritage preservation with local economic benefits while avoiding visual or structural intrusions into the rock landscape. - Tourism infrastructure development is thus permitted only under strict guidelines. Hotels or accommodations must respect room capacity limitations and maintain architectural harmony with the surroundings. - Visitor paths, interpretation panels, and rest areas are designed to distribute tourist flow and minimise erosion. - Balloon-flight operations are regulated by daily limits and designated take-off zones to reduce environmental disturbance (Aktaş, et al., 2019).
Funding	The site's conservation and management are jointly funded by the Turkish government through the Ministries of Culture and Tourism and of Environment, with additional support from UNESCO, EU projects such as *UNDERGROUND4VALUE*, and revenues generated from tourism and entrance fees. This integrated funding model sustains restoration, monitoring, and community-based heritage initiatives in the region.

Result and impact	The conservation framework in Göreme has successfully preserved the authenticity of the rock-cut landscape and maintained the cultural fabric's integrity. Restoration and management projects have enhanced documentation, visitor control, and adaptive reuse of traditional cave dwellings. Moreover, combining local communities and tourism revenues has strengthened regional development, making Göreme an internationally recognised model for sustainable management of rock-cut heritage.

One contemporary project includes Göreme as a pilot case study to demonstrate how underground and rock-cut heritage can contribute to sustainable regional development. This project encourages heritage reuse, community participation, and the creation of management models that balance conservation with tourism and local livelihoods (UNDERGROUND4VALUE, 2021)

The management plan also includes community engagement. Residents are encouraged to participate in decision-making through heritage-awareness programmes and sustainable-tourism training. Including local crafts and agricultural products in the tourism economy helps support the long-term preservation of both tangible and intangible cultural values.

7.6. Defining Maaloula's identity

Maaloula has a population of 5,000 and 1,000 families. In winter, only 1,500 people lived in the town, where people live, work, or study. Due to the religious festival, they occasionally increased to around 10000 in the summer months (Arnold, et al., 2004, p. 8)After the armed conflict in the town, the number of residents decreased to 1500 people around the year (UNDP, 2015). The unique features of the local place are the primary factors that draw attention to the area, including geography, agriculture, archaeology, vernacular architecture, religion, and language.

Consequently, Maaloula is a Christian town that combines tangible and intangible elements. The geological formations in the Maaloula region are among the important geological sites classified by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites in need of conservation (Sattout, 2020). The settlement features archaeological sites dating back to the Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic periods.

The ancient part of the town has 49 caves carved in stone. Historically, the carved units used as dwellings, storerooms, and stables demonstrate an advanced understanding of local geology and spatial adaptation, which has not been studied before. Those caves form a significant part of Maaloula's tangible heritage and reflect the earliest interaction between human settlement and the landscape, representing the initial stage of the town's development. As such, they form the material nucleus from which the later urban fabric evolved. The continuity between the hewn architecture and the built houses in the old town reinforces the concept of Maaloula as a living settlement where natural and cultural layers coexist.

The old town has 12 churches and shrines, most of which were built on pagan temples, and features remarkable vernacular architecture, encouraging travellers to describe the houses in their papers. The town's valuable intangible heritage is expressed in numerous practices. The religious festivals are part of a "tradition reinvention" that seeks to promote and renovate what still belongs to popular culture in Syria. The public is aware that their festivals are among the last of this type and intend to preserve their authentic character. The festive sequence lasts 25 days, starting every year on 13 September and remaining till 6 October. During this, the two Christian Churches celebrate a typical feast, that of the Cross, then their respective patron saint celebration (Chiffoleau, 2006).

Furthermore, Maaloula is one of many towns that still use Aramaic; the surrounding villages, which converted to Islam, began to lose their language. Nevertheless, many linguists have commented that their Aramaic differs from that of Maaloula's, not only in its oral usage but also in its written form. Besides the Aramaic usage, the importance of keeping the language till the present day is emphasised.

The local community participates in the town's famous practices and routines. They have a traditional ritual that they illustrate every year. Moreover, indigenous people have preserved some traditional agricultural practices, such as vine cultivation, sumac harvesting, and beekeeping, in addition to their use of traditional house food supplements and wine production.

Through an international reputation, these characteristics together create a unique settlement. As a result, the different components become dominant factors that illustrate the place's identity, distinguishing it from the surrounding provinces. International concern was raised when Maaloula was registered on the UNESCO Guidelines or tentative list on 8 June 1999. The knowledge, connection, dedication, and significance that inhabitants identify with a place may all be summed up as residents' place identity. Residents' attitudes and behavioural

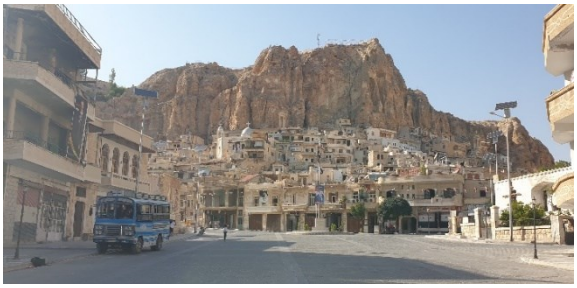


Figure 81: *The old town overview, by the author.*

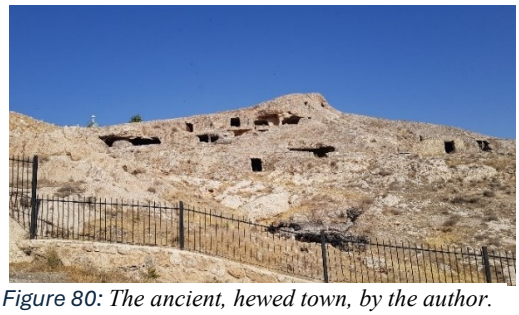


Figure 80: *The ancient, hewed town, by the author.*



Figure 78: *Vernacular architecture in the old town, by the author.*



Figure 79: *Overlapped houses in the old town, by the author.*



Figure 77: *Vernacular architecture in the old town, by the author.*



Figure 75: *The Western Gorge, by the author.*



Figure 76: *The eastern gorge, connected in the local narrative with the St. Thecla flee tale, by the author.*

intentions towards taking part in local tourism are frequently explained by place identification. As a result, the indigenous people of Maaloula are aware of its importance, which impacts their behaviour and value the co-creation process. Photos 75-81 present different parts of the town.

7.7. Conservation projects in Maaloula

Many projects were implemented before and after the army conflict in the town; many aimed at empowering the residents and the historical features of the town. Between 1976 and 1998, the Maaloula Hotel was built on top of the cliff over the old town, between St. Sergius and St. Thecla monasteries. In 2009, the Syrian Government, Rif Dimashq Governorate, started the planning project for Al-Tal, Saydnaya and Maaloula regions. The project aims to create religious tourism in the region and create cultural trails connecting the towns with religious and archaeological importance. Many plans were drawn that show the main settlements and their significance, but projects still needed to be constructed (Abo Zaidan, 2018). Rif Dimashq Governorate launched the Rehabilitation and Management of the Historic Town of Maaloula Site project in 2011. The project included rehabilitating the infrastructure of sewage, water, telephone, and electricity networks. However, the work is currently suspended due to the circumstances. Regardless of the absence of an architectural approach to follow in the restoration of this project, there was no reliance on the local labour force and no benefit from the townspeople's distinguished experiences in the ongoing restoration work.

Many projects were launched after the town's armed conflict to support individuals. In 2015, UNDP provided a rehabilitation project to remove debris from the town and restore 200 houses. The Syrian Trust for Development project also provided small loans to support small projects and students. The operational projects presented were distributed among the purchase of livestock, beehives, poultry, support for shops, workshop tools, and agricultural equipment, in other words, individual support.

In 2017, the Eastern Christians Organisation SOS founded the Vineyard Revival Project, the start of work on a project to revive the cultivation of vine and sumac in Maaloula. The project was extended for five years, starting in October 2017. In 2018, a small sewing workshop was constructed with local finance. The project empowers the women who reside in Maaloula. Another small project for household supplies of Maaloula products, such as Sumaq, pomegranate molasses, apple, grapes, and cider vinegar.

In 2021, in cooperation with the Governorate of Rif Dimashq and the Maaloula town Council, the Syrian Trust for Development launched an initiative to activate tourism investment in

Maaloula. The project aims to invest in real estate in or outside the old town. This initiative considers the participation of the local community a key element in the success of this work.

The weaknesses of these projects are their need for an integrated project in several phases, with the indigenous people being a prominent part of it to ensure its continuity and effectiveness. Conserving the regional characteristics of settlement in a globalised world requires considering identity conservation. Hence, urban conservation initiatives evaluate the significance of a historic urban context to maintain or enhance its character against damaging influences. Therefore, historic urban areas should be integrated into comprehensive economic and social development plans and urban and regional planning at all levels for greater effectiveness.

7.8. Syrian Heritage Legislation

On October 26, 1963, the Syrian Antiquities Law was enacted. Many changes were made, but the last modification was in 1999. The law defines antiquities as immovable and movable properties built, manufactured, produced, written, or drawn by man before two hundred years AD, or two hundred and six Hijri years. Moreover, the antiquities authorities can consider immovable or movable properties that date back to a more recent era as antiquities if they find historical, artistic, or national characteristics. Generally, the regulations define antiquities and their types. All immovable and movable antiquities and archaeological areas in the Syrian Arab Republic are considered public property of the state by law, except what has been proven by official documents.

Article 8 of the law stipulates that archaeological areas and buildings must be preserved when developing city and village planning projects. These projects should only be approved after obtaining the authorisation of the antiquity authorities concerning city planning and building permits. Article 10 stipulates that municipalities may only grant building and restoration licenses in places close to archaeological sites and historical buildings after obtaining the approval of antiquities authorities to ensure that new building styles are appropriate to the archaeological character.

Article 9 of the law stipulates that the relevant ministries, departments, and committees, when planning, improving or beautifying cities and villages with archaeological areas or historical buildings, must consider the easement rights established by the antiquity authorities. Hence, it is clear that the Syrian legislators are keen to protect antiquities from every intentional or unintentional sabotage. Therefore, the legislator restricted the relevant ministries, departments, and committees when developing projects for planning cities and villages to

implement the duties previously mentioned, and this expresses a keenness to protect antiquities and archaeological sites from encroachments, even if they are from a governmental entity.

Under the registration clause, chapter II, article 13 claims the role of antiquities authorities is embodied in determining what should be preserved concerning archaeological areas, historical buildings, or old neighbourhoods. This issue is to protect these areas and ensure their preservation due to their combination of original artistic characteristics, their indication of an era, and their association with important historical memories. These authorities must work to register them in the Register of Historical Areas and Buildings after the approval of the Antiquities Council and the issuance of a ministerial decision for registration. The registration decision stipulates the easement rights that are accrued from neighbouring properties.

Article 18 of the law stipulates that registered historical buildings not owned by the state remain in the owners' possession. They ensure that they will not use the buildings for purposes different from the original purpose for which they were established. Antiquities authorities allow their use for humanitarian or cultural purposes. Many antiquities, especially Damascene houses, have been transformed into galleries for drawings, filming sites for television, and platforms for lectures, seminars, and poetry evenings, which help revive these places. Unfortunately, some buildings have been converted into restaurants and nightclubs, where significant changes and destruction have occurred.

The terms of Maintenance and restoration claim that the authorities alone have the right to maintain and restore the immovable registered antiquities to preserve them and their elements and decorations. The owner or the disposer of the affairs has no right to object to that. The reforms and restorations arising from works and investments are carried out by the owner or administrator with the approval of the antiquity authorities and under their supervision, provided that he bears their expenses.

However, for the registered buildings and monuments belonging to the Ministry of Endowments or religious organisations, the Antiquities Authority funds to restore them, and half of the expenses are paid by the party to which the antiquity belongs. If the building does not belong to the state and is at risk of collapse or damage, the owner refuses to restore it. The antiquity authority may take the initiative to save and restore it from its budget. The owner pays off the debt and may also be exempted from paying these amounts by a decision of the Minister of Finance based on the proposal of the Minister of Culture (Article 22 of the Antiquities Law).

The law defines the easement rights of finding an unbuilt buffer around archaeological areas and historical buildings and determining the style of new or renovated buildings, for instance, the heights, materials and colours, for the new structures to be consistent with the old structures. This clause contains permission from antiquities authorities to open windows or balconies on historical buildings or archaeological areas (Article 14 of the Antiquities Law). On the other hand, the owner's duties of antiquities are illustrated as follows. By the provisions of the Antiquities Law, the owner of an immovable registered antiquity may not demolish it, move it in whole or in part, restore, renovate, or change the building in any way without a previous permit from the antiquity's authorities. In case of any violation, the antiquities authorities are responsible for restoring the historic building to its original state. The owner bears the expense, in addition to the penalty stipulated in the Antiquities Law (DGAM, 2015).

Consequently, the law aims to protect the antiquities materially and morally by illustrating the relation between the owners and the authorities and providing their rights and duties, even in some architectural details such as height and colour.

Restoration of archaeological sites in Syria began in the 1930s in some sites, such as Palmyra and continued after that. The restoration of archaeological finds began with foreign excavation missions restoring their finds. Then the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) became involved in these works, and recently it has been able to carry out most types of delicate restoration. Notably, most of the restoration work in Syria is carried out by the DGAM and partly by the directorates of endowments and provincial councils that own some archaeological sites. The Antiquities Law, in its articles (22) and (23), dealt with the most important administrative and legal controls in implementing restoration work. The Directorate of Archaeological Sites Management, the Directorate of Engineering for Restoration and Maintenance, and the archaeological departments in the governorates are responsible for managing and maintaining archaeological sites and buildings within their natural and urban surroundings.

Since the absence of urban conservation in Syria, conservation and restoration projects have focused on individual buildings and structures. The safeguarded method needs development and a turning point to investigate the historic site and sizable areas. However, this change cannot be a smooth transition when more comprehensive conservation programmes are required. Particular attention is given to the restoration after creating a special restoration approach for each city in Syria in cooperation between the DGAM and municipalities, issued by the Ministry of Local Administration (MOLA), which can be considered the first step in

this work. The restoration approaches were created in 1996, considering the features of each city and town. These approaches define the restoration methods and materials. Though Syrian cities have different components and materials, the restoration approach has the same structure for all governorates in Syria, with the primary aim of protecting as much of the original styles of the cities as possible.

7.8.1. Restoration Approaches in the Old Town of Maaloula

Maaloula is listed on the UNESCO tentative lists according to the Criteria for Selection (v) and (vi) (UNESCO, 1999). The criteria illustrate that Maaloula is an extraordinary instance of a traditional human settlement and is directly or tangibly related to events, living traditions, thoughts, or beliefs, with artistic and literary works of exceptional universal significance (UNESCO, 2004). Nationally, the town was listed by three decisions; the old town was registered in the heritage sites list in Rif Dimashq Governorate. First, in 1966, considering the archaeological area stretching between St. Sergius Monastery and St. Thecla Monastery, bounded from the west by the rocky slope of the old town and from the north by the road separating this area from the vineyard plains, in addition to the tombs area. The second decision was made in 1976, considering the eastern gorge and the old town. The third decision was made in 2006 to register Saint Thecla Monastery and the western gorge (Hadad, 2011). Thus, the whole old town and its surrounding area are registered, and it is controlled by the building system of DGAM in cooperation with Rif Dimashq Governorate. The old town and the surrounding area are inhabited areas with critical tourist sites that need continuous development. The restoration and reconstruction approach investigates the work allowed in the registered area to preserve the town's heritage, architectural themes, and urban fabric. The approach has three main articles (MOLA, 2010):

Articles 1 and 3 illustrate definitions and administrative issues, including the committees, the members, their responsibilities, and a group of idioms used in the procedure. On the contrary, Article No. 2 discusses the architectural and site works; more details are provided considering the building's borders, area, and height. Accordingly, the cadastral plan and official real estate descriptions are reliable to define the properties' borders and heights in the old town.

The approach defines that restoration and rebuilding authorisations are allowed in the old town to obtain, illustrated under spaces, unification, and secretion terms. These authorisations can be received separately or together for one estate to keep the original borders of the building, courtyards, and terraces, as they are in the cadastral plan. Moreover, it is authorised to merge properties for a distinguished small project unless this merger changes the property's plan,

including the height, dimensions, and interior and exterior spaces (courtyards and terraces). This statute follows law No. 9 of 1974, in addition to the need for the approval of the preservation and technical committees. The heights of the pre-approval rebuilding estate can be reconstructed at the original height. It can be established harmoniously with the neighbourhood, and the neighbours' rights can be respected if the original heights are unknown.

The architectural and construction conditions of the approach mainly concern the construction issues, where most details present examples of local conditions that could be faced during the restoration works in an attempt to keep the site work as much under control.

Therefore, all the interior infractions, the distorted added parts, and the added parts in the courtyards and terraces have to be removed. Besides saving the estate's original outline and keeping the courtyards as in the Cadaster plan. Although adding (bathroom, kitchen, toilet, balcony, stairs, chimneys, windows, doors, handrails) is sometimes allowed.

Ceiling rebuilding requires using wooden pillars with circular or rectangular sections. Further, an insulation layer, cement with metal mesh, and a concrete layer on the exterior ceiling are allowed. Load-bearing walls are the primary building method, yet the exterior walls must be constructed of local stone or cement block with a local stone layer as a cover. Interior walls can be built with modern or traditional materials. Otherwise, stairs are built with stone, wood, or concrete and coated with stone, wood or traditional materials that are proper to the values of history and antiquities.

Traditional materials are required, such as wood for interior windows and doors and wrought iron with traditional design for exterior doors and windows. Cement plaster covered with blue acrylic or calcareous paint is recommended for the exterior cladding. In the case of no plaster, it is allowed to present the traditional stone walls, as it was a general feature for the first floor in some buildings. In these terms, the approach seeks to save the traditional perspective of the town's urban fabric, even with new materials. Submerged or reinforced concrete can be used in foundation works when necessary. Supporting elements like columns and interior beams are permitted if covered with stone in visible places.

Regarding the facade's refinement, it is necessary to obtain restoration authorisation for this work, and the refinement has to be suitable for the traditional features of Maaloula. Moreover, the roof must be horizontal without any protrusions or curves and tanks, and satellite dishes must be hidden appropriately.

In terms of saving the originality of the settlement, demolishing and removing a stone building as a whole or part is prohibited. On the contrary, rebuilding the stone parts to the original is obligatory. The approach also considers the rehabilitation issue to preserve the buildings. Using the buildings as an industrial place or storing dangerous materials is prohibited, while residential, cultural, educational, touristic places and traditional workshops are adequate.

Ancient buildings, which have particular importance as a whole or a part, are DGAM's responsibility to determine the building's importance and special restoration and rebuilding requirements. These requirements consider the obligatory usage of original interior and exterior materials, keeping the interior design unchanged, and removing all building violations. Through these special conditions, the authority aims to safeguard the originality of these buildings as much as possible.

Finally, the approach defines four types of restoration authorisation: Simple restoration, restoration, reconstruction, and a new building on a site in the registered area. The first type concerns simple work like renewing plaster, tiles, electricity wires, sanitation facilities, and changing doors and windows. Restoration includes changing some structural parts, while the Reconstruction authorisation regards demolishing and rebuilding the properties for reasons defined by the committees. In general, most of the statutes are concerned with the legislative part.

7.8.2. Legal Framework and Implementation

The dilemma in Maaloula started ages before the Syrian crisis; despite the mistakes made, the government tried to redress the situation by making many decisions to save the town. The town had no significant development or expansion between 1958 and 1976. New roads were built after the hotel's construction, which changed the town's topography and relationship with its surroundings. As the western gorge disappeared, a road for cars was built on its path to reach the hotel. The hotel project has many problems. The main and most important one is that the hotel existed on a registered heritage site in the list of the rural Damascus Governorate in 1966. The site has hewn caves, which date before Christianity, and many are in the hotel buffer zone; thus, it is against Article 10 of the Syrian Antiquities Law. Mainly, this area has never been studied or documented. Thus, the damage caused by this hotel in the area is unclear. Likewise, the design does not regard the town's vernacular architecture.

The decision in 1976 to register the town of Maaloula was primarily aimed at preserving the old neighbourhood in town, which has between 200 and 250 houses. Due to a report by the

Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) in 1976, 60% of the neighbourhood houses were in their original condition, which was at least two hundred years old. This part required restoration and renewal due to the collapsed ceilings and the removal of the violating balconies and stairs. Around 20-25% were mixed buildings, distorted by some renovations, such as a concrete roof over an original stone wall or a cement balcony attached to a stone house. The remaining 10-15% were entirely new and renovated homes. The only elements that have remained unchanged are the alleys that permeate the old neighbourhood. The registration decision in 1976 aimed to control building violations and preserve the town's overall structure. It is forbidden to demolish real estate within the area mentioned above, restore it, or change anything in it without the approval of the antiquity authorities. Despite these governmental steps, the town has continued to lose its original perspective, and the cement buildings have occupied most of the view. Consequently, this problem is due to the gap between the governmental preservation objectives and the practical needs of the residents.

Restoration projects should be founded on a prior and in-depth understanding of the building and its surrounding settlement. Before any intervention is proposed, the building must be thoroughly studied. The strength of such a study lies in direct surveys and detailed analyses of the structure, materials, and construction techniques. The restoration approach applied in Maaloula sought to respond to the town's unique character; however, this intention was not clearly reflected in the written methodology. Nevertheless, the initiative has a strong aspect and can be considered an important first step towards safeguarding such a significant heritage site.

Furthermore, the approach demonstrated variations in the types of work carried out, offering examples of different intervention levels to maintain or save buildings. However, the overall methodology lacked coherence and completeness. There was no clear mention of any preliminary documentation or analytical phase prior to the interventions. The only instances where old photographs were considered were those involving reconstruction. For a historic settlement such as Maaloula, archival photographs and documents should form the primary basis for authorisation applications and restoration planning.

Maaloula has tangible and intangible heritage. The originality of the village is only mentioned in the architectural and construction condition’s part, when the traditional blue colour of the exterior facades is mentioned. Furthermore, there are no articles concerning the vernacular items (beehives, granaries, chimneys, and interior decorations), which are valuable vernacular elements that still exist in the village. Consequently, the absence of this part makes the

approach more construction-concern than identity conservation. For clarity, the only difference between Tartous, Safita and Maaloula approaches is the traditional materials, if they are used. On the Syrian coast, the local limestone is the primary material, where the facades have no exterior plaster, while in Maaloula, most buildings are covered by blue, lime plaster (MOLA, 1999) (MOLA, 2010)

After the armed conflict in Maaloula, the town was affected. About 60% of the old town was damaged; the damage varied between simple and severe, with some old houses destroyed. Many projects started there to restore the settlement. Generally, the work does not meet the approaches' principles, where the item of the architectural and construction conditions section clearly states that the outer walls are made of local stone or cement block and covered with a coat of local stone. Further, another item of the same section dictates that it is recommended to use cement plaster and cover it with blue acrylic or calcareous paint. It is permissible to present the traditional stone walls without plaster when there is no plaster, as it was a typical characteristic of the first floor in some houses.

Figure 85 shows the restoration work, where the load-bearing wall is present without a cover; while this type of stone is not the type to be present, Figure 83 and Figure 86show the typical type of stone houses in the town, where the stones are well-carved and shaped.

Another example of the site work is shown in Figure 84. As mentioned before, the stone should be covered by traditional or cement plaster with blue acrylic or calcareous paint. The work presented in example 2 applied a paint layer directly over the stone. Both restoration types change the traditional features of the settlement, whereas the approach concerns refinement, which is appropriate for Maaloula's traditional features. Consequently, the mismatch between the theoretical part and the practices yields destruction, where the cement blocks occupied the whole scene in the town and not in a proper way, as shown in Figure 82. The committee takes most site decisions; the members' change often means a new vision. This issue can be expressed as another weakness. The absence of an explicit clause defines each circumstance that could be faced.



Figure 85: Restoration work in Maaloula, by the author.



Figure 84: Public space in the village, by the author.



Figure 83: Typical stone house in Maaloula, by the author.



Figure 86: Typical stone house in Maaloula, by the author.



Figure 82: The scene changes over time. Photo 2021 taken by the author, the rest provided by (Hadad, 2011)

7.8.3. Maaloula case study

As presented in the previous sections, several attempts have been made to protect Maaloula from the unregulated changes that threaten to destroy its distinctive character. Although specific projects have targeted residents, the town continues to lose its distinct identity. The main reason lies in the fragmentation of these initiatives; they have been carried out as isolated efforts rather than as parts of a comprehensive conservation strategy with clearly defined objectives, stages, and timelines.

The following proposal Table 8 outlines a theoretical conservation project for Maaloula, developed in reference to the principles of the Burra Charter and the case studies of Yangzhou, Hermoupolis and Göreme National Park. This project framework emphasises stakeholders' participation, their awareness of their needs, and the town's cultural significance.

Table 8: Maaloula conservation project.

Size of the city	5000 inhabitants	Duration	
Size of the project	1.06 km2		
The principal function of the city	Aramaic Christian town in the Rural Damascus Governorate, Syria		
Diagnosis status	Maaloula has numerous heritage sites of cultural and archaeological significance. It is listed on the UNESCO Tentative List and registered in the Heritage Sites List of the Rural Damascus Governorate.		
Problems	Maaloula experienced rapid growth within the old town, where new construction was built over the old structures; consequently, the town began to lose its identity. The hewn village, the earliest architectural core of Maaloula, remains neglected, undocumented, and vulnerable to erosion despite its archaeological value. The lack of development initiatives contributed to population displacement before the armed conflict and exacerbated it afterwards. The town had many disconnected and unintegrated projects that could have leveraged its cultural and heritage resources more effectively to generate income.		
Objectives	The project aims to create a sustainable urban conservation standard that links historical conservation to raising people's quality of life by		

	developing the town and supporting self-help initiatives. Moreover, A long-term plan has to be created and assessed using a cooperative and process-focused methodology. Creating a community action plan is essential to engage the indigenous people in the old town renovation. In this case, the challenge is similar to the one in Yangzhou: establishing a plan to persuade the original occupants and encourage their participation as "investment partners" in the restoration process.
Implementation	First, adopting Community Action Planning (CAP) involves and links local government decision-makers, technical teams, and residents in planning, decision-making, and priorities agreement for action. By considering all owners' views, partners have to build sustainable concepts for improvement and set priorities for short, medium, and long-term activities. Second, encouraging shared responsibility from the public and private sectors through community action planning workshops that provide participants with a feeling of "ownership" over the development process.
Management and tools	- The main aim of this project is to incorporate heritage preservation with local economic benefits, where the indigenous people are the primary beneficiaries of any heritage project, to maintain the project's continuity. - Providing workshops that increase awareness of the old town and the heritage sites, residents and representatives from many institutions must attend these sessions. - Database creation by an architectural survey is crucial in recording the archaeological sites, the main buildings, and the exterior characteristics of the building's type, age, condition, and style. Moreover, the interior features authenticity of the parts, vernacular items and construction violations, in addition to the facades'

	situation and roadways, in order to save the architectural and archaeological identity of the site. - Providing a conservation plan that integrates tourism within a sustainable development framework. - Creation of Visitor paths, differentiation between the standard path and the one during the religious fests. - Interpretation panels and rest areas are designed and added to help visitors decide their aims and plan their visits. - Remove Maaloula Hotel, ban large new structures within the conservation area, and incorporate the hewn caves into the tourism path in Maaloula. - Tourism infrastructure development is thus permitted only under strict guidelines. - Encourage the locals to provide houses in the old town as traditional tourist accommodation for the visitors to be part of the sustainable conservation plan. - Establish a digital heritage system that allows residents to share their memories and stories about buildings and sites to create popular memories of the place. Moreover, researchers and interested people must be prompted to contribute their suggestions. Additionally, the users may submit music, video, and images. - These contributions are documented and saved to be added to the database. In future, a QR symbol can be applied, and visitors may use their cellphones to scan the sign to discover more about the building's past through the eyes of the area. These strategies inform inhabitants of their assistance in the place's collective memory, public events, and interactive workshops. The initiatives will be studied, assessed, and improved. - Finally, Workshops have to be held regularly to examine difficulties, review the challenges, and suggest what should be done.

funding	These kinds of projects need international support, especially at the beginning, thus the Syrian government cannot fund this project in the same situation as the case studies. Therefore, this project has to be shared between the governmental sectors and international organisations. Engage the universities in the research domain since the architecture faculties presented concern about the town, as illustrated in many documents and planning projects.
Result and impact	The significant impact of this project will be raising the residents' awareness about their town and cultural heritage conservation, as well as the community's current challenges. It will also enhance the municipal authority's role in paying attention to the community's views. The primary concern is improving deteriorated housing, poor municipal infrastructure, and a lack of facilities to achieve good living conditions in the old town. This step will be the base of the following stages to introduce sustainable urban conservation projects and self-help initiatives. Where the ongoing projects in the town can be considered part of the project, the future fund will support different or current projects.

The recommended upgrading policies form the foundation of the pilot town improvement project. The previous steps help improve Maaloula's restoration approach regarding the database, turning it into an approachable structure. The restoration approach must include a toolkit created as a guideline that provides clear, comprehensible models for professionals and individuals during a restoration procedure. In addition to serving as a benchmark to evaluate the work, it also has preconceived notions of the results. Besides defining each party's function and timeline, a comprehensive project theory is provided, which can easily illustrate the stages, duration, cost, and parties involved.

7.9. Discussion and Conclusion

Urban conservation has become an increasingly global vision, closely intertwined with the broader ambitions of sustainability. However, fulfilling this vision remains challenging, particularly in contexts where economic and social pressures dominate national agendas. The case of Maaloula exemplifies the ongoing challenge of striking a balance between economic development and heritage preservation. A fundamental question arises: why would low-income

countries voluntarily restrict their economic growth in the interest of heritage conservation or tourism development, especially without immediate or tangible incentives?

In situations where financial resources are limited, integrating heritage conservation within the sustainable development framework becomes desirable and necessary. Such integration provides governments with clear guidelines for action. It creates potential accountability mechanisms, particularly when adherence to these principles is associated with the international recognition and protection mechanisms of the *World Heritage in Danger* list.

For Maaloula, heritage conservation and development must not be treated as separate or conflicting pursuits. Given the limited prospects for large-scale industrial or commercial growth, the village's most viable future is leveraging its rich cultural and architectural heritage as a primary driver for sustainable local development. Like other historical settlements, Maaloula's cultural assets, its monuments, buildings, and archaeological sites, should be viewed as active catalysts, or "vectors for development." Learning from successful international experiences is therefore imperative, particularly those grounded in the principles of globally recognised frameworks such as the Burra Charter and the urban conservation strategies demonstrated in Yangzhou (China) and Hermoupolis (Greece).

In all these examples, effective urban conservation emerges from active stakeholder participation. The involvement of inhabitants, the individuals for whom the site holds personal, social, spiritual, or cultural significance, is essential to ensuring the authenticity and sustainability of conservation efforts. Their participation in the planning, implementation, and management processes transforms conservation into a living practice rather than a static preservation of the past. Until now, visitors to Maaloula have missed visiting most of the sites and got lost in the old town. Many struggle to navigate its historic core, which lacks adequate signage, visitor infrastructure, and interpretive services. Addressing these deficiencies through participatory and community-based strategies could represent a significant step toward realising a sustainable model of heritage-led development.

Chapter 8

8.1. Summary of results and future work

I have argued throughout this work the critical aspects that give Maaloula its uniqueness and create in its combination a genius loci, in other words, the place identity of the site. In the case of Maaloula, every detail is worthy of conservation. In the past, we lost a specific part of it; today, the village will lose its unique features if no action is taken. In particular, I demonstrated in this dissertation the following points:

1- Provide a table of the travellers who visited Maaloula and describe its language, location, architecture, and people, in addition to their works. Furthermore, presenting the history of the village name and its evolution over time contributes to the village's significance.
2- Investigate and identify the biography of the two main religious features in the village, St. Thecla, and St. Sergius. Otherwise, their connection with the village, their dedication to monasteries, and their fests.
3- Introducing the main churches and caves that played a significant part in the village's history.
4- Investigate and identify the historical frame of the village, starting from the prehistoric period till the current situation, and describe the Maaloula portion in each period.
5- Illustrate the traditional architecture as well as the materials, house types, interior features, doors, and windows. The main target represents the vernacular elements that present the village's picturesque characteristics described in the travellers' papers since that time.
6- Introducing the place identity term and its practice in the field of urban conservation. Moreover, presenting the urban conservation concept of preserving the settlement and the significance of this methodology in the case of Maaloula, thereby preserving its identity.
7- Investigate the ancient part of the village; hence, this work is the only study for this part of the village. I presented an approach study of similar sites; on the other hand, these examples helped to well comprehend the site. Furthermore, forty-two caves on the site were visited, measured, and drawn. The main target was documenting the caves and illustrating the interior characteristics. Moreover, typologize these caves to define the main types. I was finally presenting the zone maps of the village.

8.2. Future work

The ancient part of Maaloula, Blot Ollo, is an essential part of the village history, where the old village developed starting from the thought of the cave house. Many sites worldwide with the same character were considered, studied and opened to people to visit. I can briefly describe the future works of my research as follows:

1- Completing the documentation work in the old village, where more investigation and study should be provided, to complete the gaps in this research. Moreover, a survey to determine the existing traditional houses, as well as the interior features, aims to define the loss that the village has suffered over time and during the crisis period.
2- Adjust the restoration approach to enhance the government's role in the field of saving the village identity.
3- Complete the study in the ancient village, where this research concerns only area A1, while more caves in areas A2 and A3 were measured and drawn; otherwise, they are not presented in this study, particularly since the two areas are functional caves. The field observation reveals that the rest of the caves are pressurised, containing many tanks carved into the ground and interconnected by chutes to hold liquid. Otherwise, area A3 has a unique space where the cave features many rock-carved arches in the ceiling that droop down, although there are no columns supporting them, beside a massive cistern. In the same area, there is another spacious cave with two ceiling holes. This place is severely damaged, and the interior furniture is almost nonexistent. However, it could be the central kitchen for the village, where it was common to have one kitchen in this kind of settlement.
4- It is critical to create a rehabilitation project for the village. The only places people visit are the monasteries of St. Sergius and St. Thecla, while the Blota Ollo is a closed area belonging to the monastery of St. Sergius. Furthermore, the vernacular village is a maze; after the crisis, the damaged buildings are still under reconstruction, while the other parts are neglected and face demolition over time.

   These two sites in the village are excellent tourist projects, provided they undergo good rehabilitation, and can provide support and financial resources if invested well.

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