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Maaloula, the Aramaic village
Documentary and analytical study

PhD Dissertation Booklet of

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1. Overview

Cultural heritage preserves collective memory and strengthens communities' sense of identity, belonging, and continuity. Its protection is particularly significant during conflict and disaster, when the loss of meaningful places can deepen social and psychological disruption. Heritage conservation and humanitarian assistance should therefore be understood as complementary responsibilities. Integrating cultural protection into emergency responses can support community cohesion, recovery, and human dignity.

Maaloula, situated in Syria's Qalamoun Mountains northeast of Damascus, possesses distinctive architectural, cultural, and linguistic heritage. It is one of three villages in the region traditionally associated with the survival of spoken Aramaic, alongside Bakhaa and Jabaaden. Its mountainous setting, characterised by limestone cliffs, narrow gorges, natural shelters, and water sources, provided favourable conditions for settlement and shaped its architectural development.

Archaeological evidence from nearby sites, including Baaz Rock Shelter and Kaus Kozah Cave, demonstrates a long history of human occupation in the area. These sites contribute to understanding prehistoric settlement and the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture and sedentary life. Maaloula's rock-cut spaces also reflect diverse uses, including dwellings, chapels, presses, stables, and storage areas.

The settlement developed through the adaptation of natural and excavated spaces to changing domestic, economic, and religious needs. Buildings expanded along the slopes, while caves were incorporated into houses or retained for secondary functions. The relationship between rock-cut spaces and later construction is therefore central to understanding Maaloula's architectural development. Traditional building practices responded to the terrain through local materials, spatial adaptation, and the close integration of buildings with the surrounding landscape.

Modern construction materials, changing lifestyles, and the Syrian conflict have affected this architectural heritage. These pressures underline the importance of documenting and analysing Maaloula's rock-cut dwellings, both as evidence of the settlement's development and as a basis for informed conservation.

2. Research objectives

Maaloula's vernacular architecture is increasingly threatened by modern construction, the decline of traditional craftsmanship, and insufficient conservation measures. The replacement of traditional houses with concrete-block buildings has altered the settlement's architectural character, creating an urgent need to document its historic fabric, particularly the main plateau and its rock-cut spaces.

This research aims to document and analyse Maaloula's architectural heritage, with particular emphasis on the ancient settlement of Blota Ollo. Its principal objectives are to:

- Identify the architectural characteristics of Maaloula's traditional houses, including their spatial organisation, construction practices, and disappearing domestic features.
- Examine the settlement's historical development and how successive periods shaped its architecture.
- Document previously unstudied rock-cut spaces in Blota Ollo through surveys and architectural drawings, and establish a typology based on their layouts and functions.
- Investigate the spatial organisation of the ancient settlement and determine whether its apparently irregular layout reflects underlying patterns.
- Assess the challenges affecting Maaloula before, during, and after the Syrian crisis, and evaluate the strengths and limitations of the Syrian conservation framework in relation to international approaches.

By bringing these aspects together, the dissertation contributes to a broader understanding of Maaloula's built heritage and provides a documentary basis for future research and conservation.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical, and deductive approach, combining historical research, comparative analysis, and field documentation.

The first stage examined travellers' accounts, reports, and academic studies concerning Maaloula, including accounts dating from the fourteenth century to 2015. Identifying relevant sources required searches for alternative spellings of the village's name, as well as references to neighbouring settlements and regions. These fragmented sources were brought together to

investigate Maaloula's historical development, architectural characteristics, and cultural context.

Fieldwork followed two complementary lines. The first focused on the old town and its vernacular and religious architecture. Site visits, photography, and direct observation documented building layouts, façades, interiors, openings, lanes, and construction techniques. Deterioration and partial collapse exposed architectural features that could be examined directly. This work was supported by consultations with local architects and researchers, master's theses from Damascus University, and documentation undertaken during the author's master's studies.

The second line focused on the ancient settlement surrounding St. Sergius Church, for which no prior plans or a complete inventory of caves was available. Documentation proceeded in three stages: identifying and numbering the caves; photographing, measuring, and preparing preliminary plans of each accessible cave; and examining their spatial relationships. Interior features and recurring architectural characteristics were recorded to support classification and comparative analysis.

Measurements were taken using tapes, laser distance meters, and laser levels. Plans and sections were prepared in AutoCAD, while photographs were processed in Adobe Photoshop. Google satellite imagery from different dates, interpreted alongside field photographs, helped locate cave entrances through visible features and shadow patterns.

An extended stay in Maaloula enabled detailed documentation and observation. Comparisons between contemporary and historical photographs supported the analysis of architectural change, while comparisons with similar settlements informed interpretations of the ancient village's development and morphology.

4. New Results

1.1. Thesis 1: Historical Frame

The historical framework was necessary for understanding Maaloula's development. It considers the settlement within successive periods: the Prehistoric, Aramean, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Early Islamic, Crusader, Mamluk, and Ottoman periods, followed by the French Mandate, independence, and the contemporary era.

The chapter brings together historical references to Maaloula and its surrounding region to construct a chronological account. This framework provides a basis for considering how changing historical circumstances influenced the settlement and its architecture. It also situates the architectural investigation within a longer history of human occupation, allowing the buildings and rock-cut spaces examined in subsequent chapters to be considered in their wider regional context.

1.2. Thesis 2: Introduction to the Site

I introduced Maaloula as a place whose significance extends beyond its physical architecture. Following a general description of the site, I examine travellers' accounts, books, and academic studies that refer to the village. This investigation considers the different spellings of Maaloula's name across these sources, which were essential to identifying relevant material.

The findings are compiled into a documentary record that identifies each author's name, nationality, date of visit, where applicable, and principal observations. The record also distinguishes between authors who visited Maaloula and those who wrote about it without visiting, as illustrated in Figure 1.

This review provides an important foundation for the research by bringing together the perspectives of travellers, linguists, tourists, and other researchers. Comparing their accounts helps identify the characteristics that attracted attention over time and reveals differences in how Maaloula was perceived and described.

The writer's name	**Nationality**	**Date**	**The outcomes**
Aḥmad Ibn faḍl Allah Al'omary	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 (Al'omary, 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 *Ma'lula* 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*

Figure 1: Traveler table.

In this part, I also investigated Maaloula's name and linguistic heritage through historical sources, travellers' accounts, and linguistic studies. I bring together references dispersed across different publications to examine how the village was identified and how its Aramaic dialect attracted scholarly attention.

I studied Maaloula's name for both historical and methodological purposes. Variations in spelling and transliteration required me to search under several forms of the name to identify relevant sources. By comparing these references, I distinguished variations in transcription from proposed historical identifications.

I reviewed interpretations connecting the name with Aramaic and Syriac expressions associated with entrance, passage, narrowness, or elevation. I considered these interpretations in relation to the village's mountainous setting and narrow access routes. I also examined historical names associated with Maaloula in the literature, including Magluda, Magloula, Calamona, and Saloqia, while addressing uncertainties surrounding these identifications. For example, I discuss Parisot's reservations about identifying Saloqia, as he could not find an ancient description that matched Maaloula's characteristics.

Aramaic is part of Maaloula's identity, so I examined its significance within Maaloula's cultural identity, considering the village alongside the neighbouring Aramaic-speaking communities of Bakhaa and Jabaaden. I reviewed explanations offered for the language's survival, including the settlement's mountainous location, relative isolation, and community continuity.

In this section, I address the question: **How could a village like Maaloula preserve its Christianity and maintain both its oral and written Aramaic?** Drawing on historical accounts and linguistic studies, I examine the role of its mountainous location, natural protection, and relative isolation in sustaining its religious and linguistic traditions. I connect these factors with the continuity of community life to explain the relationship between Maaloula's geographical setting and its cultural identity.

To explore the religious dimension of this continuity, I examined the lives and cults of Maaloula's principal saints: St. Thekla and Sts. Sergius and Bacchus. I showed how their veneration shaped local traditions and annual celebrations, contributing to Maaloula's enduring

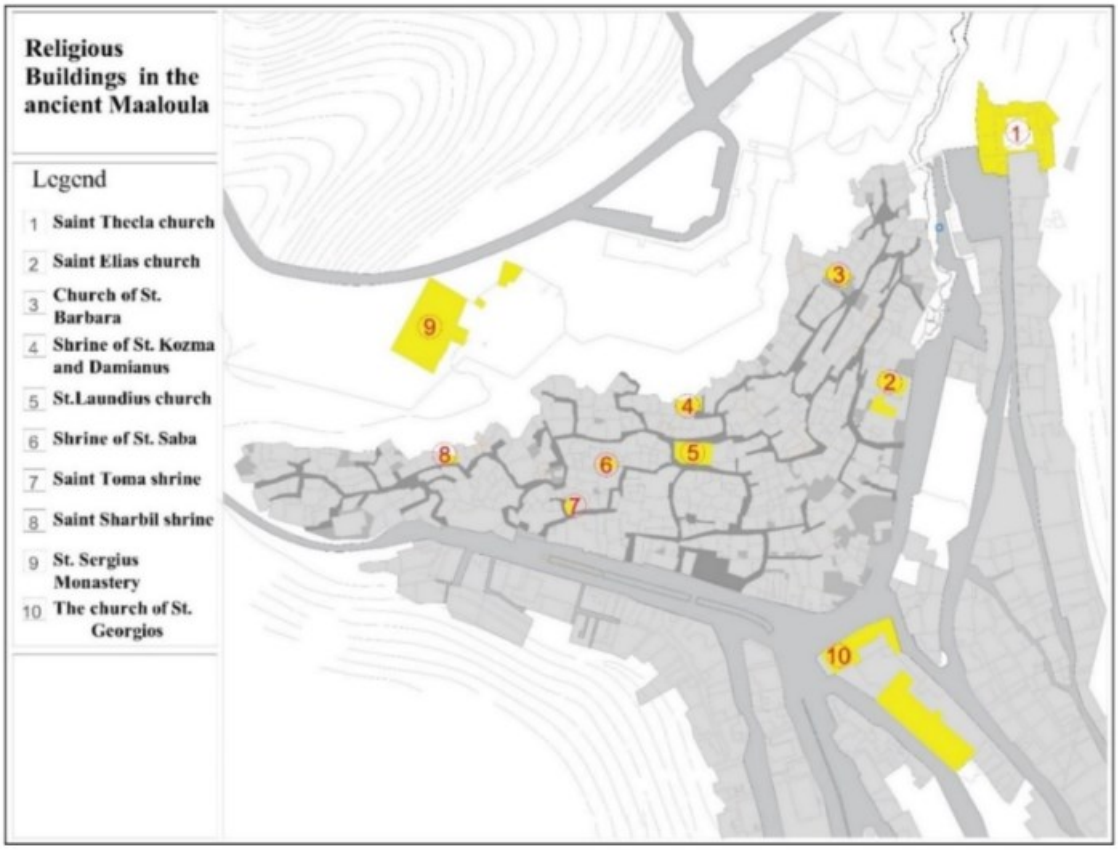


Figure 2: Churches location in the old village.

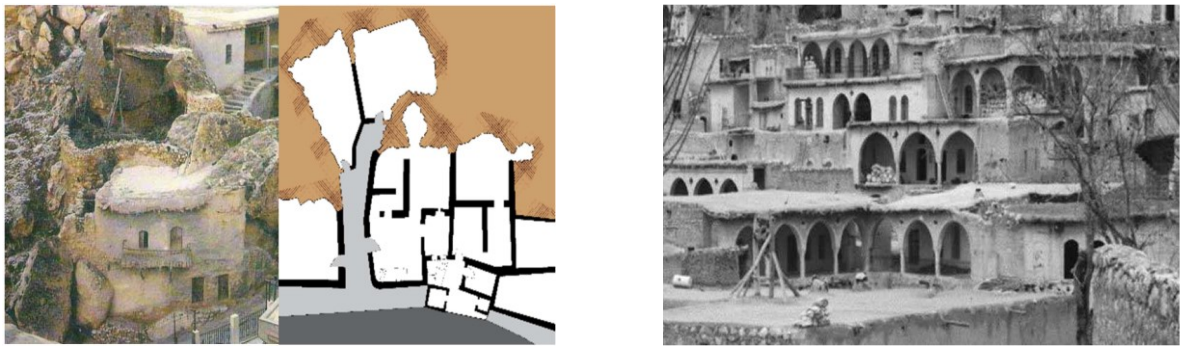
reputation as a Christian settlement of regional importance. Together, these discussions connect the village's geographical setting, language, and religious practices with its cultural identity.

1.3. Thesis 3: Description of the Main Monuments

I investigated and documented Maaloula's principal sites of significance to local inhabitants and visitors, identifying their dates and examining their roles in the town's history. I explored how their historical and religious significance anchors them in collective memory and reinforces Maaloula's cultural and spiritual identity. I also produced a map showing their locations to clarify their spatial relationships and their place within the town's urban fabric; see Figure 2.

1.4. Thesis 4: The vernacular Architecture in old Maaloula

I studied the vernacular architecture of Maaloula's old village, documenting its defining characteristics and residential features. I developed a residential typology that demonstrates how the rocky terrain shaped housing forms and contributed to the village's distinctive architectural identity, Figure 3.



The simple House **The Arcade House**

Figure 3: The vernacular houses in the old village.

I also investigated traditional building methods and materials, Figure 4, examining how geographical conditions influenced construction techniques and material choices. I identified features that have persisted over time and those that have been altered through adaptation to modern building practices. Finally, I analysed the urban pattern and architectural elements, tracing historical influences that remain visible in many of Maaloula's houses.

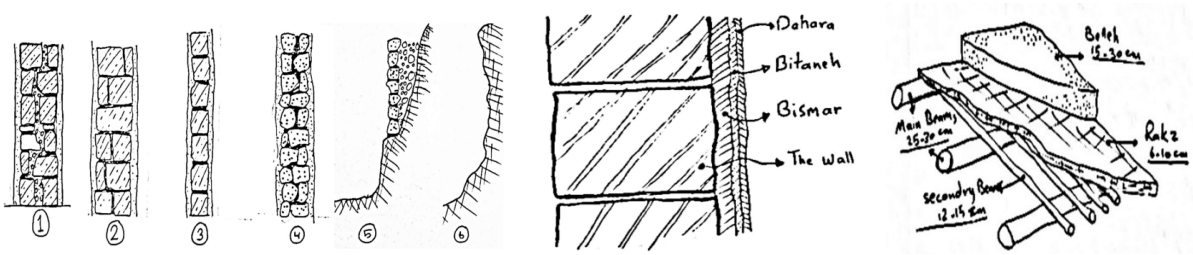


Figure 4: The traditional building methods.

1.5. Thesis 5: Bloto Ollo, Rock-Cut Village

Documentation, Interpretation, and Spatial Analysis of Maaloula's Rock-Cut Settlement

I investigated Maaloula's rock-cut architecture through comparative research, field documentation, architectural analysis, and historical contextualisation. My study moves from documenting individual caves and their interior features to interpreting dwelling types and the spatial organisation of the ancient settlement of Bloto Ollo.

Comparative research and literature review

I studied rock-cut settlements from different regions to understand the characteristics of hewn architecture and establish a comparative context for Maaloula. These examples supported my investigation of architectural forms, internal arrangements, and the adaptation of excavated spaces to their physical surroundings.

I also reviewed previous research on rock-cut architecture in the Qalamoun region. Although rock-cut shelters had been briefly mentioned, I identified a lack of systematic architectural analysis of the caves examined in this dissertation. This gap established the need for detailed field documentation and a framework for comparing and interpreting their characteristics.

Field documentation and cave typology

I documented, measured, and prepared architectural drawings of 49 caves across three areas surrounding the Monastery of St. Sergius and Bacchus. This work provides the first systematic architectural record of these caves, bringing together their layouts, principal features, and spatial relationships.

Based on this documentation, I developed a typology according to the caves' internal designs and recurring architectural elements; see Figure 5. I compared their spatial arrangements to identify shared characteristics and distinguish different forms. The resulting classification



Figure 5 :Cave types in Bloto Ollo.

provides a framework for understanding the surveyed caves and a basis for further investigation of rock-cut architecture in the region.

Carving techniques and the construction process

I examined the carving techniques and processes applied in Blota Ollo. Drawing on the architectural evidence, I proposed a reconstruction of the successive stages through which the rock-cut houses may have been excavated and finished. I also estimated the time required for carving the houses.

I present this sequence as a theory derived from the investigation of the surviving spaces. It offers an interpretation of the work involved in producing the dwellings and connects their completed architectural forms with the practical processes of excavation.

Interior features and functional interpretation

I investigated the interior parts of the caves in detail to identify their possible functions. Where relevant parallels were available, I compared these features with architectural elements in houses of the same period. Where their purposes remained uncertain, I proposed hypotheses, distinguishing these interpretations from directly observable evidence.

I gave particular attention to unusual interior elements, examining their form, position, and relationship with the surrounding space. Through this analysis, I considered both their possible uses and the reasoning behind their placement within the caves Figure 6.

I also examined what individual architectural elements might indicate about the inhabitants' ways of thinking, social hierarchy, and craftsmanship. By considering these features together, I explored how the organisation of domestic space could reflect aspects of community life.

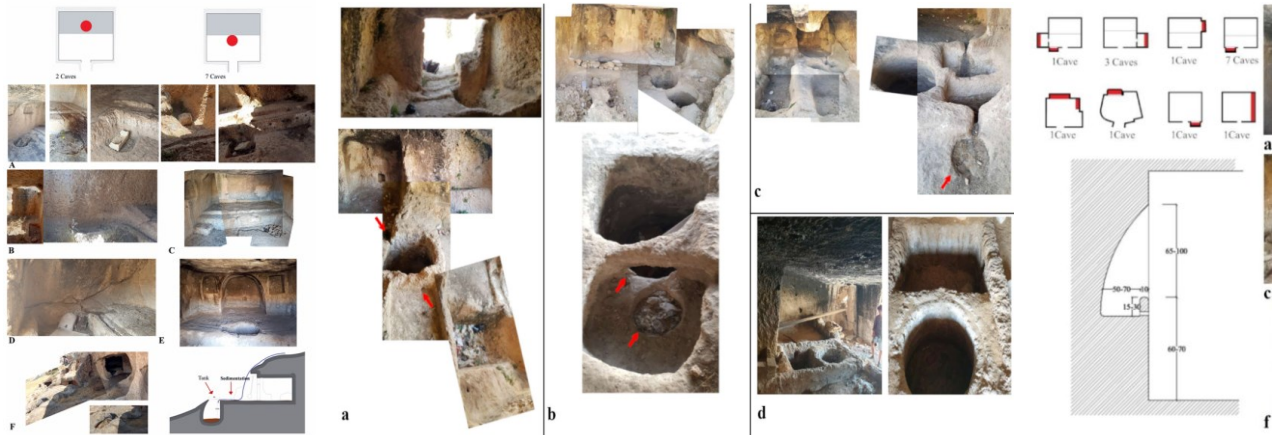


Figure 6: Interior features.

Environmental adaptation and entrance design

I investigated how the inhabitants adapted to their environment and expressed this adaptation through architecture. I examined the relationship between the rocky setting and the organisation of the dwellings, considering how existing physical conditions influenced the formation and use of interior spaces.

I also studied the village's doors and entrances through surviving architectural remains and comparisons with ancient styles. This allowed me to propose interpretations of their original forms and designs while acknowledging the limitations of the remaining evidence.

Historical and epigraphic interpretation

To place the architectural investigation within its historical context, I examined the Roman era in the region and reviewed how Maaloula was represented in literature and historical sources. I investigated the concept and role of the Roman colony, with particular attention to Maaloula's proposed position within this context.

I also investigated the influence of the Sun cult through archaeological and epigraphic evidence, considering religious practices and symbolism in daily life. Alongside this investigation, I studied the inscriptions published by Bliss and provided interpretations of texts that are no longer visible today. These published records therefore formed an important source for examining evidence that could not be assessed directly during fieldwork.

Housing types and settlement organisation

At the scale of the dwelling, I analysed architectural outlines and recurring spatial arrangements to identify standard housing types. This investigation connected the classification of individual caves with the interpretation of more complete residential units.

At the settlement scale, I mapped and analysed the relationships between cave dwellings and the broader layout of Maaloula. I produced a detailed distribution plan showing cave locations and conducted a zonal analysis to interpret the use of different parts of the village.

By bringing these scales of analysis together, I examined Blota Ollo as a connected settlement. The resulting plans and classifications enabled me to investigate how individual spaces, housing units, and functional zones related to one another and contributed to the organisation of the ancient village Figure 7.

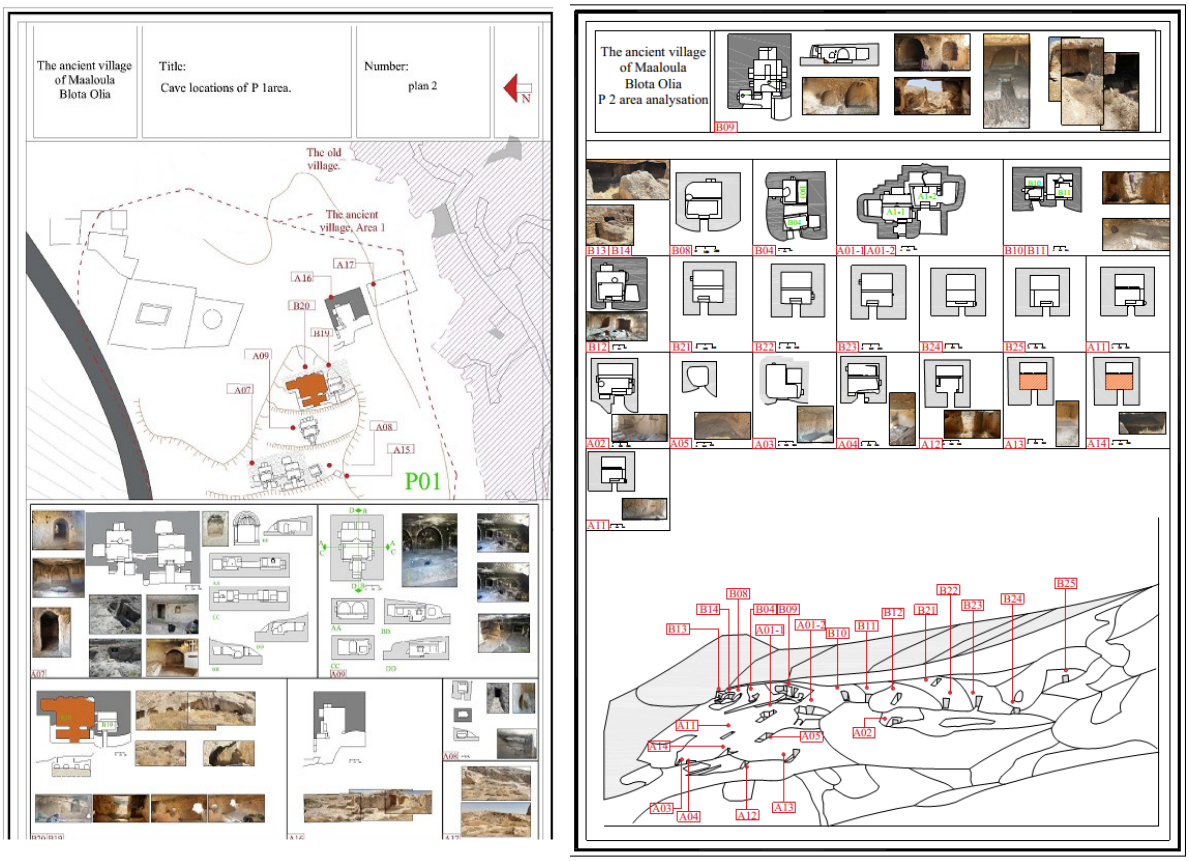


Figure 7: Site plans show the cave locations on the site.

Through this work, I established a documentary and analytical foundation for understanding Maaloula's rock-cut heritage. My contribution combines the recording of 49 caves with interpretations of their construction, interior functions, historical context, and spatial organisation.

1.6. Thesis 6: Place Identity and a Conservation Strategy for Maaloula

I examined the concept of place identity to establish a framework for understanding and conserving Maaloula's distinctive character. I traced its definition and development in scholarly literature and investigated its relationship with the "spirit of place." This theoretical investigation provided a basis for considering the relationship between Maaloula's physical environment, cultural traditions, and the meanings associated with the settlement.

Theoretical framework and international conservation principles

I analysed international charters addressing the spirit of place, urban conservation, and sustainability. I examined how their principles could inform the conservation of a historic

settlement whose significance encompasses architecture, landscape, religious traditions, language, and collective memory. Through this review, I established a framework for assessing conservation approaches in Maaloula and developing proposals appropriate to its particular circumstances.

Syrian legislation and restoration practices

I studied Syrian heritage legislation and examined the restoration approach applied in Maaloula. I assessed its implementation, considering how conservation principles were translated into practice and identifying areas for improvement. This investigation connected the legal framework with the practical challenges of preserving the village's architectural character and cultural significance.

Comparative analysis of international projects

I examined selected international conservation projects to identify experiences relevant to Maaloula. Through comparative analysis, I considered how different approaches addressed place identity, urban conservation, and sustainability. I used these examples to inform my assessment of Maaloula's circumstances and to identify methods to support improvements in its conservation approach Figure 8.



Figure 8: The changing scene over time.

Characterising Maaloula's identity

Drawing together the historical, cultural, and architectural investigations presented in the dissertation, I characterised Maaloula's place identity. I considered the relationships among its mountainous setting, rock-cut settlement, traditional urban fabric, religious significance, and linguistic heritage. This allowed me to explain how these interconnected characteristics contribute to the village's overall identity.

Proposed conservation strategy

Based on this investigation, I proposed a conservation strategy aligned with the international charters examined in the research. I connected the proposed approach with the characteristics that define Maaloula, the limitations identified in existing practices, and the lessons drawn from international projects.

My contribution lies in bringing the investigation of place identity into a practical discussion of conservation. I established a basis for evaluating interventions by their relationship to Maaloula's architectural and cultural significance, linking the preservation of its ancient settlement and historic old town to the continuity of its identity.

5. Summary of Results and Future Work

5.1. Summary of Results

Throughout this dissertation, I have investigated the interconnected characteristics that give Maaloula its distinctive identity, or genius loci. I argue that this identity emerges from the relationship between its mountainous setting, architectural heritage, language, religious traditions, and collective memory. Conserving Maaloula therefore requires attention to both its individual features and their relationships within the settlement.

I established a historical and documentary foundation by reviewing travellers' accounts, books, and academic studies. I compiled a record identifying authors, visits, publications, and principal observations, distinguishing direct descriptions from accounts based on indirect information. I also investigated the different forms of Maaloula's name and examined proposed historical identifications. Together with a chronological review from prehistory to the contemporary period, this work provides a framework for interpreting the village's development.

I examined Maaloula's religious significance through the lives and cults of St. Thecla and Sts. Sergius and Bacchus, their associated monasteries, and annual celebrations. I also documented significant churches, caves, and other sites, investigating their dates and historical roles. By mapping their locations, I clarified their spatial relationships and their place within the town's urban fabric.

My investigation of vernacular architecture documented traditional materials, construction techniques, housing types, and architectural elements, including interior features such as doors and windows. I demonstrated how the rocky terrain influenced residential forms and identified characteristics that have persisted or changed through modern interventions.

A principal contribution is my systematic documentation and analysis of Blota Ollo's rock-cut architecture. Through measurements, photographs, and architectural drawings, I established a record of the surveyed caves and developed a typology based on their layouts and recurring features. I investigated interior functions, proposed a sequence of carving stages, and examined architectural and historical evidence. Distribution plans and functional zone maps enabled me to analyse relationships between individual spaces and the wider settlement, revealing patterns within its apparently irregular organisation.

Finally, I connected these findings with the concept of place identity. I examined international conservation principles, Syrian legislation, and restoration practices in Maaloula. Drawing on comparative projects, I proposed a conservation strategy that addresses the ancient settlement and the historic old town together. These contributions provide a foundation for further research and for conservation informed by Maaloula's architectural and cultural significance.

5.2. Future Work

Further documentation is needed in the historic village. I identify a systematic survey of surviving traditional houses and interior features as a priority. Comparing their present condition with historical photographs and earlier records would help assess losses caused by gradual transformation and the Syrian conflict.

I also identify the need to improve restoration practices and translate the proposed conservation strategy into practical guidance. Further work should clarify how traditional materials, construction techniques, and architectural features can inform interventions and strengthen the protection of the village's identity.

The detailed investigation of the ancient settlement should extend beyond Area A1 to Areas A2 and A3. Preliminary observations reveal rock-cut tanks connected by channels, suggesting activities involving the collection or processing of liquids. Their functions require further investigation. Unusual ceiling features, a large cistern, and a spacious cave with two ceiling openings also warrant detailed study. I suggest a communal kitchen as one possible interpretation of the latter space, but additional evidence is needed to assess this hypothesis.

Finally, I propose an integrated rehabilitation project that connects Blota Ollo with the vernacular village. Such a project should address damaged and neglected buildings, access restrictions, interpretation, and appropriate visitor routes while considering ownership and community needs. Sensitive rehabilitation could broaden appreciation of Maaloula beyond its principal monasteries and generate resources for conservation. Its central objective should remain the safeguarding of the village's distinctive character alongside the continuity of community life.

5.3. Publications

5.3.1. International Journal

- Aldaher, R. (2025) "History until Christianity (Maaloula) " In: Major, B.; Vass, L. (szerk.) Studies in the Near Eastern Archaeology I.Budapest, Magyarország : Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem BTK, Régészettudományi Intézet , Közlemény:35257688 Nyilvános Forrás Könyvrészlet (Szaktanulmány) Tudományos
- Aldaher, R. (2025) "Maaloula Caves Description" In: Major, B.; Vass, L. (szerk.) Studies in the Near Eastern Archaeology I. Budapest, Magyarország : Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem BTK, Régészettudományi Intézet, Közlemény:35257618 Nyilvános Forrás Könyvrészlet (Szaktanulmány) Tudományos.
- Aldaher, R. (2021) "Traditional Architecture of Maaloula: Typology and Materials Methods", Periodica Polytechnica Architecture, 52(2), pp. 146–154. https://doi.org/10.3311/PPar.17162.
- Aldaher, R. (2024). Maaloula: Analysis of Restoration Approach, Urban Conservation Research and Action Plan. In: Thiel, F., Orabi, R. (eds.), Reviving Aleppo. Cities, Heritage and Transformation. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-65858-7_10.

- Aldaher, R. (2025). The Ancient Rock-Cut Village of Maaloula and the Interior Hewn Elements. Drainage System, Basins, Mangers, Seats, and Inscriptions, ZOrA 17 (2024), § 1–67, https://doi.org/10.34780/6ycqc893
- Aldaher, R. (2025). Maaloula, a Christian Village, Unique Site: Authenticity and Challenge of Traditional Architecture. In A. Moaz, History of the Architecture of Syria, Cities, Architecture, and Cultural Heritage in Syria from the Ottoman Period Until the Modern Times (Vol. Two). Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.

5.3.2. International Conferences

- Aldaher, R. (2021, November 18–20). [Maaloula: Analysis of Restoration Approach, Urban Conservation Research and Action Plan] [Conference presentation]. Recovery of Aleppo – Law, Architecture and Geodata Management to Revive War-Torn Cities.
- Aldaher, R. (2023). Historical study of Maaloula hewn village: Theory of local Roman colony, and Sun cult [Conference presentation]. 42nd Madrid International Conference on Chemical, Biological, Environmental & Natural Resources (CBENR-23), Madrid, Spain.