Natural Caves and Popular Sacred Sites in the Syrian Coastal Countryside

Abstract

This study looks at the popularity of natural caves in the countryside near the Syrian coast. It looks at three sites near Jableh and Baniyas in the Roman and Byzantine eras and how these caves have been remembered by locals. The study looks at how some natural caves have been made into religious shrines linked to the Virgin Mary and the seeking of blessings, pilgrimage, and popular celebration. This has happened even though there is no official religious architecture or traditional archaeological evidence linked to official religious institutions. The study also compares these cases with another natural cave that has not become a place of religious or symbolic importance. This is to try to understand what makes a place sacred in the countryside.

The study uses field observation and local stories, while also looking at ways to study popular religion and holy places in the Eastern Mediterranean. The results show that the change of a natural cave into a sacred space is not just linked to the site's geographical nature. It is also shaped by the interaction between local stories, ritual practice, and collective memory. The study also shows how important informal spaces are for understanding the religious and social history of the Syrian coast. It also shows that traditional archaeological methods need to be changed to include sites that are important in popular culture, not just sites with physical evidence.

Key words: Syrian coast; natural caves; popular religious beliefs; sacred spaces; the memories of the community; the Virgin Mary; Jableh; Banias; popular rituals; the Syrian countryside.

Introduction:-

The Syrian coastal countryside has many ancient religious sites from the Roman and Byzantine eras. These include churches, monasteries and shrines with unique architectural features. But the religious places in this area are not just the churches and other buildings; they also include natural spaces that have become special because of local memories and traditional rituals. These spaces don't need to have any religious buildings or be connected to any kind of organised religion. Some of the most famous of these are natural caves, which people still visit today to receive blessings, experience spiritual healing and make vows. There is no archaeological evidence to prove that these caves were used as places of worship in earlier periods of history.

These sites raise a research question that goes beyond the traditional archaeological description of religious buildings, prompting us to ask how a natural site becomes a sacred space within the collective consciousness of a rural community. Here, sacredness does not seem linked to the existence of an official religious institution or organized liturgical rituals, but rather to the accumulation of oral narratives, repeated ritual practices, and symbolic associations with the place. From this perspective, these caves offer an opportunity to study forms of rural folk religiosity that have developed outside official ecclesiastical frameworks, while simultaneously maintaining an active religious and social presence within local communities.

This study looks at three caves on the Syrian coast, near Jableh and Baniyas. Two of these caves have been made into popular religious buildings connected to the Virgin Mary, where religious activities and visits by groups and

individuals take place. The third cave has not been changed in this way and is still a natural space. This is one of the most important ideas in the study. It helps us to understand why some places are holy and others are not, even though they look very similar.

The study doesn't try to prove that the traditional stories about these caves are true. Instead, it looks at the ways these stories have become part of people's beliefs and what they mean. In this context, the study asks a number of questions about what sacred spaces in rural places are like: How does a natural cave become a religious shrine? What effect do stories and rituals have in making something feel holy? Can these things be seen as a later development of older beliefs about caves in the Eastern Mediterranean, or are they a local product connected to later social and spiritual needs? The study also tries to understand why some natural sites are considered sacred, while others are not, even though they are similar in terms of their location.

The study is based on real observations of the places, as well as local stories and comparisons with other studies of religion and holy places in the Eastern Mediterranean region. It also looks at how sacredness is not fixed and tied to the place itself, but how it is a social and symbolic process that gradually takes shape through ritual repetition, collective memory, and how the place is imagined by the local people. From this point of view, these caves can be seen as "popular sacred spaces" that appeared outside of the official religious institutions. However, they still played an important spiritual and social role in rural communities.

This study helps us understand more about religion in the Syrian coast during later periods, and shows how important it is to study places of worship that are not built on land, as people often remember and continue to use these kinds of buildings for religious purposes, even if there is no physical archaeological evidence left. A place can also become sacred if people keep on using it for religious purposes, every generation.

Popular sacred spaces that are not part of a religious institution.

For a long time, the study of sacred spaces in the Near East and the Mediterranean world has been linked to official religious buildings like temples, churches, and monasteries. These buildings were the most visible signs of religious organisation and ritual authority within ancient societies. However, modern approaches to the study of religion have started to pay more attention to religious practices that are not connected to formal buildings or religious organisations. Instead, they focus on places that have become sacred because people have used them for religious activities many times.[1] In this context, the idea of "lived religion" has become a way to study everyday religious experiences and local practices that happen outside traditional religious groups. This suggests that religion is understood not only through official doctrines or sacred structures, but also through the relationship of individuals and groups to places, symbols, and rituals within their daily lives.[2]

In this way of thinking, 'sacredness' is not seen as something that a place has in its nature, but as something that is created through the relationship between the community and the place. A natural site can become a sacred space when it becomes important for religious people because they visit there or tell stories about it. This can happen even if the government doesn't officially recognise it. Research into religion in rural areas during the late Roman period has shown that many religious practices continued outside of the control of the Church. Rituals connected with people's homes, the local community and nature played a significant part in people's daily religious lives in the Eastern Mediterranean region and the late Roman world. In her study of religion in rural communities in the late

[1] Albrecht, J., Degelmann, C., Gasparini, V., Gordon, R., Petridou, G., Raja, R., Rieger, A.-K., Rüpke, J., Sippel, B., & Urciuoli, E. R. (2018). *Religion in the making: The lived ancient religion approach*. Religion, 48(4), 568–593.
[2] Jörg Rüpke, Greg Woolf, and Rubina Raja (eds.), *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 3–7.

Roman period, Kim Bawes shows that local religious practices and informal spaces were important in shaping the religion of these communities, even though they were not officially recognised by the Church.[3]

Natural caves are particularly important in this type of space because of their long history with ritual and symbolic practices in the Mediterranean world. Since ancient times, caves have been used as places to escape, worship, heal, and make vows. In many ancient cultures, caves were also linked to sacred waters, healing rituals, and contact with supernatural forces. Research on holy caves in the Mediterranean shows that the link between caves and being holy does not depend on a particular religion. Instead, it is connected to the special qualities of the cave, such as being remote, dark, and connected to water or the land. Some caves were also used for healing and for rituals, and these continued in different forms over time.[4]

This does not mean that pagan rituals and Christian folk practices are the same. This is because it is difficult to find direct archaeological evidence for this. But some symbols and rituals connected to caves, like using oil and candles, and thinking of caves as places of healing or blessings, can be used to talk about the idea of "nature worship" in rural communities. This idea of "nature worship" was later understood in different ways by different religions. In some of his works on ritual practices in the Eastern Mediterranean, David Frankfurter has noted that local communities often took natural symbols and spaces and used them in new religious practices, but this does not mean that the old rituals survived in their original form.[5]

From this point of view, the caves along the Syrian coast can be seen as special places that have become sacred over time. This happened because of local stories and traditions, not because of an official religious group that said the caves were holy. Stories, visits and rituals are all ways in which the local people come to understand the importance of the place. What's more, the fact that these practices have continued to the present day shows that some natural spaces can still have a symbolic and religious function, even when there is no building or organisation that is typical of traditional religious sites.

Natural caves and the feeling of being close to nature in the landscape near the coast of Syria

The Syrian coastal region is characterised by a landscape that combines mountain ranges, valleys and natural springs, leading to the presence of a large number of caves and rock cavities within the rural landscape stretching from Jableh to Baniyas and the surrounding mountainous areas. These caves were not just random natural things in the landscape; they were often used by people. People used them as places to live, to escape, to graze animals, or for religious rituals. Research shows that natural environments in the Eastern Mediterranean, like caves, springs and mountains, were often given religious meaning by local communities.[6]

The connection between caves and ritual practices does not prove that ancient practices directly led to today's folk rituals. This is because there is no clear archaeological evidence to prove this. However, there are some similarities in the symbols used at these sites, such as the connections to water, oil and candles, as well as the rituals of blessing and healing. This suggests that there are wider cultural patterns related to the way nature is respected in rural communities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Some caves were isolated and far from big cities. This meant that they were a good place for people to go and pray on their own or together. This happened in the early days of

[3]Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 12–18.

[4]*Sacred Places: The Origin and Evolution of Cult in Caves in the Mediterranean Context* (Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2011), pp. 25–31.

[5]David Frankfurter, "Magic and the Forces of Materiality," in *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 147–152.

[6]Rüpke et al., *Lived Religion*, pp. 12–14.

Christianity, especially in the countryside and mountains. These places were not controlled by the church as much as other areas. We can't be sure if the caves under study were actually used in this way, but it's possible. This is because of the early Christian relationship with isolated natural spaces. What's more, the way certain natural places are talked about in local Christian stories shows how rural communities can include natural things in their religious symbols and stories without turning them into formal religious buildings with a clear architectural style.[7]

The Cave of the Virgin Mary in Al-Qatrubiyah: A Place of Local Memory and Ritual Significance

The Cave of the Virgin Mary is found near the village of Al-Qatrubiyah, to the east of the city of Jableh, in a mountainous area with lots of valleys and natural rock formations. The cave is in a remote spot at the bottom of a rocky slope in a forest. It's far away from where most people live. There is no clear evidence of ancient religious buildings or archaeology that would show it as a known religious site. But the cave is important to the local people because of its religious significance and has become a place where people go to seek blessings and perform traditional rituals.

Local people say that the cave was important in the life of the Virgin Mary. They believe that she stayed in the cave for a short time while travelling through the mountains along the Syrian coast. This was at a time when Christianity was spreading in this area. We can't be sure about the history of this story without more evidence, like written documents or archaeological finds. But the story is important because it plays a part in how the local people think about their religion. Here, the story is more important than facts and figures because it makes the place seem more meaningful and important in the eyes of the people who come after us.[8]

Information from local people and from the cave itself shows that some of the traditions associated with the cave are still being practised. These include lighting candles, burning incense and putting oil in the cave for blessings or healing. People from nearby villages also often visit, and there is no church organisation or official religious ceremony linked to the site. This shows that the cave's importance isn't linked to a religious institution. Instead, its importance comes from people repeating rituals there and it being a part of the local people's shared memory.

It is worth noting that the meaning behind the site's features has not always been the same. Some local accounts say that changes have been made to the symbols in the grotto, including replacing some images or symbols connected to the Virgin Mary and adding other religious symbols. These changes have made some visitors and local residents happy and some sad. They think that the site is very important because of its connection to the Virgin Mary. This issue shows an important part of what makes popular sacred spaces special: they are always being reinterpreted and their meaning is constantly changing for the people who use them. This means they are not strict and do not follow rigid rules.

The Cave of the Virgin Mary is an example of this. It is a holy place even though there is no religious architecture or an official institution overseeing the site. This is because of the interaction of stories told by people with the rituals performed there and the fact that people still use the site today. This also shows how rural communities can change natural spaces to make them important for religion and symbolism, even when there is no archaeological evidence for these spaces being used by religious groups in the past.

Al-Basiya Cave: Collective Rituals and Popular Piety

[7] Bowes, *Private Worship*, p. 18.

[8] Author's fieldwork and oral testimonies collected in al-Qatrubiyah village, Jableh countryside, 2024.

Al-Basiya Cave is found to the south of the city of Baniyas, near the coast. In the past, this area was a natural route for people to travel between the coast and inland areas. Despite being small inside and simple, the cave has become important to local people in Baniyas and nearby villages because of its religious significance. Over time, it has become a holy place for popular religious practices and group pilgrimages linked to the Virgin Mary. Local stories tell of a cave that's been linked to the story of the Virgin Mary's journey along the Syrian coast. It's said that she stopped in the cave to rest. This story is told in different ways at many popular sites related to the Virgin Mary in the coastal region.

We can't be sure about the history of this story without proof, like old documents or finds from digs. But the fact that it's been passed down through the generations shows that it has a special meaning for the local people. The most important thing about this story is that it shows the site as a sacred space, not as a history. Local accounts show that the cave was not just a place for individual visits or seeking blessings. It was also a place for the community to come together for prayers and seasonal religious celebrations. [9]These were for the Virgin Mary, especially in the month of May, which is known as the Month of Mary. There were also popular celebrations on 8 September to mark the Virgin Mary's birthday.

Local data shows that the site has historically hosted big religious gatherings, where prayers and masses were held with visitors from Baniyas and nearby villages like al-Rawda and al-Fayha, as well as other areas in the Tartus and Latakia governorates. Simple visitor amenities, such as stone tables and rest areas, were also added. These show how the cave has changed from just a natural space into a place that is important for the local community. It seems that the site's importance was more connected to the local people's visits and the stories they told about its sacred nature, rather than to the church itself.

Some local people also say that there are rock formations and carved tombs near the cave. These are often thought to be the work of monks or people who were religious in the past. It is difficult to know exactly what these uses were, but there are caves and rock-cut tombs in the area. These are similar to those found in some coastal and mountainous regions during the Roman and Byzantine periods. At that time, isolated natural environments were sometimes used by monks to live alone or to pray in a less formal way.

The Al-Basiya Cave is different from the Cave of the Virgin Mary in Al-Qatrubiyah in some ways. People visit the Al-Basiya Cave for different reasons. They go there for group activities and seasonal celebrations. This has made the Al-Basiya Cave a popular religious centre in the coastal region. This case also shows that the idea of natural spaces being sacred doesn't depend on them having big religious buildings or official institutions. It can be created by ongoing rituals and social practices, and by local stories connecting the place to religious beliefs and the rural community's shared memory.

Basina Cave: A Natural Cave Between Use and the Absence of Sacredness

Basina Cave is in the countryside near Jableh, in an area with lots of rock formations and old tombs from the Roman and Byzantine periods. The Directorate of Antiquities thought the cave might be a rock-cut tomb, especially as there are a lot of rock-cut tombs at nearby sites in the coastal and mountainous areas around Jableh.[10] However, the exploration and survey work conducted inside the cave revealed no clear archaeological evidence indicating its use as a burial site, nor were any architectural elements, interior fittings, or material evidence found that would allow it to be classified among the known rock-cut tombs in the region. So, it was seen as a natural formation that was probably used as a shelter or natural cave, rather than a place for religious or funerary activities.

[9]Author's field observations and oral testimonies collected in al-Bassiyeh area, Baniyas countryside, 2024.

[10] Directorate of Antiquities of Jableh, unpublished field information and local archaeological inspection records, accessed by the author during fieldwork.

This case is particularly important for the present study, not because of the site's religious function, but because of its absence. Although Basina Cave is similar to other caves that have become popular religious sites on the Syrian coast, it has no local stories about it. There is also no evidence of rituals, religious visits, or practices related to seeking blessings, healing, and remembering the past. These things were clearly seen at the Cave of the Virgin Mary and the Cave of al-Basiya.

This comparison suggests that the change of a natural cave into a sacred space is not just linked to the geographical or natural characteristics of the site. It is also not just linked to how old the site is or the presence of an archaeological context around it. Instead, it depends primarily on the formation of a local narrative that gives the place religious significance, and on the continuity of the practice of

This suggests that the change of a natural cave into a sacred space is not just linked to the geographical or natural characteristics of the site, nor even to how old the site is or the presence of an archaeological context around it. Instead, it depends primarily on the formation of a local narrative that gives the place religious significance, and on the continuation of the social and ritual practices associated with it within the local community. The Basina Cave is a good example of this. It shows that nature and sacredness are not the same thing, and that a place is not considered sacred just because it is natural. A place becomes sacred when people come to think of it as special, and when they act in a special way towards it.

The Production of Sacredness Outside Religious Institutions

The cases studied show that the change of some natural caves along the Syrian coast into religious spaces was not linked to the presence of sacred buildings or direct religious control. Instead, it was mostly the result of the interaction between local stories, ritual practices and the shared memory of rural communities. The caves that became important for religion were not different from other caves in the area. Instead, they were connected to local stories that gave the place a special meaning. This meaning was made stronger by people visiting and doing rituals there, like seeking blessings, healing, and having parties.

A comparison between the Cave of the Virgin Mary and the Cave of al-Basiya on one side, and the Cave of Bsina on the other, shows that nature alone is not enough to make something holy. Even though the natural environment and geographical isolation were similar, Basina Cave stayed the same, while the other caves became places where religion was a big part of people's lives. This suggests that sacred spaces are not just formed because of how old they are or what they look like. Instead, they are created by a social process that gives new meaning to the place and makes it part of the symbolic structure of society.

These cases also show that religiosity in rural areas was not always linked to official religious institutions. Instead, it was able to create its own sacred spaces based on traditional stories and collective practices. These sites have kept up their religious presence despite having limited buildings and no central religious organisation, showing how flexible local religion is and how it can include natural things in long-lasting symbolic and spiritual contexts. In this case, local stories seem to be an important part of creating a sense of sacredness. They are not used as an exact historical record, but as a way to give the place a symbolic importance and connect it to the community's religious beliefs.

The data we have does not allow us to establish a direct connection between these popular practices and the veneration patterns associated with caves in classical periods. However, we can discuss a broader continuity in the relationship between rural communities and secluded natural spaces, based on shared symbolic elements. So, these caves show how sacredness can be created outside of the official religious structure. This happens through the ongoing interaction between place, memory, and ritual within the local community.

Conclusion

This study shows how important informal natural spaces are in understanding the religious landscape of the Syrian coastal countryside during later periods. It reveals that sacredness was not always linked to religious institutions or special buildings, but was sometimes shaped by the ongoing interaction between local stories, social practices, and collective memory. By studying several natural caves that are linked to seeking blessings, pilgrimage, and popular celebration, it becomes clear that some sites have a long-lasting religious presence in the local community, even though there is not much archaeological and material evidence for this.

The study also shows that the usual archaeological approach is not always useful for this type of site. This is because the lack of architecture or archaeological finds does not mean that the site was not used for religious purposes. However, looking at the case studies shows that a natural environment on its own is not enough to make a space sacred unless it is also part of a symbolic and social framework that gives the site meaning in the minds of the people. So it's really important to combine field data, local stories, and anthropological approaches when studying popular sacred spaces. This is part of the religious and social history of rural communities in the Syrian coast and the Eastern Mediterranean in general.

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