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REVIEWER'S REPORT

Manuscript No.: IJAR-57623

Title: Natural Caves and Popular Sacred Sites in the Syrian Coastal Countryside,

Recommendation:
Accept after major Revision

Rating	Excel.	Good	Fair	Poor
Originality		✓,		
Techn. Quality		✓,		
Clarity	✓,			
Significance	✓,			

Reviewer Name: Abdul Haseeb Mir

Detailed Reviewer's Report

The manuscript entitled "**Natural Caves and Popular Sacred Sites in the Syrian Coastal Countryside**" presents an insightful micro-historical and ethnographic investigation into the transformation of natural landscape features into spaces of popular veneration and collective memory. Focusing on the rural peripheries of Jableh and Baniyas along the Syrian coast, the study explores three distinct natural caves that evolved into popular shrines dedicated to the Virgin Mary. By comparing these localized sacred sites with a fourth, non-venerated natural cave, the author effectively isolates the specific socio-cultural dynamics—such as ritual practice, oral testimony, and informal collective memory—that drive the sanctification of space independently of institutional ecclesiastical architecture or official state religious structures.

The study addresses a highly significant and under-researched dimension of Eastern Mediterranean religious history. Exploring the resilience of "lived religion" and informal sacred spaces outside the boundaries of official institutional control provides a critical framework for understanding rural community identity in the Levant. The methodology, which balances direct field observations and the recording of contemporary local oral histories with late antique Roman and Byzantine contextualization, is a notable strength of the research design.

However, the manuscript currently exhibits a weak engagement with modern spatial and anthropological theories, lacks sufficient historical contextualization linking late antiquity to contemporary practices, and contains critical presentation issues regarding its visual and archival evidence that must be addressed prior to publication.

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Suggestions for Improvement

- **Deepen the Theoretical Grounding in Spatial and Religious Anthropology:** While the paper successfully maps out local practices, it deals with the concept of sacred space in an overly descriptive manner. The author should ground the analysis within established spatial and anthropological frameworks, such as Mircea Eliade's concepts of *hierophany* and the *axis mundi*, Henri Lefebvre's production of space, or Robert Hertz's work on the symbolic representations of landscapes. This will elevate the text from a local case study to a broader theoretical contribution.
- **Bridge the Historical Gap Between Late Antiquity and Contemporary Memory:** The paper attempts to connect the usage of these caves during the Roman and Byzantine eras directly to contemporary Marian devotion. However, it leaves a vast historical gap. The author must provide additional historical context regarding how these spaces survived, adapted, or were repurposed during the early Islamic, Crusader, and Ottoman periods to better justify the claim of long-term continuity in popular religious memory.
- **Clarify and Enhance the Technical Presentation of Visual Evidence:** On page 8, there is an unresolved placeholder text reading [Image 1]. For an archaeological and ethnographic study, high-quality visual documentation is indispensable. The author must replace this placeholder with actual field photographs, site maps, or architectural plans showing the physical layouts of the caves (such as Kahf Bsinna), making sure to include precise captions, scale bars, and orientation arrows.
- **Provide Explicit Details on the Unrecorded Archival Material:** In the reference list, the author cites "Unpublished archaeological inspection records and field observations" from the Directorate of Antiquities of Jableh. Because these archival records are inaccessible to the wider public, the author should incorporate specific footnotes or translated summary excerpts within the body text detailing what these official inspections originally found (e.g., specific ceramic shards, coins, or structural modifications from the Byzantine era).
- **Systematize the Oral History and Ethnographic Methodology:** The methodology section notes the use of local stories and testimonies. To meet peer-review standards, the author needs to expand this section to detail the exact parameters of the fieldwork: state the number of local informants interviewed, provide a brief demographic breakdown (such as age range and gender distribution) of the community members consulted, and explain the language or translation protocols used during data collection.
- **Elaborate on the Comparative Analysis of the Non-Sacred Cave:** The choice to include a fourth, non-venerated natural cave as a control variable is an excellent analytical strategy.

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However, its discussion is brief. The author should expand this comparative section, analyzing whether its lack of sanctification is due to physical inaccessibility, the absence of an anchoring local myth, or its distance from historical rural trade routes.

- **Incorporate Contemporary Literature on Mediterranean Lived Religion:** While the manuscript references foundational works like Rüpke et al. (2020) and Frankfurter (1998), it overlooks recent scholarship regarding Levant landscape archaeology and popular shrines. Engaging with peer-reviewed articles from the last five years on the rural archaeology of Syria and Lebanon will substantially modernize the literature review.
- **Correct Syntax and Formatting Imperfections:** The prose contains occasional colloquial phrasing and minor typos that detract from its academic tone (e.g., repetitive phrasing in the abstract such as "looks at the popularity... looks at three sites... looks at how some natural caves"). The abstract and body text should be polished using professional academic verbs (e.g., *examines*, *investigates*, *deconstructs*). Additionally, verify that all in-text citations follow strict APA 7th edition compliance.

Final Recommendation

Recommendation: Revisions Required (Major Revision)

The manuscript presents a compelling, highly authentic, and valuable contribution to our understanding of popular piety and landscape sacralization in the Syrian coastal countryside. The integration of ethnographic fieldwork with historical regional analysis is laudable. However, to meet international publication standards, the paper requires a major revision that resolves the missing visual elements, deepens the engagement with modern anthropological spatial theories, expands the methodology of the oral history collection, and provides a more seamless historical narrative across different eras.