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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 minor revision.....

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

Reviewer's ID: FAHEEM ABDUL MUNEEB

Reviewers Report

The manuscript investigates the transformation of natural caves in the Syrian coastal countryside into locally recognized sacred spaces through ritual practice, oral tradition, and collective memory. Focusing on caves near Jableh and Baniyas, the study examines how certain natural caves became associated with the Virgin Mary and evolved into sites of blessing, pilgrimage, healing, and communal devotion despite lacking formal religious architecture or direct ecclesiastical control. Through comparison with another cave that did not acquire sacred status, the article seeks to explain how sacredness is socially produced within rural communities.

The topic is original, significant, and well suited to interdisciplinary discussions in archaeology, religious studies, anthropology, and memory studies. One of the key strengths of the manuscript is that it shifts attention away from monumental religious structures and instead focuses on informal sacred spaces

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shaped through local practice and collective imagination. In doing so, the study contributes meaningfully to recent scholarship on lived religion and the social construction of sacred landscapes in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The conceptual framework of the article is particularly strong. The engagement with the concept of “lived religion” and with scholarship by Rüpke, Bowes, and Frankfurter provides the manuscript with a solid theoretical foundation. The paper effectively argues that sacredness is not an inherent property of geography or architecture, but rather a social and symbolic process created through repeated ritual activity, storytelling, memory, and communal attachment to place. This argument remains coherent throughout the study and gives the article clear analytical direction.

The comparative structure of the manuscript is also commendable. The inclusion of Basina Cave as a non-sacralized site is analytically important because it strengthens the broader argument of the paper. Rather than simply describing sacred caves, the study demonstrates comparatively why some natural spaces become sacred while others remain ordinary despite similar geographical and environmental characteristics. This comparative element substantially strengthens the intellectual contribution of the manuscript.

The site-specific discussions are detailed and insightful. The analysis of the Cave of the Virgin Mary in al-Qatrubiyah successfully illustrates how local narratives, ritual practices, and symbolic associations sustain sacredness outside formal institutional religion. Similarly, the discussion of Al-Basiya Cave effectively demonstrates how communal rituals, seasonal gatherings, and pilgrimage practices transformed a natural cave into a locally significant devotional center. The study appropriately emphasizes that the importance of these sites lies not in historical verification of the narratives attached to them, but in the role these narratives play within local religious consciousness.

Another positive aspect of the manuscript is its methodological restraint and balance. The author does not attempt to prove the historical authenticity of local traditions associated with the Virgin Mary, nor does the paper force direct continuity between ancient pagan practices and contemporary Christian folk rituals. Instead, the study carefully discusses broader symbolic continuities related to natural spaces, healing, ritual isolation, and sacred geography. This cautious analytical approach strengthens the academic credibility of the article.

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The manuscript is generally well-organized and readable. The movement from theoretical framing to field-based discussion and comparative interpretation is coherent, and the conclusion effectively synthesizes the main findings of the study.

However, there are several areas where the manuscript could be strengthened further.

The most significant issue concerns methodological clarification. While the paper refers repeatedly to field observations and oral testimonies, the methodological dimension remains relatively underdeveloped. The manuscript would benefit from a more explicit discussion regarding how oral testimonies were collected, how field observations were conducted, and how local narratives were evaluated analytically. Since the study relies heavily on ethnographic and memory-based material, a clearer methodological explanation would improve the rigor and transparency of the research.

Additionally, although the paper engages effectively with theories of lived religion and sacredness, some sections remain somewhat descriptive. In particular, the discussion concerning rural religiosity outside institutional structures could be analytically expanded further. Greater engagement with broader debates concerning unofficial sacred landscapes, folk Christianity, and memory-based religious practice in the Eastern Mediterranean would strengthen the scholarly depth of the article.

The paper could also benefit from slightly more historical contextualization. While the author correctly avoids making unsupported historical claims, a somewhat fuller discussion of pilgrimage traditions, Marian devotion, or rural religious practices in Byzantine and post-Byzantine Syria would enrich the interpretive context of the study.

There are also a few stylistic issues. Certain passages become repetitive, especially where the manuscript repeatedly explains sacredness as socially constructed through ritual and memory. Minor condensation and stylistic editing would improve the overall flow and precision of the writing.

The current title generally reflects the manuscript, but it remains somewhat broad and descriptive compared to the actual conceptual depth of the study. The article is not simply about “natural caves” or “sacred sites”; rather, it specifically examines how sacredness is produced through memory, ritual, and local religious practice. A more focused and analytically refined title would therefore strengthen the scholarly presentation of the paper.

Possible alternative titles include:

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Natural Caves and the Social Construction of Sacred Space on the Syrian Coast

Ritual, Memory, and Sacred Landscapes in the Syrian Coastal Countryside

Lived Religion and Popular Sacred Spaces in the Syrian Coastal Countryside

Overall, this manuscript represents a thoughtful and original contribution to the study of sacred landscapes, popular religion, and community memory in the Syrian coastal region. The integration of field observation, oral tradition, and contemporary theoretical approaches gives the paper significant value, especially in highlighting forms of religiosity that remain outside formal institutional and archaeological frameworks.

The concerns identified mainly relate to methodological elaboration, deeper analytical contextualization, and minor structural refinement. These are manageable revisions and do not undermine the overall quality or originality of the study.

Recommendation: Accepted with minor revisions.