

# Cultural landscape of Northern Syria in the memories of locals in the displacement

## Cultural landscape memory role in the post-war recovery and rehabilitation

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### Introduction

In north-western Syria, between the cities of Aleppo and Idlib, lie numerous of archaeological sites. The area, with its many impressive ruins built from massive limestone blocks, is known as the "Dead Cities", or "Ancient Villages of Northern Syria" (Witakowski, 2010). The cultural landscapes of the Dead Cities area, including structures and village, remains, reflect the transition from the Roman Empire to Byzantine Christianity (Wail, 2015). In modern times this was also a vibrant landscape that was once filled with living villages and a population engaged largely in agriculture, especially olive oil production and olive tree cultivation. The Ancient Villages of Northern Syria and their relict landscapes provide an excellent example of sustainable rural settlement from the first to the seventh centuries CE, based on the careful use of the soil, water and limestone, and the mastery of production of valuable agricultural crops ("Cultural Properties - Ancient Villages of Northern Syria (Syrian Arab Republic) | InforMEA," n.d.), such as olives and grapes.

### Statement of the research

Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Syria's rich archaeological heritage has faced serious threats, including looting and damage associated with fighting and intentional destruction of antiquities (Casana and Laugier, 2017). This destruction is prevalent across the Ancient Villages in Northern Syria, some of which are part of World Heritage sites (Cunliffe et al., 2016). Since the start of the conflict in Syria, the security situation has not allowed any missions to be undertaken to the Ancient villages of Northern Syria property as it is stated by the UNESCO. Reports of serious destruction of some places as well as ascertained and potential threats consequent to the armed conflict in Syria that began in March 2011 have been published, according to the UNESCO. The Syrian conflict has been defined by more than 10 years of displacement, making Syria the source of the largest population displacement crisis since World War II. More than 13.5 million Syrians have fled their homes in search of safety. Many of them have been displaced multiple times. Around two million people have been displaced in Idlib. At the present time, many sites of the ancient villages of northern Syria have been evacuated, but it has become a scene of clashes along the military front line that

separates the opposition forces from the forces of the Syrian regime. The site has fallen victim to deliberate and severe sabotage, deformation, and recent additions that may come to change its distinctive cultural and archaeological scene.

The interconnection of traditions and values in the shaping of unique cultural landscapes, and the special features found within them has been repeatedly acknowledged in the scholarly literature. Anthropogenic forces are a dominant factor in shaping spaces and memories. All wars, in all their phases, have direct and indirect effects on the landscape that can be traced on the scarred surface of the earth and in peoples' memories even long after the fighting has come to an end. The archaeological sites and displacement landmarks provide intimate spaces in which the past can inhabit and live. Heritage, identity and cultural landscapes draw on discursive practices that are, themselves, complex and contradictory. The close connection between the intangible and tangible cultural landscape of the sites follows a unique and specific awareness of the cultural landscape by the folk who formerly lived there. The conceptual link between intangible heritage, cultural landscape and identity provides a basis for a deeper understanding of societies and their interrelationships with the cultural landscapes that surround them, ultimately leading to a better understanding of collective memory, war and rehabilitation.

The ancient villages of Mount Al-Zawiyah characteristically cluster into coherent groups with their antique ruins spanning and overlooking the ancient agricultural divisions (field systems). The natural landscape surrounding the site is generally still preserved. The olive groves, grape vines, figs, and some forest trees are still partially distributed as they had been in the more distant past. The most important site within this park is Al-Bara village, which remained an important centre of the villages in the area.

The landscape within the park is very well-preserved and is closely related to agricultural investment in these lands sites such as Serjilla, Shinshirah and Batrasa and Martahun valley provide an incomparable framework that complements and underlines the importance of architectural and archaeological ruins located within living landscapes, Fig.1. In some areas, pomegranate and fig trees grow in and around the buildings. Some of these ancient villages have a ghostlike quality, as if they were abruptly abandoned and then slowly crumbled into the landscape. Unfortunately, the landscape was not preserved to this degree of magnificence in other places within the boundaries of the park.



*Fig. 1. Serjilla Site, Idlib, Syria (© Idlib Antiquities Center).*

The research focuses on south Idlib province cultural landscapes in northern Syria (the landscape surrounding the Roman and Byzantine sites of Albara and Sarjila). The features of cultural heritage in these sites can be assessed carefully, identifying their resonance within memories of locals as well as the connection between the monuments and displaced locals. The aim of the study is to explore issues of importance of heritage in support of post-war psychological recovery of the community in the Syrian diaspora, drawing upon their memories of home - the good, bad and horrible. The role that such significant cultural landscapes play in the preservation of collective memory and post-war psychological recovery will be pivotal.

## **Methods**

There is an interconnected relationship between humans and technology that exists. Through people's use of technology, technology has contributed to shaping and contributing to many research and field works. Since my research is based mostly on interviews and surveys, I am using different scales of technologies based on software managed by individuals by handy devices. The collection of data will be carried out through various media. I am going to use the walking interview and GPS to capture displaced people's understandings of places and to focus on oral history and changes in cultural landscape memory.

A method of showing places virtually and interviewing at the same time will be involved, in this case, the environment thus acts as a visual and auditory prompt to the stories being told whilst moving as well as involving sound walking. It offers an opportunity to rethink oral history practice. One of the technologies that will be used is the GIS software (ArcGIS) for visualizing and presenting status

assessment data connected to changes in damage to physical structures. Also, I am going to use 3D presentations to provoke memories of the materiality of the cultural and natural environments.

The second phase comprises assessment and analysis after the collected data is processed (qualitative and quantitative analyses). For the qualitative analyses, the author is going to use emotions analysis software (Noldus) to analyze the feeling and the memory reflection of the interviewees. Also, some software will be used like (SPSS, and STATA) to analyze the qualitative data.

## Outcomes

There are a huge number of displaced local people who have sought refuge in the cultural landscape of northwest Syria. The importance and significance of the cultural landscape created by the physically endangered ancient villages of North Syria make this research crucial. There is the possibility that cultural heritage could be one tool in helping reduce the psychological trauma of people in diaspora and, eventually, even in internal post-war recovery in Syria. Moreover, there is a need to incorporate forward-looking heritage futures into research and findings connected to resilient heritage and the 'ability to aspire' during displacement. Finally, there are social connections that can be created through provoking and stimulating mutual memories of this special cultural landscape.

The results will shed light on the connection cultural landscape comprising the ancient villages of Northern Syria and the olive groves and activities connected to olive oil production that took place until very recently among the monuments. Also, a better illustration will be in constructing links between spatial and temporal space, place, cultural/agrarian landscape, displacement, and memory among the displaced people who once lived and worked in this region. Moreover, one of the outcomes is going to be an understanding of the feelings of belonging of displaced people concerning these archaeological monuments and their old agrarian way of life within the landscape. This research aims to show the role that cultural landscapes play in the preservation of collective memory and post-war psychological recovery.

## Funding

Central European University.

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