

Bara (al-Bara) البارة

Idlib Governorate





FIGURE 11. Overview of Bara and damage of cultural heritage locations.

Site Description

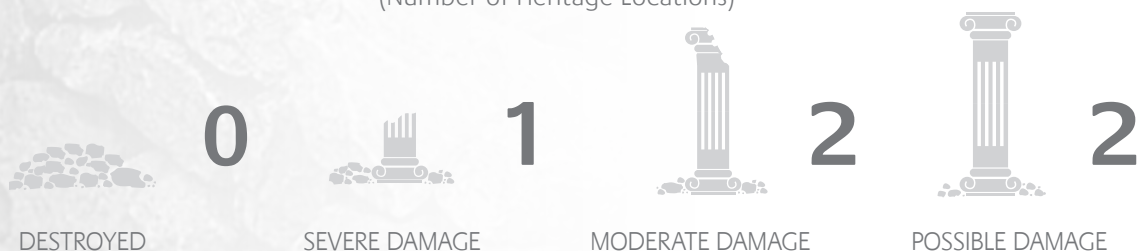
The largest site in this area is the Byzantine settlement of Al-Bara, one of the so-called Dead or Forgotten Cities, dating back to at least the fourth century AD. It was a key trading route between Antioch and Apamea, as well as a centre of wine and olive oil production for the area, expanding to cover an area 2 km by 3 km, making it one of the most impressive Dead Cities. Al-Bara remained predominantly Byzantine Christian, even after the Islamic conquest, until the occupation of the Latin Crusaders in the late-eleventh century. The Crusaders led a massacre of Ma'arat al-Numan during their occupation of Al-Bara and were eventually driven out of the area by 1125 AD, after which the area came under Muslim control. The site was largely abandoned, potentially due to an earthquake, in the twelfth century.⁽⁶⁾

The ruined Byzantine settlements of Mujleya, Btirsā, Bshilla, Ba'uda, Dalloze, Serjilla, Rabi'ah and Shinsara (also called Khirbet Hass) also fall within this area of interest and are discussed in this report. All of them are part of the World Heritage Site called the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria, inscribed in 2011 and composed of eight archaeological parks. Those listed are in Archaeological Park 4 (Jebel Zawiya, in the Ma'aret Al-Nu'man and al-Bara provinces). Today, many remain in an exceptional state of preservation, particularly Serjilla; some buildings still have two stories, and much of the surrounding cultural landscape is also preserved, including some field boundaries, wine presses and other such installations (see figure 11).



Bara Damage Level

(Number of Heritage Locations)



Status Overview

There is no resettlement visible at Al-Bara and only possible evidence of conflict damage, but Shinshara, Rabi'ah and Serjilla have apparently been resettled, potentially by civilians who are seeking refuge from conflict. The exceptional level of preservation of the Dead Cities provides shelter not only from the shelling, which often occurs in the area, but also from the harsh winters. In addition to building makeshift shelters, many refugees dig beneath the ruins for refuge:

“These Dead Cities have become home to thousands of refugees who have fled from the civil war and now live in the caves beneath the ruins... Some have even dug up the ancient stone graves and are using them as makeshift homes... There is little or no access to places like this while war rages, so the true nature of the devastation will not be known for some time.”⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

In some cases, particularly where a Dead City has been resettled, there is the potential for looting to occur. “People are not only using these ghost towns as a place to live, but also as a way to make a living.”⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ Minor looting has been reported at Al-Bara,^(iv) but the extent of the damage done to the reviewed sites cannot be confirmed beyond the presence of civilian activity. However, potential looting holes were visible at Shinshara and Btirsā. A new construction was visible on a comparison of imagery at Btirsā, but this appears to be an extension of existing settlements, rather than the resettlement of an abandoned area.

No damage was visible at Mujleya, Bshilla, Ba'uda or Dalloze, though clouds covered Mujleya on the 2014 image, so only the December 2008 and January 2013 imagery could be assessed.

BARA DAMAGE ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

LOCATIONS NAME	DAMAGE LEVEL
al-Bara	Possible damage
Btirsā	Possible damage
Rabi'ah	Moderate damage
Serjilla	Moderate damage
Shinshara (Khirbet Hass)	Severe damage

NOTE

This report provides a detailed analysis of significant changes to the cultural heritage of this site resulting from the ongoing conflict in Syria. World View 1 and 2 satellite imagery acquired on 16 December 2008, 17 January 2013 and 17 September 2014 was used for this report.

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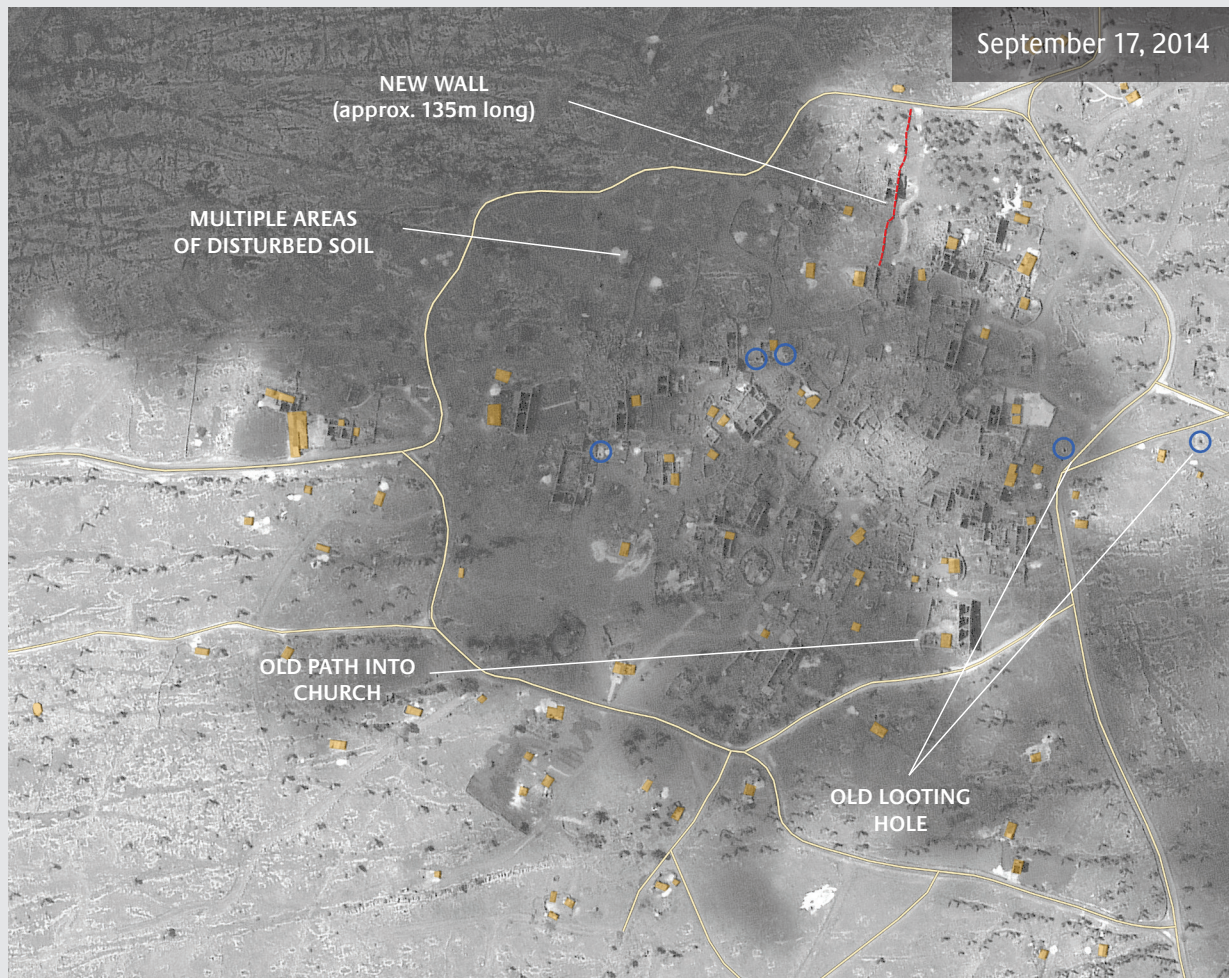


FIGURE 12. Shinshara Roman/Byzantine village showing signs of new structures and disturbed soil. New structures are marked in orange.

SHINSHARA

(SHEMSHARA/SHINSHRAH/KHIRBET HASS)

Description

A Roman/Byzantine village with many surviving houses with superb decoration and a church.

Damage Assessment

There is evidence of resettlement amongst the ruins of Shinshara,^(v) which has caused extensive damage. Approximately 80 new structures have been built amongst the ruins. In some places, the ruins have been cleared or disturbed to make space for the new structures. Stone robbing also seems likely; for example, in one area a wall has been built that is approximately 135 m long, potentially using material from the ruins. In some structures, such as the ruined church northeast of the village, the ground has been disturbed, suggesting either heavy use or possible looting. One small hole was visible north of the village on the 2008 imagery, indicating looting was already a problem, but at least three more possible small looting holes are also visible south of the village on the 2014 image (see figures 12 and 13). There are multiple areas of disturbance of the ground some of which may possibly be a result from shelling. Shelling was reported to have occurred from an airstrike on 02 May 2014, which destroyed an entire house and the wall of one of the churches.^(vi)



FIGURE 13. Shinshara.  Visible looting holes



FIGURE 14. Rabi'ah Byzantine settlement showing shelters and tents within the ruins. New structures are marked in orange.

RABI'AH

Description

Rabi'ah is a component site of the World Heritage property of the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria. It dates back to approximately the fourth century AD. The site is one of many Byzantine settlements surrounding Al-Bara that once benefited from trade and wine and olive oil production in the area. The ruins of the site still contain many standing structures.

Damage Assessment

The ruined settlement was apparently resettled at some point between January 2013 and September 2014. Approximately 29 shelters have been placed in and around the ruins as of 17 September 2014 (see figures 14 and 15). A report released by the The Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology shows that the settlements were well established by July 2014.^(vii) The extent of the damage to the site cannot be determined at this time. However, it is likely the activity has affected the ruins and the archaeological levels. No looting was visible in the imagery.



FIGURE 15. Rabi'ah Byzantine settlement.

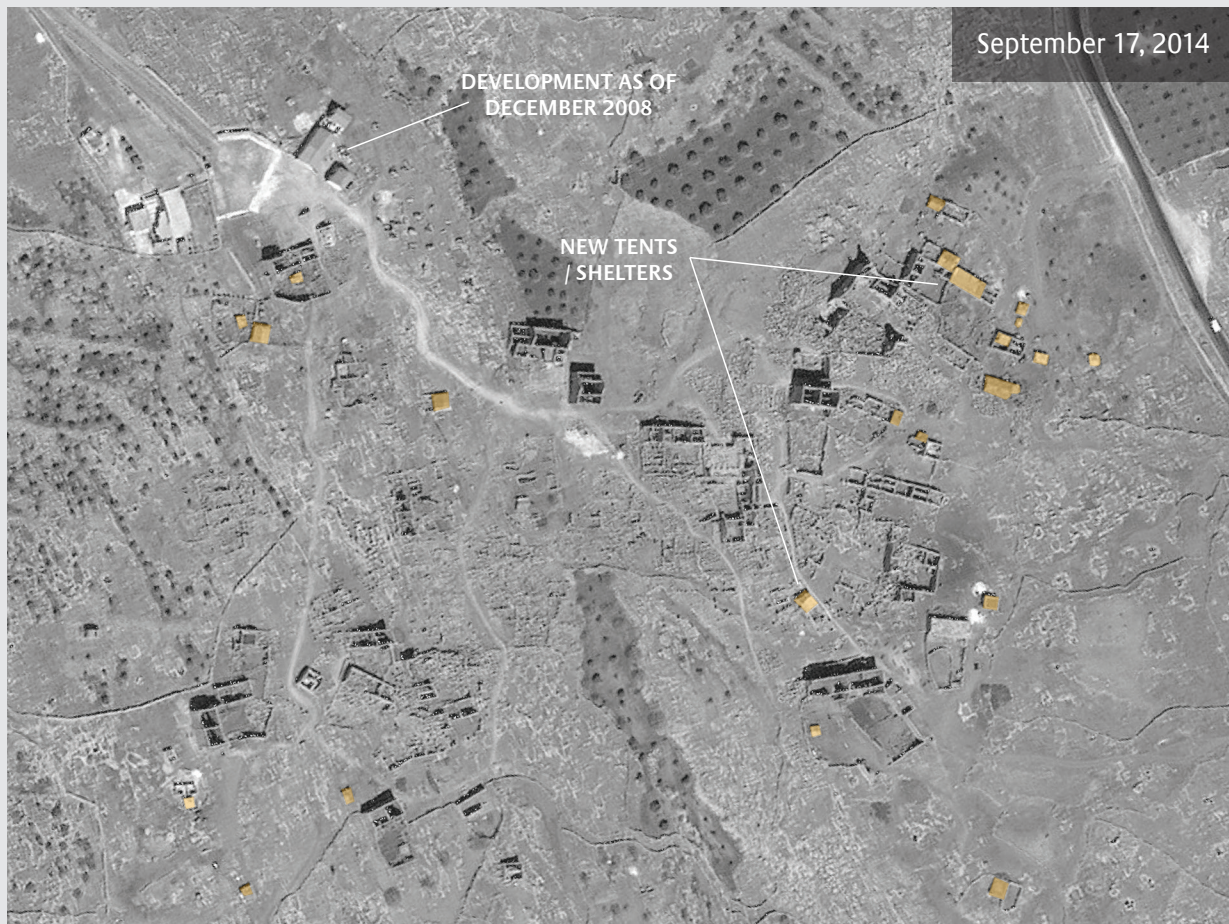


FIGURE 16. Serjilla Byzantine settlement showing new structures, tents and shelters. New structures are marked in orange.

SERJILLA

Description

Serjilla is a component site of the World Heritage property of the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria and it is probably one of the best-preserved. The site was founded in approximately 473 AD and abandoned around the seventh century, when Arabs conquered the region and discontinued merchant routes to Antioch and Apamea.^(viii) The site contains numerous residential houses, a two-story villa which is still standing, baths and the remnants of a small church.

Damage Assessment

Approximately 22 shelters and one new structure had been placed in and around the ruins as of 17 September 2014 (see figures 16 and 17). Most of these structures were placed between January 2013 and September 2014. The level of damage to the site cannot be determined at this time. However, it is likely the activity has affected the ruins and archaeological levels.^(ix) No looting was visible in the imagery.^(x)



FIGURE 17. Serjilla Byzantine settlement.



Overview of the Byzantine settlement of Serjilla/
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

AL-BARA

Description

This World Heritage property was a Byzantine settlement and dates back to approximately the fourth century AD and covers an area of 2 km by 3 km. In terms of size and variety of the structural remains, it is one of the most impressive Dead Cities. Much of the site has now been incorporated into olive orchards, but many of the buildings still contain at least two stories.

Damage Assessment

Fighting has been reported in the area since the start of the conflict in Autumn 2011.^(xi) Although the majority of the structures appear undamaged, in two locations around buildings, and several more within the area of the orchards that contains the city, the ground is clearly disturbed and trees are no longer present. This may represent evidence of shelling, but the extent of damage to the buildings cannot be assessed on the imagery. There is no visible evidence of looting, although reports indicate that some of the tombs (long empty) have been broken into, damaging the structures.^(xii) There is also no evidence of resettlement,^(xiii) as seen elsewhere on the Limestone Massif that contains the Dead Cities.

BTIRSA

Description

This World Heritage property was a Byzantine settlement and dates to the first millennium AD and is noted for its fine sculptures adorning the houses.

Damage Assessment

A new structure has been built on the eastern edge of the village, potentially affecting the ruins. In addition, a hole, indicative of looting, is visible inside one of the ruined houses.

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- (i) Burns, R. 2010 [3]
- (ii) Kurisositas.com [1]
- (iii) Mcevers, K., and Marrouch, R. 2013. [2]
- (iv) Le patrimoine archéologique Syrien en danger reported that the pyramid tomb was looted in 2013 [4]. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=455866514481678&set=a.168560016545664.36383.168536393214693&type=1&relevant_count=1&ref=nf
- (v) According to a report by the The Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology, some 350 families settled in the village in 2012, but many of them left later. By 2013, only 50 families remained. They also reported ongoing looting and stone robbing [5]. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.526069614166821.1073741846.324869057620212&type=1>. Shelling, the destruction of historic structures, and re-occupation by refugees were also listed in the UNESCO State of Conservation Report, 38th Session [6]. Available at: <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2014/whc14-38com-7A-Add-en.pdf>
- (vi) Article by the Damascus Bureau about the airstrikes, May 2014 [7]. Available at: <http://www.alvoices.com/contributed-news/17084496-idlib-archaeological-site-under-threat>
- (vii) Video report by Mahmoud, A., and al-Hamid, M., 2014, showing the resettlement [8]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZeWrfAKLXwk&feature=youtu.be>
- (viii) Burns, R. 2010 [3]
- (ix) The Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology report on the damage caused by the resettlement, 2014 [9]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPdU6mw5BTg>
- (x) The DGAM reported [10] that looting at Serjilla had been occurring, but was under control in September 2012. Available at: <http://www.dgam.gov.sy/index.php?d=288&id=963>
- (xi) YouTube video shows the effects of gunfire on one of the tombs, by Soryasorya1, 2012 [11]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKSsKl65g5w&feature=related>
- (xii) Le patrimoine archéologique Syrien en danger reported that the pyramid tomb was looted in 2013 [6]. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=455866514481678&set=a.168560016545664.36383.168536393214693&type=1&relevant_count=1&ref=nf.
- (xiii) In October 2013 the The Association for the Protection of Syrian Archaeology reported [12] that refugees had reoccupied the site. Although it is not confirmed on satellite imagery, it was also mentioned in the UNESCO State of Conservation Report, 38th Session [6], as was looting. Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_q9yFS7WHU and <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2014/whc14-38com-7A-Add-en.pdf>