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Article

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Abstract

Mount Hermon, situated at the junction of Lebanon, Syria, and Israel, is one of the most archaeologically and symbolically significant highland regions in the Near East. This study synthesises a comprehensive range of archaeological evidence from the prehistoric through modern periods to reveal the mountain's enduring cultural, religious, and strategic roles. Drawing on landscape archaeology, cultural ecology, and symbolic archaeology, the research identifies Mount Hermon as a dynamic space where sacred ritual, subsistence adaptation, and military control intersected over millennia. Findings reveal continuous human activity, including Palaeolithic habitation, Neolithic agricultural development, Bronze and Iron Age sanctuaries, Roman religious and administrative sites, and medieval Islamic and Crusader fortifications. Despite modern geopolitical tensions impeding extensive excavation, Mount Hermon continues to offer valuable insights into the longue durée of Near Eastern archaeology. The paper concludes with a call for regional collaboration, digital conservation, and renewed excavation efforts to protect and better understand this exceptional cultural landscape.

Keywords: archaeology; cultural continuity; geography; heritage conservation; Mount Hermon; sacred landscape; strategic prehistoric settlement

1. Introduction

Mount Hermon, a towering mountain range situated at the intersection of modern-day Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, has long served as a cultural, religious, and strategic landmark in the Levantine region. Rising to approximately 2,814 meters above sea level, it dominates the landscape and serves as a geographical and hydrological cornerstone of the surrounding area (Mazar, 1990). Due to its altitude and abundant water sources, Mount Hermon has sustained human habitation for tens of thousands of years, emerging as a significant locus for archaeological inquiry. This paper seeks to synthesise the archaeological evidence of Mount Hermon from the prehistoric era through to the modern century, offering a diachronic analysis of its occupation, cultural significance, and transformation across millennia.

The strategic location and ecological diversity of Mount Hermon have made it an attractive destination for prehistoric human groups. Archaeological surveys and excavations conducted in its vicinity have uncovered lithic tools, burial sites, and habitation layers that date back to the Lower and Middle Palaeolithic periods (Ronen and Weinstein-Evron, 2000). These findings align with broader patterns observed across the Levant, where early hominins exhibited complex behavioural adaptations to mountainous and varied terrains (Goren-Inbar et al., 2000). The Mount Hermon area, in particular, presents an exceptional case study due to its confluence of highland and lowland ecologies, which likely contributed to both settlement continuity and technological innovation.

By the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, Mount Hermon had become integrated into the expanding network of agro-pastoral communities throughout the southern Levant (Garfinkel, 1999). Radiocarbon-dated structures and material culture from this era—including pottery fragments, grinding stones, and early architectural remains—suggest that Mount Hermon played a role in the broader Neolithic revolution, particularly in terms of resource exploitation and ritual practices. These findings illustrate the area's socio-economic complexity and its participation in the transformative processes that marked the end of foraging lifeways and the rise of sedentary farming communities (Henry, 1989).

The significance of Mount Hermon persisted into the Bronze and Iron Ages, when it became enmeshed in the mythological and theological frameworks of Canaanite, Israelite, and later Greco-Roman cultures. Historical texts, such as those from Ugaritic and Biblical sources, frequently mention Mount Hermon, associating it with divine assemblies, territorial boundaries, and spiritual significance (Bar-Yosef, 2002). These textual references complement archaeological evidence, providing a layered understanding of the mountain's cultural role throughout time.

In the classical and Islamic periods, Mount Hermon's relevance shifted from being primarily religious and symbolic to one also encompassing military and political dimensions. Fortifications, monasteries, and waystations found on and around the mountain from these periods indicate its integration into broader regional systems of control and communication. Throughout the modern century, Mount Hermon has continued to serve as a strategic high ground, particularly during the 20th-century conflicts in the Levant, underscoring its enduring geopolitical significance (Mazar, 1990).

This study undertakes a comprehensive review of published and unpublished archaeological data from Mount Hermon, analysing artefacts, site stratigraphy, and historical sources to construct a chronological narrative of the region's occupation and significance. Through an interdisciplinary lens, combining archaeology, history, and cultural anthropology, this research aims to offer an in-depth understanding of how Mount Hermon has functioned as an artistic and strategic landmark from prehistory to the present.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study of Mount Hermon's archaeological record from prehistory to the modern era necessitates a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that synthesises principles from historical archaeology, landscape archaeology, and cultural memory theory. This integrated approach enables a more nuanced understanding of the long-term human interaction with the landscape and its cultural evolution across millennia.

At the core of this study lies the paradigm of historical archaeology, which emphasises the use of both material remains and documentary sources to interpret past societies (Orser, 2016). While traditional archaeological analysis often focuses on prehistoric societies lacking written records, historical archaeology allows the incorporation of epigraphic, literary, and religious texts, such as Biblical accounts, Ugaritic tablets, and Greco-Roman writings, to contextualise and triangulate archaeological data from later periods. This dual evidentiary method is essential for a region like Mount Hermon, which has been referenced in diverse cultural canons, including the Hebrew Bible, Hellenistic literature, and Islamic historiography (Dever, 2001). Through this lens, archaeological remains are not interpreted in isolation but as part of broader socio-political and theological narratives.

Landscape archaeology further strengthens this study's framework by treating Mount Hermon not simply as a backdrop to human activity but as an active agent in shaping historical processes. This theoretical approach explores the interplay between human agency and environmental settings, focusing on how people adapt to, modify, and assign meaning to their surroundings (Anschuetz et al., 2001). Given Mount Hermon's high-altitude ecology, its role as a water source, and its strategic visibility, landscape archaeology provides crucial insights into why and how human settlements developed on and around it across different historical epochs. Furthermore, sacred geographies—

where natural features are imbued with religious significance—form a key component of landscape theory. Mount Hermon's consistent association with divine manifestations and spiritual boundaries across various cultures suggests that the mountain itself functioned as a symbolic landscape shaped by both natural features and cultural perception (Tilley, 1994).

A third theoretical strand derives from cultural memory theory, particularly as formulated by Assmann (2011), which examines how collective memories are transmitted through rituals, myths, and material culture. Mount Hermon's continued presence in oral traditions, sacred texts, and religious symbolism highlights its status as a site of enduring cultural memory. By employing this theoretical perspective, the study recognises that the meaning of Mount Hermon evolved, reflecting the shifting priorities and identities of successive communities. In this way, the archaeological record becomes a repository of memory practices that both preserve and reshape collective identities. This approach is particularly relevant when analysing the continuity of sacred spaces, the repurposing of religious architecture, and the symbolic re-inscription of meaning onto ancient sites during later historical periods.

The integration of these three theoretical models—historical archaeology, landscape archaeology, and cultural memory—permits a robust and layered analysis of Mount Hermon's archaeological record. It allows the researcher to move beyond typological classification of artefacts to investigate the dynamic relationship between people, place, and memory across time. This framework also enables a critical reflection on the biases inherent in both archaeological interpretation and historical narration, especially in a geopolitically contested region like the Levant.

By applying these intersecting perspectives, the study aspires not only to reconstruct the material past of Mount Hermon but also to interpret how it has been imagined, sacralised, and politicised from prehistoric habitation to modern geopolitical relevance. The theoretical framework thus functions as a conceptual scaffold supporting the comprehensive investigation of Mount Hermon as both a physical and symbolic entity in the human historical landscape.

3. Literature Review

The archaeological exploration of Mount Hermon and its surrounding regions has attracted scholarly attention across disciplines, including archaeology, historical geography, religious studies, and anthropology. The literature reviewed in this section is categorised chronologically, beginning with prehistoric human activity and progressing through antiquity to the modern era. The aim is to assess the scope and identify gaps in the current research landscape regarding the archaeological significance of Mount Hermon.

3.1. Prehistoric Occupation of Mount Hermon

The earliest discussions of Mount Hermon's prehistoric context emerge from broader regional studies of the Levantine corridor, often referred to as a "bridge" between Africa and Eurasia during the Pleistocene. Bar-Yosef (2000) and Goren-Inbar et al. (2000) offer foundational accounts of Lower and Middle Paleolithic occupation in the region, citing Acheulean and Mousterian tool industries as indicators of Homo erectus and Neanderthal activity. Although Mount Hermon itself is less frequently excavated directly, its foothills and adjacent valleys—such as the Hasbani and Banias river regions—have yielded substantial evidence of prehistoric habitation. Ronen and Weinstein-Evron (2000) demonstrate through palynological data that the ecological environment of the area was conducive to early human adaptation.

Henry (1989) emphasises the transitional period from foraging to farming, using the Natufian culture as a case study for early sedentism in the Levant. His work, although not explicitly related to Mount Hermon, helps contextualise findings from sites on its lower slopes, where semi-permanent structures and burials with grave goods have been uncovered. Similarly, Cauvin (2000) and Kuijt and Goring-Morris (2002) offer critical insight into Pre-Pottery Neolithic settlement dynamics that may relate to Hermon's microecological zones, allowing extrapolation from adjacent cultural loci.

3.2. Chalcolithic and Bronze Age Developments

The Chalcolithic period and Early Bronze Age mark a shift in the region's socio-economic complexity. Garfinkel (1999) discusses ceramic typology and metallurgy as indicators of increasing specialisation, and his conclusions apply to peripheral zones, such as Mount Hermon. Mazar (1990) explores proto-urban developments in the southern Levant, identifying long-distance exchange routes that would likely have included Hermon's timber and mineral resources. Although these authors do not isolate Mount Hermon as a primary site, their findings are vital for understanding its peripheral but significant role within regional systems of trade, ritual, and settlement.

In contrast, although limited, direct archaeological surveys, such as those reported by Weinstein (2001), reveal the presence of rock-cut tombs, cisterns, and cultic structures on the flanks of Mount Hermon. These findings support a growing consensus that Hermon was ritually significant during the Bronze Age, aligning with the mountain's appearances in Ugaritic texts and early Semitic mythologies (Pardee, 2002).

3.3. Classical Antiquity: Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Eras

Archaeological investigations into Mount Hermon during classical antiquity have revealed a continuity of both sacred and strategic functions. Avi-Yonah (1975) documents Greco-Roman temples scattered across the Levantine highlands, including Hermon, which were often built on top of earlier holy sites. These temples, such as those at Qasr Antar and Niha, display architectural elements consistent with Roman influence but also include local religious motifs, indicating a syncretism between classical and indigenous traditions (Taylor, 2001).

Epigraphic evidence collected by Lapp (1966) and further analysed by Millar (1993) indicates that these temples served both civic and religious functions well into the Byzantine period. The inscriptional records also help to trace the spread of Christianity into the Hermon area. While much of the region transitioned under Christian influence during the 4th and 5th centuries CE, Mount Hermon retained a duality, continuing to serve as both a religious and geopolitical frontier (Bowersock, 1990).

3.4. Islamic and Medieval Archaeology

The Islamic period introduced new dynamics of settlement and fortification on Mount Hermon. Excavations have identified Mamluk and Ayyubid fortresses, watchtowers, and road systems, suggesting strategic military interest in the area (Boas, 1999). Contemporary Arab geographers and historians, such as al-Idrisi and Ibn Jubayr, referred to Hermon's imposing geography and its proximity to key pilgrimage routes (Le Strange, 1890).

Scholars such as Kennedy (2001) and Walmsley (2007) examine Islamic rural settlement patterns and religious infrastructure, noting that Mount Hermon—although not a primary urban centre—played a role in sustaining agricultural and defensive networks in the Anti-Lebanon region. The architectural remnants from this period demonstrate both practical and spiritual uses of the terrain.

3.5. Modern Archaeological Perspectives and Methodologies

Recent archaeological efforts have adopted more interdisciplinary methodologies, incorporating GIS mapping, satellite imagery, and palaeoenvironmental studies to reconstruct Mount Hermon's ancient landscapes. Researchers such as Frumkin et al. (2003) have utilised speleological data and stable isotope analysis to understand long-term climatic trends, which have a direct impact on archaeological interpretation. These methodologies offer insights into ancient agricultural viability, water management systems, and settlement resilience.

Contemporary political tensions in the Hermon region have also influenced archaeological accessibility. As Meskell (2005) notes, archaeology in the contested areas often becomes entangled with national narratives and territorial claims. The tripoint nature of Mount Hermon—shared by Lebanon, Syria, and Israel—makes it a complex site for neutral academic study.

Nevertheless, collaborative initiatives such as the UNESCO-led cultural heritage programs and the work of local universities have yielded promising data on Bronze Age and Classical period remains. The work of Baruchi-Unna (2017) and others reflects a renewed interest in Hermon's role as a religious "cosmic mountain," potentially linked to ancient Israelite theophanies and later mystical traditions in both Judaism and Islam.

3.6. Critical Gaps and Future Research Directions

Despite its historical prominence, Mount Hermon remains under-researched in comparison to sites like Jerusalem, Megiddo, or Jericho. The relative lack of systematic excavation on its upper slopes and summit is partly due to topographical challenges and political sensitivities. As such, many conclusions about prehistoric and early historic occupation are inferred rather than directly evidenced.

Another limitation is the lack of integration between archaeological and textual sources. For instance, while Mount Hermon is referenced in biblical and extra-biblical texts, few studies rigorously compare these literary records with material findings (Dever, 2001). Moreover, although ecological studies provide a clearer picture of settlement viability, they are seldom aligned with cultural analyses, leading to fragmented interpretations.

Future research should aim to bridge these disciplinary divides, possibly through a comprehensive geoarchaeological survey that incorporates remote sensing, ethnographic mapping, and archaeobotanical analysis. Such an approach would help to reconstruct not only where people lived and worshipped on Mount Hermon, but also how their interaction with the landscape evolved.

4. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology, with a firm reliance on historical archaeology, literary analysis, and geoarchaeological mapping, to investigate the archaeological record of Mount Hermon from the prehistoric period to the modern era. The approach integrates archaeological site data, ancient texts, epigraphic sources, and secondary academic interpretations. This triangulation of methods ensures a comprehensive analysis of Mount Hermon's significance across various cultural epochs.

The primary data set includes excavated materials from prominent archaeological missions documented by Israeli, Lebanese, and international teams. These include stratigraphic reports, artefact inventories, architectural remains, and field notes from excavations at major sites on and around Mount Hermon. Key among these are the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age settlements, Greco-Roman structures, and medieval fortifications such as Qal'at Namrud (Nimrod Fortress). Site reports and published surveys, including the works of Garfinkel (1999), Mazar (1990), and Boas (1999), offer critical empirical data for evaluating site continuity, material culture, and cultural transitions.

The research also undertakes a critical content analysis of ancient texts, including Ugaritic ritual documents (Pardee, 2002), biblical references, and Islamic historical accounts (Le Strange, 1890). These textual sources help interpret the religious and symbolic meanings attributed to Mount Hermon across different traditions. Their integration with archaeological materials supports a hermeneutic method in understanding how material remains and sacred geography were mutually reinforcing.

Additionally, this study utilises spatial mapping and geographical information system (GIS) tools to contextualise archaeological data within the topography of Mount Hermon. Topographic maps, satellite imagery, and digital elevation models (DEMs) are employed to visualise the distribution of sites, water sources, trade routes, and ecological zones. The spatial component enhances understanding of the settlement patterns and strategic significance of Mount Hermon across different historical eras. Bar-Yosef (2000) and Ronen and Weinstein-Evron (2000) provide baseline geographical frameworks for prehistoric settlement studies in the region.

To maintain methodological rigour, a thematic coding strategy was used in the literature review process. Sources were categorised according to chronological period (e.g., Neolithic, Roman, Islamic),

thematic focus (e.g., religious significance, military architecture), and typology (e.g., fortifications, cultic sites, habitation structures). This classification helped identify patterns and gaps in the existing archaeological narrative, facilitating comparative analysis across time.

Furthermore, ethnographic analogies and regional comparative studies were selectively employed to infer cultural practices from material remains, particularly in periods where the archaeological record is fragmentary. The use of ethnoarchaeological insight, although limited, offers heuristic value in interpreting symbolic and domestic artefacts (Meskell, 2005).

Ethical considerations were observed by relying exclusively on published, publicly available data and respecting modern political sensitivities associated with contested heritage sites. The study consciously avoids drawing speculative conclusions in politically volatile contexts and instead focuses on scientifically verifiable evidence.

The methodology's strength lies in its integrative and diachronic design, allowing the research to trace long-term continuities and disruptions in Mount Hermon's archaeological profile. By combining empirical data, textual interpretation, and spatial analysis, the study offers a multi-dimensional understanding of the site's evolving historical landscape.

5. Data Analysis

The archaeological data from Mount Hermon reveal a complex, stratified historical narrative that spans millennia, from early human occupation in the prehistoric era to the architectural and cultural transformations of the modern century. This analysis synthesises material remains, site stratigraphy, settlement patterns, and symbolic representations to demonstrate the continuity, shifts, and ruptures in the socio-cultural and religious use of Mount Hermon. The findings have been examined in four broad chronological clusters: prehistoric and protohistoric periods, classical antiquity, medieval Islamic and Crusader periods, and modern archaeological and preservation efforts.

5.1. Prehistoric and Protohistoric Layers

Evidence from lithic assemblages, burial cairns, and early settlement sites suggests that Mount Hermon played a significant role in the movement and settlement of early human groups during the Upper Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods. Excavations and surveys on the southern slopes of Mount Hermon, including sites such as Marjayoun and Hasbaya, have unearthed flint tools, sickle blades, and basalt grinding stones (Bar-Yosef, 2000; Cauvin, 2000). These tools reveal a transition from hunter-gatherer societies to early agro-pastoral economies.

Cave shelters and open-air sites exhibit signs of domestic activity, including hearths and postholes, indicating seasonal or semi-permanent habitation. Radiocarbon dating of organic material from several Neolithic layers (c. 8500–7000 BCE) aligns with broader Levantine settlement trends (Ronen and Weinstein-Evron, 2000). The presence of obsidian, absent locally, indicates the existence of trade or exchange networks extending to Anatolia, underscoring Mount Hermon's early integration into regional mobility systems.

In the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age (c. 4500–2000 BCE), burial architecture becomes more visible. Dolmens and megalithic structures dot the western slopes of the mountain. These mortuary features suggest a growing emphasis on ritualised burial, community identity, and territoriality (Mazar, 1990). Funerary goods, including pottery vessels and metal objects, support interpretations of socio-economic stratification.

5.2. Classical Antiquity: Hellenistic to Late Roman Periods

The Hellenistic and Roman periods (c. 300 BCE–400 CE) witnessed a flourishing of monumental architecture and urbanisation in the Hermon region. The construction of temples, aqueducts, roads, and agricultural terraces reflects both imperial influence and local religious expression. The most notable is the Roman temple complex at Deir El Aachayer, characterised by a tri-partite cella and

intricate stone carvings (Sourdel, 1974). These features are typical of Syro-Roman temple architecture, bearing affinities with sites in Baalbek and Mount Lebanon (Bowersock, 1994).

Greek and Latin inscriptions found at various high-altitude shrines, including those at Ain-Harsha and Hebbariye, reveal dedications to deities such as Zeus, Baal, and Pan (Millar, 1993). This syncretism underscores the coexistence of Greco-Roman pantheons with older Semitic cults. Coins, statuary, and votive altars offer material evidence of long-distance pilgrimage and the mountain's sacral geography.

Furthermore, the strategic position of Mount Hermon, which commanded routes between Damascus and the Phoenician coast, made it a vital part of the Roman military infrastructure. Fortifications, milestones, and barracks found along these corridors confirm the region's militarisation (Kennedy and Riley, 1990). The settlement pattern during this time suggests a dense distribution of rural and semi-urban communities supported by viticulture and olive cultivation.

5.3. Medieval Period: Islamic and Crusader Fortifications

During the medieval period, Mount Hermon remained a strategic and religious focal point. Islamic geographers such as Al-Muqaddasi and Yaqut al-Hamawi documented the mountain's prominence in local cosmology and military geography (Le Strange, 1890). During the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods (12th–14th centuries), defensive architecture became the dominant style. The most significant structure from this era is Qal'at Namrud (Nimrod Fortress), a massive stronghold perched on the southern slope of Mount Hermon.

Archaeological analysis of the fortress reveals multiple construction phases, combining Frankish, Islamic, and local engineering techniques (Boas, 1999). Masonry inscriptions identify builders and patrons, including Sultan Baibars. Features such as underground cisterns, watchtowers, and arrow slits demonstrate defensive priorities aligned with the geopolitics of the Crusades.

This period also exhibits evidence of small-scale rural settlements surrounding the fortress, which may have served as garrisons or agricultural outposts. Pottery shards, animal bones, and domestic installations suggest a mixed subsistence economy. Islamic inscriptions and mosques indicate the continued spiritual significance of the mountain, now reinterpreted through Islamic theological frameworks (Goitein, 1967).

5.4. Modern Discoveries and Preservation Challenges

Both scientific inquiry and geopolitical contestation have shaped archaeological activity in the modern period. Modern surveys conducted by Israeli and Lebanese teams, often in collaboration with European institutions, have significantly expanded the site corpus on Mount Hermon. However, political boundaries, military presence, and landmine hazards have limited sustained excavation (Gal, 2002; Hütteroth and Abdulfattah, 1977).

Recent studies employing GIS, aerial photography, and satellite imaging have enabled the reconstruction of ancient landscapes. Spatial data confirm long-term continuities in settlement along the Hermon escarpment, especially where water sources and arable terraces converge. These methods have also revealed previously undocumented megalithic fields and ancient roadways (Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz, 2001).

Preservation remains a key concern. Looting, urban expansion, and climate-related erosion threaten many unexcavated and exposed sites. International conventions on cultural heritage, such as those under UNESCO, have yet to stabilise the protection of Mount Hermon's archaeological landscape fully. The lack of unified heritage management strategies—particularly across Israel, Syria, and Lebanon—poses additional obstacles (Abu El-Haj, 2001).

5.5. Thematic Interpretations and Cultural Continuity

The data reveal several key themes that cut across periods. First, Mount Hermon's elevation and visibility made it a natural axis of sacred geography, whether as a high place for the Canaanites, a

temple site for Romans, or a fortress in Islamic-Christian conflict zones. This 'vertical symbolism' reinforces its role as a cosmological anchor in Near Eastern worldviews (Smith, 2001).

Second, the archaeological evidence demonstrates cultural continuity alongside adaptation. Local religious practices evolved from megalithic and Semitic traditions to incorporate Greco-Roman deities and later Islamic monotheism. Material culture reflects this through shifts in iconography, architecture, and spatial use.

Third, the strategic utility of Mount Hermon's topography—militarily, economically, and symbolically—remained consistent. From Roman roads to Crusader castles and modern military installations, the mountain has served as a nexus of control and communication. The durability of this pattern suggests a long-term logic of territorial occupation rooted in geography.

Lastly, the political fragmentation of the contemporary region has an impact on archaeological scholarship itself. Nationalistic narratives, contested borders, and selective funding all influence which sites are explored, preserved, or neglected. As such, any comprehensive understanding of Mount Hermon's archaeology must also interrogate the conditions under which knowledge is produced (Bernhardsson, 2005).

6. Discussion

The archaeological and historical evidence from Mount Hermon reveals a rich palimpsest of human interaction, shaped by environmental affordances, cultural adaptation, and political dynamics. Through multiple lenses—such as landscape archaeology, cultural ecology, and symbolic analysis—Mount Hermon emerges not only as a repository of material culture but as a dynamic engine in human history. This discussion explores four interrelated themes: environmental adaptation and subsistence, sacred geographies and symbolic continuities, strategic and political uses, and contemporary challenges to heritage.

6.1. Environmental Adaptation and Subsistence Strategies

Mount Hermon's varied topography, water availability, and ecological diversity created an ideal setting for human adaptation from the Palaeolithic onwards. Lithic evidence suggests early hominin groups practised seasonal habitation, tracking game migrations and exploiting highland resources (Bar-Yosef, 2000). Faunal assemblages mirror broader Levantine patterns, indicating subsistence on gazelle, ibex, and wild cattle (Ronen & Weinstein-Evron, 2000). Cultural ecology theories, particularly Steward's (1955) multilinear evolution framework, help situate these patterns: Mount Hermon's subregions provided ecological niches that supported both mobility and innovation, shaping lifeways through environmental constraints.

The Neolithic transition—evidenced by domestic architecture, grinding stones, and domesticated seeds—is notable on Hermon's lower slopes (Kuijt & Goring-Morris, 2002). Radiocarbon dates align with regional trajectories of sedentism (Ronen & Weinstein-Evron, 2000). Water runoff from snowcaps enabled the first irrigation experiments. Landscape archaeology highlights how this combination of geography and human ingenuity produced settlement continuity and agricultural experimentation (Anschuetz et al., 2001). This continuity contrasts with earlier mobility-based subsistence strategies and indicates early regional interconnectivity through trade networks supplying obsidian and early copper (Goren-Inbar et al., 2000).

6.2. Sacred Geographies and Symbolic Continuities

Mount Hermon's stature and visibility fostered its long-term role as a locus of sacred meaning. Canaanite, Israelite, and Near Eastern inscriptions associate high places with the divine presence and ritual activity, as embodied in votive altars, megalithic tombs, and limestone shrines (Cauvin, 2000; Hodder, 1982). Bronze Age sanctuaries show material religiosity, while Biblical and Ugaritic texts affirm the mountain's sacred cosmology (Bar-Yosef, 2000; Pardee, 2002). Such overlaps reflect what Tilley (1994) terms "landscape-as-symbol," where geography is imbued with metaphysical meaning.

Roman and Byzantine temples built atop or near these earlier sacred nodes demonstrate cultural continuity and transformation (Millar, 1993). Inscriptions to Zeus, Pan, and Semitic deities reflect a syncretic religious environment, as supported by physical evidence, including altars and structural elements (Bowersock, 1990). The Christian tradition of the Transfiguration further reframes Hermon's sacred identity in late antiquity (Taylor, 2001). Each epoch absorbs prior monumental constructs into its cosmological order, revealing how sacred landscapes morph over time yet retain their symbolic core.

Symbolic archaeology provides an interpretive framework for understanding these processes (Hodder, 1982). Hermon's sacred status is embedded in its spatial distribution and cultic structures, as well as in cultural memory, comprising texts, rituals, and oral legends that preserve its mythic identity. These sacred narratives sustained the mountain's status even as formal religious institutions changed, illustrating how "stacked landscapes" accumulate layered meanings despite external transformations (Renfrew & Bahn, 2016).

6.3. Strategic Control and Political Utility

Beyond its spiritual allure, Mount Hermon possessed distinct strategic value, spanning from the Bronze Age to the modern period. Its elevation allowed military surveillance over key trade routes connecting coastal cities with inland Syria. Bronze and Iron Age fortifications utilised this topography, with watchtowers and fortified settlements serving as territorial control points (Mazar, 1990). The presence of weaponry in settlement debris further confirms Hermon's militarised role.

The Hellenistic and Roman eras intensified this strategic use. The integration of roads and milestones through the highlands consolidates imperial logistics, with Hermon functioning as a centre of administrative oversight (Renfrew & Bahn, 2016). Roman builders also established villas, forts, and water storage systems to support institutional occupation. These integrated elements of infrastructure, urbanism, and cult architecture reveal Hermon's dual role as both a frontier fortress and a religious landmark.

The Crusader and Islamic periods maintained this tradition. Qal'at Namrud (Nimrod Fortress) and other medieval strongholds harnessed panoramic views for defensive advantage (Boas, 1999; Kennedy, 2001). Pottery and domestic debris indicate settlement beyond purely military functions, while religious monuments—such as mosques and shrines—reflect the resacralisation of space within Islamic cosmology (Anschuetz et al., 2001). This dual usage illustrates how sacred landscapes can become militarised frontiers when political pressures emerge.

In the modern era, Hermon remains a geopolitically contested area. Israeli installations, border fortifications, and sovereignty assertions preserve its strategic importance (Sneh et al., 1987). Mount Hermon's geography continues to define and be defined by political boundaries—evidence of its persistent strategic fault lines that have shaped ancient and modern worldviews.

6.4. Methodological Reflections and Interdisciplinary Value

This study's multidisciplinary methodology facilitated a layered interpretation of Hermon. GIS-enabled site mapping traced physical distributions across terrain (Anschuetz et al., 2001), while textual and material integration enabled the creation of a chronology blend. Symbolic archaeology decoded sacred and militaristic imagery within artefacts and architecture.

However, there are limits. Excavation access remains constrained, especially on the summit and upper slopes, leading to interpretive bias from surfaced artefacts. The tripartite national borders complicate data sharing and interpretation (Meskell, 2005). Interdisciplinary synthesis partially offsets these challenges but demands robust cross-border collaboration.

Improved paleoenvironmental studies could deepen our understanding of climate change, hydrological shifts, and their impacts on subsistence and settlement practices. Collaborative DNA analysis of faunal remains can reconstruct early migratory patterns, while isotopic analysis clarifies agricultural chronology.

6.5. Heritage Management and Ethical Considerations

Hermon's layered identity, combining natural, religious, and political heritage, requires sensitive management. Looting and development threaten visible sites—news reports cite damage to dolmens and shrines. UNESCO frameworks are often limited in their effect due to geopolitical divides and divergences at the ministry level (Abu El-Haj, 2001). International cooperation remains hampered by political mistrust, despite the shared cultural patrimony demanding cooperative stewardship.

Ethical archaeology in contested spaces demands transparency, community engagement, and multi-national frameworks. Survey permissions, data sharing, and digital heritage (e.g., 3D modelling) offer paths to representation over appropriation. Hermon can become a model for best practices in mountain archaeology, free from the dominance of single-nation narratives.

6.6. Broader Implications and Theoretical Contribution

Mount Hermon offers more than a regional case study—it contributes to global understandings of mountain archaeology. Its spectrum of human interaction—from hunter-gatherers to global powers—demonstrates the enduring role of elevation, ecology, and symbolism in the evolution of culture. Insights into Hermon support theories of human-environment adaptation, sacred landscape development, and strategic geography.

Moreover, this case study challenges binary categorisations of "sacred vs strategic." Hermon shows that religiosity and control often coexisted—temples near forts, shrines near walls—highlighting space as both mythic and practical. This duality resonates with conceptions in symbolic landscapes, asserting that symbolic value may coexist with militarisation (Tilley, 1994). Integrative theoretical approaches thus offer richer, more complex understandings of cultural history.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The archaeological evidence from Mount Hermon reveals a landscape that has served as a critical nexus of human settlement, ritual expression, and strategic control from the prehistoric era to the modern century. Through an integrative approach that combines landscape archaeology, cultural ecology, symbolic analysis, and stratigraphic excavation, this study has traced the mountain's evolution from a seasonal hunting ground into a locus of sacred worship and military fortification. Mount Hermon's material remains—from Palaeolithic tools and Neolithic dwellings to Roman temples and Crusader fortresses—demonstrate the mountain's long-standing importance as both a spiritual beacon and a geopolitical stronghold.

Key findings underscore Mount Hermon's dual identity as a sacred and strategic landscape. Its religious continuity, visible in the preservation of cultic sites across periods, attests to the mountain's symbolic permanence. Simultaneously, its strategic topography enabled successive civilisations to utilise the high terrain for surveillance, defence, and governance. These patterns underscore the importance of interdisciplinary frameworks that integrate environmental, religious, and political perspectives on archaeological data.

However, challenges persist. Geopolitical tensions across the Lebanese-Syrian-Israeli borders inhibit sustained excavation and collaborative scholarship. Looting, erosion, and limited site protection further endanger the archaeological record. To address these issues, this study recommends the following:

- Cross-border archaeological collaboration: Establish regional partnerships and shared research protocols among Lebanon, Syria, and Israel, potentially under the oversight of a neutral international body.
- Digital documentation and conservation: Utilise 3D modelling, GIS integration, and satellite imaging to digitally preserve threatened heritage sites.

- Community engagement and education: Involve local communities in stewardship programs and integrate oral histories into heritage management strategies.
- Further excavation and environmental sampling: Target unexplored summit zones, dolmen clusters, and cave sites for stratigraphic excavation, radiocarbon dating, and palaeoenvironmental analysis.
- Policy development: Advocate for trilateral heritage protection agreements, especially in transboundary zones where legal frameworks remain ambiguous.

Mount Hermon offers a microcosm for understanding broader archaeological questions regarding the interaction between geography, belief systems, and political authority. Future research and heritage management must prioritise both preservation and inclusivity, ensuring that this mountain's rich past informs scholarly and public knowledge alike.

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