

# Glossary of earthen architectural terms in Syria

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We present an essential glossary of terms related to earthen architecture in northern Syria. The glossary is the outcome of a field research on Syrian mud architecture carried out in collaboration with the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums. The aim is to underline the various local earthen architectural terms and traditions of the country, focusing on those terms used in the northwest and on some terms used in rural building culture.

During the on-site research and documentation focusing on the Syrian heritage of earthen architecture especially in the region of Aleppo, we faced the question of words (with their transcription) associated with elements of this special cultural landscape. We decided to prepare a primary glossary of terms describing this architectural culture where terms are described, summarized briefly and illustrated in order to allow a synthetic understanding of various earthen building cultures and terms in five main regions occupying the northern parts of Syria, extending from east to west in the following order: Al-Hasakah (Al-Qameshli), Ar-Raqqa, Aleppo, Idlib and Hama (Salamiyah) region which is considered as a continuity of the Idlib and Aleppo plains. We found common terms quite widespread across the entire north of Syria, in near classic Arabic, such as: *Al-Baedar, Asas, Bab, Attabeh, Be'er, Baet Al-Muneh, Dar, Daraj, Ewan, Dekkeh, Fallah, Ellea, Gedar, Gurpha, Hajar Hamam, Haush, Hazeera, Hawwara, Kateph, Kels, Kashab barm, Lebn, Mastaba, Madafa, Madena, Marhad, Masjed, Matbakh, Matban, Mauqed, Memarje, Mezrab, Muallem, Mustauda' Hatab, Nafeza, Najafeh, Qaleb, Qarea, Qar-meed, Qaus, Qefl, Qunn, Qesh, Qubba, Raff, Saha, Saqf, Sebat, Shurfa, Sur, Taqa, Tannur, Tebn, Teen, Teena, Turab, Zuqaq.*

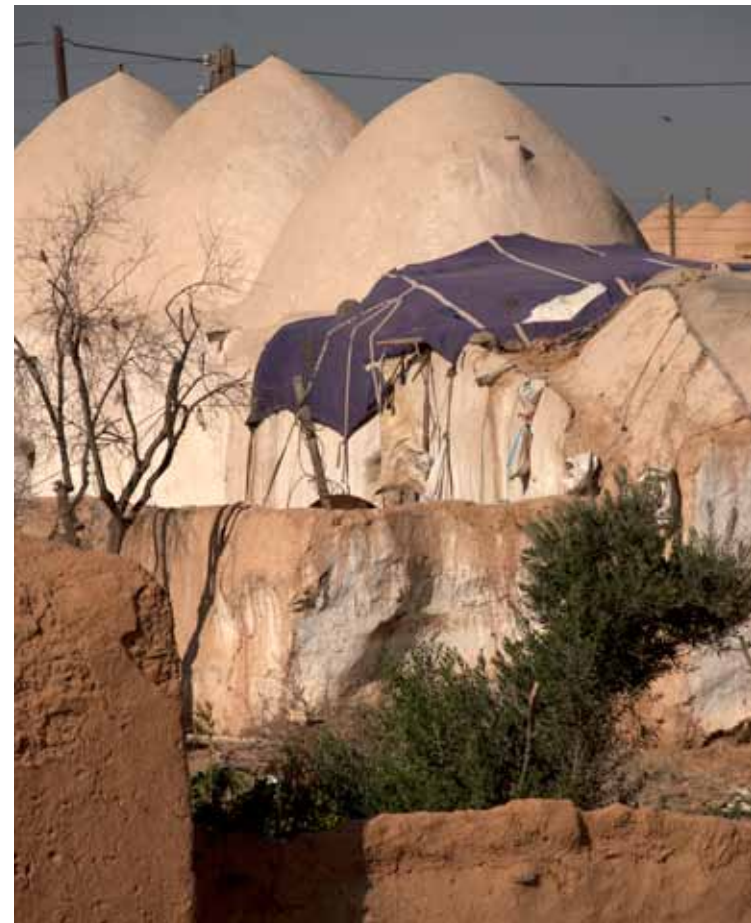
Other terms are used in the northwest of Syria (Aleppo and Idlib regions), such as:

*Al-Fejje or Al-Kuara, Hakura, Zribeh, Khabia, Kehla, Muzarrek, Khum, Zreeqa.* There are also some specific terms used in their own regions and not known elsewhere, such as: *Dewar (Idlib), Qubbia (Hama), Tasee' (Hama, and Ar-*

*Raqqa), Oda (Aleppo, Idlib), Dewan (Ar-Raqqa), Medmak (with different meanings between Aleppo and Ar-Raqqa),*

## Earthen Architectural Terms

Earthen houses in Syria do not differ very much in their rural nature and their urban features from rural houses, for this reason we grouped together terms used in earthen architectural culture and rural buildings, organized in alphabetical order as follows.



**Al-Baedar**

A place where fruit is collected to be ingathered, this term is used in earthen architecture villages and rural contexts.



Fig. 1: Al-Baedar, Idlib (Giobas)

**Aamoud (Amuod)**

A column, rarely used in domed houses or mud architecture, except occasionally to support the roofs of porches.

**Areshesh**

Architectural space similar to 'Ewan', usually delimited from three or (rarely) two directions, mostly covered with climbing plants (grapes, etc.).

**Attabeh**

A delimited part of the floor, on a lower level than the room, at the door used to deposit shoes, often we find a pot of water (Al-Khabia) nearby, sometimes used by poorer people for bathing purposes.



Fig. 2: Attabeh, Idlib (Mardeekh)

**Asas**

A base composed of mud and small stones. Sometimes lower parts of earthen walls are constructed with stone, and are thereby well protected from the rain.



Fig. 3: Asas, Aleppo (Habbuba)

**Bab**

A door or portal, often made of timber, sometimes we find a stone nearby to extend washed clothes on.



Fig. 4: Bab, South Aleppo.

**Baet Al-Muna (Al-Fejjeh)**

A store room, used to keep food and fruit for winter; sometimes we do not see it as a separate room but as a section called a 'Kuara' in the living room, having small holes in the lower part to place food.



Fig. 5: Baet Al-Muna, Idlib region.

**Be'er (Giubb, Gialeeb)**

A well sometimes with the upper part built from stone or from mud and stone.



Fig. 6: Be'er, South Aleppo.

**Dar**

A house or home, which can be built from mud or stone or both.



Fig. 7: Dar, South Aleppo

### Daraj

Stairs constructed of stone or mud.



Fig. 8: Daraj, Aleppo (Saint Simon)

### Dekkeh (Mastaba)

Interior or exterior bench, often built of mud and stone, plastered with earthen or cement mortar, large or small.



Fig. 9: Dekkeh, Ar-Raqqa

### Dewar

A earthen construction technique used in Syria, very similar to the cob technique, made by building an earthen dome with loam courses, two each day until the entire dome has been completed: one in the morning and a second in the evening to permit good drying.



Fig. 10: Dewar, earth, Meksar Shamlei, (Hama)



Fig. 11: Dewar, earth and stones, South Aleppo

### Ewan (Sebat)

Delimited space with three earthen walls, often opened from one direction toward west, used always to repose or to receive visitors, but not common in all rural houses where it is called 'Sebat'.

### Elleah

Large room situated on the first floor or higher level, built from mud or stone particularly used in summer or for guests.



Fig. 12: Elleah, Idlib (Giobas)

### Fallah (Karai)

An inhabitant of a village (Karea), building his earthen house by himself with the help of his parents or neighbors, hiring a mason (Memar or Muallem) for the building of mud domes.



Fig. 13, Fallah, Hama (Salamiyah)

### Gedar (Haet)

A wall, may be constructed by several techniques of mud architecture: earthen bricks (adobe), rammed earth, mud-stone, cob, etc. It can be built with many different methods.



Fig. 14: Gedar, Aleppo (Habbuba).

**Gurpha**

A room, may be for guests (Deuf), living (Mae'sha), sleeping (Naum), this room may be domed or non-domed, and sometimes it has multiple functions at the same time (living, sleeping, etc.).



Fig. 15: Gurpha, Ar-Raqqa

**Hajar**

Stones, used in different elements of mud houses (base, wall, etc.), their shape and volume depends on construction technique (mud-stone, etc.), there are two main types of it used in mud houses: basaltic called 'Hajar Bazelti', and calcareous called 'Hajar Kelsi'.



Fig. 16: Hajar, Aleppo (S. Simone)

**Hakura (Bustan)**

Interior garden surrounded by boundaries, situated in front of the earthen rooms or behind them.



Fig. 17: Hakura, South Aleppo

**Hamam**

A bathroom, has many types of roofs: traditional (flat) and, rarely, earthen domes which have small holes.



Fig. 18: Hamam, South Aleppo

**Haush (Sahn)**

A space exists in mud or rural houses open to sky surrounded by boundaries or walls which protect the house from animals and strangers, sometimes there is an independent 'haush' used to lodge animals situated near a stable called 'Hazera', 'Zribeh' or 'Qabu'.



Fig. 19: Haush, South Aleppo

**Hawwara**

A solution of white fragile stone dipped in water for three days until it emulsifies, sprinkled then on mud walls as a form of plaster, sometimes used as a first layer under the lime plaster to strengthen earthen surfaces.



Fig. 20: Hawwara, South Aleppo

**Hazera 'Qabu'**

A room where animals are kept, in some regions it is called 'Qabu' or 'Zribeh'.



Fig. 21: Hazera, Idlib (Kelli)

**Hour**

Poplar, a type of wood used in covering mud houses with flat traditional roofs, this wood is inexpensive but not very resistant to weather effects.

**Khabia (Mzammaleh)**

A water-pot, usually made of terracotta called 'Fakhar' and situated near the room door, its loam mixture (before being burnt) is composed of: three parts earth, two parts finely sieved earth and fine straw or animal hair. This mixture will be laid on a slow fire, protected from the effect of direct fire by treating its surface with animal dung called 'Fashfash'!



Fig. 22: Khabia, Aleppo (Saint Simon)



Fig. 23: Fashfash, Idlib Region

**Khashab Barm**

Trunks used to support a traditional roof. In cross-section always round, or nearly so.



Fig. 24: Khashab Barm, Aleppo (Habbuba)

**Khashab Tabak**

Flat wood used in wooden traditional roofs, set on 'Khashab barm'.



Fig. 25: Khashab Tabak, Al-Qameshli

**Khezana Gedaria**

A rectangular or square hollowed shape in mud walls, used to store many things depending on the room: bedroom (cushions, covers, etc.), kitchen (dishes, spoons, etc.).



Fig. 26: Khezana Gedaria, South Aleppo (Al-Wdehil)

**Ketf**

Constructive element or buttress integrated into earthen walls to carry earthen domes.



Fig. 27: Ketf, Ar-Raqqah

**Kehla (Malat)**

Mortar Joint, the layer of mortar between mud blocks (See Fig. 27).



Fig. 28: Kehla, Al-Qameshli

**Kels**

Lime, the procedure of mud wall painting is named 'Taklees'. Sometimes people plaster the whole facade with lime plaster or only around the doors or windows.



Fig. 29: Kels, Idlib (Mardeekh)

**Jaez (Jisre)**

New idiom used in new architectural terms, related to cement elements more than mud and traditional architecture, meaning a horizontal structural element to load the roofs. In mud architecture and traditional roofs it represents the round trunks 'Khashab Barm' which carry the other layers of the roofs.

**Lebn**

Local name of sun-dried brick or 'adobe', it is called sometimes 'lebn trab' to distinguish it from stones 'Hajar' or cement blocks 'Qarmeed', its size varies regionally.



Fig. 30: Lebn, Hama (Salamiyah)

**Madafa (Oda)**

A large room for guests, usually built for rich men or village chiefs called 'Mukhtar' or leaders 'Agha', built outside the house and often very rich in decoration.

**Madena**

City. There are some big cities in Syria that have examples of mud architecture.

**Marhad (Baet Al-mai)**

A toilet, rarely situated in the house, in many cases separated.

**Masjed**

Mosque built from mud or stone, without minarets in some mud villages.



Fig. 31: Masjed, Idlib (Giobas)

**Matbakh**

Kitchen with earthen shelves.



Fig. 32: Matbakh, South Aleppo

**Matban**

Sotre, for keeping straw. When it has a traditional flat roof, there is a hole in the ceiling named *Afa'a* used to pour the straw through.



Fig. 33: Matban, Idlib (Giobas)

**Mauqed (Dfeeh, Kanun)**

Fireplace, situated in the middle of a mud room or at the corner, sometimes there is a simple open 'mauqed' in the kitchen for cooking.



Fig. 34: Mauqed, Idlib region

**Medmak**

A course of earthen blocks used in walls or in mud domes; it has a round shape in domes, earthen bricks situated horizontally in the conic domes, and inclined in the round. This term means an instrument to compact earth in other regions, such as Ar-Raqqa, while the same instrument is called 'Duqmq' in the region of Aleppo.



Fig. 35: Medmak, South Aleppo

**Memarje (Memar, Banna)**

A mason who builds in adobe or stone, in some regions he leaves his handprint as a signature at the end of construction.



Fig. 36: Memarje, South Aleppo

**Mezrab**

Canal, extending some distance from a roof, made of iron or occasionally made of stone in richer houses.



Fig. 37: Mezrab, South Aleppo

**Muallem (Maalem)**

Expert mason, chief of builders who leads a group of 'Memarje', he is more skilled than others and specialist in dome construction or difficult constructive cases.



Fig. 38: Muallem, South Aleppo.

**Mukhtar**

village chief.

**Mustauda' Hatab**

Timber store, a place where people put wood for cooking or for storage in winter. Sometimes this place is used as a kitchen by poorer inhabitants, in other cases it is a very small store used particularly to provide the 'Tannur' earthen oven with wood.



Fig. 39: Mustauda' Hatab, Idlib Region

**Muzarrek**

Plasterer. Usually this work is carried out by women in the tradition of mud architecture.

**Nafeza (Shubbak)**

Windows, having many shapes in mud architecture.



Fig. 40: Nafeza, Aleppo (Habbuba)

**Najafeh**

Lintel, covering doors and windows, generally made of wood.



Fig. 41: Najafeh, South Aleppo

**Qaaleb**

Wooden module, into which loam mixture 'Teena' is poured to produce earthen bricks, with various dimensions.



Fig. 42: Qaaleb, Al-Qameshli

**Qarea**

Village, there are many villages in Syria that are completely built with earthen houses.

**Qarmeed**

Small fired bricks used in inclined roofs on mud houses, or cement blocks used in new buildings substituting mud houses.



Fig. 43: Qarmeed, Idlib (Mardeekh)

#### Qasab

A cane, used in some flat roofs to cover mud constructions, especially those called 'Ewan' or 'Sebbat' situated mostly near rivers or lakes.

#### Qaus (Qantara)

An arch on doors or windows, or in a wall separating two domes or rooms; it can be constructed of stone or mud.



Fig. 44: Qaus, Idlib (Mardeekh)

#### Qefl (Tantur, Antuuz)

A stone at the top of a dome, usually placed on the final blocks which close the dome, having the structural functions of protecting the top of the dome and keeping all the courses together, with also an esthetic, traditional role. When a mason completes the dome structure he does not descend until he has received a tip from the owner.



Fig. 45: Qefl, Hama (Salamiyah)

#### Qunn (Khum)

A place where hens are kept, it can be considered as a typical part of mud or rural houses.



Fig. 46: Qunn, Idlib (Mardeekh)

#### Qesh

Long pieces of straw, always used with mud mixture and employed to produce adobe blocks. Straw is mostly used with mud plaster.



Fig. 47: Qesh, Al-Qameshli

#### Qubba

Dome, built with adobe blocks, mud-stone or cob technique, having many shapes and may be true or false depending on its shape and courses.



Fig. 48: Qubba, South Aleppo

#### Qubbia

Small earthen domes, used to keep lumber, to conserve fruit and food or to store straw.



Fig. 49: Qubbia, Idlib (Giobas)



**Raff**

Gypsum or mud shelf on earthen walls in houses, of many different shapes and figures, sometimes rich in decoration.



Fig. 50: Raff, Idlib (Mardeekh)

**Saha (Fas-ha)**

Urban term meaning plaza or small square found in earthen villages.

**Sane' (Agee)**

A person who works with a mason 'memarje' or 'muallem', sometimes making adobe.



Fig. 51: Sane', Al-Qameshli

**Saqf**

Ceiling, earthen houses have many forms, inclined (in one or two directions), flat or domed roofs.



Fig. 52: Saqf, Ar-Raqqah

**Sebat**

Rectangular earthen room (called 'ewan' in some regions), opening on one part toward north because it is used in summer for repose or to receive guests, with benches (dekka), fireplace (mauqed) and water-pot (khabia).

**Shurfa (Riwak)**

Porch, a covered gallery which makes up the entire front elevation or a section of it, but not present in all Syrian earthen houses.

**Sur**

Mud boundary or wall, it is usually high enough to prevent animals or strangers from entering a house. It is not high enough for privacy, this role being less important than in the cities.



Fig. 53: Sur, Al-Qameshli

**Tall (Tell)**

A hill, in many cases can hide a village or an archeological site beneath, some earthen villages are at the foot of the hill.

**Taqa**

Holes in earthen walls, sometimes they open onto the exterior face of the wall (used as small narrow windows in this case), in another cases not extending into the wall depth and are used for placing food or small objects.



Fig. 54: Taqa, South Aleppo

**Tannur**

Traditional oven to bake bread. Women always construct it with a mixture composed of mud, terracotta and some local dried grasses, includes a large hole through which dough is inserted. Open skywards (horizontally) or vertically.



Fig. 55: Tannur, Rasm al Bugher

**Tebn**

Straw used with mud plaster or in earthen bricks.



Fig. 56: Tebn, Idlib (Giobas)

**Teen**

Clay-mud, used in all construction techniques.



Fig. 57: Teen, Aleppo (Saint Simon)

**Teena (Malat)**

Earthen mortar or mixture used to produce earthen bricks, to connect earthen blocks, or to plaster walls and surfaces.



Fig. 58: Teena, Al-Qameshli

**Turab (Trab)**

Earth, suitable for construction when it has enough clay to be coherent and consistent. Syria has several colors of earth: red, orange, yellow, brown.

**Zreeka (Tasee')**

Plaster, mud-straw mixture used as wall covering, in richer houses the plaster can be of lime.



Fig. 59: Zreeqa, Idlib (Kelli)

**Zukak (Darba)**

Urban term meaning alley, which in Syrian earthen villages are not asphalted.



Fig. 60: Zuqaq, Al-Qameshli

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