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CAVE DWELLINGS OF HALFETI – URFA (SOUTHEASTERN TURKEY)

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Abstract

Halfeti (Urfa province) is a small settlement located on the bank of Euphrates, in south-eastern Turkey. There are two dams on Euphrates on the region: Ataturk Dam, 145 km north of Halfeti and Birecik Dam, 55 km south of Halfeti. Because of the second dam, the water level of Euphrates reached up to 60 meters, with a width up to 500 meters. In this area the river is flowing through the Eocene limestones, and there are hundreds of dwellings carved in those soft limestone walls. Those structures are mostly in the northern part of Halfeti and beginning from Kızılın and Gumuskaya villages near to the northernmost part of the river, near to Ataturk Dam. As OBRUK Cave Research Group, we began to search these cave dwellings in the area during April 2013. We have been making an inventory of all rock dwellings from Gumuskaya Village to Halfeti. Our project has been executed on land and underwater on 35 km long river walls of Euphrates. We launched our work from Kızılın Village, located in the north part of Euphrates. We found 73 rock settlements in 24 different points between Kızılın and Gumuskaya villages, three of which are church or monasteries. On the other hand, another team had been working on the south part of the project: Halfeti. In this area, on both banks of Euphrates numerous rock dwellings and few village settlements exists. Especially towards the north of Halfeti, there are tens of artificial cavities around Rum kale, located on the west coast of Euphrates. Rum Kale, also known as “Hromgla”, was mentioned in Assyrian scripts and had been the capital of United Armenian Church for 90 years until 1293, when conquered by the Mamluks. During our survey project each artificial cavity in the area has been marked by GPS, photographed and then surveyed. The inventory of all those rock dwellings is held by separate files. We are planning to survey the whole rock settlements within the 35 km bank of Euphrates, from Gumuskaya Village to Halfeti till the end of 2015.

Keywords: Urfa, cave dwellings, Halfeti, Euphrates.

Riassunto

Halfeti, nella provincia di Urfa, è un piccolo villaggio situato sulla riva dell'Eufrate, nel sud-est della Turchia. Nella regione si trovano due dighe sull'Eufrate: la diga di Ataturk, 145 km a nord di Halfeti e la diga di Birecik, 55 km a sud di Halfeti. A causa di questa seconda diga, il livello dell'Eufrate ha raggiunto i 60 metri e una larghezza di 500 metri. In questa zona il fiume scorre attraverso i calcari dell'Eocene e ci sono centinaia di abitazioni scavate nelle tenere pareti di calcare. Tali strutture si trovano per lo più nella parte settentrionale di Halfeti partendo dai villaggi di Kızılın e Gumuskaya, vicino alla parte più settentrionale del fiume, presso la diga di Ataturk. L'OBRUK Cave Research Group ha iniziato a localizzare le abitazioni rupestri della zona nel mese di aprile 2013. È stato fatto un inventario di tutti gli insediamenti rupestri, dal villaggio di Gumuskaya ad Halfeti. Il lavoro di ricerca ha preso in considerazione sia la terraferma che i tratti immersi delle pareti dell'Eufrate, per una lunghezza di 35 km. Il lavoro è iniziato dal villaggio di Kızılın, situato nella parte nord dell'Eufrate. Sono stati individuati 73 insediamenti rupestri in 24 punti diversi tra i villaggi di Kızılın e Gumuskaya, fra cui tre chiese o monasteri. Un'altra squadra ha lavorato sulla parte sud della zona oggetto di studio: Halfeti. In questa zona, su entrambe le sponde dell'Eufrate, si trovano numerose abitazioni rupestri e pochi insediamenti in villaggio. Soprattutto a nord di Halfeti, ci sono decine di cavità artificiali intorno a Rum Kale, che si trova sulla sponda occidentale dell'Eufrate. Rum Kale, conosciuta anche come “Hromgla”, è menzionata nelle iscrizioni assire e fu capitale della Chiesa Armena Unita per 90 anni, fino al 1293, quando fu conquistata dai Mamelucchi. Durante il nostro progetto di indagine ciascuna cavità artificiale dell'area è stata posizionata con GPS, fotografata e censita. L'inventario di tutti gli insediamenti rupestri è costituito da file separati. Il progetto prevede di rilevare, entro la fine del 2015, tutti gli insediamenti rupestri compresi entro i 35 km di costa da Gumuskaya ad Halfeti, sull'Eufrate.

Parole chiave: abitazioni rupestri, Urfa, Halfeti, Eufrate.

Introduction

Urfa Province of south-eastern Turkey (Fig. 1) has a worldwide importance due to its long history. Gobeklitepe, which is located in this province is the oldest temple of the world. Urfa, whose antique name is Edessa, is a settlement frequented since the prehistoric times. Furthermore, Euphrates flowing in the west borders of the province is historically probably one of the most important rivers in the world. However, five dams have been built on this river since 1975. Today,

the lake of the every dam on the river extends nearly to the previous dam wall. Only 1/3 of Euphrates, whose length is 1.260 km in Turkey, is in natural flow; the rest has become dam lakes. The five dam lakes built on Euphrates submerged hundreds of villages and antique settlements. Despite several rescue excavations in many antique settlements before the constructions, there is an incredibly huge loss in historical heritage. After the construction of Birecik Dam in 2000, the level of the river in this region raised about 60 meters and



Fig. 1: location map.

Fig. 1: inquadramento dell'area.

countless rock settlements in the area were submerged. The antique sites which would be submerged had been explored, dig or, at least inventoried previously by big projects such as ODTU-TADCAM, but the cave dwellings of this area were not searched before the construction of Birecik Dam.

As OBRUK Cave Research Group, we began this new inventory project of the rock settlements in the north of Birecik Dam Lake, between Halfeti and Gümüşkaya villages in April 2013 (Fig. 2).

This project, covering 35 kilometers of Euphrates, is still going on. The northernmost borders of the project are Kizilin and Gümüşkaya villages. During the first reconnaissance trip we had found 73 rock settlements in 24 different points between those two villages, three of which were church or monasteries (Fig. 3).

Each artificial cavity in the area has been marked by GPS, photographed and then surveyed. Following these processes, its precise location has been marked on the topographical map. For the north part, the main river wall settlements named F1 through F21. The caves in



Fig. 2: location map of the area studied.

Fig. 2: ubicazione dell'area di studio.

a branch of Euphrates River are in this region named EK1, 2 and 3. The inventory of all those rock dwellings are held by separate files. To the south, around the villages Ciftekoz, Yenikoy, Killik and Kurttepe there are many dwellings which have not been searched yet. On the other hand, we had another reconnaissance trip at the southernmost point of our project: Halfeti Village. Although there are few rock settlements in or around Halfeti, the most important group lies at Savasan Village, 3.5 km to the north. On the south coast of this, half submerged village, we have completed the survey and mapping of another 17 rock settlements most of which are small but quite interesting (Fig. 4).



Fig. 3: second storey of monastery F21 near Kizilin (photo C. Cankirili).

Fig. 3: secondo livello del monastero F21 vicino Kizilin (foto C. Cankirili).

As rock dwellings have been used on this region for hundreds of years continuously, it is not possible to detect the date of construction. However, a small Armenian Church, carved into rocks in Savasan Village, gives at least a small clue about the date of construction through its ornament and scriptures (Fig. 5).

Opposite to Savasan Village, there are numerous dwellings around Rum Kale which is located on the west wall of Euphrates. Rum Kale is the most important historical structure of this part. This castle, also named as "Hromgla" in ancient scripts, is now on a peninsula (Fig. 6). The remaining structures of the castle, whose name is mentioned even in Assyrian scripts, most-

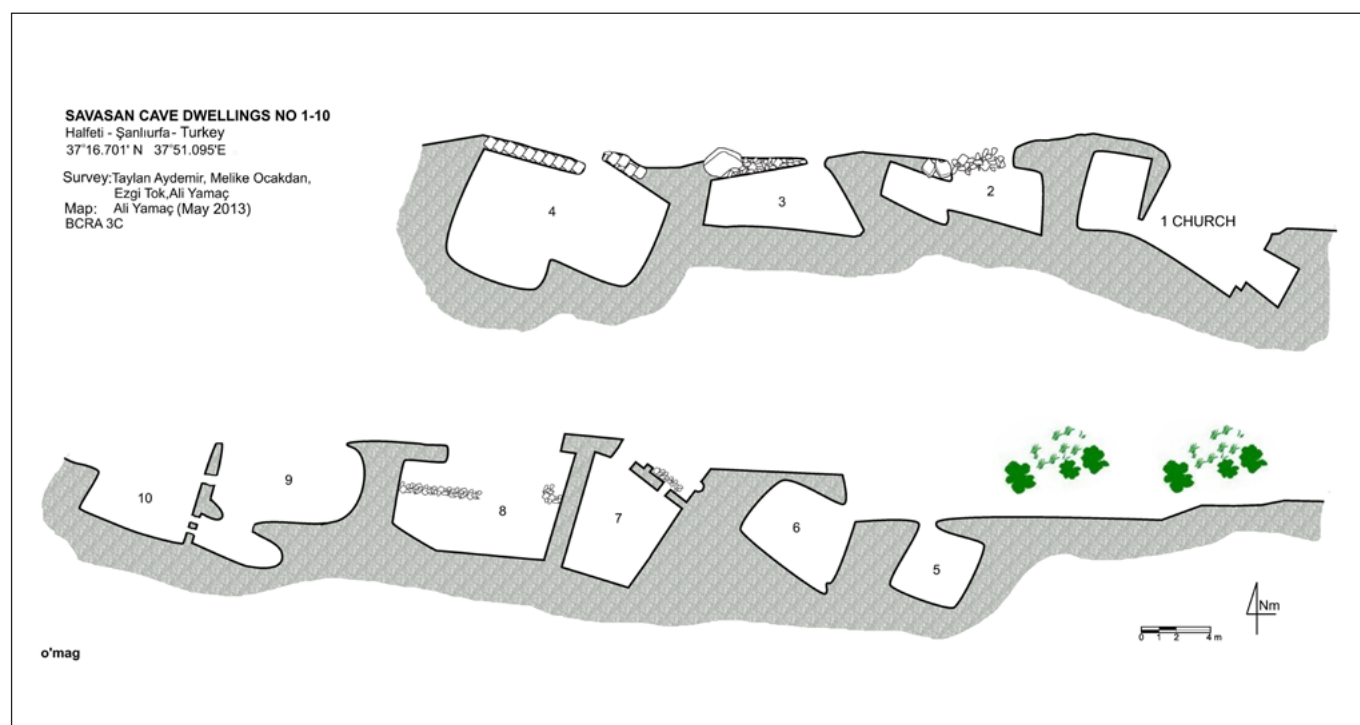


Fig. 4: Savasan Village: cave dwellings from 1 to 10.

Fig. 4: villaggio di Savasan: le abitazioni rupestri da 1 a 10.

ly date to Roman and Byzantium periods. Rum Kale, which was captured in 1098 during the First Crusade, has an interesting history. From 1203 till the capture by Mamluks in 1293 it was the residence of the reunified Armanian Church. During that period the clerks in in this castle illustrated the best religious works of Armenian history. A painter, Toros Roslin of Hromgla had a distinguished rank among others (DER NERSESSIAN, 1993; STEWART, 2006). With his 12 known books, he is acknowledged as the greatest painter of Middle Age Armenian religious books.

Geology of the area

The whole area extending to the northwest of Urfa is

horizontally bedded, neritic, Eocene limestones. The thickness of this structure, known as *Midyat Formation*, is more than 400 m. Miocene - Lower Miocene neritic limestones, overlying this formation and observed on the northern and southern part of the region, are placed as discordant within this main structure. All of these thick limestones in the region have been settled on the shelf parts of Neo Tethys. The southern part of Neo Tethys, which started to close by late Cretaceous, caused compression between the Arabian and Anatolian plates. This compressive tectonic lasting intensively from Cretaceous to Late Miocene has been the main factor for the current formation of the region and the faults of the area (ULU, 2002; YESILNACAR *et al.*, 1998).

Conclusion

Artificial cavity researches in this region should have begun long before Birecik Dam was built. But, even the excavation and restoration of the most important historical structure of the area (Rum Kale) have started recently. As hundreds of other rock dwellings on the rocky banks of Euphrates, the settlements on the slopes of this historical castle were submerged below the waters of Birecik Dam, without any research was carried out. We believe that this project should be completed as soon as possible, in order to survey and inventory all these artificial caves of enormous historical importance.

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Fig. 5: ornaments in a church at Savasan Village (photo C. Cankirili).

Fig. 5: ornamenti in una chiesa presso il villaggio di Savasan (foto C. Cankirili).



Fig. 6: Rumkale peninsula, seen from the north. Euphrates flows on the left side of the photo. The river on the right side is a branch of the main flow (photo C. Cankirili).

Fig. 6: penisola di Rumkale, vista da nord. L'Eufrate scorre sul lato sinistro della foto. Il fiume sulla destra è un braccio del ramo principale (foto C. Cankirili).

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