

Rock-cut Byzantine churches of Koramaz Valley (Kayseri, Turkey)

Le chiese rupestri bizantine della Valle di Koramaz (Kayseri, Turchia)

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Abstract

Despite being the capital of Cappadocia during the Roman and Byzantine era, no comprehensive scientific research has been carried out until now in terms of the rock-cut architecture in Kayseri (Caesarea, Mazaca). To fill this deficiency we, as OBRUK Cave Research Group, have started to work for the "Kayseri Underground Structures Inventory Project" in January 2014. This project, carried out based on a triple protocol with Foundation for the Protection and Promotion of the Environment and Cultural Heritage (ÇEKÜL) and Kayseri Metropolitan Municipality, includes the research, survey, mapping, and documentation of all the underground structures located in Kayseri territory. This project, covering the entire province and ongoing for six years, has become very significant and important currently, which was not expected in the beginning, with 46 Byzantine rock-cut churches, 33 underground shelters, 3 underground aqueducts, 10 Assyrian tin mines and 2 cliff-dwelling villages with 476 different rock-cut dwelling structures in total, explored, researched and inventoried for the first time by OBRUK Team. The most valuable part of this project carried out in various areas in Kayseri is Koramaz Valley. Four of these newly found Byzantine rock-cut churches are located in different areas of Kayseri and all the remaining 42 churches are located in Koramaz Valley. In this valley, there are seven different villages and both the interior and surrounding of all these villages are full of rock-dwelled structures. Though most of these structures are houses, warehouses, barns, and dovecotes, there are also several rock-cut churches. Though a part of these previously unexplored churches of the valley are small and without fresco, there are frescoes on the walls of few churches and some of the churches researched are as large as the similar examples in Cappadocia. On the other hand, another rock-cut structure complex located in the valley is a monastery. In this article, these newly explored 42 Byzantine rock-cut churches of Koramaz Valley are explained.

Keywords: Kayseri, Koramaz Valley, Cappadocia, Byzantine rock-cut church.

Riassunto

Benché l'odierna Kayseri (in antico Caesarea, Mazaca) sia stata la capitale della Cappadocia durante l'epoca Romana e Bizantina, sulla sua architettura rupestre, sino ad ora, non è stata condotta nessuna ricerca scientifica esauriente. Per colmare questa carenza, il Gruppo di Ricerca Speleologica OBRUK di Istanbul, da gennaio 2014, ha iniziato ad operare nell'ambito del "Kayseri Underground Structures Inventory Project". Questo progetto, condotto sulla base di un triplo protocollo con la "Foundation for the Protection and Promotion of the Environment and Cultural Heritage (ÇEKÜL)" e con l'Amministrazione della Città di Kayseri, si occupa della ricerca, mappatura e documentazione di tutte le strutture sotterranee incluse nel suo territorio. Il progetto, della durata di sei anni, è diventato particolarmente significativo, travalicando le aspettative iniziali, con l'esplorazione e la catalogazione, per la prima volta da parte del *team* OBRUK, di un insospettato numero di cavità antropogeniche, tra cui 46 chiese rupestri bizantine, 3 rifugi sotterranei, 3 acquedotti ipogei, 10 miniere di stagno assire e due villaggi "a parete" costituiti da 476 differenti ambienti.

Le ricerche più importanti sono state condotte nella valle di Koramaz, dove, su uno sviluppo di sedici chilometri, sono presenti sette villaggi, sotto e attorno ai quali sono localizzate innumerevoli strutture rupestri. Benché nella maggior parte dei casi si tratti di unità abitative, magazzini, fienili e piccionaie, sono anche presenti parecchie chiese rupestri, in precedenza del tutto sconosciute. Una parte, che potrebbe essere definita di "tipo familiare", risulta di modeste dimensioni e priva di affreschi; altre sono invece decorate da cicli pittorici di notevole pregio, anche se molto rovinati, ed hanno dimensioni comparabili a quelle già note nel resto della Cappadocia. Inoltre, uno dei complessi più articolati localizzato nella valle potrebbe corrispondere ad un vero e proprio insediamento monastico. In questo articolo vengono documentate alcune delle quarantadue chiese rupestri presenti nelle formazioni rocciose lungo la valle di Koramaz, di cui soltanto due sono state in passato oggetto di pubblicazioni.

Parole chiave: Kayseri, Valle di Koramaz, Cappadocia, chiese rupestri bizantine.

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Introduction

Situated in the Central Anatolian Volcanic Province (CAVP), in the middle of Anatolian Plateau in Turkey, Kayseri and its vicinity had a tremendous volcanic activity, which had started approximately 11 million years ago and continued until the Early Holocene (ca. 10,000 – 8,000 years ago) (Aydar *et al.*, 2012; Innocenti, Mazzuoli, Pasquarè, Radicati Di Brozolo, & Villari, 1975), has piled pyroclastic rocks with an enormous thickness on the surface. Both the elevations on the north of Kayseri and wide plateau on the south of Kayseri are completely covered by these volcanic rock deposits. The amount of pyroclastic deposits shows significant differences regionally and is known to reach a thickness of 400 m in the north of Kayseri (Sen, Kürkçüoğlu, Aydar, Gourgaud, & Vincent, 2003).

When the volcanic rocks covering the entire area were first started to be dug and when the inhabitants started to use the underground as their dwellings are unknown. The continuous usage of the rock-hewn structures for thousands of years has made such an archaeological exploration impossible. The earliest dated rock-hewn structures encountered in Cappadocia are probably the Roman rock-cut tombs in Nevşehir / Mazıköy and south of Kayseri, especially Ayşepınar and Yeniköy (Durukan, 2012). From the Roman to Byzantine empires, the variety of the underground and rock-cut structures was incredible. The structures carved in rocks in the area are not limited just to the houses, barns, dovecotes, tombs, and churches. There are also monasteries, aqueducts, cisterns, and even apiaries housed in the rocks and these rock-cut structures observed in different parts of Kayseri area have been continuously used until today (Gilli & Yamaç, in press).

The different natural formations of Cappadocia and numerous rock-dwelling structures dug in these formations, especially the rock-cut Byzantine churches, have drawn the attention of numerous travelers starting from approximately 300 years ago and have been subject to various researches and scientific studies. These works and studies started for the frescoes in numerous rock-cut churches found in the area, have expanded to other rock-cut structures. Today, from the underground shelters to the hydraulic structures and from the dovecotes even to the rock-cut apiaries of the area, there are hundreds of different scholarly works and studies. Though the volcanic area of over 20,000 sq km where surveys are being carried out is named as Cappadocia, nearly all of these researches were performed only in Nevşehir - Ürgüp - Göreme triangle and this area is a very small part (ca. 5,500 sq km) of the ancient Cappadocia.

Cappadocia was a province of both the Roman and the Byzantine empires. In AD 371 it was the largest province of the Roman Empire with a total area of 50,000 sq km and its capital was Kayseri (Mitchell, 2018; Ramsay, 1890). Kayseri was named “Mazaca” from the Hattians to Strabo and it was changed as “Caesarea” in the honor of Caesar Augustus in AD 14.

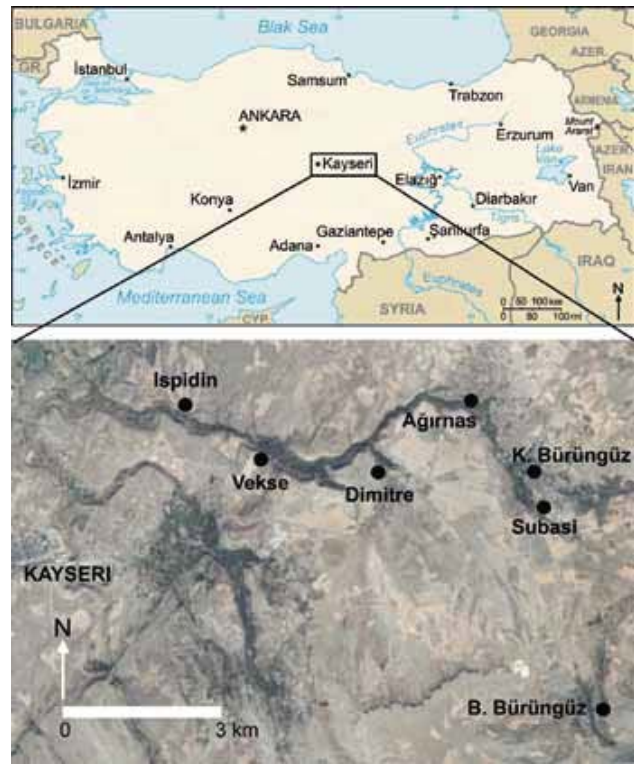


Fig. 1 – Location maps showing Kayseri and Koramaz Valley (after Google Maps and Google Earth-elaboration A. Yamaç).

Fig. 1 – Mappa con la posizione di Kayseri e della Valle di Koramaz (da Google Maps e Google Earth-elaborazione A. Yamaç).

During the 3rd century AD, it was the largest city of Central Anatolia.

Despite being the capital of Cappadocia during ancient times, no comprehensive scientific research has been carried out until now in terms of the rock-cut architecture in Kayseri. To fill this deficiency we, as OBRUK Cave Research Group, have started to work for the “Kayseri Underground Structures Inventory Project” in January 2014. This project, carried out based on a triple protocol with Foundation for the Protection and Promotion of the Environment and Cultural Heritage (ÇEKÜL) and Kayseri Metropolitan Municipality, includes the research, survey, and documentation of all the underground structures located in Kayseri. This project, covering the entire province with an area of 17,500 sq km (of which about 6.000 sq km consists of volcanic rocks), and ongoing for six years, has become very significant currently, mainly due to the findings in Koramaz Valley.

General Description of Koramaz Valley

There is an elevation difference of 700 - 800 m between the plain where Kayseri is located and mountains located 30 km east of this plain; consequently, each creek flowing down these slopes has formed its valley by eroding the soft pyroclastic rocks. East of

Kayseri there are six different valleys eroded by these streams flowing down from the high hills; in the rock sides of these valleys, there are structures carved by the inhabitants dwelling in the area for hundreds, or even more for thousands of years. The longest of these six valleys is Koramaz Valley (fig. 1). In this 16 km long valley there are in total seven different villages. From west to east, these are Büyük Bürüngüz, Üskübü (Subaşı), Küçük Bürüngüz, Ağırnas, Dimitre, Vekse, and Ispıdın. Both the interior and surroundings of these seven villages, located on the slopes of Koramaz Valley, are full of structures carved into the rocks. Though it is very hard to date these structures due to their continuous usage, the experts have dated some of the rock-cut churches in the valley to the 9th and 11th centuries. On the other hand, it is a generally accepted assumption that the underground shelters on Koramaz Valley have been dug between the 7th and 10th centuries by the Christians living in the region as a protection against the Arab raids.

Beyond all these, the experts examining the rock-cut structures near Ağırnas have stated that, though these structures have changed over time due to different usages, by taking into consideration the entrance decoration and interior architecture, at least 18 of the cavities on the valley have been dug as Roman rock-cut chamber tombs and 16 as *Columbarium* (Gilli, 2017; Yazlık, 2019). To sum up, it is possible to say that the background of all these structures carved in rocks on Koramaz Valley dates back to at least 2,000 years ago and probably to even older times (Yamaç, in press). Recently accepted to UNESCO World Heritage Site tentative list, new projects for the restoration and protection of various structures and churches in Koramaz Valley have already begun.

Rock-cut Churches of Koramaz Valley

There are 42 different rock-cut churches in and around five villages of Koramaz Valley. Although most of them can be accepted as “family-type” small churches without any ornaments, which was a tradi-

tion in the Byzantine Empire during this period, few others are large and having frescoes. Only two of these 42 churches had been published previously.

List of rock-cut churches according to the villages of Koramaz Valley is below:

VILLAGE	NO. OF CHURCHES
Büyük Bürüngüz	–
Subaşı	1 (monastery)
Küçük Bürüngüz	–
Ağırnas	15
Dimitre	7
Vekse	5
Ispıdın	14
TOTAL	42

Considering that some of the rock-cut churches we researched in the valley are very similar to each other, we decided that it would not be necessary to describe all of them individually and in detail. Therefore, in this article, while we will give accounts of all these churches we explored based on their villages, we will give details only for a few more important ones.

Subaşı (Üskübü) Village

The previous name of Subaşı Village was Üskübü and earlier it was Skopi. There is a huge complicated structure, located 200 m northwest of Subaşı Village, dug on a rocky slope, with a church as well. In this settlement, excavated on a steep wall and located on a line with a length of 180 m, there are 11 different structures of all sizes. Some are connected with tunnels and this complex, consisting of some small chambers and a room in the size of 100 sq m, as well as a kitchen with oven and chimney, is most possibly a monastery with its church, courtyard, kitchen, dining hall, living spaces, and ceremonial chamber (fig. 2, fig. 3, fig. 4).

The church is a cross planned structure with an approximately rectangular narthex in front, barrel



Fig. 2 – General view of Subaşı rock-cut complex (photo A. Yamaç).

Fig. 2 – Vista generale del complesso rupestre di Subaşı (foto A. Yamaç).

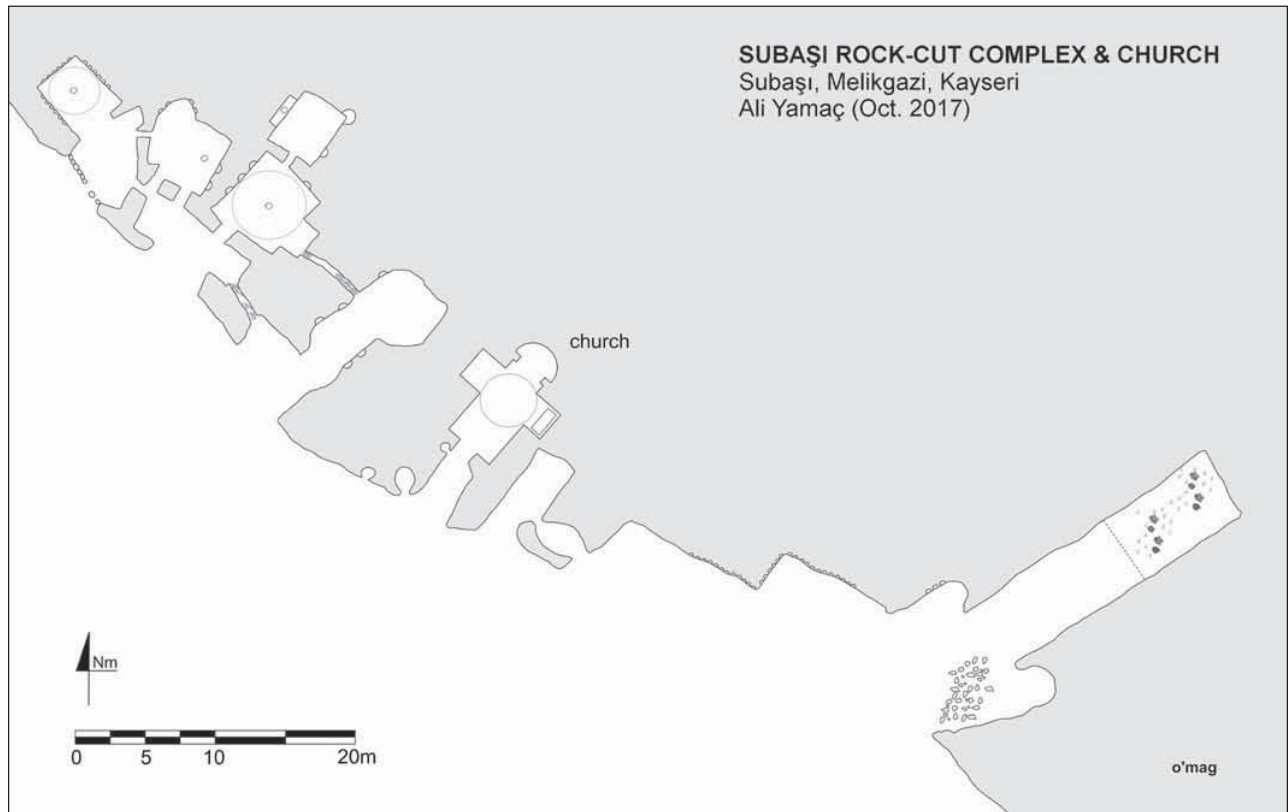


Fig. 3 – General plan of Subaşı rock-cut complex (drawn A. Yamaç).

Fig. 3 – Planimetria generale del complesso rupestre di Subaşı (grafica A Yamaç).

Fig. 4 – Church of rock-cut complex of Subaşı (photo A.E. Keskin).

Fig. 4 – Chiesa del complesso rupestre di Subaşı (foto A.E. Keskin).

vaulted, with grave niches at the entrance and the south wall partially destroyed. The church is one of the two biggest rock-cut churches in Koramaz Valley together with Vekse Church No 1; taking into consideration the similar examples in Göreme (Karakaya, 2014), it can be dated to the 10th - 11th centuries.

Ağırnas Village

Ağırnas Village is located 4 km north of Subaşı Village and on the slopes of Koramaz Valley. In accordance with the population and tax records of the Ottoman Empire, there were 53 Christian and 3 Muslim families in 1500. In 1520, this changed as 72 Christian and 2 Muslim families (Inbaşı, 1993). The oldest houses of the village are on the first two lines facing Koramaz Valley and the house of Mimar Sinan ("Sinan the Architect"), who was born here in 1489, is also among these houses (Yamaç & Tok, 2015).

Apart from the two churches which were constructed



during 19th century, there are a total of 15 rock-cut churches in and around Ağırnas Village, and only one of them is in the village. This church is inside the “Ağırnas Underground Shelter” which is located 200 m south of the village center, dug on a rocky slope on the east of Koramaz Valley, left bank. The main entrance of this structure, which is currently open to tourists, is protected with a millstone door. After the first room in the entrance, there is a church with a length of 8.40 m and the main axis of northwest-southeast direction. As often encountered in Cappadocia, the church has

a barrel-vault ceiling and a horseshoe apse. There are three niches on the south wall of the church and a single niche both on west and north walls. A passage on the west wall connects the church to storage chambers. Most possibly the church must have been excavated within the underground shelter, between 9th-11th centuries (fig. 5, fig. 6).

On the other hand, located approximately 500 m west of Ağırnas, there is an enormous cliff settlement on three different walls of Koramaz Valley, where the valley is forked. Here, in total 195 rock-cut dwelling

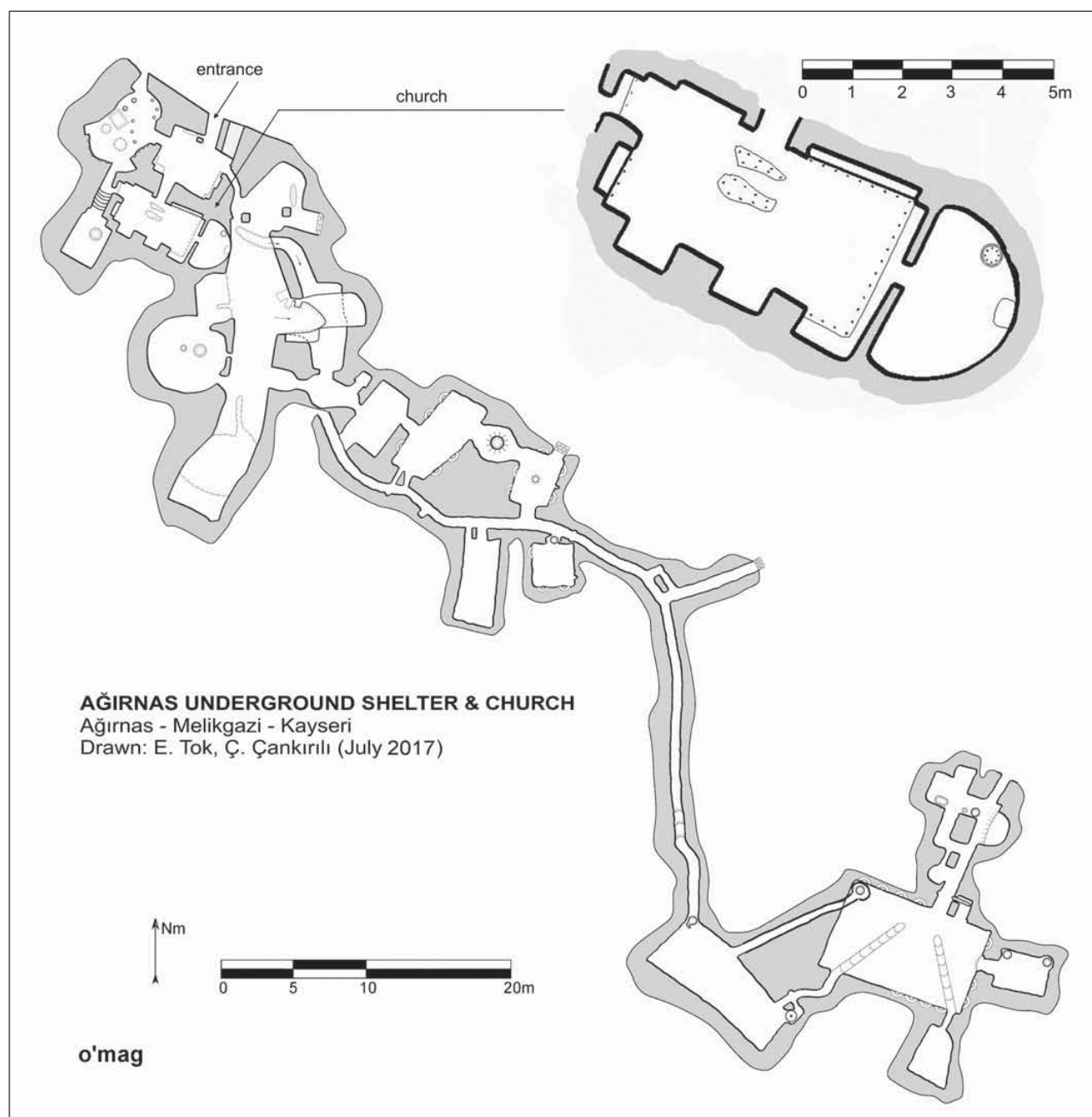


Fig. 5 – Plan of Ağırnas Underground Shelter. On the upper right corner the larger-scale church is reproduced (drawn E. Tok & Ç. Çankırılı).

Fig. 5 – Pianta del Rifugio Sotterraneo di Ağırnas. In alto, a destra è riprodotta la chiesa a più grande scala (grafica E. Tok & Ç. Çankırılı).

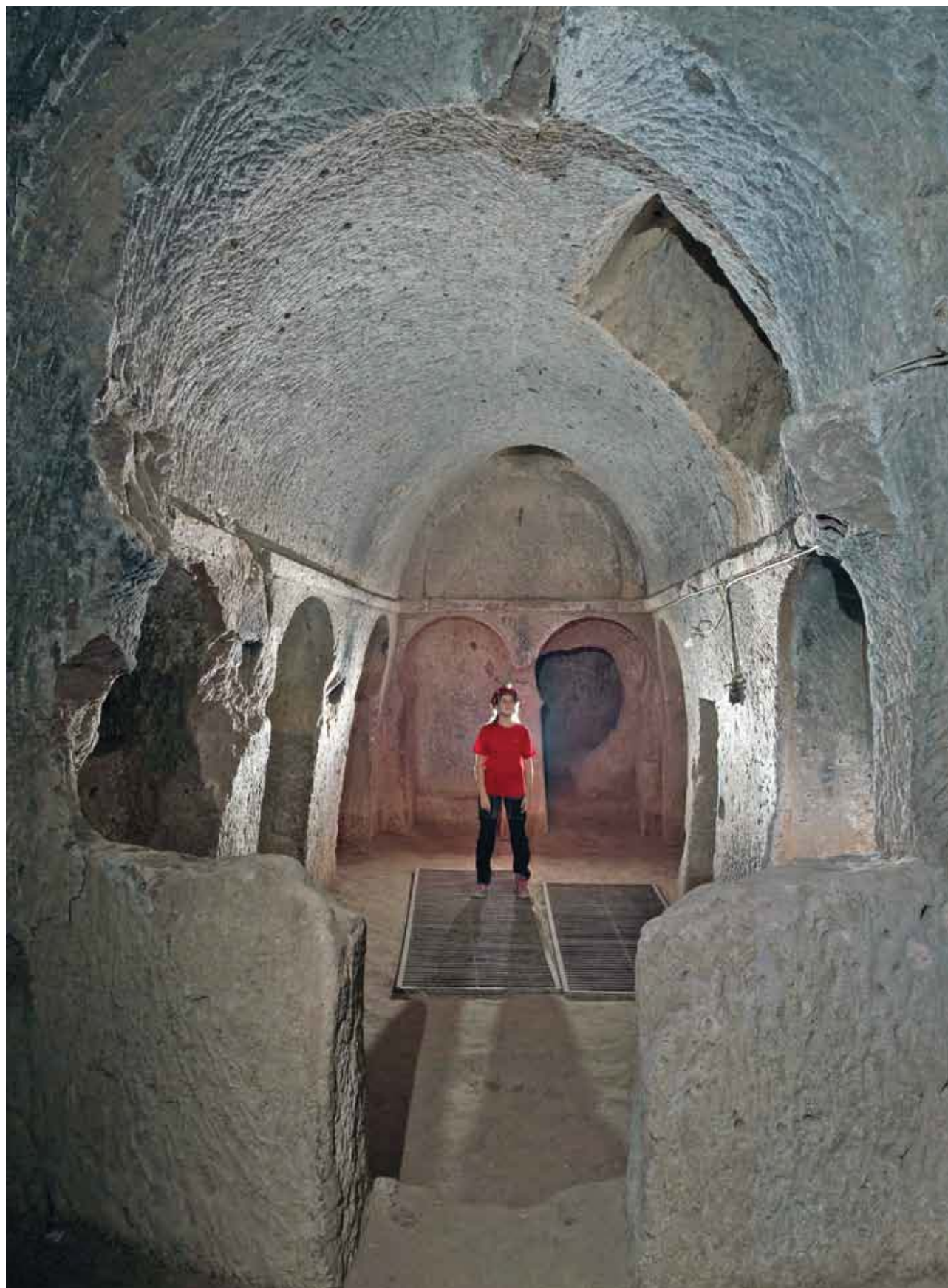


Fig. 6 – Church of Ağırnas Underground Shelter (photo R. Straub).

Fig. 6 – Chiesa del Rifugio Sotterraneo di Ağırnas (foto R. Straub).

structures have been explored and surveyed. Though most of these structures are houses, storage units, barns, or dovecotes, there are also 14 churches. By taking into consideration the churches and underground shelters in these settlements, rock-cut architecture in this region can also be dated between the 7th and 11th centuries (Lamesa, 2011). Rock-cut churches in these cliff settlements will be explained according to their locations on the walls (fig.7).

Ağırnas South Wall Churches

In this section of the cliff settlement, a total of 154 rock-cut structure had been surveyed and there are eight different churches which can probably be dated to Late Byzantine Era. Luckily we know the local names of all of them. These names, given by the inhabitants of the village centuries after the construction of these churches, have nothing to do with their history. Even, as there are no frescoes inside those churches, they are not names originating from images like in Göreme. However, we think it is more original than numbering, as we have had to do in the case of the churches of Vekse and Ispidin villages.

Höngöle Church

Both the entrance and the apse of this church are facing east and the main axis of the structure is towards the north. The window behind the apse is the only example in the region. There are two arcosolium graves next to each other on the northern wall of the church, which measures 6.03 m × 2.93 m and has a height of 3 m. The door of the church has highly detailed workmanship and the embossed cross above the entrance door is rare. There is a grave on the right and left of the entrance door in the atrium. These graves are thought to belong to the donors of the church. The unique workmanship at the entrance gate and the arcosolium tombs in it suggest that this structure could be excavated as a Roman tomb before it was converted into a church around the 11th century (fig.8).

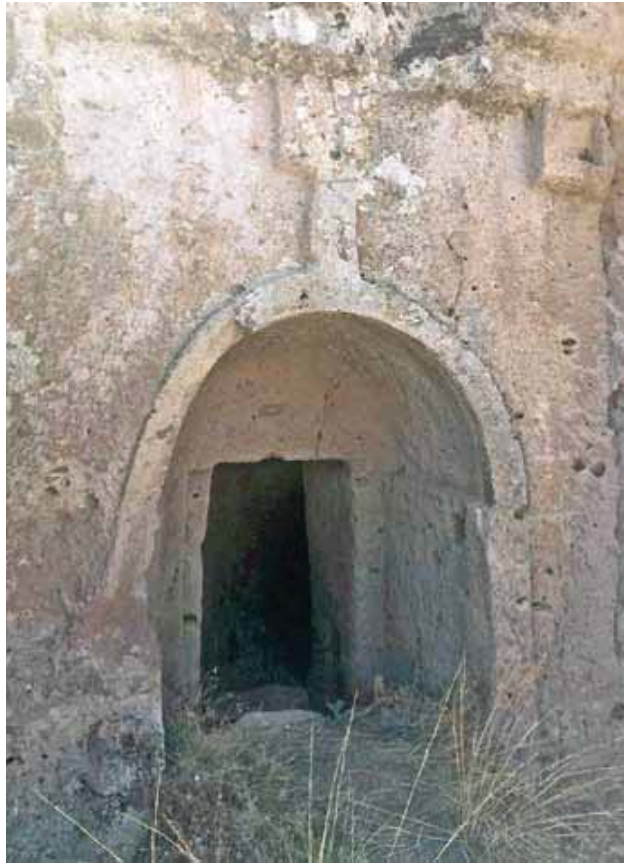
Ağırnas North Wall Churches

Starting with the entrance of the valley by Ağırnas, this cliff settlement group continues to the south from here and unites with the southern wall structures.



Fig. 7 – Korumaz Valley develops south of Ağırnas Village, with another small branch towards North. All those three rock walls of the valley are full of rock-cut dwellings (after Google Earth-elaboration A. Yamaç).

Fig. 7 – La Valle di Korumaz si sviluppa a sud del villaggio di Ağırnas, con un altro breve ramo verso Nord. Le tre pareti di roccia della valle sono cosparse di abitazioni rupestri (da Google Earth-elaborazione A. Yamaç).



The most important difference of this part compared to the southern structures is that they were dug with in different levels. The structures have similar architectural features to all other rock-cut buildings of the Koramaz Valley extending to the south and have undergone major changes over time. In this section, a total of 34 rock-cut structures had been surveyed and there are three rock-cut churches.

There is a large hall measuring almost $16 \text{ m} \times 4.5 \text{ m}$ in the middle part of the wall. The main entrance of the church, which was reached by a chimney in front of the western wall of this building, was clogged with

Fig. 8 – Entrance of Höngele Church. Ornament style and interior of the structure suggests that previously it was a Roman tomb (photo B. Yazlık).

Fig. 8 – Ingresso della chiesa di Höngele. Lo stile della decorazione e della struttura interna suggeriscono che in precedenza fosse una tomba romana (foto B. Yazlık).

Fig. 9 – General plan of Northeast Wall Dwellings of Ağırnas Village. Gilaburulu Church can be seen at the bottom right corner of the plan (drawn A. Yamaç).

Fig. 9 – Pianta generale del villaggio a parete Nordorientale del Villaggio di Ağırnas. La Chiesa Gilaburulu è localizzata nell'angolo inferiore destro della planimetria (grafica A. Yamaç).

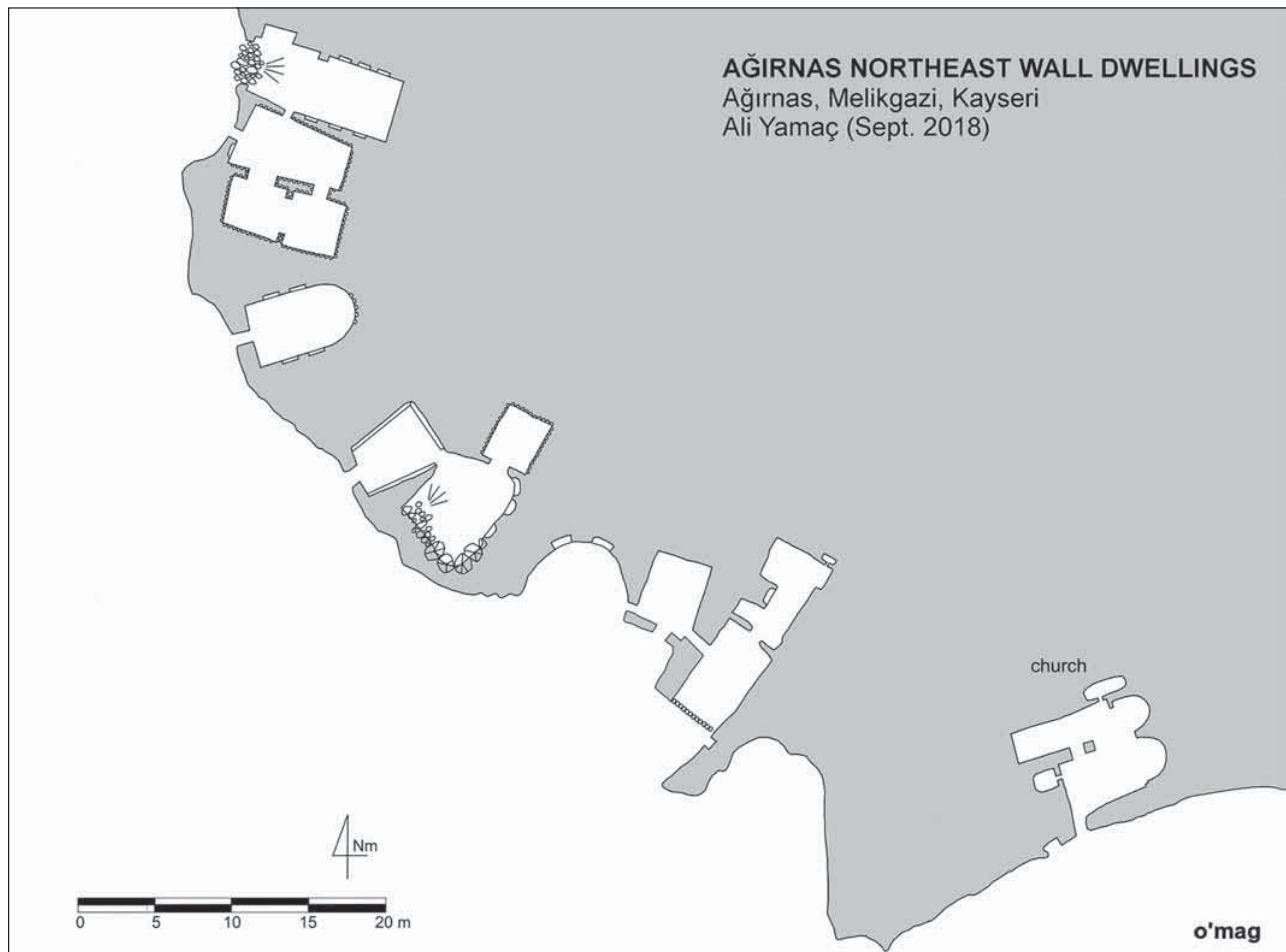




Fig. 10 – Entrance of Görmis Church (photo A. Yamaç).

Fig. 10 – Ingresso della Chiesa di Görmis (foto A. Yamaç).

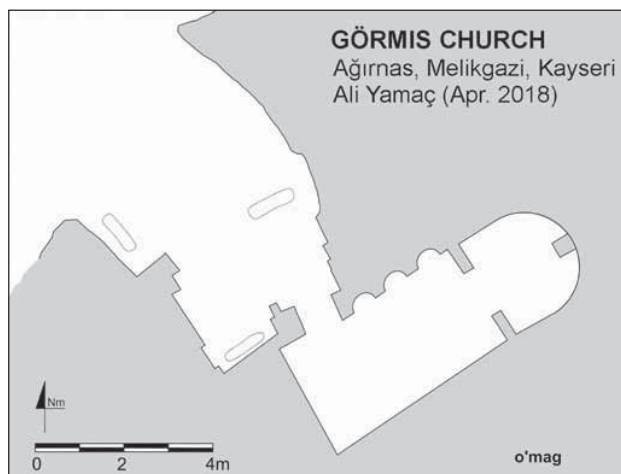


Fig. 11 – Plan of Görmis Church (drawn A. Yamaç).

Fig. 11 – Pianta della Chiesa di Görmis (grafica A. Yamaç).

rubble. Probably it was turned into dovecote long after its construction and at this stage the entrance part should be blocked and a chimney should be opened. There is a small chapel with a double apse next to this church and at the same elevation.

Ağırnas Northeast Wall Churches

Although all the rock settlements of Koramaz Valley near Ağırnas were dug into the western walls of the valley, an exception is a small number of rock

settlements on the northeastern bank of the stream. At the point where the valley made a fork and under the newly built houses of the village, there are seven rock-cut settlements and two are churches. At the most southeastern end of the complex, there is a double apse Gilaburulu Church (fig.9) with some frescoes, even though it has been heavily damaged. This church has a total area of 66 sq m and is supported by a single column carved into the rock body. North nave of the church is significantly larger than the south nave and there are silo-like underground structures dug into the ground in front of both apses.

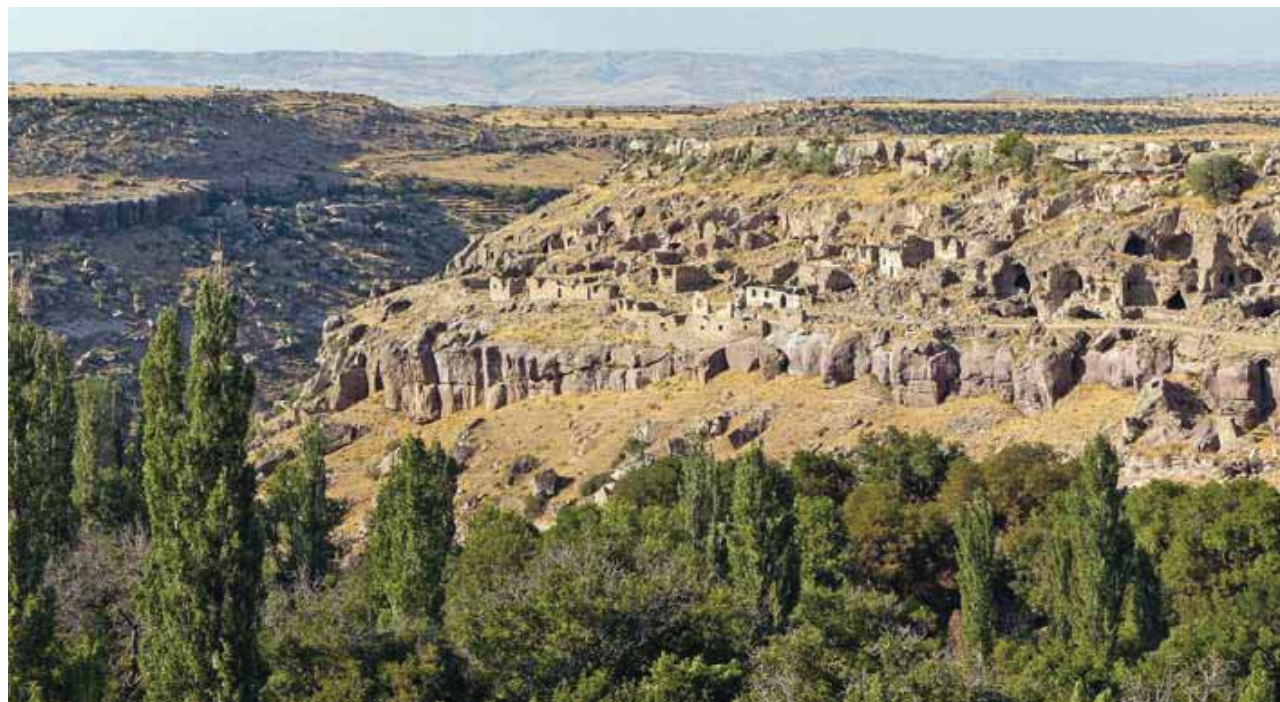


Fig. 12 – West corner of Dimitre cliff settlements (photo A. Yamaç).

Fig. 12 – Sperone occidentale dell'insediamento a falesia di Dimitre (foto A. Yamaç).

Gormis Church

The peculiarity of this structure is that it is the only structure on the east slope of Koramaz Valley around Ağırnas and all other rock-cut structures on the main-line of the valley are located on the opposite, western wall. The entrance door of this church faces north and a total of 6 graves, probably belonging to the donors of the church, are located in the atrium of the church. The templon and the altar of the church have survived to the present day. It appears that the access to the church was partially destroyed. A room on the right side of the entrance and a rock tomb on the floor are interesting. This church, which is an 11th century Byzantine structure, measures 6.88 m × 2.60 m and a height of 3.54 m, has been well preserved compared to its counterparts. The rectangular church has semi-circular apse, an altar carved from the rock body, and three semicircular niches on the north wall of the nave (fig. 10, fig.11).

Dimitre (Turan) Village

Four kilometres after Ağırnas, Koramaz Valley reaches Dimitre, which is currently known as Turan Village. In the Ottoman registrations, dated 1500, 37 dwellings, and 1520, 48 dwellings were recorded in the village (Inbaşı, 1993).

Old Dimitre Village is not located on the mainline of Koramaz Valley but on the north slopes of a branch extending to the east (fig. 1 and fig. 12). This region is the deepest point of Koramaz Valley: in Dimitre branch, the maximum difference between the altitude of the plateau and the bottom of the valley reaches 80 m. The total number of cliff dwellings on the walls of this branch are more than the cliff dwellings of Ağırnas: the most important reason is that, differently from Ağırnas, the residents of Dimitre Village continued to live in these rock-cut structures until recently. When the village became uninhabitable due to the collapses, in 1966, it has moved to the plain on



Fig. 13 – A small Byzantine church in Dimitre Village (photo D. Albov).

Fig. 13 – Piccola chiesa bizantina nel villaggio di Dimitre (foto D. Albov).

top of the valley, to its current settlement. The rock-cut settlements of Dimitre have changed much more due to its inhabitation and usage until such a recent date. During this study, in Old Dimitre Village, in to-



Fig. 14 – Wall of Koramaz Valley to the north of Vekse Village. In this sector there are few rock-cut dwellings and four churches (photo A. Yamaç).

Fig. 14 – Parete della Valle di Koramaz a nord del villaggio di Vekse. In questo settore vi sono poche abitazioni rupestri e quattro chiese (foto A. Yamaç).



Fig. 15 – Vekse Church No. 1, view from the nave towards the apse (photo R. Straub).

Fig. 15 – Chiesa n. 1 di Vekse, vista dalla navata verso l'abside (foto R. Straub).

tal 229 rock-cut settlements have been explored and surveyed. Among these structures, most of which are dwelling, barn, and dovecote, there are also seven churches. Those small rock-cut churches are architecturally quite similar; all of them are with a length of 6-7 m and have a horseshoe apse (fig. 13).

Vekse Village

The next village after Dimitre in Koramaz Valley is Vekse which is located 2.5 km west and is the smallest village of this valley. The opposite slopes of the valley consist of red-colored volcanic rocks reaching to a height of 20 m from place to place and extending like a wall from one end to the other (fig. 14). Structurally, Vekse is very similar to Ağırnas. On one side of the valley, there is the current village and on the other side, there are the rock-cut structures. Differently from Ağırnas and Dimitre, there are not many rock-cut settlements on the walls of Koramaz Valley extending in front of Vekse. The number of rock-cut structures on the walls is just 12 in total and five of these structures are churches. Apart from Vekse Church No. 1, all other four churches have approximately a 6 m long axis and horseshoe apse plan.

Vekse Church No. 1

The rock-cut church of Vekse No. 1 is situated 400 meters south-east from the main settlement of Vekse and on the top of a cliff. The entrance of the church is located on the north wall. It was partly destroyed but on the broken wall we still can see the square exonarthex overlapped by the semicircular vault. The semicircular niches are carved in the lower parts of the west and east walls. The naos is a Byzantium type “compact cross-in-square” style. In the apse there is still the rectangular-shaped altar carved in a rock protrusion. There are three arch-niches over the altar. On the north wall a small rock-cut table (the prothesis) is present. Connection with dome is made by the flat pendentives of triangular shape. To the south of the naos the parekklesion of rectangular shape that extend on the axis north-south is adjoining. It is covered by a barrel vault. Along the west wall of the parekklesion a rock-cut bench has been obtained and in the south corner a burial pit of rectangular shape is situated. On the east side the second apse was excavated with a rock-cut altar in the centre and two rock-cut shelves. To the west of the naos adjoining large narthex extends on the east-west axis. It is overlaid by a high barrel vault. In the east part of the narthex,

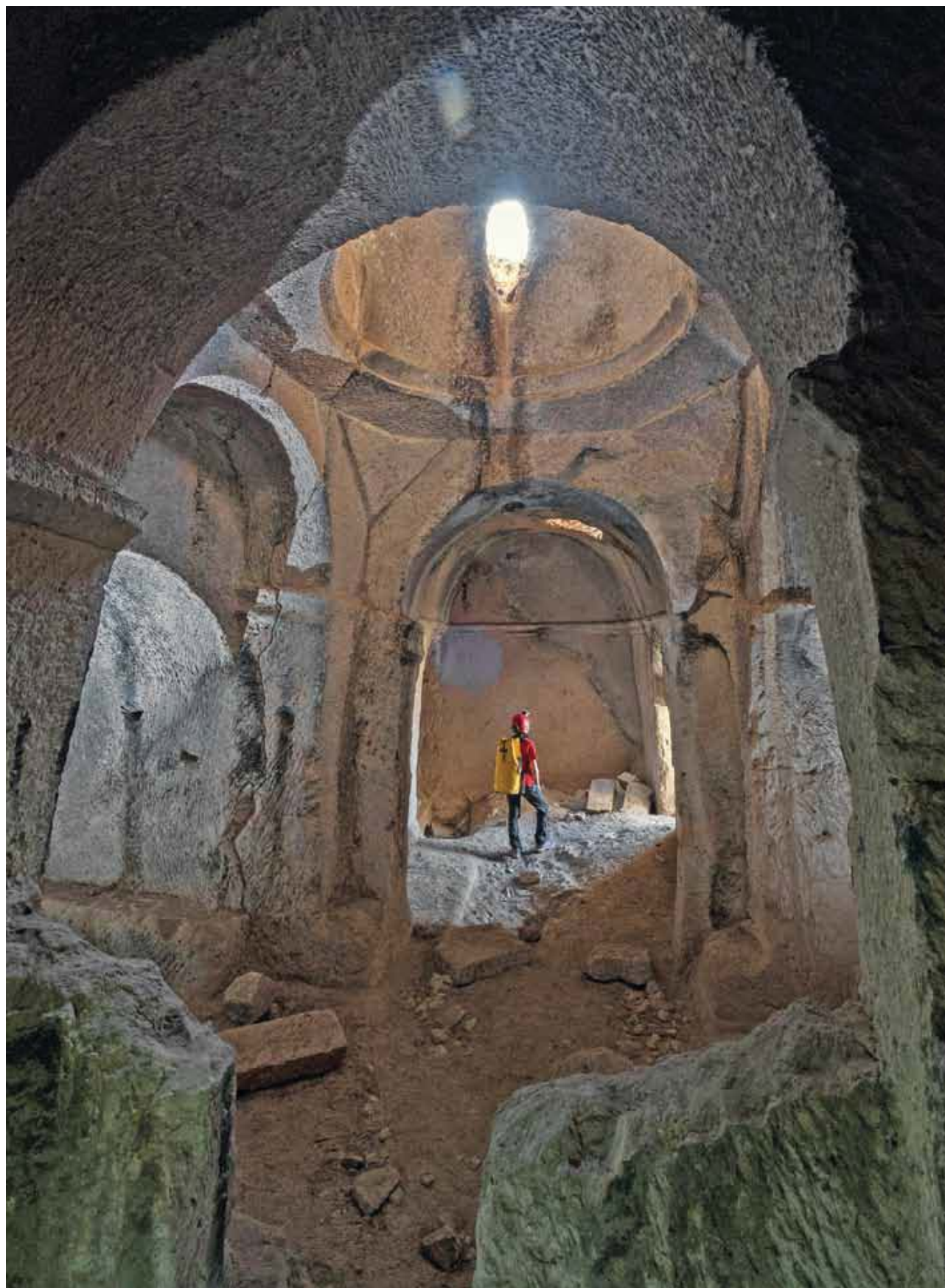


Fig. 16 – Vekse Church No. 1, view from the apse towards the nave and the entrance (photo R. Straub).

Fig. 16 – Chiesa n. 1 di Vekse, vista dall'abside verso la navata e l'ingresso (foto R. Straub).

on each sides, in the walls two arcossolium niches were carved. In the western part of the southern wall a big arcossolium niche semicircular-shaped in plan-section is positioned. In front of that niche on the floor there is a burial pit. One more burial pit was cut on the floor between two eastern arcossolium niches (fig. 15, fig. 16, fig. 17). One fresco is preserved on the east wall between the apses of the main church and parekklesion. It is preserved fragmentarily but there still could be seen two human figures.

Vekse Church No. 2

To the north of today's Vekse settlement, there are

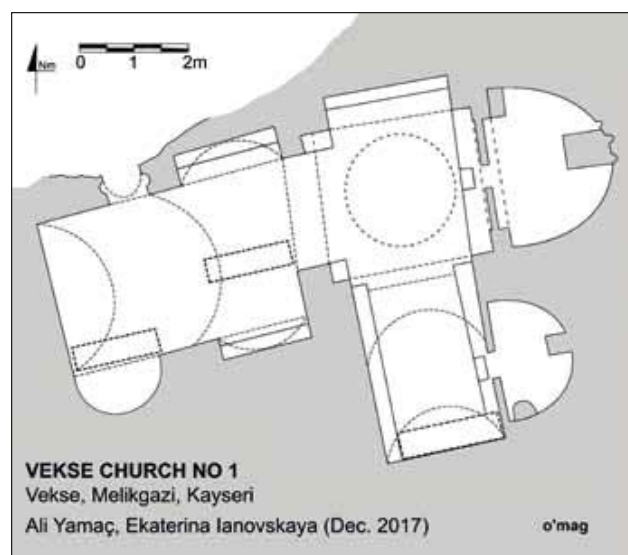


Fig. 17 – Plan of Vekse Church No. 1 (drawn A. Yamaç & E. Ianovskaya).

Fig. 17 – Pianta della Chiesa n. 1 di Vekse (grafica Yamaç & E. Ianovskaya).



Fig. 18 – Nave of Vekse Church No. 2, looking from west towards east (photo A.E. Keskin).

Fig. 18 – Navata della Chiesa n. 2 di Vekse, guardando da ovest verso est (foto A.E. Keskin).

four different churches along the north wall of the Koramaz Valley. Called Vekse Church No 2 by us, this is a good example of the adaptation of a relatively large rock-cut church to the natural form of the rock body. There are two round arched niches on the east of the nave measuring 3.8×6 m, supported by a single column. The main apse is connected to the lateral apse by a passage to the west. There is a simple templon wall in front of both apses (fig. 18, fig. 19). The total distance between this church, which has no fresco remains insight, and Vekse Church No 3 on the same slope, is about 200 m.

Vekse Church No. 5

This is the last structure to the east on the northern wall of Vekse. This church, which is located in the middle of the rock wall, on top of the slope, is entered through a rock-carved courtyard that has been excavated neatly and has niches on its walls. On both walls of this 7,5 m long church, there are three large niches with rectangular plan and arches. There is an altar carved into the rock body on the east wall of the horseshoe apse. The purpose of the room, which was dug in the southeast direction inside the church with a nearly square plan and a ventilation shaft in the centre of the ceiling, is uncertain. There is no niche on the walls and the floor is filled with debris fallen from the ceiling (fig. 20).

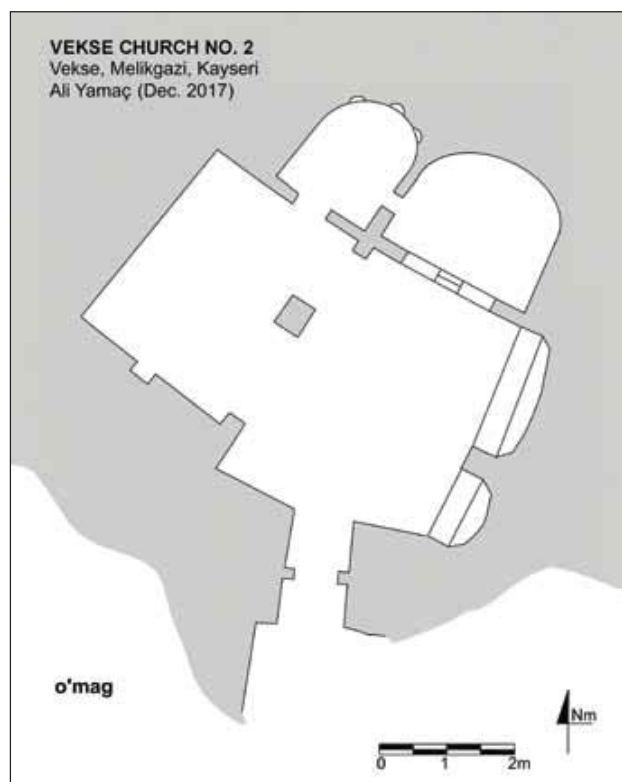


Fig. 19 – Plan of Vekse Church No. 2 (drawn A. Yamaç).

Fig. 19 – Pianta della Chiesa n. 2 di Vekse (grafica A. Yamaç).



Fig. 20 – Plan of Vekse Church No. 5 (drawn A. Yamaç).

Fig. 20 – Pianta della Chiesa n. 5 di Vekse (grafica A. Yamaç).

Ispidin Village

This is the last western village of Koramaz Valley. In accordance with the Ottoman registrations, in 1500 population census, there were 19 dwellings in total and 15 of these dwellings were stated to be Christians. In the 1520 population census, the number of houses increased to 35 and the number of Christian houses was 23 (Inbaşı, 1993). In the village, there are 14 different rock-cut churches on both walls of Koramaz Valley (fig. 21). All these churches are scattered to different parts of the valley. Apart from 3-4 small rock-cut dwellings, the lack of cliff settlements is as interesting as the excessive number of churches in such a small village. In a village with 19 houses in total in 1500, it is hard to explain the existence of 14 different rock-cut churches approximately 500 years even before this date. All these 14 churches numbered by us are approximately in similar sizes and are small structures with the main axis of approximately 6-7 m. Apart from one church, all other churches have a horseshoe apse. In three churches, there is windowed templon carved into the main rock between the apse and the nave.

Ispidin Church No. 1

This small rock church, located on the rocky ridge next to the bridge that crosses the Koramaz Valley in the southwest of Ispidin Village, was the only frescoed church we have come across in Kayseri. We say “it was” because the intense destruction by illicit diggers that



Fig. 21 – Distribution of 14 churches around Ispidin Village (after Google Earth-elaboration A. Yamaç)).

Fig. 21 – Distribuzione delle 14 chiese rupestri attorno al villaggio di Ispidin (da Google Earth-elaborazione A. Yamaç).



Fig. 22 – Ispidin Church No. 1 (photo R. Straub).

Fig. 22 – Chiesa n. 1 di Ispidin (foto R. Straub).



Fig. 23 – Ispidin Church No. 1: detail (photo R. Straub).

Fig. 23 – Chiesa n. 1 di Ispidin: particolare (foto R. Straub).

we have observed in this church only in the last year is incredible. Most of the frescoes described in Karakaya's article published in 2013 and dated 11th to 13th centuries are now unrecognizable (fig. 22, fig. 23). The church has an irregular rectangular plan and there is a small narthex in the north (fig. 24). The central section where the cross arms meet is square-shaped and covered with a dome that is crossed by pendants. The cross arms, which are rectangular and covered with barrel-vaults, differ in size. The church has northeast and northwest corner rooms. In the east of the cross arm forming the bema, there is a half-round apse and a prothesis in the northeast (Karakaya, 2013; Straub, Yazlık, & Yamaç, 2019).

Ispidin Churches No. 2, 3 and 4

To the north of Ispidin Church No 1, on the rocky slope opposite the bridge, there are three small churches, which are separated by 10-15 m and are very similar to each other in terms of architecture. The church number 2 in the west direction, like the other two, is in the northwest-southeast direction and has an amorphous rectangular plan. The ceiling is barrel-vaulted

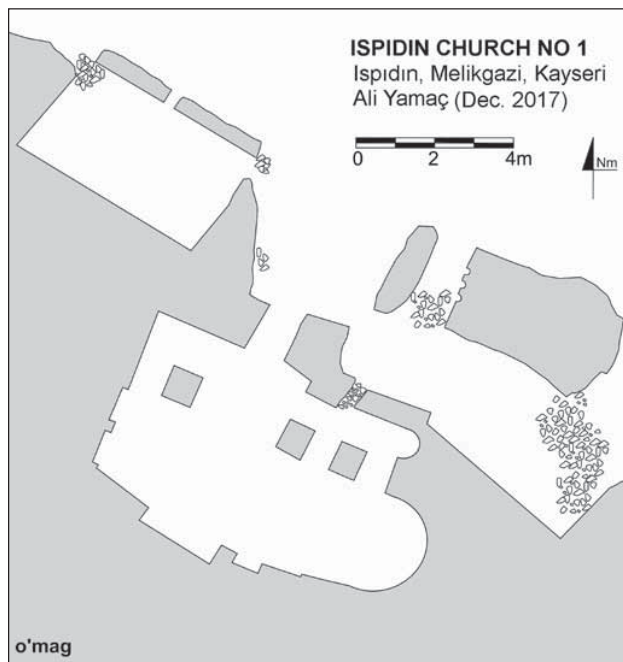


Fig. 24 – Plan of Ispidin Church No. 1 (drawn A. Yamaç).

Fig. 24 – *Pianta della Chiesa n. 1 di Ispidin* (grafica A. Yamaç).

and the naos is full of debris due to illicit digging in front of the horseshoe-shaped apse. Numerous small niches partly on the walls and on the architrave and the chimney in front of the entrance show that the church was once changed to a dovecote.

From this church to the southeast, Ispidin Church No 3 is located on the same rocky ridge. Unlike the church no 2, there is a narthex in front of the western entrance of this building, which was later turned into a dovecote. The church has an entrance from both the south and the narthex. There is a rectangular niche with round arches on both walls of the naos. Ispidin Church No 4 is located 15 m southeast of Ispidin Church No 3, along with its narthex with a very smooth architecture. The building, like the other two churches, has a semi-circular apse and a barrel-vaulted ceiling (fig. 25).

Ispidin Church No. 5

The church is entered through a door on the rocky slope facing south and to the valley. The building has a rectangular plan measuring 7.5×2.5 m in the north-west-southeast direction. The ceiling of the building has a barrel-vault, and there are four square-shaped, round-arched niches and a transept lined side by side on the north wall of the naos. As the rock block in the southern part of the church was too thin to allow a

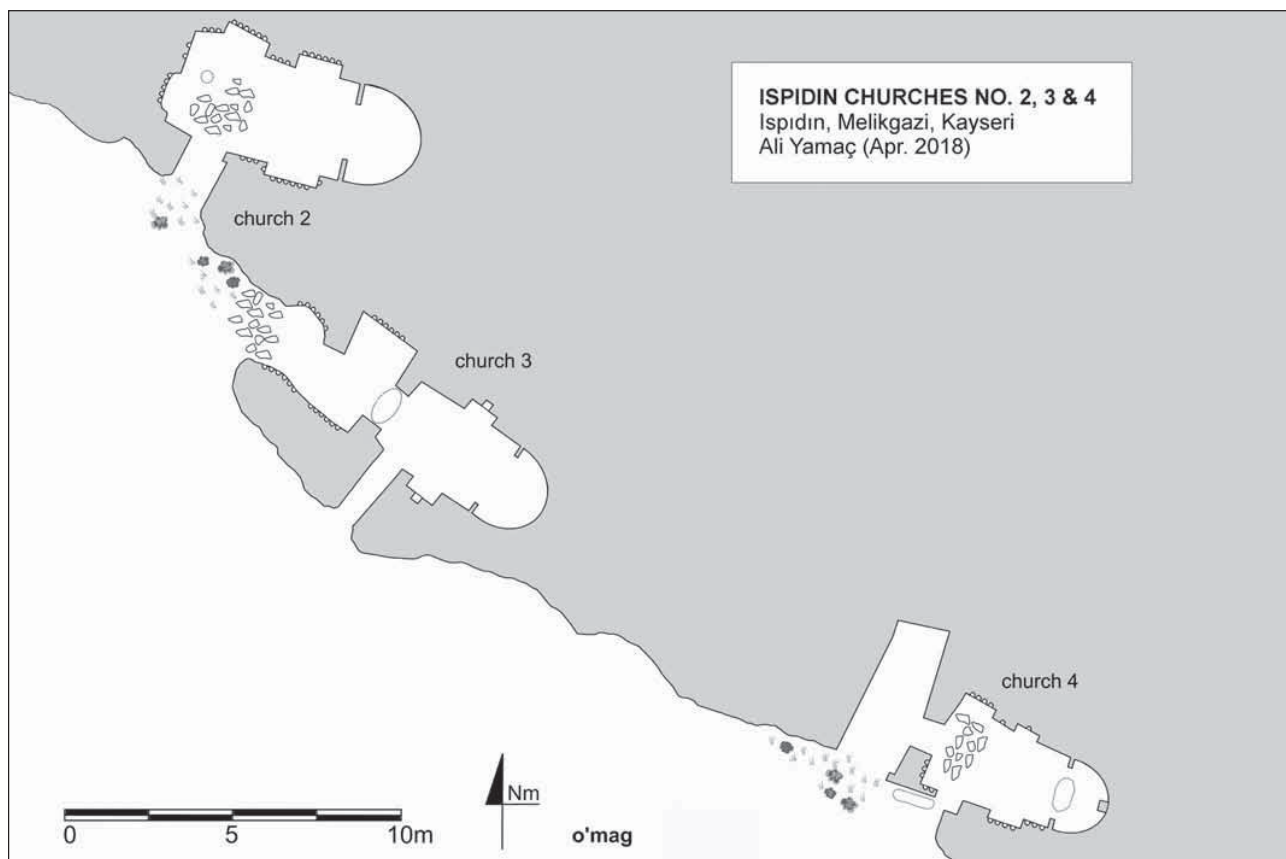


Fig. 25 – Plan of Ispidin Churches No. 2, 3 and 4 (drawn A. Yamaç).

Fig. 25 – *Planimetrie delle Chiese n. 2, 3 e 4 di Ispidin* (grafica A. Yamaç).



Fig. 26 – Ispidin Church No. 5 (photo A.E. Keskin).

Fig. 26 – Chiesa n. 5 di Ispidin (foto A.E. Keskin).



Fig. 27 – Ispidin Church No. 12 (photo D. Albov).

Fig. 27 – Chiesa n. 12 di Ispidin (foto D. Albov).

transept arm to be excavated here, just like Vekse Church No.1 only one arm of the transept was made. The only feature of this small church, which has no fresco today, is the templon wall with windows that separates the apse and the nave. (fig. 26).

Ispidin Church No. 12

Located on the eastern end of Ispidin, 20 m above Church No. 7, this building is another frescoed church in the region. Although a few fragments of these frescoes remain, the few human motifs that can be detected are remarkable. This building, which can be regarded as one of the largest churches in the region with its dimensions of 3.5×8.5 m, has a barrel-vault, a semi-circular apse and has a very elaborate architecture and workmanship. The altar on the east wall of the apse is carved into the rock body. The function of the room measuring 3.5×4 m, which is connected to the church with a large entrance from the south and which has been possibly excavated in the same period, is uncertain. There is a *mihrab*-like niche on the south wall of this room, the southwestern corner of which has collapsed (fig. 27, fig. 28).

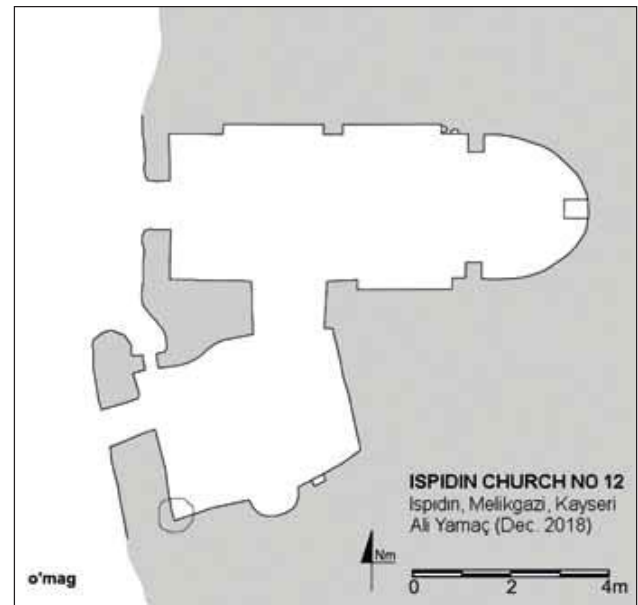


Fig. 28 – Plan of Ispidin Church No. 12 (drawn A. Yamaç).

Fig. 28 – Pianta della Chiesa n. 12 di Ispidin (grafica A. Yamaç).

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