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Ağırnas (Kayseri, Turkey): a monastery, a shelter or both?

Ağırnas (Kayseri, Turchia): un monastero, un rifugio o entrambi?

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ABSTRACT

Ağırnas Village in Kayseri Province has a long history dating back to Roman times. Under the old houses of this village, whose ancient name was Aragen, overlooking the Koramaz Valley, there is an underground shelter that covers the entire village. In addition to this vast underground shelter, there is another, separate underground shelter near the village, named 'Ağırnas Underground City' and opened to tourism. While there are shelters in both the village and Koramaz Valley, the reason for the construction of this other shelter is a mystery. In this article, we attempt to reveal this enigma by presenting some of the findings we have uncovered during our research into this structure.

Keywords: Kayseri, Cappadocia, underground shelter, rock-cut church.

RIASSUNTO

Il villaggio di Ağırnas, nella provincia di Kayseri, ha una lunga storia che risale all'epoca romana. Sotto al villaggio, che domina la valle di Koramaz e il cui antico nome era Aragen, si trova un rifugio sotterraneo che si estende sotto all'intero abitato. Non distante, ma separato, ce n'è un altro denominato "Città sotterranea di Ağırnas", aperto alla fruizione turistica, la cui funzione è rimasta sino ad oggi enigmatica. In questo contributo si analizzano i risultati conseguiti nel corso della ricerca condotta dal gruppo OBRUK provando a definire meglio quale potesse essere la destinazione della struttura ipogea.

Parole chiave: Kayseri, Cappadocia, rifugio sotterraneo, chiesa rupestre.

INTRODUCTION

Ağırnas Village is located 25 km northeast of Kayseri (country seat of one of today's provinces to which historical Cappadocia corresponds, central Turkey) at a point where the Koramaz Valley forks and on the edge of this valley (fig. 1). Although the date of the village's foundation is unknown, the name *Aragen* appears in church records from the 5th century onwards (Hild & Restle, 1981). Today the oldest buildings in Ağırnas are dated to 18th and 19th centuries. Agios Prokopios Church, located north of the village and on the border of the old settlement and new buildings, was erected in masonry in 1857. In 1500 there were 53 Christian and 3 Muslim families in Ağırnas Village according to

the population and tax records of Ottoman Empire. In 1520, these numbers have changed to 72 Christian and 2 Muslim families (Inbaşı, 1993).

Mimar Sinan (Sinan the Architect), the most significant architect of the Ottoman Empire, was born in this village in 1489. The official list of his works in *Tazkirat-al-Abniya* indicates that he planned and supervised the construction of 374 buildings in many locations of the empire, 196 of which still survive (Akin & Crane, 2006; Necipoğlu, 2010). This represents the largest number of buildings constructed by a single architect in the world until the present day. Both the bridge he constructed on the Drina River in Visegrad, Bosnia, and the Selimiye Mosque he erected in Edirne, in the name of Sultan Selim II, are now UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

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