



Underground Vision

SpeleoMedit Magazine

magazine of exploration, research and culture

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magazine of exploration, research and culture
of the underground world

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Grava del Parchitiello I (M. Alburni, Campania - Italy) Ph. Francesco Maurano

UNDERGROUND SHELTERS OF KAYSERI (TURKEY)

Ali Yamac

OBRUK Cave Research Group

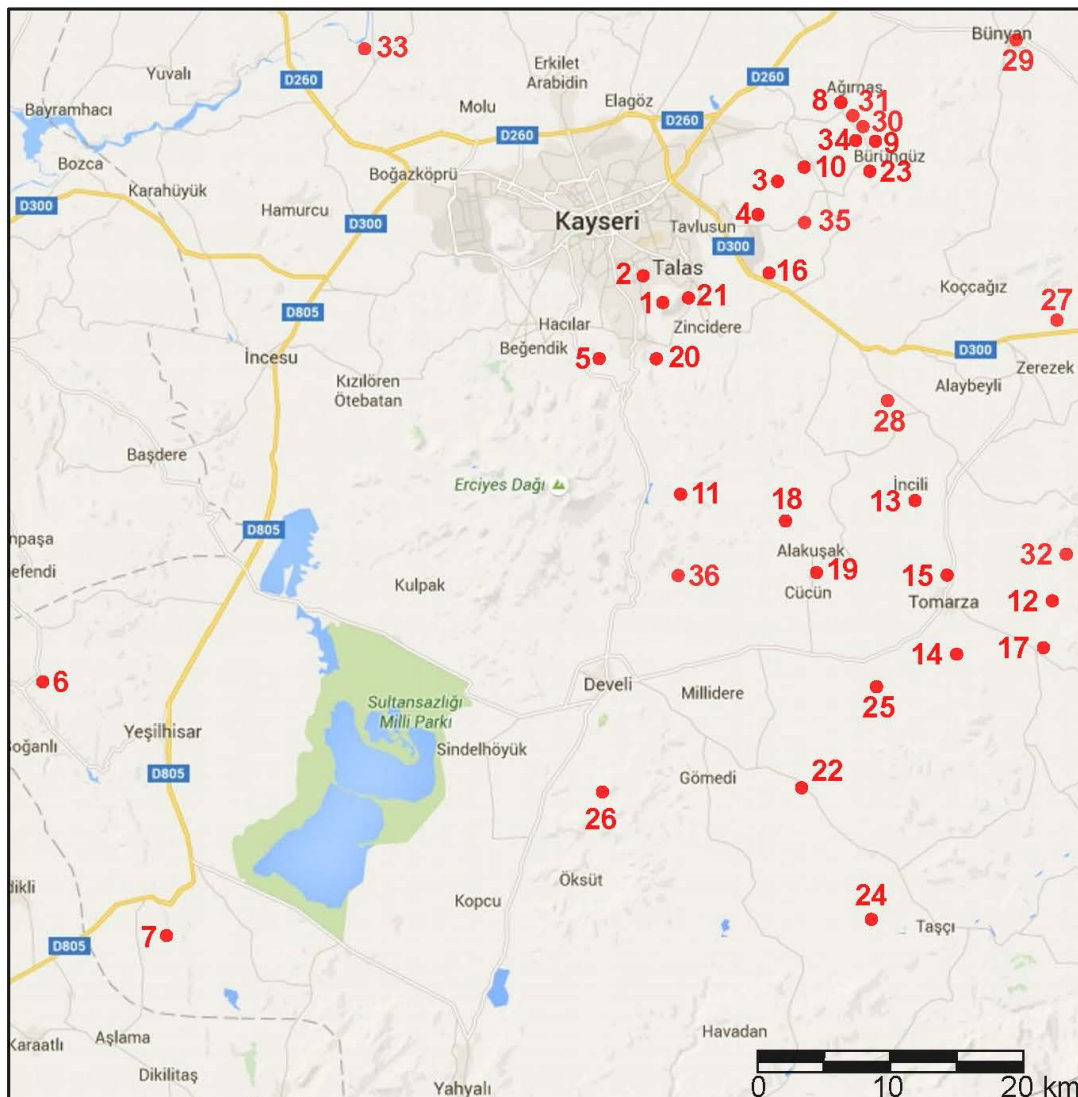


Büyük Bürüngüz Underground Shelter. Photo by A.E. Keskin

People have been using the underground for thousands of years to hide and protect themselves. Entrances of these shelters dug underground were difficult to detect. Numerous rooms connected to one another by intricate tunnels filled with traps and doors that are almost impossible to open from the outside have turned these structures into defense centers indispensable against all types of attacks throughout history. Therefore, in numerous different geographic regions, from Vietnam to France, there are countless underground defense structures today and these relevant structures have been used for thousands of years (Triolet & Triolet, 1996, 2013).

Though they have been used for hundreds or even thousands of years in numerous different countries, the first place that comes to mind when it comes to 'underground defense structures' is always Cappadocia. The two main reasons are the excessive number of underground shelters in the region and the enormous size of some of these shelters. Derinkuyu Underground City is an extreme example of these types of structures. This underground city, which we surveyed in 2013, is excavated on five floors, with a total length of 1.880 m and a depth of 55 m; many connections are still closed (Yamaç & Tok, 2015). It is predicted that this relevant defense structure extends under the entire Derinkuyu Village and its total length is much more than currently known. Similarly, the part of Kaymaklı Underground City, located 11 kilometers north of Derinkuyu and which can be visited today, is a very small part of its total length (Bixio, 2012).

KAYSERİ UNDERGROUND SHELTERS



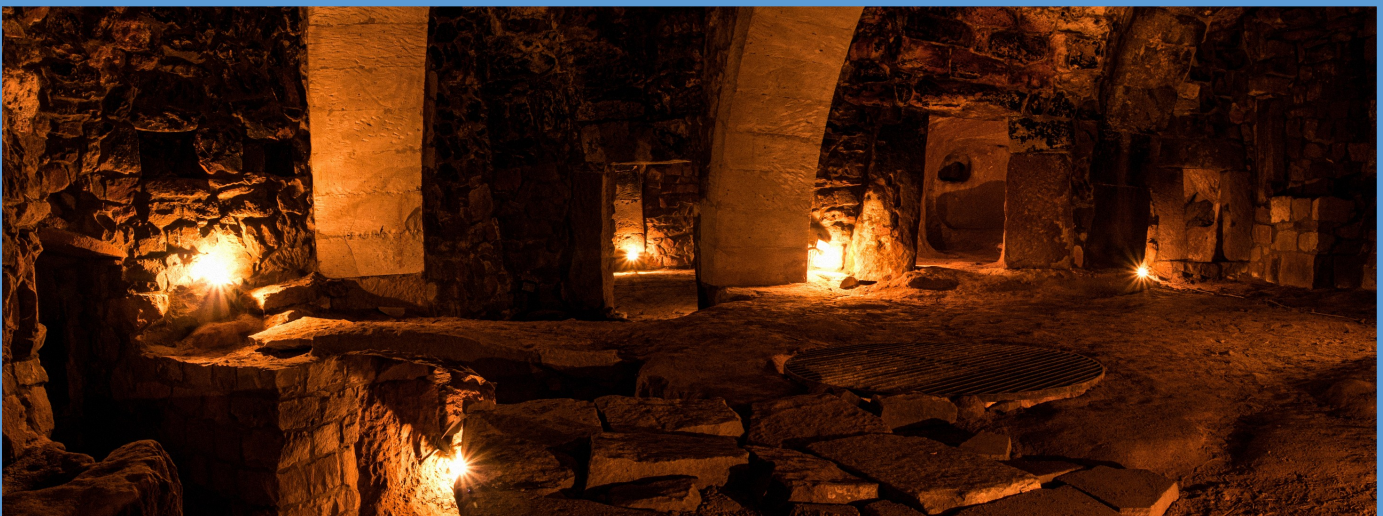
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Location map showing the underground shelters of Kayseri (after Google Maps - elaboration A. Yamaç).



Mimar Sinan Underground Shelter. Photo by Ç. Çankırılı

Small or big, almost every village in Cappadocia has at least one, probably numerous, underground shelter, and this situation are not only limited to the provinces of Nevşehir and Kayseri. In the provinces of Aksaray, Niğde, Kırşehir, and Yozgat, there are also several underground shelters. Yet, there is still very little scientific research of these relevant structures. The two most comprehensive inventories prepared



Mimar Sinan Underground Shelter. Photo by Ç. Çankırılı

until now are "Cappadocia: Records of the Underground Sites," published in 2012 under the editorship of Roberto Bixio (Bixio, 2012), and "The Archeological Settlements of Turkey" (www.tayproject.org), prepared with the inclusion of 33 underground shelters mentioned in the preliminary reports of Kayseri Underground Structures Inventory Project, in addition to the information received from the aforementioned resource (Akyürek et al., 2015).

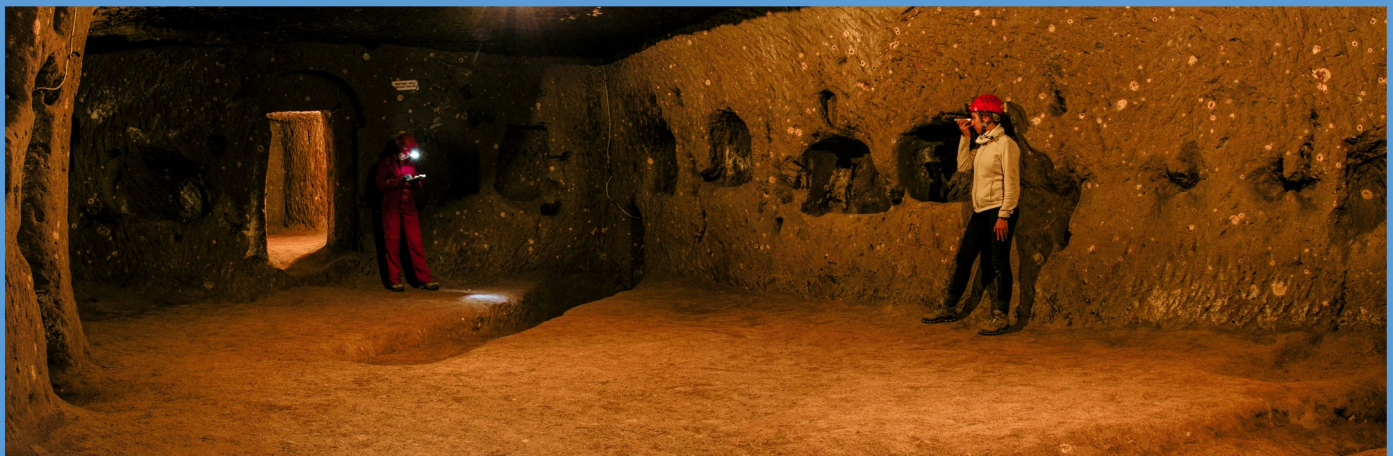
Determining the first excavation dates of all these underground shelters in Cappadocia is another controversial issue. Because of the lack of information, the first construction dates of these defense structures -about which there is no historical record and for which archaeological finds do not provide clues- are open to speculation.

This region, as of the seventh century AD, became the easternmost point of the Byzantine Empire.



Mimar Sinan Underground Shelter. Photo by Ç. Çankırılı

Because of its boundary with the Sasanian Persian Empire, the Byzantine Empire faced attacks by Persian armies. During the occupation of Caesarea by the Persians in 611, the residents fled, most eluding death or capture, and the city was destroyed. Afterward, in 622 and 627, Herakleios, the Byzantine Emperor, campaigned against the Persians in Anatolia, winning a string of victories. The Persian Wars of the 610s



Ağırnas Underground Shelter. Photo by Ç. Çankırılı



Belagasi Underground Shelter No 2. Photo by A.E. Keskin

and 620s had placed Cappadocia on the frontline of a bitter, sustained conflict, a position the region has not seen since the first century. Once a major world power, the Sasanian Empire had exhausted its human and material resources after decades of warfare against the Byzantine Empire. Between the years of 628 and 632, the civil war started in the Sasanian Empire which quite weakened this empire, and the Arabic armies, which took advantage of this situation, started to attack Iran and Anatolia. In 646, Muawiya, the Governor of Syria, attacked Caesarea and caught the citizens by surprise. Khalifa ibn Khayyat reported an unsuccessful attack on Caesarea by Abdallah bin Asad in 681, but in 725 Maslama bin Abd al-Malik sacked the city. In 739, Said bin Hisham attacked Caesarea again and, though the damage done is unknown, it was the fifth major attack in a century suffered by the capital; there may well have been others not recorded in the sources (Cooper & Decker, 2012).

Arab raids, which continued until the 10th century, had an identity of a kind of 'looting raid' that was repeated nearly every summer, rather than an invasion of the region. Raids by the Persians and the Arabic against Cappadocia continued for approximately 400 years, increasing especially during the weak eras of the Byzantine Empire.

After the Arab attacks, the region was faced with the Seljuk Turks' raids. Seljuk armies destroyed Melitene in 1057 and Sebasteia in 1059. In 1067 they captured Caesarea, burnt it to the ground, and massacred all the people. As a result, the city remained uninhabited for the next half-century. Four years later, in 1071, Byzantine Emperor Romanos IV came to the region with a big army to take the control of Cappadocia. After his defeat in the Battle of Mantzikert, the whole region was completely occupied by the Seljuk Turks (Ash, 2006; Hild & Restle, 1981).

It is known that as a result of all these wars and plunder raids, which continued for almost four centuries, there was a breakdown of the civil and military order, and colossal displacement of population in



Fatinler Underground Shelter. Photo A.E. Keskin

Cappadocia. Those centuries were probably very unkind to the people of Cappadocia, as the chaos of invasions further slackened the government control in an already chaotic landscape troubled by thuggery and lawlessness (Cooper & Decker, 2012).

Therefore, it is considered that all these underground shelters located in Cappadocia were dug by the local Christian population to defend themselves and survive in this chaotic environment between the 7th and 11th centuries and numerous different researchers also support this opinion (Kempe, 1988; Triolet & Triolet, 1993, 2002). There is a church in several underground shelters explored in Cappadocia; there are crosses engraved on the walls of most of these shelters and during the excavations of Aydıntepe, Kavlaktepe and Oymalı underground shelters only Byzantine pottery fragments have been found (Bilici, 2002; Erkmén, 1998; Faydalı, 1992, 1993; Özkorucuklu, 1991; Şahin, 1993). The churches were constructed right at the entrance of the structures in Ağırnas and St. Mercurius Underground Shelters that we surveyed, and the tunnels continuing after these churches are protected with millstone doors. This shows that these churches were used in normal times but that during the raids, people hid inside the churches (Yamaç, 2017; Yamaç, Tok, & Filikci, 2014).

On the other hand, Cappadocia was a 'buffer-zone' between the Phrygian and Assyrian kingdoms a thousand years ago, 8th-7th centuries BC, just as it was in the 7th-11th centuries AD. During the era, Cappadocia was managed by the Tabal Kingdom, which was under the control of the Phrygian Kingdom and paid taxes to the relevant state. It is known that, despite the apparent power of the Phrygians in the region, with the pressures of the Assyrian kings up to the boundaries of the Tabal, the Tabal kings changed sides from time to time. There were several Assyrian attacks on Cappadocia in 718 BC and the following years. Following the destruction of the Assyrian Kingdom by the joint powers of Babylonia, Scythian, and Med (612 BC), the Med and Lydia kingdoms started another conflict in Cappadocia (590 –



Kömür Underground Shelter. Ph A.Yamaç

585 BC) (Sevin, 1998).

Urban, one of the first to research the underground shelters in the region, proposes a hypothesis that these defensive structures in Cappadocia were not first excavated by Christians, but by residents to defend themselves in this chaotic environment experienced in the region 8-7 centuries BC. Urban points out that maybe those underground shelters not only had the defensive function but also the function of holding together the fighting Phrygians (Urban, 1973a, 1973b, 1973c). Other recent studies have confirmed Urban's hypothesis, arguing that it cannot be ignored (Mora, Balza, Bixio, & De Pascale, 2020). In addition to the aforementioned hypothesis, due to the fact that some Neo-Hittite inscriptions in Topada, Karaburna, and Sivasa are very close to these defense structures and the military operations are mentioned in one inscription, there is also a theory stating that these types of refuges -just like in the Phrygians era- were dug by the residents for military purposes or defense needs in 8-9 centuries BC even before the Phrygians (Mora, Balza, Bixio, & De Pascale, 2017 ; Mora et al., 2020).

As we have stated above, all rock-cut structures in this region have been changed and re-used for centuries and even today they are still used. There is, of course, the possibility that defensive structures are no exception, that they began to be excavated long before Byzantium and continued to be used, enlarged or altered, over the centuries. Certainly, big and interconnected underground shelters such as Filiktepe, Göstesin, and Derinkuyu cannot be dug in a short time (Bixio, 2012). On the other hand, even if they had been started to be dug before the Byzantine Empire, as a result of the uninterrupted use for centuries, it is normal that the archaeological excavation of these structures would not produce any

result. Moreover, Mehmet Arif Bilici, carrying out the cleaning excavation of 16 small underground shelters located in Oymalı Village, has stated in his report that "It is not possible to encounter dense findings in the underground shelters which were used in every period" (Bilici, 2002).

When considered from the scientific aspect, we believe that the theories concerning when all these defense structures were first started to be dug can only be proven with the archaeological findings and for now, since the findings in these structures are just crosses engraved on the walls, churches, and few Byzantine pottery fragments, we argue that these structures need to be dated to the Byzantine Empire and 7th and 11th centuries until there is a contrary archaeological finding.

As part of the "Kayseri Underground Structures Inventory Project," which began in 2014, 43 underground shelters have been explored in Kayseri province to date. Considering that at least one, and sometimes more, underground defensive structures exist in almost every village in Cappadocia, it is predictable that this number in Kayseri province will increase even further. While some are similar, the architecture and construction methods of many of these underground shelters differ. In the underground shelters studied so far, in addition to horizontal defensive structures that cover an entire village, there are also defensive structures that extend vertically underground, very large structures with a single entrance, or very small structures connected to four separate houses on the surface.

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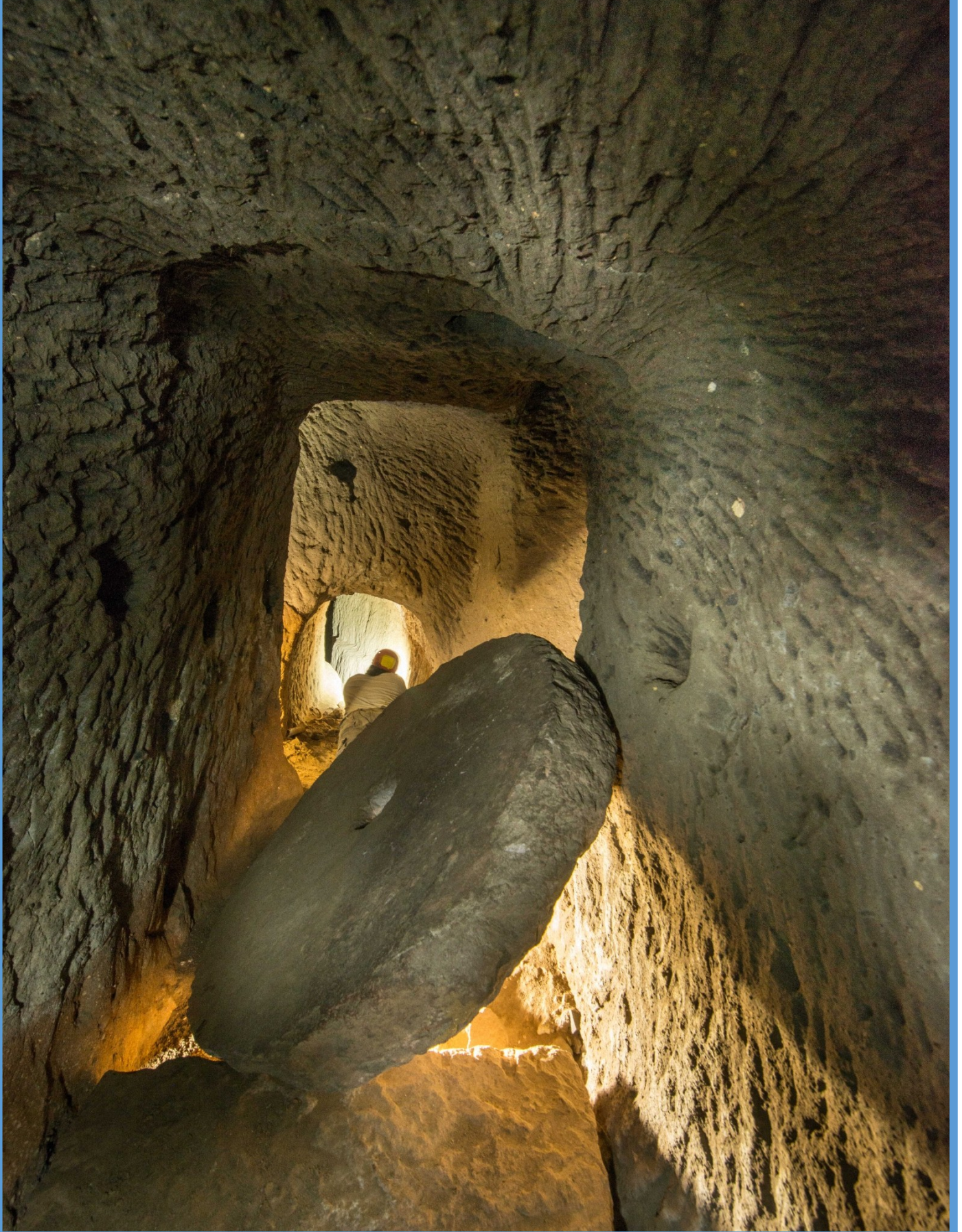
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Ağırnas Underground Shelter. Ph Ç. Çankırlı



Kuruköprü Underground Shelter. Ph E. Keskin



Ötedere Underground Shelter No 2 . Ph A.E. Keskin



Kömür Underground Shelter. Ph A.Yamaç



Büyük Bürüngüz Underground Shelter. Ph A.E. Keskin



Emiruşığı Underground Shelter. Ph A.E. Keskin



Kuçcağız Underground Shelter. Ph A.E. Keskin



Kömür Underground Shelter . Ph A.Yamaç