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Cliff Dwellings Of Koramaz Valley (Kayseri – Turkey)

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Kayseri (Caeserea), the capital of antique Cappadocia, and its vicinity have tuffaceous and ignimbrite rocks that can be as thick as hundreds of meters in some parts due to volcanic activities that took place millions of years ago. Those volcanic rocks, rising to the east of Kayseri city, are worn away by streams and form deep valleys parallel to each other on the northeast– southwest axis. As in other areas of Cappadocia, this soft and easy to dig volcanic rocks of those valleys were carved out by locals to be used for many different purposes such as houses, barns, dovecotes, churches and underground shelters for several centuries. From Kayseri to the east, the land swiftly gains altitude and seven kilometers to the east of Ağırnas reaches an altitude of 1907 meters at Mount Koramaz. Sides of all these peaks facing westward towards Kayseri were broken down with melted snow waters, and deep valleys were formed. While some of these surface waters continue to flow westward and erode their own valleys, others have submerged into the ground and have returned to the surface as springs in different spots. There are countless springs around the settlements in the valley. The waters of all these rivers and springs in the region gently join to each other and form the Koramaz Valley, which extends westward. Today, there are seven different settlements in this valley. These settlements, dating back hundreds or even thousands of years, include countless rock dwellings. Extending a total of 16 km, Koramaz Valley is among the longest valleys of not only Kayseri but also Cappadocia and with both its natural beauty, as well as its cultural and historical richness, it is one of Turkey's most special valleys. Within this poster presentation we'll explain our research and findings in this valley.

Keywords: Kayseri, Koramaz Valley, cliff dwellings

INTRODUCTION

From Kayseri to the east, towards Büyük Bürüngüz/Ağırnas, the land which rises about 300 meters forms a mountain range on the east west – northeast direction by swiftly gaining altitude at the east of these two settlements (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1. Location map showing the area of exploration (Google Maps)

Mount İvriz, which lies to the east of the Büyük Bürüngüz, and Kilise Tepe and Sivridağ rising further north, are among the highest peaks of this mountain range. Seven kilometers east of Ağırnas, the highest point of this range, Koramaz Mountain, is located at an altitude of 1907 meters. Sides of all these peaks facing westward towards Kayseri were eroded with melted snow waters, and deep valleys were formed. While some of these surface waters continue to flow westward and erode their own valleys, others have submerged into the ground and have returned to the surface as springs in different spots. From south to north; there are numerous springs in the vicinity of the Bürüngüz, Subaşı, Küçük Bürüngüz and Ağırnas settlements. The waters of all these streams and springs in the region slowly converged to the west and formed Koramaz Valley.

Today, there are seven different villages in this valley. These are Büyük B r ng z,  sk b  (Subasi), K   k B r ng z, A ırnas, Dimitre, Vekse and Ispidin. Starting from B y k B r ng z and extending up to Kayır Han region lying 2.5 km west of Ispidin for a total of 16 kms, Koramaz Valley is among the longest valleys of not only Kayseri but also Cappadocia and with both its natural beauty, as well as its cultural and historical richness, it is one of Turkey's most special valleys (Fig.2).

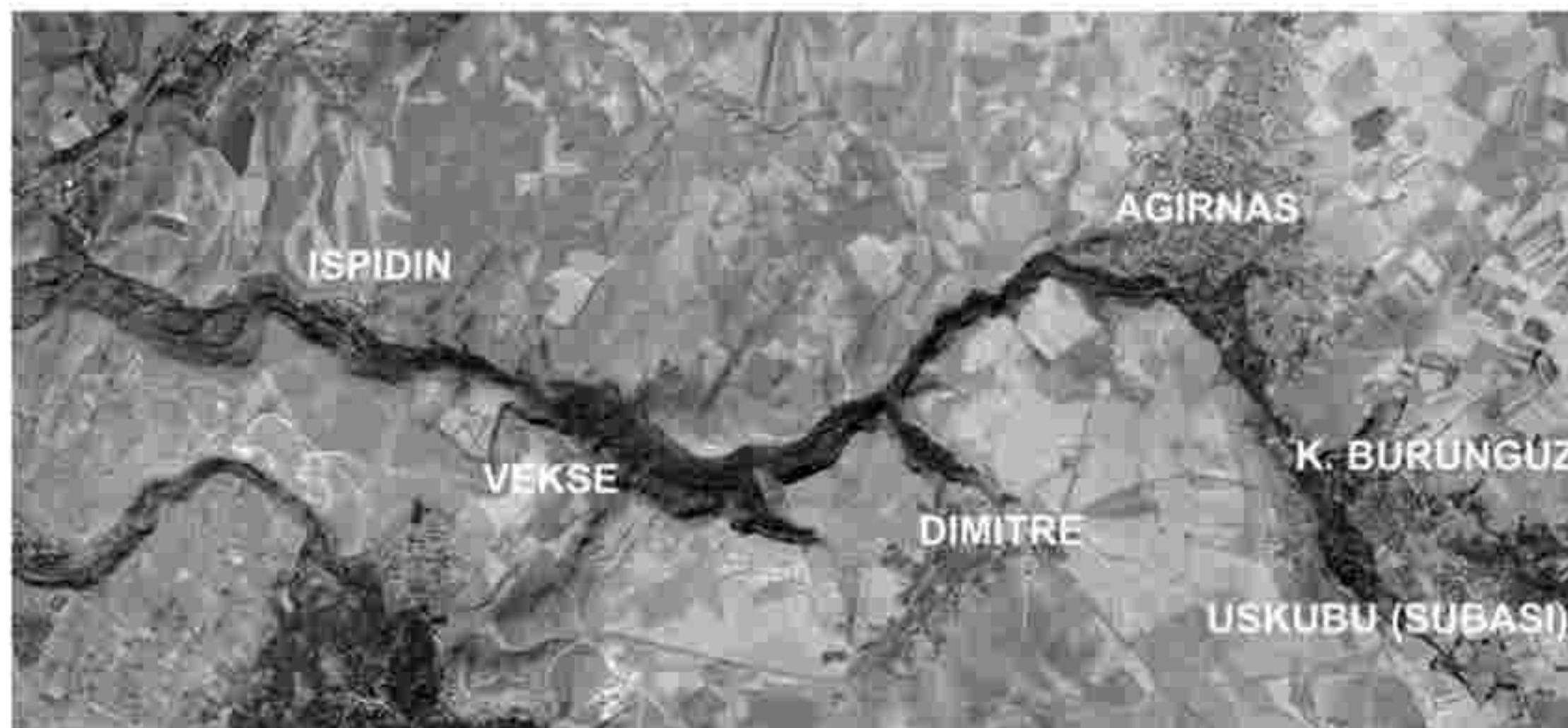


Fig. 2 Koramaz Valley and villages (Google Earth)

GEOLOGY

Millions of years ago, there were violent volcanic activities in a fairly large area including the present provinces of Kayseri and Nevsehir. From numerous small volcanic cones, to the large volcanoes such as Erciyes, Hasanda , Melendiz, and G ll da , lava and ash were being sprayed everywhere. Over the past 10 million years, this volcanic activity has slowed down from time to time and then resumed and continued until almost 2000 years ago. The volcanic cones we see today in this region are evidence of these explosions that lasted for millions of years. As a result of such eruptions, an incredible thickness of volcanic rock is deposited in the area. These rocks, which are called "pyroclastic rocks" that are sprayed onto the earth by the volcanoes and cover almost the whole of Kayseri today, are mostly porous and easily eroded. There is a 700– 800-meter elevation difference between the plain where Kayseri is located and the mountains lying 30 km east of this plain and each stream flowing from these hills to the plain formed their own valleys by eroding these soft pyroclastic rocks. The east of Kayseri is full of valleys eroded by these streams descending from the high hills down to the plain. As an interesting geographical feature, most of these valleys are parallel to each other from north to south. All these valleys separated by only a few kilometers from each other; Avedik,  tedere, De irmendere, Nize, Gesi, Derevenk and Koramaz valleys have a great importance from a historical and archaeological point of view.

HISTORY

As in all Cappadocia, the history of Kayseri is measured in thousands of years, and the settlements in the region date back to the Neolithic period. It is not known however when the volcanic tuffs, which completely cover the region, were first carved, and when the people living in this area made these underground dwellings a home to themselves. The use of these rock-cut structures for thousands of years uninterruptedly makes such an archaeological discovery impossible.

The earliest dated rock-cut structures of Cappadocia are probably Roman rock-cut tombs. Apart from a few examples in Nevşehir / Mazıkoy, there are rock-cut Roman graves in the south of Kayseri, especially in Ayşepınar and Yeniköy, although they are not known as a tourist attraction destination. On the other hand, many other Roman rock tombs near the villages have been changed over time for different purposes. There are many buildings in the vicinity of the Ağırnas, which are evidently Roman rock tombs with their entrance gates in the walls of the Koramaz Valley and with their klines that have been converted into barns or dovecotes over the time. On the other hand, some of the dovecotes we found in Vekse and Ağırnas resembled the 'columbarium' of ancient Rome, rather than the classical dovecotes of the region, both in terms of building styles and nest recesses on the wall. Several numbers of Roman columbaria carved in ancient times in the region are likely to be transformed into dovecotes after a while.

From the times of ancient Rome to the Byzantine period, the diverse variety of underground and rock-cut structures around Kayseri is unbelievable. The buildings that are carved onto the rocks in the region are not only settlements, barns, dovecotes, graves or churches. There are monasteries, irrigation canals, cisterns and even beehives dug into the rocks. Since most of these structures continue to be used in the course of the past centuries by changing their characteristics, it is almost impossible to determine their initial construction dates (Fig. 3).

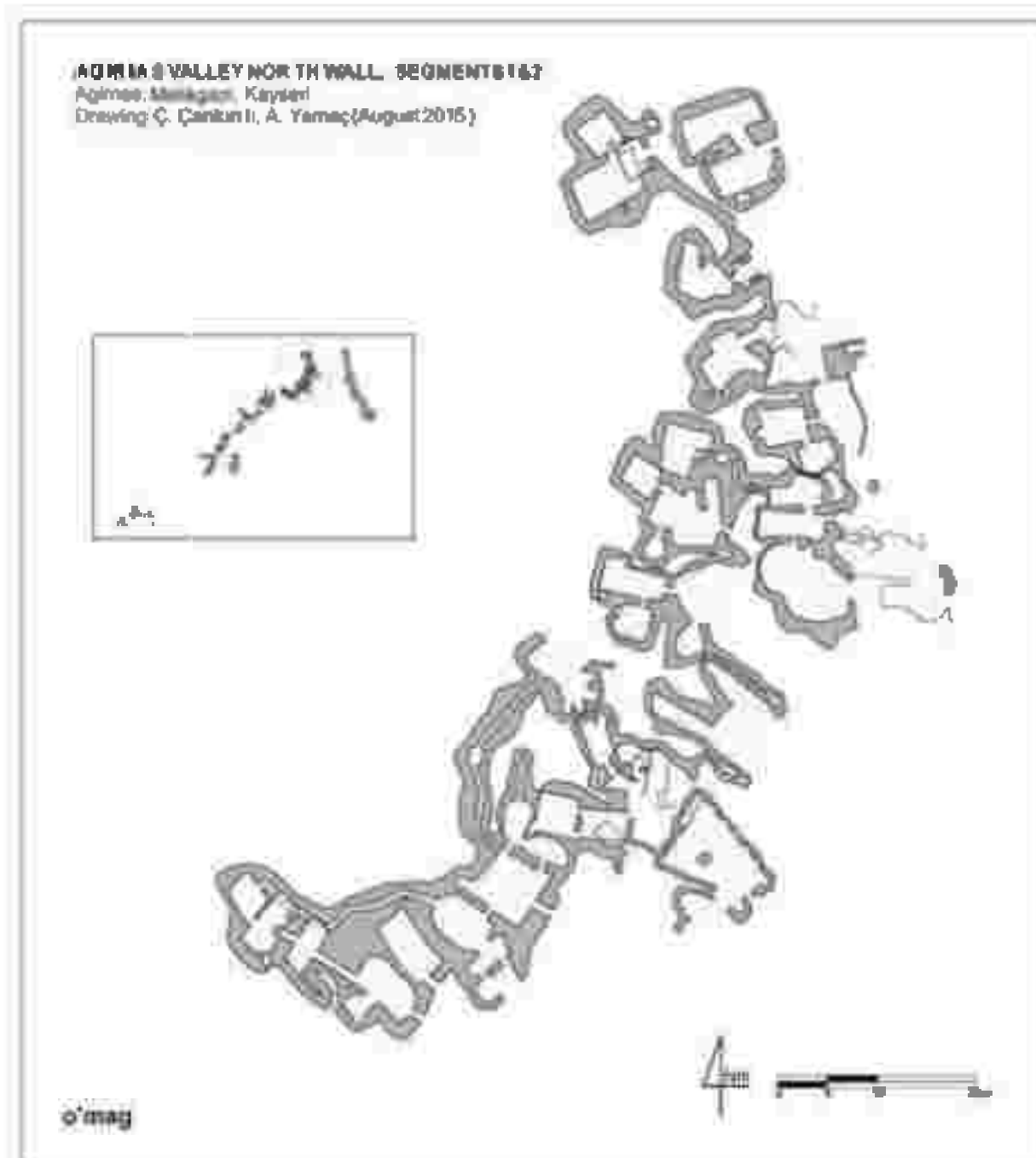


Fig. 3. Map of a part of Ağırnas cliff dwellings at Koramaz Valley, North Wall, Segments 1 & 2. Total number of cliff dwellings in this part of the valley are 154 (Drawing C. Cankirili and A. Yamac)

The rock settlements observed at different points of Koramaz must have been used uninterruptedly from the Roman Empire period until the Middle Ages. Just taking the rock-cut churches that are found among the dwellings in the settlements as a reference, we think that it would be wrong to date the initial constructions dates of all of these buildings from the 7th to 11th century, like the churches (Fig. 4 and 5).



Fig.4. Some fragments of frescoes in Ispidin Rock Cut Church No. 1 (Photo A. E. Keskin)



Fig.5. Ispidin Rock Cut Church No. 5 (Photo A. E. Keskin)

It is also possible that these settlements began to be used as houses long before Christianity. Unfortunately, we do not have any archaeological data to support these estimates, and it is almost impossible to determine the date of the initial construction date of a rock settlement.

The oldest Cadastral Record Book of Kayseri belongs to the year 1500 and in the records of this book all seven villages on the slopes of Koramaz Valley today are present. This is natural because; the history of the Büyük Bűrüngüz, Üskübü, Küçük Bűrüngüz, Ağırnas, Dimitre, Vekse and Ispidin is much older than the Cadastral Record Book. All of these villages are full of rock-cut structures. It is generally accepted that the underground cities of whole Cappadocia were carved between 7th and 11th centuries by Christians living in the region in order to defend themselves from the Arab raids of this region (Fig. 6).



Fig.6. Ağırnas Underground City (Photo R. Straub)

Beyond all these; the experts examining the rock-carved structures in the vicinity of Ağırnas, although they have changed due to different uses over time, have indicated that the first construction purpose of some of the structures could be the Roman rock cut tombs by looking at the entrance decorations and interior architecture.

In summary; we can say that all these structures carved into the rocks in Koramaz Valley date back to at least 2,000 years and possibly even earlier.

KORAMAZ VALLEY EXPLORATIONS AND SURVEYS

As OBRUK Cave Research Group, we have been continuing “Kayseri Underground Structures Inventory Project” for more than 4 years. As the co-partners of this project; Kayseri Municipality and ÇEKÜL Foundation decided to have a 1. Degree Archaeological Protection for Koramaz Valley and an application to UNESCO World Heritage Site, we had concentrated our efforts to that region. After several trips, all the underground structures of the valley had been explored and surveyed. The results of our work is:

- *Üskübü Village
 - Subaşı Underground City
 - Subaşı Rock Cut Church and Monastery
- * Küçük Bürüngüz Village
 - 6 cliff dwellings
- * Ağırnas Village
 - Mimar Sinan Underground City
 - Ağırnas Underground City
 - Mustafa Bozdemir Underground City
 - More than 200 cliff dwellings with 3 rock cut churches and several underground shelters
- * Dimitre Village
 - More than 250 cliff dwellings with 5 rock cut churches and several underground shelters
- * Vekse Village
 - 5 rock cut churches
 - 4 cliff dwellings
- * Ispidin Village
 - 10 rock cut churches
 - 4 cliff dwellings

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