Cave Dwellings of Euphrates River (Southeast Turkey)

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- **Abstract**

As OBRUK Cave Research Group, we began to search cave dwellings on the bank of Euphrates River, in south-eastern Turkey, during April 2013. Our research is between Halfeti and Gumuskaya villages. 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 this second dam, the water level of Euphrates raised 20 meters, with a width up to 500 meters in some areas. In this region the river is flowing through the Eocene limestones, and there are hundreds of dwellings carved in those soft limestone walls. Those structures are mostly to the north of Halfeti, reaching up to Gumuskaya Village, near Ataturk Dam. Especially 2 km north of Halfeti, on both banks of Euphrates there are tens of artificial cavities around Rum Kale. Rum Kale, also known as "Hromgla", was mentioned in Assyrian scripts and was the capital of Armenian Church for 90 years until 1293, when conquered by the Mamluks. We are planning to survey the whole rock settlements within this 35 km stretch of Euphrates, from Halfeti up to Gumuskaya Village. In addition to cave dwelling villages, we had explored and surveyed several underground churches in this area. During our survey project, each artificial cavity has been marked by GPS, photographed and surveyed. Till today, four explorations have been realized and a total of 73 rock settlements in 64 different points, three of which are church or monasteries have been found, 33 of which have been surveyed and mapped. In this presentation, in addition to the surveys of previously unknown cave dwellings and underground churches, the major aim of this project will be explained in detail.

Keywords: Euphrates, Halfeti, cave dwellings, Turkey

- **INTRODUCTION**

Urfa Province of south-eastern Turkey (Fig. 1) has a worldwide importance due to its long history. Urfa (antique name Edessa) is a settlement frequented since the prehistoric times.



Figure 1: Location map showing the general area of exploration

The Euphrates River, flowing in the west borders of this 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 every dam on the river extends nearly to the previous dam wall upvalley. Only one third of

Euphrates, which length is 1.260 km in Turkey, is in natural flow, the rest consist nowadays of dam lakes.

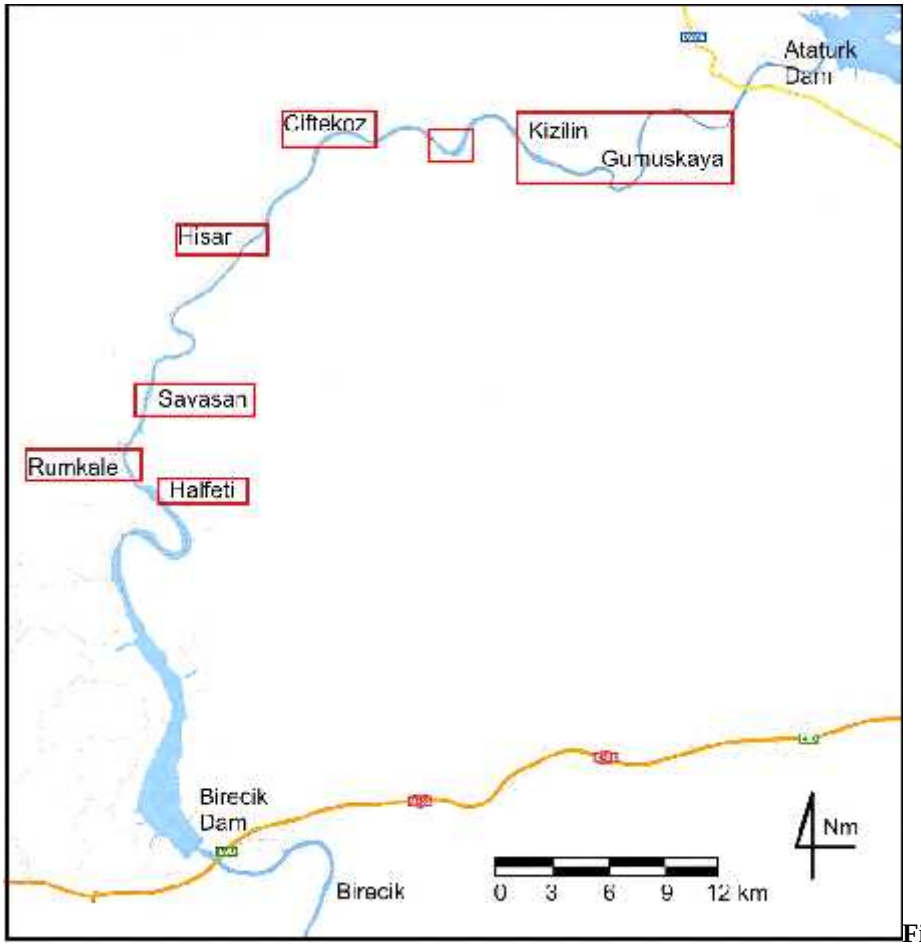


Figure 2: Various rock dwelling localities in the working area

The five dam lakes built on the Euphrates River submerged hundreds of villages and ancient settlements. Despite several rescue excavations in many ancient settlements before the constructions, there is an incredibly huge loss in historical heritage. After the construction of the Birecik Dam in 2000, the level of the river in this region raised about 20 meters and countless rock settlements in the area were submerged. The ancient sites that were going to be under water had been explored, dug 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 the Birecik Dam.

As OBRUK Cave Research Group, we began this new inventory project of the rock dwellings north of Birecik Dam Lake, in March 2013 (Fig. 2). Following this first reconnaissance trip, two other research surveys were made in April 2013 and June 2015. There are hundreds of dwellings carved into the rocks of this region, where the River Euphrates flows between locally very steep limestone walls. Unfortunately, these structures were not comprehensively studied or inventoried until today. As OBRUK Cave Research Group, we have begun a long-term project to identify and inventory these ancient cave dwellings with ÇEKUL Foundation. The work planned for this study consists of marking through GPS all the cave dwellings on the walls of the River Euphrates from Halfeti northwards, until the Atatürk Dam, inventorying them by means of photographs and maps, and to map all the important buildings.

- **GEOLOGY OF THE REGION**

The whole area extending to the northwest of Urfa consists of horizontally bedded, neritic, Eocene limestones, more than 400 m thick. Miocene - Lower Miocene neritic limestones unconformably overlie this formation, and are observed on the northern and southern parts of the region. All of these thick limestones have been settled on the shelf parts of Neo Tethys. The southern part of Neo Tethys, which started to close in 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 observed in the area. Digging and working this soft stone, locally strongly fractured, is easy [Ulu, 2002; Yesilnacar et al., 1998].

3. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

We carried out three different explorations in the area and, as a preliminary result, a total of 97 different rock dwellings were identified and inventoried, with 42 of them surveyed and mapped. In the following, the area of study is decribed in four different sectors, starting from the south.

3.1 Between Birecik Dam and Halfeti

Only a few small cave dwellings have been identified in this area mostly due to the lack of vertical limestone cliffs, which are the only landscape formations where rock settlements were excavated. Nevertheless, towards the south of Halfeti three small cave dwellings were found and surveyed.

3.2 Around Halfeti

During the first and third seasons' of work we identified 22 cave dwellings in and around Halfeti. At Degirmen Pass inside Halfeti, in addition to 2-3 small rock dwellings, we surveyed a 159 m long water tunnel and a natural cave that is currently being used as an animal shelter. A small dwelling, located on the western shore of Halfeti, was also mapped during the first study. The next cave dwelling in this area was named "The King's Daughter Cave" in the legends, on the western shore of River Euphrates. This complex, which consists of three stories and five separate caves, is one of the most important rock dwellings in the area. 17 cave dwellings have been surveyed and mapped on the southern shore of Savasan Village, situated 2 km north of Halfeti. The forms and locations of those structures seem to outline its use as a small cave village.



Figure 3: Figures on the wall of an Armenian Church at Savasan Village (Photo A. Yamac)



Figure 4: Rumkale (Hromgla) Peninsula, with the Euphrates flowing on the left of the photo (Photo A. Yamac)

The most important structure among these rock dwellings was a small Armenian church carved in the rock. This structure, the walls of which were covered with crosses



Figure 5: Rock dwelling localities between the villages of Gumuskaya and Kizilin (Google Earth)

(Fig. 3) and Armenian writings, may probably be dated to the 13th century, when Rumkale (Hromgla), located on the eastern shore of Euphrates River, was the seat of the reunified Armenian Church from 1203 until its capture by Mamluks in 1293 [Stewart, 2006] (Fig. 4). Rumkale, named as "Hromgla" in ancient scripts, is now on a peninsula. The remaining structures of this castle, the name of which is mentioned even in Assyrian scripts, are mostly dated to Roman and Byzantium periods. There are tens of other rock dwellings around this structure, not yet surveyed and inventoried due to continuing

archaeological excavations and restorations in the area.

3.3 South of Çiftekoz Village

There are tens of rock dwellings on both rocky walls of the River Euphrates in this region, which lies inside the city of Gaziantep. The only mode of transport to the area is by the river. A reconnaissance trip was organized to this region during the third study. Twenty-eight different rock dwellings, many of them multi-storied, were identified and marked with GPS during this study. This region will be further investigated.

3.4 Between the villages of Kızılin and Gümüskaya

The first season of work began in this region, with the rationale that this 1.5 km-long part has the densest population of rock dwellings (Fig. 5). Rock dwellings were identified at 30 different locations. Although some of these were single dwellings, in many other cases tens of dwellings are clustered together. Multi-story, multi-chamber structures that were all church/monastery complexes were identified and surveyed at three different locations. No significant rock structure was found under water during the divings in various points.

The most important rock complex in the area is a structure located on the southern shore of the River Euphrates. Named as Kizilin Monastery (F 11 in Fig. 5) this structure has tens of rooms spread over six stories, consists of a large church at the top floor, and many rooms and common areas in the others (Figs. 6 and 8). Another rock structure complex on the River Goksu, which meets the Euphrates, consists of tens of structures dug side by side. These old rock dwellings are situated on a E-W direction and lined up on a rocky cliff; they are probably Roman tombs (EK 3 in Fig. 5). Gelin Cave (F 21 in Fig. 5), on the northern shore of the River Euphrates, near Kizilin Village is another important church / monastery complex with several rooms on two stories (Fig. 7). The old, rock dwelling village of Kızılin lies below the new houses of the village. A small part of this 18 different single-room rock structures within the Euphrates coast was mapped to constitute an example for an ancient cave dwelling village (F 22 in Fig. 5).



Figure 6: Kizilin Monastery F 11 (Photo A. Yamac)



Figure 7: Gelin Cave on the shores of Kizilin Village (F21 in Fig. 5) (Photo A. Yamac)

4. PLANNED SURVEYS

We had been informed that between Halfeti and Gümüskaya villages there are more areas with rock dwellings, not yet investigated. The caves in the Karasu Canyon and the dwellings in Yenikoy are the fairly important ones among these. We are planning to investigate all the cave dwellings on the River Euphrates from Halfeti to the village of Killik. An inventory book that includes all the cave dwellings in this region will be published after this project.

5.CONCLUSION

In our opinion, a study that will reveal the cultural and historical value of the Halfeti region, in addition to its touristic value, will make a significant economic contribution to the region. These historical structures, with various rock dwelling churches or monasteries are an important part of the historical heritage of the Gaziantep, Urfa and Adiyaman provinces which reach beyond ages.

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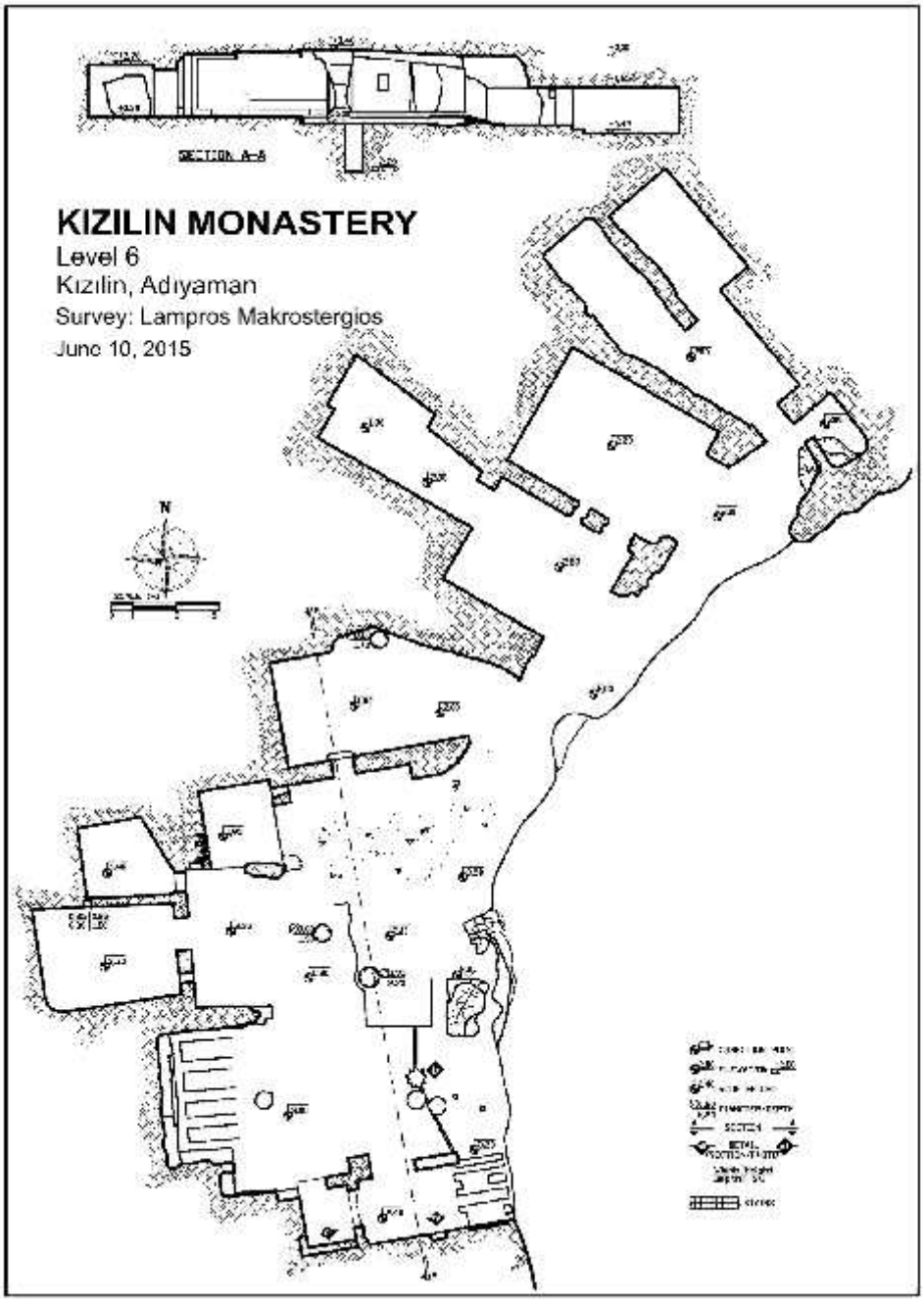


Figure 8:

Kizilin Monastery plan and profile of level 6 (Survey L. Makrostergios)

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