SOIL STORY: AN EARTHLY INVESTIGATION

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As an artist, I am interested in earth—both the world on which we live and the dirt beneath our feet. Soil fertility depends on a multiplicity of organisms that live in and constitute good soil. These bacteria, fungi, protozoa, etc., work together and need each other for survival. For the current project, which is ongoing, I attempted to read soil culture and human culture together from the perspective of a trip through Cappadocia. Animals, including humans, have internal processes that work in continuity with soil: the bacteria living in our digestive tracks, making food available to our bodies through decomposition, are continuous with the ones in soil, which make compost available to plant tissues. Just like cows, sheep, and pigeons, humans are also soil-dwelling agricultural actors.

Some of the questions I'd like to address are the following: How does soil suffer when the land is deprived of its people? Is it possible to talk about something like ethnic cleansing by talking about the effects of monoculture on soil—for example, the potato plantations—in Cappadocia? And what does all this have to do with the progressive, post-Edenic "abjectification" of soil? These photographs begin to interrogate these issues, from a geography where humans have burrowed into the landscape, just like other soil-dwelling critters. Looking at the relationship between fairy chimneys and their sedimentary plains, we try to imagine the behaviors of their agricultural communities.

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FIG.1

The volcanic soil of Cappadocia allowed for cultivation but required both irrigation and fertilizer. The history of its soil and its people are inextricably bound together.

FIG.2

As has been the case historically, the volcanic formations in the highlands of Cappadocia alternate with areas of agricultural investment, as in this example in the Kızıl Çukur, where both irrigation and fertilizers are necessary to support the gardens and fields.

FIG.3

Most of the region's historical settlements were agrarian villages, but erosion and the collapse of rock-cut settlements have forced many inhabitants to move into the flatlands. This is the case at Çavuşin, which was relocated in the 1950s from the hillside in the foreground to the nondescript masonry village in the near distance—where it occupies lands previously given over to agriculture.

FIG.4

Viniculture dominated Cappadocian landscapes, then as now. Grapes provided both food and drink. Researchers have identified hundreds of Byzantine- and Ottoman-era wine presses throughout Cappadocia. Unlike French or American vineyards, in which the vines were raised off the ground, Cappadocian vines grow horizontally, taking advantage of the ground's warmth, while sheltering from the wind. Their relationship to the soil has always been intimate.

FIG.5

The juxtaposition of abandoned rock-cut settlements and areas of contemporary agricultural investment offer the visitor evocative possibilities to contemplate past settlements, past agricultures, and past human investments in the land. This image is from Gorgoli, which continued to be frequented by the Ottoman Greek community of Sinassos until the population exchange of 1922–1923. Today, the rock-cut settlement is abandoned and mostly forgotten, but the land continues to be farmed.

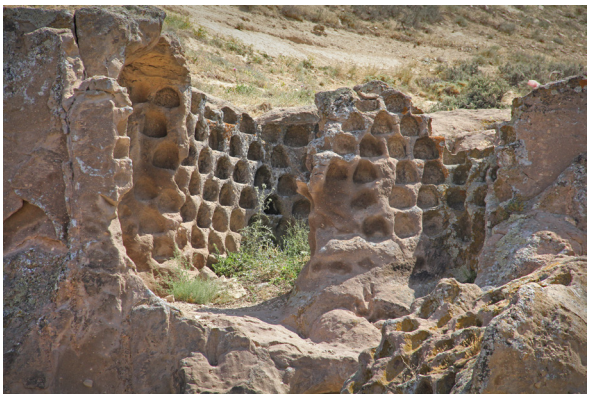

FIG.6

Traditionally, fertilizer for household gardens was provided by pigeon guano. Most of the rock-houses were equipped with upper-level dovecotes with pigeonholes for the birds to nest. The examples from the Çanlı Kilise settlement are mostly collapsed today, but originally they had limited access, separate from the living quarters.

FIG.7

When we see pigeons or doves represented in Cappadocian wall paintings, we can imagine them as vital components to the historic agrarian economy. The detail is from the Karabaş Kilise in the Soğanlı Valley, showing Joseph presenting an offering of doves in the Temple.

FIG.8

Changes in agriculture and economic investment are transforming the historic landscapes of Cappadocia. The volcanic rock has proven to be ideal for preserving citrus fruit. While not grown in the region, citrus fruit is imported from the Mediterranean coast for storage. Now the region is blighted by newly-carved storerooms with little concern for their ecological impact—this one is on the road near Mazı.

FIG.9

Also destructive has been the introduction of non-native plants in areas traditionally given over to grazing or grains. Potatoes, natives of the Americas, are the worst of the intruders, requiring the use of artificial fertilizers, insecticides, and extensive (and often wasteful) irrigation. This desolate field has been cleared for planting potatoes, in the plains near Derinkuyu.

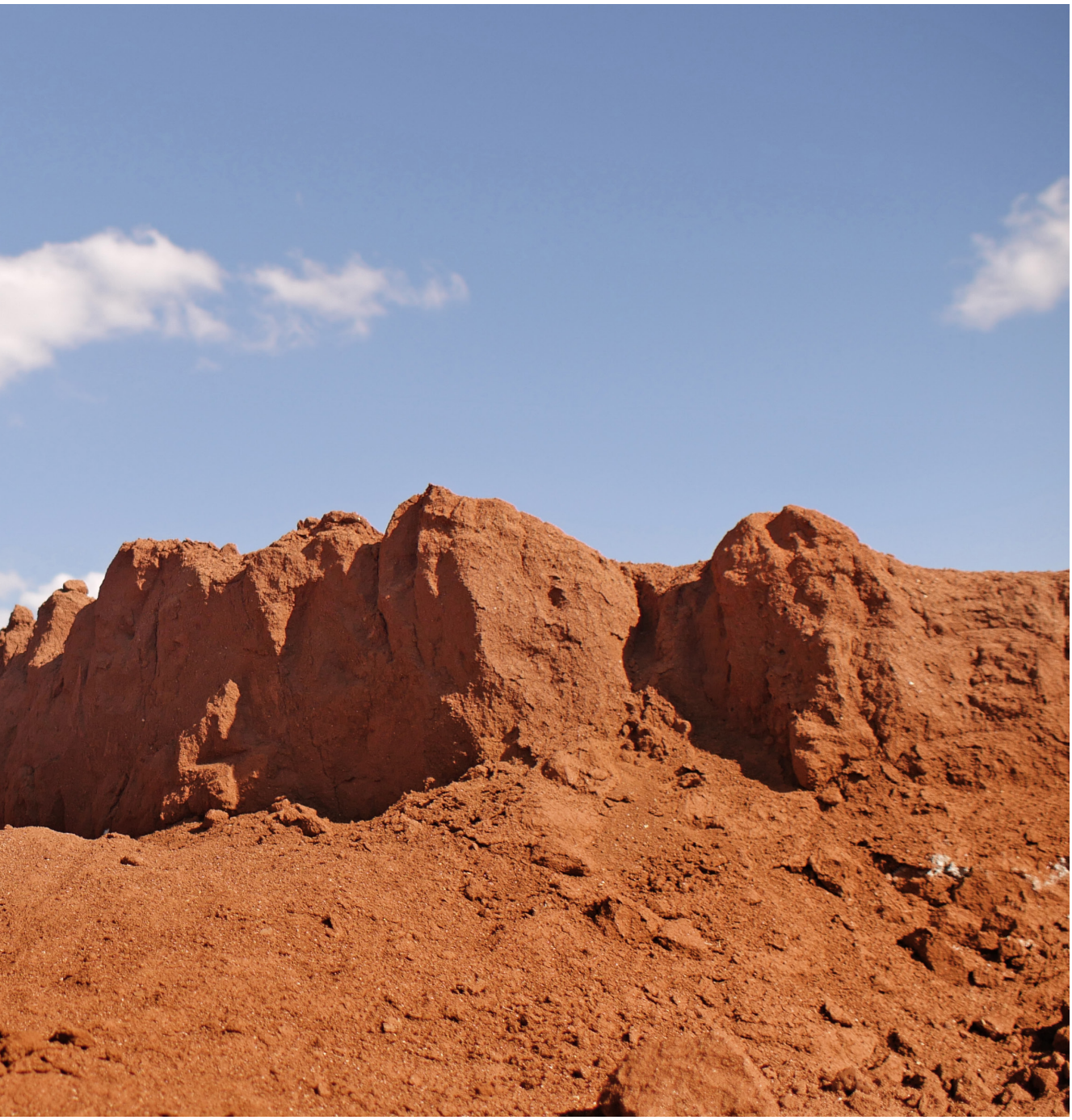

FIG.10

Another area of commerce in contemporary Cappadocia is pottery, taking advantage of the extensive clay beds along the Kızılırmak near Avanos. As the beds are cut away, they begin to resemble the traditional landforms of the volcanic highlands. This photo is slightly deceiving—it's a rather small heap of clay in the Sanayi Sitesi, the industrial zone in Avanos. The angle makes it look like a landscape. Earthenware has been produced in the region since ancient times.

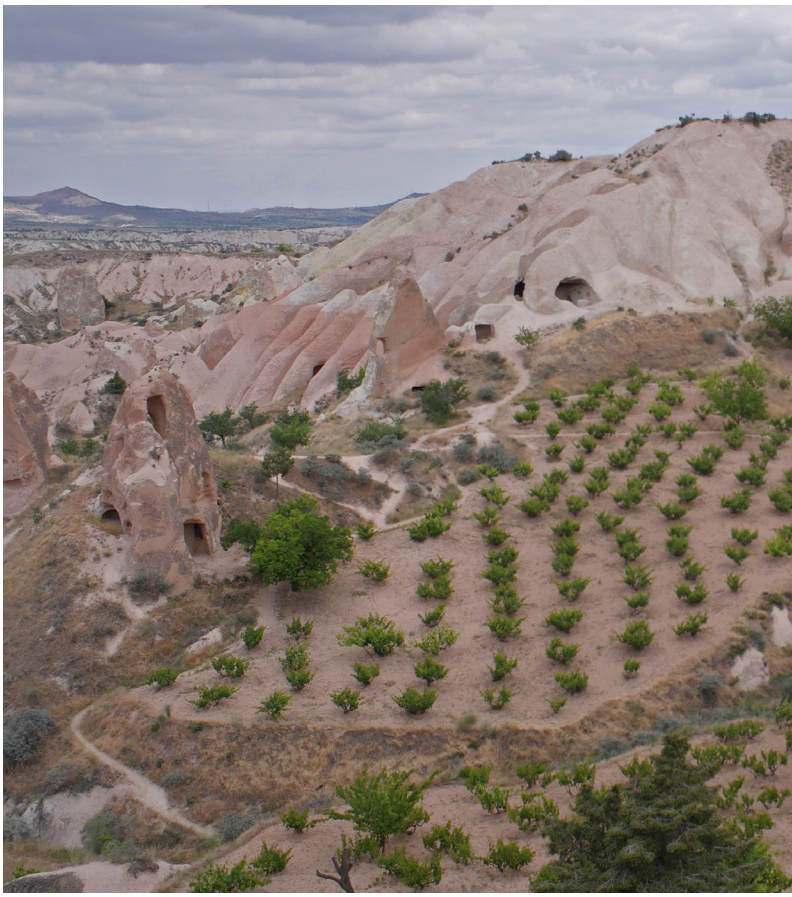

FIG.11

Agricultural plantations are often as exuberant and irregular as the eroded landscapes that frame them, as in this example in the Kızıl Çukur, which has been maintained by many generations of farmers.