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The Pelion Cave Project
– an ethno-archaeological investigation of the human use of caves in the early Modern and Modern period in east Thessaly*

Niels H. Andreasen, Nota Pantzou & Dimitris C. Papadopoulos

Introduction

In 2006–08, an international project under Danish direction and in cooperation with the Ephorate of Palaeoanthropology and Speleology of Northern Greece was undertaken on Pelion Mountain in Southeast Thessaly, Greece. The Pelion Cave Project (PCP) was a diachronic, regional survey with the goal of documenting the diversity, complexity, and development in the use of caves in the Modern period (*c.* 1500 AD-present).

Caves and rockshelters on the mountain were classified by function and characterized by location and material content. The purpose of the study was two-fold: 1) to enrich our understanding of the mountain's cultural history with information about cave use in the recent past, and 2) to collect a body of data as a basis for hypotheses and possible analogies concerning site use and function in the past. The results of the project are now being prepared for publication in a monograph.

Archaeological interest in the early Modern period in Greece

A disciplinary divide in Greece still tends to isolate the remote past as the domain of archaeologists and the investigation of more recent periods as a subject for anthropologists and historians. This ideological division and a shortage of specialists and techniques distinctive to medieval and later archaeology have not facilitated an understanding of the more recent Greek past.

Archaeological interest in the Modern period in Greece goes back to the early 20th century and was initially reflected by studies that can be best described as ethnological antiquarianism.[1] Later, attention to modern aspects of Greek society was expressed in survey projects and studies that involved modern cultural materials on an equal footing with the prehistoric and Classical periods.[2] Currently, there is a growing interest in broader and more systematic studies of material culture from particularly the Ottoman period from the 15th century until the end of the 19th century. However, the Ottoman period remains one of the most neglected ones as most scholars have focused on post-Byzantine art

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[1] *E.g.* Wace & Dawkins 1914.

[2] *E.g.* McDonald & Rapp 1972; Aschenbrenner 1976; Dimen & Friedl 1976; Doorn 1987; Davis 1998; Mee & Forbes 1999; Forbes 2000, 2001, 2007; Watrous, Hadzi-Vallianou & Blitzer 2004.

and architecture rather than a broader range of Ottoman material culture.[3]

Some scholars have attempted to find parallels for archaeological artefacts through ethnographic documentation of traditional craft activities, such as ceramic production.[4] Another branch of ethno-archaeological research in Greece employed ethnography as a tool with which to refine archaeological approaches to the study of pastoral economies. These investigations focused principally on the morphology of pastoral settlements and functional aspects of pastoral production.[5] Several of the studies provided a stronger focus on the structural remains of modern pastoral communities. Chang's, for instance, advanced understanding of pastoral site morphology and her research provided much-needed social and behavioural insights into pastoral land management.[6] A recent and complementary development is the implementation of scientific techniques (*e.g.* geoarchaeology and phytolith analysis) at modern pastoral sites.[7]

The Pelion Cave Project has moved beyond conventional "ethno-archaeology" defined as the investigation of archaeological problems through the study of contemporary communities, and engaged in ethnographic fieldwork based on 'Archaeological Ethnography'.[8] It was conducted by archaeologists with an 'insider's' awareness of material relations that could provide answers to archaeological questions and also had the broader aim to explore the historical and socially dynamic relationship between local communities and their landscape. This approach entailed a certain involvement of villagers in the archaeological process as field guides, informants, or discussants.[9]

The Pelion Cave Project (PCP): scope, overview, and methodology

Despite the growing interest in recent historical periods in Greece, cultural historians and archaeologists often seem to consider the use of caves in the recent past as a relatively peripheral phenomenon. This disregard is still occasionally reflected in poor excavation and documentation practices in post-Byzantine contexts. Furthermore, interest in modern cave use is typically focused on notable single localities. Such studies are not well suited to provide a representative picture of cave use and its development. If we do not know how 'typical' our examples of cave use are, they will remain simply anecdotes that are not necessarily illustrative of some wider process.

Besides the need for larger and more representative case studies, it is also necessary in ethno-archaeological studies of pastoral and generally rural landscapes to give more attention to historical trends on a larger geographical scale.[10] More specifically, it is clear that in the case of caves, a number of pastoral as well as non-pastoral uses can only be properly understood when related to historical and economic developments outside the study-region.

The Pelion Cave Project provided an opportunity to document some of the ways in which regional, national, and international economic developments and technological transformations affected traditional modes of production and societal dynamics in local Greek communities. In particular, by studying cave and rockshelter sites on a regional scale, we wanted to evaluate the restructuring or abandonment of land resulting from changes in the agricultural economy and increasing industrialization, a process that reshaped all aspects of local life. As such, the Pelion Cave Project provides a useful counterbalance to case studies from open-air sites in Greece.

The research questions that guided our fieldwork were:

1. How are pastoral and other activities organised in and immediately around caves?

[3] But see Blitzer 1990a; Vroom 2003; Sigalos 2004.
[4] Blitzer 1990a; Kalentzidou 2000.
[5] Murray & Chang 1981; Murray & Kardulias 1986; Blitzer 1990b; Halstead 1990; Chang 1992, 1999; Chang & Tourtellotte 1993; Efstratiou 1999.
[6] Chang 1992; Chang & Tourtellotte 1993.
[7] Brochier *et al.* 1992; Balme & Beck 2002; Kontogiorgos 2008.
[8] Watson 1979; Meskell 2005, 2007; Forbes 2007.
[9] For an indicative account on community involvement in archaeological projects, see Moser *et al.* 2002; Moser 2003.
[10] Mientjes 2004, 162.

2. When and why were caves modified, used, re-used, and abandoned?
3. What are the socio-economic use values, the cognitive and symbolic associations of cave sites for rural communities?

The overall aims of the project were to be achieved by means of a survey, in which archaeology and ethnography were equal partners. Our objective was to gather a comprehensive body of evidence as a basis for a quantitative and qualitative inquiry.[11]

To begin, we searched through the archaeological and palaeoanthropological site records maintained by the Ephorate of Palaeoanthropology and Speleology in Northern Greece. These indicated that approximately 30–40 caves fell within the boundaries of the survey region. These records, however, were of limited use since in most cases only a cave's association with a particular village or a wider area was identified. HERON, an association of speleologists in Volos, provided additional and more accurate information on a smaller number of caves. Also, small rockshelters and mines were generally not incorporated in the site records of the Greek Archaeological Service but we wished to include these features in our survey as we had previously observed that the activities taking place at rockshelters and abandoned mines, and the built structures around them are similar to those associated with caves.[12]

A small field team consisting of two archaeologists and a geologist/speleologist conducted reconnaissance and site documentation. Another team consisting of two archaeologists with training in heritage studies carried out ethnographic fieldwork with a dual purpose: 1) to have a direct, concurrent exchange of information with the archaeological survey team, 2) to be able to contextualise the ethnographic data through a combined, pre- and post-fieldwork historic and archival research.

Each morning the two teams visited a different area on the mountain and carried out fieldwork or met with local informants. Informants were typically found in the fields during the day or in the village squares in the evening. After contact was established, the ethnographic team would usually arrange an interview. On several occasions, informants were interviewed 'on the spot' while in the fields, or herding their goat/sheep, thus providing a chance to visually identify sites in the vicinity. Some informants volunteered to guide us to certain sites, this being an ideal means of identifying, dating, and interpreting cave structures, features, and artefacts. We would also return to informants to have further discussions in light of the survey findings. We were always eager to have contact with villagers engaged in outdoor activities such as game hunting, logging, hiking and climbing who had a good knowledge of the mountain's place names and morphological features. The majority of the informants were male, over 50 years of age, occupied in agriculture, animal husbandry, or logging.

We carried out semi-structured interviews and on some occasions had informal conversations with focus groups in public places. In order to facilitate the categorization, further processing and 'compatibility' of the ethnographic material with the archaeological survey, we used a structured data sheet organized in sections (*e.g.* personal informant data, cave place names and locations, cave uses and practices, local history and economy, oral tradition and personal narratives). The interviews with the villagers took place in Greek, summarized in English for the Danish field director to be able to understand the general discussion. At the end of the afternoon/beginning of the evening, this information was used to plan the fieldwork for the next day. This research method enabled the team to discuss the findings obtained during the fieldwork and to verify and correct possible misinterpretations due to language problems.

[11] Initially, we discussed whether documentation of some sites should include limited excavation. Subsurface testing can help establish the extent, depth, and possible age of dry-wall remains and other partly buried structures or provide evidence whether surface scatters of prehistoric pottery come from an exposed cultural layer. This would form a small component of the project, as the primary aim was to document relatively recent features in the caves. However, our final opinion was that trial trenches would be too time-consuming and perhaps cause difficulties in future excavations.

[12] We have evidence of even multi-functional use of abandoned mines in modern time (habitation, resting place, shooting covert, and goat-pen).

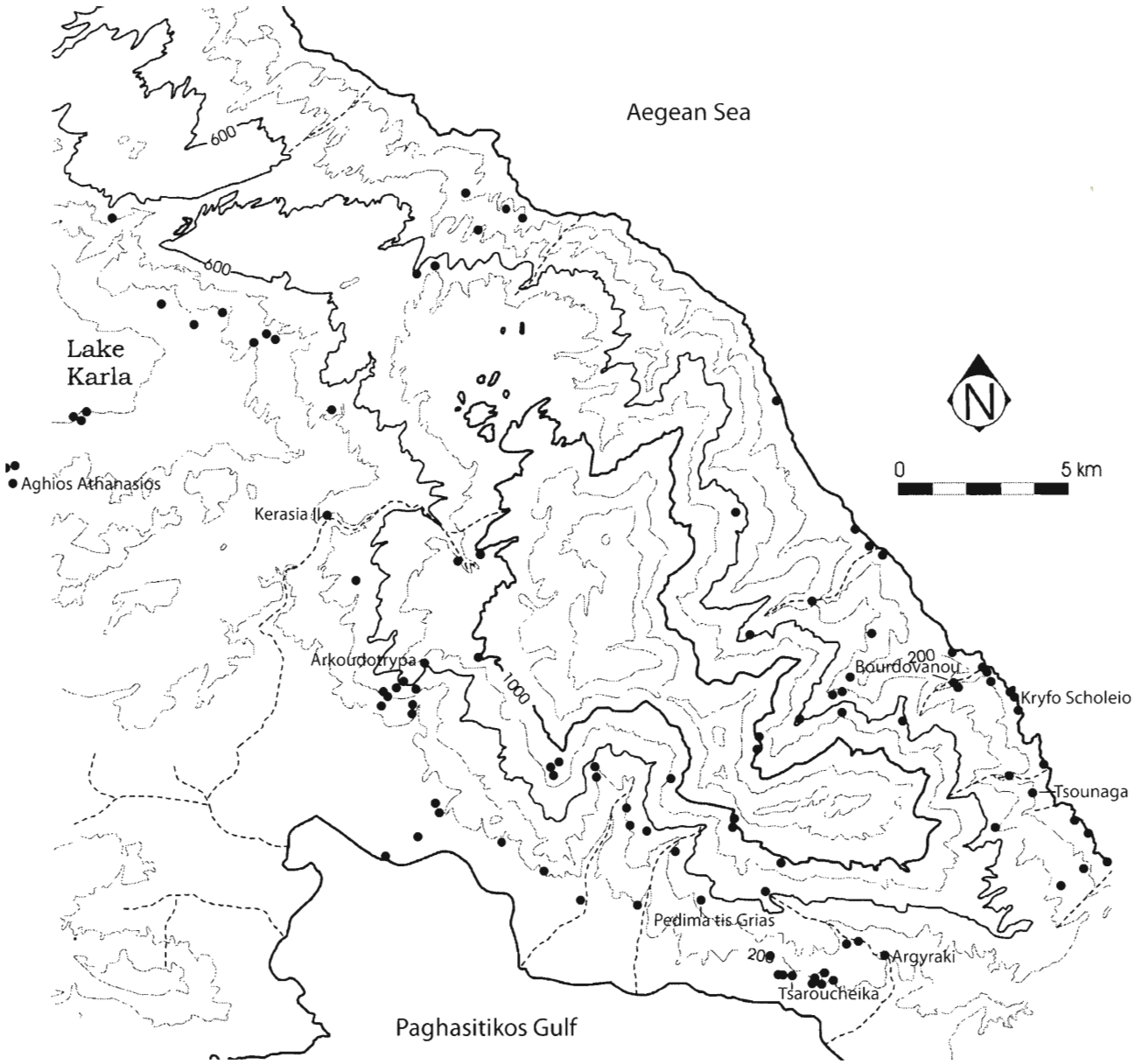


Fig. 1. Map showing caves and rockshelters documented by the Pelion Cave Project 2006–08.

During the 2007 field season, the ethnographic fieldwork covered 26 villages and hamlets in Central and West Pelion gaining information on caves and place names, of which 75 were actually identified by the archaeological survey team. In the 2008 field season, the ethnographic fieldwork – coinciding with the apple harvest season – focused on East Pelion (the 'Aegean side') in the wider region between Kalamaki in the south and Veneto in the north and covered 14 villages and hamlets. In total, we visited 153 sites (Fig. 1), but it should be noted that the information derived from interviews indicated a higher number of possible sites and locations, particularly at higher altitudes, that could not be located.

Structures and artefact distributions at 35 caves and rockshelters were documented on plan drawings. These included caves in current use as well as abandoned sites. Criteria for selecting a site for more detailed documentation were: (a) details of its use that could be obtained from local informants; (b) the condition of the site and the possibil-

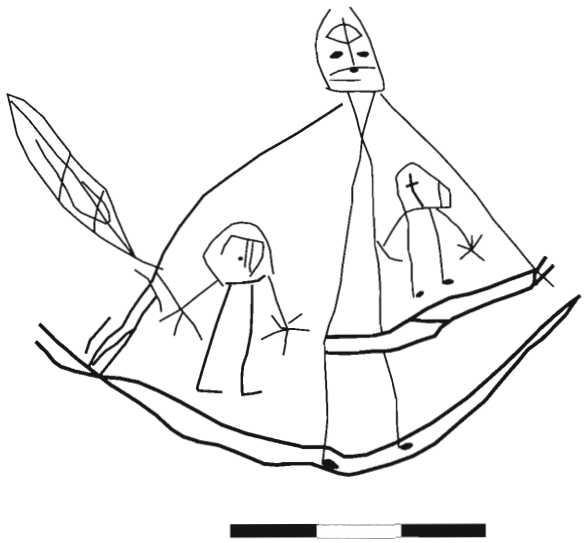


Fig. 2. Early modern engraving from a rockshelter (Arkoudotrypa) near Makrinitsa showing a ship(?) and three anthropomorphic figures.

Fig. 3. Recent (2004) engraving from the cave of Aghios Athanasios showing a speared deer.

ity of interpreting its features without major doubts or ambiguities. Analysis of the structures in and around the caves was given priority, along with remains of other key structures on the localities.

Cave floors and the areas outside the caves were systematically surveyed for any artefacts (in the widest possible sense) that were not part of the cave's architectural modifications. Provenience of all cultural material on the surface was then recorded on plan drawings. Particular consideration in the form of drawing and photography was given to artefacts and visible patterns of refuse disposal that might potentially date or shed light on activities carried out within or around the cave. While all visible artefact categories were collected, some types of non-diagnostic detritus were, for practical reasons, documented and described only in the field.[13]

Observations and preliminary results from the survey

Perhaps not unique to Pelion, we noticed the absence of a strong interest in or a living tradition relating to caves and their uses with some exceptions where caves were regarded as possible tourist attractions. This should probably be considered reasonable since only a few caves are still being used and these are sites detached from the village's territory of production tendeding to vanish from local memory in the last decades. However, we noticed that our own archaeological and ethnographic fieldwork and research questions inspired local interest and triggered processes of social enquiry and personal recollection of past rural activities, local events or family stories and of 'marginal' places.

This process of recalling a past landscape was not without problems or contradictions. Informants were sometimes vague or they might often disagree with fellow villagers about cave names, locations, or descriptions of events. Interestingly, it seemed that status was still attached to the ability to recall place names and events and to having a solid knowledge of landscape and environmental features, pathways, and mountain orientation. This 'awareness' is even rarer in regard to caves since on modern-day Pelion there are only a few individuals who routinely spend time in and around them. The lack or unavailability of primary or 'key' informants – particularly during the harvest season – meant that in many cases we were not able to find field guides or get reliable data on cave locations, the existence of which we already knew. This was particularly the case for caves and rock shelters on the upper part of the mountain from 1000 m.s.l. to its highest point at 1624 m.s.l., which were known only to a very small group of individuals. Access

[13] Such as fragments of plastic covers, scrap metal and -wires.

Table 1. Main types of cave use on Pelion.

Dwelling	long-term occupation, one or more individuals
Short-term shelter	during poor weather, overnight
Agropastoral	animal pen
Storage	dairy products, equipment, weapons (WWII, Civil War)
Refuge	bombshelter, hide-out, improvised hospital during wartime
Quarantine	isolation of cholera-infected individuals
Mining/quarrying	animal dung for fertilizer, 'gold'/other treasure hunting, schist quarrying
Spiritual	cave chapels, dwelling for hermits
Burial ground	human bones, grave offerings (Mycenaean)
Shooting covert/hunting stand	cartridges
Leisure	sight-seeing, caving, recreation, children's playground
Research	archaeological, speleological and zoological

to this heavily wooded area was extremely difficult because of few roads or paths.

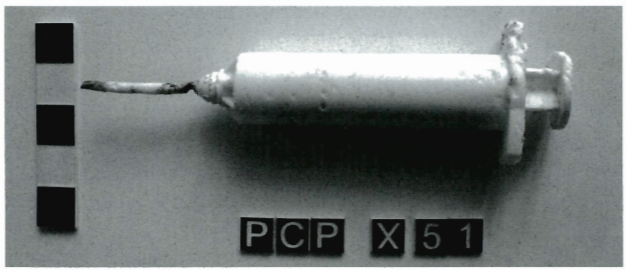
On specific occasions, however, we were able to directly or indirectly define cave use by identifying informants who had used the caves themselves or who had a family tradition of cave use (*e.g.* goat pen, storage, seasonal dwelling or refuge during the WWII). These instances proved extremely interesting, as they provided cave use timelines and privileged insights into traditional practices, personal experiences, and anecdotes. In a few cases, the physical presence of past cave users was confirmed by on-site evidence, such as names and initials carved on cave walls (Figs. 2–3).

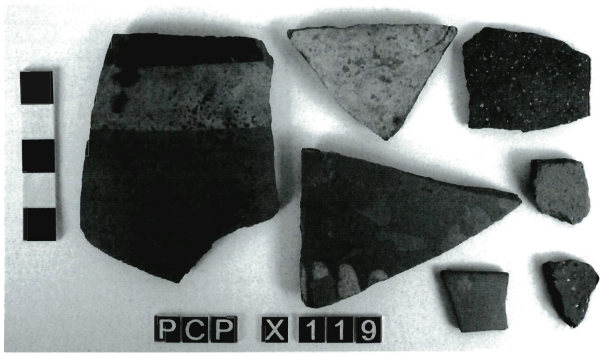
Significantly, we noted at least 12 types of cave and rockshelter use on the mountain and in its foothills (Table 1). Identification of use was achieved through the collection of artefacts from the cave floors, recording of architectural remains, and information from local villagers.

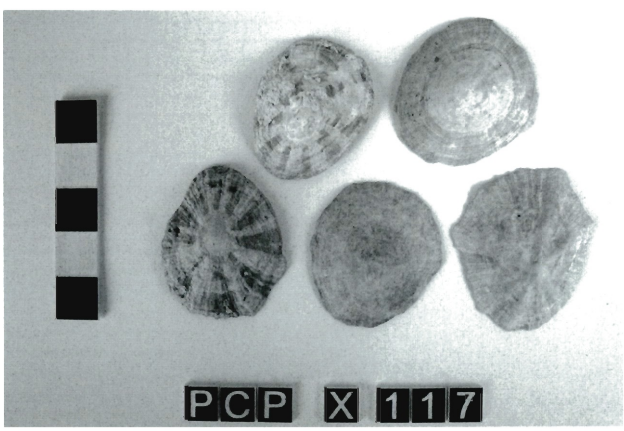
All cultural material was divided into analytical categories: a) food/food refuse, b) containers, c) indulgences (snacks, cigarettes, *etc.*), d) medicinal, e) personal effects, f) domestic routine, g) recreation and play, h) pastoral and agricultural implements, i) construction and maintenance, j) construction materials, k) unidentified objects. We acknowledge that this procedure was not without problems, as there is no evidence that the objects were used where they were discarded. The functions attributed to the objects themselves were also in some cases arbitrary and often problematic. Furthermore, some artefacts remain difficult to date and the date-ranges of Medieval and post-Medieval wares can mostly be given only in rather broad time-spans.

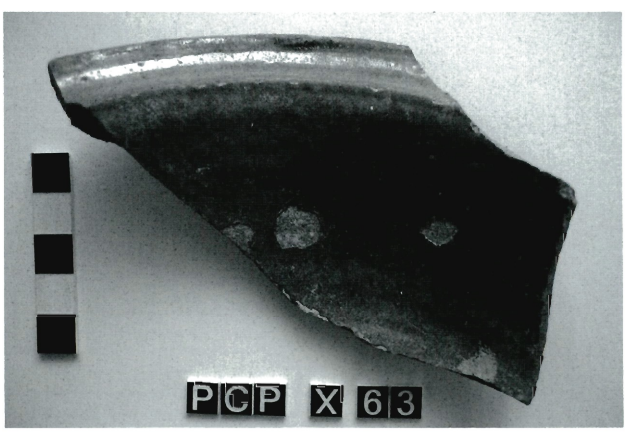
Approximately 1,100 finds were collected from 52 of the 153 caves (two thirds of the caves yielded no portable artefacts) and comprise a wide range of artefacts from the ancient through modern periods (Figs. 4–7). Although we collected far fewer artefacts than most surveys, preservation conditions were generally significantly better than for artefacts collected in open-air surveys.

The scarcity or complete lack of artefacts on the floor is a characteristic of several caves in the research area. We do not believe that humans did not use these caves and the absence of material remains may be a result of both natural and cultural factors.









Figs. 4–7. Selection of finds from caves on Pelion: Plastic syringe from Kentavron (X 51), unglazed and glazed ceramic sherds and *Patella* sea shells from Kerasia II (X 117 & X 119) and rimsherd of 19th century green-glazed plate from Argyraki (X 63).

The latter may include removal of cave soils as fertilizers or be the effect of short stays combined with ephemeral activities leaving no artefacts on the surface.

We frequently attributed lower artefact density (or the total absence of surface finds) to limited surface visibility, defined principally by the amount of surface vegetation or other obstructions. Extensive built-up of goat pellets or tree leaves make artefacts impossible to see. Heavy vegetation had developed around and in front of many abandoned caves and rockshelters, which further inhibited visibility.

Walls of animal pens preserved immediately outside the cave openings were typically semi-circular dry-stone walls built of poorly sorted stones (Figs. 8–9). Others were extremely well made dry-stone walls with built-in windowsills and doorframes. Sometimes the walls support a roof or the walls of the pen were topped with layers of dried prickly shrubs to keep the goats or sheep from jumping out (Figs. 10–12). Although the walls appear to be stable, some of the woodwork had deteriorated, particularly the doors and their frames. The amount of work invested in the construction of these features ranged from placement of a couple of stones to creation of strong walls using hundreds of stones. The most recent sites, used until a short time ago, show that other materials have also been employed. The use of stones as the only construction material seems feasible when caves are situated far away from houses or villages.

Claims on land in the Greek countryside were often made according to traditions of use (χρησικτισία, 'use-ownership'). We can see this in Pelion because some caves belonged to shepherds from a particular village.[14] This notion of land-ownership was up to the middle of the 20th century constantly established by seasonal or yearly use, and lineage rights throughout a lifetime or across generations. This enabled limited specialized access to certain caves and grazing grounds in areas that in theory were open to every member of the local community. The termination of use by a shepherd or group

[14] This was confirmed to us by an elderly goatherdess from the village of Vyzitsa.

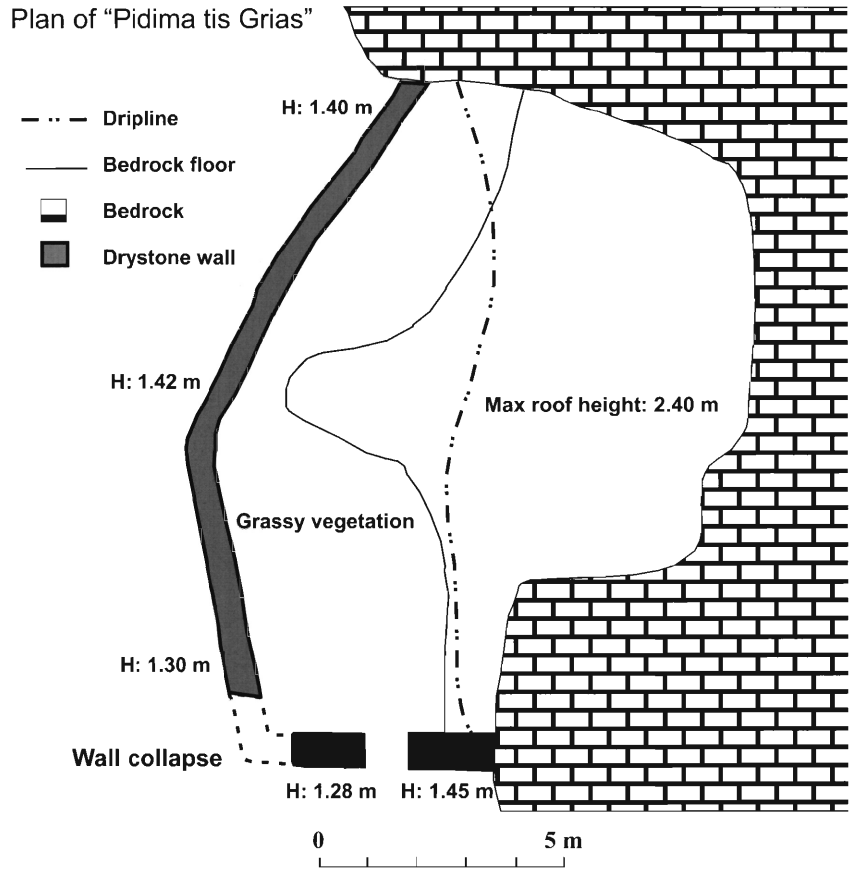


Fig. 8. Plan of shallow rockshelter, "Pidima tis Grias", with semi-circular drystone wall from SW Pelion.

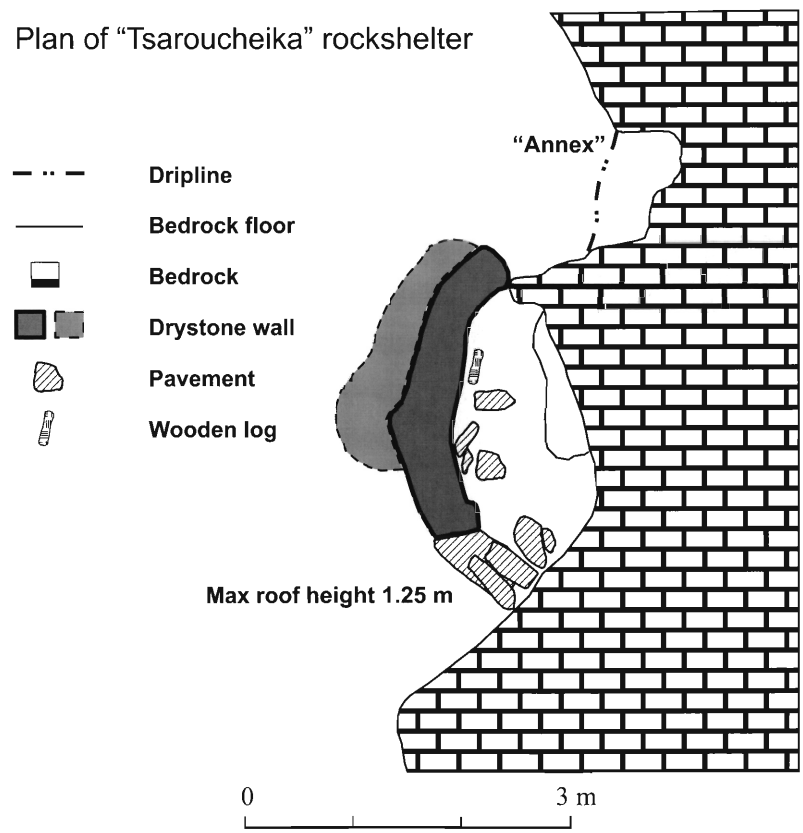


Fig. 9. Plan of shallow rockshelter, "Tsaroucheika", with semi-circular drystone wall from SW Pelion.

Fig. 10. Drystone wall with brushwood and abandoned construction materials at Tsounaga.

Fig. 11. Wooden structures outside Bourdovanou.

of shepherds even for a brief period might allow others to take 'possession' of the disused cave and associated structures.

In terms of most recent developments, we noted various stages of reuse and abandonment in the time between the 1940s and today. There are clear indications that pastoral use of caves declined during these decades, with partial continuity. Two types of archaeological evidence are critical: the architectural structures made by shepherds and associated portable artefacts. Recent disused or ruined structures made of modern construction materials (*e.g.* corrugated iron, telephone poles, and cement) associated with caves show that they do not belong to current patterns of land use. Such evidence may point to either a decline in animal husbandry or a re-organization of the pastoral economy. Our observations from Pelion show that a decline

Fig. 12. Monk cell inside shallow rockshelter at Kryfo Scholeio ('The Secret School').

in cave use does not necessarily indicate a parallel decline in animal husbandry or in the number of animals. Rather than utilizing caves and rockshelters for overnight stays, most goat herders now prefer open-air stations, which are more spacious and have more facilities.

Rather than size and shape being a determinant for the function of caves and rockshelters, the most important reason for their use or lack thereof seems to lie in their relationship to villages, fields and grazing grounds, that is, their location in the cultural landscape. For instance, our observations on the edge of Lake Karla, which meets the foothills of western Pelion, show that the function and use of caves and rock-shelters along the shore-edge remained the same throughout the Late Modern period (*c.* 1800 AD onwards). The local economy, general land-use patterns, and husbandry practices, however, were significantly affected by the draining of this lake in the last century.

Conclusions

Landscape archaeologies of post-medieval periods in Greece, which combine local, regional or national historical contexts in their analytical approaches, do exist and their numbers have been increasing. Although such studies have not focused primarily on pastoral economies, they indicate the most promising direction towards the study of pastoral landscapes in material, socio-economic, and political contexts. We argue that the combined study of archaeological and ethno-historical evi-

dence, considering local and wider historical contexts, similarly offers the best prospect for the investigation of pastoral landscapes in modern history, and their socio-economic organization.

Cave use seems to be a vanishing practice, indicating a shift in modes of production and economic growth in the Greek countryside. It could be suggested, however, that certain Pelion cave sites – at least those of easy access – might be re-established in local knowledge and practice through new uses that are compatible with the contemporary economic context while retaining their historic meaning. As many villagers have pointed out, in light of eco-tourism (*e.g.* path-hiking) and environmental education, properly managed cave sites could be integrated into networks of educational and leisure activities thus providing a support for the local economy.

Our research underlines the importance of regionally-focused studies permitting the archaeological identification of activities at caves and rockshelters. Much of the variability in the use of caves would remain undetected without ethnographic data. Diagnostic items of 'pastoral' material culture are almost impossible to identify without the benefit of ethnographic insight.

Modern examples of cave use from Pelion provide a conceptual background for understanding the evidence from archaeological excavations in caves. In that sense, the greatest value in studying traditional cave use potentially lies in providing a guide to the questions we should be asking about the past.

Although ethnoarchaeological projects such as the Pelion Cave Project permit alternative interpretations about prehistoric behaviour in caves, research on Pelion was not carried out as an analogy to Greek prehistory. The investigation was made primarily to establish a correspondence between recent cave use and its archaeological consequences. We believe that the study of modern cave use is necessary and worthwhile. Caves were, until recently, an integral part of the life and economy of the Greek countryside and in our view, this exciting aspect of Greek history deserves to be investigated in its own right as part of the archaeology of the recent past.

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