

Cave Explorations on the Islands of Kárpathos and Kásos (South Aegean, Greece)

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6 pp.



Bedding-plane half-tubes exposed in the wall of the Bat Cave (Fledermaushöhle) near Apéri on Kárpathos (photograph: TH. RATHGEBER, 3rd of May 1983). <Fig. not in the edition of Athens-Kalamos.>

Paper accepted with Ref. No. 216 by the Scientific Committee of the 14th International Congress of Speleology.

Published with 7 pictures and 1 table as file < 216FullPapers.pdf > at Athens-Kalamos during the Congress events, $21^{st}-28^{th}$ August 2005.

Improved edition Stuttgart – October 2005

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Abstract

During two visits in the years 1983 and 1987 to the islands of Kárpathos and Kásos 13 smaller caves were documented. The explorations included surveys of the caves and the examination of Recent, subfossil and fossil bones found in these caves and also at other places of the area. The results are seen as a contribution for the questions on the formation of the Greek islands. A better knowledge of the faunal and floral development on the islands allows the identification of old land-bridges. A summary of the work is given, including the illustrated and detailed descriptions of two of the more interesting caves.

Introduction

In the south of the Aegean Sea the Greek island of Kárpathos is situated at a point of interfering influences from Europe and Asia (and Africa as well). The island is 49 km long and 15 km wide. It lies halfway between Crete and Rhodes. Together with Kásos (12 km long, 4 km wide) in the southwest, the nearby Saría (6 km long, 4 km wide) in the north and a number of smaller to tiny coastal islands Kárpathos forms the Kárpathos Archipelago. The three larger islands contain widespread mountainous areas with some higher peaks, culminating on Kárpathos in the Kalilímni (1213 m), on Kásos in the Megálo Príonas (601 m), and on Saría in the Megálos (660 m).

The islands are built up of Cretaceous limestone on Kásos and in the north of Kárpathos and of a series of neritic limestones (Lias-Eocene) and phyllite in the main part of Kárpathos. While the limestones of Kásos are completely autochthonous, the structures of Kárpathos belong to an autochthonous and to four allochthonous series, being displaced from their submarine development area. Due to considerable tectonic movements in the Miocene (20 million years ago), these masses were uplifted, forming a landmass from this time on. According to current knowledge, there were no land bridges to other larger islands or to the neighbouring continents during the Pleistocene



Fig. 1: Entrances of the Bat Cave (Fledermaushöhle – right) and Cricket Cleft (Grillenspalte – left) near Apéri on Kárpathos (photograph: TH. RATHGEBER, 1st of October 1987).

ice ages. This point is significant for a discussion about the younger history of the faunal and floral development on the islands.

Politically Kárpathos belongs to the Greek district Dodecanese. The harbour of the capital town Pigádhia connects the island to the ferry lines from Crete and Rhodes. A small airport on the island also allows daily flight transfers from Rhodes. The historical development of the islands is quite complex. It is thought that the first settlements took place in the Neolithic period about 4600 years b.p. from the northeast. During Bronze Age (about 3500 b.p.) the Minoan culture had greater influences. Around 2500 b.p. four antique prospering villages are known from Kárpathos: Poseidon (Pigádhia), Arkeseia (Arkása), Vrykous (Vrukúnta, see cave description below) and Nissyros (Tá Palátia on the now uninhabited island Saría). After belonging to the Roman Empire in the years before Christ, Kárpathos was governed by Genoa, Venice, Rhodes, Turkey, Italy, Germany and Britain, and it was not until 1948, when it was united with Greece after 654 years of foreign occupation.

In the year 1991 a population of only 5323 inhabitants was living on Kárpathos. Signs of a denser settlement in former times are for example man-made terraces almost everywhere and the occurrence of artificial cave structures even in very remote places. 9 older villages are situated on Kárpathos with Ólimpos in the north and Pigádhia together with Apéri in the south being the greatest. On Kásos, a number of 5 villages exists, but to-day only the harbour town Frí is of greater significance. A network of good roads was built between all the villages on the main islands and it was only in 1981, when a road reached Ólimpos, up to then being the remotest town in Greece, accessible only by trails. Comfortable annual temperatures of 20°C (Pigádhia) and low annual precipitations of 464 mm give the islands touristic attractivity.

Karst forms are abundant on the islands, but in contrast to Crete and Rhodes they are of minor extension and only of regional significance. Typical for this fact is a region near the summit of the Kalilímni, where corrosive surface features like karren and dolines are formed and the open potholes reach down only to a depth of about 10 m. Bigger caves are found only in coastal regions, related to old sea-levels, mainly around 70 m above the present level. Summarising it is clear, that on the islands only an "initial karst" is developed. The reason for this might be the small catchment areas for precipitation and the geological disturbance with a lack of a long time constant karst water table inside the limestone. This result of our work supports the theory of a relatively independent development with no land bridges in the younger history of the earth, especially none during the Pleistocene.

Remarks on the fauna of Kárpathos

From Neogene sediments near the airport DAAMS & VAN DE WEERD (1980) investigated a fauna of small mammals and placed them in the early Pliocene. The sample contained teeth of 5 different species. In a quantity of only 20 teeth this comparatively high number is a sign for a diverse continental influence. Hence, the authors came to the conclusion of a high evidence for massive land bridges from Kárpathos over Rhodes to the Asian continent in the early Pliocene.

The Pleistocene mammal fauna is completely reigned by remarkably small endemic cervids. First found 1963 in a cave 700 m to the southeast of Pigádhia, these cervids were placed by KUSS (1975) in a new genus and in the two new species *Candiacervus cerigensis* and *C. pigadiensis*. Type locality is a cave named Kandilia or, used by the German zoologists KINZELBACH & MARTENS (1965), Seglergrotte (see Tab. 1). Living in the Middle and Upper Pleistocene, probably even in the early Holocene, these deer species held the ecological niche which now is occupied by the domestic goats. Nearly all discoveries of fossil deer bones have taken place in caves or in karst sediments, giving a spotlight on the living circumstances of the animals, seeking for shade and a damp climate. Beside the deer only remnants of snails, birds, a mouse and a turtle have been found up to date (KUSS 1967, 1973, 1975; WEESIE 1984). Predators are lacking in the Pleistocene fauna. Today, only one wild living Mammalian species of predators exists on the island, the Stone Marten (*Martes foina*).

Cave descriptions

As examples, two of the more interesting caves of Kárpathos are presented, one being an old Christian church and the other one the longest cave of the island known to us.

The cave church Ágios Ioánnis near Avlóna at the northwestern part of Kárpathos is probably the most visited underground structure of the whole archipelago. A considerable portion of the underground volume seems to be carved out of the rock in former times and it is difficult to determine natural and artificial parts. The cave lies at the tip of Cape Vrukúnta near the antique town Vrykous, from which relics of walls and tombs are preserved. It is very likely that the artificial parts of the cave were

Fig. 2 (opposite): The Kárpathos-Archipelago with the caves surveyed in 1983 und 1987. The numbers are the same as in Tab. 1 (Altitudes of the mountains as given in the Road Map 1:75000 Karpathos/Kasos by Freytag-Berndt u. Artaria, Wien – Edition 01/99).

Table 1: Caves on the islands of Kásos und Kárpathos.

No.	Name of the cave	Longitude	Latitude	Altitude	Total length
1 2	Kásos Stilokamára Ellinokamára	E 26°54′27″ E 26°54′40″	N 35°23' N 35°23'	26" 255 45" 150	5 19 m) 20 m
3	Kárpathos Höhlenkirche Ágios Ioánnis bei Avlóna	E 27°10′22″	N 35°47′	51" 15	5 32 m
4	Höhlenkirche Ágios Ioánnis	E 27°09′45″	N 35°37′	903″) 72 m
5	Kuss-Höhle Ziegenhorst	E 27°05′32″ F 27°06′45″	N 35°34' N 35°34'	753" 7(739" 190) 22 m
7	Hirschhöhle	E 27°06'56"	N 35°33′	18″ 7() 14 m
8 9	Achátahöhle Marderhöhle	E 27°12′39″ E 27°12′38″	N 35°33' N 35°33'	12" 70 11" 70) 56 m) 50 m
10 11	Fledermaushöhle Grillenspalte	E 27°11′15″ E 27°11′14″	N 35°31′ N 35°31′	744" 70 744" 70	102 m $35 m$
12	Pfeilergrotte	E 27°14′28″ E 27°14′48″	N 35°30'	02" <u>5</u>	$\frac{5}{5}$ 26 m
Explan	ations: Same number as in fi	E 27 14 48	Latitude	According to the	• Italian topogra- 5000 (1932-1934)
Nam	ne of For detailed informat	tion see	Altitude	Floor at the entr	ance (in metres

Name of the cave	For detailed information see JANTSCHKE & RATHGEBER (2005)
Longitude	According to the Italian topogra- phical maps 1:25000 (1932-1934)

	above sea-level)
Total length	For detailed information see
	JANTSCHKE & RATHGEBER (2005)





Fig. 3: Cave Church Ágios Ioánnis near Avlóna on Kárpathos – plan of the cave surveyed and mapped 11th of October 1987 by H. JANTSCHKE, A. LEHMKUHL and TH. RATHGEBER (drawn by H. JANTSCHKE).

formed in these times and that the church has only been occupied and rearranged in Christian times. Even parts of the trail from Avlóna down to the festival ground above the cave are likely to be very old. As a replacement to a usual chapel tower, a rock cross was erected directly above the cave and the bells hang in a wooden frame nearby. Stairs are leading down to the entrance in the upper third of the steep cliff. A tiny harbour in the neighbourhood functions as a transfer point in festival times.



Fig. 4: Cave Church Ágios Ioánnis near Avlóna on Kárpathos – view over the baptistry to the stairs which lead down into the cave (photograph: TH. RATHGEBER, 11th of October 1987).

At the entrance, some seating possibilities invite the guests to take a rest.

From the small and white painted entrance some more stairs lead down into an impressive dome with hot, sticky air and the ever lasting smell of incense. The room hosts a shrine, a part of an antique column and a baptistry in the form of a cross. This basin is fed, like two similar, but simpler ones, with dripping water from the roof. Candle holders and metal votive panels are installed at the walls. In the southeast corner of the room a tiny shaft drops into the dark, protected by stonewalls and "sealed" with many crosses and candles.

Concerning the foundation of the church a legend exists, saying that in the times of Byzantine emperors the inhabitants of Vrykous decided to build a church, but they did not know where. Three times it happened that an icon of Saint John, bound for the new church, vanished from the town and was found inside the cave. Therefore people followed the will of Saint John and the church was build inside the cave.

The 28th of August every year, several hundred people from Ólimpos and Diafáni are celebrating a festival in the honour of Saint John the Baptist, singing, dancing and staying there for two nights.



Fig. 5: View through the huge portal of the Bat Cave (Fledermaushöhle) down to the ground of the valley (photograph: TH. RATHGEBER, 1st of October 1987).

The great entrance of the Bat Cave (Fledermaushöhle, Höhle Tsourlaki, Tsoulaki's Cave, Tzoullaki Spilæon) is situated about 2 km southeast of Apéri and 4 km northwest of Pigádhia. It lies in a little valley about 70 m above sea-level. The cave is developed in Cretaceous Dolomites of the Olonos-Pindos-Series and shows a total length of 102 m. The dolomitic banks of the rock are tectonically deformed into a saddle structure, where the cave follows a series of parallel faults to the north. In the steep northward dipping strata the nearly black dolomite contains different layers of whitish grey flintstone, which are now sticking out of the walls as an insoluble component.

Directly behind the entrance the main room of the cave is 26 m long, 9 m wide und up to 8 m high. On the floor,

beneath an only 10 cm thick bed of small stones and earth, fine layered clay points to a formation in quiet water. Near the western wall of the main room remnants of a building were observed, partly covered with flowstone and therefore of an older age. At the right hand end of the main room, a fissure forms a small, high passage which runs 20 m upward to the north. There is a good resting place for bats. In the far reaches cave crickets (*Dis*-



Fig. 6: Map of the Bat Cave (Fledermaushöhle) and the Cricket Cleft (Grillenspalte) near Apéri on Kárpathos – caves surveyed and mapped 24^{th} and 26^{th} of April and 3^{rd} of May 1983 by B. HELLWAGE-RATHGEBER and TH. RATHGEBER, completed 1^{st} of October 1987 by H. JANTSCHKE and A. LEHMKUHL (drawn by TH. RATHGEBER and H. JANTSCHKE – sections see fig. 7).

coptila kinzelbachi HARZ, 1971) were found. On the western wall of the main room a low gap gives way to a roomy fissure, orientated towards the hillside.

Only few speleothems are found within the cave. In the development of the cave, the highest Pleistocene sealevel during the Tyrrhenic transgression (KINZELBACH & MARTENS 1965) might have played a role. MELAS (1985) reports the discovery of ancient pottery, which he assigned partly to the Neolithic and mainly to the Middle and Late Bronze Age period. West of the entrance, the neighbouring cave Cricket Cleft (Grillenspalte) follows one of the faults mentioned above. The passage goes straight to the north without reaching a connection to the main cave. It forms a narrow fissure and its far end is difficult to access.

Further information

For a detailed description see JANTSCHKE & RATHGEBER (2005), where also a more complete list of literature is given.





Acknowledgements

The speleological investigations in the South Aegean were initiated by H. PIEPER, Kiel. From 14th of April to 4th of May 1983 he visited Kásos and Kárpathos together with the principal author. Also B. HELLWAGE-RATHGE-BER, TH. RAUS, Berlin, O. RUNZE, Kiel, and H. SCHMAL-FUSS, Stuttgart, participated. During this journey, the islands Armáthia and Saría were also visited.

From 30th of September to 14th of October 1987 a second journey led to Kárpathos. This time both authors were accompanied by the speleologist A. LEHMKUHL, Stuttgart.

We thank all the named persons for their friendship and for many helps.

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