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GRAFFITI IN THE MELIDONI CAVE IN CRETE, GREECE

YANNIS Z. TZIFOPOULOS¹, NIKOS LITINAS²¹*Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, Faculty of Letters, Department of Classics
GR-54124 Thessaloniki, Greece, tzif@lit.auth.gr*²*University of Crete, Department of Philology, Rethymno 74100 Crete, Greece, litinas@phl.uoc.gr*

The graffiti, texts that were engraved or written on the walls of caves, are important, because they provide information about individuals who entered the caves, the dates of their visits, and specific areas of the cave they visited. Graffiti are found in all types of caves and in all continents, and they date to all periods, a fact that shows the tendency or need of humans to express certain thoughts or sentiments on the walls of these natural formations.

As regards the caves on the island of Crete, Greece, the graffiti were usually engraved on the exterior walls near the entry or in the first halls of the caves, and in a few cases on the interior walls. The Melidoni Cave (Gerontospilios or Gero-Spilios) lies 28 kilometers east-southeast of the city of Rethymno and another 1,800 m from the village Melidoni, at a height of 220 m on the southern slopes of Mt Kouloukonas in the lower Mylopotamos valley. The Cave has been attracting people since the late Neolithic period, and visits to the cave have started to appear from c. 100 BCE until today, that is for over 2100 years. The engravings follow more or less the same pattern - the name of the visitor, the date, and, in a few cases, the reason of the visit. Their study produced the following results. First, their number is approximately 3500. Most are found on the walls of the two main branches of the cave, and their documentation includes such details as position on the wall, size, paleographical details, date, transcription of text, and commentary. Second, the individuals who scratched or engraved on the interior walls of the cave may have been pilgrims because the results of the excavations by Yannis Tzedakis and Irene Gavrilaki suggest the cave constituted a religious center for worshipping a female deity from the Middle Minoan (ca 2160 BCE) until ca 500 BCE, and Hermes from ca 100 BCE. The pilgrims/visitors in antiquity respected the attempts of other people who entered the cave for the same reason as theirs, to worship. In later times, however, the cave became more or less a tourist attraction and the people who entered were interested more in engraving on the walls, wherever it was convenient, their own name as a memento, rather than in respecting earlier engravings. Those individuals who entered the cave and its remotest areas either as pilgrims or as visitors came from all over the world. Many engraved their names on the walls in various languages, such as Greek, Venetian, Arabic, Turkish, German, French and English. Many of these engravings correspond to specific important periods of the history of Crete, and they thus constitute a visitor's palimpsest book of Cretan history.

1. Introduction

The engravings, or texts on the walls of caves are important because they provide information about the individuals who approached and entered the caves, the dates of the visits, and the specific areas of the cave visited. Graffiti are found in all types of caves and in all continents, and they date to all periods, a fact that shows the tendency or the need of humans to express certain thoughts or sentiments on the walls of these natural formations. Albeit extremely significant, one can find only a few sporadic references or photos of this specific human activity in publications or presentations of caves, but no systematic scientific recording of graffiti on exterior or interior walls of caves.

As regards the caves on the island of Crete, Greece, there are many caves or caverns with engravings on their walls, most of which are usually engraved on the exterior walls near the entry or of the first rooms of the caves, and in a few cases on the walls of their interior. The cave of this presented here is the Melidoni Cave (Gerontospilios or Gero-Spilios), which lies twenty-eight kilometers E-SE of the city of Rethymno and another 1800m from the village Melidoni, at a height of 220m on the southern slopes of Mt. Kouloukonas in the lower Mylopotamos valley. The cave has been attracting people since the late Neolithic period, and visits to the Cave have started to appear from c. 100 BCE until today, that is for over 2100 years. Until 1998 only three inscriptions were known, engraved on the outer or the inner walls near

the entrance of the cave. In the last ten years the cave has been explored more systematically through archaeological excavations, which are ongoing under the direction of the archaeologist Irene Gavrilaki (Gavrilaki-Nikoloudaki 1988; Tzedakis and Gavrilaki-Nikoloudaki 1990; Godart and Tzedakis 1992; Tzedakis and Gavrilaki 1995; Gavrilaki 1996), and through the epigraphical survey (transcription, study, and commentary of the engravings found on the walls of the two main branches of the cave) which was entrusted to us.

A descent of 25 m from the entrance leads to the main chamber, the so-called “Heroes Room” (Fig. 1), named after the inhabitants who, pressed by the Turks in 1824, took shelter inside, and subsequently were suffocated when the Turks blocked the entrance and lit a fire (Fig. 2). This is the only area of the cave open to the public, and the graffiti on the walls of this room date to the 19th and 20th centuries. From this Room the cave is separated into two long branches, the longest of which extends eastwards and is closed to the public not only for security reasons, but also because of the ongoing archaeological and epigraphical research. After a small area (the “Raulin Room”), where no engravings have been found, and a descent of 3 m, the

“Pashley Room” is reached, named so after its first explorer. It is divided into three successively deeper areas by fallen stalactites and rockfall from the ceiling. The walls at the end of the first and second areas, at a depth of 40-42m from the entrance level, are covered by names of visitors and dated mostly to the Venetian period and onwards. After a very narrow corridor the third small area is reached at the depth of 53 m from the entrance level. It was named “Inscriptions/ Graffiti Room” because the graffiti and inscriptions on walls of the corridor and room are numerous and dated to the 1st century BCE and onwards. (The latest one was carved in 1998, the same year that this branch was closed for the public). From this area, a 5 m climb leads to the Room of Anna Petrocheilou, the legendary Greek speleologist who also explored and mapped the cave, where there seem to be no graffiti/inscriptions (Fig. 1). A 3 m descent leads to a very narrow precipice, where there are a number of graffiti dated to the Venetian and later periods.

The second branch of the cave runs NW of the Heroes Room, almost at a 90° turn from the eastern branch. This branch may be accessed by visitors but it is very difficult and extremely dangerous because of the uneven and slippery passage which leads to a circular area with the so called “Petrocheilos’

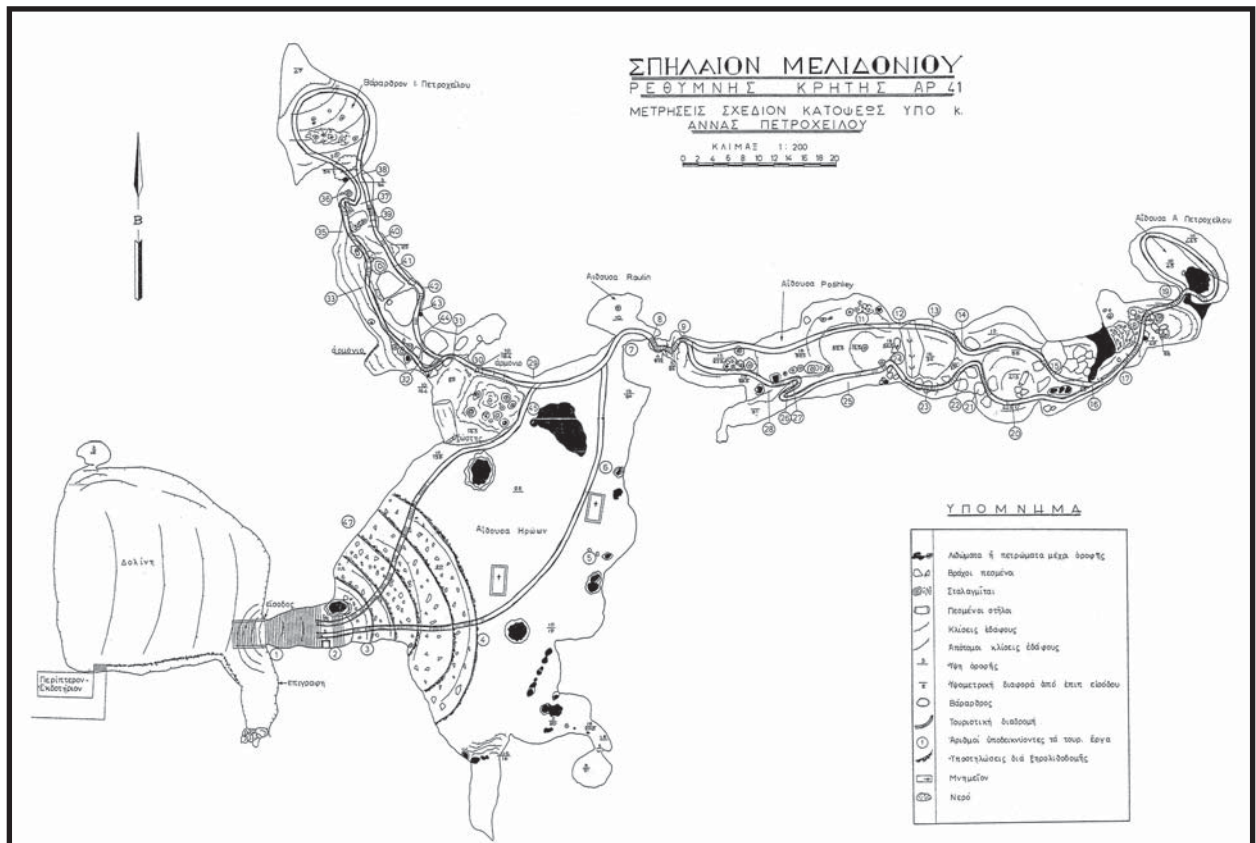


Figure 1: Map of the Melidoni Cave.



Figure 2: Entrance to the Melidoni Cave.

precipe,” a steep drop of 13 m (Fig. 1). On the walls and stalactites of this Room a number of graffiti/inscriptions are engraved, dated to the Venetian and later periods.

2. The Publication

The final publication of all the engravings, approximately 3500 which more or less follow the same pattern (name of visitor, date and, in a few cases, the reason of the visit), includes the following sections according to the epigraphical conventions used in scientific editions of inscriptions and graffiti.

Position on the wall and relation with engravings around it

Each wall is named and divided into smaller sections for easier identification; the division into sections basically follows the stalactite formations on the walls.

Measurements of the space occupied by the entire engraving on the wall

First the width and then the height in meters is given at their maximum values.

Paleographical details

These include: (a) Measurements of the letters and digits (maximum and minimum letter-height [LH] and digit-height [DH]); and (b) the way the text was carved (deep incision), scratched (light incision), or written (by pen, pencil, carbon, etc.).

Date

If a date is not included in the text, then a date is provided on the basis of paleographical and/or internal criteria.

Transcription of the text

The editorial signs employed are the following:

[αβγ]	letters restored in a lacuna
[...]	(ellipsis) established number of letters in a lacuna
()	resolution of abbreviations or symbols
{αβγ}	letters rejected by the editor
□αβγ□	letters deleted by the engraver
<αβγ>	letters added by the editor
...	(ellipsis) established number of unread letters
α β γ	letters which are doubtful or partially preserved
[---]	a number of letters lost in the lacuna
ABΓ	letters which are read, but which cannot be transcribed into known words
\αβγ/	letters inserted by the engraver above or below the line

Critical apparatus, where the transcribed text is explained by line number.

Translation, where necessary.

Commentary, where paleographical, linguistic, historical, and other relevant aspects of the text are discussed.

The few texts that follow provide an example of the methodology (the edition numbers are not final):

 Edition no **5**. Inscription’s Room. East wall. Section I. First block of engravings. To the right of graffito no **4**. Dimensions: 0.12 x 0.055; LH 0.01.5-0.023; DH 0.02. Carved and written with black pencil.
 Date: 1580

Transcription
 180
 Z/ ROSSO
 Resolve Z(yan).



 Edition no **6** (see image in ed. no **5**). Inscription’s Room. East wall. Section I. First block of engravings. Below graffito no **5**. Dimensions: 0.13 x 0.06; LH 0.01.5-0.025. Carved and written with black pencil. At some points the black pencil does not follow the carving.

Date: 16th century (1580?)
 Transcription
 ZYAN B̄AR
 BARIGO

The family name Barbarigo appears in some other graffiti in the cave.

 Edition no **10**. Inscription’s Room. East wall. First block of engravings. Below graffito no **9**. Dimensions: 0.165 x

0.04; LH 0.0280.032. Carved.

Date: 20th century

Transcription
E Ανδρουλιδακης



Resolve □E(μμανουήλ)? Between A and K there is a long stroke from the graffito above.

Edition no 14. Inscription's Room. East wall. Second block of engravings. Below graffito no 13. Dimensions: 0.12 x 0.045; LH 0.5-0.9 (l. 1), 0.015 (l. 3); DH 0.014. Written with black pencil.
Date: 1899

Transcription
A. VERDAGUER
1899
VIVE LA FRANCE

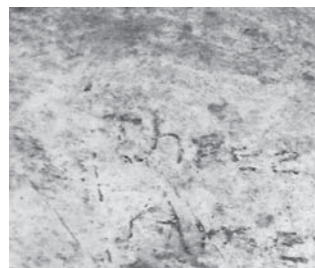


The same person also engraved his name in the Pashley Room (see graffito 450) and on the wall of the in the beginning of the Petrocheilos precipice, the remotest area of the east branch of the cave (see graffito no 2330).

Edition no 490. Pashley Room. East wall, opposite to the point 24 (map). Second block of engravings. Below graffito no 489. Dimensions: 0.07 x 0.10; LH 0.7-0.015; DH 0.01. Written with black pencil.

Date: 1973

Transcription
Three
Americans
d .. n
1973



Line 3: the engraving is damaged and difficult to read.

3. Purpose of the Graffiti/Inscriptions

The individuals who scratched or engraved on the interior walls of the cave may have been pilgrims because the results of the excavations by Yannis Tzedakis and Irene Gavrilaki suggest the cave constituted a religious center for worshipping a female deity from the Middle Minoan (ca 2160 BCE) until

ca 500 BCE, and Hermes from ca 100 BCE. From the 1st century BCE humans who entered the cave felt the need, sometimes not without danger, to scratch their name with a sharp instrument mainly on the south wall of the Inscriptions Room, the innermost and deepest place of the cave, an activity which they described by using the Greek verb προσκυνῶ, denoting worship and perhaps a ritual (Dillon 1997; Elsner and Rutherford 2005; Lajtar 2006). The main tendency in antiquity was to engrave on a blank space of the walls, but in later times people wrote on top of the other engravings, in most of the cases destroying what was already engraved (fig. 2). This could be explained by the fact that the pilgrims/visitors in antiquity respected the attempts of other people who entered the cave for the same reason as theirs, to worship. In later times, however, the cave became more or less a tourist attraction and the people who entered were interested more in engraving on the walls, wherever it was convenient, their own name as a memento, rather than in respecting earlier engravings. Even so, there are a few examples which indicate that the cave did inspire sanctity and religiosity in later times as well: small cavities within the remote interior of the cave were changed by visitors into niches of some kind of worship. Those individuals, who entered the cave and its remotest areas either as pilgrims or as visitors, came from all over the world. Many engraved their names on the walls in various languages, such as Greek, Venetian, Arabic, Turkish, German, French and English. Many of these engravings correspond to specific and important periods of the history of Crete, and they thus constitute a visitor's palimpsest book of Cretan history.

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