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An offprint from

SAILING TO CLASSICAL GREECE

Papers on Greek Art, Archaeology and Epigraphy

Presented to Petros Themelis

Edited by

Olga Palagia and Hans Rupprecht Goette

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12. Eleuthernaean pilgrims inside the Melidoni Cave (Tallaeum Antrum)

Yannis Z. Tzifopoulos

The Melidoni Cave, Gerontospilios, or Gero-Spilios, lies twenty-eight kilometers E-SE 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 (Fig. 12.1). What makes the Melidoni Cave exceptional is that since antiquity its walls have been serving as a visitors' book. Margarita Guarducci published three inscriptions, one of which on the outer wall became visible again in 1998 (Fig. 12.2), when the entrance to the Cave was cleaned (*IC* II.xxviii.1): the *ex voto* (ἐὐχά) to Hermes by Hipponax son of Diokles.¹ The remaining two texts have not yet been located, probably because they were engraved on the walls as one enters the Cave, now buried under the debris fallen during the intervening years, and especially during the Turkish blockade in 1824, when the Turks blocked the entrance, lit a fire, and suffocated the inhabitants sheltered inside. They are the name of the freedman *Quintus Volteius Menodoros* (*IC* II.xxviii.3), and Salvius Menas' prayer in six elegiac couplets to Hermes of the Tallaeum Mountains. Menas with his wife visited the Cave annually except in the year when she died, and on the occasion of his last visit his daughter Artemis inscribed the prayer (*IC* II.xxviii.2).

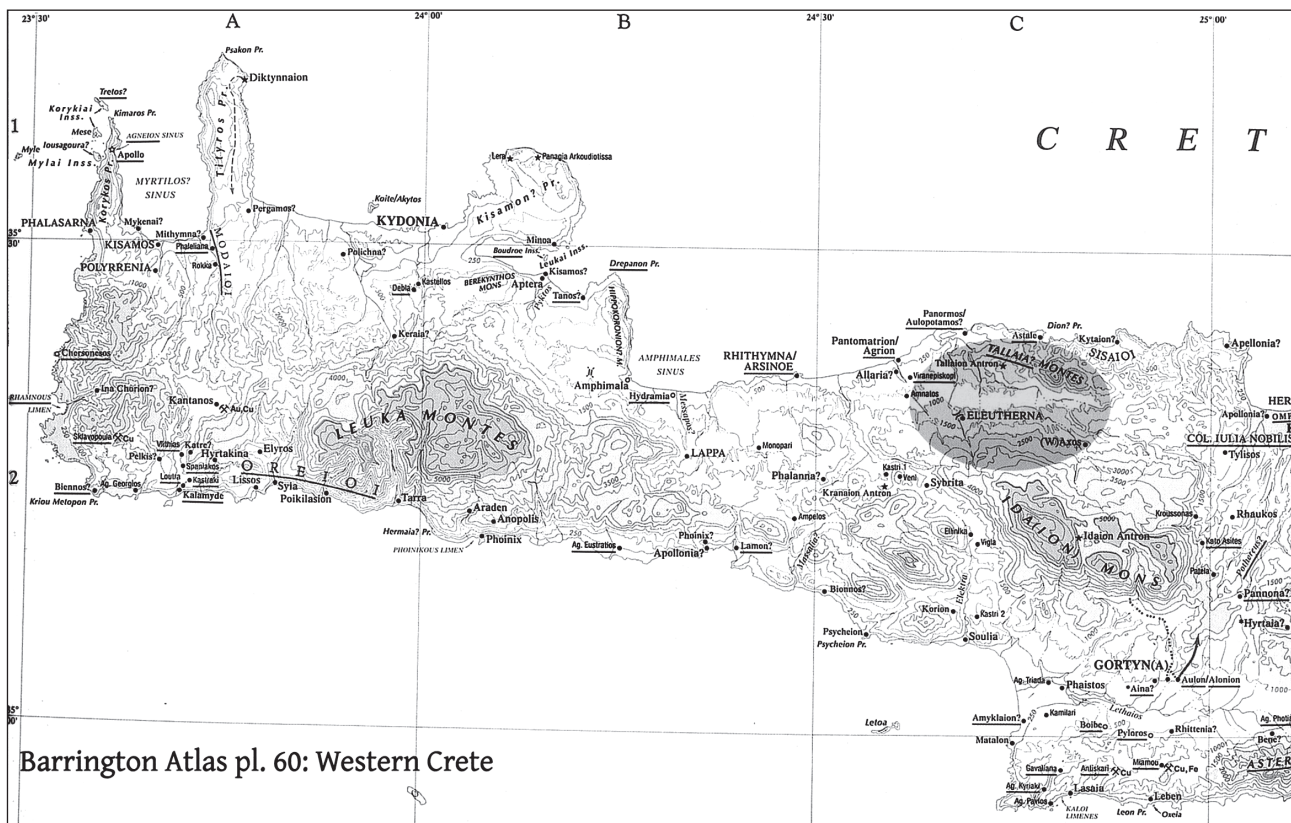


Figure 12.1. Map of western Crete. After R. J. A. Talbert (ed.), *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World* (2000) pl. 60.

¹ For this inscription, see Y. Z. Tzifopoulos, *HOROS* 13, 1999, 217–218, no. 3; *SEG* 49. 1250.

The mention of Hermes on two inscriptions has been regarded as sufficient evidence to declare the Cave sacred to Hermes Tallaios, an epithet adduced from Menas' hymn (*IC* II.xxviii.2 line 2): οὔρεσι Ταλλαίοισιν ἱδρυμένε Μαιάδος Ἐρμῆ. This epithet, if it was ever attributed to Hermes, certainly was an epithet of Zeus, who was, however, worshipped in the eastern part of the island, as a number of inscriptions attest.² That the Cave was sacred to Hermes is certain at least during the period when these inscriptions are dated, in the late Hellenistic and Roman periods, but it certainly was not sacred to this god throughout the Cave's history. The Cave has been attracting people since the late Neolithic period, and its fame increased in the Middle Ages, when memoirs of visits to the Cave started to appear in print.³ Small-scale excavations were conducted in 1987, 1988 and 1992 by Yannis Tzedakis and Irene Gavrilaki of the 25th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities with the collaboration of the Ephorate of Speleology in two areas of the Heroes Room, named in memory of the inhabitants of Melidoni who suffocated by the Turkish fire in 1824 and are buried in the tomb at the Room's center. This Room is open to visitors. Excavations were also conducted in the Raulin Room, named after its first French explorer, a small niche to the N, both at a depth of 20m from the entrance level (Fig. 12.2). The preliminary results established that the Cave was used throughout antiquity: during the late Neolithic and most probably the early Minoan period, the Cave was used as a habitation place; but from the middle Minoan period until late antiquity, as a place of worship. The divinity worshipped in the Raulin Room was female at least down to the archaic period, although at present a male consort cannot be ruled out.⁴

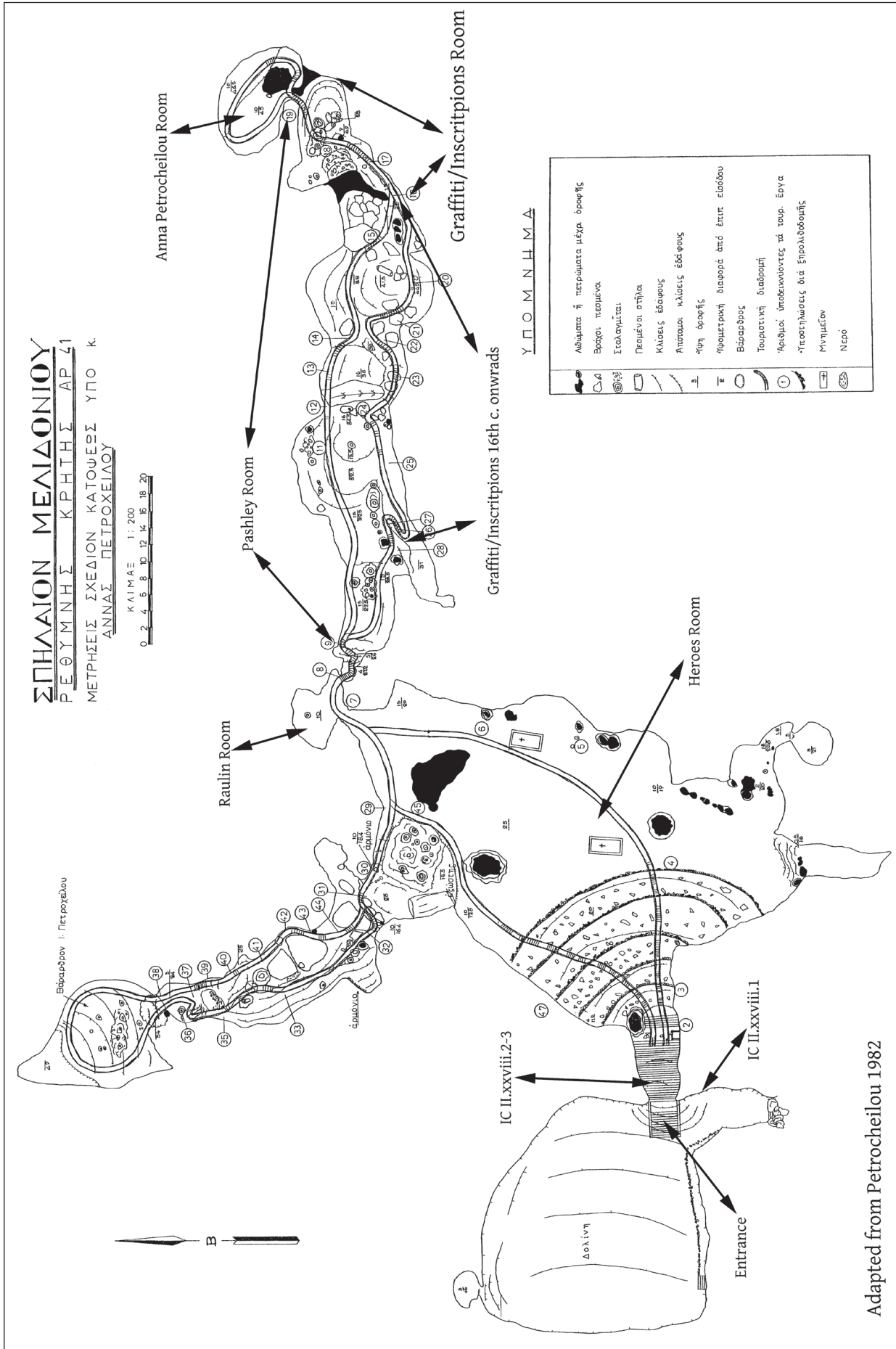
This being the state of the evidence, the Cave was explored more systematically for graffiti/inscriptions in 1998 and the following years, and a number of them was discovered on the walls of the Heroes Room, which date to the twentieth century, but none in the Raulin Room (Fig. 12.2). Things became extremely interesting, if intriguing, in the Pashley Room (Fig. 12.2), named after its first explorer, which extends eastwards. Fallen rocks divide this Room into three areas, each at a deeper level than the previous one. At the end of the first area, at a depth of 35m from the entrance level, the walls are covered by names of visitors, mostly from the Venetian period onwards. The same is true for the second area, further east of the first, at a depth of 40–42m from the entrance. The last, easternmost area of the Pashley Room consists of a very narrow corridor, through which the deepest point of the Cave is reached at a depth of 53m from the entrance level. From this area, a five-meter climb-up leads to the Room of Anna Petrocheilou, so named after its first explorer, where there seem to be no graffiti/inscriptions (Fig. 12.2), and a three-meter climb down leads to a very narrow precipice, which contains a number of graffiti, dated from the Venetian period onwards.

This easternmost area of the Cave is a small room, 12m long, 10.6m wide, and 7m height, at a distance of approximately 140m from the entrance (Fig. 12.3). It may be called, for all intents and purposes, the Inscriptions/Graffiti Room, because both walls of the narrow corridor leading to this small room, and the south wall of the small area, where incising and engraving were relatively easier, are full of graffiti/inscriptions. Conditions in this part of the Cave are extreme: humidity is almost 100%; oxygen is limited; it is pitch dark and very slippery; and a lot of effort and care is required to reach it. Under these conditions, at a depth of 53m and a distance of approximately 140m from the entrance, people felt the need, sometimes not without danger,

² In Dreros (*IC* I.ix.1; A. Chaniotis, *Die Verträge zwischen kretischen Poleis in der hellenistischen Zeit* [1996] no. 7); in the treaty between Lato and Olous (*IC* I.xvi.3–5; *IG* II² 1135; *SEG* 33.134; *ID* 1513, 1514; *SEG* 33.638; Chaniotis nos 54, 55A, 55B, 60B, 61A); in Olous (*IC* I.xxii.4C); and in Lyttos (*IC* I.xviii.9; Chaniotis no. 60A). This epithet of Zeus is restored in inscriptions from Gortyn (*SEG* 28.734), and Eleutherna (*SEG* 41.743; Chaniotis no. 6). On Zeus Tallaios, see further K. Sporn, *Heiligtümer und Kulte Kretas in klassischer und hellenistischer Zeit* (2002) 319–321.

³ For the memoirs of travelers, see I. Mylonaki in E. Gavrilaki and Y. Z. Tzifopoulos (eds), *Ο Μυλοπόταμος από την αρχαιότητα ως σήμερα. Πρακτικά διεθνούς συνεδρίου, Πάνορμος 24–30 Οκτωβρίου 2003*, vol. 6 (2006) 220; M. Palioura, *ibid.*, 238–240; and K. G. Tsiknakis, *ibid.*, 197–216, who does not always take into account the archaeological evidence.

⁴ For the remarkable results of the ongoing excavations, see I. Gavrilaki-Nikoloudaki in *Κρητική Εστία* 2, 1988, 305–307; Y. Tzedakis and I. Gavrilaki-Nikoloudaki, *Κρητική Εστία* 3, 1989–90, 273–275; Y. Tzedakis and I. Gavrilaki in *Πεπραγμένα Ζ Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου* A2 (1995) 887–894; I. Gavrilaki, *Κρητική Εστία* 5, 1994–96, 291–293; very briefly L. Godart and Y. Tzedakis, *Témoignages archéologiques et épigraphiques en Crète occidentale du néolithique au minoen récent IIIB* (1992) 79–80. The geometric-archaic/classical figurines recovered from the excavations were entrusted for study to E. Kefalidou in Gavrilaki and Tzifopoulos (*supra* n. 3) vol. 4, 227–273; K. Sporn, *ibid.*, 205–226, and E. Tegou, *ibid.*, 275–293. General discussions of the Cave appear in: L. Tyree, "Cretan Sacred Caves: Archaeological Evidence," diss. Columbia Missouri (1974) 43–45; P. Faure, *Τα ιερά σπήλαια της Κρήτης* (1996) 101–105; B. Rutkowski and K. Nowicki, *The Psychro Cave and Other Sacred Grottoes in Crete* (1996) 63–65; Sporn (*supra* n. 2) 231–232. For a similar phenomenon of graffiti in the Chrysospilia Cave in Pholegandros, see G. Dalamangas in *Πρακτικά Α' Πανελληνίου Σπηλαιολογικού Συνεδρίου, Δημοσιεύματα Αρχαιολογικού Δελτίου* 68, 1998, 173–178; V. Vasilopoulou in *13th International Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy, Oxford, 2–7 September, 2007* (forthcoming).



Adapted from Petrocheilou 1982

Figure 12.2. Melidoni Cave. After A. Petrocheilou, *Δελτίον Ελληνικής Σπηλαιολογικής Εταιρείας* 8.3, 1982.

to incise with a sharp instrument their name mainly on the south wall of the Inscriptions Room. Reading these graffiti/inscriptions at times becomes very difficult, because some texts are incised over earlier ones.

One of the texts on the south wall, presented here in a preliminary edition, is incised on an area of 0.23m in height and 0.31m in width, and its letters range between 0.01m and 0.03m in height (Fig. 12.4). Compared to the other graffiti/inscriptions, it is rather long as the majority of them are simply names. Dating this and the other texts in this area must rely on internal evidence, if any, and the lettering, in this case the letter-forms, is an insecure criterion. Once the entire corpus of the inscriptions/graffiti is studied, the date of this and the other texts will be more secure.⁵ The forms of the alpha, delta, kappa, lambda, omega, and the lunate epsilon and sigma suggest the second or third centuries CE, but at present later centuries cannot be excluded.

	II–VI CE	
	Διοκλῆς	Diokles
	ΜΕΤΑΞΟΛΚΗ	‘together with’ ...
3	κὲ σχεδὸν π	and almost ‘all (the inhabitants)’
	πόλεως ὄλης/κλειν(ῆς)	of the ‘entire/renowned’ city
	τῆς Ἐλευθέρνης	of Eleutherna
	προσκυνήσαντες.	after they made a pilgrimage.

Line 2: ΜΕΤΑΞΟΛΚΗ: the dotted letters show the difficulties in reading this line. It is either the preposition μετὰ followed by a name, perhaps the person who accompanied Diokles; or it may be a verb describing what happened to Diokles and the Eleuthernaean after their pilgrimage.

Line 3: ΚΕΣΧΕΔ^νΟΝΠ: there are two vacant spaces between delta and omicron, most probably due to the rock’s surface. The pi may stand for an abbreviation π(άντων^ν), if the preposition μετά is correct in line 2; or π(άντες^ς), if a verb is to be read, in which case *almost all* may imply that women and children were excluded and did not reach this area. Alternatively, the pi may be ruled out, if the engraver began to incise the next word beginning also with a pi, but realized that it could not fit in the space. The contraction of the diphthong κὲ = καὶ is a common phenomenon since the late Hellenistic period.⁶

Line 4: ΠΟΛΕΩΣΟΛΗΣ: the omicron may equally well be a small kappa; the eta may be epsilon and iota in ligature; and of the sigma only a trace of a very small stroke survives, which may equally well be part of a lunate sigma or a vertical. Thus, another possible reading with ending abbreviated may be: κλειν(ῆς), *renowned, famous, glorious*.

The scenarios this text may trigger are many but far from certain.⁷ What is beyond doubt is that Diokles and the inhabitants of the entire or renowned city of Eleutherna made a pilgrimage in this area. Diokles is not a new name in relation to the Cave, and one is tempted to associate him with the family of Hipponax son of Diokles, whose ex voto is incised on the outer wall to the left of the entrance (*IC* II.xxviii.1 above).

The new text together with the three inscriptions published by Guarducci raise crucial questions and set the conditions for future research with regard to humans visiting the Melidoni Cave. These four texts betray two different attitudes. On the one hand, the ex voto of Hipponax, the elaborate prayer to Hermes by Salvius Menas, and the new text with the verb προσκυνῶ suggest worship and perhaps a ritual, and, therefore, they are texts of worshippers or pilgrims. On the other hand, a simple name graffito, as that of the freedman *Quintus Volteius Menodorus* (and many others) may indicate either a worshipper/pilgrim, who did not think it was necessary to inscribe a dedicatory εὐχὴν, a hymn, or a sentence with the verb προσκυνῶ, or something else, because these were easily understood; or he could have been simply a visitor, who wrote his name as a memento, proof of his presence inside the Cave.

⁵ Y. Z. Tzifopoulos and N. Litinas, *The Melidoni Cave Inscriptions/Graffiti (Inscriptiones Creticae Tallaei Antri)* forthcoming.

⁶ R. Browning, *Medieval and Modern Greek*² (1983).

⁷ Who directed them into this innermost and deepest area of the Cave, which cannot have been known to all, or was it? Was there a local guide, a priest? Who wrote the text? Why is Diokles singled out? Why did they undertake such a laborious and strenuous effort to reach this place? What was the meaning of this enterprise? A kind of ritual by stages from one area to the next, which included a ritual *pompe* in an eastward direction, with a certain amount of danger involved, through which they reached one room after another at a deeper level, and, in the end, a kind of revelation of and experience with the divine? For convincing answers to such scenarios and for the use of the verb προσκυνῶ in texts from an Egyptian temple in Hellenistic and Roman Deir el-Bahari, see A. Lajtar, *Deir el-Bahari in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods: A Study of an Egyptian Temple Based on Greek Sources. Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement* (2006) 80–94.

In the case of the worshippers/pilgrims different attitudes towards the divine are attested. For some (like Hipponax) an ex voto with the name was enough. Others (like Salvius Menas) went into more elaborate measures and inscribed a prayer. And others (like the Eleuthernaean) specified their activity with the verb προσκυνῶ. The first two attitudes are not new and are well attested, but the last is striking and intriguing in that the verb προσκυνῶ is employed. Recently, scholars have employed the words pilgrim and pilgrimage, in order to translate the ancient activity of *theoria*, because, as they argue, the ancients lacked the activity of pilgrimage and therefore the words to describe it.⁸ The semantic range, however, of the words pilgrim and pilgrimage is by far narrower than these scholars allow. In modern times pilgrim and pilgrimage have acquired a very limited semantic field, due to Christian, Islamic, Buddhist and other influences, and are a direct translation of the Arab (Turkish) word *hadji*, the specific activity of either a Muslim making a sacred trip to Mecca, or a Christian of the Greek Orthodox or Armenian Churches visiting Jerusalem – hence in many modern Greek family-names the prefix Χατζη/ι-. *Stricto sensu*, therefore, pilgrim and pilgrimage do not and cannot translate the ancient term *theoria*, whose semantics were various, as it could refer to worship, but also to some other, unrelated to cult and religion, activity.

And yet, *pilgrim* and *pilgrimage* may well translate the verb προσκυνῶ. The ancients did not lack the activity of *pilgrimage* or the word(s) to describe it, as the new inscription with the προσκυνῶ-formula manifests (and there are more of them in the Inscriptions Room). As far as I know, there are relatively few instances of this verb in the epigraphic record in such a context, mainly in Egypt and Asia Minor.⁹ A compound verb from πρὸς and κυνέω which means *to kiss* and is used primarily in poetry and seldom in prose, προσκυνέω is the verb par excellence to denote worship and pilgrimage: *to make obeisance to the gods or their images, to fall down and worship, to do reverence to, to kneel, to bow, to worship, to pay due honor to, to pay one's respects to*, or in



Figure 12.3. The Inscriptions/Graffiti Room (south wall on the right). Photo: Y. Tzifopoulos.



Figure 12.4. The Diokles inscription. Photo: Y. Tzifopoulos.

⁸ M. Dillon, *Προσκυνητές και ιερά προσκυνήματα στην αρχαία Ελλάδα* (2001), especially 19–20; J. Elsner and I. Rutherford (eds), *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity. Seeing the Gods* (2005) is the most recent discussion on the subject with arguments pro and con, and extensive previous bibliography, to which now add Lajtar (supra n. 7) 80–94 and *passim*.

⁹ A search in the PHI database (<http://epigraphy.packhum.org/inscriptions>) has produced 1265 results for προσκυνέω, προσκυνητής, and προσκύνημα, of which 1231 occurrences are in inscriptions from Egypt, Nubia and the Cyrenaica; twenty-two from Asia Minor; eight from Greater Syria and the East; one from Thrace and the Lower Danube; one from Italy; and only two from Greece (Euboea and Syros).

the Oriental fashion, *to prostrate oneself before kings and superiors* (LSJ), a verb that eventually became a *terminus technicus* in Christian worship. What makes things even more astonishing in the new text is that the object of the verb προσκυνῶ is omitted. In literary texts this is rare, as the verb is transitive and takes the accusative, which is omitted only when it is easily understood (see the examples in LSJ). What, however, Diokles and the Eleuthernaean προσεκύνησαν is omitted because they thought it was easily understood and self-evident. They knew very well what they worshipped and to what they made a pilgrimage. Each one of them inside the Inscriptions Room of the Melidoni Cave saw, heard, sensed, experienced the divine, but, at present, it would be presumptuous to argue what divinity this was.

The new text and the ones already published by Guarducci present in a unique way the context of visits to the Melidoni Cave in the Roman and later periods. At present it is only possible to ask questions, the answers to which must remain open, until new evidence is brought to bear. This will provide a solid basis for understanding what was going on in this and the other Rooms, and therefore for interpreting these texts. Nonetheless, and until then, it appears – and I emphasize the verb – that some entered the Melidoni Cave as worshippers/pilgrims with different attitudes towards the divine; others entered the Cave and wrote only their names either as pilgrims/worshippers, engraving the minimum of text; or as visitors, who simply enjoyed the visit and left behind their names as a memento of their presence. But appearances may be deceptive.

Acknowledgements

It is an honor to present this small token of gratitude to Petros Themelis, a pilgrim of *Altertumswissenschaft* himself. I am also indebted to Irene Gavrilaki, director of the Melidoni Cave excavations, for the unstinting support and collaboration in this project, which forms part of the Archive of Inscriptions of the Rethymno Prefecture, and to the Ministry of Culture for permission to study the texts. In 1998 I was informed by Zacharias Tsirintanis and Haris Stratidakis, members of the local Speleological Society, of graffiti on the interior walls of the Cave, among which might be the three texts I was searching for, which were published by Margarita Guarducci in *Inscriptiones Creticae* II. I visited the interior with Irene Gavrilaki, with the assistance of a small team of speleologists, and we saw the walls of the Pashley Room covered by a great number of inscriptions and graffiti. Needless to say, after informing the Archaeological Service and the Ministry of Culture about the find and its importance, we decided the study of the texts to be part of the overall and ongoing study of the diachronic presence of humans in the Melidoni Cave. In December 2003, with the unreserved and generous support of the Geropotamos Municipality, and personally of the Mayor Manolis Mavromatis and the Municipal Council's president Manolis Sklavakis, we made a great effort to photograph and make drawings of the inscriptions/graffiti. In 2005 a small selection of texts was presented at the 10th Cretological Conference, for which I am grateful to Maria Andreadaki-Vlaziaki, in charge of the 25th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities. Since late 2006 Nikos Litinas, research assistant at the Papyrology Epigraphy Workshop of the University of Crete, Department of Philology, joined me in the daunting task of transcribing the engravings.