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9 Cave archaeology in Greece: An overview

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Caves have long been valued in archaeology for their exceptional preservation of stratified deposits and other finds (e.g. palaeontological), making them vital sites for chronological sequencing and interpretive analysis. While some cave sites exemplify the value of stratigraphic integrity, many cave contexts present methodological and epistemological challenges due to palimpsest layers, complex usage histories, and symbolic dimensions. This paper critically examines the multifaceted nature of caves with particular focus on southern Greece. It is based on some of the most recently available data, exploring their archaeological, cultural, and environmental significance from the Palaeolithic to medieval periods. Given the extensive number of cave sites in Greece, this paper argues that caves are case-specific sites characterized by the implementation of specific archaeological research and conservation strategies, and that they are critical loci for interpreting human–environment interaction and cultural expression across millennia.

Introduction. Caves as archaeological sites: theoretical, methodological, epistemological issues

Caves, as archaeological sites (Map 9.1; Fig. 9.1), have traditionally been valued for their ability to preserve stratified deposits, thereby facilitating relative chronological sequencing, while also forming a 'protective shell' that typically ensures the preservation of both organic and inorganic materials (Bergsvik and Skeates 2012: 1, 2). For example, the excavations at **Franchthi Cave** (ID 4879; Jacobsen 1973; Perlès 1999; Farrand 2000) continue to serve as a model of detailed stratigraphic excavation, often employed in comparative analyses of material from other sites, while **Sarakenos Cave** in Boeotia (ID 10873; Sampson 2022; Sampson and Tsourouni 2023), preserves a stratigraphic sequence spanning the Palaeolithic to the Middle Helladic. Furthermore, caves often preserve archaeological contexts not commonly found in other site types (see, for example, the **Andritsa Cave** below). However, this idealized picture reflects only one facet of the reality. The repeated and diverse utilization of caves, combined with typically low sedimentation rates, can result in the creation of palimpsests, archaeological layers with evidence of mixing and reworking over time (Bailey and Galanidou 2009: 216). For example, the Minoan cave sanctuaries, where stratification is often minimal or absent, pose challenges for scholars attempting to discern their function and meaning (Platon 2013: 155). Furthermore, caves frequently contain distinct sediments and deposits due to their unique usage, which are better preserved than in open-air sites because of reduced exposure to the elements (Angelucci *et al.* 2009: 191).

Numerous methodological and epistemological issues are related to the excavation, study, and interpretation of cave sites. Much like in Plato's allegorical caves, archaeologists confront fragmentary, shadow-like remnants of the past, necessitating careful

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Map 9.1. Sites mentioned in text: 1. Franchthi, Argolid; 2. Sarakenos, Boeotia; 3. Andritsa, Argos; 4. Kalamakia, Mani; 5. Lakonis, Mani; 6. Apidima, Mani; 7. Theopetra, Thessaly; 8. Maroulas, Kythnos; 9. Kouvaras, Attica; 10. Negros, Astypalea; 11. Cyclop's cave, Youra; 12. Lion's cave, Attica; 13. Pan's cave, Attica-Marathon; 14. Agriomenos, Samos; 15. Alepotrypa, Mani; 16. Tharrounia, Euboea; 17. Keratsini, Mt. Aigaleo, Attica; 18. Drakaina, Kephalonia; 19. Kalampaki, Paros; 20. Agia Triada, Karystos, Euboea; 21. Perachora, Attica; 22. Agios Ioannis, Irakleia; 23. Vintsi, Attica; 24. Asphentou, Crete; 25. Pelekita, Crete; 26. Inatos, Crete; 27. Idaion, Crete; 28. Psychro, Crete; 29. Kamares, Crete; 30. Arkalochori, Crete; 31. Agios Charalambos, Crete; 32. Skoteino, Crete; 33. Stravomyti, Crete; 34. Kathedriko Akrotiri Chania; 35. Anekathestos Crete; 36. Kato Spilios, Crete; 37. Adiavatos, Crete; 38. Ouranias to Froudi, Crete; 39. Katafygi, Paros; 40. Anonymous (mantri) near Agios Ioannis, Irakleia; 41. Daskalio, Kalymnos; 42. Katafygadi, Kythera; 43. Nympholept, Vari, Attica; 44. Pitsa, Corinthia; 45. Corycian, Delphi; 46. Mastros, Aetoloakarnania; 47. Lechova, Corinthia; 48. Drakospilio, Kephalonia ; 49. Polis, Ithaka; 50. Kouritas, Vonitsa; 51. Nymphs, Boeotia; 52. Drakospilios, Astypalea; 53. Chrysospilia, Pholegandros; 54. Daveli, Attica; 55. Anavalos, Mani.

reconstruction and interpretation (Moyes 2012: 1). Traditional perceptions, such as the enduring idea of the 'caveman', have influenced how prehistoric caves are viewed, often as mere shelters or dwellings (Darlas and Andreasen 2017: 9–11), thereby oversimplifying the diversity of cave types and the nuanced perceptions of prehistoric communities. This has also led to interpretations based on binary oppositions, such as sacred versus profane or economic versus social, categories that are deeply embedded in Western thought (Bergsvik and Skeates 2012: vii). It has been proposed that Neolithic and Minoan cave use on Crete was largely, if not entirely, ritualistic in nature and that Middle and Late Minoan cave sanctuaries evolved from earlier ritual practices established during the Neolithic and Early Minoan periods (Tomkins 2009; 2012). Additionally, caves are increasingly viewed as significant to hunter-gatherer cosmologies, as evidenced by the presence of art and burials, among other features (Arias and Ontañón 2012), offering various modes of use for these communities (Mlekuž *et al.* 2012: 199).

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Fig. 9.1. Cave exploration on Paros. © EPS/F. Mavridis.

The use of caves in Greece

While caves have undeniably propelled Stone Age research in Greece, it is crucial to acknowledge that they represent only a fraction of the sites utilized during the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic (Kotjabopoulou and Bailey 1998). Moreover, for much of its historiography, Greek cave archaeology was sidelined within Aegean archaeological discourse, only gaining prominence as sanctuaries linked to the illustrious Minoan or Classical civilizations (Darlas and Andreasen 2017: 9–11). The brief survey of recent archaeological research especially in southern Greek caves offered here is illustrative rather than exhaustive. It is, however, a fortunate coincidence that a recent exhibition at the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, along with its accompanying scholarly catalogue, provides a comprehensive overview of cave sites in northern Greece (Georgiadis and Gadolou 2025). In this report, select references to cave research beyond the Aegean are also employed to underscore the discipline's anthropological and archaeological contributions, as well as the scientific methodologies employed.

Cave archaeology has been significantly enhanced through collaboration with other scientific disciplines, fostering the application of multidisciplinary research frameworks which include (but are not limited to) geology, radiocarbon dating, physical anthropology, palaeopathology, DNA analysis, archaeozoology, micromorphology, geomorphology, sedimentology, and palynology. For example, ancient DNA has been successfully extracted from cave sediments (Massilani *et al.* 2022), while geosciences have substantially enriched our understanding of human evolutionary history (O'Connor *et al.* 2017; Morley *et al.* 2023). In Greece, archaeological investigations in the central Ionian Sea region have engaged with ongoing research into prehistoric climate and sea-level change, and their impact on Palaeolithic settlement patterns and archaeological visibility (Galanidou 2018: 17). Furthermore, the adoption in the field of tools such as GIS has greatly improved our understanding of caves as subterranean spaces and has helped to mitigate issues relating to sediment mixing and reworking (Fig. 9.2). This is especially effective when used

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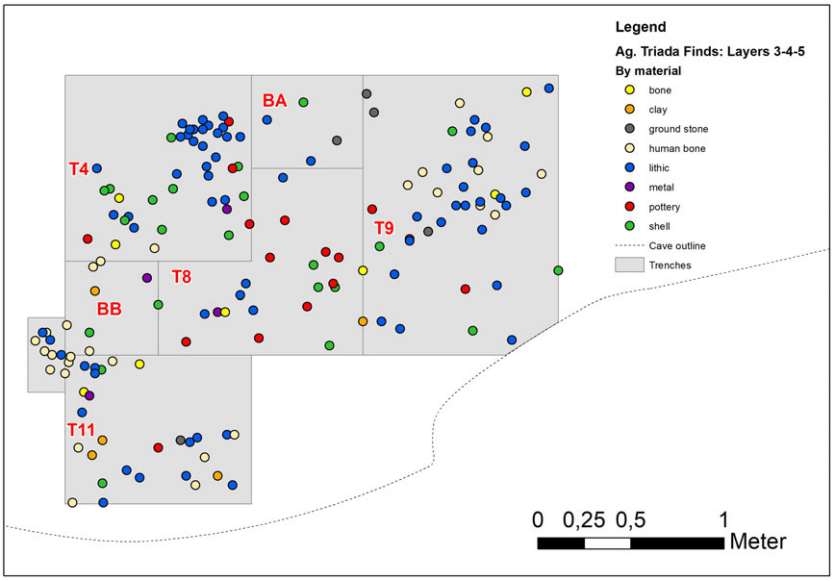


Fig. 9.2. Distribution of finds with the use of GIS. Agia Triada Cave, Karystos (drawn by M. Katsianis) after Katsianis *et al.* 2017. Publication of the Norwegian Institute at Athens.

alongside 3D methods, while terrestrial laser scanning and close-range photogrammetry have also been employed (e.g. Lerma *et al.* 2010; Katsianis *et al.* 2017; Vouklari *et al.* 2018; Landeschi *et al.* 2019). Robotic mapping has also been implemented, while recent advances in computer science are being harnessed for the analysis of archaeological datasets (Tabib *et al.* 2022). Underwater cave exploration presents its own unique set of challenges (Soldevilla, González and Lladó 2023). Caves are also key loci for studies concerning climate change, pollution, and habitat degradation (Psenner and Sattler 2012), while speleothem analysis proves sensitive in identifying past environmental and climatic events (e.g. Theodorakopoulou *et al.* 2020).

Furthermore, archaeological research is progressively shifting away from the concept of the cave as a 'laboratory of archaeological stratification' predicated on the systematic excavation of individual sites, towards a broader framework that integrates regional survey methods, sometimes in conjunction with excavation (e.g. Efstathiou-Manolakou 2009; Koumouzelis *et al.* 1996; Darlas 2012; Katsarou and Darlas 2017; Galanidou 2018; Mavridis and Trimmis 2020; see also below). This approach significantly enhances our understanding of the spatial, temporal, and socio-economic dimensions of cave use, highlighting their multifaceted significance and meaning (Mlekuž 2021). In this way, cave finds are more effectively incorporated within wider thematic and regional research agendas. For example, the regional *Tithorea Cave Survey* revealed a dense cave landscape characterized by spatial and geomorphological variation (e.g. caves and rock shelters, single- and multi-chamber sites), demonstrating a diachronic emphasis on ritual use (Katsarou *et al.* 2024). Similarly, the *Maleas Peninsula Project* has brought to light several cave sites with evidence of use from prehistoric to modern times, while also examining the region's palaeoenvironmental conditions, geological and topographical features, and hydrological characteristics (Eftathiou-Manolakou 2009; Efstathiou, Karkazi and Basiakos 2025). Moreover, the *Pelion Survey Project* (ID 808), which focused primarily on post-medieval cave use, adopted a multidisciplinary approach involving archaeology, archival research, graffiti studies, literary evidence, toponymy, mythology, historical texts, and ethnographic interviews (Darlas and Andreasen 2017: 10), thereby highlighting the

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complexity of cave use and meaning across different synchronic layers (Plantzou and Papadopoulos 2017: 151).

Considering that approximately 7,000 caves are known in Greece (Darlas 2022: 767), of which more than 3,000 are located in Crete (Darlas 2020: 157), and more than 2,000 exhibit evidence of human activity across various periods (Katsarou and Nagel 2021), it is evident that caves constitute a prominent feature of the Greek landscape. As such, they require specialized archaeological research protocols and adjusted methodological practices (Katsarou and Darlas 2017), as well as distinct administrative and conservation measures (e.g. Gillieson 2021).

The Stone Age

Extensive investigations have been conducted in caves globally, and in many regions where open-air sites are poorly preserved, caves constitute the sole source of information on human fossil remains (e.g. in southeast Asia, see Gilbertson *et al.* 2013; Sutikna *et al.* 2016; Morley *et al.* 2017; McAdams *et al.* 2020; Maloney *et al.* 2022; for the Aegean, see Darlas 2014; Harvati *et al.* 2019, and below). Cave archaeology has substantially enriched our understanding of the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods in Greece. Thanks to cave finds – both fossil and archaeological – researchers have been able to integrate innovative methodological and interpretative models addressing, for example, the relationship between Neanderthals and anatomically modern Humans, their dispersal across continents and seascapes, and other pertinent topics. The Mani peninsula has long been a focal point for Palaeolithic research, with the highest concentration of Palaeolithic and palaeoanthropological sites in Greece (Fig. 9.3), particularly from the Middle and Late Palaeolithic. Notable among these are three systematically excavated reference sites with human remains: the caves of **Kalamakia** (ID 10292), **Lakonis** (ID 1488), and **Apidima** (ID 16943) (Elefanti, Panagopoulou and Karkanas 2008; Harvati 2009; Harvati, Stringer and Karkanas 2011; Darlas 2012; Harvati *et al.* 2013). The discovery and analysis of Neanderthal skeletal remains in the Mani has provided crucial insights into the presence of *Homo neanderthalensis* in the Balkans (Ligkovanlis and Darlas 2024, with references therein). In



Fig. 9.3. Anavalos cave, Mani, with Palaeolithic finds. © EPS/I. Efstathiou.

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parallel, the *Maleas Peninsula Project* has identified Upper Palaeolithic sites – both caves and open-air – along the eastern coast of the southeastern Peloponnesian peninsula (Efstathiou-Manolakou 2009; Efstathiou, Karkazi and Basiakos 2025). Therefore, the combination of survey and excavation, primarily of caves but also of open-air sites, has yielded a comprehensive picture of landscape use, human mobility, resource exploitation, and the broader integration of cave sites within the Palaeolithic cultural landscape (e.g. Koumouzelis *et al.* 1996; Darlas 2012; Tourloukis *et al.* 2016). Projects such as those in the Inner Ionian Archipelago and Lefkas, which investigate both cave and open-air sites, are designed to explore issues of connectivity and mobility during the Middle and Late Palaeolithic (Galanidou 2018: 2, 3, 18).

Moreover, the re-examination and systematic publication of material from Palaeolithic cave sites has significantly advanced our knowledge of chronology, lithic technology, palaeoenvironmental reconstruction, site use, subsistence strategies, ideological frameworks, mobility, connectivity, and more (e.g. Darlas and Psathi 2016; Ligkovanlis 2016; Starkovich 2017; Starkovich *et al.* 2018; Elefanti and Marshall 2023). The systematic study of ornaments from Franchthi Cave has established it as the richest European site for such evidence (Perlès 2016; 2018). Further systematic analysis of lithic industries from Late and Final Upper Palaeolithic sites has demonstrated that Mesolithic stone industries on the Greek mainland retained elements of the late Upper Palaeolithic (Epigravettian) tradition (Fig. 9.4), at least in the early phases of the period (Kaczanowska and Kozłowski 2014; 2018; Papadea *et al.* 2020; Elefanti and Marshall 2023).

The Mesolithic represents a crucial transitional period for understanding responses to climate change and the origins of the Greek Neolithic (Elefanti and Marshall 2023). When targeted surface surveys were conducted, research encompassed both caves and seascapes (e.g. Panagopoulou *et al.* 2002; Runnels *et al.* 2005; see review in Galanidou 2014; Elefanti and Marshall 2023), leading to the identification of numerous Mesolithic sites and ushering in a new era in Mesolithic research. It is estimated that the number of sites with definite or probable Mesolithic chronology in Greece has tripled over the last two decades (Elefanti and Marshall 2015). These discoveries have generated discussion on a wide array of topics, including lithic production, subsistence strategies, seascape exploitation, and many more. Beyond the traditional reference sites, Franchthi Cave in the eastern Peloponnese (Cullen 1995), **Theopetra Cave** (ID 1980) in Thessaly (Kyparissi-Apostolika 2021; Papagrigorakis *et al.* 2022), and the settlement of **Maroulas** on **Kythnos** (ID 11517; Sampson, Kaczanowska and Kozłowski 2010), new finds including human remains have come to light. Notably, the 2019 rescue excavations at **Kouvaras Cave** in East Attica (Fig. 9.5) uncovered stratified Mesolithic deposits and a primary burial of a woman in contracted position, along with other paleoanthropological remains (Mavridis *et al.* 2021; Mavridis and Papadea 2024). Additionally, a primary burial was excavated at Negros Cave on Astypalaea, dated to *ca.* 9000 BC. This early Mesolithic burial represents the earliest known human presence on the island and constitutes one of the very few securely dated burials from the Mesolithic period in the Aegean (Efstathiou 2023; Stravopodi 2023). These discoveries have enabled the exploration of burial practices and beliefs concerning the afterlife and, through ancient DNA, strontium isotope analysis, and related analyses, offer a unique opportunity to construct biocultural profiles of prehistoric Aegean populations. Such ongoing studies will also yield new data on gene flow, mobility, residential patterns, biological relationships, health, and diet based on systematically excavated and stratified samples (Fig. 9.6). It has been proposed that caves played a central role in Mesolithic communities (Galanidou 2011), serving multiple functions as base camps, burial and feasting locales, and stopovers during hunting, fishing, and gathering expeditions (Galanidou, Vukosavljević and Perlès 2025: 372).

Research on Neolithic cave use has traditionally emphasized dwelling and periodic occupation, often linked to specialized economic practices such as transhumance, the latter particularly during the Late Neolithic (Mavridis 2018a; 2024). However, recent excavations

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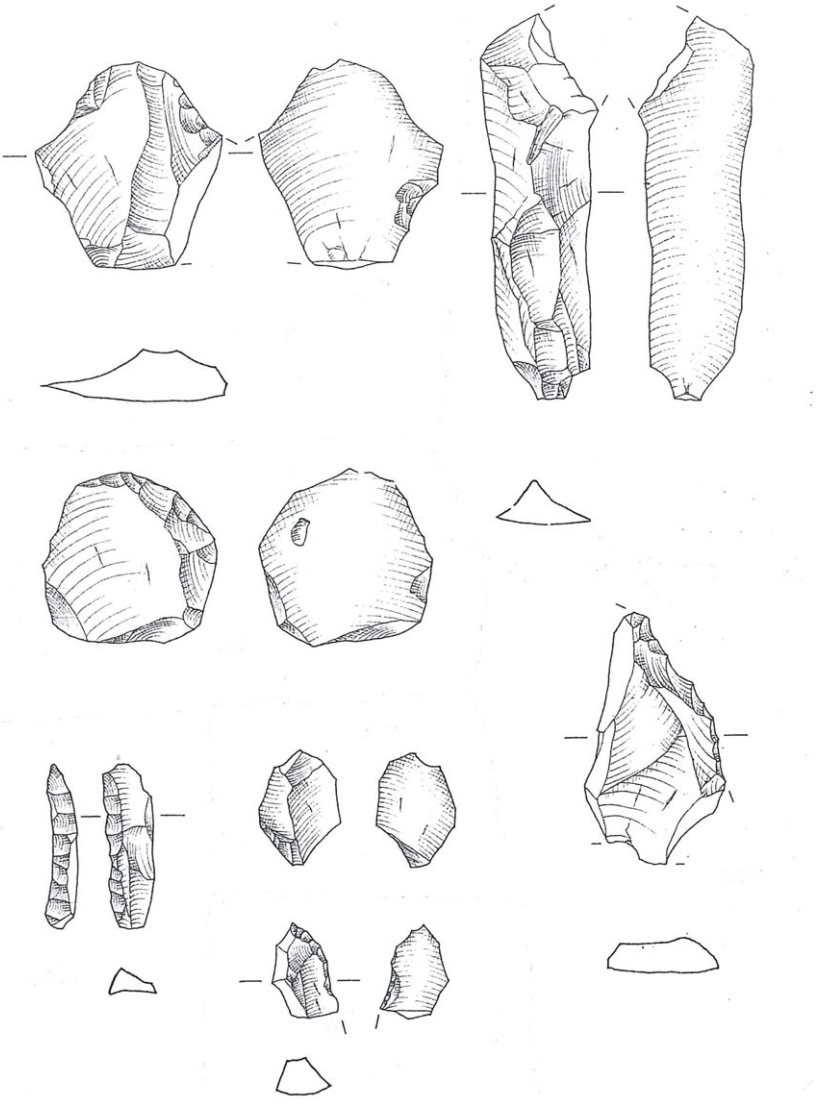


Fig. 9.4. Lithics from Schisto Cave, Attica, after Papadea *et al.* 2020. © EPS/F. Mavridis.

and analyses of Neolithic cave finds and their contextual associations reveal a more complex picture, with ritual activity playing a significant role beyond mortuary use. Evidence for symbolic behaviour has been identified in several cave sites. For example, in the **Cave of the Cyclops** (ID 3094) on Youra (North Sporades), fine ware pottery was deposited in a pool deep within the cave, suggesting symbolic practices (Katsarou 2021). At Sarakenos in Boeotia (ID 10873), the ritual nature of Late Neolithic deposits is evident, including hundreds of figurines dated to around 4000 BC (Katsarou and Sampson 2013; Sampson 2014). In some instances, deer antlers were discovered alongside figurines on occupation floors or near hearths (Sampson 2014: 55, 56). At **Lion's Cave** on Mount Hymettos in Attica, figurines were deliberately placed in association with other artefacts beneath stone-lined floors, with stone figurines positioned singly and clay ones grouped (Karali, Mavridis and Lambropoulos 2018;

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Fig. 9.5. Kouvaras Cave, Attica. © EPS/F. Mavridis.



Fig. 9.6. Mesolithic burial, Negros Cave, Astypalaea, after Efstathiou 2023. © EPS/I. Efstathiou.

Mavridis 2019). Similarly, at **Pan's Cave** in Attica (Mari 2018), deer antlers were associated with secondary burials and other finds (Mari 2024a; 2024b). **Agriomenos Cave** on Samos yielded evidence of ritualized activity, including artefact deposition, food consumption, hearth maintenance, and human burial (Menelaou *et al.* 2024). **Alepotrypa Cave** (ID 16941; Papathanasiou *et al.* 2018) reveals an exceptionally complex subterranean ritual system involving a wide range of ceremonial practices. These were spatially demarcated across chambers and niches and included both primary and secondary mortuary treatment of remains, including disarticulation, cremation, and the exposure of cranial and post-cranial

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remains in ossuaries (Katsarou 2021). **Tharrounia Cave** (ID 14974) in central Euboea (Katsarou 2021) and **Drakaina Cave** in Kephalonia (ID 8882; Stratouli and Metaxas 2017) further exemplify the diversity of Neolithic cave use. Such evidence underscores the significant role caves played in Neolithic communities, suggesting that 'through ritualization, the everyday is referenced and transformed' (Tomkins 2009: 125).

The Bronze Age

During the Early Bronze Age, a period during which organized cemeteries predominated (e.g. Doumas 1977, for the Cyclades), caves were rarely employed for burials or other functions in mainland Greece and the Cyclades, in contrast to Crete (Papadatos 2007: 433; Vavouranakis 2007: 157). Most often, only sherds and pottery are found (e.g. Schisto Cave, Attica, and **Kalampaki Cave**, Paros, as well as several caves in the Maleas peninsula), without any specific contexts yet excavated that could provide evidence regarding a specific cave's use and meaning. Nonetheless, notable exceptions do exist. The cave at **Agia Triada** (ID 4732), Karystos, Euboea (Fig. 9.7), presents a complex burial assemblage, including archaeologically attested sequential rituals involving food offerings (Vykukal *et al.* 2021). Also present are traces of Cycladic mortuary practices, Cycladic/Helladic material culture (Mavridis and Tankosić 2016), and evidence for the manipulation of human remains (Prevedorou, Mavridis and Tankosić 2019), further highlighting the unique contextual importance and special role that this cave played in the lives of local people. These finds may only be paralleled at open-air sites in mainland Greece (Mavridis and Tankosić 2016; forthcoming). In this context, the ossuary at Lake Vouliagmeni in **Perachora** (ID 14109; Stravopodi 2024) should be interpreted as reflecting specialized treatment of the dead, connected to ideologies concerning the ancestral past and memory (Mavridis and Tankosić forthcoming). Moreover, the cave of Vri in Laconia brought to light Neolithic, Early and Middle Bronze Age, as well as Classical and Hellenistic pottery and appears to be associated with an Early Bronze Age settlement located directly above it, on top of the hill Klisizes (Efstathiou-Manolakou 2009).

With regard to the Middle and Late Bronze Age in mainland Greece, the utilization of cave sites has been discussed by several scholars (Vasileiou 2000; Mavridis *et al.* 2013; Katsarou 2021). Middle Bronze and Mycenaean material is known from caves on the Maleas peninsula and in the Mani region (Efstahiou-Manolakou 2009). Archaeological



Fig. 9.7. Agia Triada Cave, Karystos. © EPS/F. Mavridis.

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Fig. 9.8. Stravomytis Cave, Heraklion. © EPS/I. Efstathiou.

investigations have revealed additional cave sites with evidence dated from around 2000 BC and onwards, although consisting primarily of ceramic finds (e.g. **Agios Ioannis**, **Irakleia** (ID 19998), and **Vintsi Cave**, Attica), highlighting our limited understanding of their function and significance during these phases. In Crete, the study of caves reflects the broader history of Greek prehistoric archaeology (Mavridis *et al.* 2013). As elsewhere in Greece, early investigations in Cretan caves sought to identify sites referenced in classical literature, particularly the tomb of Zeus (Bradley 2000, cited in Mavridis *et al.* 2013; see also Faro 2013; Platon 2013; Stampolidis and Kotsonas 2013; Tyree 2013). Cretan caves (Fig. 9.8) were used continuously from the earliest human presence on the island. Research at sites such as **Asphentou** (Strasser *et al.* 2020) and the renewed examination and publication of material from **Pelekita** Cave (ID 18447), which revealed significant Aegean-like material (Kanta, Ferrence and Bonga 2020), offer valuable insights into cave utilization prior to the Bronze Age. Regional cave studies (e.g. Gavrilaki 2017) have contributed to our understanding of their diachronic use and evolving patterns. Ongoing research by the Ephoreia of Palaeoanthropology and Speleology continually identifies new sites and re-evaluates previously known ones (Darlas 2020; Efstathiou, Kanta and Kontopodi 2020; Liakopoulos 2020; Efstathiou *et al.* forthcoming). Moreover, the systematic publication and study of significant diachronic cave sites on Crete, such as the **Inatos Cave** on the southeastern coast – a shrine to Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth and motherhood, from the Bronze Age to the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period (*ca.* 1900 BC–400 AD) – has provided new and detailed information regarding the use and importance of the islands' caves (Kanta, Davaras and Betancourt 2022). The **Idaion Cave** is considered to have been a prominent sanctuary during the Iron Age in Crete (Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellaraki 2011; 2013). The diversity of artefacts found within it and other caves, some of which are imports from various Mediterranean locales, underscores their ritual importance (Stampolidis and Kotsonas 2013). Beyond the prehistoric period, the evidence suggests an increase in cave use during the Geometric, Archaic and Roman periods (Stampolidis and Kotsonas 2013).

In Crete, exceptional votive deposits, including ceramics, terracottas, and bronzes, have been discovered in caves such as Idaion, **Psychro**, **Kamares**, and **Arkalochori**, contributing

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Fig. 9.9. Agios Ioannis Cave, Irakleia. © EPS/F. Mavridis.

to the conceptualization of the 'Cretan divine grotto' (Katsarou and Nagel 2021). The identification of ritual caves in Minoan Crete, their associated rituals and activities, their relationship to other site types, and their role in the dynamics of settlement and religious systems, have been the focus of extensive research (e.g. Tyree 1974; 2013; Faro 2013; Vokotopoulos 2022 and references therein). Burial caves of the Early to Middle Bronze Age, such as **Agios Charalambos** (ID 9820), which served as an ossuary for secondary burials and their associated grave goods, were the locus of complex ceremonies (Betancourt, Davaras and Stravopodi 2014). The consistent ritual use of Cretan caves is widely acknowledged to have begun during the Middle Minoan period in caves such as Kamares, Psychro, **Skoteino**, and **Stravomyti** (Platon 2013: 157; Efstathiou, Kanta and Kontopodi 2020). Furthermore, the emergence of Minoan rural sanctuaries has been linked to the development of complex socio-political structures during the second millennium BC, serving as loci for the creation of communal ideologies and group identity (Agouridis and Vokotopoulos 2018: 95). Recent studies have also emphasized the diverse nature of cave use. For instance, the submerged cave of **Kathedriko** at Akrotiri, Chania, revealed ritual activity potentially linked to freshwater use; the ceramic assemblage includes conical cups suggesting ritual consumption of food and drink (Agouridis 2012: 95). In relation to the Neopalatial period, Minoan sanctuaries have been classified into three types: those associated with specific centres, border sanctuaries, and sites of pan-Cretan significance (Adams 2004). Accordingly, two caves, **Anekathestos** and **Kato Spilios** in eastern Crete, have been interpreted as border sanctuaries of the Minoan centres at Palaikastro and Zakros, respectively (Agouridis and Vokotopoulos 2018: 96, 97). In another example, the **Adiavatos** coastal cave in eastern Crete, based on its marginal location, archaeological finds, and morphology, appears to have served a local ritual function associated with rites of passage during the Final Neopalatial and early Third Palatial periods (Vokotopoulos 2011). Alternatively, the **Ouranias to Froudi cave** complex is among the few definite second millennium BC cave sites on Crete that show evidence of everyday activities such as storage and food processing, suggesting seasonal use (Kopaka 2020).

Significant discoveries are also reported from Cycladic caves. At Agios Ioannis Cave (ID 19998) on Irakleia (Fig. 9.9) and several caves on Paros, material dating to the transition from the Middle to Late Bronze Age, corresponding with the Minoan eruption of the Santorini volcano, has been identified for the first time (Mavridis 2018b). The finds from Irakleia and **Katafygi** Cave (ID 19999) on Paros represent the first evidence of symbolic and ritual cave use in the Cyclades, a phenomenon previously documented only in Minoan Crete. The presence of inverted conical cups beneath volcanic ash layers in the small anonymous cave on Irakleia, and in inaccessible parts of Kalampaki Cave on Paros, supports this interpretation (Mavridis 2018b; forthcoming). The co-occurrence of contemporaneous burnt organic materials, animal bones, large quantities of terrestrial

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and marine shells, a seal, a dagger, and scattered human remains in Katafygi Cave constitute a context thus far unparalleled in Cycladic cave archaeology (Mavridis 2018b; forthcoming). Taken together with evidence from **Daskalio Cave** on Kalymnos (Benzi 2011) and burial contexts in **Katafygadi Cave** on Kythera (Trantalidou *et al.* 2019), these findings reflect the complex and multifaceted use of caves during the period, extending beyond, or possibly influenced by, practices in Crete.

Historic times

As in the case of Crete, cave sanctuaries from the historical periods also became privileged sites of archaeological research, yielding exceptional finds and attracting the attention of pioneering scholars (Katsarou and Nagel 2021: 2). The remarkable cave complex at Vari in Attica, also known as the **Nympholept Cave**, is distinguished by its rock-cut decoration, featuring votive reliefs and carved stairs dated to the fifth century BC (Schörner and Göette 2004; Mari 2024c). Similarly, **Pitsa Cave** in Corinthia is notable for its exceptionally preserved painted wooden plaques (Orlandos 1935; 1965; Katsarou and Nagel 2021: 2; Kavvadias 2025 with references therein), while the **Corycian Cave** near Delphi (Pasquier 1977; Amandry 1981) has yielded over 16,000 vessels and 50,000 figurine fragments, significantly contributing to our understanding of the sacred landscape of ancient Phokis (Katsarou and Nagel 2021).

Numerous excavations have expanded our understanding of cave shrines during historical periods, such as the Cave of Pan at Marathon (Bravo and Mari 2021), Schisto Cave (ID 17981) on Mount Aegaleo in Attica (Mavridis *et al.* 2013; Spathi 2013; Zampiti 2013), and the **Mastros Cave** in Aetoloakarnania (Nagel 2021). In the Cyclades, work by the Ephorate of Palaeoanthropology and Speleology has revealed previously unknown cave shrines dating from the mid-Geometric period onwards, on islands such as Paros (Mavridis 2025) and Irakleia (Mavridis, Tankosić and Kotsonas 2018). Geometric-Archaic material from the cave on Antiparos, considered alongside recent discoveries from Paros, Irakleia, and other sites, suggests a growing trend in cave use in the Cyclades from the late eighth to seventh centuries BC (Mavridis forthcoming). Ritual activity in the cave of Agios Ioannis, Irakleia, was confirmed by the discovery of three clay female figurines (Mavridis, Tankosić and Kotsonas 2018). Finds include imports from across the central Aegean, while fifth-century BC layers feature Attic or Attic-type black-glazed pottery (Mavridis, Tankosić and Kotsonas 2018). The cave witnessed renewed activity during the Roman and Late Roman/Early Byzantine periods, as indicated by lamps, terra sigillata imports and amphorae. Recent investigations on Paros also suggest the existence of another cultic cave from the Geometric-Archaic era, the cave of Agios Georgios (Mavridis 2025; forthcoming).

The study of coastal cave shrines as a diachronic phenomenon in antiquity reveals a mosaic of cultic forms where religion is intertwined with the sea and the ancient maritime world, including, among other sites already mentioned in the text, the lake cave of Melissani, Kephalonia, the caves of Agia Kyriaki on Leukas, Cyclops on Meganisi, Koutalas on Serifos, and many more (Efstathiou *et al.* 2025). In more detail, on the island of Astypalaea, two coastal caves functioned as sanctuaries dedicated to the Nymphs, serving as pilgrimage sites for locals, sailors, traders, and travellers (Efstathiou 2022). In the cave of **Negros**, located above Vatses Bay, inscriptions attest to its dedication to the Nymphs (Fig. 9.10), while the names of male and female dedicants offer rich material for the understanding of the portraiture of Astypalaea (Efstathiou 2023; Efstathiou and Zavou 2023). Figurines discovered at the site confirm that the Nymphs were co-worshipped with deities such as Aphrodite, Pan, Isis, Dionysus, and Heracles (Efstathiou 2023; forthcoming). In **Drakospilios Cave**, situated on the island's northwestern coast and notable for its lake and numerous finds, ceramics, jewellery, and artefacts from eastern Mediterranean

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Fig. 9.10. Negros Cave, Astypalaea, pottery with inscriptions, after Efstathiou and Zavou 2023. © EPS/I. Efstathiou.

trading centres point to the island's integration within extensive economic and cultural networks. Animal bones discovered in both caves indicate that sacrificial rites and feasting were integral components of ritual practice (Efstathiou 2024).

The so-called **Chrysospilia Cave** on Folegandros in the Cyclades (ID 11495) represents a unique example among Aegean sanctuaries (Vasilopoulou 2018). The ongoing documentation and study of inscriptions within the cave promise to enhance our understanding of its role as a cult centre. Hundreds of inscriptions, mostly male names but with some female names as well, often including clues as to their ethnicity, have been preserved. These inscriptions, dating from the fourth to second centuries BC, mainly originate from the Aegean islands, with others from mainland Greece, Crete, Cyprus, and beyond (Vasilopoulou 2018).

The cave at **Lechova** (ID 1423), Corinthia, dedicated to the Nymphs according to some graffiti finds on pottery sherds, has revealed material from the Late Archaic (end of the sixth century BC) to the end of the fourth century BC (Kormazopoulou, Zygouri and Papathanassiou 2011; Spathi 2020). In western Greece, the systematic study and re-evaluation of excavated materials from cave shrines such as Drakospilia on Kephalonia (Samartzidou-Orkopoulou 2015), the coastal shrine of Drakaina Cave on the same island (Hatzioti 2007; Karadima 2021; 2024), and the **Polis Cave** on Ithaca, which was used from the Mycenaean-Geometric through to later periods (Benton 1935, 1939; Morgan and Hayward 2021), have revealed important aspects of cultic activity. The **Cave of Kouritas** (Hatziotis forthcoming), located approximately 10 kilometres east of Vonitsa and a few kilometres inland from the southern shore of the Ambracian Gulf, appears to have been a significant sanctuary within the territory of ancient Thyreion (Katsarou and Darlas 2017). Excavations have yielded stratified deposits containing ritual assemblages from the sixth to second centuries BC, including pottery, lamps, bronzes, glassware, and a notable sequence of terracotta figurines, from dancing groups and busts to relief plaques (Katsarou and Darlas 2017; Hatziotis forthcoming). The cave of the **Leibethrid Nymphs** (Andron) on Mount **Helikon** (ID 3082) in Boeotia, mentioned by Pausanias and Strabo, has produced a wealth of votive offerings and stands as a prominent mainland cave shrine dedicated to Pan, the Nymphs, and other deities (Vasilopoulou 2024). Syntheses of the available

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Fig. 9.11. Pottery of the sixth to eighth centuries AD. Agios Ioannis Cave, Irakleia, after Kormazopoulou and Diamanti 2021. © EPS/F. Mavridis.

evidence have underscored the complex and varied nature of cave shrines across the Aegean (Sporn 2020; Angliker 2021).

As opposed to the Hellenistic and Early and Middle Roman periods, the Late Roman/Early Byzantine is characterized by more intensive use of caves, mainly related to rural or domestic activities, including herding, temporary shelter, and storage places, with several representative examples found in Attica (e.g. Wickens 2013: 242, 243). They were also used as refugia in times of turmoil and danger (Kormazopoulou 2023: 140–43, with relevant bibliography). Later, many caves were fashioned into shelters, as dwellings and places of prayer for monks and asketes, transformed even later into chapels or evolving into monasteries (Paliouras 2004). The ancient symbolism of caves as liminal spaces between light and dark persisted in Christian iconography, albeit with altered significance. While caves were clearly significant locales, many aspects of their importance remain only partially understood (Mavridis *et al.* 2013). A reassessment of material from the Cave of Pan at Vari, which included more than 2,000 intact clay lamps (the largest assemblage of Athenian lamps from a single context so far) alongside other ceramic wares dated from the fifth to seventh centuries AD, promises to illuminate production, distribution, and usage patterns in cave contexts during these phases (Gerousi-Bendermacher 2023). Epigraphic and graffiti evidence from **Daveli Cave** in Attica, dated to the seventh century AD, further illustrates the diverse range of material available for study from cave sites (Mari, Zavou and Kormazopoulou 2023). Numerous caves have yielded Byzantine and post-Byzantine finds, particularly pottery. Fieldwork in the Cyclades, for instance, has documented Byzantine pottery from the cave of Agios Ioannis on Irakleia (Fig. 9.11), dating primarily from the sixth to eighth centuries, and offering significant insights into commercial activities and connectivity during a period for which historical sources are often silent (Kormazopoulou and Diamanti 2021). Perhaps the most distinctive case is that of Andritsa Cave (ID 2404) in the municipality of Lerna, Argolid, which contained a rare sealed archaeological assemblage (Kormazopoulou and Hatzilazarou 2005; Kormazopoulou 2024). The finds narrate the story of a group of individuals who used the cave as a refuge, sealed within it with their possessions, for obscure reasons (Kormazopoulou and Hatzilazarou 2024). The assemblage included human skeletal remains, vases, lamps, metal objects, and coins. Osteological analysis suggests the individuals were in good health and died *in situ* (Stravopodi 2006). The latest coin find, from the reign of Tyberius-Constantinus (578–82 AD), provides a *terminus post quem* for the event (Kormazopoulou and Hatzilazarou 2010).

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Conclusions

Caves represent a distinctive and methodologically complex category of archaeological site. Beyond their archaeological utility as sites of habitation or refuge, caves are becoming increasingly understood as culturally and symbolically charged spaces. Interpretations rooted in dichotomous frameworks, such as sacred/profane or utilitarian/ritual, have often imposed reductive models onto what were, in reality, multivalent spaces. The methodological and epistemological challenges of cave archaeology have fostered an increasingly interdisciplinary research agenda. Furthermore, regional and diachronic survey projects have contextualized cave use within broader socio-cultural and landscape frameworks. Given the extensive number of caves in Greece, there is a compelling imperative for continued specialized archaeological engagement. This includes the development of adjusted methodological protocols and conservation frameworks that reflect the unique environmental, cultural, and administrative dimensions of subterranean spaces. Ultimately, the study of caves necessitates an approach that recognizes their archaeological richness, not as isolated phenomena, but as integral components of the wider human past, embedded in dynamic systems of meaning, practice, and transformation.

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