



Palaeolithic cave art from Crete, Greece

Thomas F. Strasser^{a,*}, Sarah C. Murray^b, Alexandra van der Geer^c, Christina Kolb^d,
Louis A. Ruprecht Jr^e

^a Department of Art and Art History, Providence College, 1 Cunningham Sq., Providence, RI 02918, USA

^b Department of Classics, University of Toronto, 125 Queen's Park, Toronto, ON M5S 2C7, Canada

^c Department of Geology and Historical Geology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens 157 84, Greece

^d Freelance Archaeological Illustrator, 11842 Broadwater Ln., Charlotte, NC 28273, USA

^e Department of Anthropology, Georgia State University, 23 Gilmer Street SE, Atlanta, GA 30302, USA

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ABSTRACT

The earliest figural art known from Greece is dated to the Neolithic period (ca. 8,5 to 5 thousand years ago). A recent study of the petroglyphs at Asphendou Cave on the island of Crete, however, suggests that such art has a much longer history in the Aegean basin. First published over forty years ago, the debate concerning the petroglyphs' age has lain dormant for decades. In light of technological advances in digital imaging and recent archaeological and palaeontological discoveries on the island we re-assess the dating of the petroglyphs and prove that some were made in the Late Pleistocene, or Upper Palaeolithic. Comparison of the iconography to fossil data demonstrates that an extinct endemic deer (*Candiacervus*) is represented at Asphendou Cave. This is the earliest figural art yet discovered in Greece.

1. Introduction

Crete is the largest Greek island and has been isolated from the mainland for the last 5 million years (Zachariasse et al., 2008). In the Asphendou cave near the White Mountains of western Crete (Fig. 1) a speleothem (a calcite flowstone) inscribed with complex geometric and figural rock art (petroglyphs) was discovered in the 1960s; the first reports appeared in the early 1970s (Faure, 1972; Hood, 1974; Papoutsakis, 1972; Tzedakis, 1973; Zois, 1973a, 1973b). A debate centered on whether this rock art should be dated to the Bronze Age (between about 5 to 3 thousand years ago.) or the Palaeolithic period (at least 11 thousand years ago). Due to the lack of compelling evidence, this debate rapidly stagnated and the cave has received little attention since then. We are now in possession of archaeological and palaeontological information, as well as new technologies for documentation and analysis, unavailable to earlier scholars. Bringing these data and new tools to bear on the study of the engravings, we offer palaeontological and iconographic evidence to confirm a Palaeolithic date (most likely the 'Upper' Palaeolithic) for the earliest carvings.

2. The Asphendou Cave

2.1. Location and description of the Asphendou Cave

The cave is located in the region of Sphakia in west Crete (35°14'07.0" N 24°13'00.6" E), at an elevation of ca. 720 masl. Today this region serves as a fertile grazing zone for ruminants because of its elevation high in the eastern flanking foothills of the White Mountains and the associated flora. The cave is small (8.5 m × 3.5 m) with a low ceiling (0.6 m), and is formed in crystalline limestone that comprises much of the area's geology (Fig. 2). On its floor is a speleothem where the petroglyphs are carved over an area of ca. 1.15 m × 0.8 m.

The small dimensions of the extant space of the cave suggest the term 'rock shelter' is a more appropriate label, but the presence of several large piles of tumbled boulders in front of the entrance suggests that the cave was larger in the past prior to the collapse of its roof. In addition, the existing scholarly literature primarily refers to it as a 'cave', so we maintain that label here to prevent confusion.

2.2. Palaeontological discoveries after 1970

Unavailable to earlier scholars who studied the cave were the subsequent discoveries of fossil remains of dwarf forms of deer (*Candiacervus*) in the Liko and Gerani Caves on the northern coast of the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: tstrasse@providence.edu (T.F. Strasser).

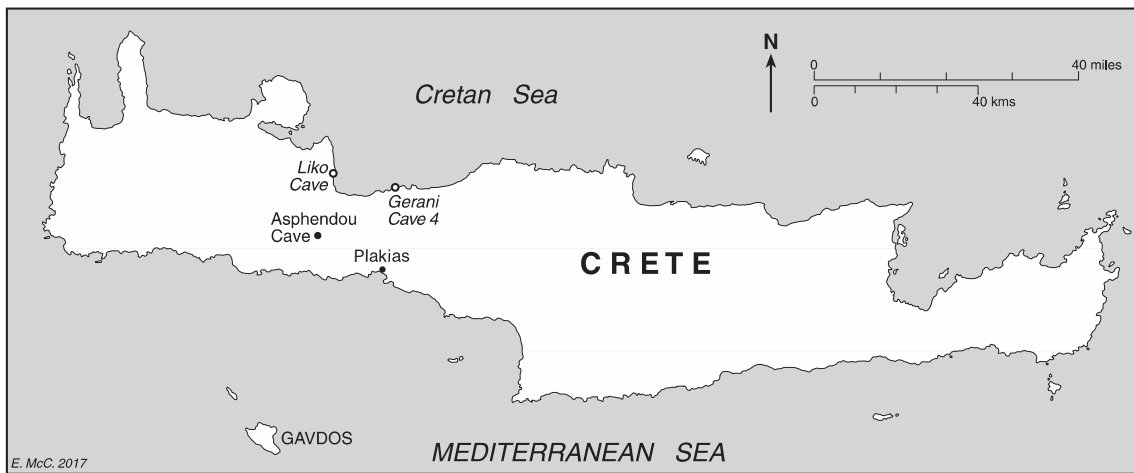


Fig. 1. Location of most relevant sites mentioned in text. (E. McClellan and S. Murray)



Fig. 2. Exterior view from the south (T. Strasser). Interior views of Asphendou Cave facing northwest with speleothem on the floor. Close-up of petroglyphs on right (S. Murray).

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