

THE CAVE TO KLEISIDI NEAR MYRTOS IN SOUTHERN CRETE

In Memoriam Bernd Kaiser 15 IX 1974

In the region of Myrtos in southern Crete two sites of major importance have been excavated by the British School of Athens. Dr. Peter Warren has brought to light the Early Minoan village 3.5 km. east of Myrtos¹, and Professor Gerald Cadogan has uncovered the Middle to Late Minoan villa and town of Myrtos Pyrgos just east of the modern village. Both sites have contributed significantly to our understanding of Minoan culture in this area.

There is a third site near Myrtos, a cave locally called Τὸ Κλεισιδί, which has also yielded important material. It caught the attention of Paul Faure and he published brief accounts of it². He states that an old woman of the nearby village Parsa (modern Metaxochori) discovered the cave in 1943; during the next two years it served the resisters to the German occupation as a place of refuge; the cave is long he thinks, ca. 150 m. and is composed of several chambers; the pottery seemed to Faure to be Neolithic, LM III, Subminoan and Geometric; he also collected some intact vessels which he stored in the local school; in addition to the pottery, the cave, according to Faure, also contains the bones of about forty adults and children who died in the cave in earlier times.

The cave's reported great length of occupation and the presence of human bones greatly intrigued the late German archaeologist Bernd Kaiser, and he

paid his first visit to it in the summer of 1968. At that time he examined and photographed the approximately fifteen pots that Faure had deposited in the local school. Although all the vases were badly encrusted with calcium, Kaiser thought³ they all seemed to correspond to the pottery types of Warren's Myrtos Period II, dated EM IIB; the most distinctive pieces were those decorated in the Vasiliki manner. A few others may have been slightly earlier or later, but no later than Early Minoan.

Regardless of the indications that the cave was not inhabited as long as Faure seemed to think, Kaiser's enthusiasm so waxed that he was able to convince the author of this note to accompany him on a second visit, with the thought that if I was suitably impressed then we would apply for permission to excavate it. We therefore journeyed to the cave in May of 1974.

The cave is situated to the southwest of the poor village of Metaxochori, formerly named Parsa, high above and to the north of modern Myrtos on the south slopes of Mt. Dikte, approximately 7 km. southwest of the bustling and picturesque village of Malles⁴. When we

2. *BCH* 80 (1956) p. 100 no 3; *Fonctions des cavernes crétoises* (*École française d'Athènes. Travaux et Mémoires* 14), pp. 30, 36 n. 1, 48, 49, 60, 67, 209 n. 4, and 226 n. 3.

3. Faure's pottery is now missing (see below), and so are Kaiser's photographs. Kaiser's notes on the pottery are here transcribed from a private communication.

4. From the church of Ayios Konstantinos in Metaxochori the remains of a Turkish *kaldirim*

1. P. Warren, *Myrtos*.

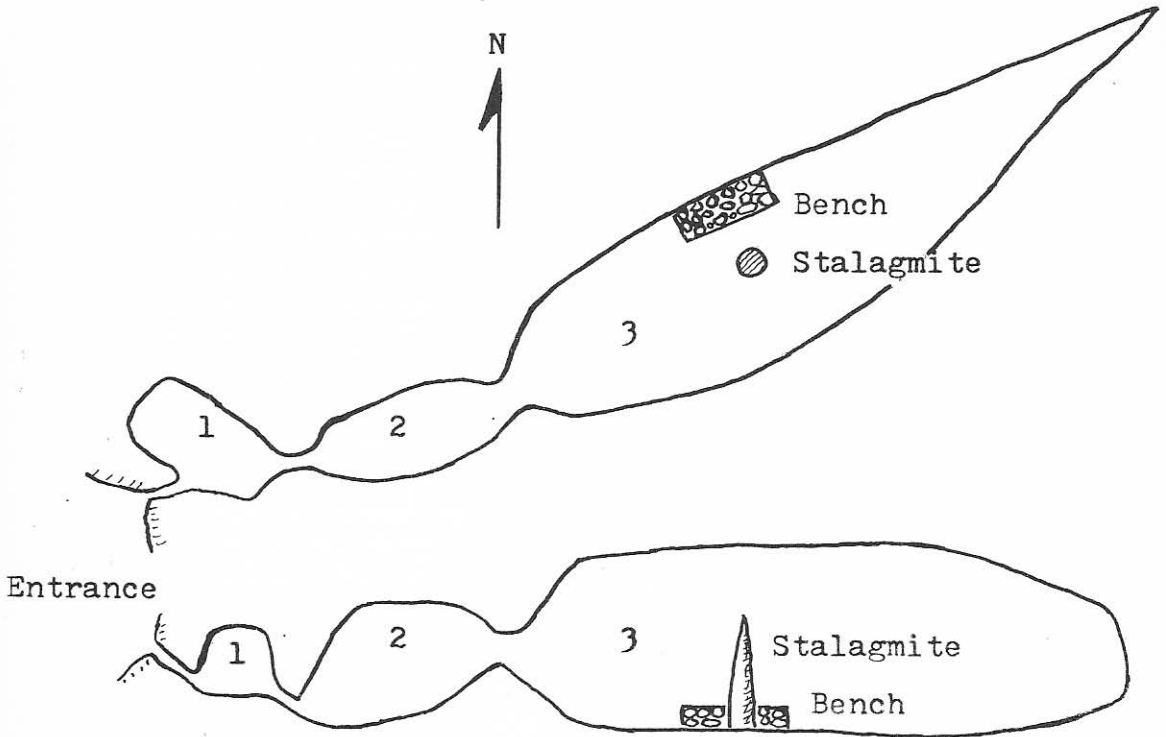


Fig. 1. Plan and section of *To Kleisidi* in rough sketch (scale, ca. 1:200).

arrived, the village Metaxochori was poor indeed. Already greatly underpopulated, it now seemed almost deserted. The few young men who still lived in the village were camping in the coastal plains below in order to harvest the tomato crop ; the only remaining residents consisted of a few old women

and two herdsmen. The houses were unwhitewashed and falling rapidly into ruin. The local school was apparently long abandoned, instruction now being offered below in the modern village of Myrtyos, and the pots deposited there by Faure were not to be found.

We persuaded one of the herders to

leads southwest. At first the road is fairly level; after it crosses one stream bed it then ascends before descending to another filled with red oleanders. The road ascends again and levels off. About 20 minutes out of the village it passes below the first set of rock outcroppings. At the

base of the second set the visitor should strike out and down the ridge about 100 m. (farther to the west are terraces and level fields). The entrance to the cave lies at the foot of a single outcropping of rock. Because of its small size the entrance is difficult to find.

guide us to the vicinity of the cave, but he refused not only to enter with us but also even to approach the entrance.

During our visit to the cave, Kaiser and I explored it to its end (fig. 1). The entrance is extremely small and narrow, just barely large enough to crawl through. After a short distance the entrance opens into the first chamber, somewhat rectangular in plan with a very low ceiling. The floor consists of loose earth mixed with a great number of bones and sherds, all thickly coated with calcium. There seem only enough bones for as many as twenty skeletons, about half of Faure's estimate, but none of the bones appeared to belong to an infant.

Another narrow passage leads on and down, some of the bones and sherds spilling into it for only a short distance. This passage gradually opens into a second small chamber which appears choked off at the opposite end by a scree. At the top of this scree, however, another narrow opening leads into the third and last chamber. This third room is really only a high and fairly wide rift in the rock. In the middle stands a tall stalagmite and on the north side of the room there is a fairly large (ca. 2.5×1 m.) bench made of medium-sized stones, the *Totenbett* of our herdsmen. The whole length of the cave did not appear to us to be more than 30 m.

The cave thus presents two distinctive features. 1. The tall stalagmite resembles those in other caves that were used in the Minoan times, especially those stalagmites in the Caves of Trapeza in Lasithi and of Eileithyia near Amni-

sos⁵. In the latter there occurs a stone construction around the central stalagmites like an altar around a cult statue. The stone bench in *To Kleisidi's* third chamber may have served a similar function. 2. The first chamber of our cave holds a mass of human bones and sherds. The bones are so badly disturbed that no skeleton is now intact; instead, the chamber with its heap of bones resembles an ossuary⁶. The calcium encrustation on both bones and sherds leads to the belief that both are contemporary. We examined over fifty sherds, cleaning them with penknives and water from our canteens as best we could. None of the sherds looked any later than Early Minoan; and the diagnostic ones were all EM IIb in the Myrtos sequence, confirming Kaiser's earlier impression. If this date is correct, then the bones ought also to belong to the Early Minoan period, and cannot therefore be the bones of the *antartes* of 1943 - 1945.

5. Trapeza : J. D. S. Pendlebury *et al.*, *BSA* 36 (1935 - 36) pp. 5 - 131. Eileithyia : Sp. Marinatos, ΠΑΕ 1929, p. 94 ; 1930, p. 91 ; 1932, p. 76 ; 1935, p. 2 ; 1938, p. 130. Faure (*Fonctions* Ch. 4, pp. 81 - 197) discusses the religious characteristics of the caves in Crete, especially some fifty of them (pp. 187 - 190) whose limestone formations the Minoans may have worshipped. Faure does not include *To Kleisidi* in this list and nowhere else does he mention the stalagmite and the stone bench in the rear chamber.

6. Many Early Minoan caves in Crete seemed to have been used as tombs (Faure, *Fonctions*, pp. 66 - 70, list) but apparently none, besides *To Kleisidi*, as an ossuary, unless the rock shelter Kato Khrysolakkos at Mallia can be described as a cave (Demargne, *Mallia, Nécropoles* I, pp. 1 - 24).

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(omitted from publication, p. 163, end of first paragraph):

After our investigations in the cave this same herder and his friend offered us their hospitality. We sat under mulberry trees in the courtyard of a house, drinking an excellent raki, and nibbling on raw almonds. We all grew warm and languid, listening to the two men's stories: during the second Great War the brave resisters against the Germans (this said with an apologetic smile) had hid in the cave and had died there nursing wounds; indeed there was, deep within the cave, a stone bed for them, although their bones are now to be seen just within the entrance. As a result, the cave is now haunted and no one dares go inside; even they, strong and brave though they are, cannot be brought to approach it.

This passage gradually opens into a second small chamber which appears choked off at the opposite end by a scree. At the top of this scree, however, another narrow opening leads into the third and last chamber. This third room is really only a high and fairly wide rift in the rock. In the middle stands a tall stalagmite and on the north side of the room there is a fairly large (ca. 2.5 × 1 m.) bench made of medium-sized stones, the *Totenbett* of our herdsmen. The whole length of the cave did not appear to us to be more than 30 m.

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A distinctive EM I Ib sherd (fig. 2 and 3) is the rim and body fragment of a Vasiliki ware, deep bowl with one handle preserved (orange - buff fabric; L. 0.097 m. ; H. of bowl more than 0.082 m. ; D. of bowl calculated 0.152 m.)⁷.

At the end of the day's exploring and the afternoon's warm hospitality we left Metaxochori full of hope for returning the next summer and excavating the first chamber. But Diktaian Zeus

7. Myrtos type P260 (*Myrtos*, p. 119, fig. 55, pl. 42F).

did not nod in our direction : almost all our photographs returned blank, the subsequent change in the Greek government made our plans uncertain, and then in September of the same year Kaiser was killed in an automobile accident while on a tour of Iran. His death was an inexpressible shock. He was an exuberant and loyal friend, and a fine and creative scholar. His unfinished doctoral dissertation on the relief frescoes from Knossos is now in the hands of friends who hope to complete it as a memorial.

JOHN G. YOUNGER

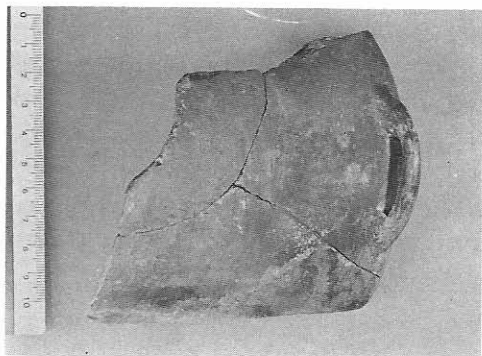


Fig. 2. Fragment of EM I Ib deep bowl.

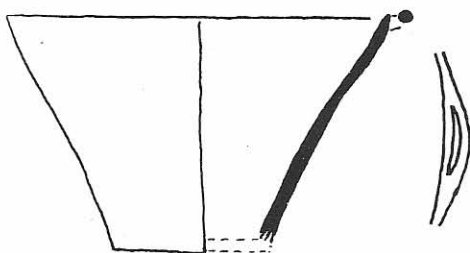


Fig. 3. Fragment of EM I Ib deep bowl, section (scale 1:3) and detail of handle (in plan).