

NEOLITHIC ALEPOTRYPA CAVE  
IN THE MANI, GREECE

IN HONOR OF GEORGE PAPATHANASSOPOULOS

*Edited by*

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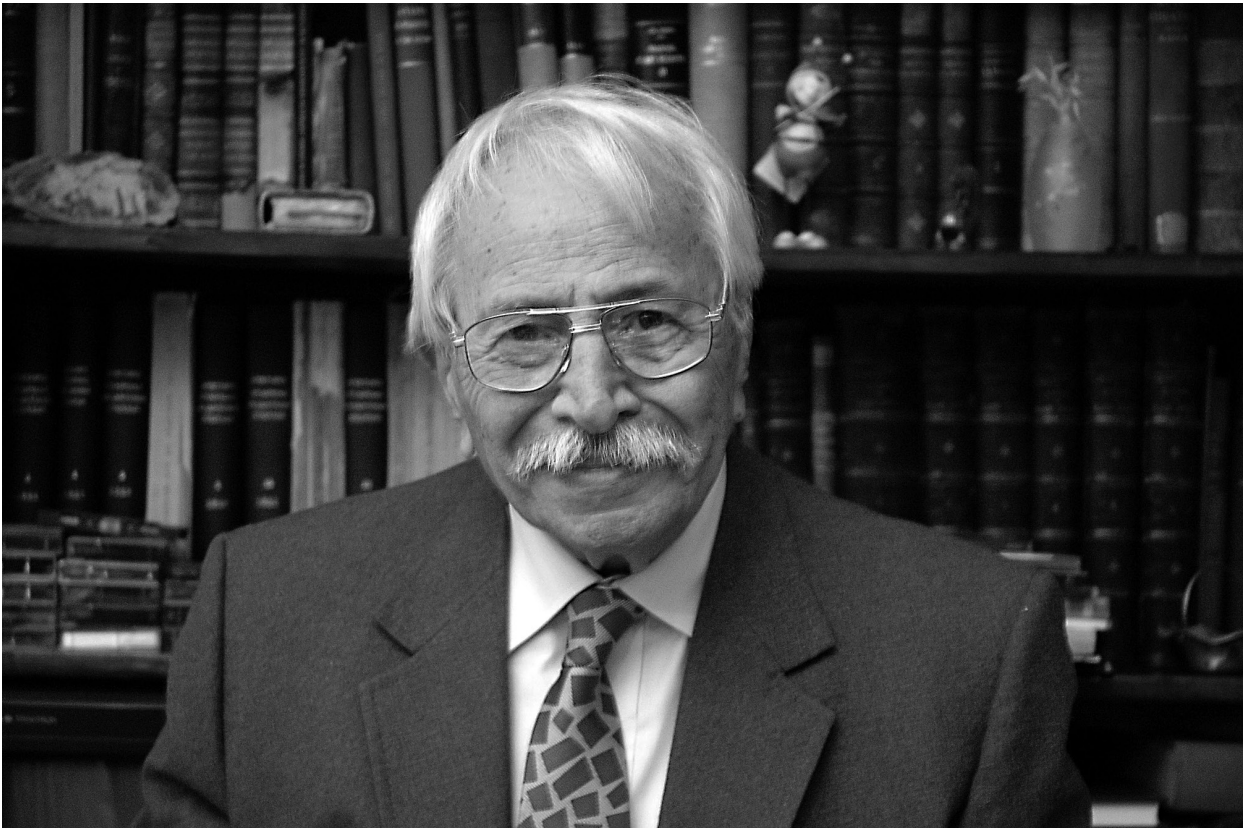
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*Front cover: Alepotrypa Cave, the Lake (by Andreas Darlas)*



*George Papathanassopoulos*



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# Memories of Alepotrypa Cave, Diros

*George Papathanassopoulos*

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In 1970, the Hellenic Minister of the Interior for the military dictatorship, Stylianos Pattakos, removed me from my position as the Ephor of Antiquities at Olympia. He argued that the opening of the irrigation canal of the dam of the Pinios River, which was to be inaugurated by the head of the military junta, Georgios Papadopoulos, was being delayed due to my extensive excavations in the city of Ancient Elis. The canal was designed to pass through that region. I was unceremoniously removed from my position – while on leave in Athens – and reassigned to the Ephorate of Sparta, where I took office on 25 March 1970.

While in my new position, my interest was attracted to two small marble female figurines of Neolithic date that were displayed in a small case on the wall of the Archaeological Museum of Sparta. These figurines had been found by the speleologist Anna Petrocheilou in Alepotrypa Cave at Diros. I was further intrigued by other artefacts in the back yard of the museum: there were four big baskets full of fragments of broken jars with exceptional relief decoration. These had also been found at Alepotrypa Cave by Anna Petrocheilou. I took photographs of the fragments and recorded them. In addition to these extraordinary findings, in the official correspondence files of the Ephorate of Sparta, I saw references and descriptions with photographs and drawings of ten wall carvings that also had been observed by Anna Petrocheilou in various parts of the same cave system.

Understandably, my interest was piqued. I immediately planned a visit to the place of origin – Alepotrypa Cave at Diros. When I arrived there, I found a group of people, organised by the Philips Company, performing the final testing for the *Son et Lumière* installation. The programme was being organised by the Greek Organization of Tourism (EOT) as part of the forthcoming touristic attractions at the cave.

As a result of my visit, I realised that all ten wall carvings were fake. They had been etched recently at

various points throughout the cave, possibly by the same person that had previously produced ‘prehistoric centaurs’ on ‘ancient’ slate tiles and delivered them to the Museum of Volos, claiming them as originals.

I decided that I had to cancel the festive opening of Alepotrypa to tourism: the cave was full of archaeological material that had not been studied by the appropriate service.

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Thus, after ten years of service at the National Archaeological Museum (1950–1960), followed by ten more at Ancient Olympia and after 1966 as Ephor of Antiquities. I began the third phase of my career as Ephor of Antiquities at Sparta where, from 1970 onwards, I was exclusively involved with the Neolithic Cave of Alepotrypa in Diros. When I entered Alepotrypa, knowing that the cave also had been used by Neolithic man, I could not help but feel strange – wondering about all the impressions and the feelings the cave had aroused in those people that had used it long ago, during the Neolithic period. Walking under the artificial light through the long corridor that winds to the back of the cave, to the lake with the potable water, I imagined a Neolithic man with just a torch in his hand following the same path I was taking. I thought that, just like me, he would have stopped – out of both respect and fear – at the point where the two corridors meet: where the higher level of Hall B descends to the significantly lower Ossuary of the Neolithic community. Then, continuing along the same path, he would have passed the cobbled ‘Niche of the Amphora’ (Niche 14) and entered Hall Z, where two neighbouring niches opened (Niches Z.22 and K.31) *en route* to the great hall of the cave, the Chamber of the Lakes.

The massive size of the cave and the incredible number of ceramic fragments found on the soil surface indicated to me that it was vital that systematic archaeological



research should be conducted here. So I asked for the collaboration of my colleague and friend Dimitris Theocharis, who was eminently skilled in the investigation of the Neolithic Age. Unfortunately, however, this was not possible due to serious obligations he had in Thessaly. So our collaboration was limited to just one visit at the very start of the archaeological investigations in the cave. The work began on 15 July 1970, with my colleague George Steinhauer, Curator of the Antiquities Ephorate of Sparta, the archaeologist Sophia Eleftheriadou and the experienced excavator Menelaus Paleologos of the Museum of Sparta.

At the beginning of the excavations in Alepotrypa, Spyridon Marinatos, who at the time was General Inspector, came to Alepotrypa accompanied by the French geologist Jean Marie Lambert of the mining operations at Laurion, with his wife Nicole. Marinatos assigned the study and further excavation of Ossuary II to them. Until then, the investigation had been carried out by myself and the biological anthropologist Aris Poulianos, who had also been brought in by Marinatos. The research started with the opening of trial trench B1 at the centre of Chamber B, where the greatest thickness of the undisturbed Neolithic human remains were, impressively, still visible.<sup>[SEP]</sup>

Meanwhile, excavation across the whole of the Northern Sector of Chamber B had revealed the surface layer of the fill. As a result, we were able to locate *in situ* significant finds and furnishings established by the users of the cave in the later Neolithic Period. These included two deep circular storage pits lined with clay, similar to the one already revealed by Anna Petrocheilou at a higher level of the same chamber. One of these had a stone-lined rim, as well as a large hearth, and two intact ceramic vessels found *in situ*.

During the course of the excavation, I first lived in a small tent under the portico set up in front of the entrance of the cave; later I had the use of a camper, a kind courtesy of the EOT.

Amongst the general difficulties and vicissitudes of life that the excavation team in Diros had to endure was the lack of drinking water. We resorted to drinking the brackish water pumped from the cave's own lake. As for food, originally we had a roughly installed kitchen near the Chapel of St. Saviour. Later on, when the Ministry of Tourism's restaurant, located near the beach, began its service, we were able to eat there.

All the above-mentioned difficulties were rendered tolerable, however, by the natural beauty of the Gulf of Diros, with Mount Taygetos in the background.

For the safe daily transport of the excavation finds from the cave to the Museum of Sparta, upon my request, a car and a driver from the military unit of Sparta had been assigned to assist us. John Orfanakos, the Mayor of Pyrgos Dirou, Takis Kilakos, who later became Mayor, and local entrepreneurs Koulis

Kolokouris and Stavros Tsoukalas all were highly supportive of the project.

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The examination of the top layer of the Northern Sector of Chamber B gave a good first impression of the conditions, lifestyle, and organisation of those Neolithic people that had used the cave. It seems that the inhabitants of the area and the cave would choose appropriate natural niches in its boundaries as places to reside; they opened circular pits with clay-lined walls and stone-lined rims – invariably of flat slabs of stones – to act as covers, presumably for the food stored therein.

This clear picture of their organized daily routine, particularly evident in the Northern Sector of Hall B and in Niche 15 of Chamber D (with its amphora *in situ*), spurred me on to pursue a general exploration of Alepotrypa. For this reason, I approached the pertinent Ministry Department and several other sponsoring bodies; I was successful in raising the finances for the project through the EOT and the Psychia Institution (1970–1971).

Unfortunately, the project was stopped in its tracks when I was held in Korydalos prison and suffered at the hands of the Junta for my political views. Even after my release, my persecution continued: first I became a *persona non grata* and then I was transferred to Agios Nikolaos in Crete, where I was eventually officially dismissed from my duties by a telegraph-message from the Junta.

After the regime change in 1974, I was legally returned to active service. First I served at the headquarters of the Ministry of Culture and then I was assigned to head up the newly-founded Department of Underwater Antiquities, a unit whose creation I had vigorously proposed. Here I served until January 1987, when I officially retired.

The period from 1970 to 1987 was a period of limited archaeological research in Diros but, over time, there was some significant development in the infrastructure. The existing portico was transformed into conservation laboratories, workshops, and a hostel where the excavation crew could live. All the necessities were provided: a kitchen, bathrooms, a study area, a conservation area, and a large storage room which later (1992) became the Diros Neolithic Museum. All this was successfully achieved with the help of the Association of Friends of the Neolithic Museum of Diros: in particular with the assistance of Carmen and Basilis Konstantakopoulos and the Greek-American couple Angelos and Eleni Tsakopoulos.

It must be emphasized that the project would never have succeeded without the dedication – well beyond their official obligations and responsibilities – of the scientific and technical staff who served and continue to do so from 1970 to the present day.

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The excavation project at Alepotrypa Cave has led to more and more significant finds and continues to

hold my interest. In 1988 I broached the possibility of acquiring more substantial funding for additional research and development with the Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri. By decision of the Minister, a programme for the project was agreed to with the Ministry of Culture, Archaeological Receipts Fund (TAPA) and the Municipality of Diros. The project was funded by grants from the TAPA. In this way, it became possible to recruit archaeologists, designers, administrators, and technical personnel.

The research included the continuation of the excavation in Trench B1: this yielded numerous finds – undecorated and painted pottery, rich skeletal material, figurines, and stone and bone tools. The progress was such that a depth of 5 m of excavation was reached: the stratigraphy of B1 revealed that Neolithic man was using Alepotrypa from c. 6,000 BC to 3,200 cal C.

In addition to trench B1, I began excavating in Niche Z22, just before the entrance to the Great Hall of the Lakes. In this area, numerous colourfully painted, broken, pots were revealed: this was an unexpectedly rich and unique cultural treasure. Apart from the archaeological value of these finds, the chance to see and handle them gave me – and even now continues to give me – joy beyond words, a deep satisfaction in that I was fortunate to have discovered them, and so to have ensured their preservation, promotion, and study.

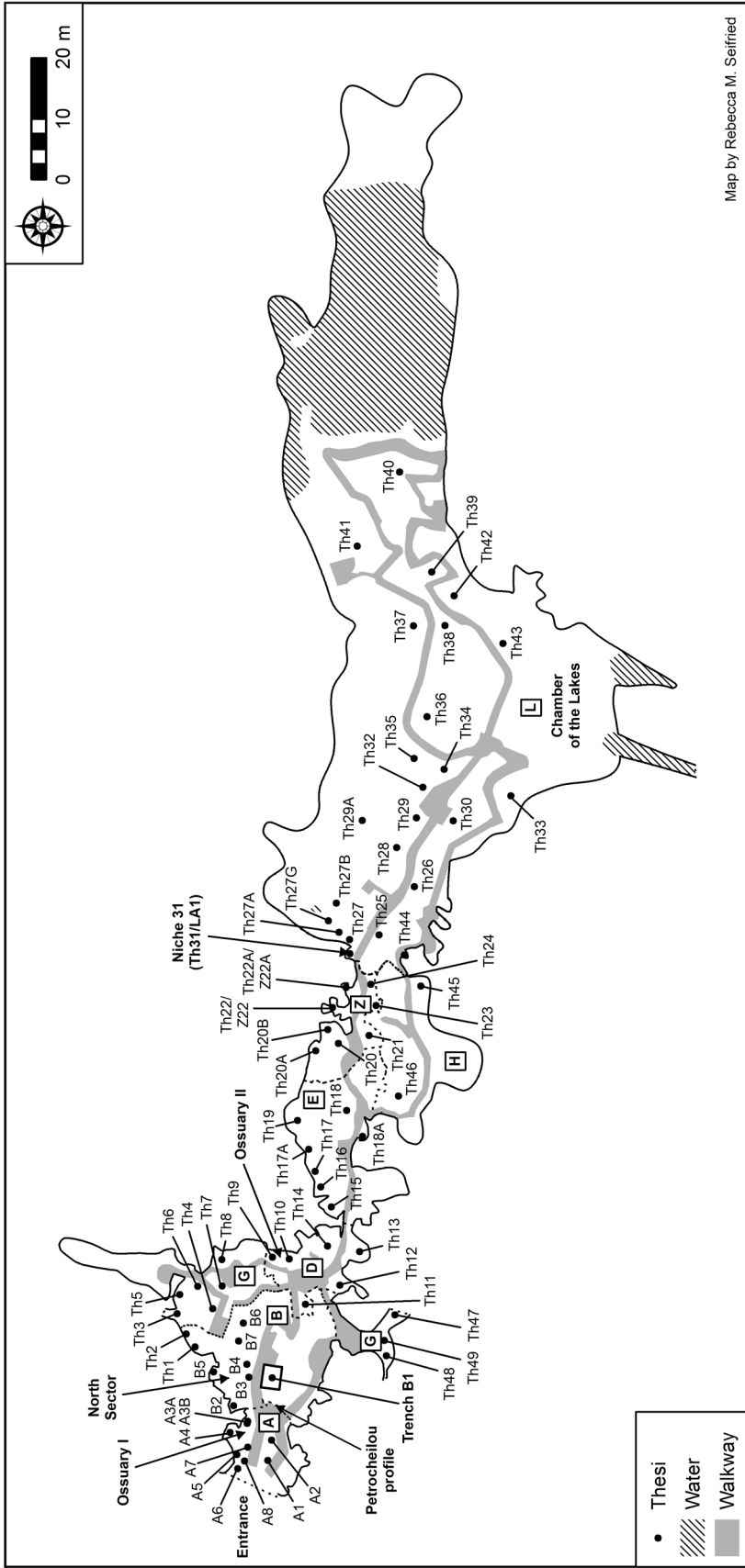
With the Planning Agreement in place and the support of the Association of Friends of the Neolithic Museum

of Diros, the excavation and planning work in Diros has been decisively promoted and further advanced by the Archaeological Receipts Fund of the Ministry of Culture. During the summer of 2006 it finally became possible to allow the public to visit Alepotrypa: but only for 6 months as the funding soon came to an end.

However, I persevered in my efforts to advance the scientific work. In 2010, following a ministerial decision, I secured a 5-year programme, with the collaboration of Greek and US scientists and funding from the Institute for Aegean Prehistory, the Wiener-Laboratory, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the National Geographic Society, and the Field Museum of Natural History.

After four decades, since 1970, Alepotrypa is now ranked as one of the most important archaeological sites of Neolithic culture in Europe. The book the site inspired me to write – *Neolithic Diros* – is included as teaching material in the Philosophical Schools of the Universities of Athens and Thessaloniki. I also feel delighted that my colleagues – Greek and foreign scientists of various disciplines – are busy with the study and publication of material acquired from Alepotrypa Cave.

I dream of the development of the infrastructure that Alepotrypa deserves and the building of a large museum nearby that will house and display all the major findings of the excavations. Thus, visitors will be best informed about the culturally sophisticated practices of Neolithic man on the southernmost tip of mainland Greece.



Map by Rebecca M. Seifried

Figure 0.1. Alepotrypa Cave floorplan and archaeological loci. Important note: TH (from Thesi) is the equivalent of Θ (Θόση = locus). TH can also be substituted for the chamber designation letter (i.e. Th20 is the same as Θ/20 or Z20). Certain loci may also bear specific names. Furthermore, Niche 31 is the same as LA1 or Th31 or Θ/31.

