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The Byzantine cave monastery of the Ilgarini mağarası (Paphlagonia) – the Chryse Petra of Nikon Metanoite?

Max Ritter

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
ritterm@uni-mainz.de

Abstract

This paper discusses the hitherto virtually unknown Byzantine cave monastery in the Ilgarini mağarası in the district of Pınarbaşı/Kastamonu based on its building remains, graffiti (mostly crosses), burials and notable finds. The remains were recorded during two brief surveys in 2012 and 2022. To shed light on the history of the site, an attempt is made to contextualise it within the mountainous regions of Middle Byzantine Paphlagonia, as well as with Middle Byzantine texts that relate to monasticism and might refer to the site. Research produces tentative evidence that the Ilgarini mağarası may be identified with the Chryse Petra known from several Byzantine texts, most prominently the *Life* of St Nikon Metanoite.

Özet

Bu makale, Kastamonu'nun Pınarbaşı ilçesindeki Ilgarini mağarası'nda bulunan ve bugüne kadar neredeyse hiç bilinmeyen Bizans mağara manastırını, yapı kalıntıları, grafiti (çoğunlukla haçlardan oluşan), gömüler ve dikkate değer buluntulara dayanarak değerlendirmektedir. Alandaki kalıntılar, 2012 ve 2022 yıllarında yapılan iki kısa yüzey araştırması sırasında tespit edilmiştir. Alan ve tarihi, hem Orta Bizans Paphlagonia'sının dağlık bölgeleri, hem de manastır hayatıyla bağlantılı Orta Bizans metinleri ışığında değerlendirilmeye çalışılmıştır. Bu araştırma, Ilgarini mağarası'nın, başta Aziz Nikon Metanoite'nin Hayatı olmak üzere çeşitli Bizans metinlerinden bilinen Chryse Petra ile özdeşleştirilebileceğine dair olası kanıtlar ortaya koymaktadır.

During a weekend break from the archaeological excavation at Pompeiopolis / Vilayet Kastamonu in August 2012, Ziver Kaplan, the then director of Kültür ve Turizm Kastamonu İl, invited some team members including me to a field trip further west to Pınarbaşı/Kastamonu. He was so kind to guide the group through what was still the fairly inaccessible woods of the Küre dağları to the Ilgarini mağarası, a large natural cave holding significant archaeological remains. As I was amazed by them, I did some subsequent research on the site, and realised that there were few written accounts available about it. I decided to investigate the matter further, but it was not easy to return due to the cave's remoteness. Not until June 2022 did a second opportunity present itself. In the meantime, routes of access from the south had been developed through signposting, among other efforts to promote local tourism, making it now possible to reach the cave more easily with a brisk 1.5h march through dense forest. On the negative side of things, many more people now set out to hike along the trail (approx. 2000 trekking tourists per year, according to the Küre Dağları Milli Parkı officials), littering along the way and leaving graffiti in the cave. After having been looted long ago, the cave's tombs and other structures now also suffer from steady destruction. The intent of this piece is to record the current situation before even more evidence is lost, but also to introduce the site to the scientific community; the cave features in Turkish publications only and is treated there in a cursory, sometimes misleading manner. The most recent and sober description is provided by Murat Karasalihoğlu (2022: 145–47).

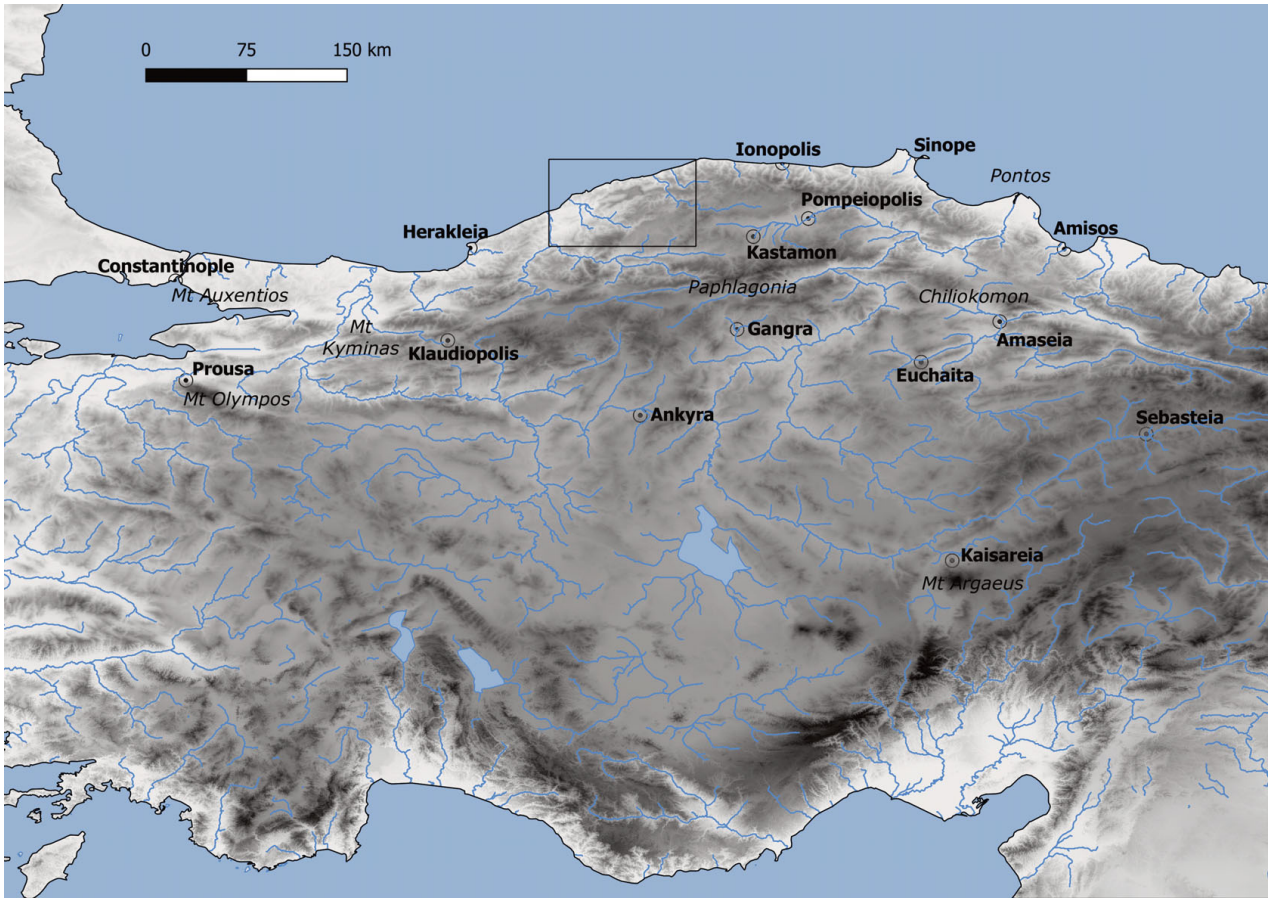

Figure 1. Map of Asia Minor (drawn by author).

Archaeological research in Paphlagonia lags behind by comparison to other parts of Asia Minor (Fig. 1), with adverse effects also in terms of our knowledge about the Byzantine period of the region. In particular, archaeologists have only recently started to adopt a holistic approach to the Black Sea region (Sökmen, Schachner 2021). To date, the coast and the interior of Paphlagonia are rarely studied in their interrelation, as most scholars focused on the Greek foundations such as Sinope, Herakleia and Amastris, while the interior was primarily studied by archaeologists of the Hittites (cf. Erciyas 2005). This state of affairs may partly explain why the cave and the Küre dağları at large have remained virtually unexplored to the present day.

The cave called Ilgarini mağarası was only rediscovered during a cartographic mission in the early 20th century, but its existence did not become widely known. There is no indication of an Ottoman-period presence in the wider area. The name of the cave is derived from Ilvar, meaning 'raid', making it the 'Raiders' lair cave'; this appellation is most likely modern, since its origins cannot be traced, just as with the alternative name Keşiş mağarası, 'Hermit's cave', which was used in the early descriptions.

In 1940, after receiving information about it in Cide, Ankara University geography professor Cemal Arif Alagöz briefly passed by the cave and prepared a very concise report (Alagöz 1944: 10–12). To my knowledge, this is the first text that mentions the cave. The Classical archaeologist Ahmet Gökoğlu devoted two pages to the cave (which he called Ilvar ini) in his monograph on the Antiquities of Paphlagonia, where he emphasised its great importance to Byzantine Paphlagonia (Gökoğlu 1952: 129–31). He reported that the tombs had already been looted and the buildings destroyed; this was, however, contested by locals in 2012, who stated that the cave's structures had been fairly intact until recently. In fact, it is said that the precinct wall was still preserved up to a height of 3m with a doorway in the centre and similar well-preserved structures beyond in the 1970s (*Kastamonu Cep Dergi* 2.2021: 65).

In 1982, the cave was fully explored for the first time, which was a turning point, as some recent Turkish publications even assume that the cave was discovered only in that year. This investigation was conducted by the student association of speleologists at the Boğazici University Caving Club (BÜMAK), which organised two field trips in August 1982 and 1983. Their second stay lasted two weeks and resulted in the first bottoming of the cave, a full

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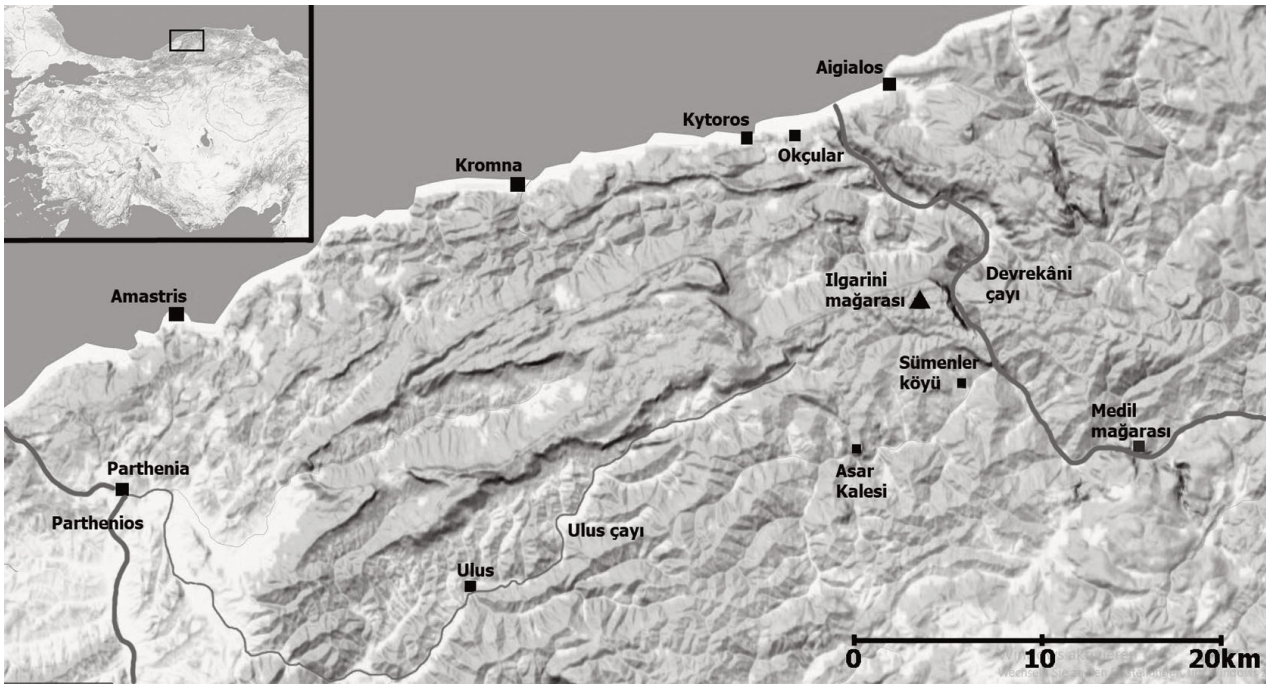

Figure 2. Regional map of Northwest Paphlagonia (drawn by author).

measurement and the drawing of the first plan of the cave system (Ülkümen et al. 1983: 5–9). With a length of 858m and a depth of 250m, the Ilgarini mağarası is considered to be one of the largest caves in Türkiye, although the frequent claim that it is the fourth deepest cave in the world is born of modern tourism marketing. In fact, the team of the Lancaster University Speleological Society exploring the cave in 1990 declared it to be the fourth deepest cave of Türkiye (Holland 1991).

The cave is located in a very remote area in a dense forest grown on karstic rock, 1160m above sea level near the Sorkun yaylası (Fig. 2; geographical position: 41.751881,33.003025; altitude: 1150m asl).

The nearest village is Sümenler köyü, 1.5 hours away from the cave by foot. The overall location of the site is characterised by steep cliffs to the north towards the coastal zone of Cide on the Black Sea coast, as well as to the east with the Valla kanyonu and the Devrekâni çayı. This location in thick forest (Fig. 3) renders it hard to reach except from the south. The Cide Archaeological Survey 2009–11 discovered a series of small Byzantine settlements along the Black Sea coast, from Tekkeönü/Kromna to Gideros/Kytoros with Abdulkadir köyü to Okçular köyü (Greek name unknown) to Cide/Aigialos (on these coastal sites, see Belke 1996: 158, 241, 245, 255), but did not include sites south of the natural barrier of the Küre dağları cliffs (Düring, Glatz 2015).

To the south, the only Byzantine settlement detected seems to have been around the as yet undated fortification of Asar Kalesi, from where one has a good vista into the valley of Ulus (Belke 1996: 174–75).

Figure 3. Forest path on the way to the Ilgarini mağarası (photo by author, 2022).

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Natural caves are a widespread phenomenon not only in this particular area, but throughout mountainous Paphlagonia. As caves have long been privileged sites for encounters with the metaphysical and are considered to have a numinous force, they have been used as religious places since time immemorial (Johnson 2010: 32; Cassis 2015: 343–55; Katsarou, Nagel 2021). With the emergence of Christianity, natural caves became a favourite place for the establishment of hermitages. They were much appreciated as temporary places for reclusion and dissociation from the material world (Schulze-Dörrlamm 2008: 545–50), following the model of the Prophet Elijah, John the Forerunner and Jesus Christ himself (Benz 1954; Della Dora 2016: 155–202).

A hermit who vowed not to leave his cave or cell for a set period of time was called ἐγκλειστός, an 'enclosed' person. In the setting of coenobitic monastery or a lavra, however, there was the oversight of a hegumen who might try to restrain extreme asceticism and thus prevent a hermit's most severe mortification of the flesh.

As a result, many ascetics in Palestine and Syria sought out mountain caves as places for transformation and spirituality (e.g. Cave of Chariton, cf. Hirschfeld 2000; and Cave of Sabas, cf. Patrich 1991). The Byzantine loss of control over the Middle East did not mark a decline in the ascetic tradition associated with mountains and caves; instead, some of the focus shifted to non-biblical mountains and caves, especially in Asia Minor (Restle 1978). Hermits were particularly attracted to caves in mountainous territory because they offered natural shelter, and, if situated atop a mountain, ideal conditions for total isolation, as they were hard to reach by prying visitors, brigands and would-be disciples (Talbot 2019: 103–29).

In anticipation of my argument below, based on hagiographical texts, we know of many celebrated ninth- and tenth-century ascetics in Asia Minor who were aiming at spiritual retreat (ἡσυχία or ξενιτεία) and the renunciation of mundane life in contemplation in the search for God, and thus decided to practise cave seclusion. These included Loukas the Stylite (VLuc.Styl. 10), Peter of Atroa (VPetAtr. 18), Euthymios the Younger (VEuth.iun. 18), Paul of Latros (VPLatr. 13; Peschlow 1995: 703–07), Ioannikios of Bithynia (VIoann. 45) or Paphnoutios, and Lazaros of Galesion (VLazGal. 39, 41), to name only the most prominent. Indeed, only the worthiest hermits were considered to have the power to withstand the demons lurking in caves. This is illustrated by the *Life* of Lazaros of Galesion, where a monk succumbs to the demons' temptation and loses consciousness (VLazGal. 43). Such an attack by cave demons on a cave hermit is depicted in the Princeton Garrett MS 16, fol. 121v, also dated to the 11th century. It is evident that a significant number of Byzantine saints lived as hermits for part of their monastic career, and that Asia Minor in particular was renowned for troglodyte asceticism at that time. As a consequence, seclusion in the darkness of a cave at a certain phase in a saint's life constitutes a topos in the hagiographical literature of the ninth–tenth centuries. For caves, the texts use two different terms: while the more common term for natural caves is 'σπήλαιον'; for caves of religious significance the term 'ἄντρον' is adopted, in continuation of Patristic tradition (Benz 1954: 384).

Those saints for whose stay in Asia Minor there are indications are said to have spent more than two years in their selected caves. We also see that the saints (or their hagiographers) had an ambivalent attitude towards caves, as they provided shelter from the elements and wild animals, and became a place of visionary experience and revelation on the one hand (1Kings 19:9–10; Isa. 33:16; Rev. 1:9–10), were filled with darkness and were considered to be infested by demons and points of contact with the underworld on the other (Della Dora 2016: 176; Talbot 2016: 707–18). As Talbot (2016: 711) already remarks, caves in high mountains were especially appreciated by hermits, as this placed them on equal footing with stylites in terms of ascent and inaccessibility.

Description of the cave

The plan and the section of the Ilgarini mağarası presented here are based on Ülkümen et al. (1983), but were refined by the author for the purpose of this contribution (Fig. 4).

The entrance is particularly conspicuous, with an approx. 6m-high and 8m-wide gigantic mouth (Fig. 5) that has no outlook to the northeast as it faces a hollow.

At the part where the cave begins to provide shelter from rain, remains of a stone precinct wall that separated the cave from the exterior are still clearly visible; incidentally, precinct walls are a distinct feature of monasteries (Ruggieri 1991: 175). Also clearly discernible are beam-holes at the northern side of the cave entrance that have been trimmed into the rock to install a wooden staircase, of which nothing else remains (Fig. 6). These end abruptly in view of a small cavern 3m above, which also features beam-holes next to it; this gives rise to the suggestion that both must have been connected at some stage, probably by a ladder.

Immediately behind the precinct, well within the entrance zone that receives sufficient daylight from the massive mouth, two rows of small, rectangular single-room structures are located, five to the north and five to the south. These have survived only up to the second row of stones. At the end of both rows is a structure that is larger than the others and positioned centrally, and in a natural cavity (see Fig. 4). A well is to the left, built of rubble without mortar; this well, already mentioned by Gökoğlu, has since been filled in. The described area of single-room structures must be considered the 'living

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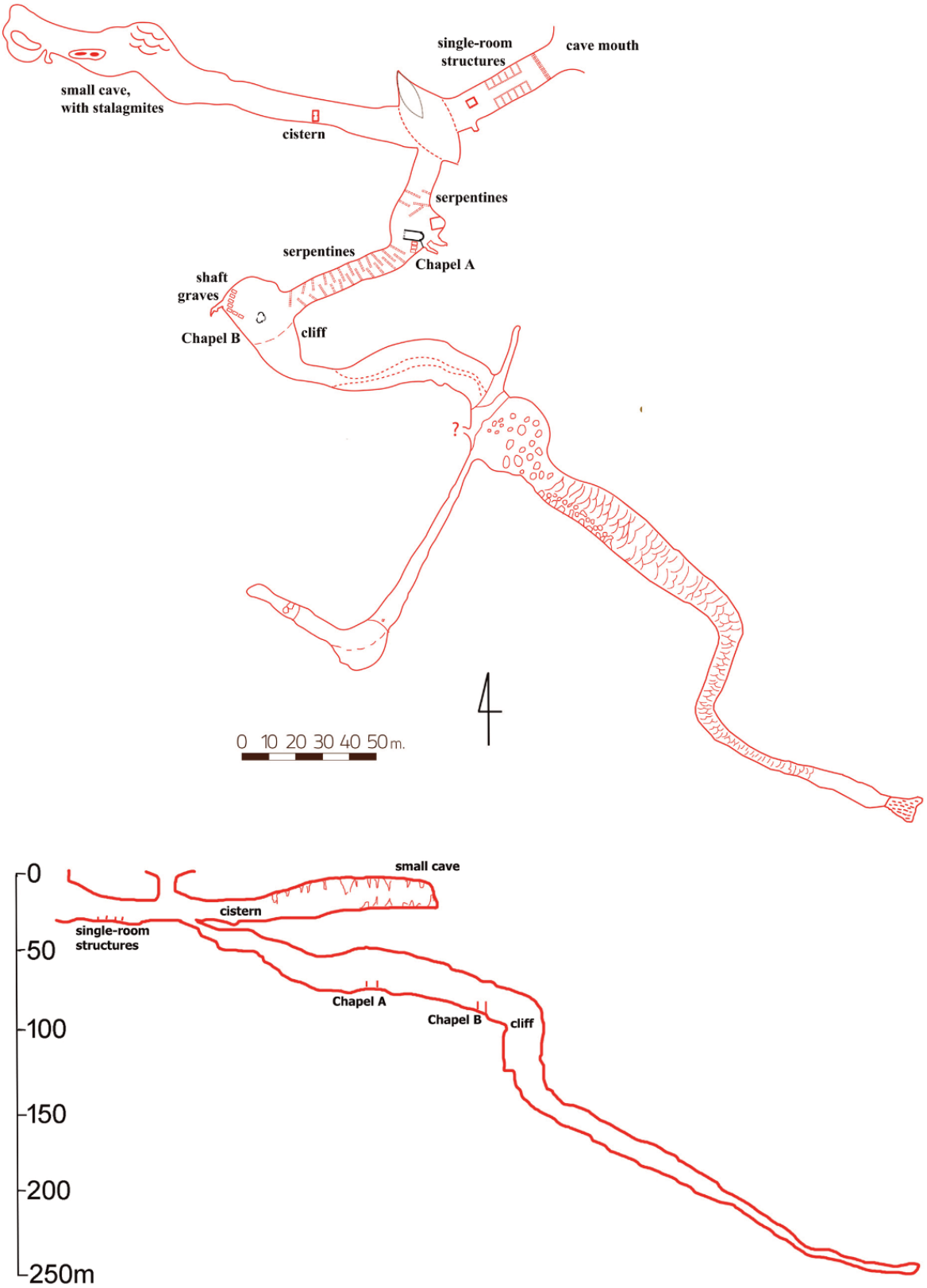

Figure 4. Plan and section of the cave (redrawn by author based on Ülkümen et al. 1983).

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Figure 5. Cave mouth (photo by author, 2022).

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Figure 6. Remains of staircase (photo by author, 2022).

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Figure 7. Cistern (photo by author, 2012).

space' of the cave dwellers, protected by the stone wall and offering faint illumination by daylight (on hermits' dwellings proper in caves, see Talbot 2016: 709).

Behind the entrance area, approx. 70m beyond the precinct wall, the height of the cave increases and the sun illuminates the chamber through a long crevice in the ceiling that potentially provides access to rainwater (what speleologists call a chimney). Below that, a spacious area is situated that is void of any stone buildings and is now used by visitors to build campfires. From this central area, two alternative routes lead into separate caves.

The smaller cave to the northwest continues from the entrance passage in an almost straight, slightly ascending line. It contains a rectangular cistern after approx. 50m, partly recessed in a cavity, yet entirely and neatly built of ashlar and four bands of brick (three brick courses each). Two engaged piers are set in the middle of the cistern's longer sides. Up to the top edge of the cistern, 1cm-thick hydraulic mortar (*opus signinum*) has remained (Fig. 7). The cistern is 4m long, 2m wide and 2.3m deep, which calculates to a capacity of approx. 18.4sqm. The water was probably obtained from the moist cave faces, supplied by ducts from the adjacent upward-slanting cave section. This section is richly adorned with stalagmites and stalactites, and is not suitable for habitation.

Figure 8. Chapel A as seen from the west (photo by author, 2012).

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Now, the focus is on the main part of the cave, which opens to the south of the central area and has a rather steep incline. Today, it is difficult to pass due to rubble, and no traces remain of any steps that were probably located there in the past. A high and wide gallery opens, followed by a descent of approx. 30m before one reaches the next level. The slope is bridged by manmade serpentines settled on the earth fill behind five well-built supporting walls, which are now in a dilapidated state. It is unclear from where the imported earth came, but it is obvious that it required some effort to create the serpentines.

This first level is dominated by a longitudinal building at its centre, measuring 3.4 x 6.5m, built of rather thick walls of orderly set rubble stones held together by mortar (Fig. 8).

The apse is oriented to the east, signalling that the building had a liturgical function. For reasons of convenience, I shall refer to the small single-nave structure as Chapel A.

To its south, three shaft graves are dug out in a row, mostly obliterated due to heavy looting. Wooden beams and many bones lie dispersed on the floor. Northeast of the chapel, a manmade platform is located that probably contained one single tomb, as only a single but large looting hole remains. In Turkish lore, this area is called Kıral mezarı, 'King's tomb', as it was once reportedly home to a sarcophagus *(Kastamonu Cep Dergi* 2.2021: 66); however, this is mere hearsay. Given the location's centrality it is indeed possible that it once accommodated an extraordinary burial site, but doubts remain; as many cross graffiti are incised in the cave faces next to the burials at the lower level (see below), they are distinctly absent on the cave face here.

The next level is reached via another, much longer descent, again accessible via well-made and mostly preserved serpentine paths with 23 terrace walls that support the approx. 1m-wide walkway (Fig. 9).

In this part, one must carefully observe the cave walls, as cross graffiti are clustered in many places, sometimes overlapping one another. Some Greek letters are also discernible, which will be discussed later in the text. The sheer amount and dominance of crosses in the cave clearly evince its Christian use.

The second level is dominated by Chapel B, which has a size of 4.2 x 3.2m and displays the same masonry style as the single-nave church on the level above (Fig. 10). The

Figure 9. Second sequence of serpentines (photo by author, 2012).

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Figure 10. Chapel B as seen from the east (photo by author, 2012).

same brownish-red mortar is used for the building, but here it is more apparent as Chapel B is, overall, better preserved than Chapel A. Neither chapel revealed any traces of plaster.

North of Chapel B, seven shaft graves are located in a row (Fig. 11). They were hewn out of the rock, and each contained three separate burials, one on top of the other, divided by wooden beams of which larger fragments were and are preserved on site. The graves here alone must have provided space for almost two dozen corpses.

A narrow crevice to the north of the shaft graves contains many more burials; the bones are scattered all over the area. It is macabre to note that no skulls are to be found anywhere in the cave, as they were most likely removed by visitors as souvenirs. Clusters of cross graffiti are narrowly packed together, especially at the cave face next to the graves, making it difficult to obtain a full overview of all of them; below follows a discussion of the more complex ones.

The cave continues further, but it is difficult to pass the cliff with its 75° slope; the descent is only possible with the help of ropes. In 1983, no human activity was traceable beyond that point, which was later discovered to be a ravine filled with pieces of travertine. The absence of archaeological remains was confirmed by subsequent visitors, who only found a pool of water at the very end of the cave. I did not investigate that part.

Architecture, finds and graffiti

In 2000, the aforementioned wooden beams from the shaft graves were sampled by archaeobotanists from Istanbul University. With the help of the Cornell University database 'master chronology of Anatolia', it was possible to determine the species as White Oak. Further, the last tree rings of the 15 samples taken date to 977 CE (Akkemik et al. 2004). The use of that specific beam can thus be dated to the years around 1000 CE, as some outer rings could not be included in the analysis, and because there must have been a time lapse between the cutting of the tree and its use in the burial covering. This exemplary dendrochronological analysis (Kuniholm et al. 2015: 67) provides a very good indication of the timing of the activity in the cave. As is common for dendrochronology, the beginning of burials in the cave cannot be readily determined from the samples. One can only say that the earliest sample taken dates from after 850 CE. It can therefore be assumed that the shaft graves by and large belong to the tenth century.

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Figure 11. Shaft grave north of Chapel B (photo by author, 2012).

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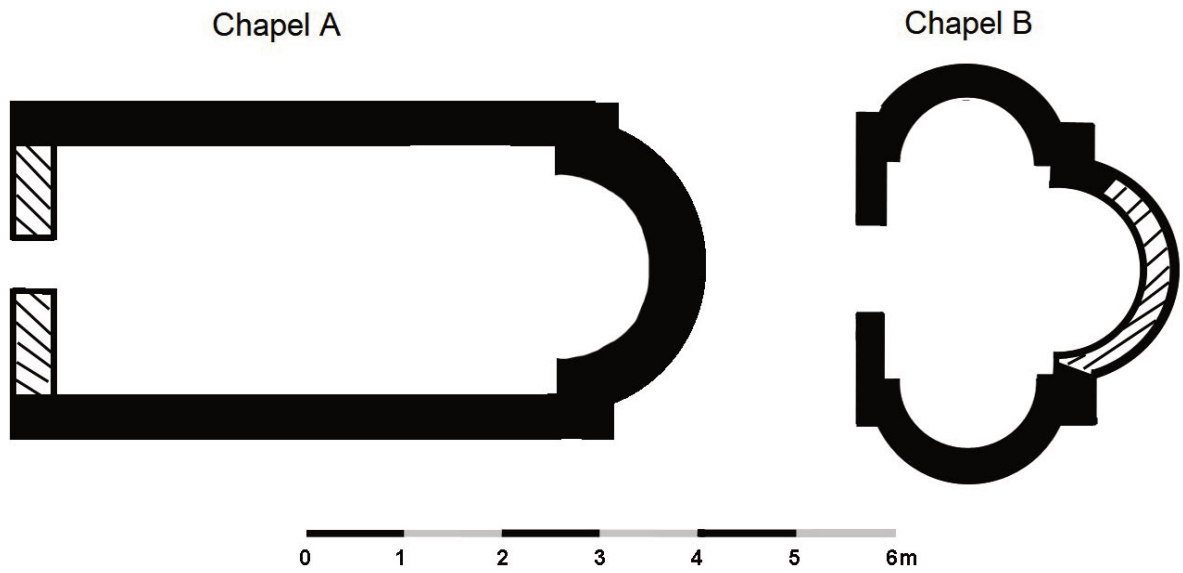

Figure 12. Ground plans of Chapels A and B (drawn by author).

The two chapels are humble buildings (Fig. 12). While Chapel A has no interesting features, Chapel B raises particular interest due to being a trikonchos. Its apse is now destroyed but the entasis is still discernible, whereas the two side conches, especially the northern one up to a height of 2.43m, are fairly well preserved. The conches are of equal size and are also apparent from the outside. The existence of windows in the conches can be excluded while no statements can be made regarding the apse zone or the roofing of the chapel (even whether it had any).

The compact trikonch church type is not very common, but is widely attested across the Mediterranean since ca 500 CE. In some parts of Asia Minor, especially in Lycia, this occurs only in relation to monasteries (Stollmayer 1999: 137–38; Hellenkemper, Hild 2004: 220; Aydın 2006); Stollmayer (1999: 139–40) discusses its prevalence in a monastic and particularly in funerary contexts during the sixth to seventh centuries. Trikonchoi continued to be built well into the 9th–11th centuries; however, the majority survived in mainland Greece rather than in Asia Minor (Orlandos 1935), for example Panayia Koumpelidiki/Kastoria or St Panteleimon/Ohrid (Ćurčić 2010: 322–25), with Mercangöz (1990: 130–34) surveying the evidence in Asia Minor. Whether the trikonch type had some prevalence in the monasteries of the Holy Mountains of Asia Minor, which would better explain the sudden appearance of the so-called 'Athonite trikonch' in the early 11th century, needs further investigation. As the inspiration for the Athonite type is yet unknown, it is worth noting that Athanasios the Athonite had been trained as a monk in one of these Holy Mountains, Mt Kyminas, before he settled on Mt Athos.

Apart from the beams, the evidence provided by the finds in the cave is less straightforward. Few tiles and very little coarse ware are present in the cave, some from the Prehistoric period. The few sherds observed appear to have been locally produced and are not diagnostic. One has to bear in mind that ceramic assemblages, especially in Byzantine Paphlagonia, remain largely unchanged over long periods of time (Cassis 2015). A better, yet rough indication is provided by the cross graffiti and the few inscriptions that I am going to discuss next. Generally, the study of Byzantine graffiti is still in its infancy, with only very few publications dedicated to this material.

First, I should mention that the cave has no 'rock inscriptions', but only 'graffiti'; while the former would have been executed with a hammer or chisel (e.g. Tinos, Mt Carmel), the latter were incised with mere pointed tools. Second, all the graffiti in the cave are non-figural and have an informal and Christian character; most of them are crosses of various types.

They cluster in three areas: near Chapel A on the first level, at the beginning of the second serpentine and near the graves on the second level, while other parts of the cave seem to accommodate only single and simple crosses.

Of these three sectors, only Sector 2 has Greek graffiti (Fig. 13), which I redrew based on my photographs.

The graffiti is clearly an invocation, although I was unable to make out its beginning on the cave face (which must have been e.g. Κύριε βοήθει τὸν or similar, as the preserved text lacks a finite verb, cf. Nowakowski 2017).

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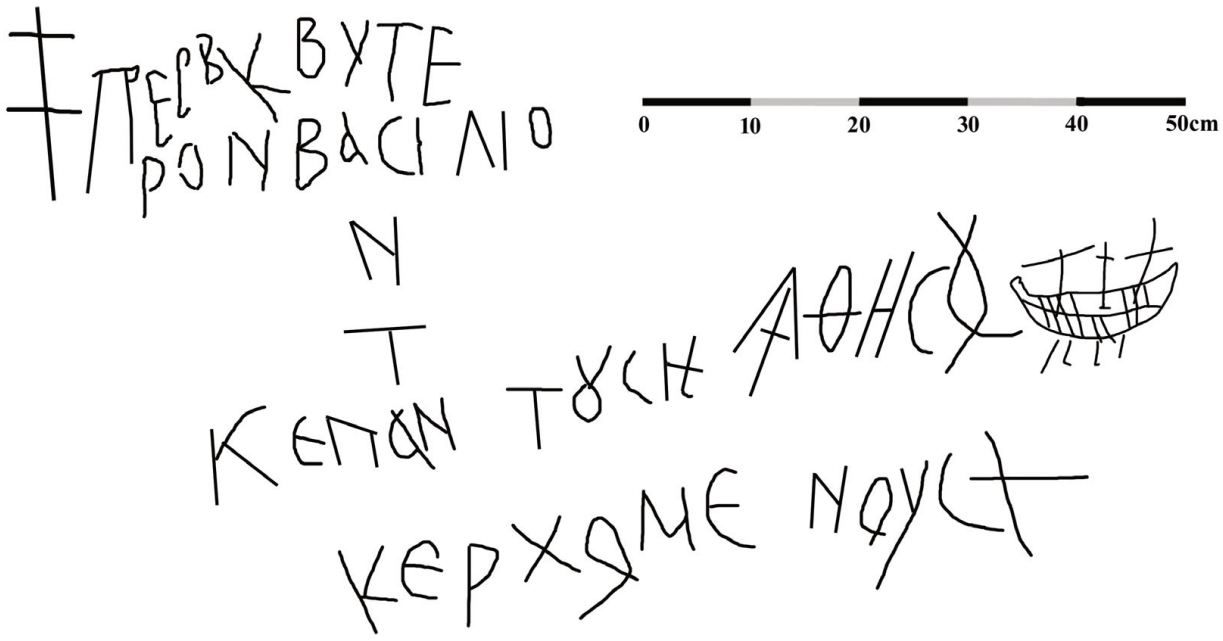

Figure 13. Graffiti sketch (by author).

1 ‡ΠRЄCBϬBϬTЄ
2 PONBⲀCIΛIO
3 N
4 ΚЄΠⲀᵀN TϬCHΛΘHCⳈ (ship graffiti)
5 ΚЄPXϘMЄNOYC+

[Κύριε βοήθει τὸν] πρεσβύ{βύ}τερον Βασίλιον κὲ πάντ(ας) τοὺς ἠλθησο(μέν)ους κ<αὶ> ἐρχομένους.

[God, help the] priest Basileios and all who came and [who are] coming.

As the invocation is constructed with the accusative case (instead of dative or genitive), it must have been written *after* the eighth century. According to the comprehensive study of Jean Humbert (1930: 181–84), the construction of βοηθῶ with the accusative became dominant in inscriptions during the tenth century, but is attested at least since the eighth century in Asia Minor. The shape of letters best suits the 10th century, at the *latest* the 11th century. Close in style and message are the graffiti recorded by Denis Feissel in a cave dedicated to St Stephen on the Cycladic island of Tinos. Feissel (1980: 509) assigns most of these graffiti to the 10th century, within the absolute range from the 7th–11th centuries (especially no. 2 has striking similarities in regard to the shape of the letters and their arrangement). Relevant in this context are also the graffiti from the Parthenon church in Athens, which often carry a date; those Parthenon graffiti most similar to the Ilgarini graffiti are dated to the ninth–tenth centuries (Orlandos, Vranoussi 1973: nos 61, 63, 65, 75, 77, 79, 81). From a palaeographical point of view, one could point specifically to the Beta, with the upper being much smaller than the bottom loop. Further examples are the Ny's diagonal bar that meets the last bar almost in the middle or the Upsilon's lower bar, which is not straight but continues the upper right bar. When compared with uncial scripts in manuscripts, the best parallels are found in those of the later ninth to the mid-tenth centuries (cf. Cavallo 1977: pls 9, 22, 38). The graffiti feature very little influence of minuscule script (l. 2, 4: α) which tallies with the observation of Mango (1977: 176) and Feissel (1980: 509) that the uncial script remained in full force with regard to graffiti until the 11th century. Language-wise, iotacism is present (l. 2: ι for ει), as well as monophthongisation (l. 4: ε for αι), which tallies with the observations of Feissel (1980: 510–11) in terms of orthography standards of the 10th/11th centuries. Very strange is the corruption HΛΘHCY, which I was initially unable to make sense of; the current suggestion is owed to the kind assistance of Maria Xenaki. A grammatical form like λθησομένους might have occasioned the mix-up of a participle of λύω (λυσόμενος) with that of ἔρχομαι, not uncommon to the proposed period. If this is in fact a grammatical mistake, one may conclude that Basileios was a moderately educated man. The use of η instead of ε, however, would still be explainable for a speaker of Pontic Greek, as the preservation of the ancient pronunciation of η is typical of it.

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It goes without saying that these are tentative considerations and cannot establish an exact date for the graffiti, but the comparanda all point roughly in the same direction, namely the ninth–tenth centuries.

The invocation could have been incised as a memento of a visit and, in this regard, mention must be made of the ship graffiti right to the Greek script. It shows a galley with three masts, all in a vertical position but without any rigged sails. The keel is almost straight, and the rudder seems to be missing; the four lines incised under the hull are possibly meant to represent oars. As no spur is indicated, it probably does not represent a dromon, but a merchant vessel. The graffiti represents a rather large galley, as one or two masts are the norm. The size suggests that it was to represent a ship used for long-distance sailing (Meinardus 1970/72: 42–43). It might be significant that the mosaic of San Marco/Venice (ca 1150), depicting the sacred theft of St Mark's relics by a merchant vessel, is represented by a three-masted, lateen-rigged round ship, which is of course inspired by 12th-century ships and not much different from what we see in the graffiti (Levi 1983: pls 42–43). A very similar, yet undated ship graffiti was documented at the Parthenon church/Athens (Orlandos, Vranoussis 1973: no. 112).

One might wonder why a ship is represented at all in a cave 30km distant from the Black Sea coast. Yet ships are the most common theme among pictorial graffiti, and they are also frequently encountered at inland locations (Meinardus 1970/72: 31). Notwithstanding this consideration, it still can be assumed that ship graffiti were incised by persons that came by sea, praying for the safety of their seaborne journey, or who had at least some connection to the sea (Nakas 2021: 54–55).

Lastly, I present the cross graffiti from the other two sectors and give a first assessment. Only very recently have cross graffiti been considered a worthy subject of research (e.g. Langner 2001: 136–38; Jacobs 2017). The fact that a

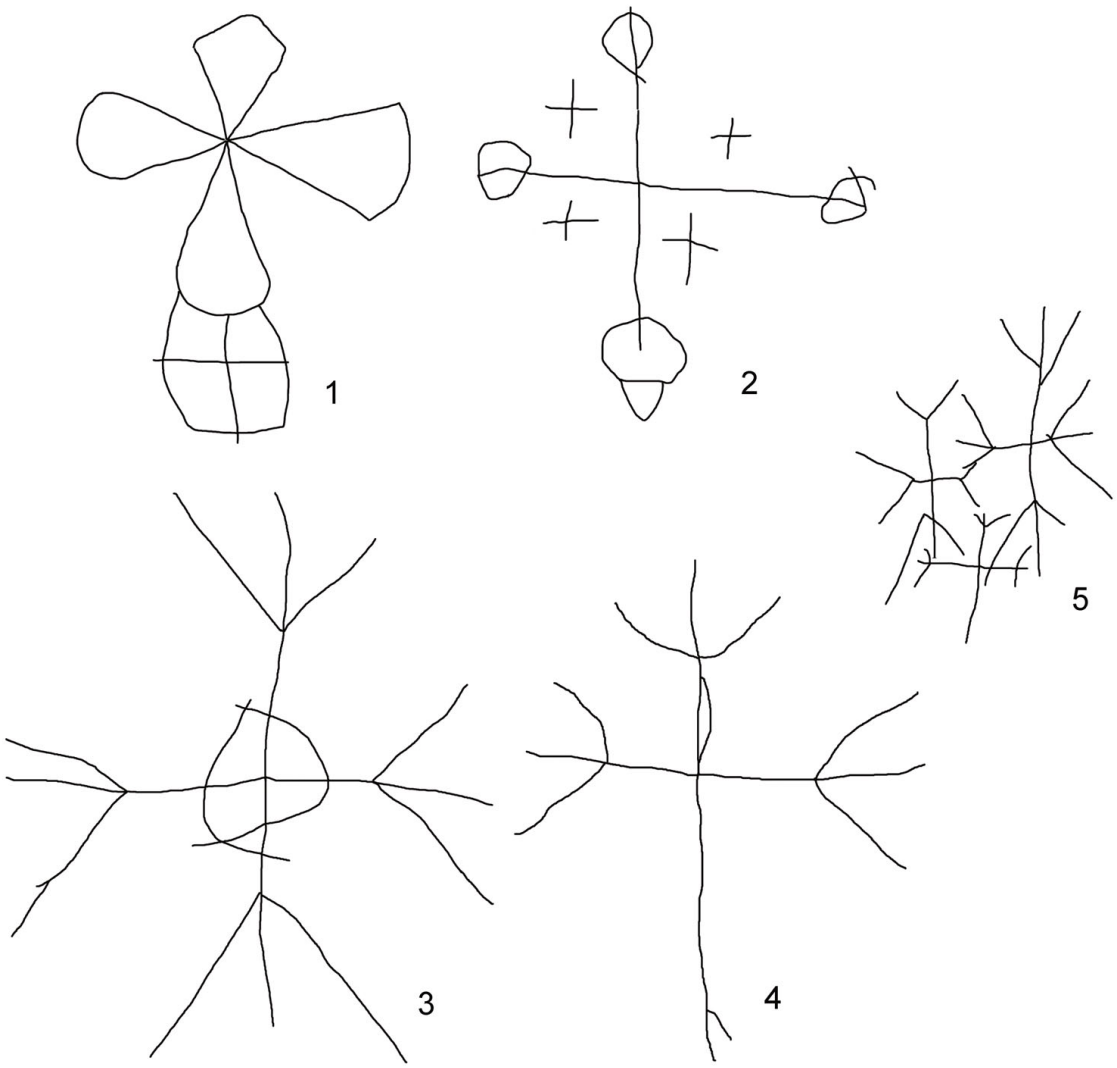

Figure 14. Cross graffiti (drawn by author).

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systematic typology of cross graffiti in Asia Minor is still a desideratum poses a major obstacle. Early attempts at stylistic typologies can be regarded as unreliable (Butcher, Petrie 1916); hence, reference will instead be made to the studies by John Cotsonis (1994: 40–42) and Brigitte Pitarakis (2006: 30–39), as they are based on more solid methodologies, even though they both cover bronze crosses and not graffiti. The best comparative material to the cross graffiti is again provided by Feissel (1980: no. 8) on Tinos.

There are varying cross types (Fig. 14), of which a typological selection is shown here (not to scale).

Cross 1. Large cross formed by petals that meet in a central dot. The cross is superimposed on a roughly square shape that is quartered by two lines. Petal crosses appear as carved in Anatolian templon epistyles in the 11th or 12th centuries (Niewöhner 2008: no. 48).

Cross 2. Large cross with circular loops on the arms' extremities. The gussets of the cross are filled with four crosslets. The shape of the main cross could be inspired by the shape of bronze crosses, on which see Cotsonis (1994: 42–45). More specifically, it recalls Pitarakis (2006: 30) Types IX and X. All these pieces point to a date in the 10th–11th centuries. However, the crosslets may change the picture, as this pattern is conventionally connected to the Crusaders. Although this cross-type became widely popular only with the Crusades, it has been argued that it occurs already in the Byzantine sphere in the 11th century (Vanderheyde 2005: 61, no. 83, fig. 73).

Crosses 3–5. These all present slight variations of the same cross-type which, however, does not yet seem to have acquired an established term in English. It is called Σταυρός με τρισχιδείς απολήξεις in Modern Greek, so roughly 'cross with three-forked ends', and *Gabelkreuz* in German. Cross 3 has a large loop encircling its centre. Cross 4 lacks any branches at its footing arm, and its vertical bar is longer than the horizontal. The Crosses 5 are similar to no. 4 and show very well how they were incised, possibly overlapping even by the same hand. Three-forked crosses are a widespread phenomenon across the Byzantine world; see, for example, St Paraskevi in Yeroskipou/Cyprus, a ninth-century church with graffiti of around the same time (Foulias, Philotheou 2008: 69), St Anthony in Kellia/Cyprus or the Aizanoi Temple-Church/Phrygia (Niewöhner 2007: 153–55; Mergen 2016: 259). Three-forked crosses seem to postdate the two-forked crosses known from well-dated sixth- and seventh-century contexts like the cemetery of Khirbet es-Samra'/Jordan (Couson, Desreumaux 1998).

The underlying meaning of the three-forked cross has not yet been discussed to my knowledge; it might refer to the Twelve Apostles, as 12 is the number of its ends; if this interpretation is correct, the loop in the centre of Cross 3 signifies Christ.

It goes without saying that any dating of graffiti crosses by their style, and even more so by comparison with other sorts of materials, is an unreliable method, but three-forked crosses are not known from Late Antique tombstones (6th–7th century), but are common in Middle Byzantine contexts (9th–11th century). Due to the lack of systematic studies, it is still mere speculation whether the crosses in a context such as the Ilgarini mağarası can be regarded as devotional, prophylactic or apotropaic in purpose and nature and, more specifically, whether they were meant to chase away demons at the place and contain evil (for the same problem of interpreting the evidence in regard to pagan temples, see Wiśniewski 2015: 125). However, the crosses do not cover all the faces of the cave, but are mostly clustered in proximity to the graves.

Discussion and comparisons

Some general points may be made here in advance of the interpretation of the site as a Byzantine cave monastery. We have already noted that the site is extremely remote and difficult to access. Apart from some pottery (Prehistoric Age), the finds and findings are all datable to the Middle Byzantine period. Therefore, it was probably deserted during the 11th century before its rediscovery in the 20th century.

The cave entrance has a precinct wall and small dwellings (cells) profiting from natural light. Further, some of the cave faces are full of Christian graffiti. Beyond the entrance area, the cave is in complete darkness and not suitable for permanent habitation. A sizable cistern, which collects water from within the cave, allowed its dwellers to stay underground for some time. Although there are no definite criteria for the identification of a site as a monastic establishment, the specifics of the Ilgarini mağarası unanimously point towards it being a cave monastery.

The cave houses two small chapels with adjacent graves, but many more of these near Chapel B. The particularity of two chapels at a site can be most readily interpreted as a functional division between a katholikon for the daily Mass and a funerary chapel. I argue for Chapel A being the katholikon, as it is larger and closer to the cave entrance than Chapel B. The latter seems to be a funerary chapel, as it is of the trikonch type, and because most graves are next to it.

Quite a few monasteries in Byzantine Asia Minor have such a division, with a distance of around 50m between them (Kisleçukuru Manastırı, Kurşunlu Manastırı, cf. Tiryaki 2021). Concerning the Ilgarini mağarası, there is currently no way of knowing why there are also at least three graves next to Chapel A, and whether their owners differed in status, date or anything else relative to the grave owners on the lower level.

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Also uncertain is the rationale for the spatial arrangement of the monastic buildings across the cave: why are the cells located in the entrance area while the chapels and graves are in complete darkness? One can only guess that it may have been believed the latter spaces could withstand the cave's evils, and that they were accessed only with lamps or candles during designated times of the day, while the cells were occupied all day long.

It seems advantageous to compare the site with other cave monasteries to better understand its layout, development and purpose. Considering that the cave is so huge that it accommodates two stone-built chapels adjoined by graves and has a well-built walkway, there are in fact not many caves of the Byzantine period that easily compare to the natural cave of the Ilgarini mağarası. There is in fact nothing similar in Paphlagonia. In the Black Sea region, there is of course the famous Soumela and Vazelon Monasteries south of Trebizond, both partially built into natural caves. Little is known, however, about their chronology prior to the 13th century (Bryer 1970: 289–98; Bryer, Winfield 1985: 254, 259) and the beginnings of these sites are obscured by later phases. For comparisons, one must thus direct attention to entirely different regions of the Byzantine world or even at its fringes. A Byzantine scholar's first impulse may be towards Cappadocia, as it has long been considered a prime example of Middle Byzantine troglodyte monasticism, but in fact, the famous sites are not located in natural caves, instead being carved into tuft rock; these are also generally of later date, as evidenced by church plans and paintings (Rodley 1985), and perhaps even of use other than as monasteries (Niewöhner 2017: 128; see also Arena 2019).

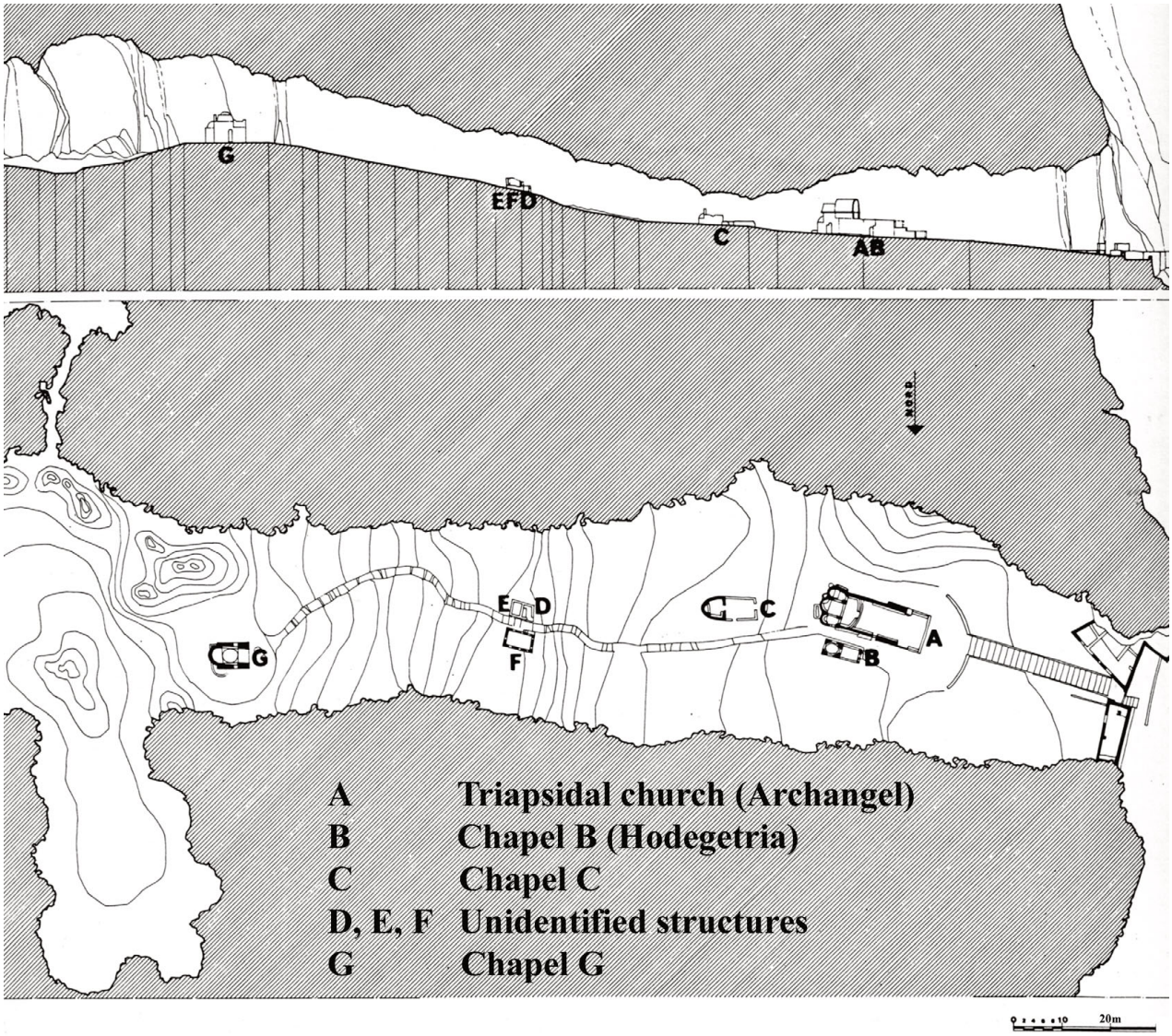

Figure 15. Plan and section of San Michele in Olevano sul Tusciano, by C. Leonardi, R. Cassanelli (eds), Paolo Diacono, Storia dei Longobardi. *Milan 1985, 342 Figs 60 and 360 (with friendly permission from R. Cassanelli; labels by author.).*

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The overall situation is more similar to the Corycian cave. At the entrance of this cave, a small chapel of the Virgin Mary was built which is controversially dated to between the fourth and sixth centuries. It has no roof since it was protected from rainfall by the overhang of the cave above (Bayliss 2004: 79–85; Cortese 2022: 125–26). Yet there is nothing else in the natural cave than this chapel.

In fact, the Ilgarini mağarası has much in common with the large cave of the Archangel Michael in Olevano sul Tusciano near Salerno. This mountain cave was settled by a monastic community which erected several churches and buried their dead in the cave (Di Muro 2019). During the Middle Ages, the mountain was called Mons Aureus, a significant parallel explained below. Based on the wall paintings in Chapels A and B and the archaeological finds during recent excavations (pottery, glass, etc.), the heyday of this cave monastery is certainly dated to the eighth and ninth centuries, when it also received the patronage of the Lombard dukes of Salerno (Fig. 15). In addition to its four chapels, noticeable are also the burials discovered around Chapel B and the fact that water from the cave face was collected next to Chapel G. During the excavations currently being carried out near the cave entrance, two rectangular buildings were revealed that are interpreted as hospices that lodged pilgrims (Di Muro, pers. comm.).

The grotto of Archangel Michael at Monte Gargano must have been a similar cave monastery, but due to constant additions up to early modern times, any direct comparisons would come with significant shortcomings.

The cave monastery of Murfatlar, now called Basarabi/Dobruja, allows for more apt comparison. This monastic site, however, is not in a natural cave but cut from the rock. The site has many cross graffiti that bear a resemblance to those in the Ilgarini mağarası, for instance with loops at the cross arms' extremities. Mostly based on pottery finds, the Murfatlar complex is conventionally dated to the tenth century (Barnea, Bilciurescu 1959; Curta 1999; Atanasov 2020). It has six chapels as well as some cell rooms spread across three areas of the ridge that used to function as a quarry (Fig. 16). In Areas E–F (Fig. 17), spaces of various functions were carved out directly next to each other, and are closely connected chapels, cells, graves and other rooms that are not yet identified (e.g. kitchen, refectory, workshop).

The Ilgarini mağarası shares building types and a rough overall scale with the two monastic sites of Murfatlar and Olevano: each of these has more than one chapel, several monks' cells, functional spaces and burials on site. Further, Murfatlar bears a resemblance to the Ilgarini mağarası in regard to the graffiti, while Olevano is peculiar, as it was also built in a natural cave with a spatial organisation and layout of the monastery dictated by the predetermined pathway as in the Ilgarini mağarası. It thus seems that the Ilgarini mağarası is a rare example of a natural cave that was transformed into a fully developed Byzantine monastery.

The Ilgarini complex should be considered the focal point of a system of troglodyte dwellings in the karstic Küre dağları, but this is beyond the scope of the present paper, as further research is required. It is reported that only 130m north as the crow flies, Kafatası mağarası ('Skull's cave') contains burial chambers and shallow graves with human burials (Holland 1991: 26). This may be the same cave Gökoğlu (1952: 131) named Toprak ini mağarası.

One should also mention Medil mağarası, also situated on the south side of the mountain range near Karakuşlu köy/Azdavay (geographical position: 41.6371677107-7138,33.23809646797555; altitude: 1046m asl). This cave houses two built cisterns and the remains of a small structure (Fig. 18). The latter building is preserved well

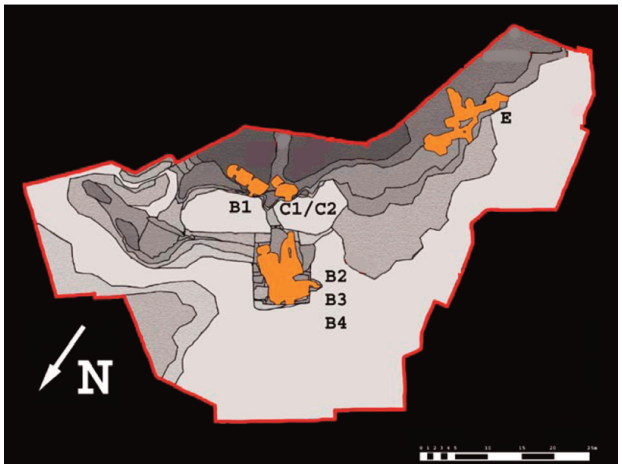

Figure 16. Murfatlar Monastery, general plan (with friendly permission from G. Atanasov).

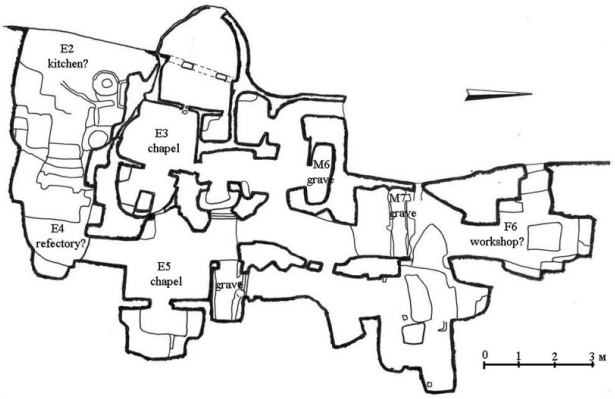

Figure 17. Murfatlar Monastery, Sector E–F (unpublished plan with friendly permission from G. Atanasov; labels by author).

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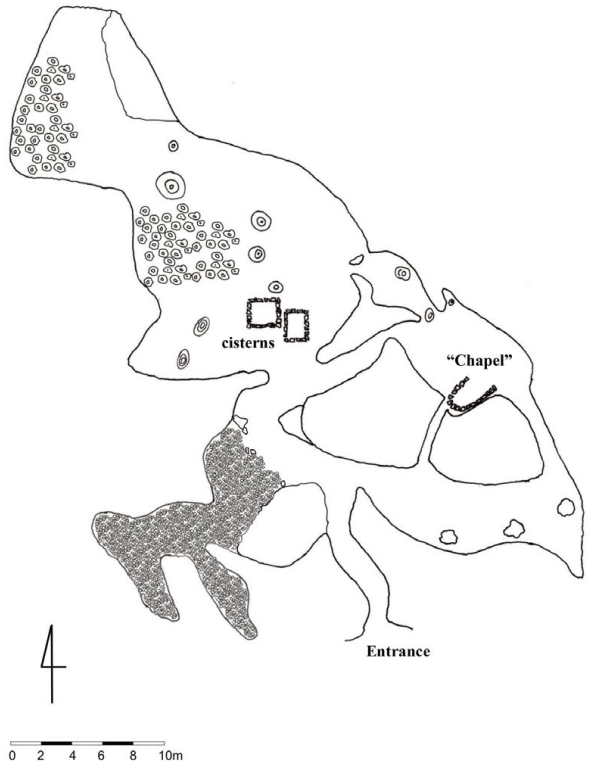

Figure 18. Medil mağarası, plan by Yamaç, Eğrikavuk 2010: 64 (with friendly permission from A. Yamaç; labels by author.).

enough to determine that it had a window, but no roof (Gökoğlu 1952: 132). Admittedly, it is uncertain whether it constituted a church, as the orientation of the building is to the southwest. As no finds were reported from the cave, it is unclear when it was occupied (Aylar et al. 2019) and whether it formed part of a troglodyte network in the range of the Ilgarini mağarası.

The coastal settlement Gideros/Kytoros afforded an anchorage where visitors to the caves of the Pontic mountains could disembark. A little southeast of this inlet, 20m from the main road, is Gideros mağarası I (41.857758,32.872021), called Şinaşi mağarası by the locals. There, crosses and a graffiti inscription have been found (Cassis 2015: 349, 352, figs 1–2). They received no proper investigation, but are very similar to the finds in the Ilgarini mağarası. Sadly, no decipherment of the Greek graffito has been attempted. Based on the published low-resolution photograph, I can only make out parts of the first two of the four lines: +ναύλους τοῦ | …αβον κὲ λη.

Attempting identification

Now, it seems useful to place the site in context with the written record of Byzantine Paphlagonia in this approximate period. The *Lives* of three saints stand out as they are staged in the mountains and caves of Paphlagonia.

To begin with, the *Life* of St George of Amastris is preserved in a single manuscript of the tenth century (Par. gr. 1452, fol. 57–75). The authorship is disputed; while Vasil'evskij (1915), Nikitin (1895: 27–49) and Ševčenko (1982: 12–17) attribute it to the prolific author Ignatios the Deacon on stylistic grounds and lexical resemblance (convincingly to me) and hence to the 840s. Others, among them Kazhdan (1999: 360–66), hypothesise on interpolations or place it in its entirety into the tenth century because the author does not claim to have had personal acquaintance with the saint. However, the matter of date is of little significance for the present purpose, as the author was well familiar with the region of Paphlagonia, which renders the text most valuable to us.

George was born to a noble family in the bishopric of Kromna/Tekkeönü in the mid-eighth century. He entered church service as a young man. Shortly thereafter, in approx. 760–770, he left for Mt Agrioserike, literally 'wild silk', to become a hermit:

> Ἄρτι δὲ τοὺς τοῦ ὄρους ἐπιστὰς πρόποδας (Ἀγριοσηρικὴ ἦν τῷ ὄρει ὄνομα) ἀποπέμπει μὲν τὸν παῖδα σὺν τῷ ὑποζυγίῳ οἴκαδε, μονοῦται δὲ πάσης ὑλικῆς ἐπιμιξίας καὶ πλησιάζει θεῷ δι' ἀταραξίαν τῇ τῆς ψυχῆς καθαρότητι καὶ χειραγωγεῖται πρὸς τὰ τοῦ ὄρους ἐνδότερα. ὕλη δὲ τούτῳ περιφυεῖσα αὐτόματος ποικίλων καὶ παντοδαπῶν δένδρων, μικροῦ δεῖν ἀντὶ ἔρκους αὐτῷ γίνεται· πρὸς γὰρ αὖ τοῖς ἄλλοις καὶ κρημνοῖς δυσεμβάτοις ἐπιστοιχειοῦται πάντοθεν. τοῦτο οὐ μόνον ἀστικῶν θορύβων ἀπήλλακται, ἀλλ' οὐδὲ ὀδίτην τινὰ παραπέμπει. πρὸς δὴ τούτου τοῦ ὄρους ἀναδραμὼν τὴν ἀκρώρειαν, καὶ ἄντρῳ τινὶ περιτυχὼν, ἀρετῆς ὄντι ἐργαστηρίῳ, ἐν ᾧ ἀνήρ τις πᾶσαν κοσμικὴν διαδρὰς ματαιότητα, θεῷ οὐκειώθη διὰ βίου καθαρότητα, ὃς εἰς τοσοῦτον ἤλασεν ἀρετῆς, ὡς καὶ προφητείας δέξασθαι χάρισμα, καὶ τῇ πρὸς θεὸν ἐγγύτητι, τῶν μελλόντων προλέγειν τὴν ἔκβασιν. πρὸς δὴ τοῦτον τὸν τοῦ Μωσέως ἢ Ἡλιοῦ ὁμότροπον ὁ τοῦ Ἀαρὼν ἢ τοῦ Ἐλισσαίου γενόμενος παραπλήσιος· […] συνδιαιτᾶται δὲ τούτῳ, τὸ μὲν τῶν ἀρετῶν ἤδη κατορθωκώς, τὸ δὲ παρ' αὐτοῦ διδασκόμενος· κόσμου γὰρ ἀναχώρησιν οὐχὶ ἔξω τούτου γενέσθαι σωματικῶς διωρίζετο, ἀλλὰ τῆς πρὸς τὸ σῶμα συμπαθείας τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπορρῆξαι, καὶ γενέσθαι ἄπολιν, ἄοικον, ἀνίδιον, ἀφιλέταιρον, ἀπράγμονα, ἀμαθῆ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων διδαγμάτων, τὰς ἐκ τῆς θείας διδασκαλίας ἐγγινομένας ἐντυπώσεις ἕτοιμον τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑποδέξασθαι. τοιοῦτος δὴ καὶ τοσοῦτος εὐς ἀρετὴν γενόμενος, ἀποκείρεται πρὸς τοῦ τιμίου γέροντος, καὶ τὸ τῶν μοναχῶν σχῆμα ὑποδυσάμενος, τοῦ λοιποῦ νόμος ἑαυτῷ καὶ κανὼν εὐθύτητος ἐχρημάτισε. καὶ γίνεται λοιπὸν ὅλος ἔκδημος θεῷ καὶ ἀγγέλοις συνόμιλος. οὐ πολὺ τὸ ἐν μέσῳ καὶ τὸν πρεσβύτην ἡ

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ἄνωθεν ἐπεζήτει χοροστασία, καὶ ἡ ὥρα παρέστη τῆς ἀναλύσεως, καὶ ἡ θεία ἐκείνη προγνοῦσα ψυχὴ τὴν ἔξοδον, μεταστέλλεται τὸν γεννάδαν, καὶ ἀναζωπυρεῖ θείαις εὐσηγήσεσι, καὶ τῶν μελλόντων προλέγει τὴν ἔκβασιν, καὶ πρὸς μονήν τινα παραγενέσθαι, ἣν οἱ ἐγχώριοι Βόνυσσαν προσαγορεύουσιν […] ὁ δὲ ταῖς εὐχαῖς τοῦ καθηγησαμένου στηριζόμενος, ἀπανίσταται τῆς ἐρημικῆς ἐσχατιᾶς, καὶ ὡς τάχιστα καταλαμβάνει τὸ κοινόβιον. (VGAmastr. 11–12, ed. Vasil'evskij 19–21)

As soon as he [George] stopped at the foothills of the mountain called Agrioserike, he sent the boy home with the pack animal and withdrew from all worldly intercourse. He then drew near to God in serenity through the purity of his spirit and was led further into the deeper parts of the mountain. There a forest of various colours and kinds of trees almost completely surrounded him. In addition to other obstacles, there were steep cliffs on all sides. This mountain not only delivered him from urban clamour but also discouraged every traveller. Climbing to the summit of this mountain, he stumbled upon a certain cave, a workshop of virtue, in which a man lived for God through the purity of his life after having exhausted every worldly vanity. This man had advanced to such a level of virtue that he received the anointing of prophecy and could foretell the unfolding of future events on account of his intimacy with God. The one had the same manner as Moses and Elijah, the other became like Aaron or Elisha. […] So they dwelt together, the former already accomplished in virtue and the latter being taught by him. For he decided that his retreat from the world, ready to receive in his heart the impressions that result from divine lessons. Having now become so great in virtue, he was tonsured by the venerable old man. He dressed like a monk and hereafter was the rule and norm of disciple for himself. He also became completely estranged from the world, talking with God and the angels. Not long after, the heavenly chorus sought out the old man, and the hour of his death was near. His divine soul, foreseeing his departure, summoned the noble youth and rekindled him with divine plans. He proclaimed the unfolding of future events, saying that a certain monastery was nearby which the inhabitants call Bonyssa […] Set on his way the prayers of his spiritual guide, he left his eremitic isolation and as quickly as possible embraced the common monastic life. (tr. by author)

Mt Agrioserike, with its cave so far not localised (Belke 1996: 157), recalls the situation of the Küre dağları and the Ilgarini mağarası. The latter location is not far south from Kromna, and is dominated by dense forests and steep cliffs that make it very difficult to reach from the north. I have been told that the main access route to the Ilgarini mağarası in the past was from the north, from Okçular köyü to Öveçler köyü, and then on a path that winds up on the steep rock; I have not had the opportunity to verify this information.

The *Life* characterises the cave as a hermit's dwelling where George was tonsured a monk by an elder hermit. How long exactly he dwelt there is not elucidated by the text. Later, probably in the 780s, he left the cave to join the not so distant coenobitic monastery of Bonyssa (Βόνυσσα, see Belke 1996: 179), which should be identified with the monastery Βονισῶν that sent a monk as representatives to the Council of 787, of which two lead seals of the ninth/tenth century are preserved. This monastery is as yet not located but, based on its name, is most likely connected to the Temple of Zeus Bonitenos near Gökören (41.473312,33.127993; Belke 1996: 178–79; see also Doublet 1889: 311–13; Tomaschek 1891: 77; Robert 1962: 344; Summerer 2014: 199–200), which would place it south of the suggested Mt Agrioserike. When the See of Amastris fell vacant in ca 790–792, Patriarch Tarasios consecrated George bishop of the city. He died between the years 802 and 807 and was buried in Amastris.

The second monastic community I want to discuss in relation to the cave is Chryse Petra. Chryse Petra ('Golden Rock') is known as an important mountain monastery of Asia Minor in the tenth century, appearing among other monastic centres on Holy Mountains (Mt Olympus, Mt Kyminas, Barachaion on Mt Mykale) as privileged by an annual stipend (ῥόγα) by Emperor Romanos I in 928 (Theoph.cont. 418–19; Kountoura-Galake 1999: 69; Talbot 2001: 266–67). In his later will, the same emperor did not include Chryse Petra, but all the other monasteries (Theoph.cont. 430). The Synaxarion of the Church of Constantinople commemorates a certain blessed Gregory who settled and died in Chryse Petra (Syn.CP 254), and a lead seal dating from the 11th century informs us that the monastery was dedicated to the Prophet Elijah (Nesbitt, Oikonomides 1999: 4.14.1: Σφραγὶς μονῆς τοῦ ἁγίου Ἠλίου τῆς Χρυσῆς Πέτρας). This provides a strong indication for its beginnings as a former hermitage, as Elijah is considered a precursor of Christian asceticism (1Reg 19,9–13; Bas.Hom. 18.2, PG 31:496), with many Byzantine cave monasteries dedicated to him (Külzer 1994: 177).

The *Life* of St Dorotheos the Younger written by John Mauropous provides further evidence for the character and location of Chryse Petra. Dorotheos had restored a monastery in the plains of Chiliokomon and partly used the typicon (monastic rule) of Chryse Petra for the re-foundation:

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> […] τὰς πρώτας μὲν ὑποθέσεις παρὰ τοῦ μεγάλου πατρὸς ὡσανεί τινα στοιχεῖα παρειληφὼς πρὸς τὸν τῆς ἀκριβείας τοῦτον κανόνα, ὧν τοὺς τύπους ἐγγράφους ἐκ τῶν Ἀρσενίου τοῦ πάνυ διαταγμάτων ὥσπερ ἄλλος Μωσῆς θεοχαράκτους πλάκας ἐδέξατο. ἦν δὲ οὗτος Ἀρσένιος, ὁ τὴν ἀρετὴν περιβόητος ἐκεῖνος ἐν μοναστα῀ς, ὃς καὶ τῆς Χρυσῆς καλουμένης Πέτρας (οὐδ' ἐκείνη δὲ πόρρω) ἄριστα πάντων ἦρξε καὶ ἀφηγήσατο, καὶ αὐτὸς πολλὰ προσεξευρὼν οἴκοθεν καὶ τῷ πολυπλόκῳ τούτῳ στεφάνῳ τῆς ἀσκητικῆς εὐπρεπείας συγκαταπλέξας, ἅμα μὲν εἰς κάλλους περιουσίαν, ἅμα δὲ καὶ πρὸς μείζονος ὤφελείας ὑπόθεσιν. (VDoroth.iun. 21–22, p. 214)
>
> [Dorotheos] took over the fundaments, like some elements, from the great father [John] for the purpose of this yardstick of exactitude, the written models of which he had taken from the ordinances of the great Arsenios as plaques engraved by God like another Moses. This Arsenios was the one who was famous among monks for his virtue, who had also in the best way ruled and led the so-called Chryse Petra – for that one, too was not far away – and he himself had made many additional inventions from himself and braided them together with his many-braided crown of ascetic decorum, partly for an increase in beauty and partly for greater utility. (tr. adapted from Krausmüller)

Dorotheos had adapted the rule of his spiritual father John, hegumen of the otherwise unknown Monastery of Genna (Γέννα) near Amisos, which the latter had adopted from Arsenios, hegumen of Chryse Petra. From this text we thus can gather, with Krausmüller (2001: 136), that John had once been a monk at Chryse Petra. Mauropous relates that Arsenios's typicon (monastic rule) laid emphasis on manual work, and was generally in keeping with the Studite tradition. In the passage, Mauropous also declares Chryse Petra not to have been far away from Chiliokomon: […] καὶ τῆς Χρυσῆς καλουμένης Πέτρας (οὐδ' ἐκείνη δὲ πόρρω). This statement has prompted Kontoura-Galake (1999) to search for Chryse Petra in the area of Amaseia/Amasya – of note, the distance between Chiliokomon/Suluova and the Ilgarini mağarası is 300km.

There is even more evidence. In an early ninth-century text known as the *Diegesis* of Daniel, Chryse Petra is mentioned as a station of the third of three Arab invasion armies marching onto Constantinople:

> Καὶ ὁ τρίτος κατέλθη τὰ μέρη τοῦ βορρᾶ καὶ Ἀμασίας πόλεως καὶ Συνοπόλεως, καὶ Ζάλιχος τὰ μέρη τῆς Χρυσιαπέτρας καὶ ὁλόφωτον κοιλάδαν καὶ Βιθυνίας καὶ Δαφνουσίας Χρυσιοπόλεως καὶ Δαμουλίου καὶ ἕως τὴν Ἑπτάλοφον. (Apoc.Dan. 2.9, p. 12)
>
> The third [son of Hagar] comes down to the northern regions of the city of Amaseia and of Sinope and Zalichos [-Leontopolis], to the area of Chrysiapetra and to the light-flooded valley, and in the areas of Bithynia and of Daphnousia and Chrysopolis, and Damalion to the Seven Hills. (tr. by author)

This text seems to refer *ex eventu* to the Arab marches in preparation for the siege of Constantinople in 717 (Berger 1976: 51–52), but more importantly for our purposes, it proves that Chryse Petra was somewhere between Sinope and North Bithynia.

Indeed, it is described as situated not far from Amastris in an anonymous and brief Synaxarion notice about John the Faster, who founded the monastery of John the Baptist in Petra in Constantinople in the 1070s–80s. According to this text, the saint left his hometown Amastris as a young man to live in the monastery of Chryse Petra not far from it:

> Πρόσεισι τοιγαροῦν, ἀπαρνησάμενος τὰ κατ' οἶκον, τῇ ἐν γειτόνων μονῇ (ἡ τῆς Χρυσῆς μὲν Πέτρας κλῆσις αὐτῇ· οὐ πολλῷ δ' ἄποθεν τῆς πόλεως κεῖται Ἀμάστριδος). Ἐκεῖσε γοῦν τὴν κόμην ἀποκαρεὶς ὡς νόμος τοῖς μοναχοῖς, καὶ τελούμενος τὰ τῶν μοναστῶν, πολλὴν ἐξ ὧν ἦν ἀρετῆς ἐργάτης, κἀκ τῆς γραμμῆς ἐδήλου τὴν ἐπὶ τέλει ἐπίδοσιν· ποῖον γὰρ εἶδος τοῦ κατὰ θεὸν βίου μὴ μετιὼν ἐγνωρίζετο. (VIoann.Nest. 3, p. 51)
>
> Thus, renouncing what he found at home, he went to a monastery in the vicinity (its name was Chryse Petra; it was not far from the city of Amastris). There, then, after receiving the tonsure in accordance with the monastic rule, and performing what is due to the monks, he practised the virtue drawn from there and immediately demonstrated great devotion for full realisation. Indeed, he knew about life in accordance with God without having to seek it. (tr. by author)

John excelled in virtue and left Chryse Petra for Constantinople, where he met Patriarch Nicholas III (1084–1111). Opposed to Cassin and Cronnier (2018: 54 n. 154), I see no reason to doubt the information contained in the text that the saint made his debut in the monastery of Chryse Petra, or to speculate about a possible conflation of Amastris with Amaseia. In fact, the geographical situation given fits very well with other texts mentioning Chryse Petra.

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The most illuminating text for our purpose is the *Life* of St Nikon Metanoite (PmbZ 26155). His early 11th-century *Life* relates that he left his native country when he was 11 years old in Pontos Polemoniakos beyond the Theme of Armeniakon (VNic.Met. 2.10–11: ἡ παρὰ τὸ θέμα τὸ Ἀρμενιακὸν κειμένη Πολεμωνιακὴ χώρα, which possibly circumscribes the area of the Theme of Chaldia). This must have occurred during the late 940s. Subsequently, he arrived in 'Pontos' after some days of travel and saw the mountain governed by Chryse Petra:

> […] κατέλαβε τὸν Πόντον, καὶ τῷ ὄρει προσήγγισεν, ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἐν μεθορίοις Πόντου τε καὶ Παφλαγονίας, ἐν ᾧ καὶ μοναστήριον ἵδρυται, ὅπερ καὶ Χρυσῆ Πέτρα ἐξ ἀρχαίας τινὸς παραδόσεως ἐπικέκληται […] (VNic.Met. 4.9–12)
>
> He came down to Pontos and approached the mountain, which is situated at the border of Pontos to Paphlagonia, where the monastery is built that is called Chryse Petra by ancient tradition. (tr. by author)

Following the geographical logic of the text, Nikon arrived in Pontos coming from Pontos Polemoniakos, which probably presupposes that he had left the Pontos region during travel, probably as he crossed through inland Paphlagonia. Sullivan (1987: 276) appears to have been right in supposing that the Pontos in question must be understood in an archaising sense and sought west of Helenopontos. Indeed, since the Hellenistic Age, the toponym Pontos designated the entire coastal zone east of the Halys or even Sinope, while the term became more often understood as confined to the east of Amisos/Samsun during the later Middle Byzantine period (Niehoff 2001: 144). The hagiographer seems to have used the toponym Pontos for the zone north of the Pontic mountain range, as it had been usual still in the Imperial Period when the Greek urbanised Pontos was administratively and culturally separated from inland Paphlagonia (Marek 1993: 80–81).

According to the *Life*, the monastery of Chryse Petra was located on a mountain (the name of which is not articulated). The text offers two explanations of how the monastery received its name 'Golden Rock': either on account of the wilderness, aridity and as if it were gilded from the violent blazing sunbeams falling upon it, or because the souls trained there become golden (VNic.Met. 4.13–16: εἴτε διὰ τὸ σκληρὸν τοῦ τόπου καὶ ἄνικμον καὶ οἱονεὶ χρυσίζον τῷ σφοδρῷ τοῦ ἡλιακοῦ ἀμαρύγματος, εἴτε, εἰ δεῖ τἀληθῆ λέγειν, χρυσᾶς τῷ ὄντι καὶ θεοειδεῖς τὰς ἐν αὐτῷ ἀσκουμένας ψυχὰς ἐπιτελεῖσθαι). The mountain's harshness, steepness and aridness are later underscored again (VNic.Met. 5.39–40).

In the course of the narrative, it becomes clear that the monastery had a large group of monks (VNic.Met. 9.4–5), but Nikon stood out because of his severe asceticism. After some years, he became regarded as a holy man. The monastery itself is not described in any way and is also not characterised as a cave. After 12 years had passed, Nikon's father, who was travelling the wider region to find his runaway son, came closer; but Nikon foresaw this and God hid him 'in a tabernacle' (VNic.Met. 11.14–22). This does not need to be interpreted in the sense that his shelter was a cave, as this is the well-known literary motive of 'sacred invisibility' (Pratsch 2005: 270–72). Finally, Nikon decides to leave the monastery to avoid discovery by and confrontation with his father. That very moment, Nikon's father arrives in the monastery, searching its entirety for his son – in vain (VNic.Met. 15.12–19). Again, the *Life* remains non-specific about the size and layout of the monastery. In haste, Nikon arrives at the Parthenios River within a day, providing the most significant indication for the location of Chryse Petra: 'The blessed one moved quickly and journeyed along the way for one day, guided by the grace which moved him, and he arrived at the river Parthenios' (VNic.Met. 15.2–4: Ὁ δὲ μακάριος ὀξυδρομήσας καὶ μιᾶς ἡμέρας ὁδεύσας ὁδόν, τῇ χάριτι ἀφ' ἧς κεκίνητο ποδηγούμενος, τὸν Παρθένιον κατέλαβε ποταμόν). Belke (1996: 184–85) rejects this information as he considers it a miracle. However, the text does not articulate it as a miracle (indecisive is Kountoura-Galake 1999: 71); in fact, Nikon worked no miracles during this period of his life, but experiences his first miracle only later when he reaches the river (Kazhdan 1984: 190). I argue that this is not a reliable method of discrediting the information, the veracity of which can still be questioned on other grounds. One should bear in mind, however, that by using numerous toponyms the hagiographer indicates that he is familiar with the region. As he wanted to convince his readers of the saint's deeds, he was certainly not inclined to connect familiar place-names to an utterly unbelievable storyline. The toponyms of the Parthenios River and the village of Parthenia survive until today as Bartın suyu and Bartın (Belke 1996: 259). The distance from the Ilgarini mağarası to Bartın is 90km, yet to the Bartın suyu only 70km, presupposing that Nikon might have run west (via Gürgen), following the valley of the Göksu/Ulus çayı until its confluence with the Bartın suyu (see Fig. 2). This is certainly a long way to run within a day (as such a distance can only be overcome with a speed of approx. 6km/h for 12 hours), but one should bear in mind that all previous localisations of Chryse Petra placed the monastery much further east!

It has indeed proved most difficult to track Chryse Petra down on a map. Lampsides (1982: 398) mistakenly

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assumed Chryse Petra to have been near Herakleia/Ereğli. This was refuted by Belke (1996: 184), who advanced the idea that it was located somewhere in East Paphlagonia. Janin (1975: 116–17, 442) proposed no localisation, while the suggestions by Anderson et al. (1910: 254–55), Da Costa-Louillet (1961: 350 n. 1) and Bryer and Winfield (1985: 95) lack any solid grounds, and have already been refuted by Kountoura-Galake (1999). The localisation of Malamut (1993: 262) is based on the incorrect assumption that the Parthenios constitutes a tributary of the Halys. Instead, Kountoura-Galake (1999), followed by Telonis (2013: 85 n. 11) and Oğuz (2023: 26), locate Chryse Petra near Amaseia/Amasya without any archaeological consideration, based solely on a vague reference to a certain Πέτρα near Amaseia by Strabo. Her suggestion, of course, also suffers from the consequence that the Parthenios River is completely out of reach. Based on Kountoura-Galakes's misconception, Cassin and Cronnier (2018: 54 n. 154) questioned the assertion in John the Faster's *Life* that Chryse Petra was near Amastris (οὐ πολλῷ δ' ἄποθεν). In fact, this text tallies with what is known already, and confirms the monastery's geographical position in North Paphlagonia.

One could now throw one's hands up and rightly state that it is never possible to arrive at a clear localisation, much less an identification from the limited corpus of texts in which Chryse Petra is mentioned. Yet, I consider it useful to note that the combined text corpus related to Chryse Petra provides a striking indication for its situation in the Küre dağları. Until now, this was regarded as an empty space in the Byzantine period (as per Belke 1996), but now there is good reason to consider it as a possible site of this monastery. At the moment, I consider it impossible to determine whether the Ilgarini mağarası is in fact Chryse Petra, mainly because the latter is not described as a cave in any of the adduced Byzantine texts, but I recognise a high probability that the Ilgarini mağarası must have been among the larger monasteries that shaped the Chryse Petra monastic network.

By any means, Chryse Petra was definitely the most important monastic establishment in 10th- and 11th-century Paphlagonia, as it did not only receive imperial attention by Romanos I, but its monastic community also attracted young men from all parts of Paphlagonia. Some of the most celebrated monastic founders have been trained in this monastery: Nikon stayed at Chryse Petra in ca 950s–early 960s, and John the Faster in the mid-11th century. Both exerted a huge impact on monasticism in other parts of the empire. Moreover, John Mauropous, a Paphlagonian by birth (JMaur.ep. 9, 11) and bishop of Euchaïta in ca 1060–1075, seems to have been acquainted with Chryse Petra's former hegumen Arsenios

Figure 19. Yellowish strip at the cave mouth (photo by author, 2022).

(VDoroth.iun. 22). There, he might also have met John the Faster in the 1060s, which would easily explain why he eventually joined John the Faster's monastic foundation in Constantinople in the late 1070s (Lauxtermann 2022: 392).

As proved by the ninth-century *Diegesis* of Daniel, the mountain monastery of Chryse Petra had become a point of reference in Paphlagonia and Pontos well before, and thus might have been operating already since the eighth or ninth century. If it is the site mentioned in the *Life* of George of Amastris as the hermit's cave of Mt Agrioserike, this may mean the monastery was established after the saint left the cave in ca 780.

How did Chryse Petra receive its name? The explanations for its name given by the *Life* of Nikon (VNic.Met. 4.13–16) fail to convince, not only because the hagiographer is indecisive regarding what prompted the appellation, but also because it is not at all obvious how harsh sunlight shining on rock can be a sufficiently peculiar feature to warrant the genesis of a toponym. Hence, I argue that the hagiographer knew that the name was ancient, but had no idea how it had come about. Although it may appear hazardous and even unnecessary, I cannot refrain from mentioning in passing that the mouth of the Ilgarini

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mağarası has a notable-coloured strip on the left side that can best be described as golden (Fig. 19); it was created by a natural hole that gives way to rainwater washing out the yellowish rock.

Conclusion

In summary, it appears evident that the Ilgarini mağarası was a Middle Byzantine monastery offering space for around a dozen monks. The matter of regional embeddedness needs more study, but at the moment it appears likely that this monastery also served as a centre for hermits dwelling on the plateau and the Küre dağları more broadly.

I put forward the suggestion that monastic life started in and around the Ilgarini mağarası with a small hermitage of a solitary recluse, who attracted disciples creating a community of anchorites surrounding the main cave. After a monastic community had formed, it became possible to establish the sophisticated structures and the extant architecture with the involvement of patrons and builders. A comparable process is reflected in the *Life* of Ioannikios (VIoann. 45) where, after dwelling in a cave for some time, the protagonist calls builders to erect a church inside the cave (εὐκτήριον ναὸν ἐν τῷ σπηλαίῳ), the nucleus of a coming monastery.

One would expect that the tomb of the founder of the community occupied a marked place or was highlighted in another way. As outlined above, there are hearsay reports about a prominent tomb on the first level, close to Chapel A. As the current state of preservation does not allow verifying the reports, one cannot base an argument on it. On the contrary, the clustering of graves in the northwestern part of the second level might have been occasioned by the tomb of the founder, to whom the deceased wanted to be close.

As Talbot (2001: 272–74) and Della Dora (2016: 194) have outlined, the presence of holy men could rid mountains of demons and turn them into 'holy mountains'; by their acts of purification through prayers and psalm-singing, they turned them into sacred places around which monasteries could develop, often attracting pilgrims from afar. The Ilgarini mağarası appears to be the centre of troglodyte monasticism practised in the Küre dağları in the 9th–11th centuries (if not earlier), where the hermits and idiorrhythmic monks could receive church service.

Concerning the identification of the cave with a monastery known from written records, I consider it quite possible that it could be Mt Agrioserike and/or Chryse Petra. I cannot recognise any formidable obstacle in the fact that the *Life* of St George calls the mountain Agrioserike, whereas the texts relating to Chryse Petra do not name the mountain upon which it was located. This difference may be ascribed to temporal distance; in the early ninth century, no monastery had yet been established so that the place was designated by the name of the mountain; however, once the monastery had been founded, it became the focal point for all anchorites on the mountain range, and there was no longer any impetus to characterise or even name the mountain, as opposed to the famed monastery.

Sadly, neither of the texts speaks about the inner constitution or layout of the respective monastic communities, and thus we cannot possibly relate the texts to the structures in the Ilgarini mağarası. So, even if its original appellation and dedication will probably remain uncertain and a matter of hypothesis, the Ilgarini mağarası is by all means an important Middle Byzantine monastic site, and can now be firmly fixed in the hitherto blank region between inland Paphlagonia and the Black Sea coast.

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