



Erato Angelopoulou: one of the first Greek female speleologists

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Abstract: Erato Angelopoulou (or Aggelopoulou) was an extraordinary woman, remembered by many for her skill with the traditional Greek horizontal loom and her knowledge of the related techniques of creating loom-made textiles. Less well-known is that Erato, who spent most of her adult life living in France, was one of the pioneers of Greek speleology. In the early 1930s, long before Ioannis Petrocheilos and Anna Petrocheilou established the Hellenic Speleological Society, Erato discovered, visited, and explored numerous caves in mainland Greece, and on the island of Euboea. This paper presents an introduction to Erato's speleological achievements, which began years before the 1950s and the formative age of Greek speleology.

Keywords: athletics; horizontal loom; Kythera

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Introduction

The history of cave exploration in Greece is linked intimately to the name of Anna Petrocheilou, who dominated the landscape of Greek Speleology in the years between the death of her husband, Ioannis Petrocheilos in 1950 until her own passing in 2001. Anna's caving history was already well-advanced by the 1950s, having begun during the 1930s. Together with her husband, she started exploring caves on the island of Kythera, where Ioannis had been posted as science teacher in a local high school (see Trimmis, 2022). As is well known, in the 1950s the earlier work of Ioannis and Anna led to the establishment of the first society focused exclusively on cave exploration and science in Greece. The birth and of the Hellenic Speleological Society and its subsequent development up until the present are well documented by various researchers (see, for example, Ioannou, 2000; Trimmis, 2022).

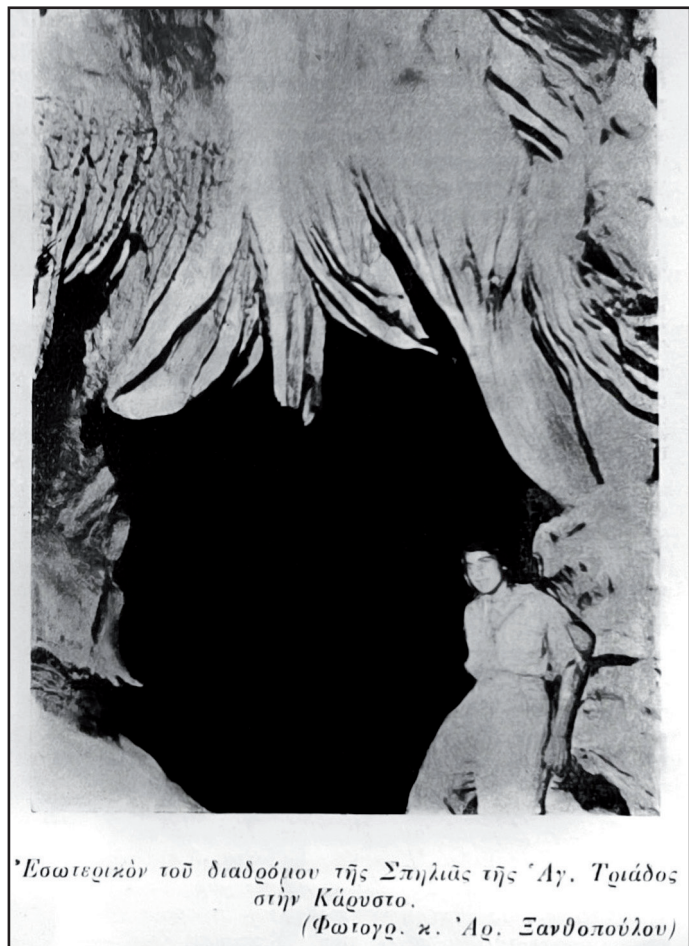
Nevertheless, the dawn period of a public interest in the exploration of caves in Greece remains relatively unstudied. This period, which also included the formative years of the Petrocheilos' work in caves, began in the mid-1920s and ended abruptly with the outbreak of the Second World War. After that, the consequent Greek Civil War depressed the country until the end of 1949. Several people were making pioneer cave explorations during the early days of Greek speleology, but this paper focusses on the role of Erato Angelopoulou, who was the first woman to publish several speleological exploration reports in Greek journals, and who was considered by her peers as being a 'specialist speleologist'.

Erato Angelopoulou (Ερατώ Αγγελοπούλου) 1910 – 2012: an extraordinary life

Most of Erato's short biographies that can be found online, are connected to her work on the Greek horizontal loom. They also suggest that she was born in the city of Patras but, according to her daughter, Aspasia, and some family notes, she was born in the Athenian coastal suburb of Paleo Faliro on 05 April 1910. She was the third of four children, all of whom had beautiful ancient-Greek names: Alkeos, Achilles, Erato, and Aspasia. Her upper-middle-class maternal forebears originated from Crete, but the Greek government had provided them with a house and land in the town of Rio, close to the city of Patras in the Peloponnese, as a vote of thanks for their support of the Greek revolution against Ottoman rule in Crete. Erato's grandparents, with whom she spent her summers, were Manuel and Aspasia Chairreti, who lived in a house in Rio, where they worked on their land. In winter they would move to a house on Agios Nikolaos Street in Patras, which was eventually destroyed during the WWII Nazi bombardment of the city. In 1913 Erato's father, George Angelopoulos, who came from an Athenian upper-middle-class family, died after suffering a stroke, and subsequently their large house at Faliro became a burden to the widowed Thalia, Erato's mother. Thus, the family then started to rent-out the Faliro villa to Athenians over the summer. By moving to Rio to stay with the grandparents they were able to save the money that came in from the villa rental. This situation continued until after the First World War, when Erato's mother began to think about relocating to Belgium to join her sisters.



Figure 1a [above] and 1b [right]:
 1a shows part of a page from 'Excursions' (Εκδρομικά), 44 (1933) that includes a photograph [shown enlarged in 1b] of Erato while she was exploring the Cave of Agia Triada in Karystos in December 1932. The main title and authorship read: "Research and Exploration of Caves: The Cave of Agia Triada in Karystos. By Miss Er. Aggelopoulou", and the photograph caption reads: "The interior of a gallery at the Cave of Ag. Triada in Karystos. Photo by Mr Ar. Xanthopoulos".



The idea was, however, abandoned when the economic situation in Greece deteriorated. Instead, the family moved permanently to the city of Patras, where they stayed until the end of the 1920s. While in Patras, Erato started pursuing the athletic activities that would later, during the 1930s, lead to her becoming one of the foremost female athletes in Greece. During the summer months the Angelopoulou family was visited in Patras by Erato's aunt and cousins who lived in Belgium. An older cousin, Hellenitsa, became a major influence on Erato, introducing her to the many feminist developments from elsewhere in Europe, and leading to her becoming an active and independent woman in the years that followed.

When Erato and her family returned to Athens, they stayed in the Faliro house and Erato started participating in athletics events as a member of the Faliro Sports club. In 1930 she competed in the first athletics games to be organized specifically for female competitors in Athens, where she achieved five gold and two silver medals. In the first Panhellenic Games, held in the following year, 1931, she was first in the shot-put, and second in the 80m hurdles, the javelin, and the high jump. Erato's success in athletics continued through the first half of the 1930s, when she gained several more medals and became one of the most important female athletes during the early days of modern Greek athletics. Established within this active background, she also began to engage with mountaineering and caving, sports that would dominate her interests during the second half of the decade.

Early days of public cave explorations in Greece

Scientific research in Greek caves pre-dated the beginning of sporting cave exploration. As early as the second half of the 19th century, famous speleologists visited Greece to study and record karstic phenomena, when Greek archaeologists excavated in caves around the Acropolis in Athens and elsewhere in the Attica region (details of the early days of Greek speleology are included in the *Introduction* to Trimmis, 2022). After the First World War and the Asia Minor Campaign of the Greek Army, which had devastating consequences for Greece, several excursionist,

nature, and walking clubs and societies were established in Athens during the 1920s. The more significant ones included the 'Travelling Club' in 1922, 'Outdoor Life' in 1925, 'Pan' in 1927 and, most importantly, the 'Hellenic Mountaineering Club' (EOS –Ελληνικός Ορειβατικός Σύνδεσμος) in 1928.

These clubs began to organize excursions to the known caves around the Attica region and in the Cyclades (such as Keratea, Panos Cave, Antiparos Cave and others). In February 1928, an article by Chatzopoulos entitled 'The caves of Attica of Hymettus – the terrible vertical cave close to the Gouri-i Samari. Descent in the depths. The most beautiful and sublime Stalactites of Greece' was published in the newspaper 'Greek Postman'. The cave that was featured in the article is nowadays known as Koutouki Cave at Paiania, close to Athens. The first systematic 'expedition' into a cave was organized by Pan at the cave of Keratea and an account was published in the periodical 'Excursions' (Εκδρομικά) by I Kapsabelis (1930: 9). This article sparked a series of similar descriptions of cave explorations in every bulletin that focussed on mountaineering and outdoor activities (such as the 'The Mountain [Το Βουνό]', and 'Pan [Παν]').

Subsequently, many of the clubs' members began to target their excursions almost exclusively upon cave visits, a trend that led to the creation of the first society in Greece that was directed exclusively towards caving – the 'Speleology Team' (Σπηλαιολογική Ομάδα) of EOS Athens.

The Speleology Team was founded officially in 1936 by I Sarris and, among others, its members included D Loukissas, A Kanellis, N Perrakis, I Nikolopoulos, G Soutsos, A Xanthopoulos and, of course, Erato Angelopoulou. In fact, the activities of most members of the Speleology Team had been targeted upon cave explorations from as early as 1932, which was about the same time that I Petrocheilos began exploring the caves on the island of Kythera (Trimmis, 2020). Erato and I Sarris were the main authors of articles and reports about explorations carried out by the Speleology Team, which appeared in journals about the Greek outdoors.

Magazine title and year	Article Title
Εκδρομικά 44 (1933) [<i>Excursions</i> ']	The cave of Agia Triada in Karystos
το Βουνό 8 (1934) [<i>The Mountain</i> ']	The cave of Karystos
το Βουνό 13 (1935) [<i>The Mountain</i> ']	The cave of Hermes in Zereia
το Βουνό 16 (1935) [<i>The Mountain</i> ']	Speleological Miscellanea
το Βουνό 18 (1935) [<i>The Mountain</i> ']	Advice to prospective Speleologists

Table 1: The main articles written by Erato Angelopoulou. This list is not claimed as being definitive, but it includes only those publications that have been located to date and examined by the author.

Erato's contribution and legacy

To date this research has located five articles written by Erato, one in '*Excursions*' (Εκδρομικά) and four in the magazine '*The Mountain*' (το Βουνό) (Table 1). These articles include information about 11 caves, some of them still well-known, including the caves of Hermes in Corinthia, Agia Triada in Euboea, Daveli in Attica, and the caves of Kouvaras, Mitromara, and Sarri, all in Attica. One cave, (the Cave of Agia Triada Karystos) was reported twice, in 1933 and 1934.

Among the papers described above, reference was found to one more article by Erato, in the magazine '*The Mountain*' (το Βουνό), but to date this has not been relocated. From interviews with Erato, that were conducted in Kythera during the summers of 2010 and 2011, she still remembered having described her exploration of the cave of Koutouki in Paiania and of Nymfoliptos in Vari, neither of which appears in her published reports discussed above.

Erato visited several of the caves more than once – as was the case with Agia Triada Cave (Fig.1a) – to complete the explorations to the limits that they could reach with the limited equipment available in that era (see, for example, Fig.1b). All the published articles are quite technical for the period, and they do not read simply as descriptions of outdoor adventures. They offer extensive information about access to the caves, their locations, the geology of each area, biological information regarding cave fauna and flora, and archaeological observations. Generally, Erato's articles are illustrated by photos, mainly by A Kanellis and N Perrakis, while one article includes a detailed map of the Hermes Cave in Kylini, made by D Loukissas. It is interesting that this detailed map, which appeared in '*The Mountain*' (1935) is far more accurate than the early sketches of the caves of Kythera produced by I Petrocheilos (Trimmis, 2022).

It is also interesting that the team members identify themselves as 'speleologists', and that in her writings Erato is aware about the importance of caves for the scientific research and for potentially enhancing the economic development of an area. As an example, when she writes about the Cave of Hermes in Zereia, Corinthia, she refers to future visitors and the need for providing better access to the cave. She also correlates her observations with those in other caves that the team members have visited previously, as is the case when she discusses the archaeology in the cave of Zereia in relation to the finds from the cave of Nymfoliptos in Vari. Clearly, she understands simple cave development mechanisms, and she also describes the techniques that they have used when descending and ascending difficult passages in the caves. All these components point to a holistic understanding of speleology, going well beyond a simple excursion into a cave. Such involvement is something that would not become the norm in Greece until after the 1950s and the establishment of the Hellenic Speleological Society.



Figure 2: Erato in 2006, re-reading some of the articles she had written 74 years before. [Photo by Thomas Theodosiadis, 2006.]

Erato's language and writing style are also simple and approachable, such that even modern-day readers can see all the endeavours of these early speleologists unfolding vividly through her many articles. Additionally, going beyond the exploration reports, one of Erato's articles in '*The Mountain*' (1935) is entitled '*Advice to prospective Speleologists*'.



Figure 3: Erato at her house in Kythera, aged 99, in front of her favourite loom. [Photo by F Ellinas – Archive of the Cerigo Speleological Project/Hellenic Speleological Society.]

In it, she gives advice regarding clothing for caving, lighting, ropes and ladders, alongside technical guidance for cave surveying and photography, and even how to maintain one's orientation in complicated underground passages (Fig.2).

Inevitably, for Erato as for many others, the hostilities associated with the Second World War led to the widespread disruption of many peace-time activities, including those related to cave exploration. Towards the end of the War, Erato met and married a French diplomat, with whom she then travelled the world before settling in Strasbourg, France.

Later, during the 1970s, Erato became deeply immersed in researching the techniques and capabilities of the traditional Greek horizontal loom (Fig.3). Eventually this in-depth study led her to write the most comprehensive guide to-date concerning the use of this type of weaving instrument (Angelopoulou, 1986).

Most of Erato's later life was spent on the island of Kythera, where she was an important member of the little island's society. She retained her independent, and always curious, spirit until the end of her life at the age of 102.

This preliminary precis of her early activities and ventures in Greek speleology forms just part of a wider and ongoing study. Already it is clear that Erato influenced Petrocheilos and other early Greek speleologists in the direction taken by their later ventures, but undoubtedly there is still more to be discovered about the full extent of her impact.

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