ANATOLIAN CAVES IN STRABO'S GEOGRAPHICA

Ali Yamaç

OBRUK Cave Research Group; Acikhava Apt. 16/7, Nisantasi, Istanbul, Turkey
info@obruk.org

Introduction

Some of the written works beginning from Ancient Greece and Rome to Byzantium and Middle Ages which could reach today is about geography, and these books give us invaluable information about the nature of that region. In a way, we can regard them as the priceless sources of nature history written hundreds of years ago provided that we search them carefully. We say "on condition that we search carefully" because many superstitious, myth and hearsays are available in such geography books as in various other books written in ancient history.

There are a few different books telling Anatolian geography. On the other hand, Geographica by Strabo is one of the primary resources and the one which lays the largest place to Anatolian geography. This is a general book of earth geography consisted of 17 books; and its 12nd, 13th and 14th volumes are completely about Anatolia. Although there are some pieces of papyrus available dated to 100-300 AD, most of the the manuscripts, which are about 30 today, are all the copies from Middle Ages.

Strabo was born to an affluent family from Amaseia in Pontus (modern Amasya of Turkey) at 64 BC. His life was characterized by extensive travels. He journeyed to Egypt and as far south as Ethiopia in addition to his travels in Asia Minor and time spent in Rome. Travels throughout the Mediterranean and Near East, especially for scholarly purposes, was popular during this era and was facilitated by the relative peace enjoyed throughout the reign of Augustus (27 BC - AD 14). Strabo moved to Rome in 44 BC, and stayed there, studying and writing, until at least 31 BC. It's been known that around 25 BC, he sailed up the Nile, reaching Philae.

It is not known precisely when Strabo's Geographica was written, though comments within the work itself place the finished version within the reign of Emperor Tiberius. Some authorities place its first drafts around 7 AD, others around 18 AD.

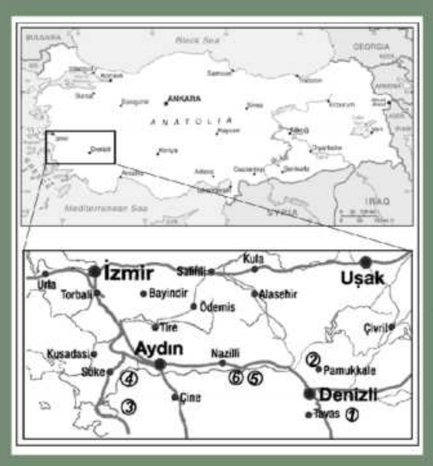
In addition to Strabo, in the works of Pliny, Pausanias and some other classical authors, there are various information about Anatolian caves. Analysing all those ancient resources and travel books of the people wandering around that lands hundreds years ago in terms of speleology will open new horizons to us for the future.



One of the most precious editions of Geographica. Printed in Rome at 1469 and sold in Sotheby's Nov. 1999 auction for 470.000 USD



Strabo's Geographica,1494 Venezia edition



Anatolian Caves in Strabo's 'Geographica'

Strabo mentioned 7 different caves in his three books about Anatolia. Interestingly, though he had travelled most regions of Anatolia, he had mentioned only 7 caves and 6 of them are on the south of Maeander River, the area with nearly no limestone and the 7. Cave is on the Mediterranean shore.

The caves of Anatolia from Strabo's "Geographica" are:

Book 12. Chapter 8. Section 16. *"Above the city lies Mt. Cadmus, whence the Lycus flows, as does also another river of the same name as the mountain. But the Lycus flows under ground for the most part, and then, after emerging to the surface, unites with the other rivers, thus indicating that the country is full of holes and subject to earthquakes".*

The above mentioned Mt. Cadmus is Mount Honaz, in the South east of Denizli. Lycus River, namely Çürüksu today, on the other hand, flows from the west and unites with Menderes River near Sarayköy in the west. Yet, this river flows in the narrow canyons in the most parts; even in a small canyon in front of the Colossae ruins near Honaz town, which gives its name to the mountain. However, as far as we know, it has no underground course. We say "as far as we know" because there is no underground course in the Honaz part of the river but the parts before arriving Honaz Town of the river have not been researched in detail.

Book 13. Chapter 4. Section 14. *"... while the Plutonium, below a small brow of the mountainous country that lies above it, is an opening of only moderate size, large enough to admit a man, but it reaches a considerable depth, and it is enclosed by a quadrilateral handrail, about half a plethrum in circumference, and this space is full of a vapour so misty and dense that one can scarcely see the ground. Now to those who approach the handrail anywhere round the enclosure the air is harmless, since the outside is free from that vapor in calm weather, for the vapor then stays inside the enclosure, but any animal that passes inside meets instant death".*



Honaz Mountain

The cave that Strabo is mentioning is namely Hierapolis Plutonium today which is in Denizli/Pamukkale, and in the South of Hierapolis Theatre. Later on, Apollon Temple was built on the structure. According to the report of Italian School of Archaeology, Apollon was joining Kybele who is the most important goddess of the region before Helen. The cave, closed with the collapse of the temple, was excavated and found again in 1964. Today, after the restoration, it can be seen almost as Strabo mentioned. On the entrance of the cave, there is a marble niche dated to Roman period. In spite of the fact that the poisionous vapor that Strabo mentioned now has become fairly less compared to the past, the entrance was still closed with a handrail.



Hierapolis Plutonium

Book 14. Chapter 1. Section 8. *"This mountain lies above Heracleia, and at a high elevation. At a slight distance away from it, after one has crossed a little river near Latmus, there is to be seen the sepulchre of Endymion, in a cave."*

Today, we definitely know the cave which we suppose that Strabo mentioned. There is a mansion which is remoured to be Endymion's on a point near lake, under the ruins of Temple of Athena in Kapıkırı Village (Herakleia am Latmos) on the shore of Bafa Lake. On the other side, it is quite surprising that Strabo did not mention several important caves which were discovered by Anneliese Peschlow in the area and only mentioned one cave that he thought to be the sepulchre of Endymion within.



Bafa Lake, view from Herakleia am Latmos

Book 14. Chapter 1. Section 11. *"Thence, within four stadia, one comes to a village, the Carian Thymbria, near which is Aornum, a sacred cave, which is called Charonium, since it emits deadly vapours."*

Unfortunately, we do not know the exact location of this antique town. However, in the light of the data from the other narrations of Strabo, we can say that this settlement is between Avsar Village and Söke, near Büyük Menderes River. In Anatolia, there are many different caves called "Charonium" dedicated to Charon who carries the deads to Hades with his boat in the underground river Styx, mentioned in Greek Mythology.

Book 14. Chapter 1. Section 44. *"On the road between the Trailleis and Nysa is a village of the Nysaeans, not far from the city Acharaca, where is the Plutonium, with a costly sacred precinct and a shrine of Pluto and Core, and also the Charonium, a cave that lies above the sacred precinct, by nature wonderful; for they say that those who are diseased and give heed to the cures prescribed by these gods resort thither and live in the village near the cave among experienced priests, who on their behalf sleep in the cave and through dreams prescribe the cures."*

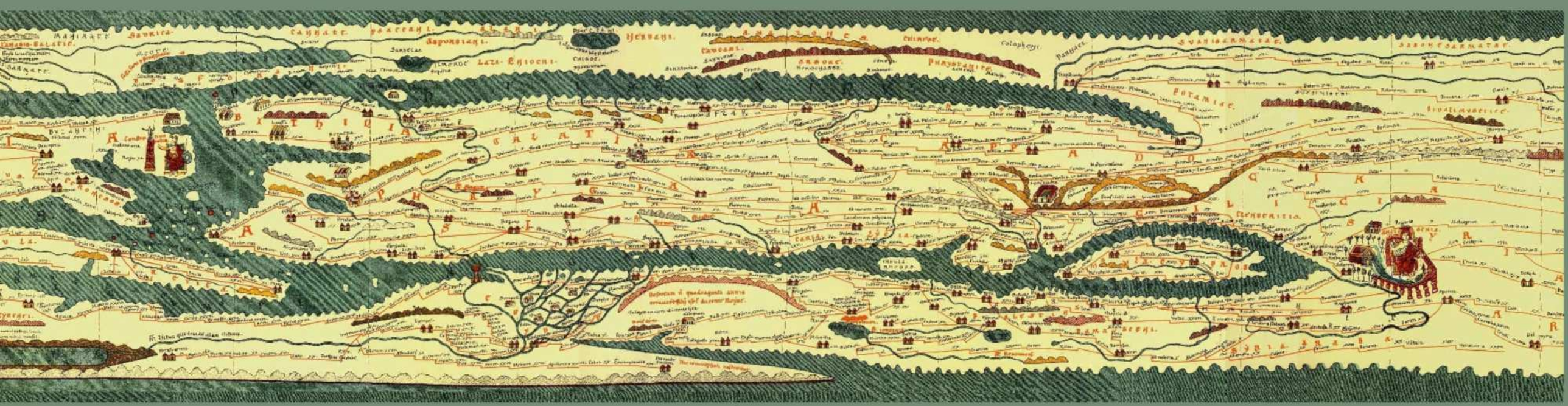


Ruins in Salavatlı Village

The place of Acharaca is not precisely known. In the excavations carried years ago in Salavatlı Village near Aydın, Sultanhisar, the sacred precinct, Pluto and Core shrines were also discovered. Yet, other Charonium which he mentioned to be just on the upper part of the mentioned temple is unavailable. George Bean, in his work "Turkey Beyond Maeander", talks about a sulfureous river called Sarısu in a deep and steep valley in the west, and states that the dejective foldings on the rocky slopes of the valley may be the places used instead of a natural cave. Numerous dedications to this cave in the ancient resources shows the place as a significant religious point.

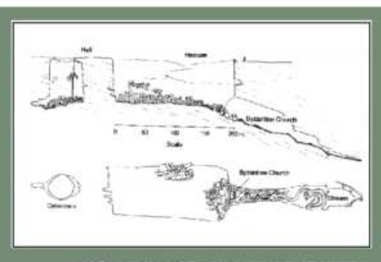
Book 14. Chapter 1. Section 45. *"Thirty stadia from Nysa, after one crosses over Mt. Tmolus and the mountain called Mesogis, towards the region to the south of the Mesogis, there is a place called Leimon, whither the Nysaeans and all the people about go to celebrate their festivals. And not far from Leimon is an entrance into the earth sacred to the same gods, which is said to extend down as far as Acharaca."*

What is surprising is that no cave could be found in this area despite the detailed description whereas the place of Leimon is -even if roughly- known. The city is estimated to be in the South of Aydın, Sultanhisar, near Karahayıt Village today. What is more, the land is smooth aluvial soil which is not available for the formation of any caves.



Tabula Peutingeriana 5. century AD. The Anatolia part of 6,75 m's long atlas roll. It's one of the earliest maps of the area.

Book 14. Chapter 5. Section 5. *"... and to Crambusa, an island, and to Corycus, a promontory, above which, at a distance of twenty stadia, is the Corycian cave, in which the best crocus grows. It is a great circular hollow, with a rocky brow situated all round it that is everywhere quite high. Going down into it, one comes to a floor that is uneven and mostly rocky, but full of trees of the shrub kind, both the evergreen and those that are cultivated. And among these trees are dispersed also the plots of ground which produce the crocus. There is also a cave here, with a great spring, which sends forth a river of pure and transparent water; the river forthwith empties beneath the earth, and then, after running invisible underground, issues forth into the sea. It is called Picrum Hydor."*



This is namely Heaven Cave today, near Silifke. There is an underground river reaching Mediterranean Sea after flowing a few more kilometers from the deepest point of doline, which is 70 m depth and 200 m width. In this cave, the only change within hundreds of years from the narrations of Strabo to-day is that there is no more a crocus in the cave and a church built during the Byzantium period. It is also very surprising that Strabo, who mentioned Heaven Cave in such a detail, did never mention other doline, Hell Cave, which has nearly the same depth as the Heaven Cave and only 50 metres far from this doline, but however he had mentioned "Picrum Hydor", namely Dilek Cave today, which is nearly two kilometers far from these two dolins.



References

Aygen T, 1984. Türkiye Mağaraları (Caves of Turkey), İstanbul, pp. 46-48.

Bean GE, 1989. Turkey Beyond the Maeander, London, pp.213-216.

Peschlow AB, 2006. Tarih Öncesi İnsan Resimleri, Istanbul.

Strabo (Translated by Jones HL), 1929. Geography, Vol. VI, Books 12-13-14, Loeb Classical Library No. 223, London.

Syme R, Birley A, 1995. Anatolica: Studies in Strabo, Oxford.



Strabo's Geographica,1472 Venezia edition