

# Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind

*Descending Underground in the  
Search for Ultimate Truth*

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# Introduction

## 1. CAVES AND THE GREEK QUEST FOR THE DIVINE TRUTH

The Greeks were ambiguous about caves, and the symbol of this ambiguity is the famous cave of the Nymphs on Ithaca: it had two entrances, one for the mortals and the other one for immortals only.<sup>1</sup> Caves hid awe-inspiring secrets and treasures, they served as shelters or places of seclusion, they could be exciting, mysterious, or frightening, but they were always numinous.

The most famous image of the cave in the ancient literature is drawn by Plato in the seventh book of the *Republic*.<sup>2</sup> A dark cavern, inhabited by fettered prisoners, is his simile of the world of the unenlightened and uneducated, forced to live in the darkness of ignorance. They believe that the shadows of the real objects are the truth; if released from their confinement, they will be blinded by the sunlight, but later will be able to comprehend the visible world. When they return to the cave, driven by compassion for their former friends, their knowledge will be ridiculed by those who have not seen the actual world. The entire human world is viewed as this dark cave, inhabited by people who cannot or do not want to see the reality, and when forced to do so, will try to escape. The appearance of the visible world shown to the prisoners is ultimately the reality, that is, the supreme truth; the prisoner's ascent from the darkness of the cave

<sup>1</sup> *Od.* 13. 103–13; Porphyr. *De antro* 1–4.

<sup>2</sup> 514A–521B.

into the light is the ascent of the soul into the realm of reason and good.<sup>3</sup>

Plato takes the notion of the world as a cave a step further: in the *Republic* the cave is the world of appearances and commonly held opinions, the only one known to the ignorant, whereas the enlightened know the realm beyond it. In the *Phaedo*, Plato ascribes to Socrates the view of the inhabited world as a huge hollow, which is in fact only the corroded part of the enormous and beautiful real world.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the cave is either a small space where the souls of the ignorant are incarcerated, or a huge place where feeble-minded men live, but in both cases the cave is the place of confinement for the unenlightened, imprisoned in their ignorance and unaware of the supreme reality.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to Plato's image of the cave as a place of ignorance, my study focuses on the gifts of the caves. First, it is about actual physical descent into the darkness of a cave as a way to enlightenment and the sojourn in a cave as a means of acquiring ultimate, superhuman knowledge. Further, it is about passage through a cave or a tunnel as a mental image of the route to divine truth. And finally, it is about mystical visions of the cosmos as a cave.

In Greek and Roman paganism, caves were omnipresent: during his great persecution of the pagans, Constantine sent his emissaries into 'every pagan temple's recess and every gloomy cave'.<sup>6</sup> I do not intend to discuss all the activities which the Greeks connected with caves. In mythology, caves were dwelling places for various creatures unwelcome in the civilized world, such as assorted monsters like the Cyclops and exiles like Philoctetes.<sup>7</sup> I do not suggest that all the cults practised in

<sup>3</sup> Procl. *In Rem publ.* 12. 287–96; Frutiger 1930: 101–5; Malcolm 1962; Adam 1963: 2, 88, 95, 156–63; Morrison 1977: 227–31; Annas 1981: 252–8; Morgan 1990: 135–8.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 109A–110A; Kingsley 1995: 105–6, 126.

<sup>5</sup> Yet Plato's ideas on descent, catabasis, are more complicated. Catabasis is the way to anabasis, ascent: in effect, the route downwards leads upwards, to knowledge. D. Clay subtly demonstrates that the *Republic* starts with Socrates' descent to Piraeus, continues with observation, *theôria*, of the events there, and finishes with his ascent to Athens: a philosophical analogue to Odysseus' catabasis into the netherworld, in order to discover the knowledge hidden from the mortals. The 'architectonic connection' between Socrates' journey and the catabasis and anabasis into and out of the cave shows that, even for Plato, the route to higher wisdom and enlightenment had to pass through lower realms of darkness (Clay 1992: 125–9; Murray 1999: 260).

<sup>6</sup> Euseb. *Vita Const.* 3. 57. 4, cited by Lane Fox 1987: 673 and by Stroumsa 1996: 175.

<sup>7</sup> Roux 1999: 259–83.

caves were aimed at attaining divine revelation. Cultic caves at the Isthmian sanctuary of Poseidon included kitchens and were used as underground dining rooms.<sup>8</sup> Caves played a considerable role in cults concerned with fertility: for instance, in the cult of Demeter piglets were deposited in underground chasms or *megara* and later collected.<sup>9</sup> As early as in the *Odyssey*, Eileithyia the goddess of birth is an owner of a cave.<sup>10</sup> Heroic and divine unions, such as those of Peleus and Thetis, of Jason and Medea, of Aeneas and Dido, are often consummated in caves.<sup>11</sup> Rhea or Mother of the Gods gave birth to Zeus and later hid him in a cave on Mt Ida or Mt Dicte on Crete.<sup>12</sup> Physical contact with the earth inside the caves, and the feeling of being within its entrails in the most tangible sense, were important.<sup>13</sup> True, the metaphor of the cave as the womb of the earth and the connection of caves with fertility and chthonic cults are common.<sup>14</sup> However, they are much less universal than thought formerly, and the notion of a primeval fertility goddess from whom all comes and to whom all return,<sup>15</sup> as well as the

<sup>8</sup> Gebhard 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Dietrich 1973: 5–8; Clinton 1993: 113–14; below, Chapter 5.2.

<sup>10</sup> 19. 188. A Minoan cult of a goddess named Eleuthia in a cave at Amnisos, featuring several rock formations modified by the hands of numerous worshipers, is testified by a tablet from Cnossos and abundant gifts, Faure 1964: 82–90; Nilsson 1961–7: i. 262; Willetts 1962: 52, 169; Dietrich 1974: 88; Burkert 1985: 26–7.

<sup>11</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 4. 165–6; Knight 1967: 272; Roux 1999: 333–5.

<sup>12</sup> Robertson 1996: 247–51; Faure 1964: 8, 83–94; Dietrich 1974: 88, 109; cf. below, Chapter 5.2. Many Cretan caves were frequented from prehistoric to Roman times, and especially during the Minoan age. A hundred out of 3,400 known Cretan caves were used in cult (Kusch and Kusch 2001: 123). However, in most cases the nature of cult, as well as its continuity, are uncertain (Faure 1964; Dietrich 1974: 81–96, 108–27; Burkert 1985: 24–6; Rutkowski and Nowicki 1996).

<sup>13</sup> It may be significant that in Dodona, regarded by the Greeks as the most ancient oracle (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275b; Rachtel 1962), the replies of the oak-tree sacred to Zeus were interpreted by the Selloi, ‘men of unwashed feet, sleeping on the ground’ (Hom. *Il.* 16. 234; Gartzziou-Tatti 1990: 180). These two obligations are perhaps symbolic of the connection of mediators of the divine will to the earth (Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: 2, 295; Parke 1967*b*: 9, 23–4; Morrison 1981: 96). For a different interpretation, see Georgoudi 1998: 333–9.

<sup>14</sup> Delcourt 1982: 177. The belief that birth is a passage from the darkness of the womb to the daylight appears in numerous literary references and is reflected in the association of ‘divine mothers’, such as the Earth, with darkness, Parisinou 2000: 45.

<sup>15</sup> Saintyves 1918: 139–65; Picard 1922: 452–67; Knight 1967: 164, 252; Neumann 1963; Dietrich 1967: 398–401; Motte 1973: 80–5, 240–3; Motte 2004: 243; Kern 2000: 31. H. and I. Kusch associate all the cave cults of the classical world with chthonic deities (Kusch and Kusch 2001: 118–19).

Freudian inclination to see every grotto as uterine image or substitute for refuge in the maternal embrace, have been generally abandoned in recent research.<sup>16</sup>

I do not claim that prophecy and the quest for ultimate truth were always focused on caves. What I say is that these two activities were connected with underground chambers and grottoes in so many cases<sup>17</sup> that the association cannot be coincidental. Since the dead were believed to know more than the living about earthy affairs, it would seem only natural for their consultation to be carried out close to their abode, in a cave or subterranean chamber, and thus, for Gaia's oracles to be located in grottoes, inside the earth. The fact that Trophonius' abode was underground may explain the descent of those who consulted his oracle. It is more complicated, however, to find a reason for placing Apollo and his mediums in a cave. For the Greeks, no other Olympian could be further from the subterranean world: as Plutarch puts it, 'Night has nothing in common with Apollo.'<sup>18</sup> The constant connection of the shining god's oracles with caves calls for an explanation which cannot be based on the assumption of the deity's chthonic nature.

These phenomena have been generally ignored or underestimated.<sup>19</sup> The oracular quality of caves was marked occasionally, but was explained as either stemming from 'their primary significance as the site of burial and periodic rebirth',<sup>20</sup> or signifying the negative 'kind of *Unheilsprophetik* which represented the dark powers of nature',<sup>21</sup> or places of contact between this world and the netherworld.<sup>22</sup> My aim is to consider the impact of the environment provided by caves and artificial grottoes on the minds of people who entered them.

<sup>16</sup> Freudian interpretations: Meslin 1973: 210; Leroi-Gourhan 1984; Roux 1999: 323–42.

For a critical assessment of the mother-goddess idea in the Mediterranean context, see Talalay 1994.

<sup>17</sup> See Ch. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 566C; cf. Farnell 1907: 4, 253.

<sup>19</sup> Very few works are dedicated to the subject: Saintyves 1918; Faure 1964. In a book on Roman grottoes H. Lavagne states that in Greece caves belonged to marginal or minor deities (Lavagne 1988: 699–700).

<sup>20</sup> Dietrich 1978: 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

<sup>22</sup> Rosenberger 2001: 129–33; Kingsley 1995: 282; Curnow 2004: 8.

I have focused on individuals who sought superhuman wisdom, and more specifically, on the conditions they required or were considered to require in order to obtain divine revelation. Contents of oracular utterings concern me only so far as they throw light on the methods used by vatic persons to achieve divine inspiration. History and politics behind oracular cults and archaeology of shrines are given attention only if they provide evidence on the process of divination.

‘Impresarios of gods’,<sup>23</sup> ‘mediators of the divine’,<sup>24</sup> ‘masters of truth’<sup>25</sup>—who were they, people who believed that their inspiration came from the gods? Francis Cornford, in his *Principium Sapientiae*, was the first to trace the common derivation of the poet, the seer, and the sage from the undifferentiated shaman-like practitioner of the past. He called attention to the traces of common origin still discernible in the activities of Greek poets, prophets, and philosophers of the Archaic and Classical ages, especially their conscious attribution of knowledge to divine inspiration, in particular by Apollo, the divine shaman-figure.<sup>26</sup> The Greeks perceived mental experiences of exceptional intensity as stemming from divine intervention: poets were inspired by the Muses, the visions of prophets were imparted by gods, sages received revelatory dreams, and the intense emotional experiences of simple mortals were also believed to be due to divine intervention. Unusual psychological phenomena were explained as possession by the gods or *enthousiasmos*.<sup>27</sup> Democritus, the inventor of the atomic theory of matter, also recognized the kinship of the seer’s intuitions, poetic genius, mystic insights, and mental afflictions, but ascribed these phenomena to an abnormal physical condition, namely to extremely rapid motion of psychic atoms.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> La Barre 1980: 50.

<sup>24</sup> Berchman 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Detienne 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Cornford 1952: 88–106. The first to suggest shamanistic aspects in the activities of the Greek sages and philosophers, such as Empedocles and Parmenides, was H. Diels (1897). See Chadwick 1942; Vernant 1974: 12–13; Murray 1981 on poetic inspiration and enthusiasm and esp. p. 88 on the spectrum of experience of inspiration. For a different view on the nature of the distinction between poetry and prophesy see Tigerstedt 1970; Nagy 1990. For the connection between singing, prophecy, and ecstasy: in the Germanic world, Davidson 1981: 129–30; in the pre-Islamic Arabic tradition, Zwettler 1990: 76–80.

<sup>27</sup> Delatte 1934: 5; Motte 2004: 247–52; cf. Maurizio 1995: 76–7.

<sup>28</sup> Delatte 1934; Cornford 1952: 64–6.



At the same time, distrust of the mundane human wisdom is inherent in Greek thought.<sup>29</sup> The early Greeks believed that only the gods could really know the truth.<sup>30</sup> Yet notwithstanding the commonsensical conviction that ‘the mind of the immortals is all concealed from man’, as Solon puts it,<sup>31</sup> there always were mortals who tried to rid themselves of human imperfection and communicate with the divine wisdom. Plutarch mentions sages (*sophoi*) of Solon’s age, who ‘acquired their knowledge of the divine by means of ecstatic wisdom’.<sup>32</sup>

In the *Phaedo*,<sup>33</sup> Socrates argues that the sustenance of the body and its desires hinders the pursuit of the truth and that, even when people turn to philosophy,

the body is constantly breaking in upon our studies and disturbing us with noise and confusion, so that it prevents our beholding the truth, and in fact we perceive that, if we are ever to know anything absolutely, we must be free from the body and must behold the actual activities with the eye of the soul alone. And then, as our argument shows, when we are dead we are likely to possess the wisdom which we desire and claim to be enamoured of, but not while we live. For, if pure knowledge is impossible while the body is with us, one of two things must follow, either it cannot be acquired at all or only when we are dead; for then the soul will be by itself apart from the body, but not before. And while we live, we shall, I think, be nearest to knowledge when we avoid, so far as possible, intercourse and communion with the body... (Translation by H. N. Fowler)

The idea that the dead were endowed with superhuman knowledge appeared as early as in Homeric times,<sup>34</sup> and accounts for the thriving

<sup>29</sup> See for instance Xenophanes (*DK* B34) and Heraclitus (*DK* B78, 79) who deny enduring knowledge to mortals. Diog. Laert. 9. 72–3 collected quotations on the subject.

<sup>30</sup> Snell 1960: 136; Starr 1968: 349, 351. The idea that human mind is evicted by the divine, and that a gap divides the unexcited state and the divine *mania*, remained ingrained in Greek philosophy till its eclipse: e.g. Philo, *Her.* 263–5, cf. Nasrallah 2003: 41; Iambl. *De myst.* 3. 11–12, cf. Shaw 1995: 232–6.

<sup>31</sup> Fr. 17 West.

<sup>32</sup> Referring to Epimenides, *Solon* 12: *sophos peri ta theia tèn enthousiastikên sophian*. On Epimenides see below, Ch. 4.1.

<sup>33</sup> 66 DE; Ogden 2001: 244; Morgan 1990: 55–79.

<sup>34</sup> Song 11 of the *Odyssey*.

of necromancy throughout antiquity.<sup>35</sup> It was considered so self-evident that in the second century AD Lucian in his *Menippus* joked about a man who was so disappointed by run-of-the-mill philosophy that he descended into Hades to find out the right way to live.

For Socrates, in order to reach the ultimate truth, the mind of a mortal must cease to be merely human, and mingle with the divine. To attain superhuman wisdom, the soul must be liberated from its connection with the body. He says in the *Phaedo* that in order to transcend the limits of incarnate knowledge the philosopher must terminate his worldly existence, and only then is he able to reach the real divine postcarnate knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

The Greeks knew several ways to liberate their souls from the constraints of the body and still remain alive. Some mystics claimed that they could release their souls at will; independent of the body, the soul could achieve superhuman knowledge. Others attained states of intense concentration by means of meditation-like techniques. Ordinary people on the verge of death reported out-of-body experiences, involving the feeling of their soul's flight. Possession by a deity, divinely inspired madness, enabled temporary abandonment of the human self and transformed an individual into a medium, uttering words coming from the deity, rather than from the mortal mind. All these techniques were known to Plato.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, on several occasions Plato associates philosophical doctrines with ecstatic revelation, thus suggesting that human enquiry derives from a superhuman source.<sup>38</sup>

Ecstatic practices were frequently associated with caves and dark spaces. The association was either physical, meaning that a certain activity was carried out in a cavern or other secluded space, or mental, implying that a certain activity recurrently produced visions of caves and tunnels. In what follows I shall focus on the use of caves and underground chambers by inspired mediums, 'impresarios of gods'—prophets, poets and sages,—in their search for the divine truth.

<sup>35</sup> Ogden 2001, esp. 230–50.

<sup>36</sup> Cornford 1952: 58; Carlier 1974: 251; Morgan 1990: 55–79; cf. Detienne 1963: 78.

<sup>37</sup> e.g. *Tim.* 71E–72B.

<sup>38</sup> Morgan 1990: 22–4, 64, 195.

## 2. INSPIRED PROPHECY

In the ancient world, there were two ways to ascertain the will of the gods: either directly, by means of pronouncements by a person believed to serve as a transmitter of the divine truth or will, or indirectly, by interpretation of signs or omens.<sup>39</sup> The transmission was a natural or divine gift, hence *mantikê atechnos* for the Greeks and *divinatio naturalis* for the Romans, whereas the interpretation could be learnt as an art, therefore respectively *mantikê entechnos* and *divinatio artificiosa*.<sup>40</sup> Terms used by modern students of divination differ: direct, intuitive, or inspired on the one hand, indirect, inductive, or deductive on the other.<sup>41</sup>

Inspired prophecy and divine revelation are comparatively rare, and could be achieved only by chosen individuals, usually in special circumstances. Thus, direct communication with the gods through mediums, among them ecstasies, or through visions and dream-visions, are known in the Near East, among the Mari, Hittites, Babylonians, and Assyrians, but they seem to have played a minor role in these civilizations.<sup>42</sup> The usual method of learning the gods' will was by deciphering the language of signs, most commonly extispicy or haruspicy, divination by inspection of the entrails of sacrificial animals.<sup>43</sup> In pharaonic Egypt, direct prophecy did not exist: deities announced their will by movements, to be interpreted and recorded by the priests.<sup>44</sup> In ancient Israel, in contrast to other

<sup>39</sup> The most comprehensive account of divination still remains Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82. W. R. Holliday (1913) introduced an anthropological approach into the study of divination. Since then, studies of major oracles and related phenomena have greatly increased our knowledge, but there are still few synthetic studies of Greek oracles (e.g. Vernant 1974; Burkert 2005). Recent years witness renewed interest in the subject, as the books by V. Rosenberger (2001, 1998) and several collections of articles (Heintz 1997; Ciraolo and Seidel 2002; Johnston and Struck 2005) demonstrate.

<sup>40</sup> Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: i. 62; Belayche and Rüpke 2005: 80.

<sup>41</sup> Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: i. 107–10; Dodds 1973: 70; Gurney 1981: 142; Karp 1998: 13; Bevan 1928; Dietrich 1990; Maurizio 1995; Burkert 2005: 2; Belayche and Rüpke 2005: 80.

<sup>42</sup> Nissinen 2000, esp. van der Toorn 2000: 79; Huffmon 2000; Bottéro 1974: 89–93; Haldar 1945: 21–9; Durand 1997.

<sup>43</sup> Gurney 1981; Bottéro 1974: *passim*, esp. 190.

<sup>44</sup> Assmann 2001: 154.

Near Eastern cultures, inspired prophecy played a more prominent role.<sup>45</sup> In Italy, imported oracles, mostly of Greek origin, were based on divine inspiration, while the normal indigenous mode of divination was by lots.<sup>46</sup> Examples of divinatory trance are known in modern Africa and Asia, in Cameroon (Mofu) and in Tibet.<sup>47</sup> It is understandable why soothsaying by indirect methods was preferred: it is more available, can be controlled or manipulated without much difficulty, and does not require the extraordinary states of consciousness indispensable for the activities of seers and prophets.

To attain true knowledge is the greatest challenge, and the way to this knowledge is perilous and excruciating. Descriptions of divination séances as painful ordeals are found in literatures of many peoples. To the Greek and Roman accounts of the exhaustion of the Pythia in Delphi, the frenzy of the Sibyl, and health risks faced by the prophets at Claros,<sup>48</sup> can be added examples from beyond the Mediterranean world. In a Norse saga, a wise woman, when posed two questions by the same person, says: 'I will not undergo this great strain again, for it has been of no small cost to me, and neither threads nor fair words will be of any avail.'<sup>49</sup> Nowadays, at the Nechung oracle in Tibet, the prophetic trance consumes all the energies of the medium known as the Kuden.<sup>50</sup>

In Greece, prophecy inspired directly by a divinity was considered to be more ancient than the decipherment of signs and superior to it.<sup>51</sup> To gain inspiration, a mortal had to become possessed by a god (*katochos* or *theolēptos*), or to 'to have the god inside him- or herself' (*entheos*): the seer (*mantis*) or prophet (*prophētēs*) served as mediums, conveying superhuman knowledge by means of their bodies.<sup>52</sup> In the grip of the god, the medium could display a wide range of abnormal

<sup>45</sup> Huffmon 2000: 66; Haldar 1945: 108–26; Grottanelli 1998. Such figures as Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha, combining the characteristics of sages, sorcerers, and seers, are classified as belonging to the 'shamanistic type'. Their revelatory trance was induced by various methods, such as rhythmical music, dancing, self-flagellation, and even use of hallucinogens (Aune 1983: 83, 86–7).

<sup>46</sup> Champeaux 1990a: 271.

<sup>47</sup> Rouget 1990: 84.

<sup>48</sup> Discussed below, Chs. 3.4–5, and 4.1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ljosvetninga Saga*, 11, cited after Davidson 1981: 125.

<sup>50</sup> Arnott 1989.

<sup>51</sup> Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: i. 49–55.

<sup>52</sup> On cult officials in oracular shrines, see Georgoudi 1998.

behaviour, from mere detachment and aloofness to violent paroxysms. These mental states, which today would be referred to as ‘altered states of consciousness’, were *enthousiasmos* (divine possession) or *mania* (madness, frenzy) for the Greeks. In the famous passage in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says that the greatest blessings come to mortals through madness, when it is a gift of the gods. He connects prophetic art (*mantikê*) with *mania* both etymologically and in essence,<sup>53</sup> and continues:

The ancients then testify that in proportion as prophecy is superior to augury, both in name and in fact, in the same proportion madness, which comes from god, is superior to sanity, which is of human origin. (Translation by H. N. Fowler)

The most intriguing question is how inspired divination was attained. By what techniques could an individual, whether a ‘freelance’ seer or a prophetic priest in an institutionalized shrine, induce in himself or herself the state of enthusiasm? The importance of an appropriate environment is immediately evident, and the striking proportion of cases in which inspired prophecy was practised in caves or was connected to vaults and close spaces may provide a clue.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The analysis of human thought cannot be based exclusively on a research into the culture which gave rise to it. Existing testimony on Greek religion and culture contains very limited direct evidence—several allusions and one or two late descriptions—on mental experiences undergone by prophets and sages. Moreover, while there are numerous factual accounts, linking prophetic and mystical activities to caverns and closed spaces, they provide very few details of

<sup>53</sup> 244AB. The etymological connection is clear to modern scholars, as well: Frisk 1973–9, s.v. *mainomai*; Chantraine 1983–4: s.v. *mainomai*. Both words derive from the Indo-European root \**men* meaning ‘to be in a special, or differentiated, state of consciousness’ (West 2007: 29). Mari texts (Syria, 18th cent. BC) provide an interesting parallel: inspired prophets are called there *muhhûm*, which means ‘completely mad’ (Durand 1997: 123, 128). For a different opinion see Casevitz 1992.

the personal sensations of those involved. These accounts cannot be explained solely inside their cultural context. What is called for in order to fill in the gaps in the knowledge of men of the past is application of facts and explanatory models based on the study of men of the present, provided by anthropology and neuroscience.

Cable-like methods of argumentation, which intertwine several stands of reasoning, as opposed to chain-like arguments that proceed link-by-link, have been applied to the study of ancient culture for some time. Whereas in the 'chain method', one absent or faulty link can invalidate the entire chain, the 'cabling' method permits compensation for gaps in extant records and the discarding of imprudent hypotheses, by enabling the researcher to seek explanation of a certain phenomenon in a different field and employ congruous data in an explanatory model. An example of the successful use of the 'cabling' method is the extensive acceptance of the anthropological perspective in the study of the Greek society.<sup>54</sup> However, the methodological foundation of this approach has only recently been expounded by D. Lewis-Williams.<sup>55</sup>

Using several classes of evidence requires caution: data are to be taken at face value, without subjective elaboration and without reading into them details that fit the suggested conception. Different classes of evidence (literary, archaeological, neuropsychological, anthropological, etc.) should be investigated separately, and comparisons are to be made only at a later stage of each line of independent research.<sup>56</sup>

In accordance with this principle, the book starts (Chapter 1) with an overview of the current issues in neuropsychological and anthropological research that are of crucial importance for the examination of the experiences of Greek sages, seers, and religious practitioners inside caves and closed chambers. Not being a professional neuroscientist or psychologist, I have made every effort to avoid statements on controversial issues and to remain within the limits of consensus among the experts.

<sup>54</sup> Jeanmaire 1939; Gernet 1981; Vidal-Naquet 1986; several works dealing specifically with oracles, e.g. Whittaker 1965; Crapanzano and Garrison 1977.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis-Williams 2002: 102–4.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. the 'neutral methodology which excludes prior assumptions' assumed by Sourvinou-Inwood 1987: 217.

The sections that follow are devoted to Greek institutionalized oracles which operated in caves, independent seers, sages, and philosophers, and mystery cults. The evidence is discussed in three stages: first, examination of literary and archaeological data concerning cultic or intellectual activities in caves; second, evaluation of their historical significance. Finally, the evidence is juxtaposed with the results of non-historical research, expounded in Chapter 1.

With the exception of Chapter 1, the book is based on evidence traditionally used in the study of history of Greek culture—written texts and archaeological data. In several cases the evidence is compared with the results of recent geological investigations. As in Chapter 1, I have used geological data only when convinced that, however recent, the research in question is widely accepted.

The written testimonies cited in this book are extremely heterogeneous, dating from different periods and belonging to several genres, such as history, philosophy, epic and lyrical poetry, drama, geography, and lexicography. In-depth analysis of historical, cultural, or textological background of each and every piece of evidence was unfeasible, and even brief references to the context of a quotation are provided only when indispensable. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same applies to the treatment of epigraphical testimonies. Likewise, as regards archaeological evidence, the characteristics of the site and the history of its research are always taken into account, although indicated only when necessary for the discussion.

As a rule, ancient written tradition is considered reliable, especially if many well-informed authors have recorded the same or similar facts over centuries; *onus probandi* of the alleged untruthfulness of a testimony rests with the researcher who questions it.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, whenever I suggest a reassessment of an established view the discussion is unavoidably more detailed, since it involves examination both of the ancient tradition and of the modern research. Where the matching of written and archaeological sources presents difficulty, it does not entail rejecting the entire ancient tradition *en masse*, but rather calls for careful analysis and evaluation of the evidence. If such an analysis does not provide clear results, a frank admission of ignorance is better than tinkering with the data.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Roux 1976: 94.