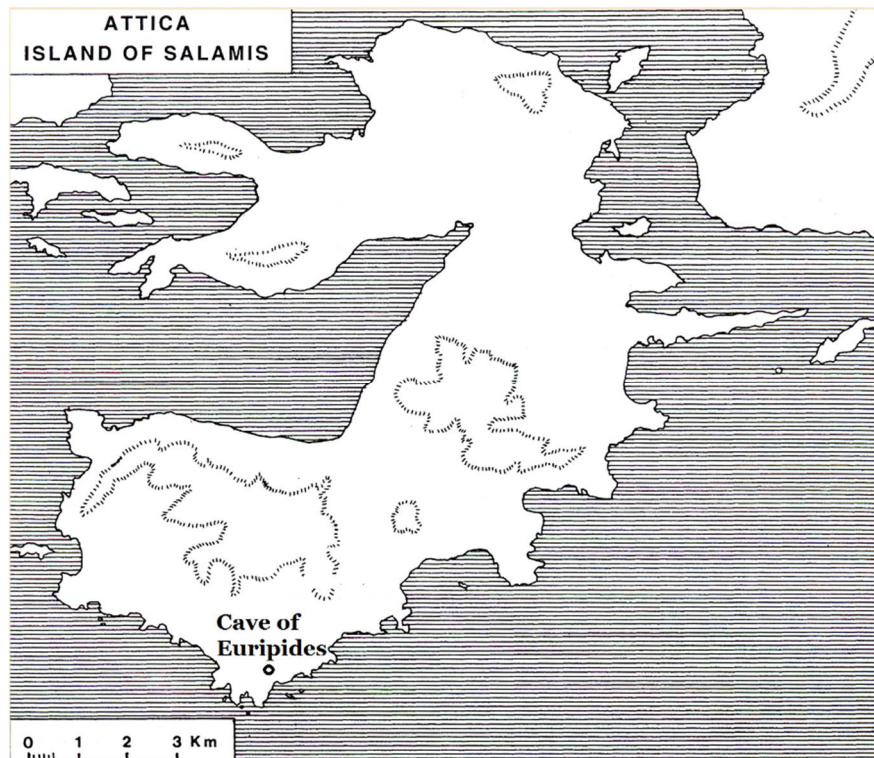


Cave of Euripides

The entrance of the Cave of Euripides is found on the steep slope of a rocky height close to the Bay of Peristeria at an altitude of 115 m. above sea level. One is led to a small natural terrace in front of the entrance of the cave after a 15-20 minute walk from the beach by following an ancient path. Also used in ancient times was a spring that is situated below the terrace, at the base of the rocky mass.

Systematic excavation at the cave began in September 1994 and progressed in four successive campaigns (1994 – 1997) by the University of Ioannina. It has yielded a large quantity of finds, a selection of which is today on display in the Archaeological Museum of Salamis.



Map of the island of Salamis in the Saronic Gulf. © University Excavation of Salamis Archives.



Peristeria. Part of the natural terrace in front of the entrance of the Cave. The terrace might well have been used by Euripides as a seat for meditation and creative writing, with a superb view towards the sea. © University Excavation of Salamis Archives.



Peristeria. View towards the sea, from the terrace in front of the Cave's entrance, with the island of Aigina in the distance. The Cave of Euripides is described by two ancient Greek writers as having "its mouth towards the sea". © University Excavation of Salamis Archives.

The cave has a total length of about 47 meters. Its entrance (mouth) is a long narrow corridor leading to a succession of chambers inside. The interior of the cave gives the impression of a labyrinth consisting of low-roofed chambers of varying size and shape, systems of narrow corridors, niches and "lofts". The roof and the main walls of the cave are of hard grey limestone, while in the interior there are many stalagmitic formations, including strong curtains and isolated columns.



Upper part of female figurine (preserved height: 5.5 cm.), belonging to the Late Neolithic period. It is made of white marble and preserves traces of decoration in red, and may be viewed as a predecessor of the marble Cycladic figurines of the succeeding Early Bronze Age (ca. 3000-2000 B.C.). © University Excavation of Salamis Archives.

In the Late Bronze Age, more specifically in the 14th and 13th cent. B.C., the cave was used as a burial place. Its deepest and largest chamber (no. VIII) was reserved for exceptional burials, i.e. of high-ranking members of a local community, quite far from the Mycenaean capital at the site of Kanakia.



View of Chamber VIII, the largest in the Cave; it had been used as a place of burial in late Mycenaean times (14th-13th centuries B.C.). © University Excavation of Salamis Archives.



Complete short sword of bronze (27.2 cm. long) datable to the early 14th century B.C. It must have originally accompanied a Mycenaean burial in Chamber VIII. © University Excavation of Salamis Archives.

Among the fragmentary vases of the Classical period recovered from Chamber IV C-D, of major importance is undoubtedly a partly preserved black-glazed Attic cup (skyphos), with the name of Euripides, half-preserved and incised upside-down, on its outer surface. Although the cup is attributable to the late 5th century B.C. (ca. 430-420 B.C.), on the basis of its close parallels from the Athenian Agora and other places, the inscription on it, apparently of dedicatory or honorary character, is probably to be dated to Roman Imperial times.

This later dedication occurring, as it does, on a relic from the late 5th century B.C., that was retrieved from the cave, may best be interpreted within the context of a hero-cult practiced by later Salaminians and Athenians in honour of Euripides, comparable to the worship of Homer on the islands of Chios and Ios and of the poet Archilochos on the island of Paros. This decisive epigraphical evidence offers definitive proof for the identification of the Cave at Peristeria with the famous den of Euripides (485/480 - 406 B.C.) on Salamis, where according to ancient tradition the playwright used to retreat and write his dramas.



Fragmentary black-glazed cup (skyphos) from Chamber IV C, inscribed with the name of Euripides on its exterior. Although the cup itself is dated to the late 5th century B.C., the inscription on it, apparently of dedicatory or honorary character, is to be attributed to Roman times. © University Excavation of Salamis Archives.

References to the cave used by the tragic poet have been preserved in the works of three (3) ancient Greek writers (Philochoros, Satyros, and the Anonymous Biographer of Euripides) and in the well-known *Noctes Atticae* (*Attic Nights*) of Aulus Gellius, a Roman writer who visited Euripides' Cave in the 2nd century A.D., i.e. more than 500 years after the death of the great poet. The testimony offered by Gellius is of exceptional value; it shows, among others, that the Salaminians and Athenians of Late Antiquity were aware of the site of Euripides' Cave and showed it, as a special sight, to young foreign scholars residing in Athens.

In the above mentioned ancient sources the Cave of Euripides is described as a) being situated in Salamis; b) having "a mouth opening towards the sea"; and c) being, in the words of Aulus Gellius, "unpleasant and horrid".

Apart from the crucial epigraphical evidence supplied by the above described Attic cup, it should be emphasized that the special features of the Cave at Peristeria, with regard to its location, shape and atmosphere, correspond exactly to the descriptions of Euripides' Cave offered by the four (4) ancient writers mentioned earlier.

The Classical black-glazed and other vases from the excavation are very likely to have been offerings deposited at the cave by close relatives and admirers of the poet shortly after his death (in 406 B.C.). Certainly, their presence, virtually confined to a single chamber, marks the beginning of the veneration of the poet on site, culminating in the foundation of a sanctuary immediately below his cave, in the succeeding Hellenistic period (in the 3rd cent. B.C.), devoted to Dionysos, patron-god of drama.



Fine Attic red-figure lekythos of the advanced 5th century B.C., with a representation of a flying winged Victory (Nike) probably holding a bowl (phiale). © University Excavation of Salamis Archives.

Cultic activity, at the cave itself, appears to have continued to some extent in the Hellenistic period, but it was certainly intensified later, as the place was achieving a wider fame, notably in the Roman Imperial period (in the 2nd and 3rd cent. A.D.).

To this phase of the cave's use belong: a large quantity of pottery including many fragments of lamps and other pots, also a relief bowl, with scenes from the worship of Dionysos; jewellery comprising bronze and iron rings, 2 silver earrings and glass beads; many bronze coins, and an intact hoard of 39 silver-plated coins struck in the name of the Roman Emperor Gallienus (260-268 A.D.) and his wife Salonina, concealed deep in a "blind" corridor, and apparently marking the last dramatic episode in the history of the cult-cave.



Intact hoard of 39 silver coins (Antoniani) of Roman Emperor Gallienus (260-268 A.D.). © University Excavation of Salamis Archives.

All the above mentioned Roman finds testify to a constant flow of visitors to the site during that period, and correlate very well with the reference to the visit to the Cave of Euripides (on Salamis) by the young Roman writer Aulus Gellius, writing sometime before the middle of the 2nd cent. A.D.

By that time, with the popularity of Euripides' plays widely established and even reflected in many works of art, the cave at Peristeria had emerged as a tourist attraction (or a tourist shrine) and place of pilgrimage in honour of the great Classical dramatist.

The last phase of the cave's function was in the Frankish period (early 14th cent. A.D.), when it was used as a refuge-site and natural "treasury".



Earrings, Frankish period. Early 14th century A.D.