

A 1850's engraving showing Mgharet Afqa

“How do we know how long Mgharet Afqa is if there is no complete survey of the cave?”

It all started with this simple question.

Rena Karanouh

renakaranouh@hotmail.com

CAVE
SURVEY

MGHARET AFQA

THE SAGA OF A SURVEY AND SOME KNEES

La grotte d'Afqa est un exemple typique de développement structurel dominant. Des failles et fractures correspondent bien avec les passages de la grotte. La caverne s'est formée principalement à cause de la géologie structurelle dans la région avec la lithologie régionale comme second facteur.

مغارة أفقا هي ثالث أطول مغارة في لبنان. انها مغارة لم تنل نصيبها الكافي من الإكتشاف ورسم الخرائط بسبب كثرة الدهاليز الضيقة التي تحتاج الى الزحف. أخيراً تم اجراء رسم خرائط كامل عام 2005 من قبل فريق من المستعورين الذين اتخذوا القرار بذلك لنتمكن من معرفة الطول الحقيقي للمغارة.

As part of the SCL's objective of making an accurate listing of the longest and deepest caves in Lebanon it was truly measured as the cave had never been fully surveyed.

Mgharet Afqa has been around for longer than people can remember. A whole legend revolves around this cave. This site was sacred not only to the ancient residents of the area, but also to the Greeks and the Romans. The love story between Adonis and Venus (the Phoenician goddess Ashtar) is a well known mythological tale. Many painters from Titian to Watteau have depicted this famous tale.

The origin of the name 'Afqa' comes from a Syriac root meaning 'source' (Skels, 2000). Legend also states that the name comes from the location of where Adonis and Aphrodite kissed for the first time. The Greek work for kiss is aphaca (Lonely Planet, 2001). The site of Mgharet Afqa according to Greek legend is where the fabled Adonis was killed by a wild boar. His lover, Venus, tried to save him but to no avail. The river has been known as the river of Adonis but it is now called 'Nahr Ibrahim'. It was believed that blood of Adonis turns the colour of the river, each Spring, to red (Skels, 2000). Milton wrote about this site and its river in Paradise Lost saying that the river 'runs red every spring'. Legend stated that the river was believed to run red with Adonis' blood.

There is also an old ruined roman temple located directly opposite to the entrance of the cave. This is the Temple of Venus where it is said that feasts were held in the honor of Adonis. A curved tunnel was used to channel water from the river. Two roman bridges of different sizes can still be found beneath the road directly at the entrance of the cave. The entrance of Mgharet Afqa is truly an amazing sight. A massive hole in the cliff-face measuring 30m high and 50m wide. In winter when the spring is at its strongest the site of the opening with the gushing water is a sight to behold. I believe it is the largest cave entrance in Lebanon but I have yet to visit all the caves of Lebanon so I might be wrong (but I do not think so).

The cave is completely inaccessible during winter due to a strong waterfall issuing from the cave entrance, but it is accessible in the summer after climbing over the boulder field slope to reach the enormous entrance. There used to be a road on the right side of the entrance that lead to the cave but a small landslide destroyed a portion of it and it has not been fixed yet, Sami (Karkabi) used to use it.

So we knew that we had a time limit before winter's arrival. For all its infamy this cave is the least explored cave in comparison to its counterparts in the rest of the country.

The only surveys of the cave available to us were an old 1960's sketch drawn by Sami Karkabi that can be found in the SCL archives and a survey attempted in 1974 (but was not completed), by members from the Spelco Club du Liban, Michel Majdalani and Antoine Comaty (and to a lesser extent Emilie Saleh, Ghassan Beyhum and Alain Maroun) who worked on the survey for the whole summer of '74. They surveyed about 2.5km of the cave and this survey survives today as a schematic point-graph only. Red numbers on the walls of the cave (that were painted by some earlier surveyers so that they would not get lost) were used by us making the surveying of the maze cave easier.

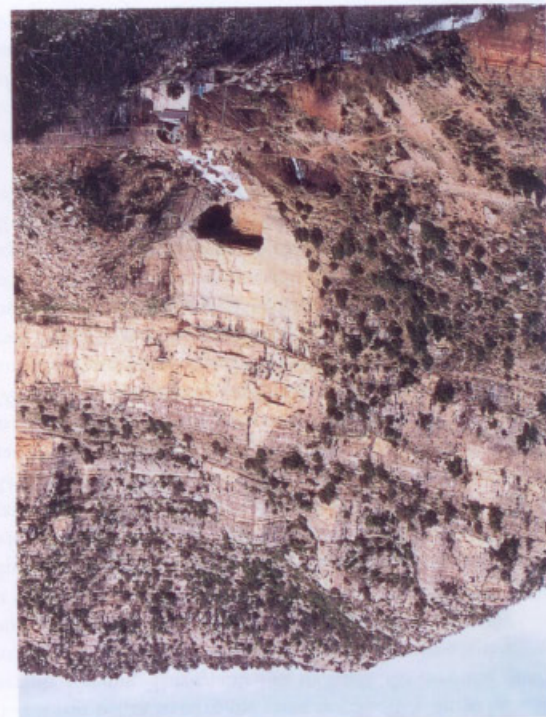


Fig. 1
The entrance of Mgharet Afqa
(Photo by Rena Karanoun)

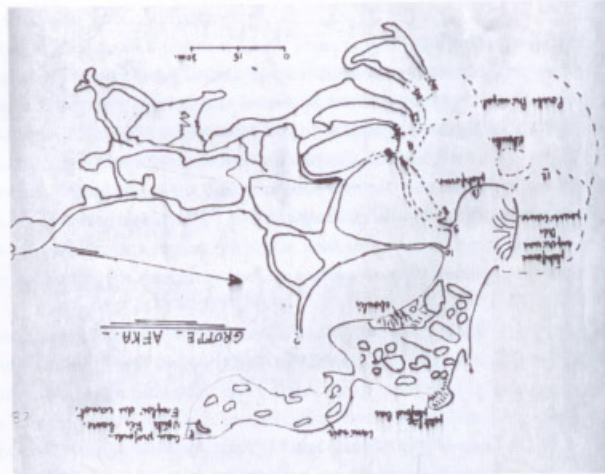


Fig. 2
The 1960's survey sketch by Sami Karkabi. This is the oldest known survey of Mgharet Afqa.



Fig. 3
Some of the tight tunnels inside Mgharet Afqa
(Photo by Marwan Zghelb)



Fig. 4
The waterflow from the water tunnel in early spring
(Photo by Rena Karanouch)



Fig. 5
The same location as in Fig.4 but from the 1950's (before the dynamiting of the rock) so a ladder was needed to reach the bedding layer.
(Photo by Sami Karkabi)

In 1993 some members from the SCL attempted again to survey the cave. Dany Malouf, Marwan Zgheib and Nabil Badari worked throughout the summer but again the survey was not completed and the survey map they worked on was lost. It is believed that they added 2km of newly discovered development.

During the late nineties a group from the Belgium caving club Spekul, headed by Steve Smeyers, worked inside the cave (but we do not have any information on what they did inside and what their work entailed, as with all work done by these Belgians in Lebanon, maybe because they thought it was alright to work in someone's country without the knowledge of the local cavers? I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for this respectful attitude towards my country).

The first day of surveying in 2004 we invited the entire club to help. The day lit area was surveyed first and each tunnel connected to it was given a letter. Each team was then assigned a tunnel and consequently the area allotted was surveyed. It was found that most areas overlapped giving us an accurate way of connecting the different surveys. The old 1970's numbers permanently painted on the walls were used as points of reference.

As the survey progressed through out the months we discovered that it was better to have the same team surveying and the same person drawing. This enabled us to 'learn' the cave and thus reduce the mistakes. Most other cavers who came with us were put to the task of exploring the connections of the many tunnels. It was found that sometimes up to four explorers were needed at the same time to understand how the maze connects together. So with 'natural selection', 'I am bored of this cave', and 'knee' issues, cavers dropped out to leave the core four surveyors who were: Rena, drawing (Hadi always knew the glazed look I get when I had over-surveyed and he would declare the end of the sortie, or maybe it was my asking the same question over and over again 'Where does this tunnel lead?' 'where?'... 'WHERE?'); Hadi, compass measurements (cracker of wise-ass statements but at least he has a great sense of direction and with him we never got lost); Fadi, meter placement (goats will never be the same again to me (sorry private joke, but you can ask me in person); Wassim, exploration ('I will change my clothes a kilometer away from all of you because I am like that' and 'I do not mind wearing a helmet that has fungi growing inside it...').

An excerpt from a report written by Karen Mouaraksh reads: *Rena was the leader, and Alain and I were new to Afqa, we had no other choice but to follow Rena's 'shortcut'. 'Thx Rena, it was really fast and easy to make 12 new bruises on my body'. So we were all following Rena, crossing from tunnel to tunnel from a narrow passage to a narrower one, from a squeeze to a squeezed squeeze! Till we reached the opening we were going to survey.*

At the end of the tunnel, one can feel a wind current at a narrow opening. It took me some time to cross through this opening trying to go head first or legs first just to check where was this wind coming and expecting a big room, don't know why I imagined this. But unfortunately, this narrow opening ended to the left in a bit wider room and to the right in a small passage locked by ebouli rocks.

At the end of the long surveying day Alain and I followed Hadi to go outside the cave where the others were to follow us when done. So we followed Hadi and I was thinking to myself after each tunnel ending "Now comes the ugly squeezed squeeze" but no... the tunnels were getting wider and the ceiling was higher, where is it?? 'Abbbb, Renaaaaa!!!!!!' She had taken us on a deadly ramping adventure when Hadi and Wassim had passed by a much easier larger tunnels route. We should have guessed there was an initiation to Afqa! And what is an outing without a group meal at the end of it to compare bruises and knee conditions?

Over a period of six months the team worked inside the cave. A survey of the cave was drawn and for the first time the true length of Mgharet Afqa was measured. The survey of 2004-2005 was performed using a Recta 'geological' compass and a 50m nylon meter. The water and mud in different locations put a strain on this compass and a week after finishing the survey the compass broke into two pieces (Alain and Wassim still have not told me who really broke it). We went through five separate meters after mud had completely obliterated and worn out the numbers printed on them.

Some section's names need to be explained.

Alain's Room is thus named because according to Alain the ramping tunnel he was crawling through 'Does not continue and it stops as the tunnel is too tight to pass through'. Wassim did not believe him and went to investigate discovering what is now known as Alain's Room.

Salle Moussa has a huge gaping lower channel passing through it and as Hadi said when we first saw it 'Wow, it looks like Moussa (Moses) parting the seas! Well, what else could we call the room?

Salle Nayla is named after Tony Comaty's then girlfriend (His wife's name is... well shall we just say...is not Nayla).

At Room X the conversation all of a sudden turned X-rated and pornographic for some weird reason.

But the story of Salle Cognac will forever remain. I had asked Wassim before we entered if he had brought his flask of Cognac with him and he said no. So, later, we were exploring the tunnels, Wassim was the last person in the tunnels...we waited for him in Salle X and it took him a long time to join us. We didn't ask why but thought it was weird at the time. On the way out...on passing through the Salle Cognac (not thus called at the time) we were surrounded by an overwhelming smell of alcohol... Wassim had decided to consume the full content of the flask on the way in. The telltale smell had let his secret out and Salle Cognac was born.

Some assumptions were made for this survey:

- The entrance was considered part of the cave thus making the entrance of the cave the big gaping opening.
- Tunnels were considered separate if they had a complete wall separating them although they ended in the same location as other tunnels. They were considered one tunnel if they were separated by an overhang or a short wall.
- The tunnel is considered one if it is separated laterally or vertically by fallen roof blocks or water carried blocks or boulders.
- A room is considered as such even when rock blocks separate different parts of it.

A collapse of its ceiling in 2006, and consequent cliff collapse in 2007 has led us to believe that this cave has some unstable aspects to it. The ceiling collapse of 2006 was exactly over the location of our campsite.

It took a group of four very devoted cavers over six months to finally obtain the much coveted number. The cave was found to measure in development 5260m making it 1660m longer than previously thought (3600m). It is currently ranked as the second longest cave in Lebanon (although this might change in our next publication depending on Mgharet Rouciss, our current survey obsession).

Mgharet Afqa needs to be approached with care.

Love it and it reveals its secrets kindly.

Irritate it and it will break you down.

Literally.

Ask our knees.



Fig. 6
Inside one of the labyrinth tunnels in Mgharet Afqa
(Photo by Rana Karamouh)



Fig. 7
The entrance of the labyrinth tunnels in Mgharet Afqa
(Photo by Rana Karamouh)



Fig. 8
Inside one of the large rooms in Mgharet Afqa
(Photo by Rana Karamouh)

This article acknowledges Hadi K., Wassim H. and Fadi T., without your fanatical dedication (almost bordering on insane!) we would never have finished the survey. Thank you ... it was a blast.

And to Issam, thank you for your long distance support, you were with us on every trip.