

The Latmija Troglodytic Settlement

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The troglodytic phenomenon was widespread in the Mediterranean region throughout the Middle Ages wherever environmental conditions proved favourable. Arid and semi-arid zones which suffered from a lack of timber, but on the other hand provided plentiful natural rock-cut shelters and an abundance of easily quarried stone, were instrumental in conditioning a type of architecture which was entirely stone oriented besides encouraging cave-dwelling. The Maltese landscape is characterised by the almost complete absence of woodland vegetation and scarce soil deposits leaving exposed the bare rock-face. This has led the natives to make the best possible use of the plentiful caves present within. The prevailing local environmental conditions provided an ideal springboard for the widespread diffusion of troglodytism within the Island in the middle ages¹.

Two different types of medieval cave-settlements have been identified in Malta². These consist of (a) the adoption of a natural karstic depression for habitational use³, and (b) the occupation of naturally formed caves, most commonly embedded in the sides of valleys and ridges⁴. Cave usage varied from (a) the adoption of the cave for cultic worship, (b) human habitation and, (c) utilisation as animal pens or as storage space connected with agricultural usage⁵.

The adoption of natural caves as places of habitation has necessitated the construction of dry-wall partitions on the cave interior in order to create different living spaces. Dry-wall constructions partitioning a cave's interior distinguish local medieval troglodytism from its Sicilian counterpart where, the use of dry-walling is always found to be limited for façade purposes⁶.

Cobbled passageways frequently facilitated access to

troglodytic sites, whilst the construction of artificial ramps was often employed to ease the passage to cliff-face settlements. Ramps are similar in their method of construction to rubble-walls, but the gap in between the cliff-face and the rubble-wall is backfilled with a soil and rubble infill and capped with cobbled stones.

The collapse of the grain markets and the subsequent economic recession in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. might have boosted the troglodytic phenomenon in Sicily. Coastal cities also suffered a decline and became unsafe due to an increase in Saracenic incursions⁷ and in several instances people took refuge in mountains⁸. It is probable that cave-dwelling became widespread in Malta at a much later date and there is at present no evidence pointing to any large scale occupation of the countryside in the Byzantine and Muslim periods⁹. The definite Norman conquest of 1127 and the subsequent occupation of the urban centres shifted the Muslim inhabitants of the Island to the countryside. It is possible that the troglodytic phenomenon and the setting up of small villages became locally widespread at this stage¹⁰.

Geophysical and Historical Considerations

The Latmija settlement is situated on high ground at an altitude of c. 150 metres above sea level and can be reached by following a footpath which from the cliffs overlooks Paradise Bay meanders towards the *Ta' Qassisu* cliffs, enjoying a clear panorama in all directions (Figure 1). The cave-settlement is a major feature of archaeological interest in this remote corner of the island. This is reflected by the toponym of the surrounding area, which is also that of Latmija. The settlement is not easy to locate and the main indicators to its whereabouts, it being of a karstic origin, are a cluster of fig trees and the remains of a dry-stone wall which once enclosed the site's entrance.

Upper Coralline Limestone predominates in the area. As is the case with *Ghar il-Kbir* and *Maqluba*, Latmija was formed as a result of the thinning out of a stratum of clay, trapped in a layer of Upper Coralline limestone. The erosion of the clay gradually formed rock-hollows, geologically identified as karstic depressions. In flat terrain, the remaining external limestone crust collapsed, creating a natural depression some times having considerable proportions.

No documentary references to the Latmija settlement are known to exist. Latmija was most probably inhabited up to the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries. Even though the dawn of human settlement in the Marfa area is difficult to establish, Veronica Veen and Adrian van der Blom¹¹ claim they managed to identify three different prehistoric cultures within the Latmija settlement¹².

Description of Remains

Entrance to the settlement is through a doorway flanked on both sides by the remains of a dry-wall construction (Plate 1). The doorway faces the Northwest. The thickness of the dry-wall structure concealing the entrance to the settlement varies from 0.80m to 1.05m and concurs in thickness and method of construction to dry-wall partitions found within other cave-dwelling sites. All the caves adopted for habitational purposes within the Latmija settlement are located on the southeastern side of the karst feature.

The well sheltered nature of the settlement together with abundant soil deposits, provide an ideal habitat for the growth of several species of trees and shrubs that would have otherwise been unable to survive in the more hostile environment of the garrigue above. Vegetation is restricted to the central and western areas of the settlement and mainly consists of wild figs, wild almond, capers and prickly pears. These are recent introductions and were probably not present when the settlement was still inhabited. The abundant and fertile 'terra rossa' soil deposits within this natural depression are the result of runoff surface rainwater deposition and was aided by the slight east-west inclination of the garrigue landscape.

An artificially constructed ramp sloping in an eastward direction, leads down to the settlement (Plate 2). The ramp had a cobbled surface, of which only a small portion managed to survive. Four areas, all distinctively partitioned through the use of rubble-wall constructions have been identified at Latmija. Areas 1, 2 and 3 are all located on the same floor level, whilst

Area 4 lies on slightly higher ground (Plate 3). Only an accurate survey of Areas 2, 3 and 4 was possible. A large mound of stone chippings concealing access to the cave in Area 1 restricted the survey to the outermost rectangular expanse fronting the cave.

Human and animal occupation of the karst feature appears to be restricted to the southeastern corner (Plate 4). A large overhanging rock ledge here shelters the area from wind and rain. All four areas share an almost identical layout, which typically consists of man-made chambers or storage recess fronted by a large open-air rectangular enclosure. All caves at Latmija are characterised by their small nature. The caves marked F, G and J (Figure 2) are too small a nature to allow human habitation and were possibly used as storage recesses. The remaining caves (fig. 2; D and E) might have been utilised as either sleeping recesses or animal pens, but the site's poor state of preservation makes this difficult to determine. In the absence of adequate historical documentation on the inhabitants of the settlement it is difficult to establish whether all four 'areas' belonged to one or more family units.

Dry-wall constructions enclosed the entrance to caves D and E. The small nature of the caves at Latmija left no scope for their internal partitioning. Dry-wall construction was on the other hand extensively used to enclose the cave entrance and to partition the area fronting the caves.

Conclusions

Our knowledge on the Latmija settlement is limited due to the absence of known historical documentation and the lack of proper archaeological investigation. This study leaves several questions unanswered. Only archaeology and archival research can help supplement the lack of historical knowledge. The dating of the Latmija settlement together with the number of family units dwelling within is difficult to determine. Basing oneself purely on architectural stylistic evidence, the complex reflects a late medieval rural set-up. The size and the layout of the Latmija settlement make it unlikely that this was inhabited by more than two or three family units.

The rural folk inhabiting the settlement were probably engaged in the farming of the surrounding land. Fertile fields fed by spring water derived from the perched aquifer are located nearby and are probably capable of producing three crop yields a year. The site's close

proximity to the sea might none-the-less imply that the cave dwellers were also involved in fishing. This hypothesis is aided by the fact that passageways hewn into the cliff-face and which lead down to the sea are only located about fifty metres from the entrance to the Latmija complex.

The out of the way location of the Latmija settlement is not aiding its preservation. Vandals that are presumably unaware of the damage they are causing to this sensitive site are demolishing dry-wall partitions only to erect temporary makeshift structures that accommodate their weekend camping-spell needs.

Endnotes

¹ Messina, A. 1989. Trogloditismo Medievale a Malta. *Melita Historica* vol. X no. 2: 109. Malta.

² For a more detailed study on the subject, Buhagiar, K. 1997. *The Ghar il-Kbir Settlement and the Cave Dwelling Phenomenon in Malta*. Long essay presented in part fulfilment for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Archaeology, University of Malta.

³The Ghar il-Kbir and Latmija cave dwellings are a typical example of such a settlement.

⁴ The San Niklaw and San Pietru cave-settlements in Mellieha and Naxxar respectively are examples of cliff-face settlements.

⁵ Buhagiar, K. 1997. *The Ghar il-Kbir Settlement and the Cave Dwelling Phenomenon in Malta*, op.cit.

⁶ Luttrell, A. 1979. Malta Troglodytica: Ghar il-Kbir. *Heritage* vol. 2: 461-4.

⁷ Messina A. 1979. *Le Chiese Rupestri del Siracusano*: 7.

⁸ Buhagiar, M. 1984. Mediterranean Architecture: Medieval Cave Dwelling and Rock-Cut Churches in Malta. In Delucca, D. (ed.) 1975. *Mediterranean & Middle East Architectural Construction Review*. *Atrium*, 3: 17. Malta, Penprint Ltd.

⁹ Buhagiar, M. 1993. *Christian Catacombs, Cult Centres and Churches in Malta to 1530*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London: 191.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 342.

¹¹ Veen, V. and van der Blom, A. 1992. *The First Maltese – Origins, Characteristics and Symbolism of the Ghar Dalam Culture*, pp 59-67. Holland.

¹²The authors claim use of the site in the Ghar Dalam phase, early Temple period and the Bronze Age.

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Site Plan of the Latmija Area

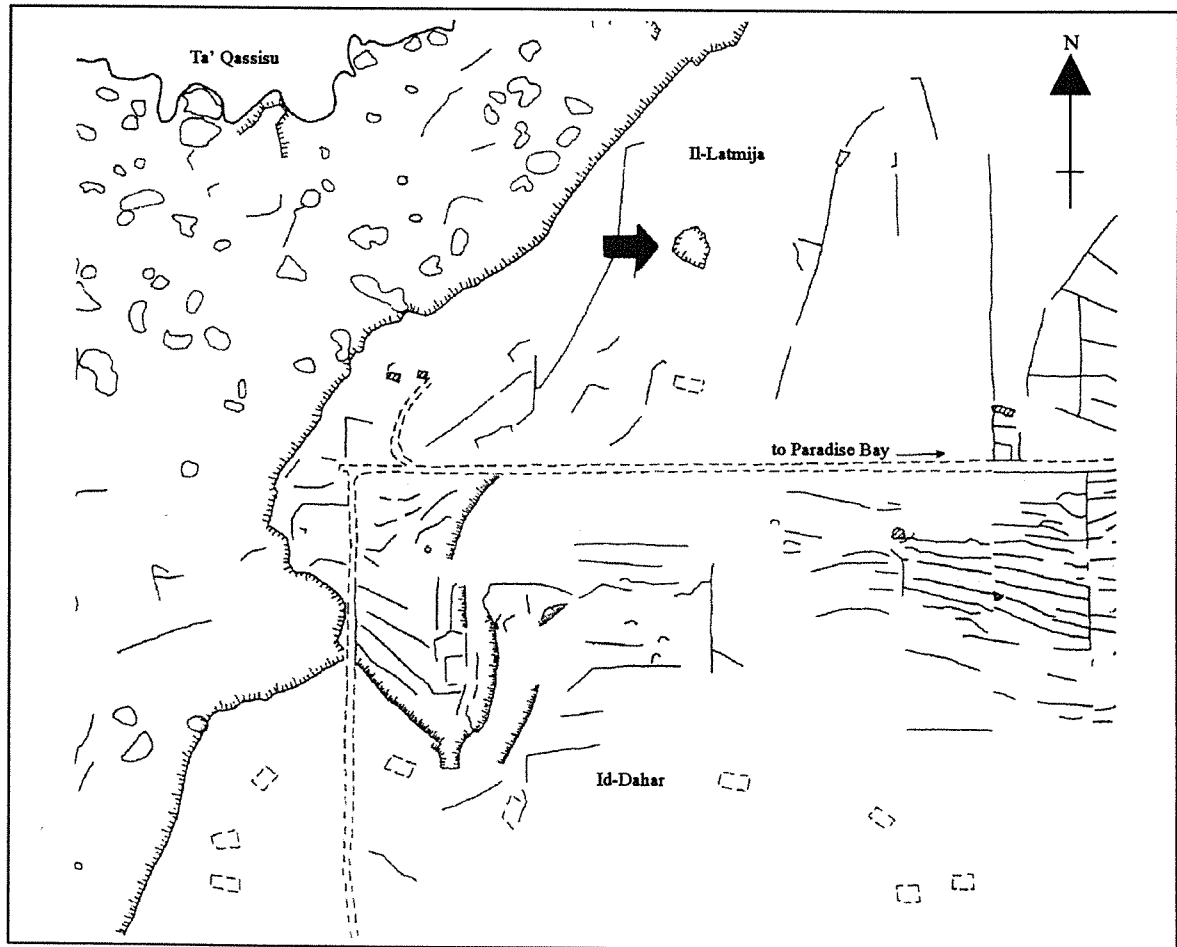
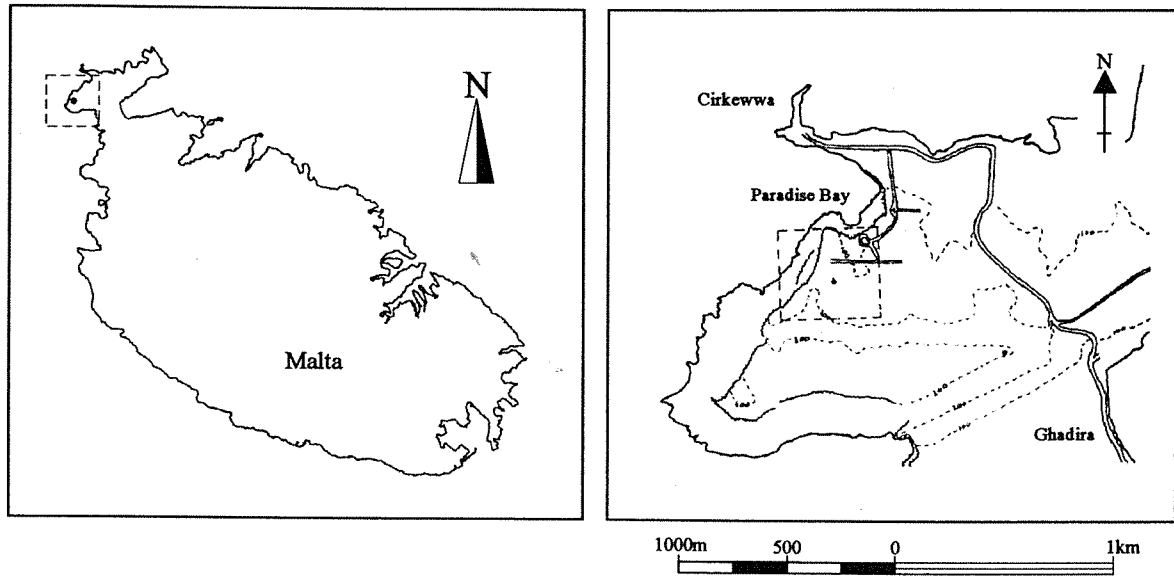
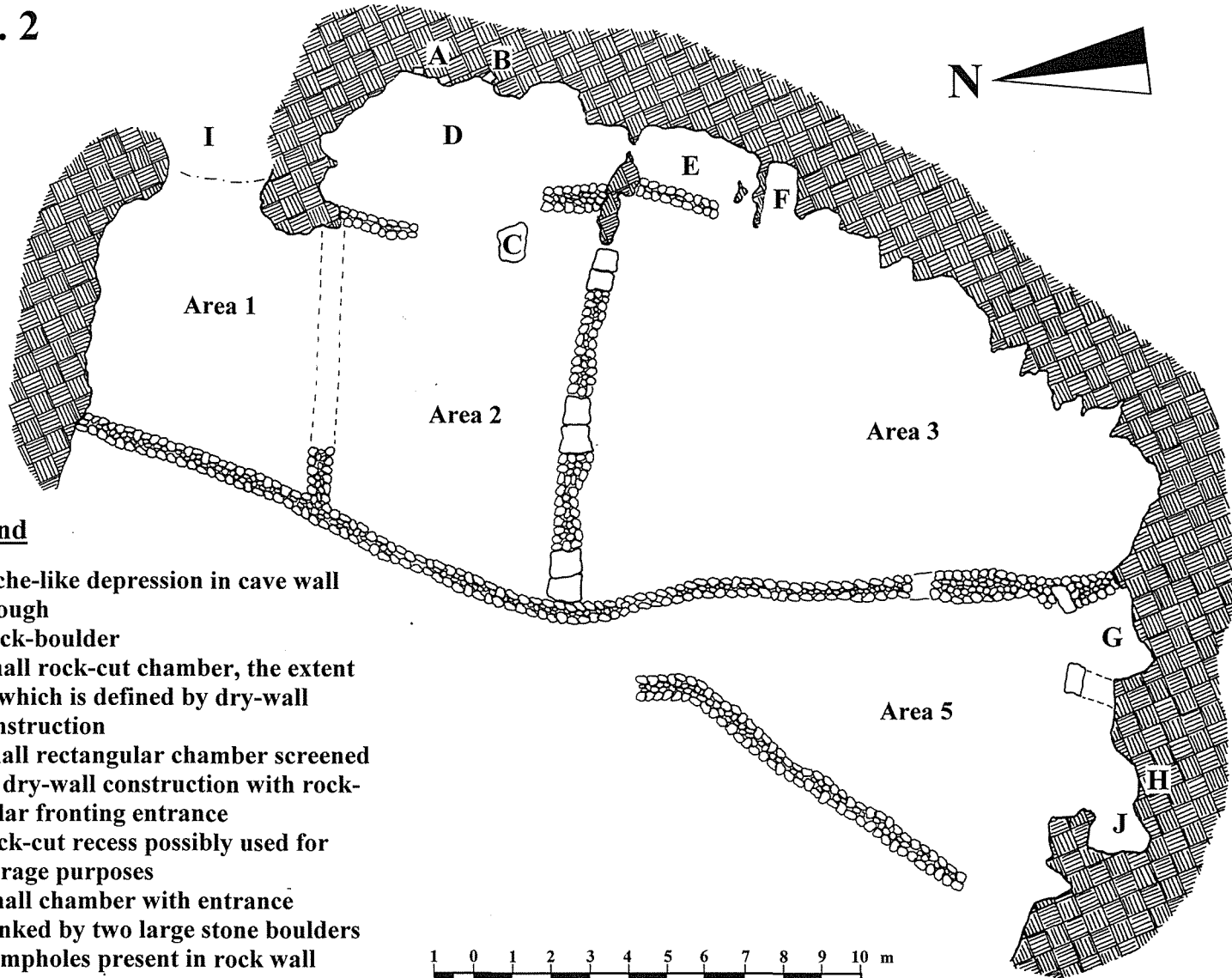


Fig. 1

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Fig. 2



Legend

- A. Niche-like depression in cave wall
- B. Trough
- C. Rock-boulder
- D. Small rock-cut chamber, the extent of which is defined by dry-wall construction
- E. Small rectangular chamber screened by dry-wall construction with rock-pillar fronting entrance
- F. Rock-cut recess possibly used for storage purposes
- G. Small chamber with entrance flanked by two large stone boulders
- H. Lampholes present in rock wall
- I. Extent of survey due to debris enclosing the cave entrance
- J. Small irregular shaped chamber

Surveyed and Drawn
by Keith Buhagiar



Plate 1: Entrance to Latmija Cave



Plate 2: Ramp leading to settlement

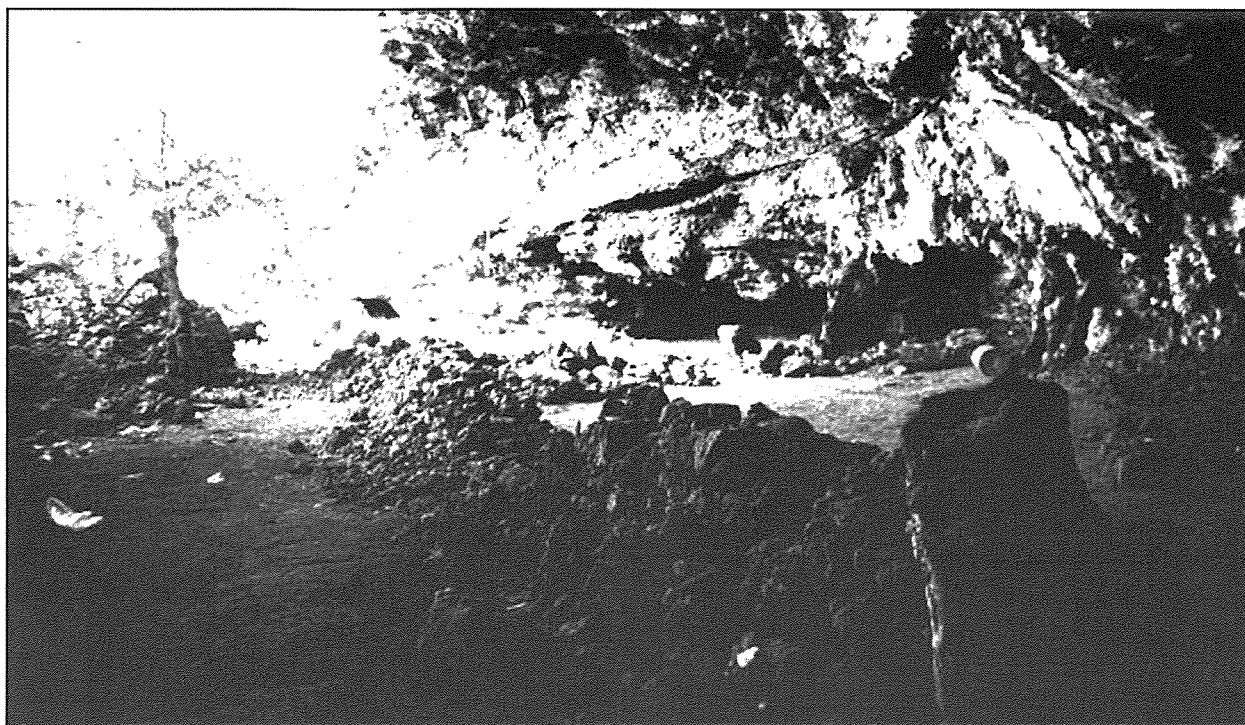


Plate 3: General view of Areas 2, 3 and 4

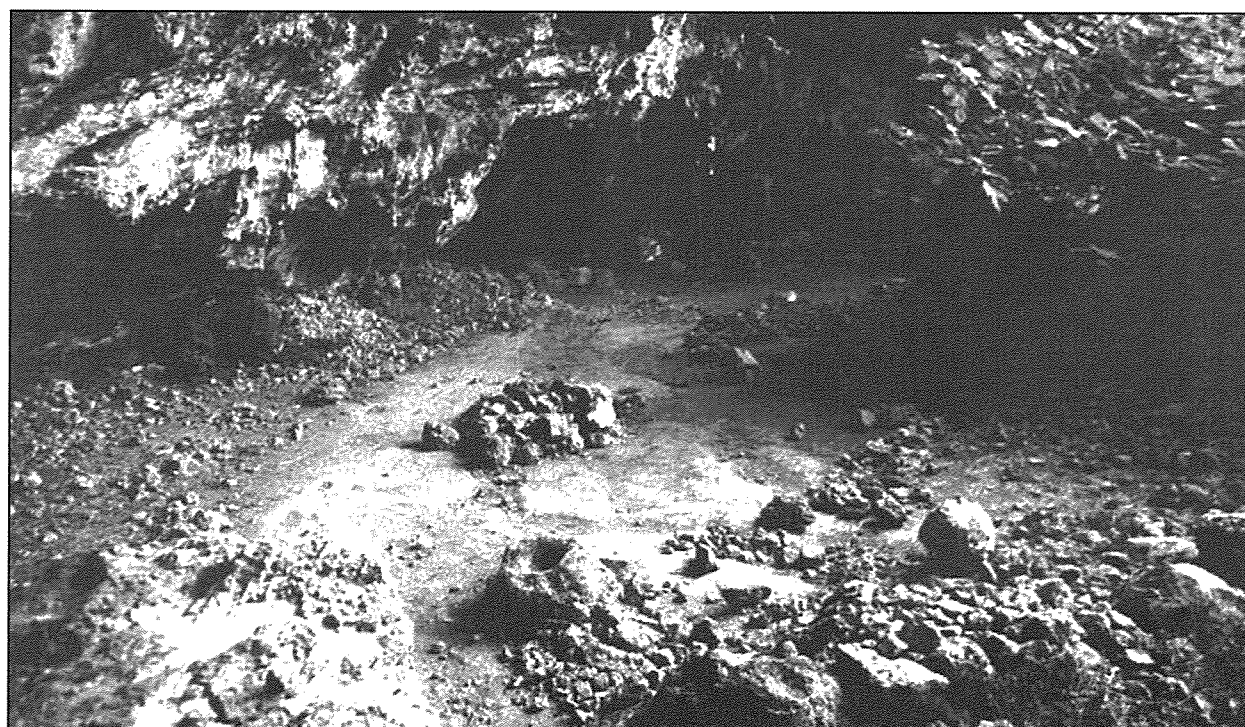


Plate 4: Areas 1, 2 and cave D