



# Traditional Beekeeping in the Peloponnese, Greece

by JOHN PHIPPS, GREECE

Greece has the perhaps dubious distinction of being the first area in which the use of moveable combs has been recorded. Long before Langstroth in America, Dzierzon in Poland and Prokopovich in Ukraine developed their moveable *frame* hives, *moveable comb* hives had been in existence in parts of Greece for at least a couple of centuries. Whilst the more modern moveable frame hives were made of wood, the Greek hives were made of wicker and

clay/cow dung, were wastepaper-basket in shape, with lats of wood being placed at regular intervals across the rim. The advantages of these hives versus the later wooden ones included excellent insulation for the colony and sloping sides which allowed the bees to build their combs in a more natural way than in rectangular frames.

Interestingly, surprising perhaps, is the fact that these moveable comb hives were found in only a few parts

of Greece and never spread throughout the whole country, despite their obvious advantages. Two possible reasons for this are that the Greeks kept very much to their own local traditions and that the types of hives used depended on the materials which were easily available in the districts. The Greek beekeeping museum at the Agricultural Institute in Athens has a range of old hives from different regions of Greece made from a variety of materials — wicker (split reeds), wood, clay and stone.

In my part of Greece, the Mani, on the middle finger of the Southern Peloponnese, two types of hive were commonly in use: the *koffinia* hive — made from split reeds and daubed with mud and cow dung — and stone hives built in tiers.

## KOFFINIA HIVES

*Koffinia* hives were common in areas with great expanses of reed beds. Kalamata, our nearest city, has many reed beds as this flat region near the coast has many ditches and damp areas giving ideal conditions for their growth and spread. In years past, malaria was a great problem because of the huge populations of mosquitoes. Not surprisingly, many Roma people today make their camps near the reed beds as they use the split cane for their basket making and chair seating.

The *koffinia* hives are more like the German tall and round-topped skeps than the broader ones in England made from straw. This being the case, it was not possible to have removable combs or to add extensions to them for extra storage of honey.

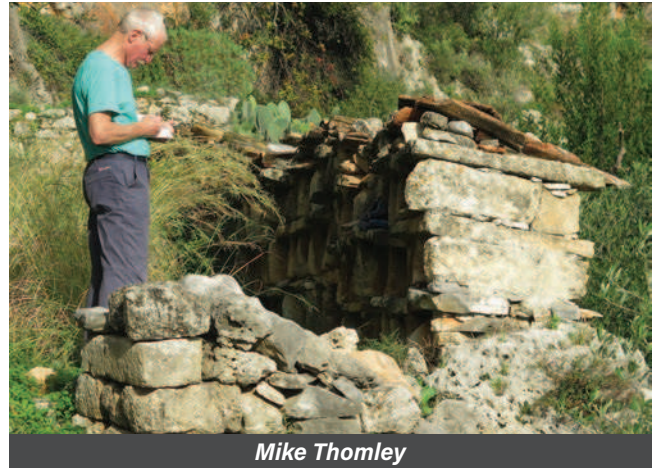
*Koffinia* hives were in use around Kalamata until a few years ago. An old beekeeper living there with



Mani Peninsula in the Southern Peloponnese region of Greece



Gene Kritsky



Mike Thomley



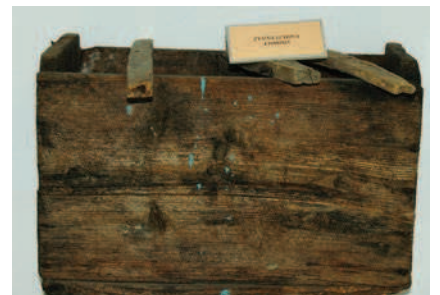
Gilles Ratia

The large collection of old hives below our village of Neochori, Mani, Peloponnese, is a mecca for beekeepers and scholars., including Professor Gene Kritsky, USA, Gilles Ratia, former President of Apimondia, and Mike Thornley, a retired conservation architect.

they were protected with Langstroth boxes and roofs. In the later years, the swarms were collected and hived into Langstroths, allowing the beekeeper's son to build up a modern commercial apiary. The beekeeper had his own way of "charming" the swarms from the trees. He put a hive with brood combs beneath the swarm and whistled until the all the bees had entered the box. A unique experience for me to witness. Sadly, just before the beekeeper's death, this last koffinia apiary was destroyed in a wildfire.

**STONE HIVES**

Stone hives were more typical homes for bees in the part of the Pello-



Early stone and wooden top bar hives and a small wicker skep

whom I became acquainted had about one hundred of them and was possibly the last person to use them in this part of Greece. The colonies in the hives were not managed in any way; they were allowed to develop naturally and to swarm. In winter,

I found two other apiaries with koffinia hives — though now no longer in use — and again, they were used in conjunction with modern hives. In this case the hives were partially sheltered in Langstroth boxes and covered with polythene or paper sacks for protection from the weather. A feature of some of the koffinia hives is a projecting piece of wood at the top of the hive which enabled the colony to be carried easily.



Exterior and interior of koffinia hive



The Greek Beehive, as depicted in George Wheeler's book from 1682



There are extensive areas of reeds growing in damp places around Kalamata which are split and used for making baskets as well as hives.



Roma people still make these hives today in Kalamata. These packet hives have pointed rather than rounded roofs.



An apiary with the pointed type of roof. They are given protection with Langstroth boxes and fertiliser bags.

*Koffinia* hive containing a colony. The combs in the hives are much thicker than those found in conventional hives which are restricted by the frames and the bee space. The beekeeper had an apiary of these near Kalamata until ten years ago. The swarms from them were put into Langstroth hives to increase his son's commercial apiary.



ponnese where we live, the Mani. Coincidentally, our mountain village has the best example of these 18th Century hives in the whole of Greece, still mostly in good repair, sited in the gorge just below the village and used until almost the 1970s.

Altogether there are 257 hives: a wall of 55 x 3 hives (165), another of 28 x 3 hives (84), and another with just two tiers each with four hives. An additional four hives are found in the wall of one of the large caves in which the beekeeper lived and where the family squeezed the honey from the combs. The hives are quite simply made — two stone uprights, a stone base, a stone to the front with a small opening at its base, and a stone top. The back also is a piece of stone or wood which can be removed when required. Except on the outside walls, adjoining hives share the same internal wall and the floor of one is the roof of another. Each wall of hives is covered with a tiled roof which slopes to the front. All the stone pieces are flat, rectangular and between 6 cm and 8 cm thick, the rock being a type of soft limestone "pourri" which hardens with weather-

ing, or a harder material for which the English equivalent is "marbelite." The internal measurements of the hives are: 55.5 cm deep x 21.5 cm wide x 28 cm high, giving a volume of 33,411 cubic centimetres (33.4 litres).

#### THE LEGEND

Almost every antiquity in Greece has some story behind it, these beehives being no exception. The story is about an ancestor of the Marabeas family, a family in the village of Neochori, whose members have been keeping bees, uninterrupted, for nearly three centuries. The story goes that in the early 1700s, one of their ancestors left his village of Nomi-tsi, near Platsa, to walk over the two mountain passes to Kalamata to seek work. Within a short time of being in Kalamata, however, he killed a Turk who had insulted him. Maniat family honour demanded this of him. Now a fugitive from the law, he did



The stone hives are on the side of a gorge facing south east. (See photo at beginning of article.) Behind the hives are two caves in which the monk and later successive generations of the Marabeas family lived whilst managing the bees.





*Iannis with swarm catcher*

what many in his predicament had done and would do in the future, he crossed the Peloponnese and sought sanctuary in one of the monasteries in Mount Athos, the Russian monastery of Saint Panteleimon, and became a monk. Later, he returned to the Mani with, as people say, “bees in his hat” from the hives at Mount Athos, and settled in the caves in the ravine below Neochori village. He then set about making stone beehives in which to place the bees and also to build a church dedicated to the saint of the monastery in which he had sought refuge. I suppose it is possible for a small swarm to have been given temporary shelter within the stove pipe hat of an Orthodox clergyman.

#### MANAGING THE BEES

Beekeeping using stone hives was very simple. The colonies swarmed in summer, the swarms were collected — using a woven straw cone on the end of a stick — and thrown into the



*The back of the hive was made of wood or stone.*

back of an empty hive. The back of the hive was sealed in place with cow dung, but initially pushed halfway in, being moved further back as the colony increased in size. A flattened spoon was used for sealing the gaps at the back of the hive.

Iannis Marabeas, now in his 80s, worked these hives in the 1950s, starting his beekeeping life at the age of 15. Being an agile lad then, he had the job of looking out for and catching the swarms. And nimbleness was certainly needed for climbing up and down the steep sides of the gorge to capture the swarms. He tells me that the swarms were placed into the hives as soon as they had clustered, but many of them absconded shortly afterwards.

Honey was extracted toward the end of the summer. Before the hives were opened, a piece of dried cow dung was put on a piece of tile and set on fire so that it smouldered. The beekeeper then blew smoke into the hive when the back was being pried open and from each hive an outer honeycomb from the colony was cut away using a specially made tool.



*Wooden versions of the hives proved to be of no use as the walls were too thin.*



*However, the upright wooden hives with the same volume as the stone hives were much better, especially if they were well protected from the weather.*

From each hive about half to one kilo of honey was taken. Interestingly, the bees built their combs at right angles to the entrance. No protective clothing was ever worn when working with the bees.

The honey was then carried into the caves behind the hives (where the beekeepers and some of their families spent the summer) and the women squeezed the honey, by hand, into large pots. The women also carried the heavy (25 kg) pots of honey up the ravine and into the villages where the honey was used domestically or exchanged for oil or other commodities.

Attempts were made at making wooden versions of these hives, but with little success. The thin wooden



*Cow dung was burnt on a tile and blown into the back of the hive. No protective clothing was ever used.*



*One piece of comb was removed from the side of the hive.*



*Other examples of stone hives still exist, in almost perfect condition, but not on the same scale as the hives in the gorge.*



*The church of Saint Panteleimon in the gorge, the date of its construction carved above the door, and the icon of the saint*



walls were no good for insulating the colonies in summer or winter and the colonies usually died.

No colonies needed feeding as little honey was taken from them and the bees still had time to forage on the many plants available in the mild autumn weather, particularly a buddleia species, ivy and carob — the latter two providing the bees with copious amounts of pollen. It was very rare for the beekeepers to sustain winter losses with the stone hives.

If people wanted a colony of bees for their own use, the Marabeas family would sometimes make up a stock for them. The bees would be housed in a vertical wooden hive with almost the same volume, the inside of the hive being 24 cm square and the vertical walls 48 cm high. Halfway down the hive, two sticks were wedged in place at right angles to each other to help support the combs. The roof was deep and fitted over the top of the hive and was sometimes given the extra protection of dried grasses. The hive entrance was a small inverted “V” at the bottom of the front wall.

The plants available to the bees all those years ago are not dissimilar with those growing in the area today. From November until July, there is a succession of wild flowers, but they peak in variety and number between the months of February to May. Carob tree, almond, spurge, common and Jerusalem sage, thyme, clovers, trefoils, oregano and the myriads of other flowers, all help to give a good blend of local honey, though now more attempts are made to market monofloral honeys. Also, today, beekeepers are able to follow the nectar flow up the mountains and thus increase their yields per hive enormously. However, a lot of forage, particularly sage and thyme, has been lost through the enormous expansion in housing.

#### **THE BEES**

The bees in our area are of the Cecropian type and build up rapidly in spring and need plenty of space otherwise they will swarm. The bees were ideal therefore for the way in which beekeeping was practised using the stone hives. It is possible though that the bees the monk brought to the Mani were not Cecropian, but Macedonian, as those bees are more common in the north of Greece.

In an attempt to assess whether or not traces of the Macedonian strain still existed locally, I went with some beekeeping friends to Mount Athos to



*The bees at Mount Athos monastery*



*The Marabeas family squeezing out the honey by hand in the cave behind the stone hives. Like in many parts of the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, such activities were a family affair. Also, when family portraits were taken they were usually taken against a back drop of hives.*

look at their bees and to try and collect some samples, with the idea of using biometry to compare them with those we have today.

Whilst the beekeeping monks made us welcome and showed us their stocks, they were unwilling to let us

part with any samples. However, just by looking at the colonies, it was obvious that much hybridisation had taken place. Whilst we had believed that Mount Athos was closed to migratory beekeepers from other parts of Greece, we found the opposite to

be true, with beekeepers paying much money to place their hives in an area so rich in honey plants and trees.

Whether or not the monk brought his bees from Mount Athos or not all those years ago, he nevertheless managed to set the foundations for a long-running and successful commercial enterprise. The Marabeas family have a rich tradition extending back for nearly three centuries — a history which they all share and of which they can be justifiably proud.

**John Phipps** has been a beekeeper for 46 years, 28 in the UK and 18 years in Greece. As well as producing his own honey he used to import many varieties of mono-floral ones from different



countries and sell them to prestigious London stores. In 1983 he started *The Beekeepers Annual*, in 1984 *The Beekeepers Quarterly* and in 2016 *Natural Bee Husbandry* magazine, all of which are published by Northern Bee Books, Halifax, UK. In 2013 his book "A Beekeeper's Progress" was published, in which he describes the ways in which his beekeeping has developed and his experiences with beekeepers particularly in Eastern Europe. Apart from beekeeping, his main hobby is photography and as well as conventional digital photography he has now reverted to using film once more.