



The Middle-East Speleology 2001 Symposium: A Turning Point for the Speleology of the Middle-East

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Abstract

The Speleo-Club du Liban (SCL) and the Lebanese National Council for Scientific Research (LNCSR) organized, in April 2001, an international speleological meeting, where local and foreign cavers discussed the present situation of the Middle-East speleology. This event, which took the form of a three-day symposium, was done also with the collaboration of the "Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches Souterraines du Liban (GERSL)" and the "Association Libanaise d'Etudes Spéléologiques (ALES)".

The symposium encompassed the three main perspectives of speleology: sport and leisure, science, and culture. During the first two days, 38 oral presentations and 20 posters were exposed. These presentations tackled different subjects that are grouped under five major topics: 1. cave rescue, 2. exploration, 3. hydrogeology and karstology, 4. protection of the karst environment, and 5. archeology. The presentations discussed various speleological features present in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. The audience consisted of cavers and scientists from the Middle-East as well as from Europe, North America, and Japan. A spelemedia exhibition with more than 150 photo-posters also took place. In addition, several films were projected. Finally, a beautiful excursion through the Lebanese western mountain chain with a picnic-lunch marked the third day and the end of the symposium.

The significance of this event is not only due to the fact that it is the first of its kind, but also for providing a meeting point for local and foreign cavers and scientists who are interested in the speleology of the Middle-East. An important link between different caving entities was, hence, established, anticipating rewarding future cooperation. In addition, the symposium falls on the 50th anniversary of the Speleo-Club du Liban which was a pioneering speleological organization in the Middle-East and a founding member of the International Union of Speleology (UIS). As it has been broadly proposed, by the participants of the symposium, to establish an international speleological documentation center for the Middle-East in Lebanon, the Speleo-Club du Liban is honored to announce the opening of such a center by the beginning of the year 2002. The Club archives, which include invaluable information along a span of 50 years, as well as the contribution of the different speleological organizations will be stored in a modern well maintained library with a state-of-the-art internet facilities.

Key words: Middle-East Speleology Exploration Karst Hydrogeology

Spelemedia Spélé-Club du Liban

1. Introduction

The Middle-East region encompasses great prospects for speleological explorations. Local and foreign cavers have been recording momentous discoveries since the 1950s. The Spéléo-Club du Liban was established in 1951 and has pioneered the organized speleological activity not only in Lebanon but in the nearby countries as well. New discoveries coming from the East fascinate many cavers around the globe. For instance, the amazing photographs from the Saudi Arabia Geological Survey – John Pint and his colleagues, the Gypsum caves of Syria discovered and surveyed by a German team – Stefan Voigt and colleagues, and the list continues... As much as these discoveries are significant to the world of speleologists, information about them is very scattered. One can seldom find specific news about such explorations if luck is not involved. This led the Spéléo-Club du Liban, on the eve of its 50th anniversary of its founding, to throw an interesting initiative in the form of an international meeting dedicated for the Speleology of the Middle-East. The main objective of such an event is to create a "rendez-vous" for all local and foreign cavers who have interests in the Middle-East region. Future cooperation and the publishing of a symposium book featuring all the presented papers will be basic building blocks for a new speleological era in this region.

This article is but a small report about the Middle-East Speleology 2001 Symposim (April 2001), which was organized by the Speleo-Club du Liban (SCL) and the Lebanese National Council for Scientific Research (LNCSR); with the collaboration of the "Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches Souterraines du Liban (GERSL)" and the "Association Libanaise d'Etudes Spéléologiques (ALES)". 38 oral presentations and 20 posters were exposed (five major topics: 1. cave rescue, 2. exploration, 3. hydrogeology and karstology, 4. protection of the karst environment, and 5. Archeology). A spelemedia exhibition with more than 150 photo-posters also took place.

The main post-symposium project, as proposed by many participants, will be the establishment of an international speleological documentation center for the Middle-East in Lebanon, the Speleo-Club du Liban is honored to announce the opening of such a center by the beginning of the year 2002.

2. Pre-Symposium

The first Lebanese national meeting for speleology was organized by the Spéléo-Club du Liban in 1996. This event brought together the four different caving entities in Lebanon (SCL, SC Ouadi Al Arayesh, GERSL, and ALES). The different presentations that were given are documented in Al-Ouat'Ouate N°10 (SCL Journal). The meeting was held on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the first Lebanese caving activity and the first Lebanese cavers (e.g., Lionel Gorra, Louis Eid,...). The idea of an international meeting originated from this previous meeting. Basically, it was thought to organize an international meeting where the different national entities will be present as well as others from the Middle-East (namely Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey) and foreigners who often explore caves in this region.

The pre-symposium work consisted on the concept creation and the putting together of the organizing team. The Lebanese National Council for Scientific Research (LNCSR) was the first target as it is the sole governmental institution for scientific research in Lebanon. It was thought that having a scientific perspective is necessary since speleology is linked to earth sciences. Then, the different Lebanese caving associations and clubs were invited to collaborate with the organizers. The interior organization was designed as follows:

- an organizing committee (SCL and LNCSR), including a president, secretary, treasurer, public relation representative, and consultant
- and 12 commissions (SCL, GERSL and ALES), each of which has a coordinator and a secretary.

The 12 commissions are grouped into scientific (hydrogeology and karstology, protection of the karst environment, archeology, exploration and techniques, and cave-rescue) and non-scientific commissions (spelemedia, social and accommodations, field-trips, mailing and correspondence, media and press, publications, and sponsoring). About six months prior to the symposium date, the commissions started to meet and work independently. The organizing committee took the role of a connection between the various commissions. It is out of the patience and hard-work of the very few members who devoted their time that the success of the symposium was achieved.

Media and Press. The media coverage was aimed before and after the date of the symposium. A sort of a media 'boom' was needed in order to attract some sponsoring. Articles in many periodicals as well as radio and TV interviews were planned. In addition a press-release was made before the symposium and all media agencies were invited.

3. The Sympoium

The symposium was held at the 'Université du Saint-Esprit Kaslik' near the city of Jounieh about 15km to the north of Beirut (the capital of Lebanon; Fig. 1), from 20 to 22 April 2001. During the first day, the opening ceremony was held under the auspices of the minister of environnement of the Lebanese government, the head of the Kaslik university, the general secretary of UIS (union internationale de spéléologie), and the chairman of the symposium (Fig. 2). After the opening ceremony, the different presentations started each of which having duration of 15 minutes plus 5 minutes for questions. First, the four Lebanese caving entities gave separate general presentations, and then cave-rescue and exploration presentations. On Saturday, the hydrogeology; karst protection and archeology presentations were given and the day ended with a momentous dinner preceded by a tour in the Jiita Grotto (the famous Lebanese show-cave). The third day included a field-trip in Mount-Lebanon with archeological and geological guiding. Eventually, some participants did some minor improvised caving as well.

In total, 38 oral presentations and 20 posters were exposed. The presentations discussed various breathtaking speleological features present in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. The audience consisted of cavers and scientists from the Middle-East as well as from Europe (e.g., Belgium, Chek republic, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland), North America (e.g., Mexico, USA), and Japan. A spelemedia exhibition with more than 150 photo-posters also took place. In addition, several films were projected. Information about all these is featured in the symposium book.

Accommodation. The foreign guests were accommodated in a 'cute' small hotel nested on a hill just on the edge. A very beautiful sight of the valley and the horizons towards the Mediterranean Sea were the daily bonus as the spring weather is marvelous in Lebanon. The hotel was about 15 minutes by car from the symposium venue and a shuttle service was provided. Other type of accommodation was also provided upon request (e.g., camping, city-hotels).

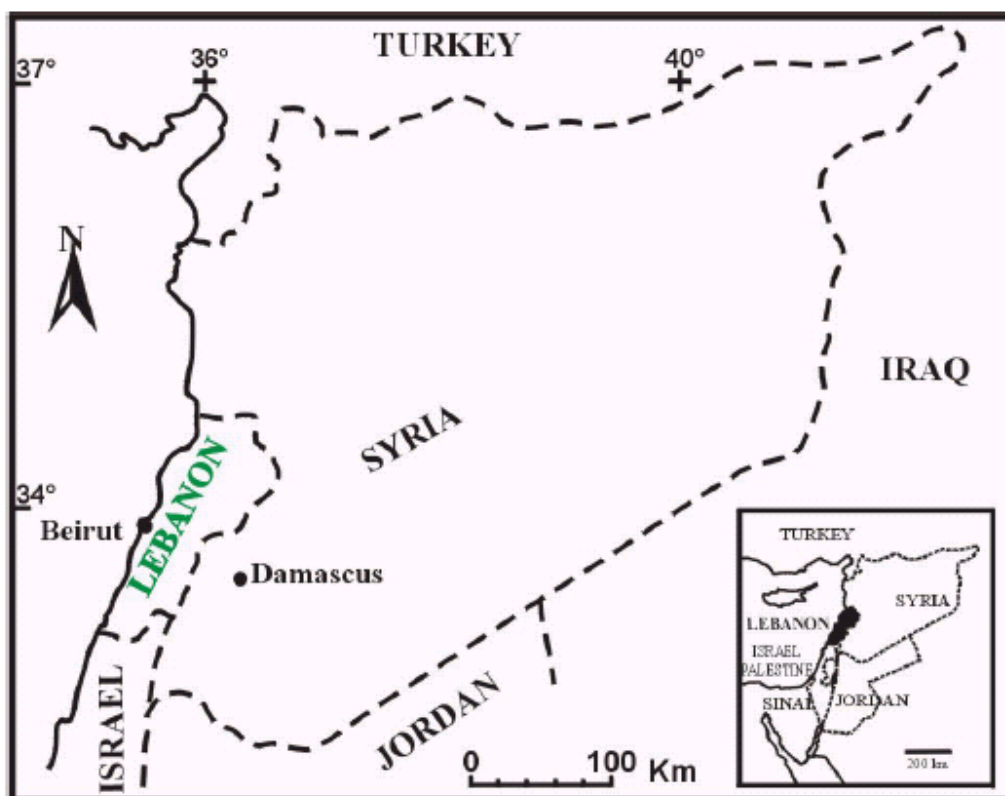


Fig. 1 – Location map of Lebanon and the neighboring countries. The MES2001 venue was in Kaslik about 15 Km north of Beirut city on the coast-line.

4. Post-Symposium

Being a first of its kind does not grant the Middle-East Speleology Symposium success, and having a 3-day leisure vacation does not make out of this event more than souvenirs to discuss over a dinner. The most important goal is to provide a meeting point for local and foreign cavers and scientists. This was targeted and accomplished due to the broad audience. Links between different caving entities were, hence, established, anticipating rewarding future cooperation. Not only partnership was promoted but friendship and caving bounds were initiated.

The next important achievement is the symposium book, which will feature the immortal record of the symposium. All the presentations will be published within the framework of this book. It is a starting point to reference and put together the various pieces of the speleological literature of the Middle-East. No more scattered information, but one single reference book is aimed. Here it is hoped that such a meeting will happen again in the future and the initiated work will be continuously evolved to match the significance of the new explorations and discoveries.

Last but not least, as it has been broadly proposed by the participants of the symposium, the Speleo-Club du Liban is honored to announce the opening of an international speleological documentation center for the

Middle-East in Lebanon. This is scheduled for the beginning of the year 2002. The Club archives, which include invaluable information along a span of 50 years, as well as the contribution of the different speleological organizations will be stored in a modern well maintained library with a state-of-the-art internet facilities. This project originates also from the quest of creating a 'meeting point' for the speleology of the Middle-East. SCL will be more than honored to offer its facilities (a big club-house and a library with documents since the 1950s) for the benefit of cavers and speleology. The documentation center will be a useful link for cavers around the world and their colleagues in the Middle-East. A huge wealth of information is already stacked in the to-be-born center due to the long history of the Spéléo-Club du Liban and its known international connections. However, additional documents are welcome and asked for in order to work all together on such a huge project.



Fig. 2 – Photograph showing Dr Pavel Bosak giving his talk during the opening ceremony. From left to right, Mr. Michel Moussa Minister of the Environment (Lebanese Government), and Mr. Jo Zgheib chairman of the symposium (SCL).

5. Conclusion

This article reports the Middle-East Speleology 2001 symposium that occurred in Lebanon, in April 2001. 38 oral presentations and 20 posters discussed various speleological features present in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. Besides, more than 150 photo-posters were exhibited and several films were projected. The symposium also included a beautiful excursion through the Lebanese mountains with a picnic-lunch.

The results of this meeting were:

- 1- Initiation of future cooperation and friendship rather than only partnership between the participating groups,
- 2- Publication of a symposium book enclosing all the papers presented during the symposium,
- 3- Preparation for creating an international documentation center for the Speleology of the Middle-East in Lebanon.

Finally, it is important to stress on the resulting friendship that was launched between the various participants and the subsequent enlargement of the Spéléo-Club du Liban big family. In fact, just after the symposium, four participants honored SCL by asking to become members of this latter club. Such a special relationship anticipates rewarding future work and achievements.