



Apiary with open-at-the-top basket hives, Skouze Estate (Pikermi), Attica, Greece, beginning of 20th c.

Photo: From George Toufexis, Beekeeping, Athens 1909, p. 97

Text:
Angelos Karagiannis, Georgios Mavrofridis

(Modern) photographs:
George Mestousis



Traditional beekeeping with movable-comb hives

An intangible cultural heritage initiative
by BEELOSOPHY



With financial support and under the auspices



HELLENIC REPUBLIC
Ministry of Culture

TRADITIONAL BEEKEEPING WITH MOVABLE-COMB HIVES

Urgent preservation
& safeguard



Apiary with clay movable-comb hives near Sphakia, Crete, ca. 1921

Photo: ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive / Hs_1360-1491

ABOUT MOVABLE-COMB HIVES

Movable-comb hives are upright, open-at-the-top or open-at-the-top-and-bottom. Their uppermost end is covered with touching wooden bars of a certain width. Bees attach their combs along the underside of each bar. Each comb can thus be moved separately, allowing a series of beekeeping manipulations, which, in other types of traditional hives, are either impossible to carry out, or are carried out with greater difficulty.



THE INITIATIVE

BEELOSOPHY documents traditional beekeeping with movable-comb hives, with the input of some of its last living bearers, aiming to safeguard it. Special emphasis is put on the upright movable-comb (clay) hives of Crete and (stone, basket, clay etc.) hives of Kythera. Moreover, through appropriate activities, the initiative contributes to modern-day interpretation, protection, safeguard and transfer of this cultural heritage, as well as to highlighting other related elements of culture.



HELLENIC MINISTRY OF CULTURE

GENERAL DIRECTORATE OF ANTIQUITIES AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

DIRECTORATE OF MODERN CULTURAL HERITAGE

DEPARTMENT OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

AND INTERCULTURAL AFFAIRS

www.beelosophy.gr



WHERE WERE MOVABLE-COMB HIVES USED?

In recent centuries, traditional beekeeping with movable-comb hives has been widely practiced in areas of southern Greece. These areas form an arc on the map, the lower end of which starts in central-western Crete and Gavdos, and which then moves through Kythera, Antikythera, eastern Peloponnese and the islands of the Argo-Saronic Gulf, and the other end touches Attica and the island of Kea.

Nowhere else in the world have movable-comb hives been recorded for the traditional practice of beekeeping with the so-called western bee, *Apis mellifera*.

JUSTIFICATION - SIGNIFICANCE

Archaeological findings show that movable-comb hives were well known in ancient Greece at least from the 3rd century B.C. onwards, and have remained in use in Greece to this day. The traditional movable-comb beekeeping method practiced in Greek hives has had a decisive influence on the evolution of global beekeeping. This method is nowadays in immediate danger of disappearing, which makes its safeguard and preservation extremely important.

The movable-comb beekeeping method, once its importance is recognised and its viability ensured, and with the right policies in place, is desirable to emerge as a development factor, offering stimuli and knowledge and enriching activities of beekeeping, apitourism, and cultural and alternative tourism, as well as other related activities to all those who could benefit from becoming acquainted with this heritage.



HISTORICAL NOTE



A beekeeper examines a honeycomb from a Cretan open-at-the-top-and-bottom movable-comb basket hive, 1938

Photo: Penelope (Popi) Papadopoulou, Institute of Agricultural Sciences Archive, Greece

www.beelosophy.gr

beelosophy@outlook.com.gr

Instagram: [@beelosophy.greece](https://www.instagram.com/beelosophy.greece)

Youtube: [@BEELOSOPHY](https://www.youtube.com/@BEELOSOPHY)

The earliest relevant reference regarding the use of *vraskia* in Crete dates back to the 17th century and we owe it to Zuanne Papadopoli, a Cretan who practiced beekeeping in *vraskia* on his home island in the 1630s. In the same century, two fellow travellers, namely Jacob Spon, French, and George Wheler, English, documented beekeeping in woven movable-comb hives as practiced in the monastery of Kaisariani on mount Hymettus, Greece, in 1676. With the publication of their travel works, the Western world was informed about the existence of these Greek hives. This fact provided several researchers with the impetus to search for a more rational method of beekeeping. This research into beekeeping methods was completed in the mid-19th century, when Lorenzo Langstroth in the United States of America created the modern frame hive and defined the bee space, based on the knowledge acquired from the Greek movable-comb hives.

When it was later found that the frame hive was not suitable for beekeeping in the developing world, Penelope Papadopoulou, a Greek woman, proposed the traditional movable-comb hive of Greece. Her proposal had mass appeal and nowadays the movable-comb hive is the most popular in the developing world, usually in an evolved design, the traditional (Greek) hive being also in use.