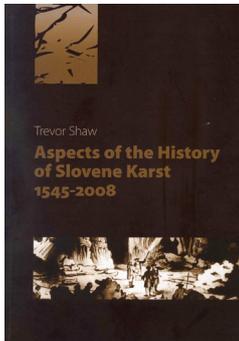


Trevor R. Shaw (with contributions by Alenka Čuk & James MacQueen) 2010

Aspects of the history of Slovene Karst 1545 – 2008,

Zalozba ZRC/ZRC Publishing, Ljubljana, ISBN 978-961-254-208-5, 306 pp.

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The author is well known for his knowledge and competence in the history of speleology but this time he reached a level still higher than in the past. With the help of two colleagues, Alenka Čuk and James MacQueen, he collected in this book so many details on caves and karst of Slovenia of the last five centuries.

The arguments are grouped into 14 chapters. In the first, the cave of Postojna is compared with other 19th century European tourist caves. From France: Grotte de la Balme, Grotte de Miremont (now usually called Rouffignac), Grotte d'Arcy-sur-Cure, Grotte de Demoiselles; from Belgium: Grotte de Han, Grotte de Remouchamps; from Germany: Baumannshöhle, Dechenhöhle, Sophienhöhle, Nebelhöhle; from Austria: Krausgrotte; from Slovakia: Dobsinska Jaskynia; from Hungary: Aggtelek (now usually called Baradla). So many details are reported for all these caves, resulting in a widespread data base for the history of these caves.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the popular books of 19th century on the cave of Postojna. In Chapter 3 the music performed in the cave of Postojna from 1814 to the present is minutely described, with the addition of some remarks also for other caves all over the world.

To the pleasure of stamp collectors, the underground post offices of the cave of Postojna from 1899 to 1945 are the object of Chapter 4. Obviously not only the history of the post offices is reported but also the reproduction of many stamps and postmarks. Stamps are again taken into account in Chapter 5 where the bureaucracy and the narrow-minded Italian authorities succeeded to have proof prints of a series of four stamps of the "Regie Grotte di Postumia" in 1928, which were never issued. Only six postcards with pictures of the cave of Postojna were issued in 1936 and are known to have been used in 1937.

In Chapter 6 glass oil lamps used in the cave of Postojna are described. Many of such objects were found in the past but only in 2000 they were identified as oil lamps.

Valvasor is known also as an engraver and one engraving of 1689 reproducing stalagmites drawn to resemble animals and humans is normally considered to be based on a scene of the cave of Postojna. In Chapter 7 this fact is duly examined and the conclusion is that Valvasor must have made his sketch in "Črna jama" (Black cave), which is different from the cave of Postojna also if it belongs to the same cave system.

Chapter 8 is written jointly with Alenka Čuk and deals with a cave museum planned in 1904 to be created at Postojna. Unfortunately the plan suffered many delays ending with the 1st World War that stopped everything. After the war the Italian Institute of Speleology was established at the cave of Postojna and some expenditures for the speleological museum are recorded, nevertheless the definition "The Museum that Never Was" seems to be quite appropriate.

The Cerknica Lake attracted attention already many centuries ago on accounts of its peculiar intermittent behaviour. A German scholar, Nicodemus Frischlin, spent two years in Ljubljana from 1582 to 1584 and wrote a poem in Latin on the lake. Chapter 9 deals with a detailed description of the poem and its successive editions.

This lake was later the object of a book by Franz Anton Steinberg dated 1758. Such a book, with its editions and Steinberg's life are duly reported in Chapter 10.

The argument of Chapter 11 is something that at present is considered to be absolutely "not correct", i.e. the sale and public display of speleothems. These, in the past, were not considered precious materials to be taken out for scientific purposes only. Still in the '50s, the government of Yugoslavia did not hesitate to quarry flowstone to be used for decoration of the Parliament building in Ljubljana.

The caption of Fig. 146 has a small mistake because it quotes Fig. 16 instead of Fig. 145.

What I consider the most relevant karst feature in the world, because it groups a number of peculiar karst features in the most beautiful sight is St. Kanzian (Škocjanske jame). An excursion organised in 1891 by the German and Austrian Alpine Club is the theme of Chapter 12, while the activity of Poldi Fuhrich in this same cave in 1921 and 1922 is described in Chapter 13. She was probably the first woman anywhere in the world to take part in especially difficult cave explorations, and was invited to karst regions in other countries including Ireland and Brazil. Eventually she died after a fall from a rope ladder in Lurgrotte, Austria at the age of 28.

It must be stressed that both chapters are a real mine of pieces of information and pictures well beyond the chapters' titles could imply. For me it was very interesting to find data concerning the founders of a dynasty of cavers, Friedrich and Franz Robert Oedl, the ancestors of Fritz Oedl, both sr. and jr, many of us had the pleasure to know as managers of Eisriesenwelt.

The last Chapter, 14th, is written jointly with James G. MacQueen and concerns the myth of the Argonauts. Among the many differing accounts of the Argonauts' return to Thessaly, an interesting part was supposed to be followed underground, as it is reported in a map of Carniola produced by W. Lazius in 1561. Many documents and detailed examinations are here reported. Another small mistake is found in caption of Fig. 195, where the note about the Argonauts should be shown enlarged in the same Fig. 195, while it is reproduced in Fig. 196.

In conclusion this book is a compendium of an incredible amount of details, most of them concerning Slovenia. But, as it was stressed above, the content of each chapter is much wider and outside the "border" suggested by the respective title. Therefore anyone interested to the history of speleology must have it in his/her library. Only a person with the knowledge and competence of Trevor Shaw could have had the idea to write it.

Cocconato, October, 2010

Arrigo A. Cigna