

Johannes Mattes

Reisen ins Unterirdische. Eine Kulturgeschichte der Höhlenforschung in Österreich bis in die Zwischenkriegszeit. [Travelling into the Underground. A Cultural History of Cave Exploration in Austria through the interwar years].

2015, Böhlau Verlag, Wien, 410 p., ISBN 978-3-205-79687-9
170x240, 60 black-and-white figures, hardcover, € 44.90.
German, abstracts in English, Czech and Slovenian.



“*Travelling into the Underground*” is more than a chronology of explorers and institutions. The book investigates the history of caving and speleology, with an emphasis on the regions of Austria and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, by means of the historical discourse analysis. It spans mainly the period from the Age of Enlightenment to the 1920s, but ancient and medieval times are also considered. The author searches for the links, relationships, and influences that cave exploring and other sciences, arts, philosophy and even theology and psychology had on each other. Nevertheless, the book has a clear structure, from antiquity through the 18th century and the Romantic period up to the Age of Nationalism and Imperialism. For each period, it investigates different perspectives and themes such as the perception of rooms and space, social aspects, science, technical approaches, and documentations. What were the motivations that drove travellers, scientists, and trained laymen into caves in these different periods? How were their perceptions formed by their view of the world, paradigms, and patterns of thought and vision? And vice versa: how did this influence their world-view?

Johannes Mattes is an expert on both caving and history. He is a professional historian at the University of Vienna and a dedicated caver.

Reading the book is like wandering along galleries of ages, following side passages of arts, philosophy, speleo-cartography, and others, and finding different perspectives lurking in the abyss of the psyches of travellers and explorers. The reader is terrified by dragons in the medieval times, searches for bizarre objects and fossils in the Baroque period, shrugs with a delightful horror in the Romantic era and strives for victory, honor, and a record of surveyed meters in the Age of Imperialism. As a local, he or she preserves cheese in an Alpine ice cave, or even worships, hidden with Protestants.

Serendipitously, there are lots of fascinating details, such as early depth records and how the water supplies of Trieste and Vienna have been fed by karst waters since the 19th century. Details about amazing ancient caving equipment and technics, the more than 30 caving clubs of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and the development of different theories concerning speleogenesis are just a few of the themes dealt with by the book.

Additionally, there are more than 100 pages of bibliography and footnotes, as well as a register of persons and locations. Perhaps the figures and images could have been larger or in color, as they have a major role in understanding the issues presented throughout the text.

“*Travelling into the Underground*” is pleasant to read, full of interesting and sometimes peculiar details. It uniquely shows new links between familiar theories, and opens the readers’ eyes and mind to a new approach to and perception of caves and caving.

Monika Schöner