

The Cryosphere Discuss., referee comment RC1
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Comment on tc-2022-25

Tanguy Racine (Referee)

Referee comment on "Brief communication: Tritium concentration and age of firn accumulation in an ice cave of Mount Olympus (Greece)" by Georgios Lazaridis et al., The Cryosphere Discuss., <https://doi.org/10.5194/tc-2022-25-RC1>, 2022

General comments

This paper presents a new series of tritium measurements from firn sampled in an underground ice deposit of Mount Olympos. The lack of the so-called 'Tritium bomb peak' in the series (all current values are under 10 TU) is interpreted as evidence for a maximum age of ~ 50 years for the ice deposit of Christaki cave. I recommend this communication for publication, provided some significant changes are made to the manuscript.

From the cave survey and the geometry of the ice body however, I believe there are limitations on the conclusions about the age of the ice deposit in this cave. It appears that there are indeed, according to the survey some deep ice layers that you could not access for sampling, which may have yielded the tritium peak. In this case, the maximum age of the ice could be older still. I stress that since the ~ 2 m sampled section was deposited in at most 50 years, the minimum rate of ice accumulation interpreted by the authors remains valid. I would encourage the authors to discuss the possibility of older ice being present, but inaccessible in the discussion, rather than the final line of the conclusion.

I feel this short communication is a relevant contribution as it provides evidence for a minimum mean annual mass balance in high elevation ice caves, which are still under researched objects of the cryosphere.

In general, the quality of the English could be significantly improved. A mix of British and American English was noted in the text (e.g., analysed in the Abstract, meters in the main body of text). Please see the technical comments for suggestions.

Specific comments

I think the title should contain ice cave in the singular, because although there is a mention of neighbouring cave on mount Olympos, the age determination is only carried out at one of these sites. I say this because the geometry constraints of each cave may permit the accumulation of firn bodies with varying thicknesses and age within a very small karst area.

From figure S3, it looks like there are organic debris falling into the entrance shaft of the Christaki pothole. I think a way to continue/ corroborate this report would be radiocarbon dating any organic inclusions found in the ice. One would expect a fraction modern $F_{14C} > 1$ from one such sample, given the hypothesis of 'young' firn in the caves of these areas.

In several places, an 'ice column' is mentioned, which I assume is the section of ice that was sampled for tritium measurements. I would suggest changing this to 'ice section', because it might otherwise be confused with a pillar shaped congelation ice speleothem.

At the end of the introduction, I would also introduce previous ice cave studies which dealt with ice dating using the tritium peak, either present (1) or absent (2).

At line 45, high average snow fall is mentioned - this could do with a citation and quantitative estimate of e.g., mean snow depth.

Lines 60-66 - I find the line of reasoning hard to follow. You observe that every sample contains soil debris and dust, a material which was deposited onto the ice deposit during the summer period. You argue that ablation and overburden by new snow the following winter result in the dissemination of the material within the existing firn, thus obscuring the layers, making them indistinguishable. You then infer that the maximum single annual layer thickness could not exceed that of the current ice deposit? If so, I do not see how it helps the following reasoning.

I think sentence 64-66 could be deleted, or made clearer in the text why it adds to the reasoning about the maximum age of the ice body.

Lines 66-71 - this section of the text contains the main line of argument - i.e., corrected for decay, one would expect a > 130 TU tritium peak in an ice deposit whose age exceeds 50 years, provided there are no hiatuses and provided the ice in the cave is not relict ice, currently melting. I think you have observations that show the snow surface is not ancient, but melts from the bottom. I have added some technical comments to have this section read better.

Figure 1 - I think that this figure would benefit from a simplified overview map of the central Mediterranean region (currently Figure S1), showing where exactly the site is in relation to the coastlines and maybe other known/published ice bearing sites from the Greek ice cave cadastre (this would serve to highlight and support the statement about how widespread ice caves are in Greece). I propose this because there is left-over width in the figure, so adding another small panel could help. Is the scale on Panel B the same as that of Panel A?

Technical corrections

l12: 'sharp raise of tritium' should read 'sharp rise of tritium' or 'sharp tritium peak'

l14: It should probably be reworded to make clear here that the absence of the tritium peak provides an upper age limit for the deepest layer of the ice deposit.

l18-19: 'and distribution': I am not sure what is meant here. The sentence could be reworded to make it clear that the classification scheme proposed by Luetscher and Jeannin (2004) helps differentiate ice caves based on their morphology (hence ventilation pattern) and the type of ice they contain (primarily firn, or congelation ice).

l22: 'have been exploited for years...' should read 'has been exploited for years between the end of the 19th Century and the 1950s'

l23: 'to villages and and town at the foothills' should read 'to villages and towns in the foothills'

l25 'were applied at' should read 'were carried out at'

l26-28: this pair of sentences would benefit from citations, eg: (3) (4)

l30 'resulting to a sharp peak' should read 'resulting in a sharp peak', also could use citation (5)

l31-32: could be better formulated such as: 'up to 6,000 TU in Canada and Austria, reached in 1953 and 1961, respectively (Cauquoin et al., 2016).'

l33-34: could be reformulated: 'The tritium peaks in precipitation of the early 1960s ...'

l35: 'on the NW slope of the mountain' could read 'on the NW slope of mount Olympos'

l36: 'the list of ice caves in Greece' could be reformulated as 'the Greek ice cave cadaster'

l37: replace 'first descent' with 'entrance pit'

l40: 'progressively goes thicker to the west, reaching about 4.5 m of thickness' could read 'progressively thickening westwards, reaching a maximal thickness of 4.5 m'

l40-41: again maybe reformulate to: 'The ice plug prevents any access to the westward continuation of the cave'.

l42: 'is consisted of' should either read 'is composed of' OR 'consists of'

l43 'gradually reduce their composition to dolomite' should read 'gradually transition to dolomite'

l43-45: reformulating the sentence so it could read 'The western slopes of Mount Olympos act as a barrier to the hot and humid westerly air masses and thus experience enhanced orographic precipitation'.

l52 'from a section of 2 m high' should read 'from a 2 m high section (Figure 1A)'

l53: 'in 5cm intervals' should read 'at 5 cm intervals'

l54: 'chosen to be measured for tritium' could read 'selected for tritium content determination'

l55: could reformulate to have no number at the start of the sentence? e.g., 'For each sample, 8 mL of melted ice were ...'

l60: I think this sentence could be reformulated to highlight the fact the lack of layers precluded the estimate of the age of the ice deposit by layer counting.

l64: I don't think incineration is the correct word: 'dissemination' perhaps?

l66-67 I would reformulate the sentence to 'Since the cave firn deposit was thought to have accumulated for many decades, it was hypothesised that the above-mentioned

atmospheric tritium peak would be found in the melted ice samples'.

l70: 'could be resulted from' should read 'could result from'

l71: 'annual mean tritium' should read 'mean annual tritium'

l77: The sentence could be reformulated thus: 'Considering this upper limit of 50 years for the base of ice deposit, the corresponding mean winter snow layer thickness is at least 4 cm γ^{-1} '.

l81: capitalise 'Croatian ice cave'.

l83: Sentence could be reformulated thus: 'However, these estimates do not date the onset of cave glaciation, nor times at which the cave may have been completely ice free'.

l84: could you provide a reference for this statement?

Suggested References:

(1) Kern et al, 2009 High-resolution, well-preserved tritium record in the ice of Bortig Ice Cave, Bihor Mountains, Romania

(2) Kern et al, 2011, Isotope hydrological studies of the perennial ice deposit of Saarahalle, Mammuthöhle, Dachstein Mts, Austria

(3) L.L. Lucas, M.P. Unterweger Comprehensive review and critical evaluation of the half-life of tritium
J. Res. Natl. Inst. Stand. Technol., 105 (4) (2000), pp. 541-549

(4) D.H. Ehhalt, F. Rohrer, S. Schauffler, W. Pollock Tritiated water vapor in the stratosphere: vertical profiles and residence time J. Geophys. Res., 107 (D24) (2002), p. 4757, 10.1029/2001JD001343

(5) E.A. Martell On the inventory of artificial tritium and its occurrence in atmospheric methane J. Geophys. Res., 68 (1963), pp. 3759-3769