WALKING THE FOOTPATHS OF ANCIENT BEEKEEPERS

Historical Beekeeping on Andros

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If you have not yet planned a holiday for the year and you like bees and walking, then you might consider one of the Greek Islands. Andros is the second largest and most northerly of the Cyclades. It lies a two-hour ferry ride, south-east of Athens, neatly juxtaposed between the mainland and the archipelago that constitutes one-fifth of the country’s land mass.

Natural evolution and agricultural practices are interlinked. Evolution brings innovation and, over the years, some of the management techniques associated with that innovation turn into traditions. However, it is very easy for the traditions to become lost and forgotten, so it is important to record and, ideally, witness the customs and habits associated with traditional beekeeping before they are forgotten.

Andros offers the opportunity, perhaps a unique opportunity in this rapidly changing and shrinking world, to examine this past heritage.

Part of the Day Job

The ubiquitous box hives of Langstroth and Dadant, with all their advantages for modern efficient production of honey were late in coming to the island and many of the traditional methods were still being practised well into the 1960s. The concept of the professional beekeeper (melissokoros in Greek) was unknown until the arrival of the modern hives. Up until then, the only ‘professionals’ were the local blacksmith, itinerant potters, barrel makers or masons. Until the last two or three decades of the twentieth century, a beekeeper was a farmer who had many occupations, only one of which was keeping bees.

The traditions of the craft were kept secret, shrouded in mystique and passed guardedly from father to son. The farmer built his hives and looked after his colonies using the techniques he had learned, copied, ‘stolen’, or even developed by himself.

The late arrival of ‘modern’ beekeeping does mean that many older beekeepers still remember the old techniques. Indeed, some still use them and an occasional traditional hive to attract and trap swarms.

Discovering Traditional Methods

Andros is a rugged island; there is insufficient flat land for an airport, so the only connection to the outside world is by ferry. It is so steep that the way to practise agriculture was to build terraces for cultivation. It is in the stone walls of the terraces that the bee boxes can be found. They vary in design, being triangular, square or pentagonal – depending on the type of hive to be housed, the preference of the builder and the availability of suitable-sized stones.

 Skeps were the most prevalent type of hive on Andros, made mainly from the chastre tree, Vitex agnus-castus, from the Latin vieso meaning to weave or tie up, a reference to its use in basketry. However, other materials were used including rope, myrtle, clematis, willow and common reeds – in fact, anything pliable that came to hand.

There were subtle variations in design; some had a solid wood conical top, others were bound with wire or tough, sinuous vegetative material. The size of the skep was about 50 cm in diameter, 50–55 cm in height and it would have 15–20 warps
or ribs. The whole thing would be coated in cow dung and then usually whitewashed with lime. Just as materials varied, so there were many local variations of size. Sometimes both outside and inside were covered in cow dung, and so on. Skeps were usually, though not always, put into the triangular or pentagonal bee boles.

Another type of hive is the bell (cañana in Greek), which is found mainly in the area around the town of Andros on the eastern side of the island, but crops up elsewhere as well. It is a clay vessel that looks like a bell, 50 cm high and about 40 cm wide at the base. It has break so they were used mainly on permanent sites in triangular or pentagonal bee boles.

The third type of hive is the cannon, the obvious descendant of the horizontal cylindrical hives which, it is thought, were originally brought from Egypt to Crete and then spread throughout the islands as beekeeping took hold over 3000 years ago. Cannons are about one metre long with a closed end (in this, they differed from the original Egyptian and Cretan hives). They were laid sideways in the bee bole and the open front was closed with a round stone into which some entrance holes had been cut.

Bee Houses Uncovered

An alternative way of keeping bees on the island was the use of a bee house. The basic design was a block building made from stones available in the immediate vicinity. Inside each house were two or three rows of ‘cupboards’. Each cupboard had a door and was worked from the inside, there were no frames or other fittings inside the niche.

On the outside there were corresponding entrance holes, each with a slightly protruding landing stone. The entrance hole was reduced in winter by the simple expedient of placing a suitable-sized stone in the hole. There are many bee houses over the island and each has its own variation on the theme. In other words, the hives, bee boles and bee houses reflect the individuality of the beekeepers who made them. It is said ‘if you put two beekeepers together, you get at least three opinions’, so that is reflected in the architecture and artefacts!

On the island are many examples of bee houses, but they are falling into greater disrepair year by year. One was discovered as recently as November 2016 when a fire swept through the vegetation, leaving a bare but charred hillside to the east of the main port of Gavrio. Sadly, the already long-disused structure was further damaged by the fire.

Following the Footpaths

Andros is a microcosm for the ethnographic study of the art and science of beekeeping and also gives the opportunity to discover the industrial archaeology of mills, olive presses and pigeon houses. A visit to the island will almost certainly encourage exploration, with the promise of expanding one’s knowledge of the cultural heritage that surrounds beekeeping. Furthermore, such exploration is encouraged by a comprehensive network of way-marked, well-maintained, footpaths.

It is a little hot for hiking in July and August, but in May, when the bee forage is in full splendour, or September, when the sea is still warm and the bulk of the tourists have gone, it is a dream. So, arm yourself with a footpath map, and a copy of Beekeeping on the Island of Andros by George Speis and you will be fascinated by what you could find.