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Candidate cave entrances in a planetary analogue evaporite karst (Cordillera de la Sal, Chile): A remote sensing approach and ground-truth reconnaissance

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1 **Candidate cave entrances in a planetary analogue evaporite karst (Cordillera de la Sal,**
2 **Chile): a remote sensing approach and ground-truth reconnaissance**

3

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5

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10

11 **ABSTRACT**

12 The Cordillera de la Sal (CDS) is a NNE-SSW elongated fold-and-thrust belt several km wide and
13 over 100 km long located in the hyper-arid climate of the Atacama Desert. This ridge contains
14 important Oligocene-Miocene continental sediments including thick interbedded salt rock units
15 which form extensive outcrops. Despite the rare occurrence of rain events, these salt rock beds host
16 well-developed and scientifically interesting underground cave systems, perfectly adapted to the
17 contemporary drainage network. The complete lack of vegetation makes this area a perfect analogue
18 to extraterrestrial evaporite karst areas. A remote sensing analysis of 600 km² of Pleiades images
19 (acquired in 2018 by courtesy of European Space Agency) at a spatial resolution of 0.5 m
20 (panchromatic) and 2 m (RGB and near-infrared bands) and DTMs extracted from stereographic
21 couples has allowed to map the lithological units, the drainage network, and the candidate cave
22 entrances (CCEs) of most of the Cordillera de la Sal.

23 The study area has been divided in eight morpho-structural units, based on our geological and
24 geomorphological mapping. An Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) was used to classify the CCE
25 potential of these karst zones into four classes: low, medium, high, and very high potential of
26 finding new caves. This remote-sensing derived CCEs inventory has been ground truthed with two

27 testing datasets (101 points): i) confronting the cave register based on explorations carried out prior
28 to this analysis, and ii) with a field-based validation in completely unexplored areas. These ground-
29 truthing methods support the quality and reliability of our remote sensing-derived CCEs, with
30 accuracies of 71% and 83%, respectively.

31 With this integrated remote-sensing and ground-truthing approach, we highlight that CCEs
32 identification by image analysis and GIS processing appears reliable for speleological explorations
33 in the CDS and might be a valuable tool also for objective decision-making in the search of caves
34 and potential areas susceptible to karst formation on other planetary bodies.

35

36 **Keywords:** halite caves; karst geomorphology; speleology; Pleiades satellite images; GIS

37

38 **1. Introduction**

39 Remote sensing offers the possibility to investigate large and inaccessible areas by indirect means
40 (Campbell and Wynne, 2011; Lillesand et al., 2015; Emery and Camps, 2017). The most common,
41 versatile, and accessible forms of remote sensing make use of aerial photographs and satellite
42 imagery, both of which exploit passive sensors to measure the radiation transferred (reflected,
43 emitted, and transmitted) from the earth's surface within specific bands of the electromagnetic
44 spectrum (Schowengerdt, 2006; Emery and Camps, 2017).

45 Satellite or aerial images have been used for geological, environmental, economic and urbanistic
46 applications like mapping, monitoring and catastrophic geo-hazard assessment, because of their
47 ability to survey large, remote and sometimes inaccessible terrains without coming into physical
48 contact with the target objects (Jensen, 2015; Lillesand et al., 2015). Recent developments in
49 satellite engineering sciences and spacecraft technology, together with open access data policies,
50 allow almost the whole Earth's surface to be covered by high-resolution (HR) to very-high-
51 resolution (VHR) images freely available through software platforms such as *Google Earth*.
52 However, these computer applications typically permit optical observations only in the visible RGB

53 spectrum window (390 nm – 700 nm), without the possibility of handling data and processing them
54 in a GIS environment for detailed quantitative analysis. Nevertheless, Sentinel Hub satellite images
55 offers free multispectral products at 10-60 m of ground resolution, allowing multitemporal and
56 high-resolution analysis.

57 Data processing with image elaboration and GIS software lead to vast opportunities in the
58 geomorphological and geological fields, allowing detailed investigations to be carried out, which
59 can be functional also to speleological research and karst sciences. These methods are also the only
60 possible for detecting surface morphologies on other planetary bodies (e.g., Palafox et al., 2017;
61 Wang et al., 2018; Silburt et al., 2019), and are actually used to find Candidate Cave Entrances
62 (CCEs) for future robotic cave exploration missions on both the Moon and Mars (Cushing, 2012;
63 Titus et al., 2021a, 2021b).

64 Most remote sensing applications in karst terrains are focused on sinkhole detection, morpho-
65 structural analysis, and monitoring for geohazard quantification in carbonate and evaporitic
66 sequences (Florea, 2005; Gutiérrez et al., 2008, 2011; Galve et al., 2009a, 2009b, 2011; Pepe and
67 Parise, 2014; Ozturk et al., 2018; Panno and Luman, 2018; Lipar et al., 2019; Menezes et al., 2020).
68 Identifying and mapping sinkholes, skylights, sinking streams and their evolution in populated areas
69 is therefore a challenging and valuable task, useful for managing practices and predicting and
70 mitigating natural and anthropogenic risks in karst areas (Gutiérrez et al., 2014).

71 Remote sensing techniques can also be applied for speleological research in remote areas of the
72 world or for assessing potential underground voids on extra-terrestrial bodies. Although rarely used
73 on Earth, in some cases these techniques have been useful for rapidly identifying possible cave
74 entrances in densely forested areas using Lidar-derived DEMs (Weishampel et al., 2011; Moyes and
75 Montgomery, 2019). Especially thermal cave detection techniques are promising for identifying
76 thermal contrasts between cave entrances or shelters and the areas more exposed to direct sunlight
77 (Rinker, 1975; Wynne et al., 2008). These techniques have especially been used to identify CCEs in
78 volcanic terrains on Mars, probably related to possible lava tubes: on Arsia Mons (Cushing et al.,

79 2007), Ascraeus Montes, Pavonis, and Hadriaca Patera and many other areas on Mars (Léveillé and
80 Datta, 2010; Cushing, 2012). On the Moon the presence of intact lava tubes has been confirmed
81 using the SELENE Lunar Radar Sounder on Marius Hills (Kaku et al., 2017), in areas where
82 GRAIL gravimetric measurements also suggested the presence of large underground voids
83 (Chappaz et al., 2017). See the review paper by Sauro et al. (2020) for a recent overview on Martian
84 and Lunar lava tubes.

85 Evaporitic karst terrains are also susceptible to the presence of caves related to dissolution processes
86 and are widely recognized in our solar system, and especially on Mars, such as Juventae Chasma
87 (Baioni and Tramontana, 2017), Tithonium Chasma (Baioni et al., 2009), Iani Chaos (Baioni and
88 Tramontana, 2015), Arabia Terra (De Berardinis, 2016; Parenti et al., 2020), Tyrrhena Terra
89 (Baioni and Tramontana, 2016), Sinus Meridiani (Baioni, 2019) and Coprates Chasma (Baioni et
90 al., 2011). Other types of dissolution morphologies on organic materials can also be expected on
91 Titan (Cornet et al., 2017).

92 In this paper, we show a remote sensing workflow to elaborate satellite images of the Pleiades
93 constellation to perform a detailed geomorphological mapping of karst features in the salt rocks of
94 the Cordillera de la Sal (CDS, Atacama Desert, Chile). This area was chosen for a series of reasons:
95 (1) as other salt areas in the world, the CDS is completely devoid of vegetation (except for some
96 areas close to the village of San Pedro de Atacama) and exhibits a typical banded terrain that has
97 strong analogs with Martian evaporite terrains (similar to Mt. Sedom in Israel, Frumkin et al.,
98 2021). Honeycomb and banded terrains on Mars have been explained by salt and ice diapirism, and
99 terrestrial analogs such as Mt. Sedom and the CDS can serve to understand the processes that
100 caused these landforms on the Red Planet (Bernhardt et al., 2016, 2019); (2) speleological
101 explorations over the last two decades have documented a large number of dissolution caves in
102 some restricted areas of the CDS, whereas other more remote parts are still completely unexplored.
103 This offers the opportunity of testing the remote sensing results with bibliographic data and real
104 ground truthing; (3) This remote sensing analysis was performed in view of a National Geographic

105 funded expedition that had the aim of exploring new caves in a previously unexplored salt area of
106 the CDS. (4) The caves actually known in the CDS are of utmost scientific importance, hosting
107 archeological findings near the village of San Pedro de Atacama, and important paleoclimatological
108 proxies (e.g., fossil bones, cave sediments, cave passage morphologies) and astrobiological targets
109 (cave mineralogy and microbiology) partially studied or still under investigation (De Waele et al.,
110 2019, 2020). Our remote sensing results have been compared and validated with a ground-truth
111 exploration of the identified entrances in two key areas of the Cordillera, Z1, a well-explored area
112 close to the village of San Pedro de Atacama, and Z7, a remote area where speleological exploration
113 never took place, and chosen as one of the main targets for the 2018 National Geographic
114 expedition (De Waele et al., 2019). Our aim was to explore the success rate of remote sensing
115 analysis in correctly identifying true cave entrances in evaporitic terrains, and to form the basis for
116 future expeditions in this extensive and extremely promising salt karst area. This methodology can
117 also work as an analogue to similar investigations in karst terrains on other planetary bodies, where
118 high resolution satellite images (HiRISE, THEMIS) and DTMs are often more readily available
119 than on Earth. The search for possible underground caves on the Moon and Mars is gaining
120 importance for many reasons: (1) caves provide access to the subsurface geology without needing to
121 drill or dig. (2) Caves on extraterrestrial bodies may host water or dry ice, brines, and organic
122 matter, (3) the underground cave temperature generally represents the average at its entrances, so
123 caves are generally warmer and more comfortable and stable environments respect to the external
124 surface. (4) Underground voids also shield possible human settlements from cosmic radiation and
125 from the often very hostile surface conditions on extraterrestrial planets. (5) For many of the above-
126 mentioned reasons caves are the most suitable locations to search for signs of present or past life
127 forms. (6) Caves are also among the best locations to establish possible future human settlements.

128

129 **2. Geological setting**

130 The Cordillera de la Sal (CDS) is located in the Central Andes (Fig.1). The Andean orogen is one of
131 the most extensive mountain belts in the world, roughly 8000 km in length and over 240 km in
132 width (Isacks, 1988; Ramos, 2009). It represents one of the most spectacular examples of an active
133 continental margin (Ramos, 2009; Rubilar et al., 2017), in which the subduction of the Nazca plate
134 below the South American plate, which started in the Lower Jurassic, is still ongoing (Isacks, 1988;
135 Ramos, 2009; Rubilar et al., 2017). The tectonic evolution of the chain has generated a complex
136 landscape characterized by rugged mountains (the highest peaks exceed 7000 m of altitude),
137 separated by sedimentary basins elongated in a roughly N-S direction (Jordan et al., 1983; Charrier
138 et al., 2007). One of these basins is the Salar de Atacama, located at the center of Atacama Desert.
139 The CDS is a NNE-SSW elongated mountain ridge that overlooks the western part of the Salar de
140 Atacama and rises above the plain for about 200 meters, representing an important structural high,
141 which exposes its rocks to considerable erosion (salt being extremely soluble). However, the hyper-
142 arid local climate (less than 20 mm/year of recorded rainfall) (Houston and Hartley, 2003; De
143 Waele et al., 2017, 2020) allowed the preservation at the surface of large volumes of extremely
144 soluble rock such as halite (NaCl). With over 22 km of salt cave passages currently verified, and
145 one of the deepest salt caves in the world (-168 m, Cueva de la Grande Quebrada) (Padovan, 2015;
146 De Waele and Padovan, 2016; De Waele et al., 2019), the CDS is a spectacular laboratory for karst
147 sciences in salt rocks (De Waele et al., 2009a, 2017).

148 The CDS is the most significant structural high of the Salar de Atacama basin, which interrupts the
149 continuity between the Llano de la Paciencia (alluvial fans outcropping to the west) and the eastern
150 area subjected to strong evaporite sedimentation (Salar). This NNE-SSW striking chain is made up
151 of a succession of Oligo-Miocene deposits belonging to the San Pedro Formation (Fm), more than
152 3000 m thick, mainly composed of sandstones, siltstones and evaporites (halite and gypsum),
153 widely deformed (Rubilar et al., 2018). In angular unconformity, the San Pedro Fm is covered by
154 Upper Miocene-Upper Pleistocene sediments corresponding to the Vilama and Campamento Fms
155 (Ramirez and Gardeweg, 1982; De Waele et al., 2020). These two units are respectively

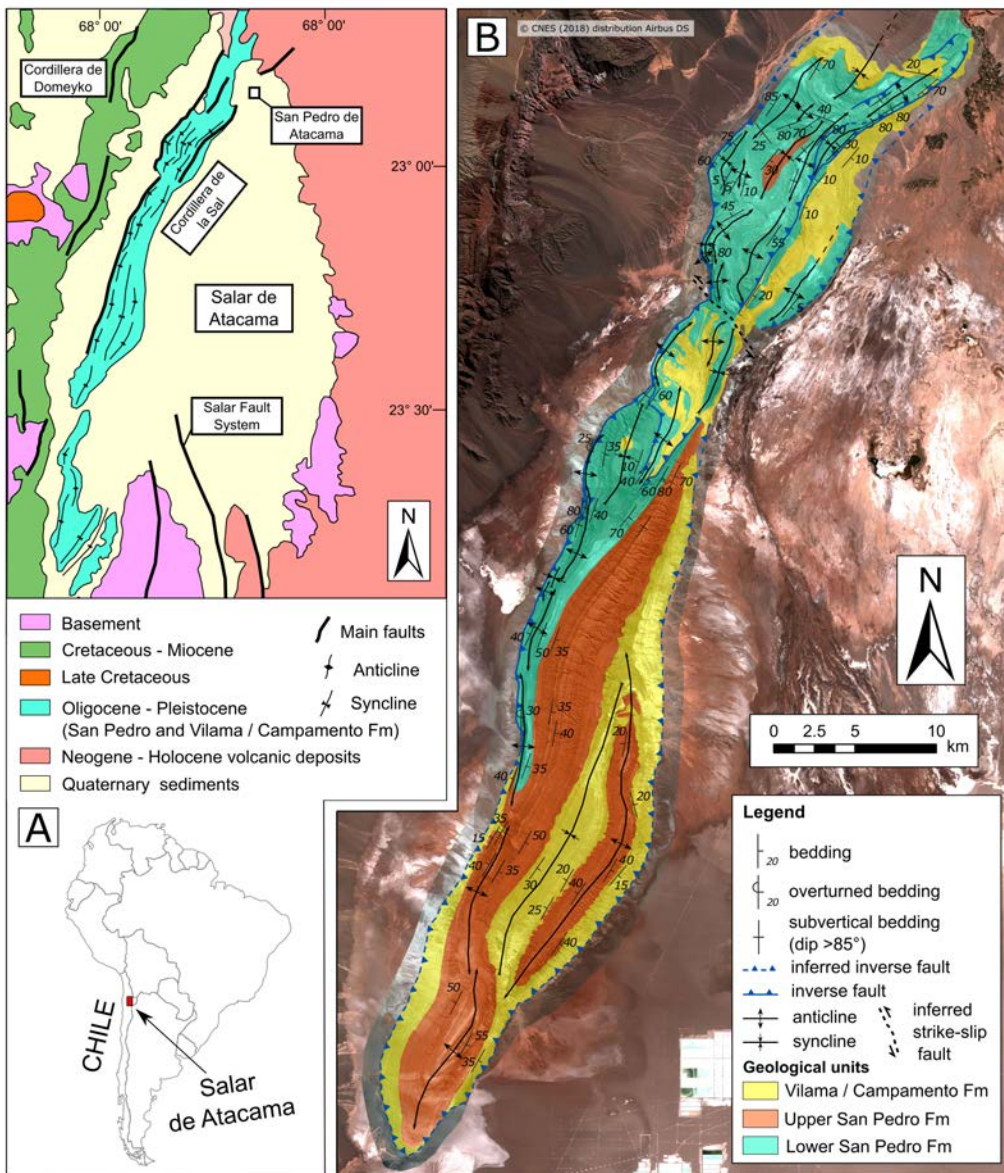
156 outcropping in the northern and southern domains of the CDS. The Vilama Fm consists of a high-
157 frequency alternation of sandstones, pebbly sandstones, tuffs, and volcanic ashes (Upper Miocene -
158 Upper Pleistocene), whereas the Campamento Fm is composed of shales, siltstones, gypsum, and
159 halite (Pliocene - Upper Pleistocene) (Moraga et al., 1974; Rubilar et al., 2018). Following the
160 classification proposed by Becerra et al. (2014) and Henriquez et al. (2014), the San Pedro Fm is
161 subdivided into two informal units: the “Lower San Pedro Formation” (LSP) and the “Upper San
162 Pedro Formation” (USP).

163 LSP is mainly composed of halite deposits with massive fabric or apparent lamination. It presents
164 intercalations of thin layers of sandstones, siltstones, and gypsum, increasing in frequency towards
165 the top. Local intercalations of pebbly sandstones and tuffs occur in the central part of the unit. The
166 overall thickness of the salt rocks is strongly variable, generally increasing towards the north.

167 USP is constituted of a continental siliciclastic succession containing sandstones, fine
168 conglomerates, and siltstones, with intercalations of hypersaline lacustrine facies (massive halite
169 interbedded with shales and siltstones) in the upper part of the sequence.

170 Based on the distribution of different deformation styles observable along the CDS, the study area
171 can be divided into two macro-domains. The southern domain is characterized by a wide range of
172 double plunging NNE-SSW oriented anticlines and synclines, locally arranged in en-echelon
173 geometry (Wilkes and Gorler, 1988; Rubilar et al., 2018). The northern domain, on the other hand,
174 contains a series of double plunging NE-SW asymmetric anticlines and synclines, with fold cores
175 exposing the evaporitic beds of the LSP.

176 According to some authors, the deformation and the structural setting observed in the CDS could be
177 guided by mechanical stratigraphy and saline diapirism (mobile salt rocks intruding into more
178 brittle surrounding rocks), reflecting the variable evaporitic thickness from the southern to northern
179 domain (Dingman, 1962; Muñoz et al., 2002; Rubilar et al., 2018).



180

181 **Fig. 1.** A) Simplified geological map of the Atacama Desert, Chile (modified from Muñoz et al.,
 182 2002); B) geological map 1:100'000 from the Pleiades images photointerpretation of this study.

183

184 There have been several cave expeditions to the Cordillera de la Sal since the beginning of the
 185 1990s (Salomon, 1995; Sesiano, 1998). Over the past 30 years, fifteen expeditions by French,
 186 American and Italian speleologists have led to the discovery of ca. 50 caves totaling over 22 km in
 187 length (Fryer, 2005; Sesiano, 2006, 2009; Padovan, 2015, De Waele and Padovan, 2016; De Waele
 188 et al., 2019). Most expeditions have taken place close to the San Pedro de Atacama village, where
 189 salt outcrops are easily accessible, but in the last 10 years, caves have been discovered also in the

190 central-western part of the CDS, where salt outcrops are more extensive and altitudinal gradients
191 are greater. In these last areas, the longest and deepest salt caves are located, four of which are
192 longer than 2 km, and three reach depths of over 120 meters.

193 Some caves southwest of San Pedro Village, north of the Valle de la Luna, a tourist area, have been
194 studied in detail from a geomorphological point of view because of their accessibility, great length
195 and the presence of interesting features (e.g. speleothems, sediment deposits, morphology). The
196 most important of these are the 600-m long Cueva Lechuza del Campanario (Barn Owl Cave),
197 Cueva Palacio del Sal (~ 400 m long), Cueva Paisaje Sal (660 m), and Cueva Mina Chulacao (1040
198 m long). aunal and vegetal material (bones and twigs) brought into these caves by flood events have
199 been C¹⁴-dated and, combined with Micro-Erosion Meter measurements carried out on salt surfaces
200 in external positions and in the caves, suggest speleogenesis in the Cordillera de la Sal to have
201 occurred in different climatic periods (De Waele et al., 2020). The first cave-forming episode
202 occurred during the onset of the Holocene, during which the large halite cave systems (e.g., Cueva
203 Chulacao) developed. This period of greater rainfall was followed by an early Holocene hyperarid
204 period with no cave formation, and a wetter mid-Holocene period (5-4.4 ka), during which smaller-
205 sized caves (e.g., Cueva Lechuza del Campanario) formed.

206 Most of the known caves are through-caves, with a sinking dry river bed, and an outflow toward the
207 plains (Salar to the East and Llano de la Paciencia to the West). The most important cave systems
208 are related to large drainage basins, which develop on the less permeable siliciclastic beds, in which
209 the occasional rainfall can be collected forming temporary streams able to carve the halite rock (Fig.
210 2a and c-d). In smaller drainage areas a series of small depressions can be formed (Fig.2b): the
211 alignment shows the possible presence of an underground passage, but these small features are
212 often partly filled with sediments and do not allow access to caves. Along the river beds, single
213 flood events can cause a salt bedrock retreat (dissolution) of more than 2 cm (De Waele et al.,
214 2009b). Secondary entrances can be created by the collapse of shallow underground river passages,

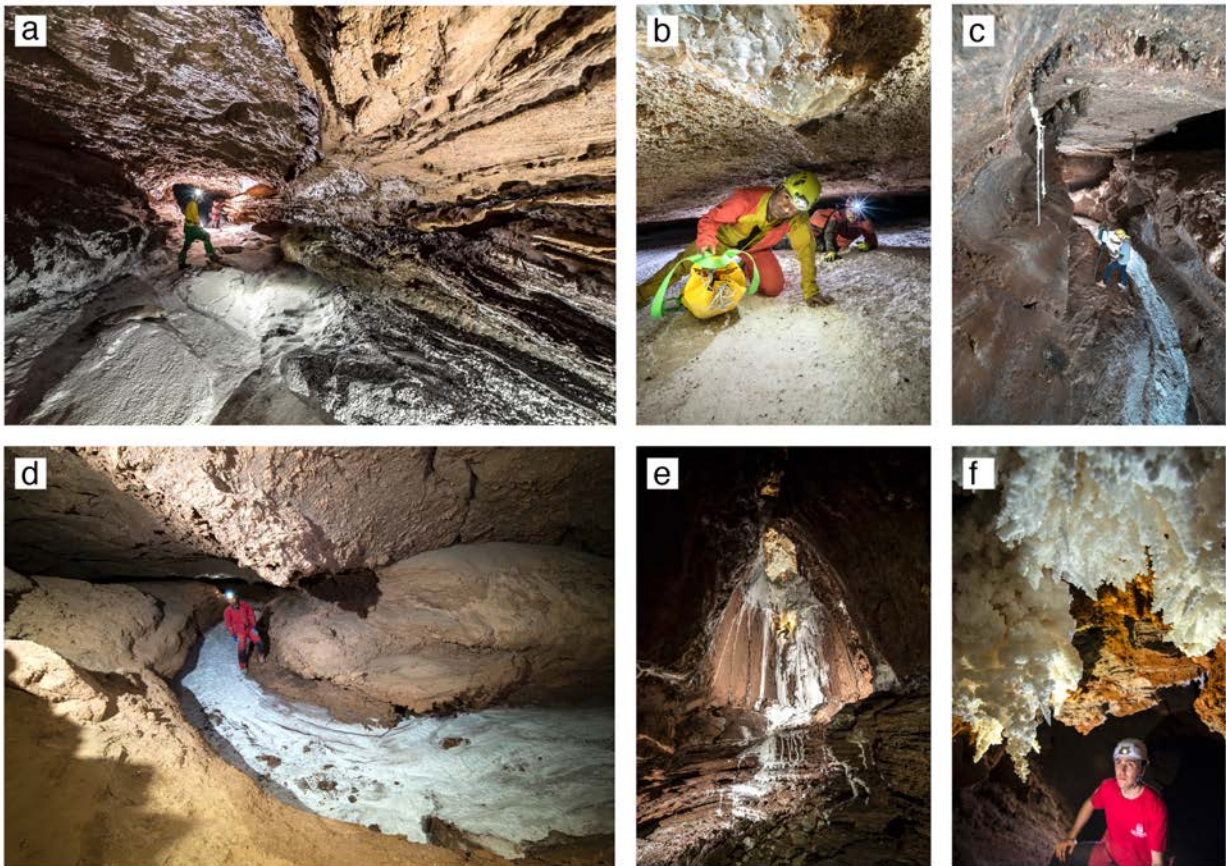
215 creating collapse sinkholes and skylights, generally from a meter wide to openings as great as tens
216 of meters (Fig. 2e-f).

217 Almost all caves are characteristic high underground canyons (Fig. 3c), or wide and low tubes (Fig.
218 3a-b), both with meandering morphologies (Fig. 3d) and evidence of changing base level (i.e. uplift)
219 in the form of lateral notches at various heights above the canyon floor (Fig. 3c). Especially in the
220 upstream sectors of the caves, vadose (water flowing in an air-filled underground passage)
221 entrenchment caused the formation of up to 50-m deep shafts (Fig. 3e). The currently explored salt
222 caves in the CDS have allowed the discovery of a wide variety of cave minerals (De Waele et al.,
223 2017) and speleothems (De Waele et al., 2009a; De Waele and Forti 2010) (Fig. 3f), making this
224 salt karst area one of the most interesting also from a planetary perspective, both for the abundance
225 of caves, the presence of volcanic material alongside the evaporites, and the rich mineralogy.



226
227 **Fig. 2.** Examples of cave entrances: (a) UAV photo showing the meandering canyon hosting the
228 longest salt cave in CDS (central part of Area A in Figure 7) (circles indicate persons for scale); (b)
229 Small depressions on the plateau suggesting possible cave entrances, filled with sediments or too

230 small to be entered; (c) River exiting from the vertical salt cliff at Lechuza del Campanario Cave;
231 (d) Small riverbed forming a short underground salt canyon cave in Zone 4 (see Figure 12); (e) A
232 typical shaft entrance, formed by the collapse of the roof of an underlying cave passage; (f) A
233 skylight seen from inside a cave. (Photos a, c, e, and f by Riccardo De Luca, b by Marco Mecchia,
234 and d by Alessio Romeo, La Venta Esplorazioni Geografiche).

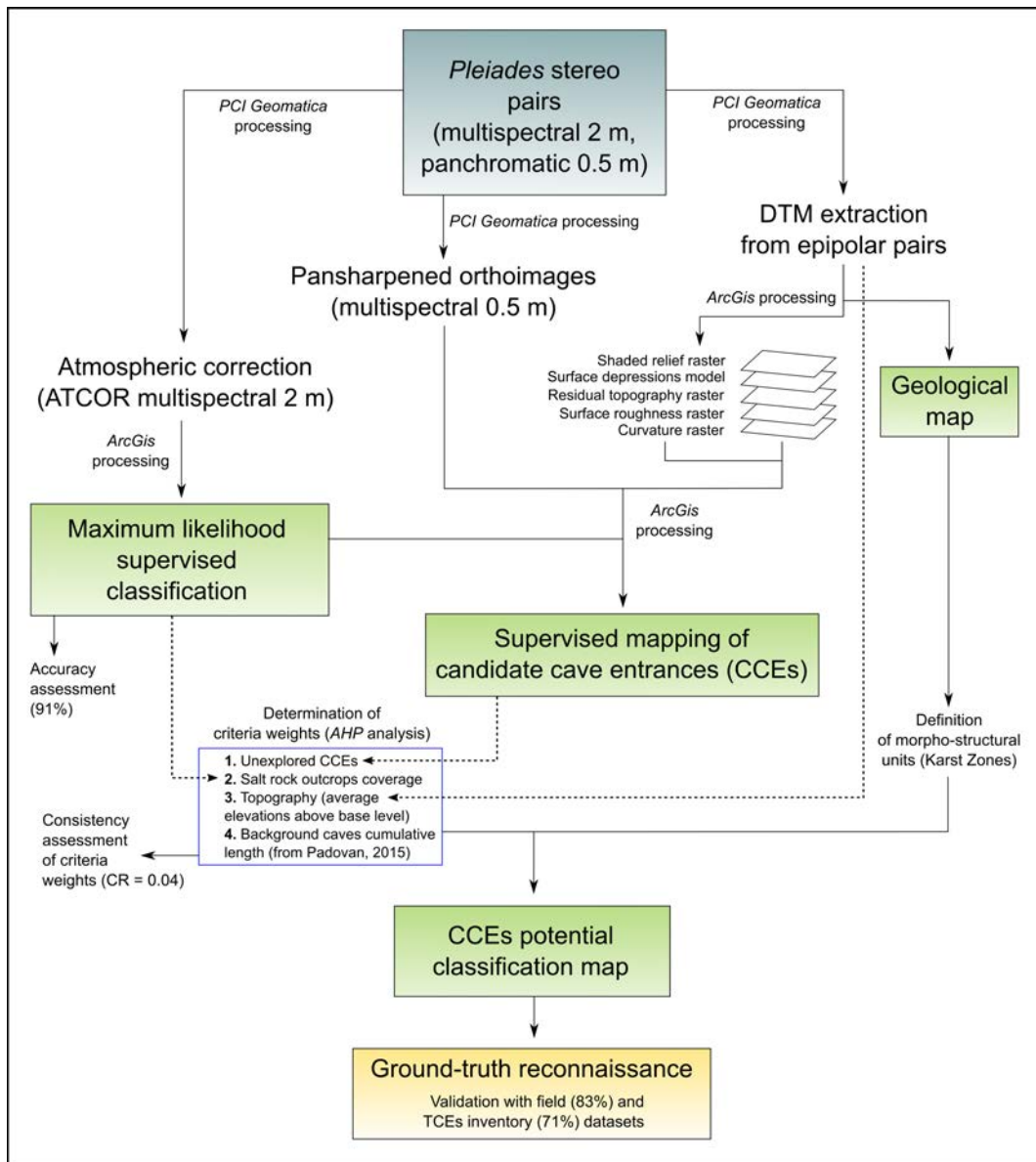


235
236 **Fig. 3.** Salt cave morphologies: (a) Flat river passage in rock salt. Note the cemented alluvial
237 sediments on the roof, and the white salt floor; (b) Narrow and wide underground river passage; (c)
238 Laser scanner surveys in a typical high canyon with notches at different heights above the present
239 river bed; (d) Underground river meander with the white salt floor; (e) A 25 meter deep shaft in
240 halite (note caver on rope); (f) Delicate salt monocrystalline halite speleothems in a newly
241 discovered cave in Zone 3 (see Figure 12) (Photos a, b, and e, by Alessio Romeo, c by Vittorio
242 Crobu, d and f by Marco Vattano, La Venta Esplorazioni Geografiche).

244 **3. Material and methods**

245 The proposed workflow aimed to identify and map candidate cave entrances (CCEs) using satellite
246 images and a Geographic Information System (GIS). This led to the compilation of a map of CCE
247 (speleological) potential for the CDS, using an Analytical Hierarchic Process (AHP) multi-criteria
248 analysis (Saaty, 1987, 2008). The CCE potential was calculated for eight “Karst Zones”, which
249 were defined based on morpho-structural units mapped with our remote sensing investigation. The
250 zonation of morpho-structural units was performed segmenting the CDS into polygons bounded by
251 structural or stratigraphic lineaments. The CCE potential map used a multi-criteria approach,
252 combining: (i) number of unverified CCEs; (ii) coverage of salt rock outcrops; (iii) topography
253 (average elevations above the base level); (iv) cumulative length of already known caves.

254 To quantify the values for each criterion, we performed a remote sensing workflow conceptually
255 illustrated in Figure 4 and described in the following sections. Criterion (iv) obviously could not be
256 derived from remote sensing analysis and was based on pre-existing speleological literature (Fryer,
257 2005; Padovan, 2007, 2015; Sesiano, 2007). We defined this criterion basing on the assumption that
258 longer and more extensive cave systems have more chance to have larger and more abundant
259 entrances in the same area, but this is not a general rule. Therefore, a low weighting factor has been
260 chosen for this criterion (see section 3.5 for further explanation).



261

262 **Fig.4.** Schematic workflow-diagram illustrating the processing operations and analyses performed
263 in this work.

264

265 The results of the analysis were then validated with two ground-truth datasets: a first based on a
266 reference true caves entrances inventory dataset (TCEs), and a second based on the field validation
267 during a National Geographic expedition in 2018 (De Waele et al., 2019).

268

269 3.1 Input data and pre-processing

270 The Pleiades images dataset was supplied by the European Space Agency (ESA). Over 600 km² of
271 Pleiades-1A and Pleiades-1B primary stereographic couples were acquired from Airbus Defense
272 and Space agency and used in this work. These satellites are part of a dual constellation system
273 capable of providing orthorectified or primary data at a spatial resolution of 0.5 m (panchromatic)
274 or 2 m (RGB and near-infrared bands).

275 For each stereo couple, one primary image was processed to obtain a raster expressed in reflectance
276 values using the ATCOR (Atmospheric Correction Ground Reflectance) tool in PCI Geomatica
277 software. Furthermore, pansharpened images (multispectral images at 0.5 m of spatial resolution)
278 were computed combining the low-resolution RGB bands with the high-resolution panchromatic
279 band using the OrthoEngine tool of PCI Geomatica (2018 version). Orthorectification operations
280 were finally performed to obtain geometrically corrected images using previously acquired
281 Sentinel-2 (level-1C) data as references for ground control points.

282 The Pleiades stereo couples were processed with OrthoEngine to manually map common
283 corresponding pixels (ground control points and tie points) and generate pairs of epipolar images.
284 Subsequently, a Semi Global Matching (SGM) algorithm was used to compute trigonometric
285 calculations basing on the geometric coefficients of the sensor and the pixels of known elevation
286 extracted from a reference 30 m-resolution DTM. Better performances in the calculation of
287 elevation values could be reached by the integration of higher quality reference DTMs or manually
288 collected GPS points. These computations were used to extract the elevation value for each cell of
289 the raster (geocoded 1 m resolution DEM). Since vegetation cover and buildings are almost
290 completely absent in the CDS, the geocoded DEMs correspond exactly to DTMs. Low-pass
291 smoothing filter (3x3 size) and noise removal adaptive Wallis filter were automatically integrated in
292 the process to eliminate outliers' pixels from the result and minimize possible sources of errors due
293 to shadows in the stereo couples (PCI Geomatica Enterprises Inc., Canada). The accuracy
294 assessment report for the SGM algorithm and DEM extraction is found in the Supplementary
295 Material section of this article.

296

297 3.2 Geological mapping

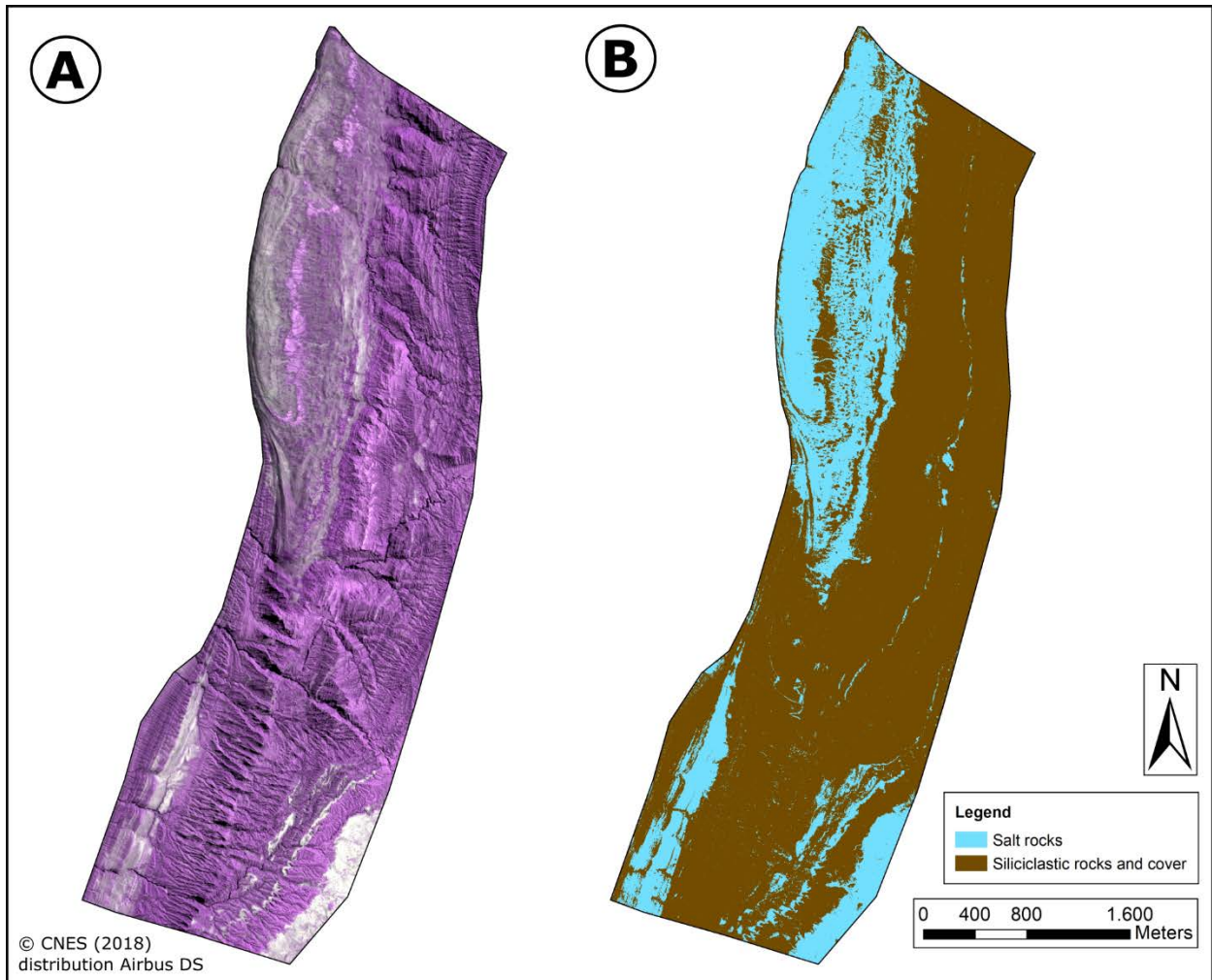
298 ATCOR corrected multispectral images were used to remotely identify areas covered by salt rock
299 outcrops. The 2 m-resolution images were displayed using a false color RGB composition as
300 follows: R (590 – 710 nm, Pleiades red band), G (430 – 550 nm, Pleiades blue band), B (740 – 940
301 nm, Pleiades near-infrared band). This preliminary visualization (Fig. 5A) helps to immediately
302 distinguish salt rock outcrops (white-grey tones) and siliciclastic lithologies (violet tones).

303 Supervised maximum likelihood classifications (Fletcher, 1987; Rossi, 2018) were used to create
304 binary maps where salt rock (soluble) and siliciclastic (insoluble) lithologies are displayed (Fig.
305 5B). These maps provide information at 2 m spatial resolution on the main areas susceptible to cave
306 formation in salt rocks.

307 DTMs and the maximum likelihood classification maps were used to calculate salt rock plateau's
308 average elevations above the base level (the Salar plains) and salt outcrops coverage (in m²), both
309 criteria involved in the AHP analysis to quantify the CCE potential.

310 Pansharpened orthoimages combined with DTMs and the above-mentioned classification maps
311 were then used for a remote-based geological mapping at 1:100'000 scale. The main stratigraphic
312 units of the study area (LSP, USP and Vilama-Campamento Fms) were mapped. ArcGis software
313 (version 10.3.1) was used to estimate measures of bedding strike and dip, calculated with simple
314 trigonometric relations extracting elevations and distances from points on the same layers (Pondrelli
315 et al., 2019). Bedding attitude permit to trace the main fold axes and produce the geological map of
316 Figure 1B.

317



318

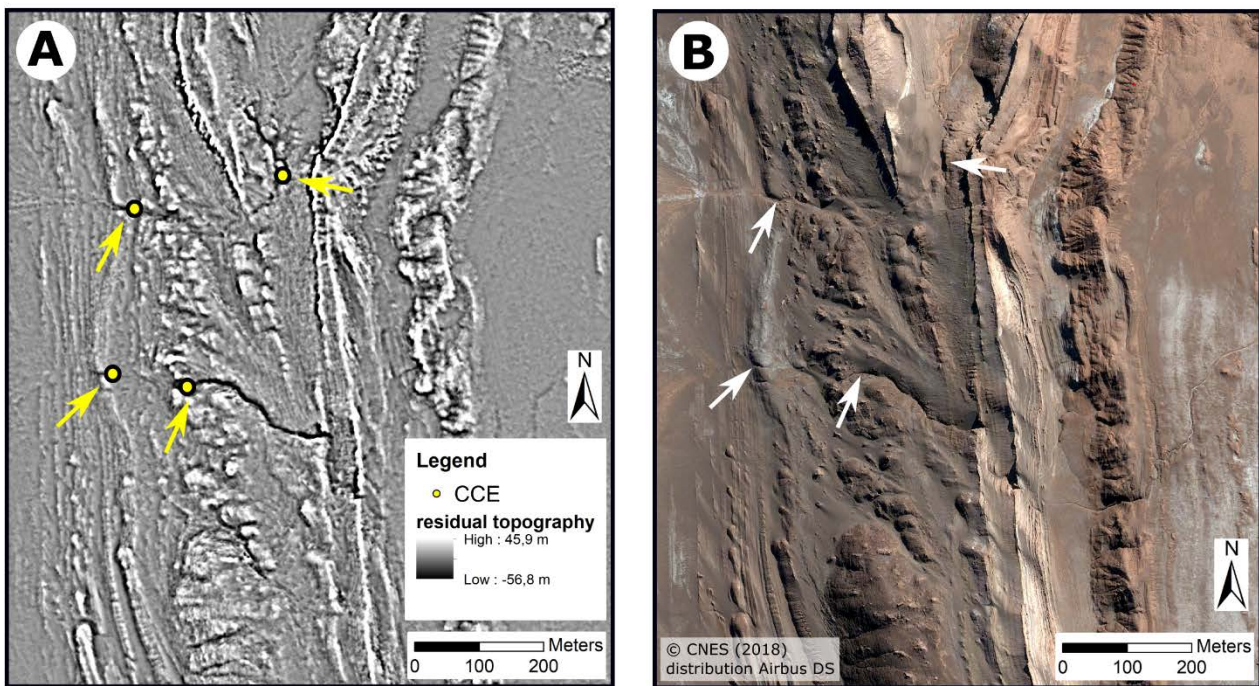
319 **Fig. 5.** A) false-color image (R: 590 – 710 nm, red band; G: 430 – 550 nm, blue band; B: 740 – 940
 320 nm, near-infrared band) of an example area with both salt rocks and siliclastic rocks/sediment
 321 cover; B) supervised maximum likelihood classification map of the sample area.

322

323 3.3 CCEs, TCEs and their verification

324 Remote sensing derived CCEs correspond to visible skylights and collapses (often large vertical
 325 openings) or interruptions of the drainage network (sinking streams or rises) (Fig.6). The
 326 identification of smaller entrances is often based on detailed morphological features, such as closed
 327 depressions or “sinking” cells. Not all these CCEs correspond to true cave entrances (TCEs), since
 328 some of these depressions might be blocked by rockfall or sediments, not allowing speleologists to
 329 enter the potentially existing underlying cave (e.g., Fig. 2b). On the other hand, some TCEs might
 330 not be visible on the satellite images for a number of reasons. For example, some meandering river

331 thalwegs (riverbeds) form deep undercuts on the convex side of the meander, therefore are hidden
332 by these overhangs from the vertical view of the satellites. Other caves are formed by dilatational
333 opening of joints in the rock, enlarged by direct rainfall and infiltration, and open on vertical walls
334 but without signs of external drainage (these caves have no sinking or rising streams). These narrow
335 openings on vertical walls can also easily be overlooked, or even be invisible, on satellite images.
336 Among the CCEs dataset, some points have been verified over the years by direct exploration from
337 cavers, to see whether or not they allow entering unexplored cave passages (defined as “Verified
338 CCEs”). The speleological exploration of salt outcrops allowed to discover a number of true cave
339 entrances (defined as “TCEs”) that represent real open passages to underground cavities, accessible
340 to humans. To estimate the quality and reliability of the CCEs dataset, the TCEs inventory has been
341 confronted with the CCEs to calculate the percentage of correctly matching points.



342
343 **Fig. 6.** Example of CCEs visualized on a DTM byproduct (residual topography raster) where
344 interruptions in drainage network are easily identified (A), and the same area on the RGB
345 pansharpened image at 0.5 m of spatial resolution (B). Note that the northernmost points were not
346 easily detectable on the original pansharpened image.

347

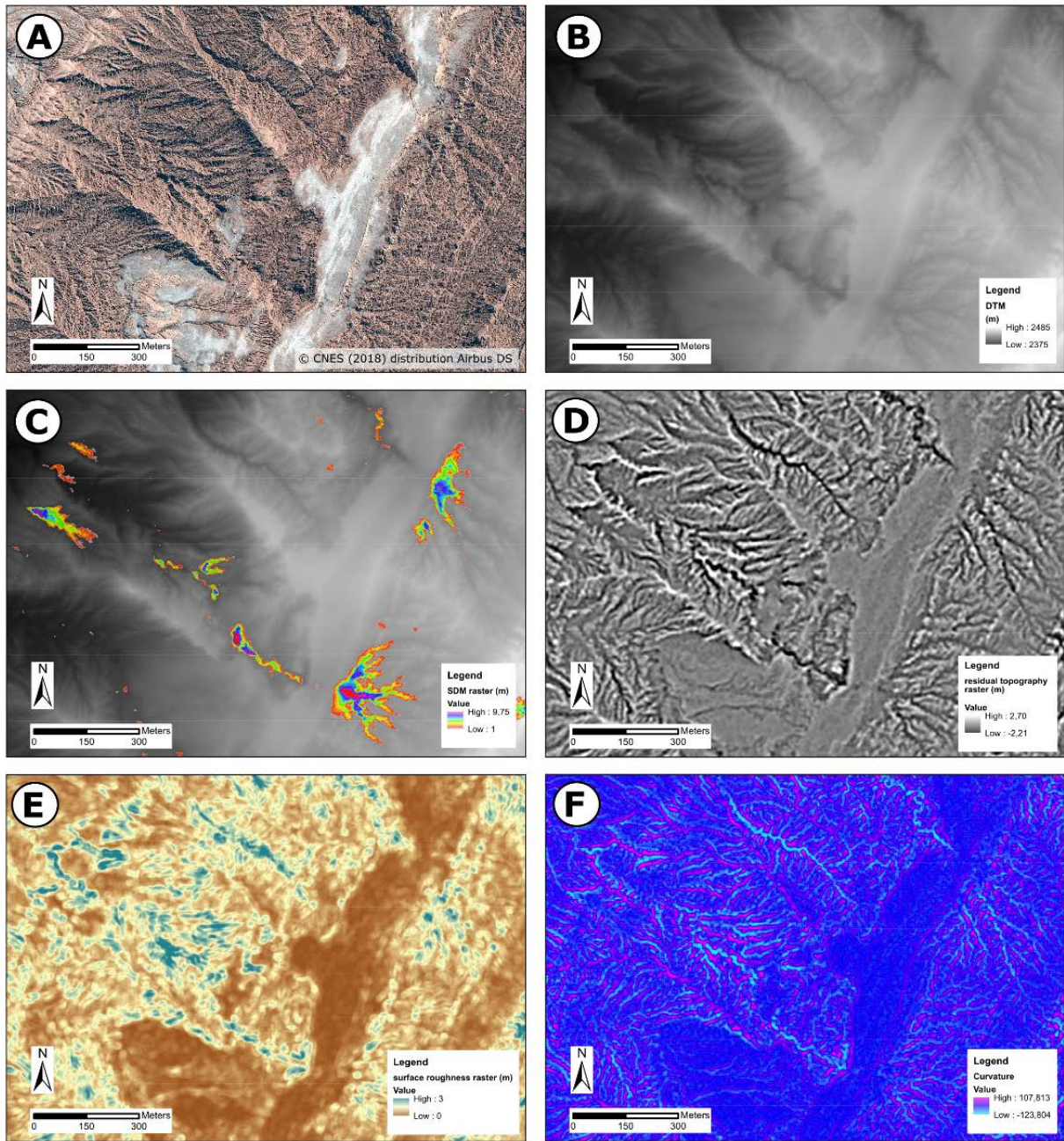
348 3.4 DTM processing and image analysis

349 Pansharpened images and DTMs were used for an image analysis workflow (performed using
350 ArcGis software) to produce a supervised mapping of CCEs. The 0.5 m spatial resolution of
351 pansharpened RGB images in the CDS allows most of these entrances to be identified with extreme
352 precision (Fig.6). However, some of the smallest features (< 1 m in diameter) could remain
353 undetected. To improve the geomorphological mapping, the 1 m resolution DTMs were processed
354 to highlight: surface depressions (sinkholes, collapses), topographic variability (canyons, streams,
355 and reliefs), surface roughness, and terrain curvature (Fig. 7).

356 The first phase of DTM processing led to the creation of “shaded relief” rasters, extracted using the
357 “hillshade” tool in ArcGis and applying a mono-directional illumination source and angle.
358 Hillshade models are valuable and immediate tools to enhance morphological features and
359 landscape morphologies. Multi-directional shading techniques, although not used in our analysis,
360 may minimize errors due to shadowed areas. Subsequently, we compiled “surface depression
361 models” (SDM), which are rasters calculated by the difference of the filtered DTMs (where sinking
362 cells in the surficial drainage are filled with the ArcGis “fill” tool) and the original non-filtered
363 DTMs. These models highlight closed-drainage cells (sinkholes, collapses, skylights) and sinking
364 streams where the surface drainage is interrupted.

365 “Residual topography” rasters were compiled as the difference of original DTMs and normalized
366 DTMs where cell values are expressed as the mean values of a 10x10 m rectangular window
367 centered on each cell. This raster provides an excellent indicator of linear geomorphic features such
368 as canyons, valleys, and streams (negative values), and topographic highs (positive values). Indices
369 of “surface roughness” were also compiled, visualized with a raster where each cell has a value of
370 standard deviation calculated in the 10x10 m rectangular window from each cell of the “residual
371 topography” raster. “Surface roughness” provides an important contribution to understand the
372 morphological variability and topography of the examined area, as it allows to measure the local
373 variability of elevations at a scale of few meters with such detailed DTMs (Haneberg et al., 2005;

374 Cavalli and Marchi, 2008). Finally, terrain curvature rasters (Cavalli et al., 2013; Nonomura et al.,
375 2019) were extracted from the DTMs using the “curvature” tool in ArcGis. Curvature is defined as
376 the rate of change of the slope and is usually determined as the second derivative of the surface.
377 Curvature values provide a measure of convergency or divergency of flow and, together with
378 “residual topography” rasters, can be used to identify raw drainage networks (Cavalli et al., 2013).



379
380 **Fig. 7.** Example of the selection of rasters used for the geomorphological mapping of CCEs in an
381 example area. A) pansharpened RGB image; B) 1 m resolution DTM; C) surface depressions model

382 (SDM) extracted using the difference of a holes-filtered DTM and the original one; D) residual
383 topography raster, with negative values (black to dark grey) corresponding to canyons, streams and
384 valleys; positive values (light grey to white) indicate prominent reliefs, scarps, crests; E) surface
385 roughness raster, useful to discriminate different types of terrains and canyons; F) curvature raster
386 which is a reflection of convergency-divergency of the surface drainage pattern.

387

388 3.5 AHP analysis and CCE (speleological) potential map

389 The Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), introduced by Thomas Saaty (1980), is an effective tool for
390 dealing with complex decision-making and ranking classifications. AHP is used to quantify weights
391 for each evaluation criteria involved in the analysis, which is determined after pairwise comparisons
392 among the different criteria supervised by the user. In addition, the AHP incorporates a valuable
393 technique for checking the consistency of the decision maker's pairwise comparisons, thus reducing
394 the bias in the decision-making process.

395 In order to compute the weights for the different criteria, the AHP starts creating a pairwise
396 comparison matrix. The pairwise comparison matrix is a $n \times n$ real matrix, where n is the number
397 of evaluation criteria. Each cell a_{ij} of the matrix represents the importance of the i criterion
398 relatively to the j criterion. If $a_{ij} > 1$, the i criterion is more important than the j criterion (and vice
399 versa). Values attributed to the cells are evaluated following the reference values reported in in
400 Table 1. Furthermore, the entries a_{ij} and a_{ji} must satisfy the following equation:

401

$$a_{ij} \cdot a_{ji} = 1$$

402 The weights vector w (a n -dimensional columnar vector) is thus calculated from the following
403 equation, where \bar{a}_{ij} are the normalized values of the pairwise comparison matrix:

404

$$w_i = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^n \bar{a}_{ij}}{n}$$

405

406 **Table 1.** Scale used to attribute the relative importance in the pairwise comparison matrix (from
 407 Saaty, 1980).

| Relative importance | Definition | Explanation |
|---------------------|-------------------------|--|
| 1 | Equal importance | The two criteria contribute equally |
| 3 | Weak importance | Experience and judgment slightly favor one criterion over the other |
| 5 | Strong importance | Experience and judgment strongly favor one criterion over the other |
| 7 | Demonstrated importance | One criterion is strongly favored and demonstrated in practice |
| 9 | Extreme importance | The evidence favoring one criterion over the other is of highest possible order of affirmation |
| 2, 4, 6, 8 | Intermediate importance | When compromise is needed between two adjacent relative importance values |

408
 409 The consistency ratio (*CR*) of the AHP is calculated to evaluate the statistical consistency of the
 410 pairwise comparisons and for detecting contradictions in the attribution of criteria's relative
 411 importance. The *CR* value is calculated as the ratio between the consistency index (*CI*) and the
 412 random consistency index (*RI*) as proposed by Saaty (1980):

$$CR = \frac{CI}{RI}$$

414 Where:

$$CI = \frac{\lambda_{max} - n}{n - 1}$$

416 λ_{max} = Principal eigenvalue

417 *RI* depends on the number of criteria (*n*) as proposed by Saaty (1980) in Table 2. The pairwise
 418 comparison matrix is considered statistically consistent when $CR < 0.1$. The *CR* value for our AHP
 419 analysis is equal to 0.04 and is therefore considered acceptable.

420

421 **Table 2.** Random consistency index (from Saaty, 1980).

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------|---|---|------|-----|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <i>n</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| RI | 0 | 0 | 0,58 | 0,9 | 1,12 | 1,24 | 1,32 | 1,41 | 1,45 | 1,49 | 1,51 | 1,53 |

422

423 The pairwise comparison matrix and relative calculated weight for each criterion is displayed in
424 Table 3. The calculated weights have values ranging from 0 to 1, with 0 corresponding to the lowest
425 importance and 1 to the highest. For each Karst Zone, we computed a cumulative weighted score
426 (*CS*) combining the weight vector (*w*) and the normalized values (*v*) attributed to each criterion:

$$CS = v \cdot w$$

427

428 The final scores were then classified using Jenks natural breaks optimization (Jenks, 1967) into four
429 classes: low, medium, high, and very high CCE (speleological) potential.

430

431 **Table 3.** Pairwise comparisons matrix and weights calculated for each evaluation criterion. Criteria:
432 1) number of unverified CCEs; 2) coverage of salt rock outcrops; 3) topography (average elevations
433 above the base level); 4) cumulative length of already known caves (based on previous literature
434 data).

PAIRWISE COMPARISON MATRIX

| criteria | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | calculated weights |
|----------|-----|-----|-----|---|--------------------|
| 1 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 7 | 0,50 |
| 2 | 1/2 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 0,28 |
| 3 | 1/4 | 1/2 | 1 | 5 | 0,17 |
| 4 | 1/7 | 1/6 | 1/5 | 1 | 0,05 |

435

436 4. Results

437 4.1. CCEs mapping and morpho-structural segmentation

438 Using the geological map (limits of the lithostratigraphic units) and the main structural lineaments
439 (faults and folds), we segmented the CDS into eight morpho-structural units, called Karst Zones,
440 from Z1 to Z8 (Fig.8). A short description of each is given below.

441 Z1 hosts the northernmost NE-SW oriented folds exposed in the CDS and located south of the
442 village of San Pedro de Atacama. This area is covered by the northern portion of the “Valle de la
443 Luna Natural Park”, and was easily accessible until 10 years ago, before stricter Park rules were set
444 in place. The area comprises a steeply inclined NE-SW oriented anticline where the highest number
445 of CCEs has been explored so far (Quebrada Honda anticline), with over 3 km of mapped cave
446 passages (Fryer, 2005; Padovan, 2015). In total, 32 CCEs were mapped, 11 of which have never
447 been field-checked.

448 Z2 is covered by the southern portion of “Valle de la Luna Natural Park” and comprises a complex
449 architecture of NE-SW oriented asymmetric anticlines and synclines bounded by inverse faults. In
450 this area of difficult access, a surprisingly small number of caves has been explored (~ 600 m of
451 mapped cave passages). In total, 30 CCEs were mapped, 7 of which were verified and gave access
452 to caves. Note this area contains 24 TCEs, meaning that many cave entrances (17), which give
453 access to relatively small caves, are not visible on satellite images (Sesiano, 2007).

454 Z3 is located immediately south of Z2, and is characterized by asymmetric and inclined NE-SW
455 oriented folds, with a lower amount of shortening respect to Z2. Its southern limit is an inferred sub-
456 vertical strike-slip fault zone marking the transition with the southern tectonic domain of the CDS.
457 In this area, entirely lacking access routes, no speleological explorations were carried out so far. In
458 total, 27 CCEs were mapped.

459 Z4 is characterized by NNE-SSW oriented asymmetric folds. This unit is at the transition between
460 the northern and southern domain of the CDS. Inverse faults mark the lateral limits with Z5. The
461 longest explored cave system of CDS is found in this area (Dario Cressi Cave System, more than 5
462 km long; Padovan, 2015). In total, 38 CCEs were mapped, 11 of which gave access to often large
463 underground passages, the remainder not having been checked in the field.

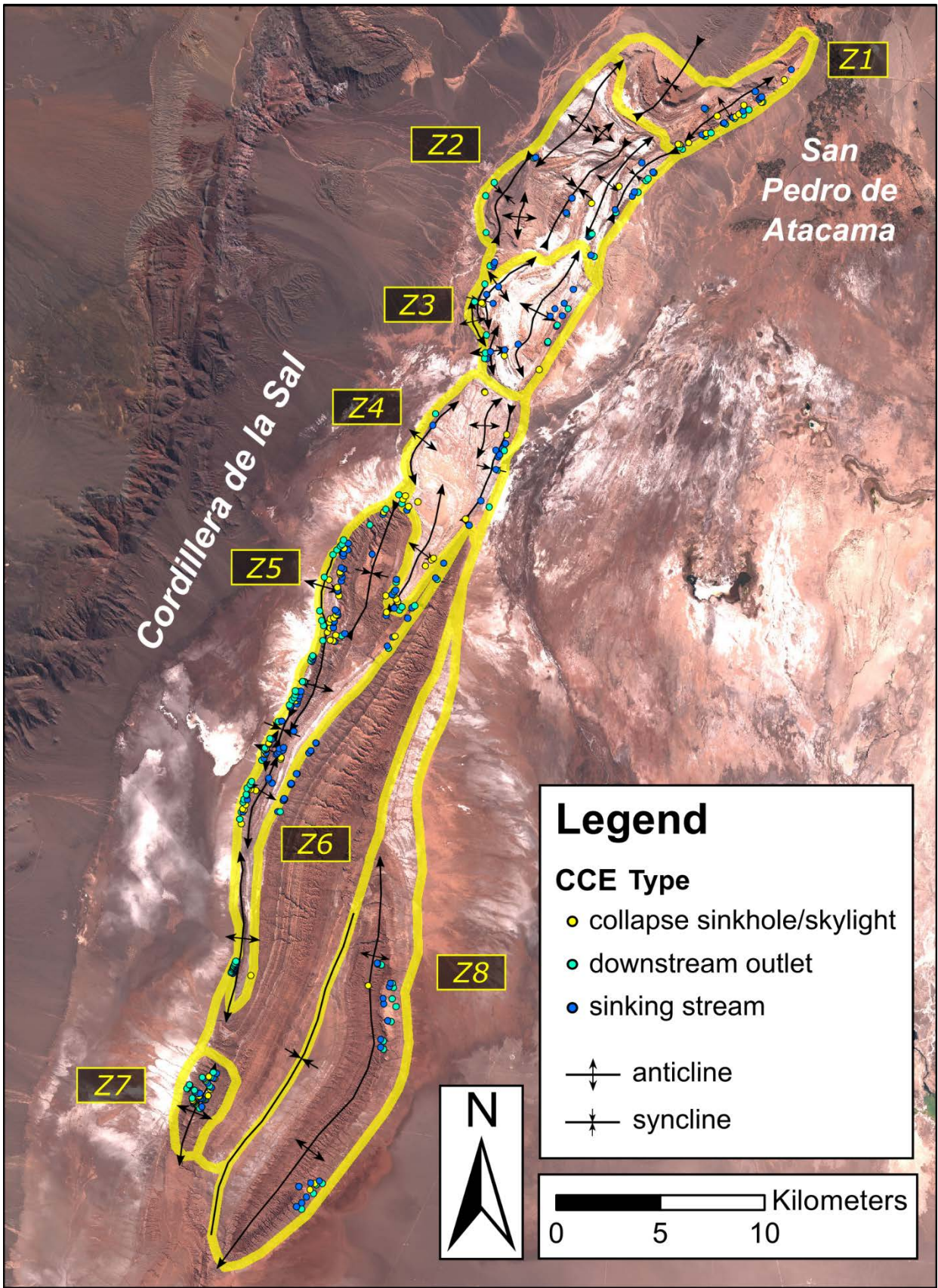
464 Z5 comprises an elongated area at the western front of the chain where a series of NNE-SSW west-
465 vergent asymmetric anticlines (occasionally overturned) outcrop. The lateral limit with Z6
466 corresponds to the lithostratigraphic contact between LSP and USP Fm. This area hosts the highest
467 number of explored caves (more than 9 km of mapped cave passages) and the deepest cave system
468 of the CDS (168 m of total depth). In total, 153 CCEs were mapped, but only 27 points were
469 verified by Italian cavers giving access to important and long cave systems (Padovan, 2015).

470 Z6 comprises the ESE-dipping limbs of the main folds outcropping in Z5. This area also hosts the
471 lowest number of CCEs (20) and the smallest areas with outcropping salt rocks, given that it is
472 entirely covered by the USP and Campamento Fms. The southeastern limit with Z8 corresponds to
473 a main syncline axial trace. This area is still completely unexplored.

474 Z7 is characterized by an isolated NNE-SSW anticline exposing an extensive salt rock core in its
475 northern part. In this salt rock core, 41 CCEs were mapped, none of which was reached before our
476 2018 expedition. We verified 28 of these entrances, 24 of which proved to be TCEs.

477 Z8 comprises the main NNE-SSW elongated symmetric anticline composed of USP Fm at the
478 southeastern margin of CDS. The lateral limit with Z6 corresponds to a main syncline axial trace (in
479 the southern part) and the lithostratigraphic contact between USP and Campamento Fms (in the
480 northern part). CCEs in this area (30) were found predominantly in the salt rock beds of
481 Campamento Fm and have never been object of speleological expeditions before 2018. We were
482 able to reach 7 out of these, 5 of which gave access to caves.

483 The general attributes extracted for the eight Karst Zones are summarized in Table 4. In each Karst
484 Zone, mapped CCEs were attributed to three types (sinking streams, collapse sinkholes-skylights,
485 downstream outlets) and the hosting lithology (Fig.9). The global table with all the 371 CCEs points
486 is included in the Supplementary Material of this article.



487

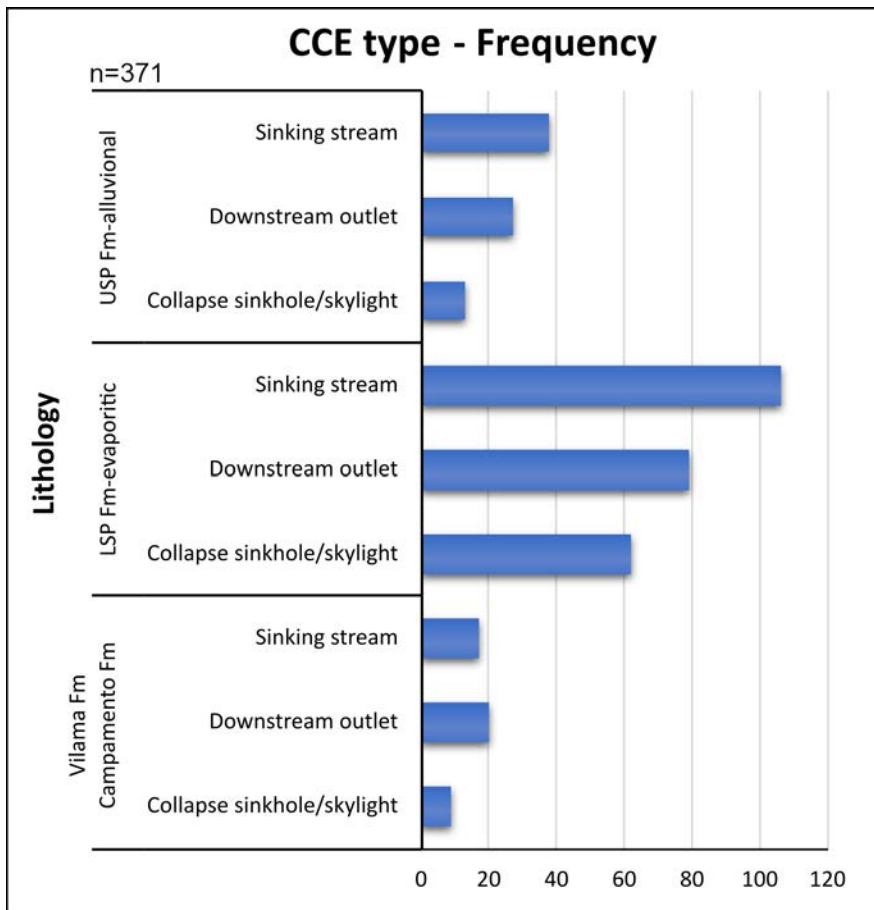
488 **Figure 8.** Segmentation in morpho-structural units and mapped CCEs. Base map: Sentinel-2 image

489 (S2A_MSIL1C_20170519T143751_N0205_R096_T19KEQ_20170519T143812).

491 **Table 4.** Summary of the Karst Zones attributes.

| Karst Zones | Stratigraphic units | Area (km ²) | Salt Coverage (%) | min/max | | CCEs | TCEs | Verified CCEs |
|----------------|--|----------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|-----|-----------------|------|---------------|
| | | | | Elevation (m a.s.l.) | | | | |
| Z1 | LSP Fm, Vilama Fm | 27,18 | 13 | 2459/2715 | 32 | 26 ^a | 21 | |
| Z2 | LSP Fm, USP Fm | 50,73 | 37 | 2436/2675 | 30 | 24 ^b | 7 | |
| Z3 | LSP Fm, Vilama Fm | 26,41 | 32 | 2389/2671 | 27 | / | 0 | |
| Z4 | LSP Fm, Vilama- Campamento Fm | 35,82 | 47 | 2366/2675 | 38 | 13 ^c | 11 | |
| Z5 | LSP Fm, Campamento Fm | 54,39 | 33 | 2370/2695 | 153 | 25 ^c | 27 | |
| Z6 | USP Fm, Campamento Fm | 110,23 | 6 | 2350/2654 | 20 | / | 0 | |
| Z7 | USP Fm | 9,48 | 13 | 2375/2485 | 41 | 24 ^d | 28 | |
| Z8 | USP Fm, Campamento Fm | 97,61 | 8 | 2308/2452 | 30 | 5 ^d | 7 | |

492 ^a from caves reported in Padovan (2007, 2015) and Fryer (2005); ^b 7 cave entrances mapped by
493 French teams (Sesiano, 2007) and 17 entrances from the cave register of Fryer (2005) and Padovan
494 (2007, 2015); ^c based on Padovan (2015); ^d from the 2018 exploration, De Waele et al. (2019).



496

497 **Figure 9.** Frequency of the CCEs divided by lithology and type.

498

499 4.2. Evaluation of the karst zones CCE potential

500 The evaluation of the CCE potential was carried out using the data available on caves and cave
 501 entrances prior to our 2018 National Geographic funded expedition (De Waele et al., 2019). This
 502 analysis was part of our preparatory work for the expedition and allowed us to have great
 503 exploration results (almost 3 km of newly explored caves).

504 The results of the cumulative weighted scores of the AHP analysis for each Karst Zone are
 505 displayed in Table 5, and classified with Jenks natural breaks optimization to produce a CCE
 506 potential map of the CDS (Fig.10). The limits between the different classes are: low (0; 0.071),
 507 medium (0.071; 0.10), high (0.10; 0.15) and very high (0.15; 0.33).

508 Two units (Z1 and Z6) were classified in the “low potential” class; three units (Z3, Z7 and Z8) in
 509 the “medium potential” class; two units (Z2 and Z4) in the “high potential” class and one unit (Z5)
 510 in the “very high potential” class.

511 After the analysis, the southernmost morpho-structural units (Z7 and Z8) with medium CCE
 512 potential and where no speleological research was performed, were selected to be the main
 513 objective of the National Geographic funded field expedition (De Waele et al., 2019).

514

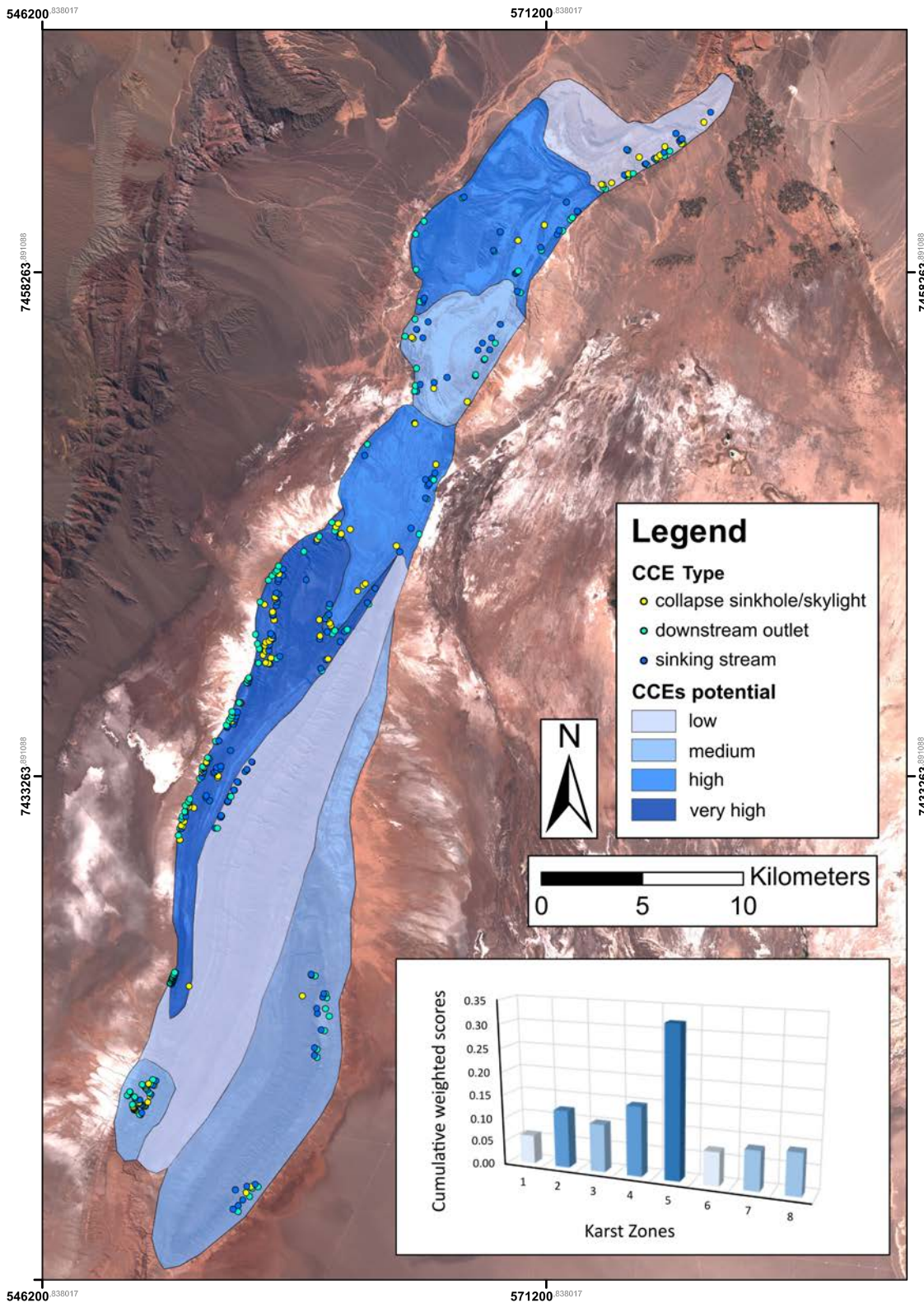
515 **Table 5.** AHP analysis and cumulative weighted scores for the eight identified Karst Zones.

| Karst Zone | Unverified CCEs (n) | Salt | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| | | coverage (m ²) | Average elevation above base level (m) | Background caves total length (m) |
| <i>Values</i> | | | | |
| 1 | 11 | 3648132 | 117 | 3684 |
| 2 | 23 | 18901196 | 101 | 606 |
| 3 | 27 | 8550570 | 155 | 0 |
| 4 | 27 | 16768758 | 182 | 5361 |
| 5 | 126 | 17854817 | 191 | 9390 |
| 6 | 20 | 6443559 | 90 | 0 |
| 7* | 41 | 1195602 | 63 | 0 |
| 8* | 30 | 8052424 | 64 | 0 |
| <i>sum</i> | <i>305</i> | <i>81415058</i> | <i>963</i> | <i>19041</i> |
| weights | 0,50 | 0,28 | 0,17 | 0,05 |
| <i>Normalized values</i> | | | | |
| 1 | 0,04 | 0,04 | 0,12 | 0,19 |
| 2 | 0,08 | 0,23 | 0,10 | 0,03 |

| | | | | |
|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 3 | 0,09 | 0,11 | 0,16 | 0,00 |
| 4 | 0,09 | 0,21 | 0,19 | 0,28 |
| 5 | 0,41 | 0,22 | 0,20 | 0,49 |
| 6 | 0,07 | 0,08 | 0,09 | 0,00 |
| 7 | 0,13 | 0,01 | 0,07 | 0,00 |
| 8 | 0,10 | 0,10 | 0,07 | 0,00 |
| <i>sum</i> | <i>1,00</i> | <i>1,00</i> | <i>1,00</i> | <i>1,00</i> |

| | <i>Weighted scores</i> | | | | <i>Cumulative</i> |
|---|------------------------|-------|-------|-------|------------------------|
| | | | | | <i>weighted scores</i> |
| 1 | 0,018 | 0,013 | 0,021 | 0,010 | 0,06 |
| 2 | 0,038 | 0,065 | 0,018 | 0,002 | 0,12 |
| 3 | 0,044 | 0,029 | 0,027 | 0,000 | 0,10 |
| 4 | 0,044 | 0,058 | 0,032 | 0,014 | 0,15 |
| 5 | 0,207 | 0,061 | 0,034 | 0,025 | 0,33 |
| 6 | 0,033 | 0,022 | 0,016 | 0,000 | 0,07 |
| 7 | 0,067 | 0,004 | 0,011 | 0,000 | 0,08 |
| 8 | 0,049 | 0,028 | 0,011 | 0,000 | 0,09 |

516 * this analysis does not include the new caves explored in Karst Zones 7 and 8 during the National
517 Geographic expedition of 2018 (De Waele et al., 2019).



518

519 **Fig. 10.** CCE (speleological) potential map of the CDS morpho-structural units, with mapped
 520 CCEs. The cumulative weighted scores obtained with the AHP analysis are also displayed with a

521 diagram. Base map: Sentinel-2 image

522 (S2A_MSIL1C_20170519T143751_N0205_R096_T19KEQ_20170519T143812).

523

524 4.3. Ground-truthing

525 To validate the remote-sensing classification of salt rocks (Fig.5) a confusion matrix was computed
526 combining 96 ground-truth control points (GCP) in which lithology was observed directly on the
527 field, enabling the evaluation of the reliability of the maximum likelihood classification maps
528 (Table 6). The global accuracy of the image classification was 91%, with the “salt rocks” class
529 correctly covering 98% of the total ground truth points of the same category.

530

531 **Table 6.** Confusion matrix for the maximum likelihood classification analysis and accuracy
532 assessment of lithological mapping through remote sensing.

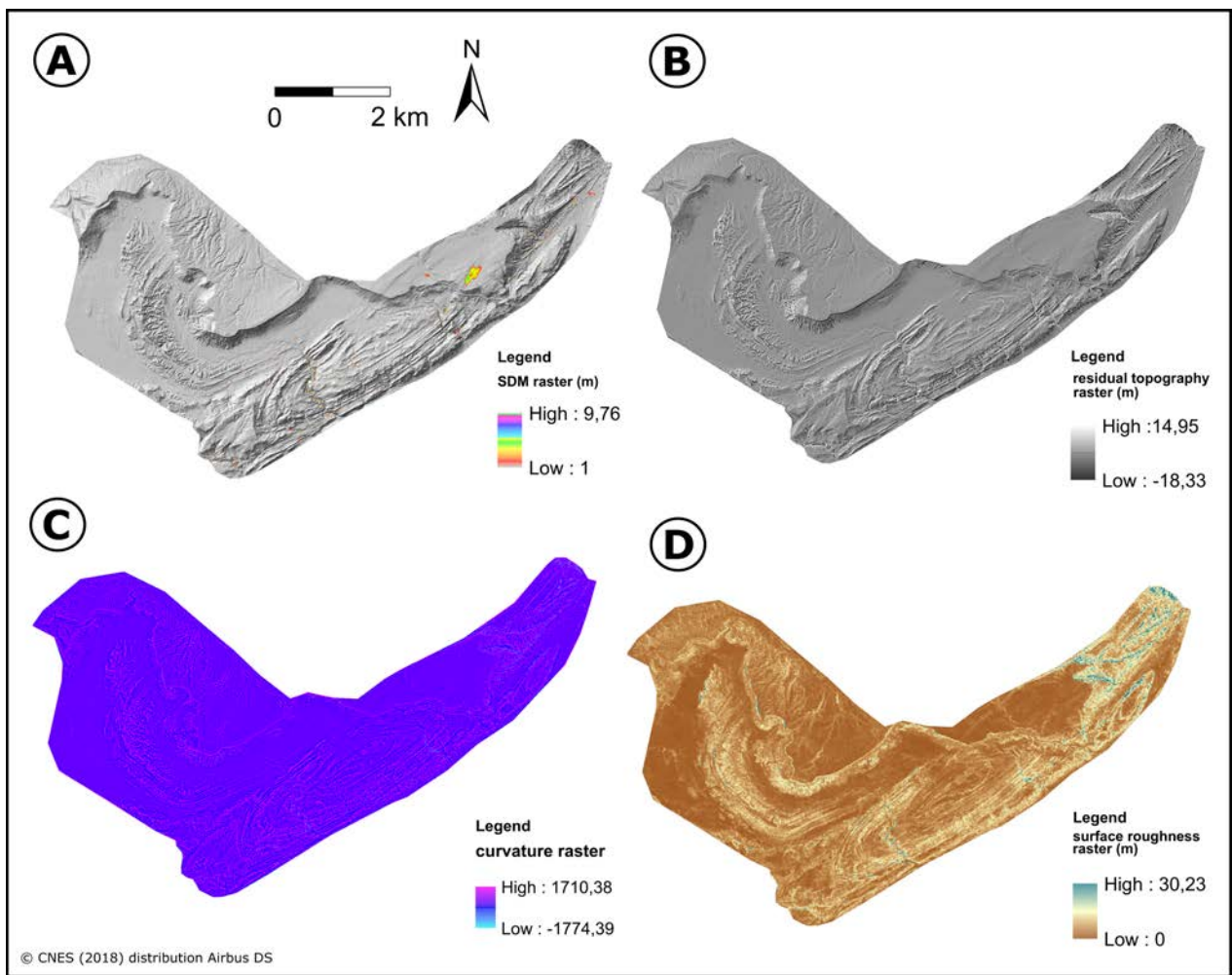
| Class | GCP 1 (salt rocks) n=52 | GCP 2 (siliciclastic rocks) n=44 | Percentage |
|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|------------|
| Salt rocks | 44 | 1 | 98% |
| Siliciclastic rocks | 8 | 43 | 84% |
| Global accuracy | | | 91% |

533

534 Two sample study areas were selected to visualize the results obtained by remote sensing and the
535 ground-truth validation of cave entrances. The selected areas were chosen among the eight morpho-
536 structural units and correspond to Z1 and Z7 (Fig.8). The northern one (Z1) is the area with the
537 lowest degree of unexplored CCEs (11, corresponding to 34%), in which explorations for caves has
538 been carried out in earlier expeditions (Salomon, 1995; Sesiano, 1998; Fryer, 2005; Sesiano, 2006,
539 2009; Padovan, 2015, De Waele and Padovan, 2016). The southern area (Z7) on the contrary, was
540 completely unexplored before our 2018 expedition. Therefore, the remote sensing results obtained
541 for Z7 unit were useful for the organization of a true caving expedition, and the most promising
542 CCEs were directly verified on the field.

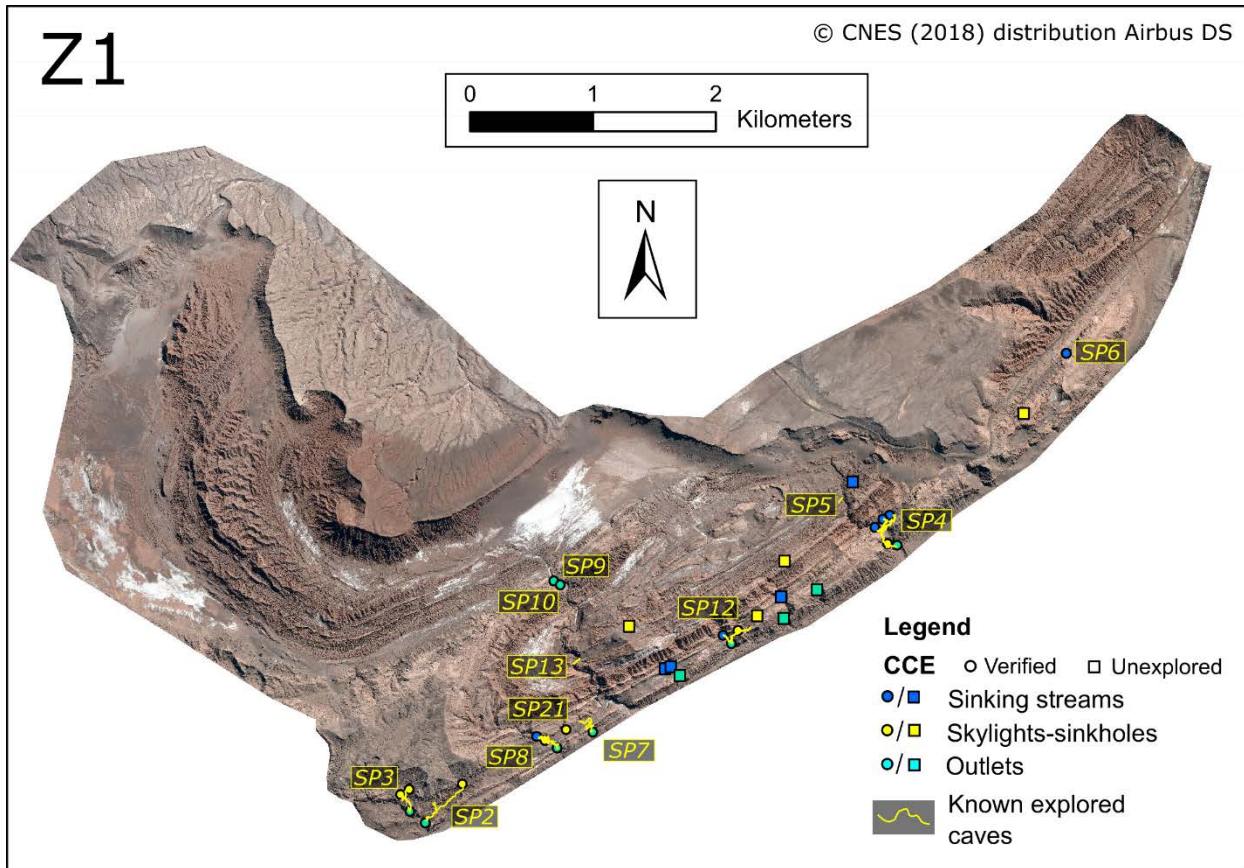
543 Rasters extracted from the DTM processing of the two areas are displayed in Figures 11 and 13,
544 respectively. The CCEs were subdivided in three types (sinking streams, sinkholes/skylights, and

545 downstream outlets), by degree of knowledge (verified or unexplored), and displayed in maps with
546 the pansharpned ortho-images as base rasters (Figs. 12 and 14). The figures also show the
547 underground traces of the verified and known caves.
548 In the Z1 unit (Fig. 12), we had the possibility to test the analysis with an already existing cave
549 inventory: within the 26 TCEs explored up to date, 21 CCEs were correctly matching, whereas 5
550 TCEs were not corresponding to our CCE dataset.



551

552 **Fig. 11.** Results obtained for the Z1 unit (Fig.8); A) SDM raster overprinted on shaded relief raster;
553 B) residual topography raster; C) curvature raster; D) surface roughness.

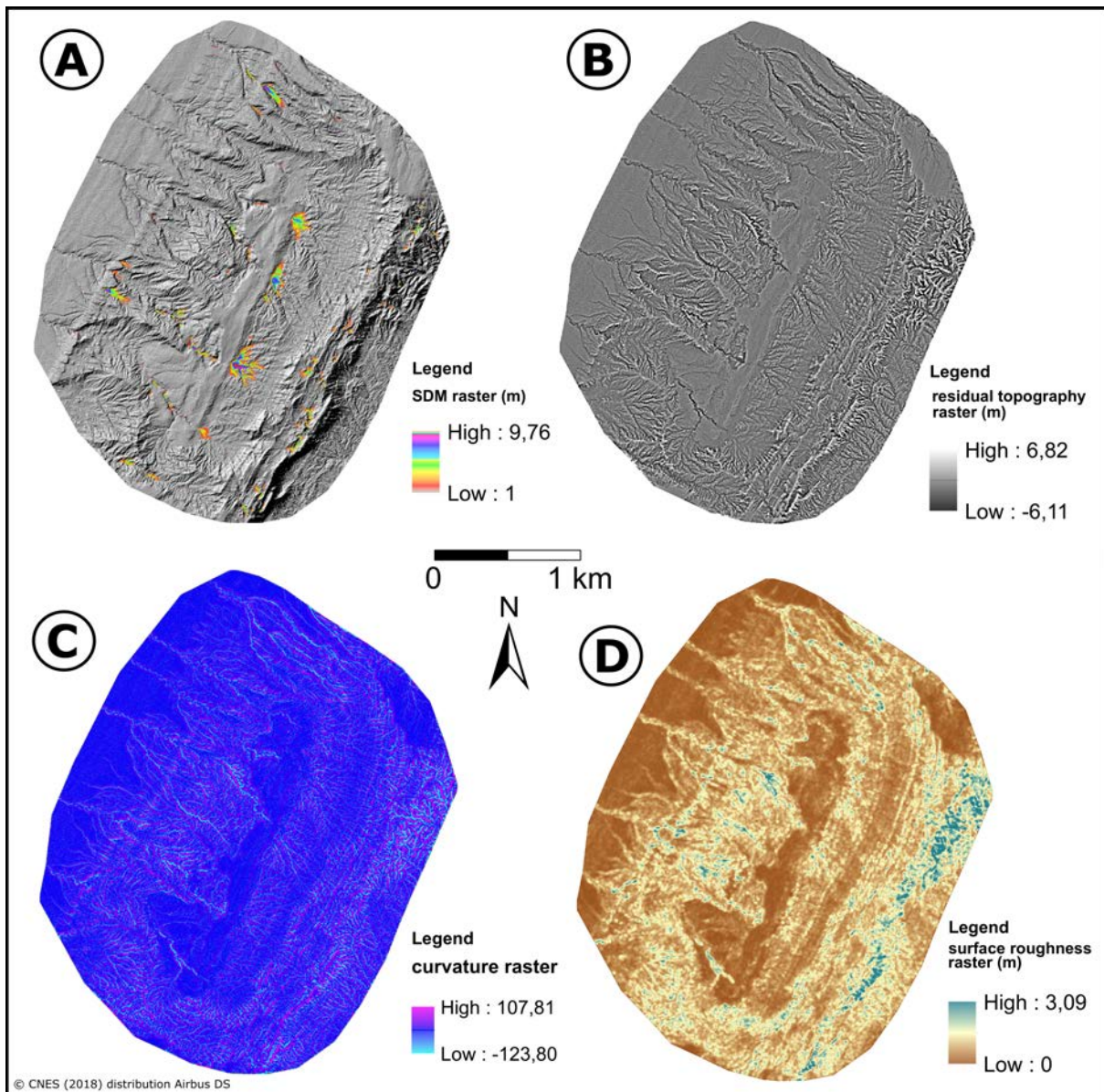


554

555 **Fig. 12.** Pansharpenerd orthoimage of the Z1 unit, with the mapped CCEs and known cave
 556 planimetries (cave labels are extracted from the inventory of CDS by Padovan, 2015).

557

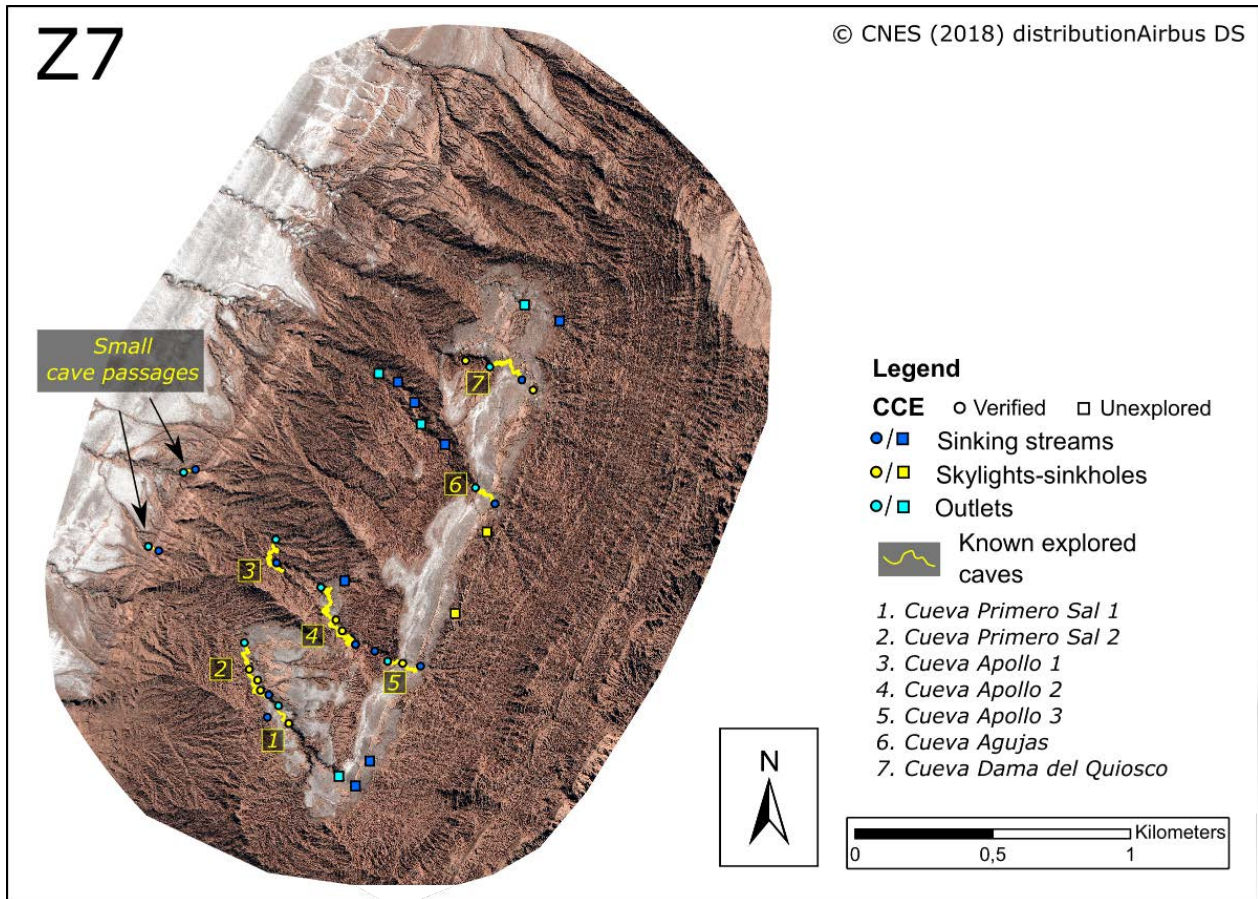
558 In the Z7 unit (Fig.14), many points selected as CCEs (corresponding to 68% of the total) were
 559 reached and verified during the 2018 expedition. Among the 28 verified CCEs, 24 corresponded to
 560 TCEs leading to a real accessible subterranean void. However, 4 CCEs in salt rocks did not match
 561 with true cave entrances, and 13 (less promising) CCEs are still unexplored after the 2018
 562 expedition (not reached because of time constraints and terrain difficulties).



563

564 **Fig. 13.** Results obtained for the Z7 unit (Fig.8); A) SDM raster overprinted on shaded relief raster;

565 B) residual topography raster; C) curvature raster; D) surface roughness.



566

567 **Fig. 14.** Pansharpenerd orthoimage of the Z7 unit, with the mapped CCEs and known caves
 568 planimetries.

569 In a similar way, a confusion matrix between the CCEs and TCEs datasets were calculated for all
 570 the Karst Zones, distinguishing from the true caves inventory verification (for Z1, Z2, Z4, and Z5)
 571 and the field-based verification in completely unexplored areas (for Z7 and Z8) (Table 7). The
 572 results show a global average success rate of 76%. A measure of the accuracy of the remote-sensing
 573 derived CCEs in finding new accessible cave systems is represented by the field-based validation
 574 method (zones Z7 and Z8), with an average accuracy of 83% (29 out of the 35 verified CCEs lead
 575 to true cave entrances).

576

577 **5. Discussion and conclusions**

578 The complete absence of vegetation and human settlements (excluding the San Pedro Village and
579 the few dirt roads along the borders of the Cordillera) and the outcropping soluble rocks make the
580 CDS a perfect analogue of possible extraterrestrial evaporite karst areas (Baioni et al., 2009).

581 Contrary to the generally large collapse entrances of lava tubes, halite cave entrances can be rather
582 small (even less than half a meter wide) and can also be located at the foot of small cliffs, under
583 overhanging walls, making them invisible in most satellite images with a zenithal view. The CDS
584 combines a series of characteristics which make it an ideal analogue site to verify the accuracy of
585 remote sensing in the mapping of candidate cave entrances (CCEs), which are: 1) it has a large size
586 (over 80 km long and up to 8 km wide), greater than most diapirs (e.g., Iran, Bosák et al., 1999); 2)
587 some areas of the CDS are rather well explored in respect to other salt areas in the world (only Mt.
588 Sedom in Israel has been investigated more in detail, e.g., Frumkin, 1998) with a good database of
589 over 50 mapped caves, corresponding to ~22 km of underground passages, useful to make
590 comparisons between remote-sensing derived data and ground-truthed caves; 3) large areas remain
591 completely unexplored, and the CCEs can be checked in the field to verify how well the cave
592 prediction method performs.

593 Based on the results obtained during our remote sensing workflow, 371 CCEs have been identified.
594 Most of the mapped CCEs are located in the LSP Fm, as expected, being almost entirely
595 represented by thick halite beds. The LSP and Vilama/Campamento Fms, on the other hand, show a
596 lower number of entrances (Fig.9). In the San Pedro Fm, the most frequent types of entrances are
597 sinking points of ephemeral streams where they contact the inclined salt rock beds on the flanks of
598 the main outcropping folds (see example in Fig.12). These kinds of entrances resulted to be the
599 easiest for identification and mapping using our image analysis workflow. The collapses/skylights
600 type, on the other hand, is the less represented class. This reflects the fact that most of these
601 entrances are collapses directly putting in connection the overlying siliciclastic sediments to
602 underlying cave passages in salt rock beds, with poor or inexistent relation with the drainage
603 network (Fig.7). In addition, these collapses can also be relatively small, below the DTM resolution.

604 In almost all the four lithostratigraphic units, sinking streams have a slightly higher frequency in
 605 respect to downstream outlets, proving that most of the base-level outlets of the meandering cave
 606 passages could be undetected due to sediment fillings or less prominent topographic signatures on
 607 DTM by-products (Fig.6).

608 To evaluate the global accuracy of our analysis, our large dataset was tested with two different
 609 methods: i) comparing it to a literature-derived reference TCEs dataset, and ii) comparing it to a
 610 field-based validation during 2018 expedition. The global correspondence table between CCEs,
 611 TCEs and verified CCEs after ground-truthing is summarized in Table 7 for all karst zones. With
 612 the first method we evaluated the mismatching of TCEs respect to our remote sensing-derived
 613 dataset, highlighting features that are most difficult to detect using remote sensing techniques. The
 614 field-based verification method, on the other hand, is a measure of the quality and accuracy of our
 615 remote sensing-derived CCEs in providing human-accessible underground voids in unexplored
 616 areas. The calculated success rate and accuracy values of our remote-sensing analysis are reported
 617 in Table 8.

618
 619 **Table 7.** Correspondence between remote-sensing derived CCEs, existing and explored TCEs (from
 620 own explorations and literature), and verified CCEs after ground-truthing for all karst zones.

| Karst zone | CCEs | TCEs | Ver CCEs | % | CCEs matching with real caves | % | CCEs not matching with real caves | % | TCEs not identified by remote sensing | % |
|------------|------|------|----------|-------|-------------------------------|----|-----------------------------------|----|---------------------------------------|----|
| Z1 | 32 | 26 | 21 | 65,63 | 21 | 81 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 19 |
| Z2 | 30 | 24 | 7 | 23,33 | 7 | 29 | 0 | 0 | 17 | 71 |
| Z3 | 27 | nd | 0 | 0,00 | nd | nd | nd | nd | nd | nd |
| Z4 | 38 | 13 | 11 | 28,95 | 11 | 85 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 15 |
| Z5 | 153 | 25 | 27 | 17,65 | 25 | 93 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Z6 | 20 | nd | 0 | 0,00 | nd | nd | nd | nd | nd | nd |
| Z7 | 41 | 24 | 28 | 68,29 | 24 | 86 | 4 | 24 | 0 | 0 |
| Z8 | 30 | 5 | 7 | 23,33 | 5 | 71 | 2 | 29 | 0 | 0 |

621
 622

623 **Table 8.** Calculated success rates of the remote-sensing derived CCE dataset.

| Testing | | Success rate (%) | Average accuracy (%) |
|-----------------------------|----|------------------|----------------------|
| TCEs inventory verification | Z1 | 81 | 71 |
| | Z2 | 29 | |
| | Z4 | 85 | |
| | Z5 | 93 | |
| CCEs field verification | Z7 | 86 | 83 |
| | Z8 | 71 | |

624

625 In Z1, among the 26 known true cave entrances, 21 were detected in our CCE inventory, whereas 5
626 points were not mapped with our image analysis. This mismatching was related to entrances
627 consisting in underground meanders developing under rock ledges on the convex (outer) side of the
628 meander's sinuosity, or narrow fissure openings on vertical cliff faces. In Z2, almost all the
629 explored TCEs are relative to very small cut-through caves, sometimes developed under the cover
630 of large dunes bodies or partially infilled by sediments (Padovan, 2007; Sesiano, 2007). Therefore,
631 17 TCEs were not correspondent to CCEs, resulting in a local success rate of only 29%. In Z4 and
632 Z5 on the other hand, almost all the points were correspondent to TCEs, with average success rates
633 respectively of 85% and 93% covering the most significant karst systems of the CDS (Padovan,
634 2015).

635 In the last two areas, Z7 and Z8, the success rates were of 86% and 71% respectively, and made it
636 possible to access and explore almost 2 km of new cave passages in Z7, and more than 1 km of new
637 cave passages in Z8. The high rate of success (average of 83%) depicts a strong reliability of the
638 proposed CCEs dataset in giving access to real cave entrances. In these two areas, all the verified
639 points that were not consistent with accessible true cave entrances (6 points) were small depressions
640 (up to 1-2 m deep) blocked by salt rock boulders and/or sediments (Fig.2b).

641 From a speleological point of view, out of the 371 mapped CCEs, only 101 were verified up to now
642 (Table 4), most of which eventually giving access to a cave passage, for a total length of over 22 km
643 of explored caves systems. With an average CCEs success rate of 83%, and an average length of
644 218 m/CCE, this would leave over 200 unexplored caves in the CDS with an estimated length of
645 nearly 50 km of underground unknown passages. Since large drainage networks often give rise to

646 large caves but with less meandering behavior (and thus shorter cave passages), the still unexplored
647 small riverbeds disappearing underground might well allow to enter narrower, but longer cave
648 systems. This is especially true for those CCEs that are located at the borders of extensive (thick)
649 salt beds. Future expeditions targeting the most promising areas will surely lead to the discovery of
650 other important salt caves.

651 This remote sensing workflow has shown to be particularly reliable in identifying CCEs and,
652 consequently, explorable caves in the CDS. Similar studies might also be carried out on terrestrial
653 volcanic terrains for the mapping of skylights and collapses of lava tubes and other volcanic caves
654 in arid, vegetation-free areas (e.g., the large basaltic shields in Saudi Arabia, Pint, 2006). However,
655 lava tube entrances are often very large (several meters in diameter) (Sauro et al., 2020), and are
656 generally collapses of cave roofs, easy to spot even on low resolution satellite images and where
657 vegetation is abundant. Given these large surface collapses typical of lava tubes, it is expected that
658 the results will be even more accurate than those illustrated for the salt caves in the CDS.
659 Additionally, other techniques may be performed to implement and enhance the accuracy of our
660 remote sensing cave detection method, for example using red relief image maps (RRIM) from
661 digital elevation models (Chiba et al., 2008; [Gökkaya](#) et al., 2021), or stochastic depressions
662 analysis by hydrological modeling to automatically map natural interruptions of the drainage
663 network (Lindsay and Creed, 2006). RRIM maps eliminate the dependency of shaded relief images
664 on incident light direction and emphasizes topographic convexity and [concavity](#) at the same time,
665 facilitating the identification of karst features by shading the side slopes and lightening the divides
666 of enclosed depressions. Furthermore, the use of LiDAR-derived DEMs and thermal-infrared
667 sensors combined with UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) acquisitions at high to very-high resolution
668 (Rinker, 1975; Wynne et al., 2008; Melis et al., 2020), may improve the chance to identify sub-
669 horizontal cave entrances difficult to detect from the vertical views of satellite images.

670 Before setting foot on the Moon or Mars, a remote sensing inventory of CCEs should be acquired
671 on potential landing sites, to target the most promising areas for future planetary cave exploration

672 (Sauro et al., 2020; Titus et al., 2021a, 2021b). The most interesting potential extraterrestrial caves
673 identified on Mars and the Moon are lava tubes, but it might be worth having a look also into the
674 possible solutional caves in evaporite (sulfate) areas (Baioni et al., 2009; Parenti et al., 2020). These
675 caves have been carved by fluids and might be potential environments to look for extant (and
676 extinct) extraterrestrial microbial life forms.

677

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689

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