

The Tortoises

Hardly any reptile fossil has been discovered at Vatera, but the ones that were found are spectacular. They belong to a giant tortoise (cf. *Cheirogaster* aff. *schafferi*), which was as big as a Volkswagen beetle: the shell was almost two metres long! In the backyard of the museum you can find a life-size reconstruction. The Vatera tortoise is one of the largest tortoises of the world. But also remains of a small tortoise (*Testudo graeca iberica*) were found. Its almost complete shell is on exhibit inside the museum. This tortoise lived also in other parts of Greece (Macedonia, Peloponese, Dodecanese, Crete) two million years ago, and at present still lives on Lesvos. Tortoises live on the land, contrary to their aquatic cousins, the turtles. From their bones and shells they can be easily distinguished from each other. Most tortoises are herbivorous, feeding on grasses, weeds, leaves, flowers and fruits. They have no teeth, but their jaws are provided with horny sheaths with hard and sharp edges. This gives the impression of a beak. Tortoises and turtles are protected by a shell (exoskeleton), composed of numerous bony plates. The upper part, covering the back of the animal, is the carapace, the lower part, covering the belly and breast of the animal, is the plastron. The bony shell is covered with horny shields. The bones of this shell can become fossilized, just as the bones of the internal skeleton.