

## THE SYMBOLISM OF CAVES AS A BORDER BETWEEN WORLDS IN THE CONCEPTIONS OF ANCIENT SOCIETIES

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**Abstract:** The cave in the collective consciousness is closely associated with the earliest shelters and origin of man, the memory of which causes permanent return to these earth wombs. The utilization of the deep cave galleries has provoked in the primitive man various magical ideas and scenes. Inspired by the phenomenal formations and reliefs, his mind has built different images that sometimes he further developed with drawings and engravings.

It can barely be found an answer to the question when the cave was sacralized (the same is valid for the sacralization of the rock). In the animistic consciousness of prehistoric man it was part of the complex essence of spiritualized nature. Moreover, the cave had special significance because it was recreating most figuratively the human-nature interactions and originated the illusion of passing into another dimension related to ancestors.

When talking about the semantics of geomorphological forms, undoubtedly the place from which we must begin is the cave. As mentioned above, the the earliest beginnings of religious thinking originates in the caves. The caves are the main places where the human development happens. As mentioned, some of them retain their role as a cult place until today.

Their function remains tied to the earliest forms of religious belief associated with underground travail essence of the ground, bound with Chthonic cults affecting equally the afterlife and the world of the dead and the gifts of land in purely practical terms, such as mining, hunting, fertility, conception and birth. It is important to note that the cave remains an important part of the sanctuary's ensemble in many sacred places of the Thracians, and other ancient societies.

On the territory of many sanctuaries are known to exist artificial caves, formed or processed shelters and rock crevices. Very often the cave can be seen as a scene where mythological themes from classical mythology are unfolding, which determines the importance and location, bound with the ritual. In these mythologies the cave is connected with the birth of a deity or the female mystery of conception.

The cave is seen as a place from which elements are born such as winds, rain and clouds. The cave represents the complex nature of the Goddess. It symbolizes both life, death, and fertility. It is seen as a gateway to the afterlife, as a place that accepts the souls of the dead and at the same time as a spot from which they are reborn to new life. This symbolism is embedded in the ideology of almost all rock tombs of antiquity, including the early Christian ones, which represent a miniature model of the cave. It is believed that the earliest examples of occurrence of these ideas can be seen in cave paintings from the late Paleolithic.

**Keywords:** sanctuaries, mythology, caves, semantics.

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When talking about the semantics of geomorphological forms, undoubtedly the place from which we must begin is the cave. As mentioned above, the the earliest beginnings of religious thinking originates in the caves. The caves are the main places where the human development happens. As mentioned, some of them retain their role as a cult place until today (Fol 2014: 9). Their function remains tied to the earliest forms of religious belief associated with underground travail essence of the ground, bound with Chthonic cults affecting equally the afterlife and the world of the dead and the gifts of land in purely practical terms, such as mining, hunting, fertility, conception and birth. It is important to note that the cave remains an important part of the sanctuary's ensemble in many sacred places of the Thracians. On the territory of many sanctuaries are known to exist artificial caves, formed or processed shelters and rock crevices. Very often the cave can be seen as a scene where mythological themes from classical mythology are unfolding, which determines the importance and location, bound with the ritual. In these mythologies the cave is connected with the birth of a deity or the female mystery of conception. As examples can be mentioned the Dicta cave of Crete or Ilithyia cave again from the island of Crete, where the deity Ilithyia was born, who is the patroness of birth - a daughter of Zeus and Hera. The Ilithyia cave has been used since the Neolithic era. (Dixon-Kennedy 1998: 120).

Thracian rock complexes are known for many artificially shaped caves. Usually, some of them occupy natural cracks or faults, which are artificially extended into the rock. Many of them (especially those from the Eastern Rhodopes – authors note) unambiguously remind female reproductive organ. Most figurative in this respect is the cave near the village Pudartsi, Kardzhali, called Tangardak or Tandardak Kaya, its name translates from Turkish as a Thunder rock (Leshtakov, Katzarov 2008: 122). At the fault line in the rock sometimes is seeping rainwater from the high end, probably it was used as an important part of the worship.

Two rocks are known from Southwestern Bulgaria which have natural cracks carved by the water. Both are named “Bobotna skala” Grumbled rock and are associated with folk healing practices. One of them is located near the village of Vukovo, Kyustendil and the other near the town of Belica. The name of the rock in the town of Belica is derived from the characteristic noise of the rumble of water that is heard from the hole in the rock. The scale is associated with the cult of St. Iliya, in honor of whom there is a chapel as well.

Bubotin stone (Grumbled Rock) in the Grashishte area near the village Vukovo is a rock located on a hillside, through its opening water is likely to flow abundantly during rain fall. On the rock is placed a cross, indicating that for the locals it is a sacred place, probably associated with healing practices. This type of monuments can be extended a part of the caves also to the symbolism of the rock and water, which almost always are interconnected within the territory of sacred space (Varner 2004: 19; Markov 2009: 33; Tilley 2010: 63-97).

With water are also related the dungeons in the town of Midas. They may be perceived as an architecture developed idea of the cave. Their complex and impressive rock-cut design does not imply only with utilitarian functions (Fol 2007: 313). Attention must be paid to the pointed arches at the entrances to these dungeons which are similar to the presentation of the entrances to the Thracian tombs. Valeria Fol gives several examples of caves on the territory of modern Greece, where the Mother Goddess was worshipped, some of which are also associated with water (Fol 2007: 87-91).

Another mythical character associated with both the water and caves in mythological aspect, is the snake or the dragon. Even in the earliest mythological texts such as Enuma Elish water element is represented as patronizing the chthonic forces in the shape of dragons (Venedikov 1992: 46). It is believed that from the mud of the flood was born the female dragon Python which inhabited the caves of Mount Parnassus. It is believed also that the myth of Apollo's victory over Python reflects a change in the cult associated with the conquest of the sanctuary of ancient Greeks (Dixon-Kennedy 1998: 266). However, it is a very significant fact that the name of the old deity and the most important part of the cult remained in delphic practices conducted there as well as in the name of the priestess Pythia (Dixon-Kennedy 1998: 106, 266). At the same place the autochthonous population professed the cult of the Mother Goddess, which was later identified with the Greek goddess Ge (Dixon-Kennedy 1998: 107). V. Markov gives several examples of the relationship between water and the serpent of old legends of Bulgarian folklore, as well as their commitment to Thracian sanctuaries, at some of which caves exist (Markov 2009: 33-72). This link can be found in the image and rituals of the St. Marina as a patroness of snakes and related to springs, caves and healing waters. (Georgieva 1993: 238; Stoinev 2006: 81; Fol 2014: 12). In the image of the saint many authors recognize the characteristics of one of the most ancient deities – the Mother Goddess and her ancient variety in the Thracian pantheon (Georgieva 1993: 238; Fol 2014: 12). The ethnographer Dimitar Marinov gives an interesting testimony about the cult of St. Marina. The author describes a rocky area with running water considered as healing, where the locals worshiped the saint. Because of its vision the place was called by the locals with the explicit name “Pichkarets” – referring to a specific word for female reproductive organs (Marinov 1981: 681). The unequivocal connection with the Mother Goddess and the primordial birth giving beginning is deeply rooted in the caves. Again, it comes to a universal archetype of mythological thinking, which is evidenced by the fact and the existence of similar notions in the world, related to caves. (Varner 2004: 139-151; Toporov 1988: 311). The cave is seen as a place from which elements are born such as winds, rain and clouds. (Toporov 1988: 311). The cave represents the complex nature of the Goddess. It symbolizes both life, death, and fertility. (Toporov 1988: 311). It is seen as a gateway to the afterlife, as a place that accepts the souls of the dead and at the same time as a spot from which they are reborn to new life. This symbolism is embedded in the ideology of almost all rock tombs of antiquity, including the early Christian ones, which represent a miniature model of the cave (Toporov 1988: 311). It is believed that the earliest examples of occurrence of these ideas can be seen in cave paintings from the late Paleolithic. (Toporov 1988: 311). A good parallel to the religious notions of the hunter gatherer from the late Paleolithic could be the myth of the North American tribe Kawaiisu about a shamanic journey between worlds. The story is about a man who went into the hole in a rock and fell into another world. There he saw the ghost of a deer killed during hunting. In order to reach the Hereafter, the shaman had to pass through water that was like a window, he could see the mountain through it (Varner 2004: 139-151). This myth may explain the role of the multiple images of animals in the cave art – these are images of the spirits of dead animals which should be reborn again.

Sacred caves are often associated with water which is also associated with the female divine essence of the Great Goddess. (Varner 2004: 143). Varner says that when a man enters the cave, symbolically he enters

into the Goddess. He also noted the proximity between the sacred cave and other sacred objects in its vicinity, which can be viewed as a complex. The example he gives is the temple of Athena Polias in the Acropolis, which was built on top of an earlier temple of the Goddess. In the vicinity of it a cave is located (Varner 2004: 143). In this context V. Fol examines also the rock tombs from the Eastern Rhodopes. Referring to the statement of Porphyry, the author clarifies the meaning of the two holes of the rock tomb, a symbolic representation of the entrance and exit of Beyond. In the same symbolism are presented the entrance and dome of the mound tombs (Fol 2007: 184-197, 337-338).

The genesis of the cave into a temple could be illustrated very well in the Neolithic temples of Malta. One theory about the origin and design of surface Neolithic temples is that they mimic the halls of the earlier cave tombs, most representative of which is the hypogeum Hal Saflieni. In its details is clearly recognizable the architecture of the surface temple (Zamit 2013: 93). Citing T. Meydan, Varner believed that natural phallic looking forms of stalactites and stalktons, generations of rock from the rock with the creative force of the water are the basis of the regenerating myths ideology (Meaden 1997: 25-26; Varner 2004: 142). In other words, it can be assumed that the interaction between rock and water in pre-modern societies is one of the mysteries of the sacred marriage and rebirth. This concept is supported by V. Fol about the cave of St. Marina near Slivarovo where the created water limestone pebbles are attributed to have medicinal and magical properties (Fol 2000: 34). The places associated with the cult of St. Marina are compared with the sanctuaries of Demeter, because of the mystical by its character ritual (Fol 2000: 34). The architectural variation of these natural forms associated with the goddess can be seen in menhirs, dolmens and later in the columns of the temples (Evans 1901: 7-8).

There is another phenomenon that could trigger an idea of mythological relationship between Heaven and Earth in the form of holy matrimony. These are some documented projections of the sun inside some caves-wombs of the Rhodope mountains (Stoev 2015: 9-11). Such projections are registered in the aforementioned Neolithic temples in Malta. In them is presented the scene of sacred marriage between the Sun and Earth (Albrecht 2007: 47-54). It is logical phenomena such as sun and rain to be connected with the myth of Earth's fertilization (Albrecht 2007: 47-54). According to K. Albrecht this myth can be found in the festive cycles of all societies from the Neolithic Age to present day. According to him, Malta is not an isolated case and a parallel of the myth can be seen in the sanctuary at Eleusis, where one of the most sacred sites is a cave whose orientation coincides with the azimuth of the sunrise at the winter solstice (Albrecht 2007: 51). Mythologically the cave is linked to the abduction of Persephone in the Netherworld (Fol 2007: 52). Albrecht also emphasizes the relationship of the cult of Demeter and her daughter Persephone both with fertility and in the Hereafter, making it associated with the image of the prehistoric Great Mother (Albrecht 2007: 47-54). He sees similarities in the sculpture of a couple sitting Neolithic goddesses from Malta and alike images of the Mediterranean and Greek antiquity (Albrecht 2007: 47-54). Such an interpretation has already been granted to the dual idol images from the Phrygian rock-cut sites. Naumann sees them as different aspects of the Goddess (Naumann 1983, 92-100; Berndt-Ersöz 2006: 159-162). Other authors tend to see in them the Mother Goddess – the Phrygian Matar and her husband – a male deity, originally displayed in the form of a bull and later anthropomorphized and called The Father or initially called with the early Anatolian word Atta or Tati. (Berndt-Ersöz 2006: 162-166). Maya Vasileva assumes that these are images of Goddess and the divinized king-priest (Vassileva 1995: 275; Berndt-Ersöz 2006: 162). The rock-cut facade from the lands of Phrygia are in their basis deep niches in which the Goddess was depicted. Such niches in the Urartu territory are depicted as closed doors. That is, these doors symbolize the passage to the chthonic world of the goddess while in the Phrygian monuments have scene epiphany - the appearing of the goddess. That could be accepted as the idea that these doors symbolize the passage to the chthonic world of the Goddess while in the Phrygian monuments there are epiphany scenes - the appearing of the Goddess (Berndt-Ersöz 2006: 204-205; Фол 2007: 284-285). These niches in architectural aspect overlap the sacral nature of the cave. This can be perceived in the nearby Thracian culture of the Balkans, where space is partially processed but is still worshipped the old rather than the architectural essence. Also, the anthropomorphic image has been replaced by the symbolism of the feminine, hinted at in the natural shape of the cave – wombs. Besides purely symbolic, in this can be reflected some kind of a functional relationship, as far as, Valeria Fol notes, the presence inside the cave creates and reinforces the notion of the sacred marriage, which is the ideological essence of mysterial rites of the Thracians. (Fol 2007: 43).

It is interesting to note that the orientation of Tangardak Kaya is such that during the winter solstice, the sun's rays reach the deepest part of the scale (Stoev, Maglova 2015: 8-20). The winter solstice is the shortest day of the year when, according to the beliefs the sun is reborn and renewed. Winter Solstice is celebrated in all ancient cultures. In Egypt, it symbolized the rebirth of Horus, in Mithraism - the victory of light over darkness (Albrecht 2007: 47-54). Its symbolism can be found in the Roman Saturnalia, Yule of the Germanic tribes and the Christian Christmas (Albrecht 2007: 47-54). Thus the use of the caves lasted in various cultures and when the natural forms did not match the purpose, they were reconstructed (Varner 2004: 144). The space of the cave symbolized view of the cosmos, including the sky canopy (Varner 2004: 144). There are several testimonies

about the existence of this idea in antiquity from two different cultures. In Indo-Iranian one of the names of the sky is Ashmat, one of the meanings of this word is stone (Otran 1998: 106). Another testimony is some evidence that indirectly reveals the cosmological notions of Celts and Bastarnians. The first source tells about how the Bastarnians were defeated in a high mountain in Thrace similar to what happened to the Celts under the rocks of Delphi. The bad weather made them think the sky was falling on their heads (Tit. Liv. XL 54. 58). The second source is Ariane, telling how when Alexander asked the Celtic messengers what they were most afraid of, they replied that they were most afraid of the sky falling over their heads (Arrian. Anab. I 1.4).

Another interesting element is the myths related to the inhabitants of the caves, or, rather, the devious characters who are connected in some mythological way with the caves. In many religions of the East and the West there are people chosen to reside in the caves due to the power of some concept (Varner 2004: 144). To some extent, they can be compared to the shaman who saw the spirit of the deer slaughtered by him (Varner 2004: 139). In this aspect, Varner looks at the myth of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table who sleep in a hidden cave and will wake up again when Britain needs them (Varner 2004: 145). An interesting analogue from Bulgaria are the studies by V. Markov of the Bulgarian folklore about the withdrawal of Krali Marko (Markov 2007: 143-154). Like King Arthur, the folk hero Krali Marko retired in a cave (Markov 2007: 143-154). Moreover, in one of the legends there is a coincidence also in the motif with the sword buried in the rock (Markov 2007: 143-154). In his analysis Markov concludes that in the image of the folk hero are coded remnants of the image of an ancient deity bearing the characteristics of the agrarian cyclic deities that periodically disappear and appear again. A deity, companion of the Great Goddess and closely bound to the rock, seen in the form of a horseman, and whose zoomorphic hypostasis is the dragon (Markov 2007: 143-154). The withdrawal in the cave as a symbolic act represents immortality (Markov 2007: 143-154). As a link to the beliefs of the ancient Thracians is pointed the resemblance to the legend of King Rezos, which states that after his death he will reside in a rock (Markov 2007: 152). A number of other examples have been given that highlight the image of a male character whose anthropomorphic image of a horseman and warrior speaks of the image of the deity Thracian ruler, and his zoomorphic companions and features speak of older overlays that characterize a partner- husband or husband- son of the Great Goddess (Markov 2007: 143-154).

In connection with what has been said, the image of the Phrygian mountain mother Kibela, who was worshiped in the mountains and caves of the Phrygia and Moesia, can be considered as an analogous to the Thracian beliefs. In mythological aspect she is also considered as the mother of Midas or Gordie's wife (Dixon-Kennedy 1998: 107).

According to Varner, the myth of temporary retreat into the rock as an act of immortality exists in the Christianized folklore of many nations. Besides the legend of Arthur, he gives an example with a Christian parable written in the tenth century by Simeon Metaphrastus, the legend of the seven sleeping boys of Ephesus (Varner 2004: 145-146). It tells how, during the reign of Emperor Decius in persecution against the Christians, seven young men from the city of Ephesus were buried alive in the caves of the mountain (Varner 2004: 145-146). The Lord made them sleep an age-long mortal dream and wake up at a time when Christianity was already an official religion. They were canonized for saints and honored by the new emperor. Versions of the legend have spread to many countries around the world, there is even a Muslim version (Varner 2004: 145-147). More interestingly, the legend is often tied to local topos. This is the case with a chapel from the city of Plyrette - France, which was built around an ancient dolmen. Actually the roof of the chapel and the dolmens roof are the same things. The Chapel is dedicated to the seven sleeping people of Ephesus, and according to the local notions the dolmen is from the creation of the world (Varner 2004: 145-146). A comparison is made again between the symbolism of the cave and the dolmen and the prehistoric tomb of Avebury, Great Britain is considered in a similar aspect (Varner 2004: 145-147). Referring to Maiden, the author found that the vault of the tomb had modeled a womb and the 12-meters (40-foot) long corridor had led to a chamber that provided a soul-rebirth. The bones of 46 individuals, including 12 children, were found there (Varner 2004: 145-147). Apart from an act of immortality, the descent underground and to the cave can also be regarded as an act of initiation; in this respect, very valuable is the information provided by V. Fole about the oracular practices that symbolize descending into the world of the dead compared to scenes from The Thracian treasures and the positioning of the sacred caves in the Thracian sanctuaries (Fol 2007: 197-215).

A Christian character from Western Bulgaria bound to the mountains, caves and rock rites is St. Ivan Rilski. Some connections are testified of the cult to the saint with the sacred places of the Thracians (Markov 2007: 173-189; Markov 2010: 141-152). Very indicative is the unusually broad cult of the saint, connected above all with the rock-water ritual, which, as has been said, is a traditional magical rite long before the coming of Christianity. It is characteristic that the myths about the places where St. Ivan lived were found all along Struma - from Pernik region through Kyustendil to the Kresna gorge. Moreover, even in Northwestern Bulgaria, near Vratsa, there is a legend that Saint Ivan Rilski has inhabited a niche in the rock that resembles the structures of the rock sanctuaries. This gives grounds for his image to be tied to the rock rituals of the Thracians and, in



particular, to the womb-caves and the springs (Todorova 2013: 119). Kalina Todorova also compares the images of hermits with the images of pre-Christian characters such as Orpheus and their relationship with traditional healing (Todorova 2013: 111-115). Examining the legend of the saint's conversation with Tsar Peter, Markov makes analogies to the sources of the Getae ruler who periodically climbs the sacred Mount Kogayon to consult with Zalmoks, who can be all a priest, a king and a god (Markov 2007: 174). This information speaks of the presence of influential characters with priestly functions in the Thracian religion, bound to mountain cult centers. In all likelihood, they were heroized and deified after their death and had great influence over the Thracian aristocracy. Indisputable for the archetypal dedicatory character of the cave legend, the wise man and the king is the presence of a similar legendary motif about a cave in the Bohemian karst for which it was established that it has been used as a cult place for millennia. (Peša 2013: 188-191).

Such a socio-religious function is not only characteristic of the cultural places of the Thracian society. The sanctuaries and prophets in Greece also played the role of a political regulatory mechanism. This is especially well evidenced about the Delphic sanctuary. (Popov 2009: 100). Similar cult figures forming a whole class of great political influence are the Druids of the Celtic tribes. Information has reached us through time about the image of the Druids as priests, sacrificers, fortune-tellers, prophets, healers and law-making figures. (Gonsovski 1982: 106). Caesar considered them a public caste equivalent to the class of the warriors, that means are part of the tribal aristocracy (Gonsovski 1982: 106). Caesar also notes that the Druids teach many young people, above all about the immortality of the soul and the reincarnation, so that their courage is awakened and they are not afraid of death (Gonsovski 1982: 111). This information is known about the Thracians as well. We owe it to Solini, according to whom: Those who wish to study them carefully will easily understand that the Thracian barbarians despise death by some natural suggestion of wisdom (Solini 10.1.11). Druids did not record their science because they feared it would seep among the masses of ordinary folk. (Gonsovski 1982: 111). Pomponius Mela, to a certain extent, repeats Caesar's wordings, adding that the Druids "have taught in many ways the peoples aristocracy for twenty years in secret in caves and forest sanctuaries" (Gonsovski 1982: 111).

Such religious communities and teachings can be found in many ancient cultures, and in most cases the consecrated ritual is associated with the accumulation of healing, magical, astronomical knowledge, and faith in the immortality (Gonsovski 1982: 111). This dedication ritual was related to staying in the caves or their artificially created similarities like the mithraeums, the Eleusin temple and others. As an idea of a transition to another reality can be taken into account the Platon myth about the cave, whose philosophy is strongly influenced by the initiation teachings of Ancient Greece (Schuré 1992:22-33).

Examining the global spread of mithraism and the cult of the Great Mother, as well as the caves associated with their rituals, Otran considers as a reason for their easy spread the presence of the old religious substrate from the prehistory of the Aegean Mediterranean (Otran 1998: 78-106). Undoubtedly, the common foundations of human beliefs in ancient times have allowed the interpenetration of many cults, the unfolding of which is a difficult task. Most likely, however, the main dynamic generator of ideas, concepts and beliefs are the rapidly developing cultures of the Ancient East (Venedikov 1992: 315). In this regard, Otran points to Mesopotamia, Egypt, Elam, Syria, Anatolia, Cappadocia and India as one nucleus the influence of which reaches the far Mediterranean West (Otran 1998: 94). It is logical that in the beliefs, the myths and the teachings of the Thracian culture and the cultures of the neighboring nations can be found different influences given the crossroads character of the Balkans. On the other side the reconciliation of topographic universals like the caves it is rather about deeply embedded in mythological memory constants with an archetypal character in which the universal formation of religious ideas can be seen. An integral part of these religious concepts are also the myths and rituals of consecration, which manifest themselves in different forms according to the stage of development of the particular culture in which they exist. (Eliade 2001:214-219).

In this line of thought it is clear that the cave at different stages of the religious thinking of mankind appears as an allegory of the deeds of initiation, the revelation of secret knowledge and ritualism related to the afterlife, sacred marriage, new birth, immortality.

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