PART ONE

THE MITHRAIC CAVE

One of the conspicuous additions to the central tauroctone motive, although not the earliest, was a representation of a cave, called the “Persian cave” by Statius (Thebais, I. 719s). The importance of the cave in the celebration of the initiation rites was stressed by Euboulos, an early historian of Mithraism. The passage from Porphyrius in which Euboulos is cited has such an important bearing upon the cave iconography that it demands citation at some length. It runs as follows:

By virtue of matter the cosmos is murky and dark, but by reason of the interweaving of form and its decoration, whence the word cosmos comes, it is beautiful and pleasing. Hence, quite properly the cave by itself would be found pleasing to one first coming upon it, but to the mind entering into it and investigating its substructure, it would be found murky. It follows that outside and on the surface it is pleasing but within and at the bottom it is murky. Thus too Persians initiate the mystes by mystagoguing the descent of the soul into the depths and its exodus again, calling the place a cave. First of all, in the words of Euboulos, “Zoroaster consecrated in the nearby mountains of Persia a natural cave, verdant and with springs of water, in honor of Mithra the maker and father of all, because the cave conveys an image of the cosmos, of which Mithra was the demiourgos, and the things at measured intervals within the cave convey symbols of the cosmic elements and climates”. But after this he says, “Zoroaster also having exercised authority over the others delivered the secret rites (teleiai) by means of caves and grottos whether natural or artificial”. For just as shrines, seats and altars are established for Olympian gods, hearths for chthonic heroes, pits and underground rooms (megera) for the subchthonic, so caves and grottos are established for the cosmos, as also for nymphs because of the waters bubbling up in caves and flowing forth. The Naiades of these waters are presented as Nymphs, as we shall show a little later.

This fragment of Mithraic cosmology is of great importance because it reveals a world view in which Mithra is not only the Pater and Kosmokrator, but also the Creator and Demiurge.

1) De antro nympharum, 6 (Nauck).
The Mithraeum itself is recognized as an icon of the world cave in which there was a downward and an upward path for souls, the soul itself being a transitory inhabitant of the cave. Here the material world is presented in Platonic and Neoplatonic imagery (cf 7 g 2). Moreover the cave imagery was essential to the performance of the mystery rites which, though falsely attributed to Zoroaster, had their origin in Iranian religion. It is not surprising that a cave should be shown in the main cult picture of the Mithraeum at a comparatively early date.

An examination of the very large number of tauroctones which show a cave as the place of the taurotonos action reveals three distinct artistic types of cave, which in later developments tend to become more or less fused. The analyses will indicate that the cave ideology made its impact upon the iconography at a considerably earlier date in Rome and the West than in Syria.

a. Naturalistic cave. This type shows either the entrance to a natural rock cave or the whole tauroctone background made in imitation of natural rocks. These tauroctones come from the following places: Rome (350 366 368 408 415 417 435* 437 530 534 546 586 598), Italy and Sicily (164 173 181* 321* 641* 650* 654 670 736), Middle Europe (1400* 1430* 1447 1449 1510=Fig. 1 1600 1683 1798 1859), a few from Gaul and Germany (835 896 1283*) and Southeast Europe (2251 2255 2289 2306). About one half of the above tauroctones found outside of Italy are of types VII and VIII, which are comparatively late in development. It is reasonably clear, therefore, that the naturalistic type of cave spread from Rome and Italy where its use on Mithraic monuments had its artistic origin.

b. Artificial cave. This type represents a cave vault of shallow depth and symmetrical proportions that has been cut in the face of the cliff, like the Delphic cave shown on the well known relief of Archelaus of Priene 2. Not only does the very shape of the Thracian type of relief (II) convey the idea of such a vault, but this type of vault is used in its lower frieze to frame minor scenes (cf 2052 2244*). Small caves of similar type are used on many of

2) G. M. A. Richter, A Handbook of Greek Art, p 171, fig 249.