CHAPTER 5

The Motif of the Cave and the Funerary Narratives of Nāṣir-i Khusrau

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Though this Cave of the World (ghār-i jahān) is truly a tenement dark and dire,
If my ‘Friend of the Cave’ (yār-i ghār) be Reason (‘aql), what more can my heart desire?
Deem not the world, O my son, a thing to hate and to flee,
For a hundred thousand blessings it has yielded even to me.¹

The above verse, from the Dīvān of the celebrated Ismāʿīlī poet-philosopher and ḥujjat (chief dāʾī) of Khurāsān, Nāṣir-i Khusrau (394/1004–ca. 470/1077), was written during his years of exile in the remote valley of Yumgān in present-day Afghan Badakhshān, where, according to local tradition, he lived in a cave. In his poem, Nāṣir-i Khusrau associates the cave with the two coexisting worlds, the exoteric (ẓāhir) and esoteric (bāṭin), and with the intellect (ʿaql). For Nāṣir-i Khusrau, the creation of the material world flows from God through the Intellect and the Soul. ‘Just as batin cannot exist without zahir, or creator without creature, so too knowledge without action is vain’ (Hunsberger 2000: 84). The dark ‘cave of the world’ is thus the ẓāhir, the physical world in which Nāṣir-i Khusrau is confined in exile, and the locus of his tomb after death. The ‘friend of the cave’ (yār-i ghār), recalls the tradition of Muḥammad and his companion, Abū Bakr, during their migration (hijra) to Mecca when they hid together in a cave at Mount Thaur, but in Nāṣir-i Khusrau’s poem the ‘friend of the cave’ is the intellect (ʿaql).² When one advances, acting on true knowl-

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¹ Mīnuvī and Muhaqqiq 1353/1974: 126, v. 56, ll. 30–32. Trans. Browne 1906: 240. See also Browne 1905. In local Pamiri tradition, yārān-i ghār (‘friends of the cave’) refers to those who joined Nāṣir-i Khusrau in his mission in Yumgān. Yār-i ghār is also mentioned in the Qandil-nāma of the Chirāgh-nāma, an Ismāʿīlī work from Badakhshān that preserves religious practices associated with the sanctity of light and, in the words of Wladimir Ivanow, reflects a ‘Sufic-Ismāʿīlī mentality’ (see Ivanow 1338/1959: 21 [Persian text]).

² Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī begins ghazal no. 4 in the Dīvān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī with ‘I have this friend / I have this cave (yār ma-rā ghār ma-rā) // I am gutted by love/ you are that friend // you are
edge, and when knowledge drives and directs one’s actions, free of doubt and falsehood, one experiences a portion of Heaven on earth. When this primacy of knowledge is combined with the notion of *zahir* and *batin*, the search for knowledge becomes the search for the inner meaning of things...’ (Hunsberger 2000: 80).

The notion of the cave as a sacred place of protective enclosure, revelation, spiritual retreat, burial, and symbolic passage is a universal motif in traditions from ancient times to the present. Caves are associated with the birthplace of religious progenitors, such as Mithras, Abraham, and Jesus, among others. Subterranean rock-cut caves were commonplace forms of internment in the ancient Mediterranean, Mesoamerica, East Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia. A prevalent feature in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic cave narratives is the theme of protective enclosure as a means of escaping religious persecution and as a sign of God’s omnipotence. A number of biblical narratives concerns those who retreat into caves to hide: David hid from Saul in caves (1 Samuel 24:1–3); Obadiah hid a hundred prophets in two caves to escape death at the hands of Jezebel (1 Kings 18:4); the Israelites hid from the oppression of the Midianites by constructing dens in the mountains and hiding in caves (Judges 6:2). In the Islamic context, in Q 18: 9–26, *Ṣūrat al-kahf* (The Cave), the *aṣḥāb al-kahf* (Men of the Cave) fled to a cave to seek refuge from persecution due to their monotheistic beliefs and God caused them and their dog to fall asleep for 309 years under His protection.

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3 On the birth of Mithras, see Vermaseren 1952: 285–301. For Jewish legends concerning the birth of Abraham, see Ginzburg 2003: 1, 186–89; Graves and Patai 1963 [1964]: 134–39. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was constructed over the cave in which Jesus is said to have been born.

4 Q 18:30–14: ‘Behold, the youths betook themselves to the Cave: they said, “Our Lord! Bestow on us mercy from Thyself, and dispose of our affair for us in the right way!” Then we drew (a veil) over their ears for a number of years in the Cave (so that they heard not): Then We roused them, in order to test which of the two parties was best at calculating the term of years they had tarried! We related to thee their story in truth: they were youths who believed in their Lord, and We advanced them in guidance.’ The story of the *aṣḥāb al-kahf* follows the earlier Christian tale of the ‘Seven Sleepers of Ephesus’. See Tottoli 2003; Campo 2001; Paret 1960. Q 18:83–98 contains the popular story of Dhū al-Qarnayn (‘The Two-Horned One,’ usually referring to the Islamic Alexander/Iskandar) and the Wall of Gog and Magog. I recently visited the Mausoleum of the *aṣḥāb al-kahf* in Tuyukhojam, Turfan, China, where Uyghur Muslims believe the cave is located. For more on this shrine and its tradition, see Shinmen 2004.