

# Caves as Entrances to the World Beyond, from Where Fertility Is Derived. The Case of SW Slovenia.

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*This paper addresses the question of the prevailing meaning of the caves on the basis of recently discovered folklore material and some archaeological discoveries from south-western Slovenia. Among the different meanings of caves in the local landscape, the author explores their function as the entrance to the world beyond, characterised by the unnatural passing of time. Obtaining new-borns from caves or keeping dead children in caves, frequently in connection with Baba or without her, rituals of fertility, and the sexual symbolism indicate that caves were perceived as places, from where fertility was derived.*

**Keywords:** Caves, fertility, folklore, phallus, vulva, symbolism, world beyond.

The aim of this paper is to verify what kind of traditional perception is linked to caves. Although hundreds of tales linked to caves have been collected throughout Slovenia (Povše 2001), the research question of this article is the prevailing meaning of caves on the basis of new folklore material and archaeological discoveries in the region of Karst and western Slovenia.

## Caves as the Mysterious World

Fables about caves suggest two different concepts of their understanding; on one side they are perceived as shelters (Povše 2001: 56), on the other as mysterious places, entrances to the other world, places of dwelling of supernatural beings and places for ritual activities.

Until the expansion of science in 19<sup>th</sup> century, caves remained in this traditional perception a part of the mysterious and unknown world. People used to frighten children with the supernatural beings or with the Gypsies from the caves, presenting "The Other". The fear of caves among local children reflects the following experience of Valerija Macarol from Križ (Hrobat 2010: 162).

*V: The mischievous children were frightened with the threat, that the devil would find them and take them to the cave Štajnhnca, the cave in Sestauci or Pustov hram [...]. We were frightened. That was the worst threat. That fright was lost with the discovery of the cave Pustov hram, where the stalactites enlightened us, as a kind of miracle of the earth. [...] [By entering the first time to this cave]*

*I know I was all trembling and then it was [...] I know it was a unique experience, I felt like I was, today I can say, watching the most beautiful cathedral. When I first met the stalactites. At the age of 8 or 10 years.*

*K: Did people knew about these stalactites?*

*V: They did not know; it was not discovered. It was my generation that was more curious [...].*

Traditionally, caves were the dwelling place of supernatural beings, originating from other worlds. These supernatural beings can have negative aspects, which is similar to the Christian perception of the underworld as hell: dwarfs (Škrbina, Hruševica), the devil (Tublje) or dragons (Pliskovica). The supernatural beings from the caves can also be positive, as in the case of the three fairies/fates from Vilenica (Fairies' cave) (Lokev). Also frequent is the motif of the treasures in the caves or of the earth that *breaks inside* and takes the ploughmen inside the earth, which can be connected with a real fear in the Karst region (Tomačevica, Repen) (Hrobat 2010: 162; Povše 2001: 30-1; Čok 2012: 64).

The formation of caves is explained by etiologic legends. The origin of the biggest caves (Cik, Šlaver and Remeščica) in Rodik is explained as the result of the competition between Christ and St. Peter (Hrobat 2010: 161). In researching the Karstic folklore, numerous funny and mocking narratives were found that reveal that it was God who created Karst, that saints performed their miracles in the actual landscape of Karst, not only at the level of abstraction but in each particular village landscape. With this, the territory of every village community was also consecrated (Hrobat 2010: 55-7).

Caves were linked also to Christian rituals, like the Cave of the Mother of God in Tomaj (Jama Matere Božje) or the Sacred Cave on Socerb linked to Saint Servolo/Socerb from Trieste, where the cave also functioned as a church.

### **Caves as Passages to the World Beyond**

The research on Karst showed that many villages conserved in their local landscape traditions about a place, usually a cave that was perceived as the passage to the world beyond or place where people met supernatural beings (Hrobat 2010: 159-65). Outstanding is the tradition of Rodik, where two caves function as passages to the world beyond. The Šlaver cave was known until recently to be the site where many locals, mostly women, committed suicide. It was believed to be the dwelling of a dragon or, in another version, a goblin who would counsel people in distress. Remembering the suicide of a woman in his childhood, Rado Lukovec from Rodik describes how:

*Women used to tie their kerchief to a tree above the cave and then plunge into the chasm. They left their kerchief to take back on their way to heaven. The dragon was supposed to redeem them (Hrobat 2007: 44; Peršolja 2000: 18-9).*

The other cave that represents a passage to the yonder land in the landscape of Rodik is Cik cave. The tradition recorded by the same informant in 2005 is the following:

*This is Cik cave. This cave, they say, if you fall inside, you come to the other world. That it happened, that a young shepherd felt inside, when he herded the sheep, and he did not hurt himself, he lived for some years inside, and he came back after a hundred years, he came back to the village of Rodik. He told that his home was in that house, but his parents were already dead, and people did not recognise him. [...] Some say that it is a goshawk who brought him back on its wings. [...] In this cave they say, there is water. [...] In Cik cave, here inside, they would find the first linden tree [...]* (Hrobat 2010: 144).

According to other fables, after a brief stay in the cave, the boy returned with the help of a goblin or a goshawk and realised that outside, a hundred years had passed while he was away (Peršolja 2000: 14-17). The mythical dimension of Cik cave is apparent also in the narrative concerning the “first linden tree” found in the cave. According to local oral tradition, it was planted to the field of Rodik, after it was stolen by the neighbouring village and then taken back by the villagers and planted by the church in Rodik (Hrobat 2010: 145). This tradition could indicate a sacred tree. The linden tree was one of the sacred Slavic trees (Šmitek 2004: 57, 62, 84, 370-71). Linden trees are frequently found in the centre of villages with tables and chairs under them, where the community’s leaders had their meetings (Čok 2015; Macarol 2015). It is also interesting that the villagers quarrelled over the tree. The indicator of its sacredness is also the fact that the “first tree” comes from the cave where the entrance to the world beyond is. There is also water in this cave, which was viewed in Slavic folklore as a mediator to the world of the death (Mencej 1997).

A similar folktale is found in connection to Črna jama (Eng. “Black Cave”) in Mrzla draga in western Slovenia. The cave presented “*the entrance to the third world. [...] The one who managed to enter, experienced a true paradise on earth. The time has stopped there, so you remained all the time the same.*” The entrance was guarded by Dvoglavi (Eng. “Two-headed”), a creature once with a woman on its upper part, another time with the man. At the end of this third world, there was an abyss from where the dwarfs occasionally took and ate some people (Medvešek 2015).

In European and non-European folklore, the story of an individual that experiences a different passage of time by entering a special place it is common. In the European folklore, the caves in the hills present a different, parallel world. One of the oldest known motifs of this type is from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, according to which the British king Herla enters in a cave to attend a wedding. When he returns he realises that his three days in the cave correspond to two hundred years outside it. A different passing of time is an indication of the entrance to another world, another dimension, which has the connotation of otherworldliness. Most of the people who entered the other world never recovered from the experience. They were not chosen by God, but normal people who did not wish to experience that, so afterwards they were confused, scared, and surprised (Mencej 2009: 187-202). In addition to the story of Cik cave, this can be confirmed by two other experiences of meeting supernatural beings in the caves of Rodik; after meeting *Krvalo stegno* (Eng. “Bloody leg”) in Porčinel cave, a boy was never “normal” again; After taking part in a three-day orgy, a villager came home laughing like a fool, and the cave was named *Fukova jama* (Eng. “Fuck cave”) (Hrobat 2010: 159-61).

### Caves as Dwelling Places of Babas Connected to Death and Fertility

Caves on the Karst and in Western Slovenia are often dwelling places of the mythical Babas (see Hrobat Virloget 2013; 2010; Pleterski 2014), also “Wild Babas” (Slo. *divje babe*) (Kropej 2012: 139, 141, 246).

The Babas are connected with the storms and winds deriving from caves. In the 1920s in Ravne above Cerklje, the villagers walled up a cave after a strong hail, believing that from it the Divje Babe (Eng. “Wild Babas”) arrive, who were causing ice storms (Hrobat 2010: 207). In the tradition of Karst and the region of Gorizia, Baba would release winds from a hole every time she gets angry (Kropej 2008: 274). Research has shown that Babas were linked to the wind, rain, and stormy weather. From places named after Baba or in Italian *La vecchia* (Hag) in Slovenia and North Italy, stormy weather was forecasted (see the case of Železna Babica in Lokev) (Hrobat 2010: 207–10; Hrobat Virloget 2013: 145–46). In Brežice, the cold wind from the rifts in Krgunde (a place of sinkholes – Slo. *vrtalce*) would announce the Vetrnik (Eng. Windman) (Medvešček 1992: 148).

Miha Mihelič noted a connection between Babas with birth and death in western Slovenia (2013: 71–72). Babas assist in childbirth and bring new-borns from the caves, but they also take dead children in the caves and cook them.

According to the tradition of Lokev, the female mythical being called Baba is connected on one side to the cave and on the other to the hill called Železna Babica (Iron Baba, Granny, midwife). One of the legends says that one of the three fates called Rojenica, Sojenica, and Babica from the Vilenica Cave fled into the cave on the hill and was transformed from a midwife (in Slovenian, *babica*) to the evil Baba. The villagers wanted to regain the assistance of Babica for their birthing mothers. To achieve that, they had to bury iron pokers from the oven at Železna Babica during a thunderstorm when three ninth children were born. The pokers attracted lightning, which caused Babica to run away and return to Vilenica Cave, to help birthing mothers again. Since then, a black cloud above Železna Babica indicates that a thunderstorm is coming (Čok 2012: 64). In this tradition, it is possible to recognise the contrast between the benevolent midwife Babica, who assists in childbirth when she dwells in the cave, and the evil Baba from the Železna Babica hill.

The connection between births and Babas from caves can also be noted in other traditions. In the region of Soča valley, the women who gave birth were told that “Wild Babas” brought new-borns from caves. One of those caves was the cave Zare by Grgarske ravne. In the Divja jama (Eng. “Wild Cave”) Frkova Baba (looking like Pehtra Baba) lived, and she brought new-borns (Mihelič 2013: 71). Pehtra Baba would live in a cave next to Lusern in North Italy with small children, or she would watch unborn children on the slope of Wasserkufen (Timm 2003: 259; Mencej 2009: 199).

In contrast, there are traditions that connect Babas from caves to death (Mihelič 2013: 71–72). In Škocjan, Baba Ančka from the cave cooked broad beans and took dead children with her (Peršolja 2006: 25–36; Štrukelj 2005: 125). In the Skruca cave in the Soča region, the Wild Baba would live, cook polenta or she would have a stove and hunt children to bake them. The Babas from the cave of Landarica in Benečija and from the cave of Dante, hunted children to eat them (Medvešček 1992: 19; Mihelič 2013: 72). Some of the traditions about Babas eating/hunting children are not located in caves (see Mihelič 2013: 71–72). Miha Mihelič noted that Baba is often connected with stoves/cooking (2013, 72) and children. Furthermore, childbirth seems to be linked to stoves, which is clearly seen

in the traditional saying “the stove has been pulled down” (Slo. *Peč se je podrla*), meaning that a child was born (Rožman 2004).

In short, research has shown that Baba can be identified as an archaic female mythic character of Slavic or even pre-Slavic origin. She is characterised by an old, barren, dark aspect on the one hand and a young, fertile aspect on the other (see Hrobat Virloget 2013; Kropelj 2012: 47–53). According to Andrej Pleterski, Baba/Deva (or other female names) in the couple with fertile and non-fertile male mythical being corresponds to the fertile/non-fertile half of the year (Pleterski 2014; 2015). In south-western Slovenia, in Kvarner in Croatia, in France, and North Italy, children were teased that when they go to a nearby place for the first time, they would have to kiss the Baba, It. *La vecchia*, Fr. *La vieille* (Eng. Hag) associated to a certain territory (town, forest, piece of land, or mountain pasture). Stone Babas are included in certain yearly rituals. Traditions about the Baba are present throughout the Slavic world, in which kissing an old woman and forecasting the weather according to hills named after her, and can be compared to other European traditions, such as harvest rituals. In her image, we can find a similarity to a female mythical creature in the form of a hag connected to initiation upon the first entrance to a particular area, which was used as a powerful element of social control of children (see Hrobat Virloget 2013; Hrobat 2010: 183–223).

Caves are also linked to death through other folklore beings. In another legend from Lokev, the cave Vilenica is the dwelling of Vilež (Eng. “Fairy man”). He has the characteristics of snakes, he is guarded by two wolves, and he takes men to the underworld and petrifies them (Čok 2012, 48, 65; Pleterski 2014: 103, 105, 111).

The oral tradition about new-borns coming from the caves is not linked solely to Babas. According to tradition of Pliskovica on Karst, new-borns come from the three oak trees or from the cave bellow the oak tree, where the dwarfs and fairies dwell (Hrobat 2010: 156–59; Hadalin, Kocjan 1993: 57). Mirjam Mencej observes similar European beliefs about caves as places of births, places from where new souls come in our world. According to the tradition in Tyrol in the cave Lebenshöhle (Eng. “The cave of life”) there are as many lights as people, and whenever a light was switched off, a person died (Mencej 2009: 199; Čajkanović 1994: 127–28, numb, 2013; Petzold 1970: 127–28). In Bosnia, a tradition about a cave is recorded from where the wind would arrive. When the locals walled up the cave, that year there were no births, so they destroyed the wall (Čajkanović 1994: 425; Mencej 2009: 199). The wind, considered the bearer of souls, also of the newly born, in Slavic and European traditions, was connected to conception, birth, and new souls. The wind is closely connected with breath, soul, and the wind both linguistically (etymological parallels) and in folk beliefs. There is a common etymology of the words breath, soul (at a microcosmic level), and the wind, which represented their parallel at a macrocosmic level (Mencej 2008).

According to some traditional beliefs, new-borns come from another world or from the very world of the dead (Risteski 2002: 167; Dragan 1999: 287, 292, 299–98). The tradition about new-borns coming from the caves of Karst and the region of Soča valley, therefore, confirms what Mirjam Mencej indicated on the basis of some cases of European folklore. The oral traditions about caves the new-borns and dead children are kept together with the motifs of the supernatural passage of time indicate the perception of caves as places belonging to the world beyond, from where fertility originates (2009: 199).

## Caves as Places of Religious Rituals

The caves are linked to fertility not just through oral tradition, but also through religious rituals. Babja jama or Buhnja jama (probably from Buh, Bog, i.e. God) above Gabrje was the centre of the cult of “snakes’ heads”. People were praying for fertility in it, by its entrance fortune-tellers tools from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were found in 2005 (Medvešček 2006: 43–48; Mihelič 2013: 72). To Divja jama or Babja jama under Vrtače, people used to bring grains to obtain good harvests in the following year. In Kavkna jama near Livške Ravne (Eng. “Jackdaw’s cave”), Utrna jama, Brezno na Levpah rituals for the fertility were performed. In the cave Muževna škvavna in Padence, a stalagmite was brought as a symbol of fertility that was venerated. Worship of a phallic stalagmite is recorded in the cave on the south-eastern part of Gorenja Trebuša. According to oral tradition, when the stone will adhere to the ceiling of the cave, it will become a column and will lose the power of fertility, which will lead to the decline in the number of the local residents. That the stalagmite was worshiped could be confirmed by how polished by human hands it was (Medvešček 2015).

In the rock shelter of Triglavca (Eng. “Three-headed”) near Divača, the villagers from Prelože prayed for fertility. In the cave, there are two ritual stones, a stalagmite and a stalactite. On the top of the stalagmite, there is a natural hollow, shaped like female genitalia. According to oral tradition, it represents Deva. The hollow collects water that drips from the stalactite, which is shaped like male genitalia, and represents Deva’s mate Devač. In the informant’s words, “the water dripping from Devač represents that they are as a bridegroom and a bride, always marrying; from days of yore to, say, breeding”. In a ritual formula, people asked the goddess Deva to bear crops and protect their grain from Mora. In front of the two ritual stones, there are three stalactites, which gave the name to the cave Triglavca. In the words of the Boris Čok’s grandmother, they represent “three heads, three deities in one god, this was Triglav”. Triglav was described by her as the main god “who had three heads. With one, he watched the sky, with the other the earth and with the third the underworld. That is also why our highest mountain bears this name” (Čok 2012: 21–23).

Near Divača, Triglav was probably connected to another cave, which was used for divination. The rock shelter was called Terglouca or Triglouca, which is named after the three stones above it. In the early spring, the water from the rock shelter was taken for a ritual of the divination of drought and harvest for the summer (Čok 2012: 27–30; 40–43).

The highest god of the Pomeranians, Triglav, was also connected with divination, prophecies and predictions. He was worshipped in Wolin, Silberg and Brandenburg (Kropej 2008: 140). Historical sources explain his three heads in relation to the kingdoms of heaven, earth and underworld (Toporov 2002: 64–65). The same explanation about Triglav was found in the oral tradition from Prelože (Čok 2012: 21–23; Hrobat Virloget 2012: 173–75). The trinity principle frequently appears in the mythical traditions; they are linked to the highest mountain of Slovenia, Triglav (Eng. “Three-headed”). Trinity is the principle of “tročan” tradition from West Slovenia which represents a belief into three basic forces of nature: fire (sun), water and earth (Medvešček 2015; Pleterski 2008). The three spheres of cosmos are combined in the theory of the main early Slavic myth about the heavenly god Perun, the underworld god Veles and the goddess Mokoš (Toporov 2002); Three subjects

were often used in the magical apotropaic rituals and mountains with three peaks were often perceived as sacred (Hrobat 2010: 151, op. 129).

A phallic symbol was documented in the oral tradition of the village of Huje in Brkini in the region of Ilirska Bistrica, not far away. A large stalactite in the form of the phallus named Devar (similarly to Deva from Prelože) was believed to help with fertility. A story was known of a woman who implored Devar to help her conceive (Madvešček 2006: 313–323).

In Japodska jama (Eng. “Iapodes’ cave”) or Jama pri Trnovskem studencu (Eng. “Cave by the Trnovo spring”) above Ilirska Bistrica on the Snežnik plateau, there is a phallic stalactite with an incised symbol of a schematic archer and numerous crossed circles. Similar signs can be found in many places of the “rock art”, such as Valcamonica in North Italy. Considering that the signs seem to be more recent (and perhaps not of prehistoric origin), they could be interpreted in the context of the Slavic mythology as the symbol of the Slavic Thunderer. The cave is in the vicinity of the hill called Devin, derived from the word Deva. It can also be linked to the three-headed mountain of Snežnik, about which the oral tradition states is sacred. There are many analogies to the Triglavca cave in Prelože: the phallic stalactite (with petroglyphs), the toponym Deva, and the Three-headed symbol. The analysis of the cave and its mythical landscape points to the possible use of it for religious purposes (see Hrobat Virloget 2014).

The rituals in the caves with phallic symbols are also well documented in the archaeological record. In front of the phallic symbol in Spila Nakovana by Donja Nakovana on Pelješac in south Dalmatia, a concentration of rich ceramic artefacts were found together with the bones of domestic animal dated to the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC until the beginning of the current era. The archaeological material is interpreted as the remains of the celebrations, donations to some local deity connected to fertility and masculinity, probably from the part of the autochthon Illiric tribes (Menalo 2005: 8, 20, 25–27).

Recently an interesting cave was found called Hajnovca by Gradišče in Matarsko podolje with a large stalagmite with inscriptions. Ceramics was also found (from prehistoric to medieval) and traces of charcoal.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that not far from the cave there is a place named Devci, similarly to other two caves (Triglavca, Japodska jama).

There are many other caves in Karst region or western Slovenia with archaeological material or oral tradition indicating religious cults, but it is not clear if these rituals had any connection to fertility. Babja jama (Eng. “Baba’s cave”) by Soča in the valley of the stream Vogršča was the most significant cult centre of pre-Christian rituals where a white snake would dwell. According to oral tradition, ritual caves were also Duplca, Kačna jama, Žrelcna, lunina jama in Polog, Poja jama, Glenca in Volčanski Ruti, Ajdova or Ajdna jama from western Slovenia (see Medvešček 2015). Oral tradition indicates some pre-Christian rituals of the villagers of Merče in front of Zlodjev Skedenj (Eng. “Devil’s barn”). This hole in the wall seems to be connected with the cave of Bestažovca, where prehistoric paintings have been found (Čok 2012: 114–17). An exceptional archaeological treasure was found in Mušja jama in the Karst region (Eng. “Fly cave”) near Škocjan, where, along with animal bones, burnt and broken metal objects from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC were found. This rich deposit of bronze military artefacts originating from

<sup>1</sup> For this information, I am thankful to Franc Malečkar and Boris Čok. They sent me a newspaper article about the discovery, but it is not dated.

distant regions such as Italy, the Alps, Pannonia, the Balkans, and Greece indicates some sort of ritual taking place over the chasm (Turk 1994; Slapšak 1999). Regardless, my intention was not to enumerate all caves with possible (archaeological or folklore) indications of ritual activities (see Odar 2012),<sup>2</sup> but merely to indicate that some of them have evident fertility rites or sexual symbolism.

### **Conclusion: The Caves as Passages to the World of the Death from Where the Fertility Derives**

As is wildly known, caves are usually dwelling places of different supernatural beings (dwarfs, fairies etc.). The aim of this modest discussion was to surpass the usual collecting different folklore material linked to caves, to combine the folklore material with archaeological record in order to determine whether caves had any prevailing meaning in the local landscape. It seems that the prevalent perception of the caves in the examined region of Karst and West Slovenia (Soča Valley) is connected to liminality, as the passage to the world beyond from where the fertility derives. Indicative are three motifs. The first is the supernatural passage of time in caves, which tells about entering into another dimension, not of “our” world. The second is the connection of certain caves with the new-borns and/or with the female mythical being Baba, who helps in birthing or gives new-borns. On the other side, Baba (or Vilež) also keeps (dead) children in the caves or cooks/bakes them, in this manner linking caves to death. From both traditions, caves seem to be dwelling places of the souls, whether of the new-borns or of the dead. Caves are thus presented as part of the world of the death, from which new life and fertility originate in the traditional perception. It is logical, therefore, that religious rituals were performed in the caves. Especially indicative are fertility rituals or rituals with clear sexual symbols: the phallus or vulva. In addition to all the indicative folklore meanings, it is logical that people used caves for fertility rituals: nature has already shaped the cave forms (stalactites and stalagmites) into symbols indicating fertility.

It was not my intention to analyse all the different meanings of caves in the traditional beliefs and folklore of Karst and western Slovenia, but the numerous listed cases indicate that one of the frequent function of caves was as a passage to the world of the death from which fertility (and richness) originates and travels into the world of the living.

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<sup>2</sup> Forthcoming also the PhD thesis of Alja Žorž, mentor Andrej Pleterski.



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## **Jame kot vhod v onstranstvo, od koder izvira plodnost. Primer JZ Slovenije**

Katja Hrobat Virloget

Članek analizira pomen jam v lokalni krajini na osnovi novejših folklornih materialov in arheoloških odkritij v jugo-zahodni Sloveniji, in sicer predvsem na Krasu in v Posočju. Med različnimi pomeni, ki jih imajo jame v folklori, izpostavi dokaj pogosto percepcijo liminalnosti, pri kateri je jama razumljena kot vhod v drugi svet, kjer čas poteka na drug način kot v svetu živih. Pogosto so jame povezane z rojstvi otrok, še posebno v navezavi z Babo, ki prinaša novorojenčke iz jame ali pomaga pri porodih. Po drugi strani pa v jami tudi hrani mrtve otroke ali jih poje/speče, kar povezuje jame s smrtjo. Izpeljana je bila povezava med jamami in peko/pečjo, ki se tudi navezuje na koncept rojstva. Znano je, da je rojstvo otrok v tradicionalni percepciji razumljeno kot proces prehoda duše iz onstranstva oziroma iz sveta mrtvih, od tam, od koder prihaja novo življenje, in kjer se hranijo duše mrtvih ali otroci, in to je v jamah. Torej ni presenetljivo, da se v jamah odvijajo rituali plodnosti, še posebno ob kapnikih s spolno simboliko (falus/vulva), o čemer pričajo številna novejša ustna izročila, pa tudi arheološka odkritja. Avtorica zaključuje, da je eden izmed pogostih pomenov jam povezan z onstranstvom, od koder prihaja tudi plodnost (in bogastvo) v »svet živih«.