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XIBALBA, EL LUGAR DEL MIEDO:
LAS CUEVAS Y EL INFRAMUNDO DE LOS ANTIGUOS MAYAS
XIBALBA, THE PLACE OF FEAR:
CAVES AND THE ANCIENT MAYA UNDERWORLD

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RESUMEN

Las cuevas eran un elemento destacado de la cosmología maya que encarnaban el inframundo de Xibalba. Como describe el mito, su propio nombre significa “lugar del miedo o el terror”. Aún así, los antiguos mayas se adentraban en la oscuridad de las cavernas para celebrar rituales destinados a divinidades asociadas con la lluvia, la fertilidad, y los ominosos Señores del Inframundo. Aunque se ha escrito poco sobre las prácticas rituales del período maya clásico, los artefactos encontrados en las

ABSTRACT

Caves were a salient feature of Maya cosmology that instantiated the underworld of Xibalba. Described in myth, its very name meant the place of fear or fright. Yet, ancient people journeyed deep into the darkness to conduct rituals for deities associated with rain, fertility, and the ominous Lords of the Underworld. Although little was written about ritual practices in the Classic period, the artifact record attests that ancient people left offerings of ceramics, household items, incense, jewelry and

cuevas documentan que los antiguos mayas dejaron ofrendas de cerámicas, objetos domésticos, incienso, joyería, y en ocasiones también víctimas sacrificiales, para los poderosos seres que habitaban los espacios subterráneos. De hecho, estas cuevas poseen todavía una consideración sagrada entre las actuales comunidades mayas, lo que atestigua la resiliencia de la religión y la cosmología mayas, así como el poder del mito.

sometimes sacrificial victims for the powerful beings that inhabited caves. These sites are still considered sacred in Maya communities today, a testament to the resilience of Maya religion and cosmology and the power of myth.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Xibalba, religión maya, topografía del miedo, cueva, inframundo, ritual, cosmología maya, mito, ofrendas.

KEY WORDS

Xibalba, Maya Religion, Fearscape, Cave, Underworld, Ritual, Maya Cosmology, Myth, offerings.

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“Then went One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, guided by the messengers as they descended along the path to Xibalba. They went down steep steps until they came out again upon the banks of turbulent river canyons”.
*Popol Vuh*¹.

THE ANCIENT MAYA PEOPLE CONCEIVED of their world as a three-tiered universe, consisting of a sky creating the dome of the heavens, the four-sided earth that is the abode of humans and the world beneath the earth-the netherworld². The earth itself floats on a watery base, often associated with the underworld. Connecting the three levels is the axis mundi or center of the universe, usually represented by a tree whose branches are in the sky, whose trunk rises through the earth and whose roots spring from the underworld. In the Quiché Mayan language, the netherworld was referred to as Xibalba, the “place of fear”³ or “place of fright”⁴, Maya peoples in the Yucatan peninsula refer to the underworld as *Metnal* or of “place of the dead”⁵. Therefore, the underworld is characterized as a watery place beneath the earth associated not only with fear and death, but the life-giving properties of plants that spring from the earth itself, like the world tree.

The sky, the earth, and the underworld were all homes to deities. Ancestors inhabited the sky. Beneficent deities, mischievous or dangerous spirits lived in cre-

1. Translated by CHRISTENSON, A. J: *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya*, Norman, 2007.

2. FREIDEL, D., SCHELE, L., and PARKER, K.: *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*, New York, 1993; THOMPSON, J.E.: *Maya History and Religion*, Norman, 1970, 195; BASSIE-SWEET, K.: *From the Mouth of the Dark Cave: Commemorative Sculpture of the Late Classic Maya*, Norman, 1991; EAD.: *At the Edge of the World: Caves and Late Classic Maya World View*, Norman, 1996.

3. CHRISTENSON: *Popol Vuh*..., 114.

4. MILLER, M.E., and TAUBE, K.: *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion*, 1993, London, 177.

5. MACLEOD, B., and PULESTON, D: “Pathways into Darkness: The Search for the Road to Xibalba”, GREENE ROBERTSON, M., and JEFFERS, D.C. (eds.), *Tercera Mesa Redonda de Palenque*, Vol. 4, Monterrey, 1978, 71-77 (71).

vices and canyons, and the underworld was the home of the dreaded Lords of the Underworld who were the bringers of death and disease described in the ancient Maya creation myth, the *Popol Vuh*. Although considered to be a Postclassic document, Preclassic Maya iconography suggests that the mythic creation narratives of the text date as far back as 100BCE⁶, and may have deeper antiquity as evidenced in the monuments at Izapa in the piedmont area of Guatemala⁷. The earliest known hieroglyphic version was first translated into Spanish orthography in the 16th century, probably no later than CE 1558. Between CE 1701 and 1703, a Spanish priest, Francisco Ximénez, copied the text and added his Spanish translation⁸.

Based on the *Popol Vuh* as well as on ethnographic accounts reported by J. Eric Thomson⁹, archaeologists B. MacLeod and D. Puleston were the first to argue that the ancient Maya conceptualized caves as entrances to the underworld¹⁰. The mythic pages of the *Popol Vuh* describe a journey of two pairs of Hero Twins and their descent to Xibalba, arguably through the mouth of a cave. The first set is a man and his brother and the second set are his twin sons. In the story, the twins are summoned to the underworld to play ball with evil lords of death and disease. The lords have names such as One and Seven Death, Gathered Blood, Pus Demon, Jaundice Demon, Skull Staff and Bloody Teeth to name a few¹¹. The first set of twins lose the game and are sacrificed by the evil lords, but after many trials and tests, the second set of twins defeat the lords and destroy their power over humans. They resurrect their father who arises as the Maya maize deity, but remains to dwell in the underworld. Their acts clear the way for the universe to be set into motion, the sun to rise, and the stars to begin their journey across the sky¹².

In this paper, I illustrate that among the ancient Maya, caves were thought of as underworld places as well as transitional spaces beneath the earth that were, and in many traditional communities today still are, conceptualized as some of the most sacred features of the natural landscape. Archaeological research as well as ethnographic accounts demonstrate that caves were not spaces to be revered from afar, but places where humans could propitiate and placate both beneficent and dangerous deities. The archaeological record attests to their use among the ancient Maya, and

6. SATURNO, W.A., *ET AL.*: *The Murals of San Bartolo, El Petén, Guatemala, Part 1: The North Wall, Ancient America No. 7*, Barnyardville, 2005.

7. See for discussion GUERNSEY, J.: *The Performance of Rulership in Mesoamerican Izapan Style Art*, Austin, 2006, 96-102.

8. CHRISTENSON: *Popol Vuh*..., 35-42.

9. THOMPSON: *Maya History*...

10. MACLEOD and PULESTON: "Pathways into Darkness...", 71-77.

11. CHRISTENSON: *Popol Vuh*...

12. FREIDEL, SCHELE and PARKER.: *Maya Cosmos*...

elaborate architectural modifications at some sites suggest that they served as salient backdrops for large public ceremonies.

CAVES AS ENTRANCES TO THE UNDERWORLD

Though the *Popol Vuh* never mentions caves specifically, D. Stuart argues that Classic period glyphic associations for ancient Maya caves contain elements such as the skull, bone, and mandible invoking death and underworld affiliations¹³. One cave glyph is drawn as a detached eye within a half-darkened field, looking out of a cave (Figure 1). This is interesting because it suggests this outward-looking perspective. The ancient Maya tended to be very practical and many of their iconographic depictions as well as their beliefs were based on real-world characteristics of their environment. For instance, not only among the Maya, but in all of Mesoamerica, entrances into the earth are depicted as giant anthropomorphic gaping mouths with teeth. This anthropomorphic entity, called the *witz*, which is depicted an animated mountain¹⁴, is discussed further below.

One of the best Maya examples of this is from the San Bartolo (Guatemala) murals on the north wall. These murals were very well -preserved and dated to approximately 100BC¹⁵ (Figure 2). The figures in the painting are staged within an anthropomorphic mouth complete with a fang hanging from the top that is clearly a stalactite. Any caver can attest that at the entrances to many caves, stalactites hang along the drip lines. When viewed from the interior, this resembles the upper teeth of a giant mouth. In this photo of Actun Isabella in western Belize, the resemblance of a giant creature with a wide open maw is uncanny as one looks out from the cave's interior (Figure 3). This perspective, as suggested in the Maya cave glyph, is the kind of real-world observation that was clearly not lost on ancient people.

There are numerous ethnographic accounts that relate caves with the underworld. In his work in Momostenango in highland Guatemala, G. Cook¹⁶ reports that caves represent the entrance to the underworld and are inhabited by the human dead and liminal beings from other world orders or past creations. Working in the

13. See VOGT, E.Z., and STUART, D.: "Some Notes on Ritual Caves Among the Ancient and Modern Maya", BRADY, J.E, and PRUFER, K.M. (eds.), *In the Maw of the Earth Monster: Mesoamerican Ritual Cave Use*, Austin, 2005, 155-185 (157-159).

14. STUART, D.S.: "The Hills are Alive: Sacred Mountains in the Maya Cosmos", *Symbols*, 14, 1997, 13-17.

15. SATURNO ET AL.: *The Murals of San Bartolo...*

16. COOK, G.: "Quichean Folk Theology and Southern Maya Supernaturalism", GOSSEN, G.H. (ed.), *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community: Essays in Mesoamerican Ideas*, New York, 1986, pp. 139-154 (154).

same area, B. Tedlock found that the underworld is “an evil location that is entered by human beings at death, through a cave, or the standing waters of a lake or ocean”¹⁷. A. Christenson also working in highland Guatemala argues that today, caves are conceptualized as portals to the “other world,” which is the domain of ancestors, saints and deities¹⁸.

While there are clear associations between caves and entrances to the Maya underworld, caves are also envisioned by many Maya peoples today as places related to the earth and earth deities. Therefore, based on ethnographic analogies primarily from highland Guatemala, some archaeologists¹⁹ have discounted their underworld affiliations. However, as Scott acknowledges²⁰, it is likely that there is considerable disjunction between the highland Guatemalan groups studied and the Classic period Maya. Also, to understand how cave space is conceptualized in Maya cosmologies we need to revisit our understanding of the three-tiered universe. We tend to forget that in traditional Maya thought one does not move directly between the earth and sky or earth and underworld, but both the sky and the underworld are comprised of many levels. Therefore, there are transitional zones that are traversed when moving between the earth and the mythical realms. This is well reported ethnographically but has been somewhat ignored by archaeologists. To name a few examples, J. E. Thompson²¹ writes that the sky was thought to have 13 layers and the underworld composed of 4 steps descending from the earth’s western horizon to a fifth level. This is reminiscent of the journey of the Hero Twins in which they descend “stairs” on their way to Xibalba. The Tzotzil of Chamula²² envision the sky as having three concentric layers and the underworld as a single layer supported by Miguel, the Earth Bearer. Caves are considered part of the earth, though they are associated with water, dampness, darkness, and lowness, suggesting that they are in fact transitional zones between the middle world and the underworld. Nearby, the Tzotzil Maya of Larraín-

17. TEDLOCK, B.: *Time and the Highland Maya. Revised Edition*, Albuquerque, 1992, 173.

18. CHRISTENSON, A.: “Places of Emergence: Sacred Mountains and Cofradía Ceremonies”, STALLER, J.E. (ed.), *Pre-Columbian Landscapes of Creation and Origin*, New York, 2008, 95-121 (108).

19. BRADY, J.E., and PRUFER, K.M.: “Maya Cave Archaeology: A New Look at Religion and Cosmology”, PRUFER, K.M., and BRADY, J.E. (eds.), *Stone Houses and Earth Lords: Maya Religion in the Cave Context*, Boulder, 2005, 365-380; BRADY, J.E., and PRUFER, K.M.: “Introduction: A History of Mesoamerican Cave Interpretation”, BRADY, J.E., and PRUFER, K.M. (eds.), *In the Maw of the Earth Monster: Mesoamerican Ritual Cave Use*, Austin, 2005, 1-18; SCOTT, A.M.: *Communicating with the Sacred Earthscape: An Ethnoarchaeological Investigation of Kaqchikel Maya Ceremonies in Highland Guatemala*, unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, 2009.

20. SCOTT: *Communicating with the Sacred...*, 190.

21. THOMPSON, J.E.: *Maya History...*, 195.

22. GOSSSEN, G.H.: *Chamulas in the World of the Sun: Time and Space in a Maya Oral Tradition*, Cambridge, 1974, 21.

zar²³ understand the sky to have 13 levels and the underworld 9. Humans live in the bottom two levels of the sky and earth deities are located within the sky's lowest level. Both earth and underworld deities live in caves. The ninth level of the underworld constitutes *Olontik* or the "Land of the Dead". So, in these modern accounts, Earth deities appear to be associated with the more superficial areas, whereas underworld denizens would be expected to reside primarily in lower levels²⁴.

CAVE AS THE HOMES OF DEITIES

A number of different deities are associated with caves today that can be traced directly to the Classic period. For instance, among the Q'eqchi' of Alta Verapaz, the in-dwelling earth spirits or *Tzuultaq'a* (meaning literally "mountain valley"), thought to be protector deities, are propitiated deep within caves, which are conceptualized as their "houses"²⁵. Ethnographer R. Wilson²⁶ later points out that mountains are thought of as living beings (*yo'yo*), a point corroborated by S. Garza who was told that caves are "alive"²⁷. This belief likely has classic period antecedents. The Maya glyph for mountain has been deciphered as *witz* or *wits* and is represented iconographically as an anthropomorphic being with large eyes and a cleft of cracked head²⁸. D. Stuart argued that these symbols, which often adorn pyramids, mark them as anthropomorphic mountains. He noted that royal burials within these sacred artificial mountains created an ancestral landscape of power as a backdrop for royal public ritual. Entrances to the inner sanctums of pyramids are often marked with the toothy mouth of the cave illustrated by the entrance to Building II at Chicanna (Figure 4a) and the Temple of the Magician at Uxmal in Yucatan or at Temple 22 at Copan, Honduras (Figure 4b) reinforcing the ideological nexus of caves, mountains and ancestral beings. This also helps to explain why caves are often depicted as the homes of ancestral beings. For instance, there are a set of polychrome vases from the classic period that depict a couple in a cave with crossed legs that some refer to as "dancing." J. Nielsen and J.

23. HOLLAND, W.: *Highland Maya Folk Medicine: A Study of Culture Change*, unpublished dissertation, University of Arizona, Tucson, 1962, 94-96.

24. HOLLAND: *Highland Maya Folk...*, 126-133.

25. WILSON, R.: *Mountain Spirits and Maize: Catholic Conversion and Renovation of Traditions among the Q'eqchi' of Guatemala*, Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, London, 1990, 69, 98.

26. WILSON, R.: *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala: Q'eqchi' Experiences*, Norman, 1995, 53.

27. GARZA, S.: "An Ethnoarchaeological Approach to Maya Caves", paper presented at the 68th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, Milwaukee, 2003, unpublished.

28. STUART: "The Hills are alive...", 15.

Brady²⁹ as well as others³⁰ suggest that the couple is in fact copulating and that this is a fertility symbol that refers to ancestral emergence of humans from caves. Though not copulating, similar couples are also pictured within the eyes of the animated mountain known as the *witz* discussed above³¹. The eyes of the mountain, like the mouth of the cave provide windows into the earth and the spirits that inhabit these realms can be viewed within.

Rain deities are also thought to dwell in caves. This well-illustrated for the Classic period Maya where Chac the rain deity is depicted sitting in his cave/house on a Classic period vase³² (Figure 5a). Depictions of Chac seated in his cave are also found in two of the last surviving Maya books, the Dresden Codex on pages 30a and 67b³³ and the Madrid Codex pages 29 and 73³⁴. Additionally, there are iconographic depictions from the Maya Classic Period that illustrate Chac, the rain god sitting in his cave. A reified example of this is found at the cave of La Pailita in Guatemala where a life-sized sculpture of Chac sits on his throne in the cave's interior (Figure 5b)³⁵. As a corollary to this, it is reported ethnographically among the Tzotzil that clouds are thought to form inside of mountains and emerge from caves³⁶. Again, this is a notion that is played out in the natural environment. In fact, clouds do at times emerge from caves as mist. I witnessed this on the summer solstice in 2014 when a cloud literally emerged from the mouth of the cave at Las Cuevas in Belize (Figure 6).

There are also explicit associations with caves and the Maya maize god. The mythology in the *Popol Vuh* clearly states that the resurrected maize deity is left to dwell in the underworld, which may help to explain Classic period iconography. In the San Bartolo mural illustrates a woman handing tamales to the maize deity who stands with a gourd of water in hand. This suggests a scene of primordial sustenance to K. Taube and his colleagues³⁷. In the Late Classic period a series of vases illustrate

29. NIELSEN, J., and BRADY, J.E.: "The Couple in the Cave: Origin Iconography on a Ceramic Vessel from Los Naranjos, Honduras", *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 1, 2006, 203-217.

30. STONE, D.: *The Archaeology of Central and Southern Honduras. Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University*, Vol. 49, No 3, Cambridge, 1957.

31. STUART: "The Hills are alive...", 16; VOGT and STUART: "Some Notes on Ritual Caves...", 155-185.

32. COE, M.: *Lords of the Underworld*, Princeton, 1978, 78, no. 11.

33. BASSIE-SWEET: *From the Mouth...*, 91-95.

34. BASSIE-SWEET: *At the Edge...*, 98-103.

35. GRAHAM, I.: "Discovery of a Maya Ritual Cave in Peten, Guatemala", *Symbols*, 1997, 28-31.

36. THOMPSON: *Maya History...*, 267-272; VOGT, E.Z.: *Zinacantan: a Maya Community in the Highlands of Chiapas*, Cambridge, 1969, 387; VOGT and STUART: "Some Notes on Ritual Caves...", 164-165.

37. SATURNO ET AL.: *The Murals of San Bartolo...*

the maize god springing from the v-shaped element in the head of the *witz* illustrating his emergence from a cleft in the mountain.

So, in sum we find that in Classic period epigraphy and iconography there are deities and mythic events associated with caves, and that in some traditional communities today, caves are still considered sacred spaces where rituals take place to both honor deities that dwell within the earth or to ask the spirits for special favors. This helps explain why caves were used in Classic period rituals, but there is little in the ancient written sources that speaks directly to specific rituals occurring in caves³⁸. What does seem clear is that there were many different rituals associated with caves and that the archaeological record itself provides some of the best evidence for understanding ancient Maya cave use.

CAVE USE IN THE CLASSIC PERIOD

In the Maya area, there is some evidence that hunter/gatherers entered and explored deep caves, but there are no clear signs of ritual use prior to the Early Preclassic period (1100-650 BCE). There are co-occurrences of stone and bone tools with Pleistocene animal bone at Loltún Cave in northern Yucatan³⁹ that may date between 40,000 and 15,000 years ago, and Pleistocene mammal bones have also been found in Actun Halal, associated with early crude lithics⁴⁰. However, the earliest known ritual cave use in the Maya Lowlands comes from the site of Chechem Ha (Poisonwood Water) in western Belize, Central America. The cave exhibits thick layers of charcoal from human use and a small accumulation of ceramic sherds beginning between 1100-1300 BCE when the very first settlers of the Belize Valley made day-long pilgrimages to the site⁴¹. These villagers made their way to the center of the cave and conducted rites beneath a huge stalactite chandelier hanging above a pool of water. This was the

38. HELMKE, C.G.B.: *Ancient Maya Cave Use as Attested in the Glyphic Corpus of the Maya Lowlands and the Caves of the Roaring Creek Valley, Belize*, unpublished dissertation, University College of London, London, 2009, 523.

39. VELÁZQUEZ VALADÉZ, R.: "Recent Discoveries in the Cave of Loltun, Yucatan, Mexico", *Mexicon*, 2, 1980, 53-55.

40. GRIFFITH, C.: "Excavations and Salvage Operations in Actun Tunichil and Actun Uayazba Kab, Roaring Creek Valley, Belize", AWE, J.J. (ed.), *The Western Belize Regional Cave Project: A Report of the 1997 Field Season*, Durham, 1998, 37-70; LOHSE, J.C., and COLLINS, M.B.: *Lithic Artifacts Recovered in Association with Pleistocene Fauna from the Actun Halal Cave, Western Belize*, manuscript on file with the Western Belize Regional Cave Project and Institute of Archaeology, Belmopan, 2004.

41. MOYES, H.: *The Sacred Landscape as a Political Resource: A Case Study of Ancient Maya Cave Use at Chechem Ha Cave, Belize, Central America*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2006; EAD.: "The Archaeology of Chechem Ha Cave, Belize: A Late Classic Hiatus in Usage", *Research Reports in Belizean Archaeology*, 3, 2006, 225-234.

focus of ritual cave use for almost 400 years before they began using other parts of the cave. Chechem Ha exhibited continuous usage from this early time until the Terminal Classic period sometime prior to 960CE, when according to the radiocarbon dates, the entrance was blocked off until it was rediscovered in 1989.

In a study of 28 sites throughout Belize⁴², the Belize Cave Research Project found that there is a gradual increase in the number of caves used over time culminating in the Late Classic period (700-900 CE). The fluorescence of ancient cave use occurs in the Late-Terminal Classic period (700-950CE), and frequency of use drops off abruptly in tandem with what is referred to as the “Maya Collapse.” The collapse was a period in the Late Classic period in which societies in the eastern lowlands underwent major social changes including the fall of kingships and severe population reduction⁴³, which has been demonstrated in the paleoclimate records to coincide with a megadrought⁴⁴. The increase in the number of caves being used and concurrent changes in ritual practice suggest that caves became the focus of a Late Classic drought cult during this stressful time⁴⁵. In the northern lowlands in Yucatan, the pattern is different and cave use is continuous through to and during the Colonial Period⁴⁶, whereas Postclassic and Colonial use is rare elsewhere.

In many cases, we find that cave use predates human occupation of a region. For instance, at Chechem Ha, the cave was used hundreds of years before structures were built on the surface and the valley occupied. This pattern is noted in extensive cave surveys such as K. Pruffer’s work in the Maya Mountains of Belize⁴⁷ and D. Rissolo’s

42. MOYES, H., KOSAKOWSKY, L., and RAY, E.: *The Chronology of Ancient Maya Cave Use in Belize. Research Reports in Belizean Archaeology*, 14, Belmopan, 2017.

43. DEMAREST, A.A., RICE, P.M., and RICE, D.S.: “The Terminal Classic in the Maya Lowlands: Assessing Collapse, Transition, and Transformation”, DEMAREST, A.A., RICE, P.M., and RICE, D.S (eds.), *The Terminal Classic in the Maya Lowlands: Collapse, Transition, and Transformation*, Boulder, 2004, 545-572.

44. KENNETT, D., ET AL.: “Development and Disintegration of Maya Political Systems in Response to Climate Change”, *Science*, 338, 2012, 788-791.

45. MOYES, H., ET AL.: “The Ancient Maya Drought Cult: Late Classic Cave Use in Belize”, *Latin American Antiquity*, 20, 1, 2009, 175-206.

46. ANDREWS, E.W.I: *Balankanche, Throne of the Tiger Priest*, New Orleans, 1970; BROWN, C.T.: “Caves, Karst, and Settlement at Mayapán, Yucatán”, BRADY, J.E., and PRUFER, K.M. (eds.), *In the Maw of the Earth Monster: Mesoamerican Ritual Cave Use*, Boulder, 2005, 373-402 (391); RISSOLO, D.A.: *Ancient Maya Cave Use in the Yalahau Region, Northern Quintana Roo, Mexico*, Riverside, 2001; ID.: “Beneath the Yalahau: Emerging Patterns of Ancient May Ritual Cave Use from Northern Quintana Roo, Mexico”, BRADY, J.E., and PRUFER, K.M. (eds.), *In the Maw of the Earth Monster: Mesoamerican Ritual Cave Use*, Boulder, 2005, 342-372; STONE, A.: *Images from the Underworld: Naj Tunich and the Tradition of Maya Cave Painting*, Austin, 1995, 54-55.

47. PRUFER, K.M.: *Communities, Caves, and Ritual Specialists: A Study of Sacred Space in the Maya Mountains of Southern Belize*, Ph.D Dissertation, Southern Illinois University, 2002.

study of caves in the Yalahau Region of Yucatan⁴⁸. In our study of caves surrounding the site of Uxbenkà in southern Belize⁴⁹, Keith Prufer and I suggest that Kayuko Naj Tunich (Canoe Cave) is tied to settlement based on its early dates and architectural modifications. We argue that the site was a “foundational” shrine that served to legitimate early rulers and establish their ties with the land by propitiating the indwelling deities. Our work is supported by a number of ethnohistoric studies, the most notable of which was conducted by A. García-Zambrano⁵⁰ who investigated early Spanish land titles to understand how indigenous boundaries were established and maintained. He found that in deciding where to settle, immigrants sought an ideal location based on cosmological principles that mirrored the three-tiered universe of the cosmos creating a primordial landscape where earth’s fundamental elements interacted. The most sought-after landscape consisted of a valley surrounded by four mountains, one in each cardinal direction, irrigated by water holes, rivers, lakes, and/or lagoons. A fifth mountain, ideally containing springs and caves located in the center, protruded in the middle of the valley. Within the central mountain, a natural cave containing water provided the water used for community rituals. The special function of caves in ideal cosmological landscapes helps to explain why cave symbols are often incorporated into Classic period place names (toponyms) or politically charged emblem glyphs representing Maya political realms⁵¹.

The sacred landscape is often represented in the built environment and in architectural placement. There are a number of instances where pyramidal structures were constructed over cave entrances⁵². For instance, at the site of Dos Pilas, Guatemala⁵³, the royal palace complex was built above the Cave of the Bats (Cueva de Murciélagos). The cave served as an outlet for an entire drainage system of the site, so that during heavy rains water gushed from the mouth of the cave with such force that the roar could be heard half a kilometer away. J. Brady and his colleagues suggested that

48. RISSOLO: *Ancient Maya Cave...*

49. MOYES, H., and PRUFER, K.M.: “The Geopolitics of Emerging Maya Rulers: A Case Study of Kayuko Naj Tunich, a Foundational Shrine at Uxbenkà, Southern Belize”, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 69, 2, 225-248; MOYES, H., ROBINSON, M., and PRUFER, K.M.: “The Kayuko Mound Group: A Festival Site in Southern Belize”, *Antiquity*, 90, 349, 2016, 143-156.

50. GARCÍA-ZAMBRANO, A.J.: “Early Colonial Evidence of Pre-Columbian Rituals of Foundation”, ROBERTSON, M.G., and FIELD, V. (eds.), *Seventh Palenque Round Table, 1989*, San Francisco, 1994, 217-227.

51. STUART, D.S.: *Cave References in Maya Inscriptions*, manuscript on file, Department of Anthropology, Harvard University, 1999; VOGT and STUART: “Some Notes on Ritual Caves...”, 155-185.

52. See for discussion MOYES, H., and BRADY, J.E.: “Caves as Sacred Space in Mesoamerica”, MOYES, H. (ed.), *Sacred Darkness: A Global Perspective on the Ritual Use of Caves*, Boulder, 2012, 151-170.

53. BRADY, J.E. ET AL.: “Glimpses of the Dark Side of the Petexbatun Regional Archaeological Project: The Petexbatun Regional Cave Survey”, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 8, 1997, 353-364.

this was a sensory cue that announced the beginning of rainy season, the purpose of which was to reify the power and control of the king over life giving water. J. Brady and W. Ashmore⁵⁴ suggest that this is a prime example of one of the mountain/cave/water complex, one of the most salient features of Mesoamerican cosmology that references the three-tiered model of the universe in which the pyramid represents the sacred mountain and water the underworld.

The mountain/cave/water complex is also manifest at the Classic Period site of Las Cuevas in the Mountain Pine Ridge in western Belize⁵⁵. Here one of the site's largest temple constructions (Temple 1) sits directly atop a large natural cave (Figure 7). The entrance is accessed by a pathway that leads down into a dry cenote or sinkhole. Within the cathedral-like entrance chamber is a natural perennial spring that fills with water during heavy rains. Stairways descend to the pool and cut stone blocks line the water hole. Monumental architecture including rooms and terraces surround the spring attesting to its ritual importance. The constructions surrounding this natural feature create a strong cosmological statement and a salient venue for large public performances.

In Yucatan at the site of Mayapán, settlement is dictated by the karstic landscape and the location of cenotes (sinkholes) and caves⁵⁶. These karstic features are thought to be integral to social organization. Additionally, the Temple of Kukulcan, arguably the most important architectural feature at the site was built at the edge of a cenote filled with water and a cave ran beneath the temple⁵⁷. Excavations revealed death imagery modeled in stucco on the southeast corner of the temple's substructure, the corner of the building nearest the cenote. These features are likened to the three-tiered universe with clear underworld associations.

54. BRADY, J.E., and ASHMORE, W.: "Mountains, Caves, Water: Ideational Landscapes of the Ancient Maya", ASHMORE, W., and KNAPP, A.B. (eds.), *Archaeologies of Landscapes: Contemporary Perspectives*, Oxford, 1999, 124-145.

55. DIGBY, A.: "A New Maya City Discovered in British Honduras at Las Cuevas and an Underground Necropolis Revealed", *The London Illustrated News*, 232, 1958, 274-275; MOYES, H.: "Constructing the Underworld: The Built Environment in Ancient Mesoamerican Caves", BRADY, J.E. (ed.): *Heart of Earth: Studies in Maya Ritual Cave Use*, Austin, 2012, 95-110; MOYES, H., ET AL.: "Dreams at Las Cuevas: A Location of High Devotional Expression of the Late Classic Maya", *Research Reports in Belizean Archaeology*, 12, 2015, 239-249.

56. BROWN: "Caves, Karst...", 373-402.

57. BROWN: "Caves, Karst...", 391.

CAVE ASSEMBLAGES

Classic period assemblages inside of caves support interpretations of caves as underworld venues as well. Human remains found in caves connote clear underworld associations with death. Human bone is found in many, perhaps most, caves and may be classified as burials, sacrifices, and problematic deposits such as single non-articulated bones. Burials may be single or multiple, elite or non-elite⁵⁸. They can range from rare royal tomb internments such as those found at Naj Tunich cave in Guatemala⁵⁹, to ossuaries that contain large numbers of scattered bone such as the Preclassic cemetery located in Gordon's Cave 3 at the site of Copan in Honduras⁶⁰. There are a number of examples of rockshelters that appear to be used as cemeteries primarily for local non-apical elite or commoners. For example, almost 200 individuals accompanied by grave goods were found in the Caves Branch rockshelter in Belize⁶¹. Single non-articulated bones or teeth are perhaps the most commonly featured class.

Sacrificial victims can also be found in caves and cenotes. Entire skeletons lacking graves goods are found in the depths of a number of caves. One example is in the Main Chamber in Actun Tunichil Muknal in western Belize⁶². The cave contains an interior water source and a river must be traversed to reach the chamber located over 500m from the cave entrance. The chamber dates to the end of the Late Classic period based on two almost identical AMS dates (2- δ Calib. A.D. 710-950, A.D. 720-960). Distributed throughout the 4,450 m² chamber are 15 skeletons and several

58. SCOTT, A.M., and BRADY, J.E.: "Human Remains in Lowland Maya Caves: Problems of Interpretation", PRUFER, K.M., and BRADY, J.E. (eds.), *Stone Houses and Earth Lords: Maya Religion in the Cave Context*, Boulder, 2005, 263-284.

59. BRADY, J.E.: *An Investigation of Maya Ritual Cave Use with Special Reference to Naj Tunich, Peten, Guatemala*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1989; STONE: *Images from the Underworld...*

60. BRADY, J.E.: "A Reassessment of the Chronology and Function of Gordon's Cave #3, Copan, Honduras", *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 6, 1995, 29-38.

61. GLASSMAN, D.M., and BONOR, J.L.: "Mortuary Practices of the Prehistoric Maya from Caves Branch Rock Shelter, Belize", PRUFER, K.M., and BRADY, J.E. (eds.), *Stone Houses and Earth Lords: Maya Religion in the Cave Context*, Boulder, 2005, 285-296; WROBEL, G.D.: "Report on the Caves Branch Rockshelter Excavations: 2006 and 2007 Fields Seasons", HELMKE, C.G.B., and AWE, J.J. (eds.), *The Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project: A Report of the 2007 Field Season*, Belmopan, 2008, 1-19.

62. GIBBS, S.A.: "Human Skeletal Remains from Actun Tunichil Muknal and Actun Uayazba Kab.", AWE, J.J. (ed.), *The Western Belize Regional Cave Project: A Report of the 1997 Field Season*, Department of Anthropology Occasional Paper, 1, Durham, 1998, 71-92; EAD.: *An Interpretation of the Significance of Human Remains from the Caves of the Southern Maya Lowlands*, Master's Thesis, Trent University, Trent, 2000; LUCERO, L.J., and GIBBS, S.A.: "The Creation and Sacrifice of Witches in Classic Maya Society", TIESLER, V., and CUCINA, A. (eds.): *New Perspectives on Human Ritual Sacrifice and Ritual Body Treatments in Ancient Maya Society*, New York, 45-73.

unarticulated bones that may represent a 16th. Of these 14 were located by the Western Belize Regional Cave Project. Due to the cave's high humidity the bones were in poor condition but did allow for some analyses by S. Gibbs⁶³. Of the 13 she analyzed, five were children under the age of three years, two were sub-adults, and the remaining six were adults ranging in age from their early 20's to approximately 40. Of the adults, two were likely to be female and three, possibly four, male. Not one of the 13 individuals were "buried" but all of the bodies were located on the cave's surface. Eleven of the 14 were placed in intermittent pools suggesting that water was an integral element in the sacrificial rites.

Archaeological caves sites have yielded enormous artifact assemblages that may include organic remains due to the sometimes excellent preservation in caves. For instance, at Chechem Ha cave in Belize small corn cobs were found inside of a large jar⁶⁴. These were identified and "first fruits" attesting to agricultural rituals performed at the site. Animal bones are a common find as well though their ritual significance is unclear. Mary Pohl makes a good argument based on ethnohistorical, ethnographic, and iconographic data that *cuch* or renewal rites related to the accession of rulers may have occurred in caves and suggests that it is evidenced by deer bones found in some assemblages⁶⁵. However, one might argue that the bones are a result of hunting rites⁶⁶.

One of the most common objects placed with offerings in caves are speleothems or dripstone formations. Throughout the Maya area there is speleothem breakage, movement, caching, and removal⁶⁷. Brady argues that they are objects of power that contain a powerful essence similar to Polynesian mana. This is hardly surprising considering that the Yucatec term for speleothems is *xix ha tunich* or "drip-water stone"⁶⁸ indicating that the Maya conceived of stalactites and stalagmites as having been formed from water that was "*suhuy*" or ritually pure.

Caves may also contain a wide variety of objects such as jewelry, spindle whorls, celts (stone ax heads), stingray spines, lithics, crystals, grinding stones, and pyrite mirrors⁶⁹, and may produce unique finds. For instance, in Petroglyph Cave a snake

63. GIBBS: "Human Skeletal...," 71-92; EAD.: *An Interpretation of the...*

64. MOYES: *The Sacred Landscape...*

65. POHL, M.: "Ritual Continuity and Transformation in Mesoamerica: Reconstructing the Ancient Maya Cuch Ritual", *American Antiquity*, 46, 1981, 513-529.

66. BROWN, L.A.: "Planting the Bones: Hunting Ceremonialism at Contemporary and Nineteenth-Century Shrines in the Guatemalan Highlands", *Latin American Antiquity*, 16, 2005, 131-146.

67. BRADY, J.E. ET AL.: "Speleothem Breakage, Movement, Removal, and Caching: An Aspect of Ancient Maya Cave Modification", *Geoarchaeology*, 12, 6, 1997, 725-750.

68. BARRERA VÁSQUEZ, A.: *Diccionario Maya Cordemex*, Merida, 1980, 946.

69. MOYES, H.: *The Cave as a Cosmogram: The Use of GIS in an Intrasite Spatial Analysis of the Main Chamber of Actun Tunichil Muknal, A Maya Ceremonial Cave in Western Belize*, M.A. thesis, Florida

skeleton was found propped up on a speleothem, possibly the only occurrence of its kind⁷⁰. But, despite the number of exotic items that may be associated with caves, the bulk of cave assemblages are composed of household items, primarily ceramics⁷¹.

Cave ceramic assemblages possess unique properties. For instance, most objects in caves are highly fragmentary and may have been ritually smashed and the pieces stacked or scattered within a small area. This has been well-documented in the systematic study at Actun Tunichil Muknal⁷², a cave with little subsurface sedimentation. In situ refitting demonstrated that the farthest a sherd fell from its associated sherds was 5 m. In many cases, sherds were stacked together and placed in niches or small alcoves⁷³. Although many vessels could be refitted they were invariably missing fragments suggesting that some sherds were removed from the cave. Brady similarly noted that when refitting vessels at Naj Tunich, some portion of the vessel was always missing⁷⁴. Also, single sherds were brought into the cave as offerings in and of themselves. Sherd scattering events are a hallmark of Late Classic caves use and are found at almost every site in that time period. For instance, at the cave at Las Cuevas, 32,000 sherds were found scattered on the floor concentrated in Chambers 2 and 3. These had been trampled, imbedding them into the clay matrix of the floor forming a “sherd carpet.”

Not only ceramics, but almost all artifacts in cave assembles exhibit some kind of breakage, however small or large. Some light may be shed on this practice by turning to the *Popol Vuh*. At the end of the story, after defeating the evil Lords of the Underworld, the triumphant twins threaten to kill the people of the underworld, but instead decide to spare their lives and chastise them by limiting the offerings that were able to receive from humans. The punishment was that offerings could only consist of “... scabrous nodules of sap... just griddles, just gourds, just brittle things broken to pieces”⁷⁵. Bearing these words in mind, it should come as no surprise that offerings left for deities in an underworld setting such as a cave, should be fragmentary.

Atlantic University, Boca Raton, 2001; PRUFER, K.M.: *Communities, Caves, and Ritual Specialists: A Study of Sacred Space in the Maya Mountains of Southern Belize*, Ph.D Dissertation, Southern Illinois University, Illinois, 2002, 626-627.

70. REENTS-BUDET, D., and MACLEOD, B.: *The Archaeology of Petroglyph Cave, Cayo District, Belize*, unpublished manuscript in author's possession, 1997.

71. BRADY, J.E., and PETERSON, P.A.: “Re-envisioning Ancient Maya Ritual Assemblages”, FOGELIN, L. (ed.), *Religion, Archaeology, and the Material World*, Illinois, 2008, 78-96.

72. MOYES.: *The Cave as a Cosmogram...*

73. MOYES: *The Cave as a Cosmogram...*, 73-75.

74. BRADY.: *An Investigation of Maya Ritual...*, 86.

75. TEDLOCK, D.: *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of the Gods and Kings*, New York, 1996, 138.

CONCLUSION

When we consider Maya cosmology and belief, it becomes apparent that caves are one of the most sacred places for the ancient Maya. This paper has presented only a limited synthetic compilation of what has been learned about cave use over the last 40 years. This overview demonstrates that caves functioned as ritual spaces for the earliest settlers and were important sacred features of the landscape that influenced site planning and social organization. Caves functioned as underworld spaces in the reification of Mesoamerican cosmological principles and the embodiment of mythological narratives. The archaeology of caves provides insight into how the ancient Maya conceptualized these spaces as the homes of deities, both evil and beneficent where these beings could be propitiated. The archaeological record demonstrates that caves were used as multi-purpose ritual venues ideally suited for earth-based rites such as rain, fertility, and renewal ceremonies. Their netherworld associations were made manifest by ritual practices occurring within caves and in their use as repositories for human remains. The mythic associations with the trials of the twins from the *Popol Vuh* and the sacrifice of humans deep within caves further enforces their underworld connections. Through ethnography, epigraphy, iconography and the archaeological record, we have a good understanding of the Maya underworld and its complex role in Maya thinking, cosmology, and the lives of ancient Maya people.

LIST OF FIGURES



FIGURE 1. Ancient Maya glyph meaning *och ch'èen* “enters the cave” illustrates the cave symbol as an eyeball looking out from the darkness (after VOGT and STUART: “Some Notes on Ritual Caves...”, 161, drawn by D. Stuart).



FIGURE 2. Image from the north wall of the San Bartolo murals illustrating the maize deity standing before a cave entrance. A woman hands out tamales and the maize deity hold a gourd of water (SATURNO ET AL.: *The Murals of San Bartolo...*).



FIGURE 3. Cave opening of Actun Isabella in western Belize resembles a giant open toothy maw (photograph by author).

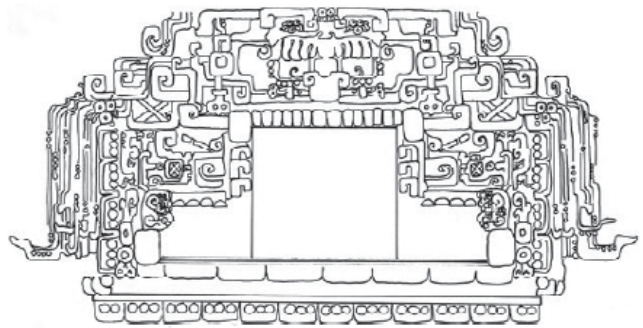


FIGURE 4. a) Photograph of temple façade of Structure II, Chicanna (Getty Images); b) Drawing of reconstructed façade Temple 22 Copan (drawing by N. Allen in collaboration with J. Schwerin in SCHWERIN, J.: “The Sacred Mountain in Social Context. Symbolism and History in Maya Architecture: Temple 22, at Copan, Honduras”, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 22, 2011, 271-300 (283)).

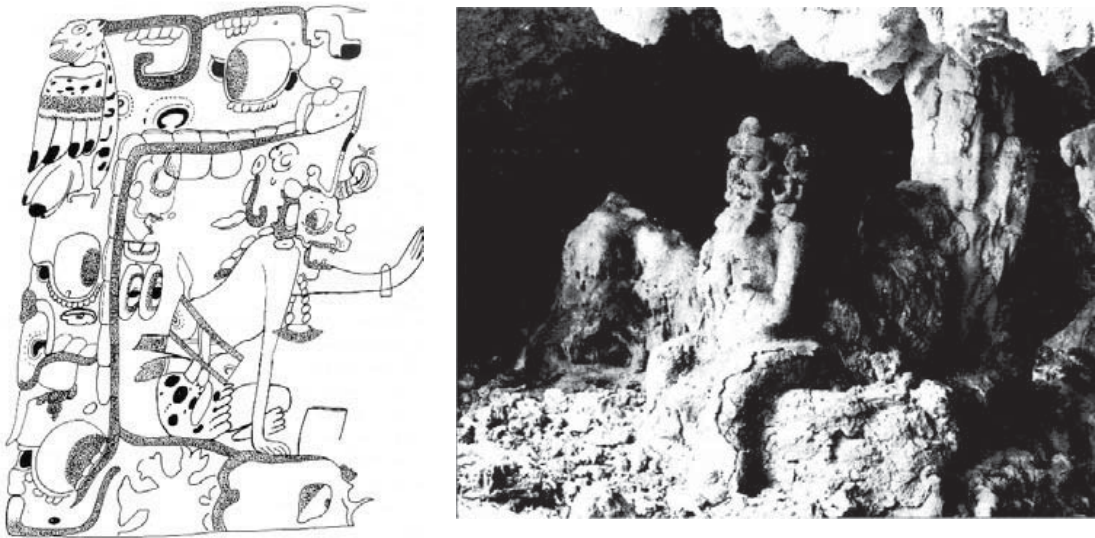


FIGURE 5. a) Chac the rain deity is depicted sitting in his cave/house on a Classic period vase (COE: *Lords of the Underworld*, 78, no.11); b) A life-sized sculpture of Chac sits on a throne inside the cave of La Pailita in Guatemala (GRAHAM: “Discovery of a Maya...”).



FIGURE 6. A cloud emerges from the cave at Las Cuevas on the summer solstice in 2014 (photo courtesy of the Las Cuevas Archaeological Reconnaissance).

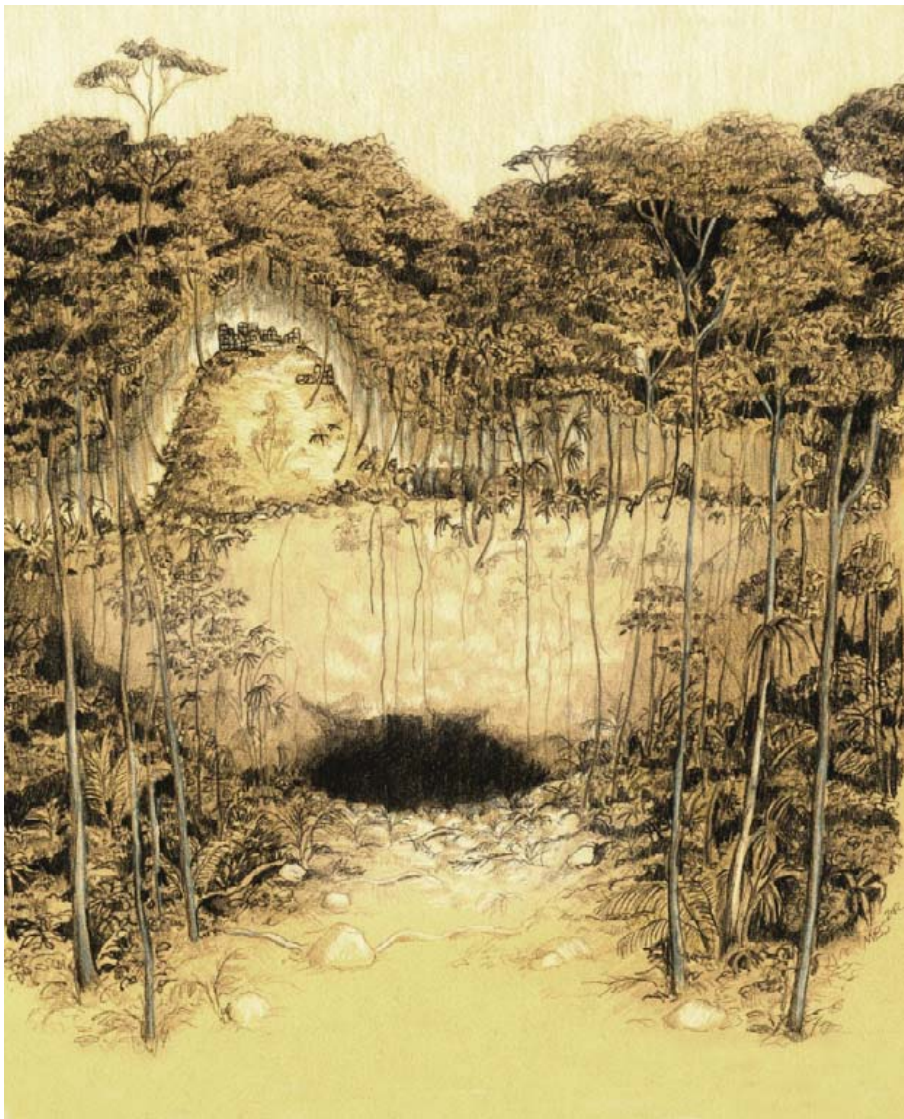


FIGURE 7. Artistic rendering of the cave at Las Cuevas that sits below an eastern pyramid (drawing by Mesa Schumacher, courtesy of the Las Cuevas Archaeological Reconnaissance).