

Water flows from the keyhole-shaped entrance of the ancient Maya ceremonial cave Actun Tunichil Muknal in western Belize.



The Heart of Creation, THE HEART OF DARKNESS

Sacred Caves in Mesoamerica

BY HOLLEY MOYES
AND JAMES E. BRADY



CAVES HAVE BEEN used as sacred spaces for thousands of years throughout the world. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Mesoamerica, where ethnography, ethnohistory, iconography, epigraphy, and archaeology have all contributed to our understanding of the meanings of these spaces for pre-Columbian societies. Although cave use was noted as early as the 1840s—during Stevens and Catherwood’s explorations of the Maya area—only in the last decade have caves been widely recognized as ritual spaces by Mesoamerican archaeologists. Since caves in Mesoamerica were used almost exclusively for ritual, they provide an unrivaled context for studying pre-Columbian religion.

The existence of a pan-Mesoamerican religion has long been noted by scholars. In 1943, Paul Kirchoff defined “Mesoamerica” not as a primarily geographic entity but as a group of cultures that shared a cultural unity and similar religious principles recognizable throughout the area and through time. These ideological concepts have survived despite changing internal political structures and the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century AD. The tenacity of these shared ideas in Mesoamerican thought suggests that they form the ideological foundations of Mesoamerican culture. These include ideas such as the integration of time and space, a four-sided universe with a fifth direction in the center, and the belief in a sacred and living natural landscape. We argue that another fundamental Mesoamerican belief is that caves are sacred spaces that materialize cosmology.

CAVES AS SACRED LANDSCAPE

To understand the importance of caves we must appreciate how Mesoamerican cosmology differs fundamentally from our own. For both ancient and modern indigenous peoples, the earth is a powerful force in the universe representing the nexus of all creation and destruction. It is both sacred and considered to be a living entity. While earth is represented in many landscape features (rocks, trees, rivers), one of its most powerful symbols is the mountain with a cave. This is well illustrated by modern Q’eqchi’ Maya belief, where both mountains and people possess *wiinqilal* (“personhood”). This animate quality of earth is exemplified by indigenous deities referred to as “Earth Lords” by anthropologists. Earth Lords live in caves—literally “stone house” in many Maya languages

The schematic drawing (after Doris Heyden 1975) illustrates the placement of the cave beneath the Pyramid of the Sun, Teotihuacan, Mexico.



(e.g. *rochoch pec* in Q'eqchi', *naj tunich* in Mopan, and *na cen* in Jalkatec and Kanjobal). In contrast to the Western concept of a church, these caves are seen as alive, with the exchange of air that one feels at the entrance of a large cave interpreted as the cave “breathing.” Thus a cave ritual is not simply performed in the house of the deity, but surrounded by the deity itself.

For an agrarian people, Mesoamerican cosmology differs from Western beliefs in another important way. Rain is considered to be a terrestrial phenomenon, originating from caves, along with clouds, lightning, and wind. Water from deep springs within the earth is often observed flowing from caves. In Mesoamerican religion, water emerging from the earth came to symbolize fertility. At Teotihuacan (AD 100), a man-made “cave” stretches from the base of the central stairway to beneath the center of the Pyramid of the Sun. In antiquity, water was channeled through a system of drains into this tunnel so it would flow out the entrance—the “cave’s mouth”—completing the image of a fertile sacred mountain. The Aztecs employed the same symbolism more than a thousand years later when they built Tenochtitlan’s Templo Mayor on the spot where an eagle perched on a cactus eating a snake. Beneath the cactus was a cave from which two springs exited.

The Maya employed a similar theme in their architectural planning at the Late Classic period (AD 600–800) site of Dos Pilas. Built above the Cueva de Murciélagos (“Cave of the Bats”), the royal palace complex serves as an outlet for a drainage system. During heavy rains water gushes from the mouth of the cave with such force that the roar can be heard a half-kilometer away. This sensory cue announced the beginning of the rainy season, reifying the king’s power and control over life-giving water. To this day, the connection with water draws people to caves to conduct rituals. Throughout Mesoamerica, groups make offerings in caves for rain and a bountiful harvest on the Day of the Cross (May 3), just before the onset of the rainy season. In everyday life, caves are the embodiment of the sacred; places where supernatural forces are petitioned for a variety of needs.

SACRED LANDSCAPE AND IDENTITY

The identity of Mesoamerican peoples is closely linked with their sacred landscape features. In his research on early Spanish land titles in Mesoamerica, ethnohistorian Angel García-Zambrano studied the criteria that migrants used in deciding where to settle. The ideal location, he discovered, was a watery place surrounded by four mountains with a fifth mountain in the center that had a number of caves—a



The Maya still use Naj Tunich Cave (Guatemala) for the Day of the Cross ceremony.

landscape configuration modeling the earth at the moment of creation.

Caves are a critical element since throughout Mesoamerica the first humans are thought to have emerged from caves. For example, surviving Mesoamerican myths dating from the Postclassic period (AD 1000–1500) describe how different ethnic groups sprang from a cavern or series of caverns known as “The Seven Caves” (*Chicomoztoc* in Nahuatl or *Tulan Zuyua*

in K'iche' Maya). In both Central Mexico and the Maya Highlands, archaeologists have found man-made caves that clearly model “The Seven Caves,” leaving no doubt about the importance of this myth.

This association between Mesoamerican peoples and the sacred landscape from which they originated is also evident in the terminology used to discuss their social groupings. For example, in Central Mexico, the Nahuatl term for community, *altepetl*, literally means “water-filled mountain,” while the Aztec glyph for a community was a hill with the specific name

mouth of the Jaguar, or Earth Monster—a well-recognized cave motif.

This motif appears in different parts of Mesoamerica for the next 2,500 years. For example, in the Chenes area of northern Yucatan, the exteriors of some Late Classic period (AD 700–900) palaces were elaborately decorated with monster-mask façades, with the open mouth of the Earth Monster framing the doorway and allowing the ruler to emerge from a “cave” every time he stepped through it. By the 16th century, the Maya of the Yucatan were using the term *aktun* (“cave”) to



at the top. Similarly, the Classic Maya term for community was *chan ch'een*, “sky cave,” and, as David Stuart and Stephen Houston have noted, the Classic Maya used a metaphor for “hill” when referring to their architectural constructions.

Caves and their associated symbolism were particularly appropriated by Mesoamerican elites. This process was well established from the early appearance of socio-political complexity in Mesoamerica. Olmec thrones (dating to 1000 BC) illustrate the close connection between early rulership and caves. A central element of many of these thrones is the portrayal of an individual emerging from a niche, the open

refer in general to stone buildings such as temples. This association of caves, elites, and power persists in modern Mesoamerican folklore as well. For example, emerging from a cave indicates that a hero/king possesses supernatural status or power as seen in the story of Condoy, the last Mixe king.

CAVE ARCHAEOLOGY

During the last decade of the 20th century the study of ancient and sustained devotion in caves by archaeologists has gained momentum. Caves have yielded enormous artifact assem-

Finds from ancient Maya caves: (a) metate (grinding stone), Actun Tunichil Muknal, Belize; (b) pottery cache, Cueva de Sangre, Dos Pilas, Guatemala; (c) painted handprints, Uayazba Kab, Belize; (d) shoe-shaped pottery vessel, Actun Tunichil Muknal, Belize; (e) calcite-encrusted skeleton of a human female, Actun Tunichil Muknal, Belize.

a



b



d



e



blages that allow archaeologists to develop a fresh view of ancient Mesoamerican religion. Because they were magnets for indigenous people, caves often provide the earliest evidence of occupation in a region. Caves tend to be low-traffic areas that preserve many objects intact and where they had been left. The cave environment frequently ensures excellent preservation, permitting archaeologists to recover normally perishable remains, such as maize cobs and other plants, wood objects, textiles, and human remains in both burial and sacrificial contexts. In some cases, the deposition of calcite has even cemented human skeletons to the floor, preserving their last position.

In a relatively short period, cave archaeology has vastly expanded our understanding of how Mesoamerican people related to their sacred landscape. Newly discovered forms of appropriating that landscape, such as man-made caves, impress on us how important caves were in the religion and cosmology of Mesoamerica. They were powerful cosmological symbols that helped anchor group identity to a particular place, and the incorporation of caves into public architecture reminds us that powerful religious symbols invariably operate in the political realm as well. Finally, the discovery of large artifact assemblages in caves illustrates the importance of these sites as religious spaces and provides a new corpus of data for studies of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican religion. 🏠

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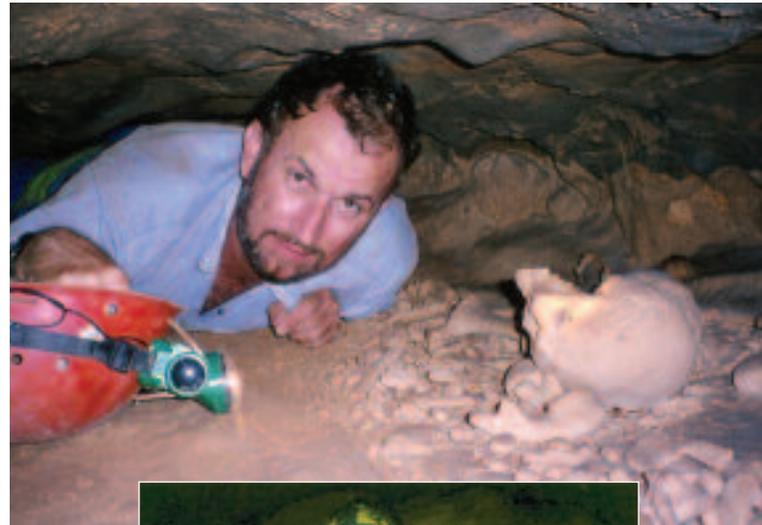
JAMES E. BRADY is generally credited with founding Maya cave archaeology as a discipline and has over 90 publications on the subject. He has directed projects at such well-known sites as Naj Tunich (National Geographic, August 1981, Archaeology, Nov/Dec 1986), Dos Pilas (National Geographic, February 1993), and the Cave of the Glowing Skulls (Archaeology, May/June 1995). He has been a fellow at Harvard University's Dumbarton Oaks Research Center in Washington, DC, and at the Center for Advanced Study of the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art. He has taught at California State University, Los Angeles since 1998.

For Further Reading

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Vincent Gancy (top), Holley Moyes (bottom)