



## Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Ancient Maya Underworld: Exploring the Rise and Fall of Maya Centres in Central Belize from the Cave Context

Shawn Gregory Morton, 2018. Oxford, UK, Vol. 2 of the series Archaeology of the Maya, Elizabeth Graham et al., eds., BAR Publishing (British Archaeological Reports, Ltd.), International Series 2910, [www.barpublishing.com](http://www.barpublishing.com), 187 p., 8.2 x 11.6 inches, softbound, ISBN 978-1-4073-1666-6. £37 (approx. \$74 retail, USA).

The Maya inhabited much of Mesoamerica, with cultures dating from before the years 300 CE, blossoming during what are considered the Classic (300 to 900 CE) and post-Classic (900 to ~1300 CE) periods, and followed by their rapid decline. This book focuses on their colonization of the Maya Mountains of central Belize, which are located along the southeastern margin of the Yucatán Peninsula, in the drainage basins of the Roaring Creek and Caves Branch River along the Hummingbird Highway. The area consists of a rugged upland located on karst-rich Cretaceous limestone. The major civic and ceremonial center of Tipan Chen Uitz has recently been discovered there and is presently under investigation by the Central Belize Archaeological Survey (CBAS). Neighboring areas have received far less study.

Dr. Morton has written many scholarly articles on the Maya culture and is currently on the faculty of the Anthropology Department at Northern Arizona University. This book is based mainly on his doctoral research in central Belize for the University of Calgary (Alberta) and several additional years of work as a senior staff member, and now co-Director, of CBAS. His primary goal is to clarify the origin of the local pre-Columbian people, to document their cave use from artifacts and related clues, and to show how they interacted with their neighbors. Throughout most of the region, little prior attention had been given to the history and culture of the Maya. Archeological sites in Belize are protected by law from unauthorized disturbance. This study was properly sanctioned and involved minimal disturbance. Abundant credit is given to previous investigators with a 27-page bibliography, including publications by at least half a dozen prominent members of the National Speleological Society.

This book is nicely printed and securely bound on semi-gloss paper. The text is scholarly, clear, and shows great care in preparation, with many detailed maps and diagrams. It is well illustrated with monochrome and color photos. Some photos have distinctly low-key lighting, but most important features are highlighted, and they portray well the dark and somewhat gloomy settings of the cave interiors.

The central theme of the book is: How did Mayan use of caves reflect on the complex history, social life, and economic status of the region during the development and ultimate decay of their culture? Discoveries over the past decade have greatly changed our understanding of the topic, and there is much more to be learned. This book focuses on ritual as the human expression of culture – i.e., rites of exchange, communion, affliction, feasting, fasting, politics, prayer, etc. This is not simply a catalogue of artifacts. Instead, it attempts to reach into the minds and thoughts of the local inhabitants. Abundant references and footnotes tie ever-greater parts of the subject together in a scholarly manner. There are still many unanswered questions, and these are summoned as an aid to future investigators. The extensive reference list includes works of interest to anyone involved in archeological field work, especially those who wish to learn about the Mayan culture in depth, and not solely in reference to caves.

The book opens in a rather academic style that reflects its origin as a dissertation, but it quickly becomes more relaxed as the interpretation unfolds. It consists of two sections divided into nine chapters. The first part summarizes the archeology of the Maya, with a focus on the use of caves in daily life, ritual, and religion. The second part gives specific details of the author's field research, including many maps of caves and interpretation of their contents. It is much more than a simple description of local sites and archeological relics. Caves are treated in a holistic way, with descriptions of how they influenced the Maya culture. It is an enjoyable read, interspersed with thought-provoking quotes drawn from authors ranging from Aristotle and Plato to fantasy novelist Terry Pratchett.

**Section 1** introduces the caves in terms of ritual, iconography, and sense of community. The author treats the subject as an adventure in time, space, and evolving culture. It includes a broad discussion of Mayan life and how caves were used for living space, water supply, religious rites, art galleries, and burial sites, as well as how caves influenced their ways of thinking. Topics include modern investigations highlighted by the production of cave maps that portray archaeological content, glyphs and paintings, and interpretation of the culture. Included are myths and aspects of religious worship, some of which continue today. The concept of caves as homes and shelters is treated at some length, including how they served as the sources or representation of fertility, wealth, communication with ancestors, and abodes of supernatural beings. As sources of drinking water, caves and cenotes probably had the most important control of population density. Caves were also used as burial grounds, crematoria, and ossuaries. There is some evidence of sacrifice.

Present evidence indicates that nucleated habitation came late to this area. All of the datable artifacts in caves reveal some use during the final cultural phases late in the Maya history (approximately 1000 to 1400 CE). Similarity of pottery types suggests that the Caves Branch River Valley was linked to a broad network of exchange and consumption, while marine shells give evidence that there was also contact with population centers along the Caribbean coast. The primary remaining question is how the changing patterns of pre-Columbian use of caves relates to the complex historical, social, political, and economic conditions during the occupation, expansion, and eventual collapse of Tipan Chen Uitz and other nearby cultural centers.

**Section 2** includes many cave maps based on careful surveys by the author and his team, including the identification and spatial arrangement of artifacts. Each site is described with location, description, geomorphic context, excavation details, and archaeological summary. Portrayal of artifacts is aided by histograms of their frequency (some with eye-popping effects where wide frequency ranges are displayed at a uniform scale). Exploration and mapping of the caves are described, including carefully detailed surveys made either with Brunton compass and tape, or with Leica Disto.

Caves are described in terms of their multiple purposes: as homes, shelters, entry-and-exit points to and from the underworld, sites of ritual acts, water sources, etc. Caves serve as a concept, rather than simply physical spaces – as sources of sustenance, even human life itself. Not all events took place specifically in caves, but the caves serve as a back-drop for most of the inhabitants' lives. Caves were also recognized as the abodes of witches, ghouls, and bizarre phenomena. The location of a cave also affected how it was used.

The book also represents caves in a broader perspective than the voids themselves – for example, the views from their entrances. Peering out of a cave entrance reveals what the ancient Maya saw, and it gives a broader perspective of the cave's meaning. A cave also serves as a point of contact with ancestors.

The final chapter summarizes the topic with two different perspectives. Does a cave mean more when you look into it, or when you look out at the rest of the world? What do you see in each case? Such philosophical points of view may seem off the subject, but they delve into the minds of the ancient Maya and set the reader to thinking. The book ends with a forecast of future directions in the field. It is highly recommended for anyone interested in the Mayan culture and the field of archeology in general.

Four appendices are available as free downloads with the link available in the book: (1) Ceramics: summary and catalog; (2) Lithics (worked rock chips, carving, etc.); (3) Faunal catalog; and (4) Radiocarbon dating.

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