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LAS RUINAS CAVE, CERRO RABON, OAXACA, MEXICO: A MAZATEC POSTCLASSIC FUNERARY AND RITUAL SITE

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Some 48 different caves and rock shelters were surveyed in a karstic region of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. A brief discussion of the morphological variation encountered and methods of underground archaeological survey is presented. The cave of Las Ruinas has been chosen for detailed examination in this paper. This cave best illustrates a typology for the considerable number and variety of funerary and other structures documented in the cave; and, different aspects of the relationship between human society and the subterranean environment. The pottery found in the archaeological survey has allowed relative chronological dating of all 48 studied sites. All belong to the Postclassic Period (900-1521 A.D.). The pottery also facilitated an evaluation of external contacts and influences on this region.

In 1971, the discovery of a cave beneath the Sun Pyramid at Teotihuacan, Mexico (Heyden, 1975), shed new light on the role of the subterranean world in Mesoamerican civilizations. Subsequent discoveries in Mayan areas have confirmed the role of caves as sacred sites, with an increasing number being found beneath later major temple structures, such as the group in the Petexbatun region of eastern Guatemala (Brady, 1991). This survey has been carried out in a karstic region of Mexico situated far from all major ancient ceremonial and economic centers, in the hope of investigating the importance of the subterranean world in Mesoamerican culture, and especially that of the Mazatecs. Recent discoveries made by this and other studies in the Cerro Rabon plateau have revealed evidence for previously unknown important ritual and funerary activities.

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

The Cerro Rabon is situated 300 km south-east of Mexico D.F., in the Sierra Mazateca (Fig. 1), bordered by the states of Oaxaca, Puebla and Veracruz. It is part of an important range of mountains extending between the cities of Orizaba and Oaxaca. We worked successively in two areas (Fig. 2), one located at San Jose Tenango in a steep valley between 700 to 900 m, the other on a central plateau in San Martin Caballero at a higher altitude (1300-1700 m).

MORPHOLOGY AND METHODS

Among the caves inspected, 48 archaeological sites have been found and documented. The caves are of various dimensions and morphology ranging from a simple rock shelter to a big vertical pit. The small caves, however, and some large horizontal systems were favored by the ancient Mazatecs. The Cerro Rabon plateau shows marked limestone relief and constitutes a fully karsified block through which rainwaters swiftly infiltrate large surfaces, without ever being able to form a river. Huge dolines are the characteristic features of this landscape. The particularly complex terrain covered with a thick rain forest makes the locating of caves difficult. In the caves, on the other hand, most of the remains are clearly visible, such as the improvement of certain key passages (i.e., stairs). Therefore, a good knowledge of the underground environment is essential. The origin, functioning and morphology of the cave (shape of the galleries, possibilities of continuation, difficulties brought about by the obstacles, age of the sediments, the collapsing of the walls, etc.) all follow physical laws. One must know these laws in order to spot traces of human activity more easily, and to distinguish them from natural phenomena.

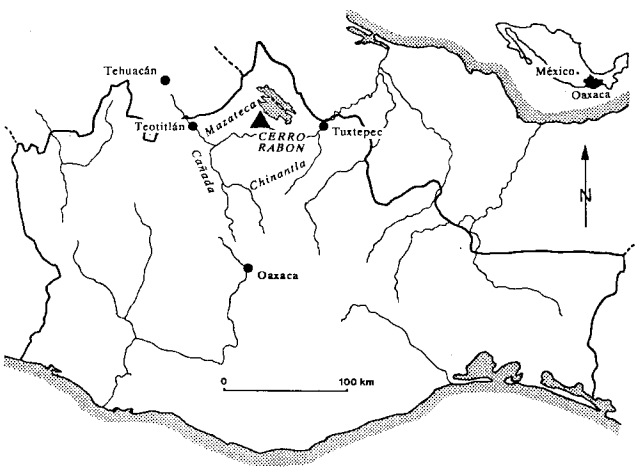


Figure 1. Location of the Cerro Rabon in the state of Oaxaca and in Mexico.

UNDERGROUND CONSTRUCTION AND IMPROVEMENTS

The underground constructions and improvements found at the Cerro Rabon are related to different uses: funerary prac-

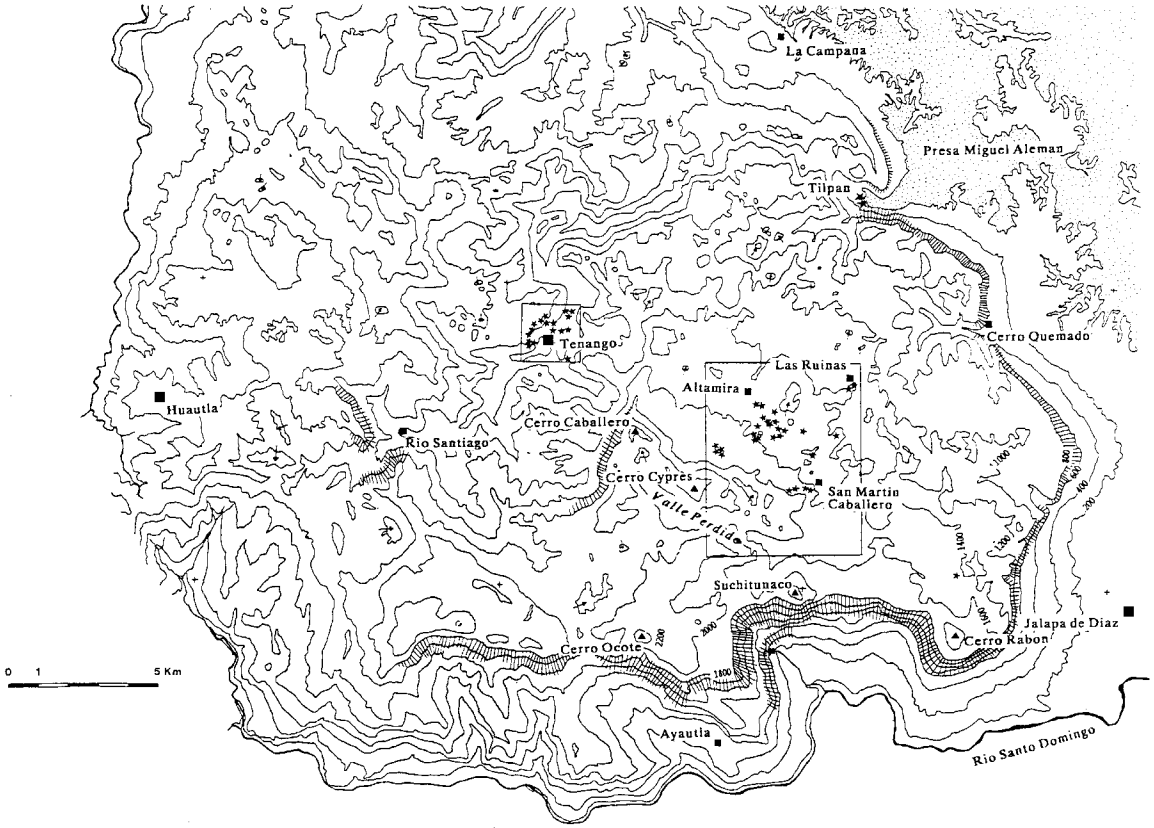


Figure 1. The two areas surveyed (boxes), at San José Tenango in a steep valley and on a central plateau in San Martin Caballero; (*) archaeological caves documented.

tices (tombs), altars, a "lithophone", terraces and water collection, either for ritual purposes or domestic use. Walled-up passage entries have also been observed in many caves.

Las Ruinas Cave (Fig. 3) has been chosen here for a more detailed examination. This vast cavity is located on the plateau at an altitude of nearly 1100 m. It is a complex cave reaching to nearly 500 m in length and down to a maximum depth of 39 m. It opens at the side of a huge doline, very close to the village of Las Ruinas. The result of this situation has been the partial destruction and looting of some structures. The entrance constitutes a shaft with vertical walls. Without too much difficulty, however, it may be traversed to reach the subhorizontal gallery, where the archaeological remains can be found. Three different areas can be distinguished from the morphological and archaeological points of view: the entrance, the Necropolis gallery, and the Lithophone gallery.

The main characteristic of the entrance is the natural lighting. A stepped ramp of 40 m in length with a slope of 20 m, allows passage from the bottom of the doline to the entries of the two galleries. Big blocks have been laid down to create more or less even steps. The drain-pipes coming down from the vault supply different water points, whose frequent use is attested by the many jar sherds on the ground.

The Necropolis gallery leads southwards 125 m, and has an average width of 5 m. Four imposing stalagmites separate this gallery from the entrance room. The space in between the stalagmites are filled by a wall (A) made of large blocks and dry stones. The construction of the wall was intended to prevent access to a burial chamber containing groups of funerary structures (B to U and AB). The thirty tombs of the Necropolis have allowed us to draw up an initial typology of funerary architecture. The tombs can be separated into four main groups, according to the number of natural walls integrated into the construction.

To the north, the ritual function of the Lithophone gallery seems to have been of the highest importance, given the presence of an altar (V) and of a lithophone (Y). The altar (Fig. 4) is made up of two stalagmites, each half a meter high, surrounded by a base of slabs. Two concentrations of charcoal indicate hearth areas. Thirty meters or so beyond the altar one finds the lithophone (Fig. 5). It is a group of stalagmites, stalactites, columns, and drapery of various colors and shapes, among which about ten have percussion wear on one or several sides. Other much smaller stalagmites are scattered broken on the ground. Using one of these to strike the speleothems of the lithophone produces particularly harmonious sounds, and their use as musical instruments is quite conceivable. It is interesting to point out that the acoustics in and between the lithophone room and the altar room are excellent. The resonance creates a phonic space among these different structures: it is thus perfectly imaginable that people near the altar would have received the full effect of beating on these "stone drums", a term derived from a Maya glyph translation (MacLeod & Puleston, 1978).

Except for some domestic activity which took place in the entry room, remains found in Las Ruinas Cave are of a funer-

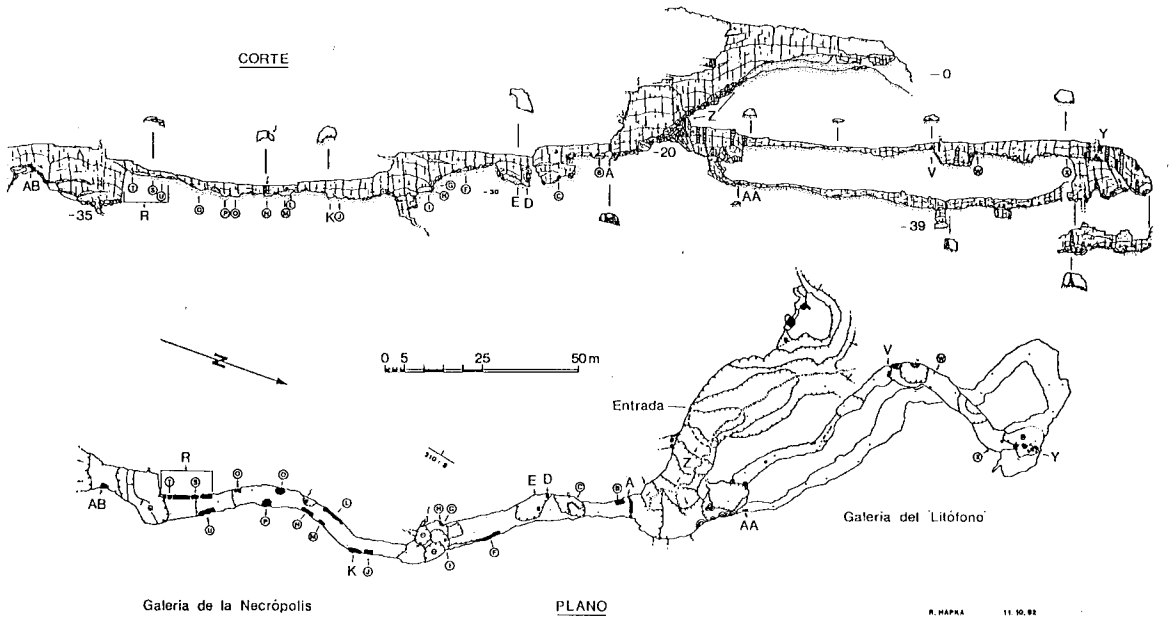


Figure 3. Profile and plan of the cave of Las Ruinas; locating of the archaeological structures.

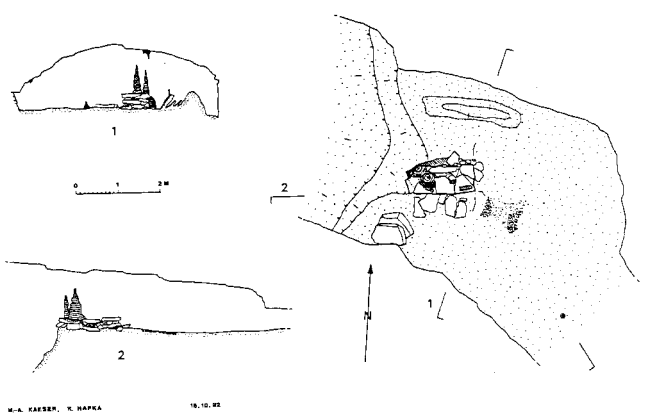
ary and ritual nature. Construction shows careful planning in the organization of space. Only after a thorough visit did the ancient Mazatecs decide where to place the different constructions. In the case of the necropolis, they decided upon a large-sized gallery, allowing the fairly simple transporting of the mortal remains; whereas, the place chosen for celebrating the cults in the Lithophone gallery is accessible only after a tiresome crawl.

Material and Dating

The pottery found in the archaeological survey has allowed relative chronological dating of all 48 sites studied, all belonging to the Postclassic Period (750-1521 A.D.). In Las Ruinas, four pottery groups have been identified. The same groups were found in the other survey sites:

1. Coarse orange-brown ceramic (Fig. 6); it is mainly composed of big utilitarian containers, such as jars, pots and pitchers.
2. Ceramics of a fine grey clay, common to several regions of Oaxaca during the Postclassic Period and apparently produced in different places during that epoch. Forms include hemispherical and tripod bowls (Fig. 7).
3. Finely painted ceramic, representing a type specific to the Sierra Mazateca.
4. Richly decorated ceramic, including Incised Teotitlan ware, coming from the Tehuacan Valley (MacNeish et al., 1970: 204-205) and Chinantla polychrome.

The first three groups are of local production, whereas the fourth one is imported. These imported ceramics give evidence of constant contacts with the Chinantla and Tehuacan outlying areas during the Postclassic Period, as well as those



Figre 4. Plan and profile of the altar of Las Ruinas.

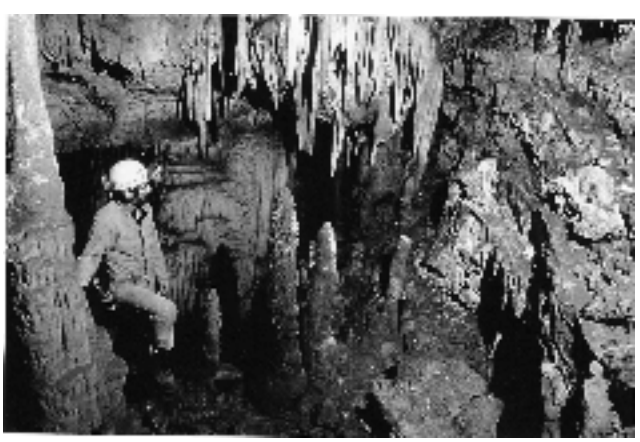


Figure 5. The lithophone, a group of stalagmites, stalagtites, columns and drapery, among which about ten concretions bear traces of percussion. Photo courtesy of Urs Widmer.

Figure 6. Coarse organge-brown ceramic. Photo courtesy of Ernie Garza.

between the Tenango Valley and the Cerro Rabon plateau. To determine a more precise regional chronology of the Postclassic Period is not possible until an excavation with a good stratigraphic sequence takes place.

Conclusion

The role of caves has been studied and discussed in Mesoamerica mainly within the context of the Maya culture. Looking at the Mazatec area in particular, we notice that, besides the domestic function confined to collecting water, the Mazatec culture of the Postclassic Period is characterized by the use of the underground world as much in the funerary as in the ritual contexts. In research at the present time, the Sierra Mazateca, an outlying area isolated from the capitals, has not revealed vast ritual architectural centers (like pyramids). One can suppose that the caves probably played the ritual role. These different elements support the existence of a Mesoamerican tradition exceeding well beyond the Maya sphere. It is linked to common beliefs about caves and to very

Figure 7. Tripod bowl of a fine grey ceramic. Photo courtesy of Ernie Garza.

strong symbolism present in the whole of Mesoamerica (Carot, 1989).

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