

SUMMER 2011

american archaeology

a quarterly publication of The Archaeological Conservancy

Vol. 15 No. 2

Caves and Cenotes: The Maya's Sacred Places



THE MAYA'S SACRED CAVES

Caves played
an important
role in Maya
spiritual practices.

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Aktun Xpukil Cave, Yucatán Peninsula, Mexico
Aktun Xpukil, which is now better known as Calcehtok, was excavated by Henry Mercer in 1895. He found 46 vessels below dripping water in one area of the cave. Some of them had been all but filled by stalactites.

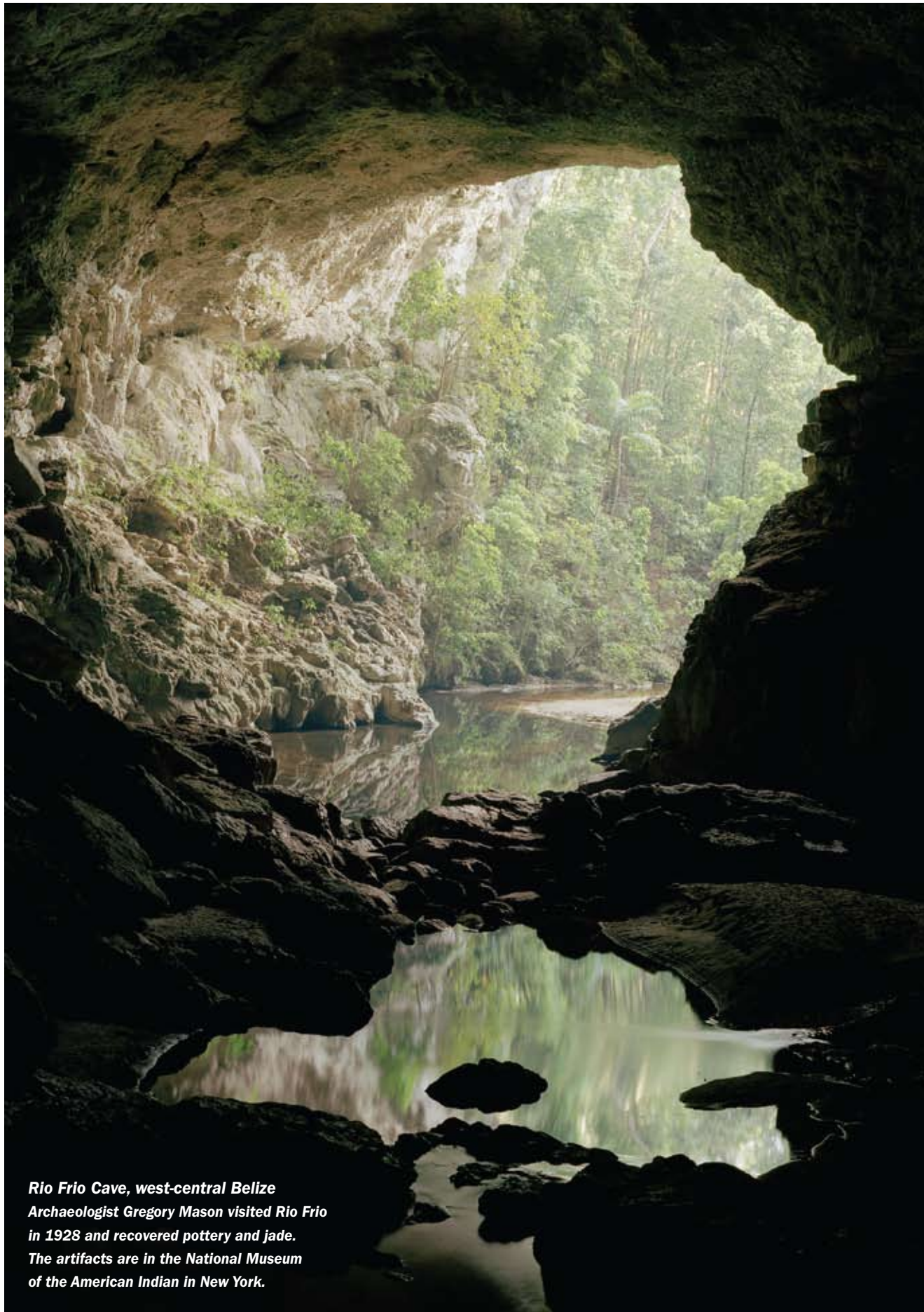
At the heart of ancient Maya religion and cosmology is the belief in a sacred, living Earth that is the paramount power in the universe. Not surprisingly, features of the landscape were treated with great reverence because they were part of the sacred Earth. Caves and mountains continue to be the two most important landscape features among contemporary Maya, and when united they are considered to be especially powerful. Ancient Maya architecture was also modeled on them. We know from hieroglyphs that pyramids were referred to as *witz*, a Mayan word meaning mountains, and the interiors of the temples at the top represented caves. A Q'eqchi' Maya ritual specialist expressed this beautifully to one of my students in saying, "For us, this cave is sacred, and although other people say that church is a sacred place, I know that this cave is important because this is the first temple of the world (*el primer templo del mundo*). My father and grandfather taught me this and all the elders and ancient ones have also



*Loltun Cave, Yucatán Peninsula, Mexico
Archaeologists have been investigating this cave
since the 1890s. Loltun contains a variety of
rock art, including a low relief carving with an
inscription dating to the Preclassic Period.*



*Actun Loch Tunich Cave, west-central Belize
A cloud of mist rises near an opening. The combination of
earth and water signified abundance to the ancient Maya.*



Rio Frio Cave, west-central Belize
 Archaeologist Gregory Mason visited Rio Frio in 1928 and recovered pottery and jade. The artifacts are in the National Museum of the American Indian in New York.



Xtacumbilxunaan Cave, Yucatán Peninsula, Mexico

The cave is well known in archaeology because of 19th-century Maya explorers John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood's description of the descent into the cave and the lithograph of the scene. The Maya name means hidden lady or hidden maiden and probably refers to the Moon Goddess.

taught us this. They say, and I know it, that many things began here... Even the sun and the moon have come out of caves."

When Earth is combined with another sacred element, water, it symbolizes an ideal landscape bursting with fertility, abundance, and promise. The relation between Earth and water is an intimate one because in Maya thought rain, clouds, and lightning are all formed within the earth before rising into the sky to fall back again. Nowhere is the relationship closer than in caves, most of which were formed by water. The humidity in some Maya caves is so high that a thin, white, cloud-like mist will form in the entrance and water dripping from formations will imitate rain. Caves often hold pools of water or have streams running from their entrances. For these reasons, people across the Maya area still go to caves to pray for rain on the Day of the Cross (May 3rd) near the end of the dry season.

The Maya, like other people in Mesoamerica and the American Southwest, believed that their first ancestors emerged out of the Earth through caves. Around the world such places are always memorialized and celebrated. It appears that a cave, whether natural or man-made, was a necessary element in the founding of a new community. Angel García-Zambrano, a historian at the Autonomous University of Zacatecas in Mexico, notes that "These cavities, when

ritually dedicated to the divinities, became the pulsating heart of the new town, providing the cosmogonic referents that legitimized the settlers' rights for occupying that space and for the ruler's authority over that site." The belief is important even today because it implies that the community occupied that spot since the beginning of time, and therefore its people are the rightful owners of the land.

Over the last two decades, archaeologists have found abundant evidence of the importance of caves. Temple pyramids, palaces, and shrines have been built on top of them. A number of man-made caves that have now been documented. Finally, caves are increasingly being recognized for hosting some of the richest archaeology in the Maya lowlands. It is not unusual for investigations to recover tens of thousands of ceramic sherds and a varied array of artifacts.

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JAMES BRADY, an archaeologist at California State University, Los Angeles, is generally credited with having founded the sub-field of Maya cave archaeology and has more than 100 publications on the subject.