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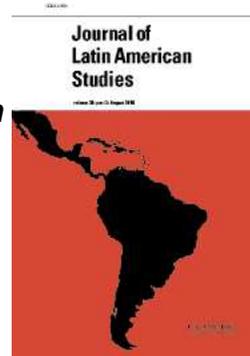
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**James E. Brady and Keith M. Prufer (eds.), *In the Maw of the Earth Monster: Mesoamerican Ritual Cave Use* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. viii+438, \$60.00, hb.**

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James E. Brady and Keith M. Prufer (eds.), *In the Maw of the Earth Monster: Mesoamerican Ritual Cave Use* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. viii + 438, \$60.00, hb.

This volume on Mesoamerican ritual cave use is a significant achievement on the editors' part and a major contribution to cave research. It is also a landmark in research on religion, ritual and worldview in Maya studies as a whole. Following Brady and Prufer's introduction, in which theoretical approaches to cave research are summarised and evaluated, Heyden reviews the use of caves in the Valley of Mexico by exploring both early colonial documents and modern ethnography. Still in Mexico, Sandstrom examines earth symbolism and cave rituals of the contemporary Nahua of northern Veracruz. Aguilar and colleagues report on the result of the excavation of a series of caves located at the edge of the site of Acatzingo Viejo in Puebla. The six caves are artificially constructed, and the fact that there were originally seven ties Acatzingo Viejo to the concept of Chicomoztoc, the cave from which humans emerged in Aztec myth.

Much less is known about caves in Oaxaca. Fitzsimmons reports on the excavation of a cave in the Sierra Mazateca, where the artefact inventory shows close ties with cave artefacts from the Maya area. Rincon reports on cave sites in the northern Mixteca Alta, where ancient ritual cave use is associated with a rich cultural tradition of considerable time depth.

Vogt and Stuart combine ethnographic and epigraphic data to show how modern ritual and ancient glyphic evidence taken together reveal continuity in the meaning and use of caves in Maya traditions of Highland Chiapas. Prufer draws on archaeological data from sites and caves in the Maya Mountains of Belize, as well as on

cross-cultural data, to discuss the role of ritual specialists and caves in Maya society. Awe and colleagues report on three caves in western Belize that contain standing megalithic monuments. Stone discusses more broadly the ordering of spaces in caves as a critical element in structuring ritual activities. She calls attention to the vertical as well as horizontal ordering of space, and she discusses the cognitive models which motivated the placement of artefacts in caves as well the problems inherent in verifying such models. Returning to Belize, Moyes analyses the spatial patterning of artefacts in the main chamber of a cave in western Belize. In comparing results to models of use of ritual space, she found a parallel in spatial models of foundation rites. This enabled her to propose that linear scatters of artefacts represent ritual pathways, and that some artefacts functioned as ritual boundary markers.

Turning to ethnography, Adams and Brady discuss modern Q'eqchi' Maya cave pilgrimages. Their study emphasises that Maya sacred geography was regional in scope, so that individual sites gained importance as parts of a complex whole. This calls into question the practice of investigating single caves as independent entities. Their chapter also highlights the importance of gendered space in cave ritual. Ethnographically, the non-Christianised Lacandon of Chiapas have been the source of a great deal of information, except in the case of cave use. Colas seeks to correct this imbalance by translating an article by Jaroslaw Petryshyn on a Lacandon religious ritual held in a cave.

Rissolo's investigation of patterns of ancient Maya ritual cave use in the Yalahau region of northern Quintana Roo follows Adams and Brady's approach by employing a regional or landscape approach. He looked beyond a single cave to 'a range of natural and cultural features both within caves and across the landscape' in order to detect patterns, one of which is that the presence of water in a cave is critical to the cave's ritual significance. Archaeological data are further explored by Brown, who focuses on Mayapan and emphasises through a number of examples the important connection between settlements and their cenotes or wells in northern Yucatán. Although many scholars have connected cave rituals in northern Yucatán to rain-bringing, Brown provides evidence that caves are associated with lineages and veneration of ancestors (p. 387).

Prufer and Brady offer concluding comments and neatly summarise the significance of the book's contributions, not least of which is that the research is empirically grounded. The book is also enriched by the fact that data and approaches to interpretation are drawn from a number of disciplines. What does not emerge from the volume is a sense that caves subsume a specific set of meanings. Instead, caves seem to be many things: constructive and life-giving; destructive and dangerous to life; associated with rain and water; associated with agriculture and the earth; places of mythical origin; liminal places between the natural and supernatural world; portals; and/or places where the spirit world of ancestors can be accessed. Pruffer and Brady state that the most important new direction in cave research represented by their edited volume is the 'emerging recognition of the importance of *Earth* as a sacred and animate entity in indigenous cosmology', and that David Stuart's decipherment of the ch'een glyph as 'cave' confirms such an importance. This is interesting, because after reading the book, this thought did not occur to me. In fact, the new data seem to complicate such an interpretation and suggest instead that our concept of 'earth' is not paralleled in Maya cosmology and worldview. Another feature of the volume that left me cold was the reliance of several authors

on Mircea Eliade, whose ideas on religion always seem to me to be more like explanations waiting for a place to happen. In fact, they approach the generic. However, these are minor points. The volume's geographic and inter-disciplinary scope, as well as the varied approaches and interpretations, are innovative and highly informative. The book will be mined for ideas and information for many years to come.

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