

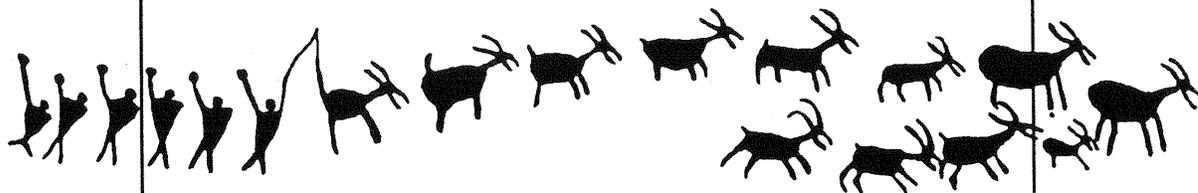
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# CAVES AND COSMOVISION AT UTATLAN

JAMES E. BRADY

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper presents data on three man-made caves originally dug under the site of Utatlan (Gumarcaaj) during its Mayan occupation. The location of settlements is often selected based on the presence of sacred landmarks which tie the site into the cosmovision of the settlers. For reasons presented in this paper, caves are often the feature used in Mesoamerica to accomplish this. The manner in which the caves at Utatlan were used to tie the site into the cosmovision of the Quiche is outlined.*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a growing critique of processual archaeology for its failure to deal with ideological factors in archaeological reconstruction (see Watson and Fotiadis 1990). This is nowhere more evident than in settlement pattern surveys where studies have consistently failed to record features which may have been of ideological significance to prehistoric populations (Hammond 1981: 176-177). This is despite the fact that it has long been recognized that the presence of such features may have been an important factor in the determination of site location. Settlement placement is not determined simply by ecology and resources but also involves mythology and religious beliefs that form a sacred landscape which is imposed on the physical terrain. Matos Moctezuma (1987: 191) observes:

As Mircea Eliade has noted, the founding or first settlement of every city is accompanied by signs and, in general, the sacred space is made into a defined area that transforms it into an "inexhaustible source" of sacrality. This place is always "discovered" by humans through certain symbols laden with mystic meaning, among which frequently occurs the presence of some animal. In many cases the symbolism of the four quarters is also repeated. As Eliade (1979: 335) says:

The foundation of the new city repeats the creation of the world; indeed, once the place has been ritually validated, a fence is erected in the form of a circle or a square broken by four doors which correspond to the four cardinal directions...the cities, like the cosmos, are divided in four; said another way, they are a copy of the universe.

A similar observation concerning the sacred nature of the physical world has been made by Joseph Campbell (1956: 43) who states:

For a culture still nurtured in mythology, the landscape, as well as every phase of human existence, is made alive with symbolical suggestion. The hills and groves have their supernatural protectors and are associated with popularly known episodes in the local history of the creation of the world. Here and there, furthermore, are special shrines. Wherever a hero has been born, has wrought, or has passed back into the void, the place is marked and sanctified. A temple is erected there to signify and inspire the miracle of perfect centeredness; for this is the place of the breakthrough to abundance....Such temples are designated as a rule, to simulate the four directions of the world horizon, the shrine or altar at the center being symbolical of the Inexhaustible Point....Ancient cities are built like temples, having their portals to the four directions, while in the center place stands the major shrine of the divine city founder. The citizens live and work within the confines of this symbol.

The problem for archaeologists attempting to deal with the cultural geography of a prehistoric people involves the recognition of sacred features and the verification that one is dealing with an important landmark in the cultural landscape. In the Maya area there is less uncertainty over the nature of sacred landmarks because there is considerable cultural continuity in belief systems, and ethnographers have stated that the most important features in the sacred landscape are mountains and caves (Vogt 1969:375). Villa Rojas (1947:579) notes that Tzeltal Maya communities are situated in relation to sacred caves. These caves give their

names to a community, and the residents there inherit the obligation to conduct ceremonies at their particular cave (Villa Rojas 1946: 16). Tzotzil Maya communities form around waterholes which, along with caves, fall under the Maya term *ch'en*. These are extremely sacred, and myths record how the ancestors found and named each. Once again, community members have a moral and even legal obligation to conduct ceremonies at these features (Vogt 1976: 25). Thus, the ethnographic record clearly indicates that caves are important features in Maya cultural geography, and ethnohistoric and archaeological data indicate that they had a similar importance in prehistoric times as well (Brady 1989a).

#### PROBLEM/DISCUSSION

An interesting example of the interplay between sacred and secular geography involving caves has recently been recorded at the site of Utatlan, the contact period capital of the Quiche Maya (the Guatemalan government has officially changed the name of the site to its Quiche name *Gumarcaai*, place of rotten reeds, however the Nahuatl translation is used in this report as it is more widely recognized). Field research was carried out by the author during three visits to Utatlan in 1988 and 1989 with the permission of the Guatemala National Museum of Anthropology. The site has a long history of investigation (Fox 1978: 17-18), but the best organized and most substantial project was carried out by State University of New York at Albany in the early seventies (Wallace and Carmack 1977). The existence of caves at the site was not completely overlooked as seen when Fox (1978: 24) mentions that:

Finally, there is a man-made cave in the west cliff side just below the plateau surface, extending for about 90 meters and ending in the vicinity of the civic plaza. Interestingly, the cave is hewn in the shape of a corbeled arch, and has several "dead end" side passages, each projecting a short distance from the main tunnel.

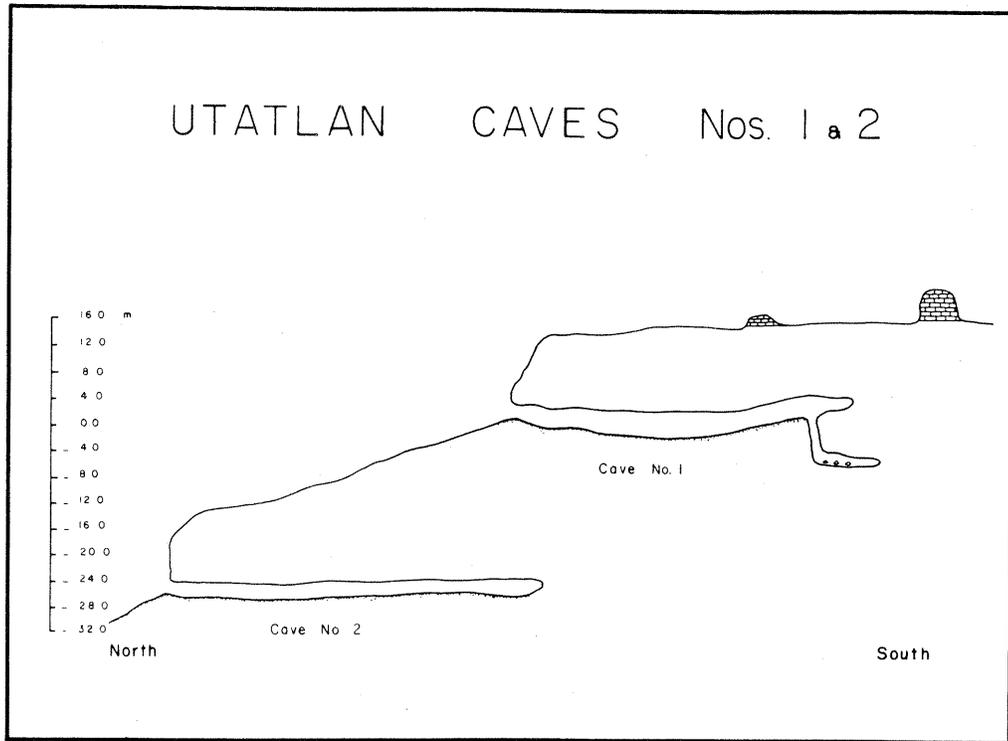
Incredibly, despite the fact that the archaeologists realized that the cave was a man-made feature nearly 100 m long that ended under the central plaza, they did not map or report it in any detail.

In actuality, there are three man-made caves at the site, all associated with

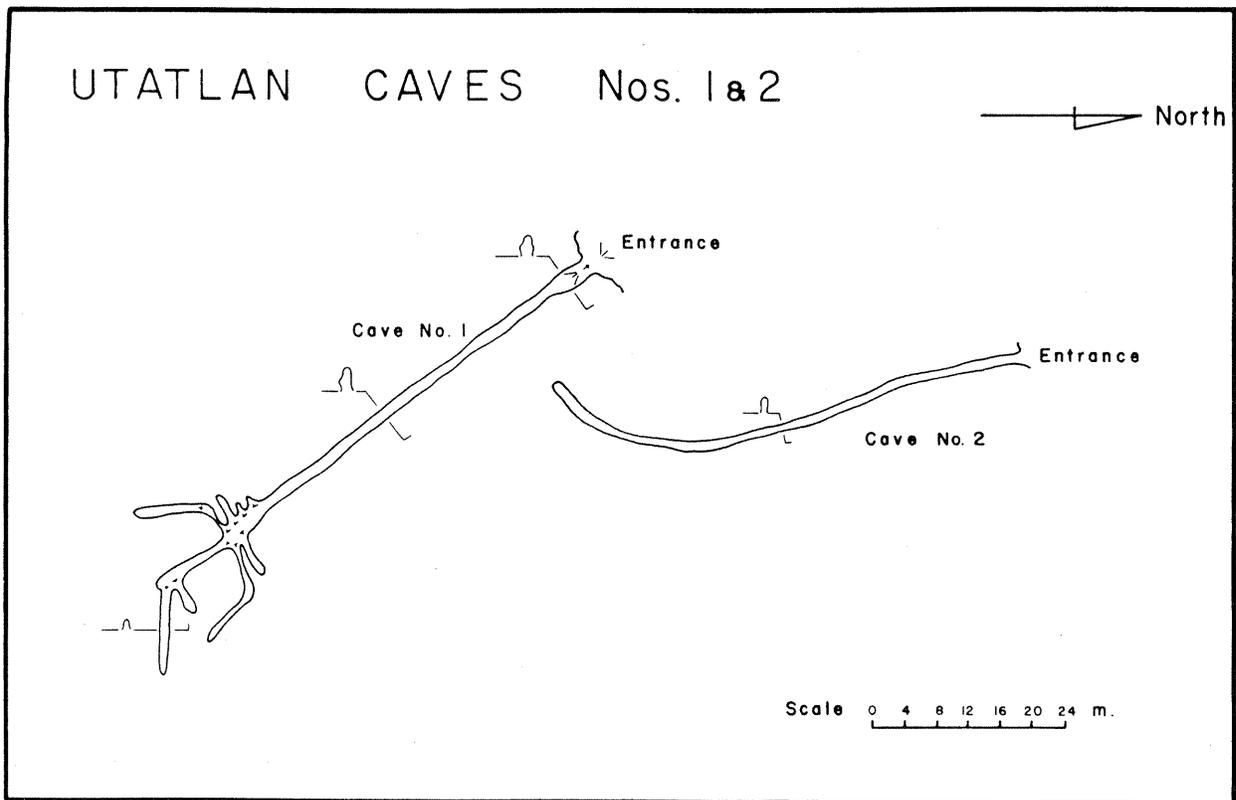
the central ceremonial complex. To the north of the cave described by Fox (Cave 1), is a second cave (Cave 2) excavated somewhat lower in the cliff face (see map 1). Cave 3, located in the eastern cliff facing Caves 1 & 2, collapsed during the 1976 earthquake but was described by guards as being a single passage of approximately equal length as Cave 2. The collapsed entrance to Cave 3 was located and the general direction of the tunnel indicates that it may extend toward the Pyramid of Awilix, across the plaza from the Tojil pyramid. This, however, can not be confirmed without excavating the collapsed portion.

The entrance to Cave 2 has been partially blocked by recent breakdowns and an examination of the ground surface on either side of the cave entrance suggests that the first five meters of the original tunnel have collapsed. The cave has a single shaft which presently measures 62.2 m in length and varies in width between 0.7 to 1.3 m with an average of 0.9 m (see map 2). The tunnel terminates beneath the architectural complex on the western border of the site. Beyond the restriction at the entrance the ceiling varies between 1.5 and 2.5 m high and is rounded in form rather than having the shape of a corbeled arch as suggested by Fox (1978: 24) for Cave 1. The walls and ceiling of the tunnel are coated with a thick, black, greasy soot from the large quantities of copal incense which were burned during Indian ceremonies conducted in the cave. At the end of the tunnel there is small, raised altar on which were found burning incense and eleven lighted candles during one of our visits. In conversation with Indians who had performed ceremonies there, it was found that the site draws pilgrims from beyond simply the Department of Quiche.

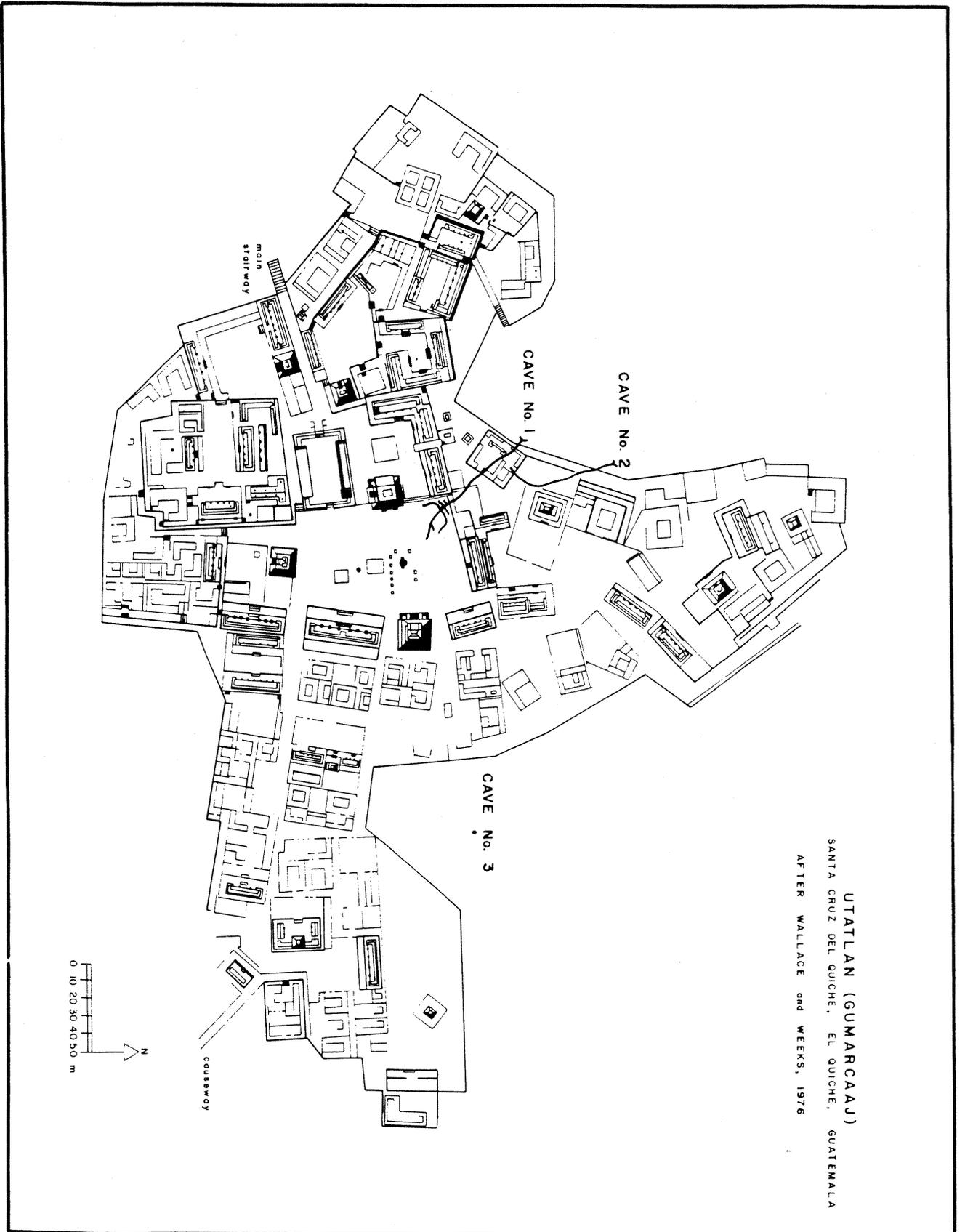
Cave 1 is the longest of the three caves with the central shaft measuring nearly 68 m in length. It is also the most elaborate containing six side passages and two small niches which total 127.5 m of tunnel (see map 2). The side passages are generally smaller than the central passage which averages one meter in width. The tunnel in the central passage is between 2 and 4 m high while the side passages vary between 1.5 and 2 m. The southwestern most side passage contains a pit 7.2 m deep. At the base of the pit, the tunnel continues for nearly nine additional meters. This lower passage contains many fire blackened



Map 1. Profile view of Caves 1 and 2 shown in relation to the plateau surface.



Map 2. Plan of Caves 1 and 2.



Map 3. The location of Caves 1, 2, and 3 with the tunnels of Caves 1 and 2 depicted in relationship to surface architecture.

rocks, some of which have been piled to form low, crude altars. A gallon paint can with a number of perforations and a rope tied to the handle was also found. These are generally used to burn incense during recent native ceremonies.

One of the most important aspects of Cave 1 is its relation to above-ground features (see map 3). As Fox noted, the central shaft of the cave terminates near the center of the central plaza. There are four side passages dug into the northern wall of the central shaft. The two larger passages approach the front of the long structure on the northern side of the plaza. The longer of the two passages dug in the southern wall approaches the pyramid of Tojil. The shorter passages on each side terminate under the structures in the northwest corner of the central plaza. The passages approach but generally do not actually terminate under structures. This may be the result of a slight error in calculations because surveying below ground is a bit more complicated than above ground. Yet the tendency for all of the passages to approach surface structures suggests that the cave was designed to replicate the layout of the northwestern portion of the central plaza.

Because of its larger size, more elaborate form, and positioning under the central plaza, Cave 1 is clearly the most important of the three constructions. There is some uncertainty as to the original form of the cave since it is not clear if the two niches were part of the original construction and whether these were to be counted as side passages. If the two niches and the termination of the central tunnel are counted as passages, there are nine which may bear a relationship to the nine levels of the underworld. Because these are somewhat cruder in form than the side passages, it is likely that the niches were either recent additions or were not considered passages. In this event the cave contains seven chambers and was probably intended to model the Vucub-Pec, the seven-chambered cave from which the Quiche were supposed to have emerged (Recinos et al. 1950: 62, 174n). In either case, it is likely that the number of side passages was deliberately chosen to have symbolic meaning.

The discovery of these tunnels raises questions about why they were dug and what they were intended to mean. In answer to the first question, I would like to suggest that

data is now emerging that indicates that caves were incorporated into sites in Mesoamerica far more frequently than is commonly believed.

There is a relatively well documented tradition of placing structures over caves in the Valley of Mexico dating back to Teotihuacan (Broda 1987: 232). The location, size, and orientation of the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan, one of the largest and most important structures in Mesoamerica, was determined by the cave beneath it (Heyden 1973, 1975, 1981). As Millon (1981: 235) says:

Nevertheless, the stubborn fact remains: the pyramid must be where it is and no where else because the cave below it was the most sacred of sacred places. Whether or not the Teotihuacanos believed that the sun and the moon had been created there, the rituals performed in the cave must have celebrated a system of myth and belief of transcendent importance.

While this cave is undoubtedly the most important feature, the layout of Teotihuacan appears to incorporate a number of reference points in the sacred landscape including a second cave near the Pyramid of the Sun (Broda 1987: 232). Post-conquest native maps suggest that a cave may also exist under the Pyramid of the Moon (Kubler 1982: 50) and remote sensing appears to confirm this (Barba et al. 1990). Heyden (1975: 139) suspected that early construction at Ozttoyahualco, meaning "in the circle of caves," incorporated other caves. Subsequent archaeological work (Basante Gutierrez 1982) and remote sensing (Barba et al. 1990) have confirmed this suggestion. Tobriner (1972) has postulated that the Avenue of the Dead is aligned with the sacred mountain of Cerro Gordo and in particular to a number of deep holes in the side of the mountain. Thus, many important areas and features in Teotihuacan would incorporate caves as points charged with sacred meaning around which the city was laid out.

The Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, in many ways, replicates all of the symbolic features of the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan. According to the legend recorded by Alvarado Tezozomoc (*Cronica Mexicayotl* 1975: 63), the Templo Mayor is built over the spot where the Mexica discovered the eagle perched on a cactus and holding a serpent. The cactus, in turn, was

located over the entrance to two caves from which water issued.

At other sites in central Mexico, such as Xochicalco (Gamio 1897: 531-532; Heyden 1981: 17), a similar use of caves appears to have been present. At Malinalco, the "Eagle House," a man-made temple cut into the side of a hill, was clearly intended to represent a cave since the doorway of the temple is framed by the open mouth of the earth monster, a common cave symbol (Mendoza 1977). The construction of a symbolic cave in this case is particularly interesting in light of the discoveries at Utatlan. In ethnohistorical sources, the prevalence of *oztoc*, Nahuatl for cave, in the site names of Central Mexico and the presence of the cave motif in site glyphs suggest that many other centers also incorporated caves into their sites (Heyden 1973, 1975). The presence of the word "cave" in the site name and the cave motif in the emblem glyph attest to the transcendent importance of these features in the sacred geography of Prehispanic Central Mexico.

While the pattern is less well documented in the Maya area, several additional examples have recently come to light. At Chichen Itza, Thompson (1938) discovered a natural cave beneath the center point of an important pyramid modeled after the Castillo. Houston (1987: 382) mentions the existence of caves beneath the sites of Dos Pilas and Aquateca. Recent investigations at Dos Pilas have produced several additional examples including one case in which a large pyramidal complex is built over a cave which has entrances on two sides of the complex (Brady 1990a, 1990b). Lundell (1934: 177) reports a possible cave in a pyramid at Polol. The important site of Quen Santo received its name from caves below the plateau (Seler 1901) and Smith (1955: 7, 43, 45, 64) also mentions a number of sites in the highlands which have caves or legends of caves connected with the site.

## CONCLUSIONS

While the above discussion has produced a number of examples of caves being incorporated into site architecture, it should be noted that these probably represent only a small percentage of the total number of caves used in this manner since, in most cases, the discovery was fortuitous. If this is the case, then these data suggest that the alignment of sites and

public architecture with important features in the sacred landscape may have been a fairly common practice. The construction of artificial caves at Utatlan would appear, therefore, to be an emulation of this pattern. This suspicion is strengthened by the fact that man-made caves have recently been discovered at several other sites in the Guatemalan highlands which lack natural caves. At La Lagunita, a cave was dug under the central stairway of one of the four principal pyramids and terminates in the middle of the central plaza (Ichon and Viel 1984). Ichon (Ichon and Arnauld 1985: 4) feels that the cave, located in the heart of the ceremonial center, represents the mythological cave of origin. Mixco Viejo has a single man-made cave and another man-modified cave below the site (Brady 1989b) and Termer (1957: 178) mentions others at the sites of Mixco and Chiriantla.

The second question posed about the Utatlan caves was what were they intended to mean. At the beginning of the article, passages by Eliade and Campbell were quoted which stated that cross-culturally people attempt to model their settlements in a way that replicates their idea of the layout of the cosmos so that their settlements conceptually become the center of the universe. Within a world of finite dimensions, the center is, above all others, the most sacred of places, a place of prestige, a place of inexhaustible abundance (Eliade 1958: 379-382; 1969: 37-47; Heyden 1981: 12). The center is where the Sacred Mountain is located; the spot where the three levels of the universe meet (Eliade 1954: 12-15). The center is where the creation of the world and the creation of man took place (Eliade 1954: 16). Eliade (1954: 12) has noted that settlements in all cultures are laid out in such a way as to conceptually place them at the center. Here the site's central pyramid represents the sacred mountain. Thus the settlement replicates or is incorporated into the sacred landscape or cosmovision of the inhabitants.

All of the concepts which Eliade describes above have been noted in Mesoamerica. The importance of the center is quite explicit in Maya thought and in that of Mesoamerica in general. The Mesoamerican universe was divided into the four cardinal directions each having its own color with a fifth point, represented by the color green, at the center which was the

axis mundi permitting travel between world levels (Thompson 1970: 196; Schele and Miller 1985: 42). It has also been widely noted that Mesoamerican pyramids are representations of the sacred mountain (Vogt 1964: 317; 1969: 594-596; 1983: 113-114; Holland 1961: 130; 1964: 305; Pasztory 1973: 150).

Because caves are associated with many of the same attributes as the center, they appear to have been regularly incorporated into site architecture as a means of placing the site at this conceptual position. As breaks in the earth, caves were universally seen in Mesoamerica as entry points into the underworld and thus were places where one can pass between world levels. As already noted, the Quiche believed that they originally emerged from a cave so these features again parallel the center by virtue of being the place of man's creation. Both the cave and the center were also associated with fertility and abundance.

Returning to the question of the meaning of the caves at Utatlan, it is clear that the construction of these features imbued the site with an entire complex of highly charged values. If we assume that Cave 1 represents the Vucub-Pec, the place of Quiche origin, the plateau on which Utatlan is located must logically be the Sacred Mountain at the center of the universe. The facts that the form of the cave was suppose to replicate the layout of the northwestern side of the central ceremonial complex and that Caves 2 and 3 terminated under other architectural complexes would give not only the existence of the site but its very spatial organization the feeling that it had been preordained by cosmic forces. The association of the site with the ancestral cave of emergence, with the prestige of the center, with abundance and even rain raised Utatlan above the level of simply being the seat of political power and bestowed upon it a sacred status.

While this, no doubt, was a valuable integrative mechanism which, by extension, helped to validate the Utatlan elite's claim to power and privilege, there were other implications as well. It was in the Vucub-Pec that the god Tohil bestowed the right to rule on the first Quiche kings (Recinos et al. 1950: 180). I have argued elsewhere that the motif of cave origin or emergence in folklore is used to signal an individual's status as a god/hero/king and that this status formed a basis for asserting

the king's right to rule (Brady 1989a, 1989c). The underworld conferral of sovereignty by divine authority in the Quiche case seems clearly related to this. The presence of Cave 1 at Utatlan, then, was a symbol and physical reminder of the king's right to rule based on divine bestowal of authority.

The man-made caves at Utatlan are of particular interest because they underscore the importance of the sacred landscape in settlement location and architectural planning. In this non-karstic region of Guatemala where caves are rare, the Quiche, nevertheless, felt the need for such features within the site limits and would constructed them. Because the caves were not created by the whim of nature, the Quiche were also able to construct, in the case of Cave 1, a feature whose form gives us considerable insight into its symbolic meaning and function.

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