

Pictographic Rock Art in Actun Kaua, Yucatan, Mexico



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Actun Kaua, (Maya for "Kaua Cave," or Spanish "Cueva de Kaua") is an extensive maze cave under the village of Kaua, about 30 kilometers east of Chichen Itza. It probably is the same cave mentioned by Pearse (1938) as containing painted figures locally thought to be very old, although it may not be the same cavern near Kaua that was visited by Blom (1929:22) and reported by Strecker (1982) as containing red and black handprints (only one obscure clay-colored positive hand print was observed during our exploration of the cave). In a monumental effort, caver David McKenzie and cave biologist James Reddell in the early 1970s mapped most of the cavern, now known to contain nearly ten kilometers of maze-like passageways. They noticed rock art in the cave and mentioned it, without elaboration, in their publications (Reddell 1977:225). In 1994 a group of Austin cavers led by Peter Sprouse and Suzie Lasko returned to Kaua to continue mapping the complex cavern. They returned with photos and stories of pictographs beginning around a kilometer into the cave. Almost immediately thereafter the authors visited the site and, using the McKenzie map, explored the cave as a continuation of the speleological activities carried out in this region by Texas cavers for several decades. We located the major pictographic panels, marked their positions on the map (Figure 1), and photographed the most significant panels. Our activities involved observation only; no disturbance of any kind was done to the cave or its contents, and no materials or samples were collected.

The only entrance (Reddell 1977:259–261) is through a small vertical opening at the bottom of a steep 3 m deep sinkhole, down another 5–7 m of vertical drop negotiable with ropes or ladders, and finally down

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ACTUN KAUA

(Mapped by David McKenzie and James Reddell, 1973)

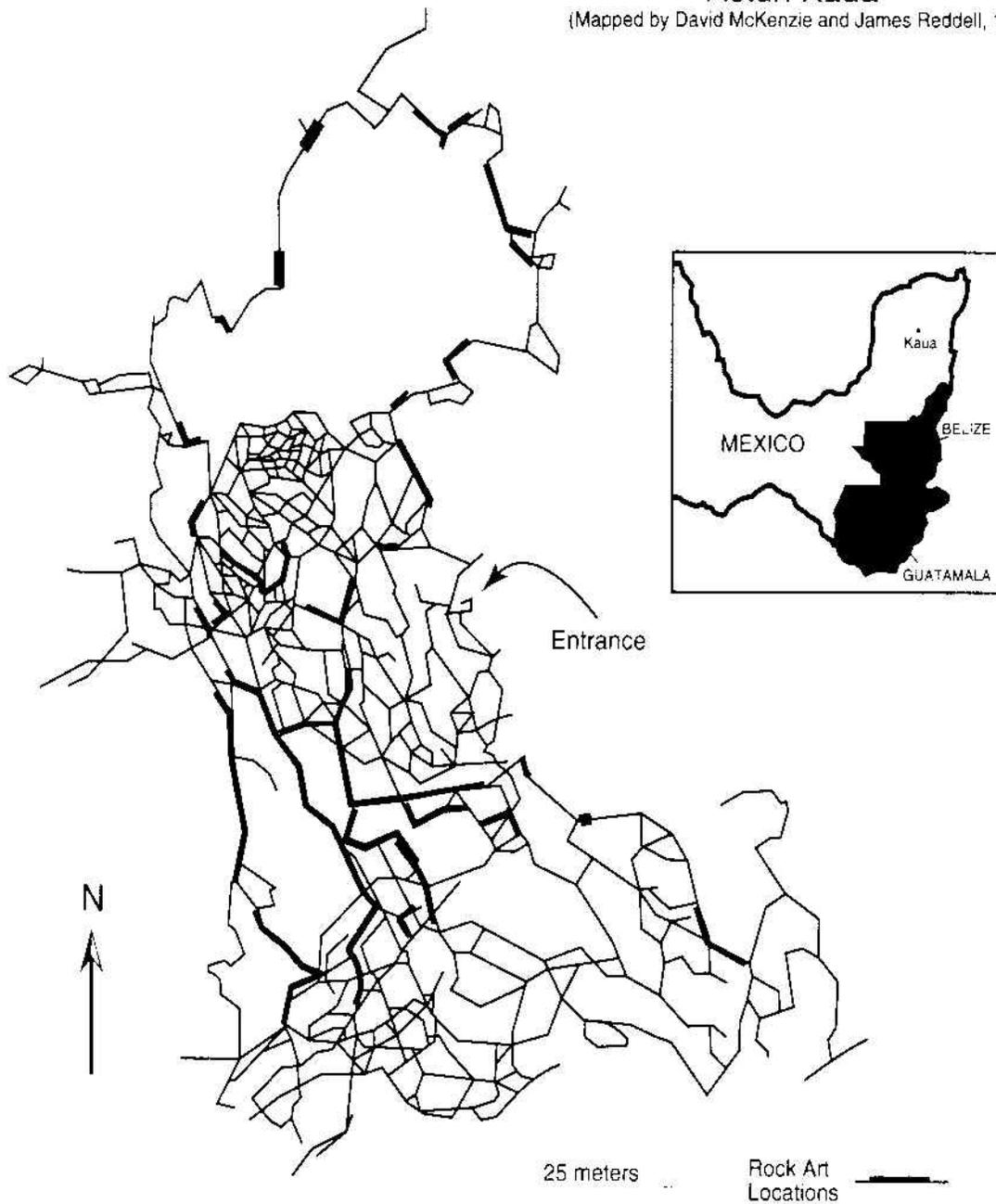


Figure 1. Map of Actun Kaua (Kaua Cave). Map courtesy of David McKenzie.

another 10 m of steep rubble slope leading to the main system of somewhat horizontally oriented passages. Passageways are relatively small, and throughout much of the cave the nearly flat ceiling is low, requiring one to walk bent over (and thus presumably causing the "mud trails" on the ceiling from previous mining activities). The cave is exceptionally complex, but generally it has

extensive maze sections running both north and south from the entrance. Both sections slope gradually down to the water table where passages become water filled and sump.

Maze sections, both north and south, are extensively decorated with wall paintings, indicating that people prehistorically reached the most distant parts of the cave. As one progresses away

from the entrance, passages become progressively tighter, more confusing, and more difficult to negotiate as they descend toward the water table, but at the water itself the passages open up and the floor changes to sand. The appearance in these areas is of a beach at the edge of an underground lake surrounded by rock walls with pictographs. While it is obvious that the people intentionally traversed the passageways to reach the underground lakes, the people of Kaua were not dependent on the cave as their only source of water. Just north of the cave are two open-air water-filled cenotes which provide the town ready access to water. Even so, the many drawings and potsherds in passages bordering the lake indicate that people did indeed penetrate the considerable distance back to the water, whether the water was used as a daily drinking supply, for ritual purposes, or both.

This use of caves as a water source is common in this northern part of the Yucatan peninsula, where the relatively flat, rocky land is honey-combed with limestone caves (Reddell 1977). Drainage is all internal, and surface water from abundant seasonal rainfall drops almost immediately underground, as is typical of karst regions such as this. Rainwater is difficult to accumulate and store; streams are nonexistent and lakes and ponds relatively rare. Fresh water is readily available, however, sometimes just a few feet below the surface through holes in the bedrock, either collapsed, water-filled caves called *cenotes*, or other cave passages that intersect the relatively shallow water table. Maya population centers developed around these water sources, and caves and cenotes became, from birth to death, a natural and essential part of Maya life (Casado Lopez et al. 1990; Reddell 1977; Veni 1990). Indeed, as population blossomed in the Late Classic period, the importance of caves increased (Stone 1997). The ritual, funerary, and religious significance of caves to the Maya has been well documented (Bassie-Sweet 1996; McNatt 1996; Stone 1995, 1997; Thompson 1975). In several cases the ancient Maya went to extraordinary measures to acquire cave water for ritual purposes (Stone 1995:18). In modern times, people of the Kaua village have drilled several one-meter diameter shafts through the rock, and buckets now are lowered 20–30 m to bring water up from the cave.



Figure 2. Typical cave passage, Actun Kaua.
Suzie Lasko photo.

Most of the Actun Kaua's many kilometers of large passages were at one time about half filled with fine clay deposits but now have been emptied of clay by mining activities (Figure 2), presumably to acquire clay for ceramic production. Main passages have had a central walkway route cleared of loose rocks and have a clay trail on the ceiling, presumably from people transporting sacks or baskets of clay on their backs or shoulders. Loose rocks have sometimes been piled to the sides of the trail, sometimes into low rock walls. Some low side passages have been emptied of clay and then rubble piled up to block them. Both wall art and potsherds were observed inside one of these blocked-off side passages. In some areas rock walls have been constructed in an apparent attempt to wall off confusing areas of the maze. Modification of the cave environment has been observed in other areas of Central America also (McNatt 1996).

The Art

Wall painting in Actun Kaua appears to have utilized dark brown mud from the cave floor as the only pigment medium. Stone (1997:33) mentions that drawings made with "hard pieces of clay used as crayons" are typical of the Maya area, and the Kaua drawings appear to be consistent with her observation. All drawings are on the natural white limestone wall above the mud line, usually the upper half of any passage. In main passages this zone extends vertically about 1–2 m above floor level. Individual panels mostly vary minimally in height; most are around a half meter tall, occasionally smaller, occasionally up to about a meter.



Figure 3. Long "fence-like" figure. Suzie Lasko photo.



Figure 4. Twenty meter long "fence." Terry Sayther photo.



Figure 5. Various simple designs. Allan Cobb and Suzie Lasko photos. Note: Individual elements are digital "cut-outs."

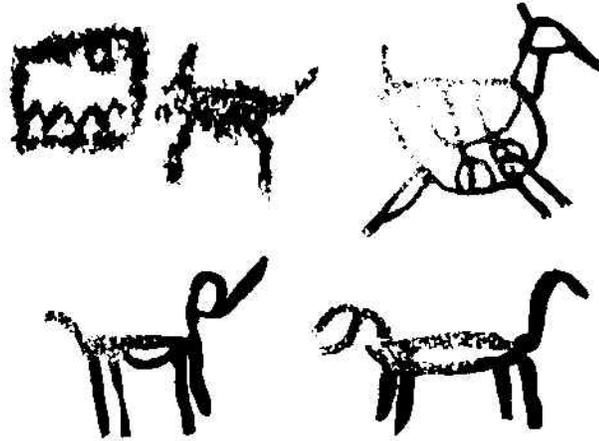


Figure 6. Various four-legged zoomorphs. Allan Cobb and Suzie Lasko photos.



Figure 7. Quadrupeds, including well formed dog-like figure. Allan Cobb photo.

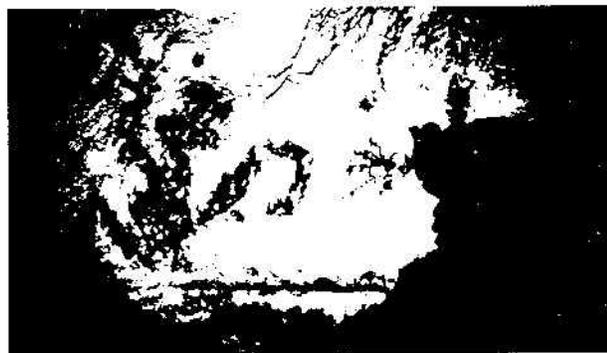


Figure 8. Monkey figure (left) and Peter Sprouse. Suzie Lasko photo.



Figure 9. Monkey figures. Allan Cobb photos.



Figure 10. Simple bat figure. Allan Cobb photo.



Figure 11. Possible bat figure with some characteristics of Hapsburg eagle. Allan Cobb photo.

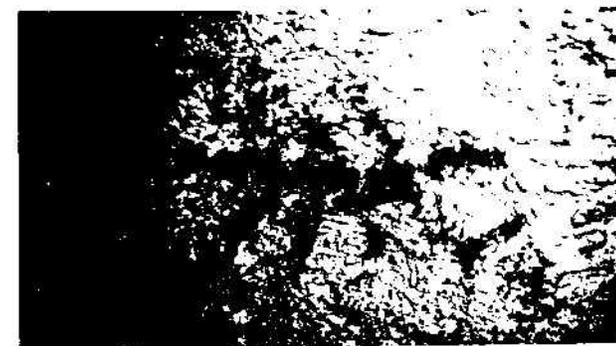


Figure 12. Scorpion figure. Allan Cobb photo.

Individual panel width varies from narrow figures at 10–20 cm wide to “ladder” or “fence”-like figures stretching up to 20 m long (Figures 3 and 4). Several of these long repetitive designs exist in different parts of the cave. Stone (1995:46) suggests that this type of motif, which she calls “schematic,” is characteristic of non-elite Maya art. Other large panels have many meters of what seem to be non-representational abstract lines. Also scattered throughout the cave are smaller abstract figures (Figure 5), some of which show resemblance to figures in other Yucatan caves (Stone 1995:81).

Kaua also contains a wide variety of zoomorphs. Various quadrupeds (Figure 6) were drawn very simply, while others were done with more care. One relatively well detailed dog-like figure (Figure 7) is reminiscent of other Maya cave drawings of long-muzzled quadrupeds (Stone 1995:67, 86, 87). Numerous monkey-like drawings, more in this cave than in any other known cave (Stone 1995:258, 259), demonstrate widely different artistic skill levels (Figures 8 and 9). None here are drawn with the skill demonstrated by the artist of the monkey-like figure in Actun Loltun (Stone 1995:59). One figure at Kaua is clearly a bat (Figure 10). Another figure is similar (Figure 11), but it also has interesting similarities to Hapsburg eagle figures mentioned by Casado Lopez et al. (1990) and also discussed by Stone (1995:85). Finally, a strikingly realistic drawing of a scorpion (Figure 12) is unusual at Kaua and, to our knowledge, is the first example of a scorpion in wall art in Yucatan, although insects have been mentioned in the cave art at Dzibichén (Casado Lopez et al. 1990).



Figure 13. Anthropomorphic figures (left) and Peter Sprouse. Suzie Lasko photo.

Anthropomorphs, in many styles and forms (Figures 13 and 14), are the most common motif class at Kaua. Notably absent, however, are drawings of heads, faces, and deities, the occurrence of which is characteristic of elite art at other sites.

Discussion and Conclusion

No other cave like Actun Kaua presently is known. It is the longest mapped cave above water in the Yucatan. Its passages show extensive evidence of human presence, more than just casual use. Immense quantities of clay have been removed from the cave. Clay mining from caves



Figure 14. Various anthropomorphic figures. Allan Cobb and Suzie Lasko photos.

by the Maya is well known (Hatt 1953; McNatt 1996), but the magnitude of this mining operation is impressive. Several kilometers of passage were once filled with clay, sometimes to a depth of a meter or more. All of it has been removed by hand and carried out the single vertical entrance. The miners moved tons of rocks to make their job easier. As judged by the clay trails on the ceiling, miners carried clay in bags or baskets on their backs or shoulders. And at places along the logical mining trails, the cave walls have been decorated with pictures and designs. All drawings appear to have been made with the commonest of materials, the local dark-colored clay of the cave floor. All the art here may in fact be unpremeditated, drawn by miners resting or waiting in line for their turn to carry a load of clay to the surface.

The drawings in Actun Kaua are not typical of most known Maya cave art (Stone 1997). The Kaua drawings are more consistent with what Stone calls "vernacular art." That is, drawings do not depict the sophistication or skill level of what is considered to be Maya high art and instead are more consistent with what might be expected of art produced by a communities' workers. In fact, Stone (1997:41) discusses this possibility when she writes, "If only the peasantry were using a particular set of caves, then the art might take on a vernacular character." The art at Kaua has, perhaps, the full range of subject matter predicted for the common man. Abstract lines, abstract designs, simple geometric designs, and repeated geometric patterns are found here, along with a spectrum of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures ranging from barely decipherable to very clear. Cave art in the Maya area, as Stone (1995:236) has pointed out, is idiosyncratic, and the cave art of Actun Kaua is entirely consistent with that generalization.

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