

CUEVA CHEVE TABLET

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A turquoise mosaic tablet was discovered within the archaeological site in Chamber 1 of the cave, Cueva Cheve, in the Cuicatec region of Oaxaca, Mexico, in March, 1989. Its four sections were found stacked, two fragments facing up and two facing down, in a space under breakdown rocks in the large entrance chamber. The tablet dates to the Late Postclassic Period (1250-1500 AD). The tablet has now been partially restored from the pieces retrieved. One quadrant pattern includes a battle scene with winners and losers. Other artifacts within the cave help explain the ceremonial context of the tablet, including obsidian blades, jade beads, a wooden mask, in situ vessels, and a platform containing buried human remains built on top of giant spalled ceiling blocks of rock. The cave was also likely used from the Classic Period (250-750 AD), and there is evidence that the cave continues to be used ceremonially today by the local Cuicatecs.

Although initially studied using methods that limit site disturbance, the tablet was removed and the three archaeological chambers in Cueva Cheve were subsequently excavated in the spring of 1990 and 1991. The excavation was necessary as there was an increase in visitors to the cave due to Cueva Cheve having become well known among speleologists at that time as being the deepest cave in the Western Hemisphere. Further, the tablet needed to be climate stabilized at the Oaxacan Museum to prevent further damage to its wood resulting from the cave's humidity.

Archaeological investigations in 1988, 1989, 1990, and 1991 revealed Cueva Cheve to have likely functioned as a ritual site. The cave was used during the Classic Period (250-750 A.D.) and Late Postclassic (1250-1500 A.D.) based on cross dating of cave ceramics to the Monte Alban ceramic sequence (Caso et al., 1967). One of the two entrance chambers is still being used ritually by the Cuicatec people who live in the region.

A Late Postclassic mosaic was discovered within the cave, and has been designated the Cueva Cheve Tablet. It has been removed from the cave ritual context, and is now partially restored. Its four assembled sections measure 43 cm by 40 cm by 1.5 cm thick, making it perhaps the largest Pre-Columbian mosaic from Mesoamerica (Fig. 1 and front cover).

SETTING

Cueva Cheve is located in a mountainous area twenty kilometers northeast from the town of Conception Papalo, northern Oaxaca, Mexico, in the Cuicatec region (Fig. 2). Although this is a tropical region, the elevation of the cave is about 3,000 m, so the area's vegetation is alpine. Winter ice storms may occur during the dry season months.

The cave entrance is in a large valley sinkhole. The south half of the sinkhole is metamorphic rock and the north half, where the cave is located, is limestone. A stream enters the sinkhole from the south as a 7 m waterfall and flows along the northeast cave wall into the cavern's depths. Cueva Cheve is one of the deepest caves in the Western Hemisphere, over

1,000 m in depth (Oliphant & Pistole 1994), but only a small portion of the cave contains cultural material.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

A team of National Speleological Society cavers led by Carol Vesely and Bill Farr began exploring Cueva Cheve for its world class depth potential. In December, 1987, cultural material was noted by the speleologists. On January 24 and 25, 1988, the Cheve Archaeological Project (CAP) explored, recorded and mapped portions of the cave. CAP studied the cave using *preservation methods*, in which nothing was removed or even touched. All artifacts were surveyed, photographed, measured and recorded in place (for a discussion of methods see Steele, 1987). The initial report to the Instituto Nacional Antropología e Historia (INAH), listed the cave as *Estrella* to protect it from looting (Snavely et al., 1988). For the purpose of recording, the archaeological chambers of the cave were labeled Chambers 1 - 4. (Fig. 3).

The entrance to the cave (Chamber 1) is naturally lighted and accessible, measuring 50 m wide at the entrance drip line and 30 m at its maximum height. The large passage extended 200 m back into the cave to the northeast cave wall. There is evidence that some of the archaeological material in this room has been disturbed by looters prior to 1987.

A rectangular stone platform (4 m x 10 m) was constructed towards the center of the chamber 40 m down a rocky slope from the entrance. Several roof spalls were incorporated in the platform by filling in gaps and leveling the gaps with smaller

Figure 1.
The assembled Cueva Cheve Tablet.
Photo courtesy of Ernesto González Licón.



stones. Wooden beams had roofed the platform, although water damage has made the wooden structure almost unrecognizable. Only 30 cm remains of one upright beam located on the platform's southeast corner. The beams were finished on the edges, a few pieces of turquoise remain in place suggesting a mosaic design. A wooden mask of the upper half of a face, or perhaps broken with the lower section missing, was found under a rock to the south of the platform. Human remains, obsidian blades and jade beads in a variety of shapes and sizes were found on and around the platform. When similar archaeological evidence is found within caves in Oaxaca, it is thought to represent the performance of rituals. Two other Oaxacan ceremonial caves with human remains, obsidian blades and jade beads are in the Mazatec region, Blade Cave (Steele, 1987) and Cueva de Tenango (Winter, 1984). The rituals in these caves possibly were directed toward rain-related deities. This belief is based partially on archaeological and ethnographic information from Oaxaca (Steele, 1997) and the Maya region (for a survey of Maya ritual cave use see Brady, 1989).

The stream entering Chamber 1 from the surface continues a course through Chamber 2. Along the bank, fiber mats and scattered ceramic sherds were found. The sherds may be compared to the Monte Alban sequence (Caso et al., 1967) and are representative of the Late Postclassic Period. On the walls above the stream bank, a bright red pigment is painted in a few round splotches. One red circle has been painted around the entry to a dead end crawl space in a wall in Chamber 2. The cave then bifurcates. One passage plunges with the stream to deeper portions of the cave. A second passage, however, leads from the stream bank to Chamber 3.

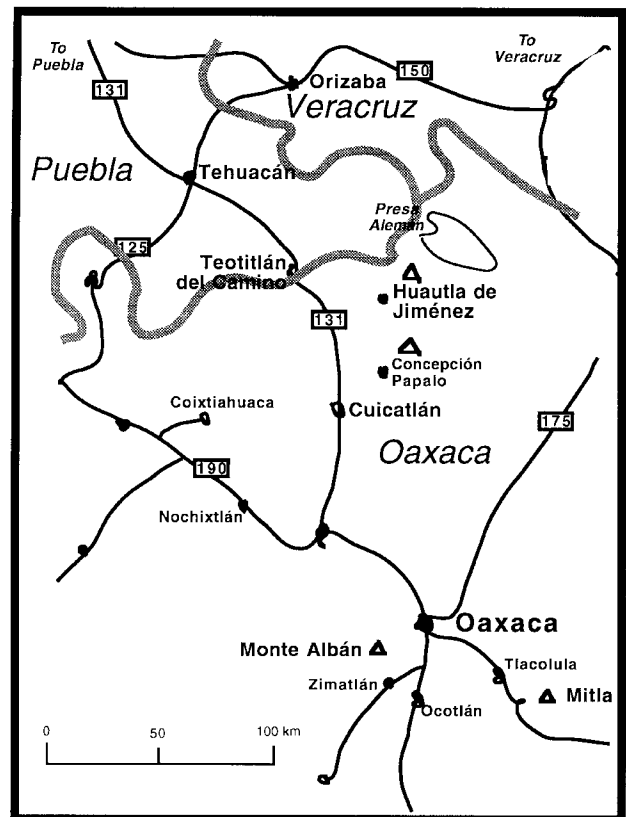


Figure 2. Proximity Map.

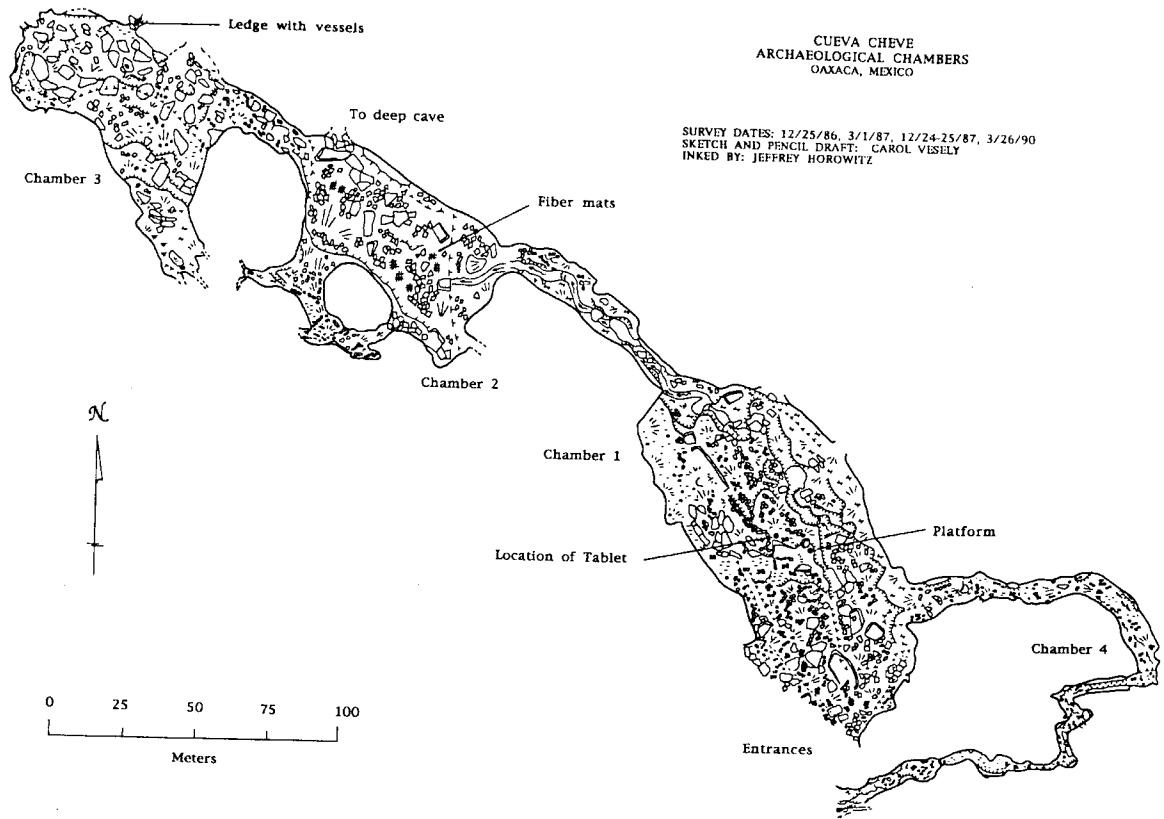


Figure 3.
Cueva Cheve
map showing
the four archae-
ological cham-
bers

In Chamber 3, there is a squeeze marked by red pigment which leads to a ledge (1.5 m x 2 m) just large enough to accommodate two or three people. This small ledge is at the edge of a 30 m sheer drop to the descending stream passage. Splotches of red pigment were painted on the ledge wall. A curious protrusion on the north wall is outlined in red and has the size and features of a human face. This face seems to have been painted to look upon seven *in situ* vessels sitting below it on the ledge next to the south wall. One vessel is a cylindrical, tripod, white alabaster bowl. The vessel is splashed with the same red pigment as the chamber walls (Fig. 4). Another vessel is a black ceramic bowl with a lid in the form of a bird effigy knob. Each of the seven vessels is intact. Chamber 3's vessels help date this portion of the site to the Classic Period. The placement of the Chamber 3 vessels on the ledge far from the light of the entrance represents the deepest pre-Hispanic exploration in the cave. The Chamber 3 ledge could have been viewed as the entry to the dark underworld, perhaps similar to what the Maya called Xibalbá (MacLeod & Puleston, 1978).

Chamber 4 in Cueva Cheve is being used today for rituals by the local Cuicatec population. Current rituals include the use of chicken eggs, torches, centavo coins, pieces of newspaper, red yarn which overlays a list of people's names, and chicken bones which are very prominent throughout the passage. This chamber was photographed and documented, but left undisturbed by the archaeologists. Contemporary ritualistic use in Chamber 4 of Cueva Cheve may serve as an ethno-

graphic basis for a pre-Hispanic ceremonial interpretation of the archaeological evidence. Elsewhere in the Cuicatec region, three human sacrificial knives from the Late Postclassic Period were found stored in a cave and, also, ceremonially used by modern Cuicatec people in blood sacrifices of chickens and turkeys (Holland & Weitlaner, 1960).



Figure 4. The alabaster vessel has been smeared with red pigment. Photo courtesy of Brian Steele.

CUEVA CHEVE TABLET

Ralph Snavely and Adrian Garcia returned with the speleologists in March, 1989. As the archaeologists were continuing the work of documenting artifacts within arbitrarily-delineated zones, Ralph Snavely discovered the tablet in Chamber 1. In a cavity beneath large breakdown blocks he saw two sets of two boards next to each other on a ledge. He could not see them well, however, because of the lack of head room. By holding a mirror above the boards, he saw turquoise mosaic pieces. The tablet was not touched or moved, but Snavely could, nevertheless, see evidence of deterioration. An arrangement was made to salvage and restore the tablet at the Oaxaca Regional Museum of Instituto Nacional Antropología e Historia.

In 1990, the tablet was removed to prevent further humidity damage. Assisting CAP in this project were Dr. Marcus Winter, Oaxacan archaeologist for INAH, Ernesto González Licón, then Director of the Regional Office of INAH, and his wife, Lourdes Marquez Morfín, a physical anthropologist.

The Cueva Cheve tablet is constructed of finely micro-carved turquoise inlaid on two wooden boards, each broken in two pieces. The four matching boards are approximately the same size (43 cm by 20 cm by 1.5 cm thick). Each piece of inlay is a carved form, averaging one half centimeter. All thirty figures are composed of more than one carved inlay piece. Each arm, leg, face, headdress and weapon is a separate and accurate carving. Using different tones of turquoise, the clear blue figures are arranged in codex-type scenes on a darker background similar to the style employed by the Mixtecs (Licón & Morfín 1994). Various other stones are used in lesser quantity, including what appear to be coral and jade from a visual inspection.

The upper left quadrant of the tablet is a battle scene between warriors with eagle, jaguar or alligator crests on their helmet-like headdresses, and people without them (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. The upper left quadrant of the tablet showing the battle scene, photographed as it was removed from the ledge. Photo courtesy of Bill Steele.

Men face each other in fighting stances with upraised arms holding weapons such as shields, knives, clubs and ropes (Fig. 6). One warrior wearing a jaguar headdress holds a captive man by his hair (Fig. 7). A rope around the neck holds another prisoner wearing a feathered headdress (Fig. 8).

On the right side of this quadrant, there is a single dominant figure sitting on a throne or litter, with rays over his head. He is clearly watching the battle and commenting (Fig. 9). One other speaking figure is a prominent warrior with an eagle crest on his helmet (Fig. 10).

The lower left quadrant displays a partially deteriorated circular design with hanging adornments. Beneath this is a ball court with ten disks below it (Fig. 11). Perhaps the disks are numeral dots associated with the head of a snake affixed to it, and could be read as 10 Snake: a day date (Henry Munn, personal communication, 1995).

The two right quadrants of the tablet were badly water damaged. All were wrapped in plastic and packaged in cotton, inside cardboard boxes. No chemicals were required to remove the artifacts. An orange Late Postclassic ceramic vessel containing jade beads was found next to the tablet and was also removed to the museum (Fig. 12).

EXCAVATION DISCUSSION

Although the tablet was taken to the Oaxaca Regional Museum, all other artifacts, in particular the Chamber 3 *in situ* vessels, remained in the cave. The decision was made to leave the vessels in place until a contextual grotto-like setting could be arranged for them at the museum. The next spring of 1991, however, the decision was reversed. Cueva Cheve was receiving increased foot traffic due to increased notoriety as the deepest cave in the Western Hemisphere. The Chamber 3 vessels were removed and an excavation was conducted with the help of the speleologists and a team from INAH.

More than 80 secondary burials were excavated from the platform in Chamber 1. The human remains had been carried to the cave and buried in a group ceremony. Disarticulated skeletons were placed in recesses between the rocks formed by breakdown boulders in the platform. Rocks were then placed to cover the bones, keeping the platform somewhat level. They were not entombed in a recognizable pattern (for a discussion in Spanish see Licón & Morfín, 1994).

CONCLUSIONS

In March, 1990, the Cueva Cheve tablet was salvaged from Chamber 1 due to its imminent destruction by the cave's damp environment. The tablet is believed to date to the Late Postclassic (1250-1500 A.D.) because vessels from that chamber belong to that part of the ceramic sequence. The codex style occurred among many linguistic and cultural groups, so it may not necessarily be valid to attribute the tablets' creation to the Mixtecs. The cave's location might imply that they had belonged to the Cuicatecs. Possibly, pilgrims brought and left



Figure 6. The warrior with an alligator helmet holds a rope and shield

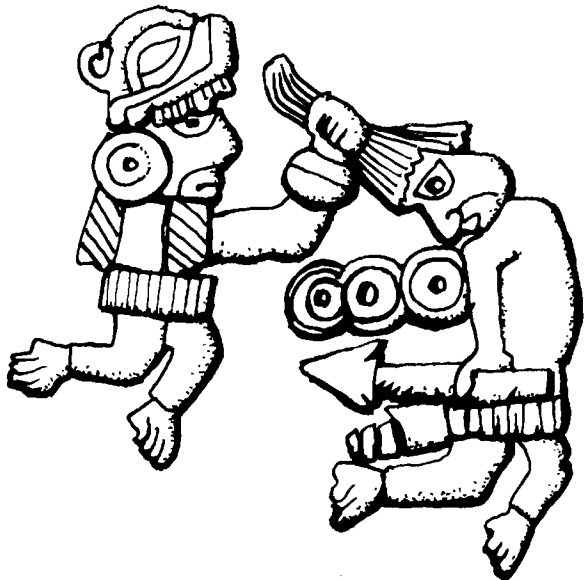


Figure 7. The warrior with a jaguar helmet holds a captive man by his long hair.

the tablet there because no urban centers have been found nearby.

The tablet appears to record an important battle scene observed by a lord or deity. This individual may be in a conversation with a warrior on the victorious side involved in the battle scene. Similarly equipped warriors are overcoming less well elaborately outfitted warriors, taking them captive, tying ropes and subjugating them to their knees. The victorious warriors wear headdresses in the form of eagles, jaguars and alli-



Figure 8. A prisoner wearing a full feathered headdress is guarded by a warrior who holds him with a rope. The face of the prisoner has not been recovered.

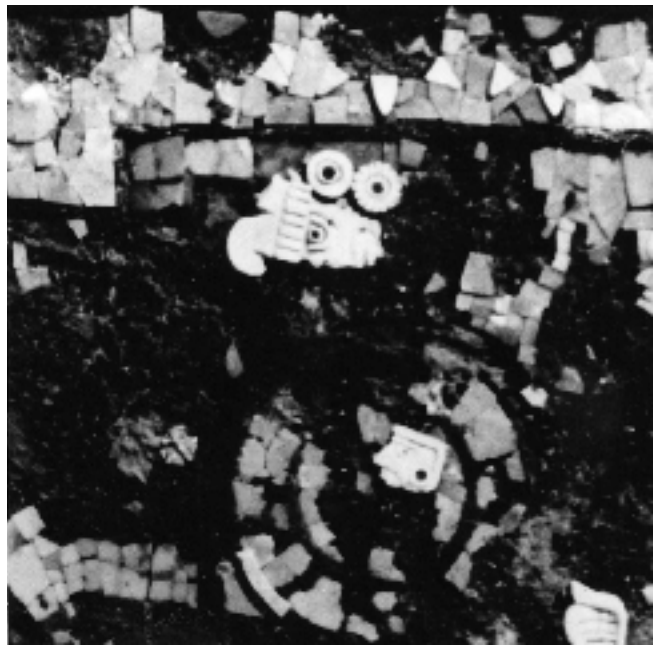


Figure 9. A lord or deity sits above the battle with rays over his head and speaks.

gators; perhaps representing warrior classes. The opposing army's uniform is more primitive. One prisoner wears a feathered headdress, a few others wear a couple of feathers in their hair and some wear no feathers at all. Perhaps the battle is documenting the military conquest giving the priests use of the cave for organized state rituals.

Cueva Cheve appears to have had a ceremonial function. The grand platform scattered with obsidian blades and jade beads in Chamber 1 further suggests that the cave passage was not limited to cemetery use. Judging from the size of the platform alone, some ceremonies may have been public events. We do not know what rituals were performed, but there is similarity to evidence for rain deity rituals such as the ancient Mazatecs and Maya are thought to have conducted. The tablet



Figure 10. A prominent warrior with an eagle crest on his helmet speaks.

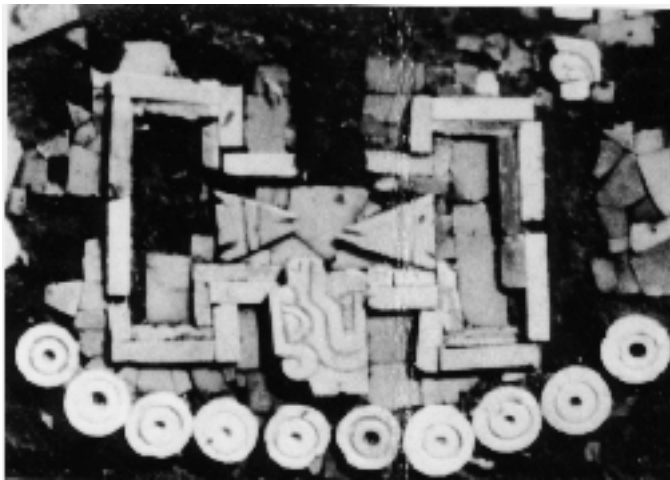


Figure 11. A ball court with a head of a snake affixed to it. There are ten disks below it.

may have had some other use originally but was left secondarily as an offering. It was deliberately hidden.

Earlier, during Classic times, people had ventured deep into the dark, inner section of the cave and left vessels where they may have believed they were in touch with their concept of the underworld. Today, Cueva Cheve is used ceremonially by the local Cuicatecs; although we have never seen the rituals enacted, only the remains of the activity.

The documentation of the archaeological evidence in Cueva Cheve, including the recovery and restoration of the tablet is one of the important contributions of CAP. Constant care by the NSS leaders of the deep exploration team, including directing foot traffic away from the archaeological zones, enabled Cueva Cheve to be studied as a preservation site for

several years. Proper reporting of this archaeological encounter has made possible the cooperative relationship between project members and the government authorities.

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Figure 12. A Late Postclassic orange ceramic vessel containing jade beads was left next to the tablet. Photo courtesy of Bill Steele.

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