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ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE AMERICAS BEFORE COLUMBUS

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COPPER MINER PENDANT IN THE KEWEENAW?

VOLUME 24 · ISSUE NUMBER 126 · $8.95

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Balamkanché, Altar of the Jaguar Priest

by George Fery

Chichen Itza the Kukulcán Pyramid

Caves are central to world cultures' cosmologies, used by humans from the dawn of time, and believed to be the homes of benevolent and malevolent deities. They are, consequently, the abode of the thousand faces of the Maya god Cha'ak, who also dwells in water pools, springs and mountains, and is the master of the powerful forces of nature. Cha'ak is the longest continuously worshipped gods of ancient Mesoamerica. Known from proto-classic times, it is still worshiped among indigenous communities today.

So, let us explore the strange world of an important cave on the peninsula of Yucatán in Mexico where life-changing rituals took place that are at the core of ancient Maya mythology.

The spectacular cave at Balamkanché, is located 2.5 miles southwest of Chichén Itzá's archaeological site, near the town of Pisté. The cave proximity to this major pre-Columbian site, underlines the fact that it was an integral part of Uuc Yab'nal, Chichén Itzá's ancient name in the Itzá language, for religious rituals and ceremonies. Balamkanché was used by people from the Maya pre-Classic period, over 3000 years ago as a source of water, and was dedicated to the worship of Cha'ak, because of the god's close association with rain, lighting and storms. Cha'ak was seen as the holder of life, given the scarcity of surface water in the Yucatán during the dry season.

Caves provide a different kind of ritual setting than surface architecture. They are associated with the underworld at the liminal zone between life and death that is, between this world and the "other world." The presence of water in caves made them Cha'ak preferred homes, together with cenotes (sink holes) in the Yucatán. But although the cave stands among the most spectacular in the Mesoamerican world, Balamkanche has received less attention than it deserves.

For over 10 years in the middle of the 20th century, the exploration of the cave had been José Humberto Gómez's past time. The in 1958 he found what seemed to be a false section of the wall in one of the chambers. On examination, it turned out to be crude masonry sealed with mortar that covered a small access to previously undiscovered number of chambers. Earlier archaeological expeditions had come within feet of the wall, which had been sealed about 940 AD not realizing what lay beyond.

The cave's significance can fully be understood when set within Chichén Itzá's monumental architecture above ground. The interaction between the surface elements and the nearby cave, sheds an unusual light on the life of the ancient metropolis. The 2018 re-discovery of the Balamkú cave under the Kukulcán pyramid may shed still more light on religious practices of the city, since the shrine seems to have been dedicated specifically to the Toltec deity Tlaloc, known as Kukulcán in the Maya-Yucatec language.

Tlaloc is understood to be the "second tenant" deity at Balamkanché, with similar attributes as Cha'ak. Tlaloc originates from Tula on the central plateau of Mexico, and is also associated with caves, cenotes and mountain-tops, believed to be the guardian and holders of rain and maize in past and present Mesoamerican mythologies. The fact that two ancient gods with identical mythological attributes, one from the highlands and the other from the lowlands inhabited the same cave, poses a question that begs for an answer.

Cenotes are sink holes common in the limestone of northern Yucatán, where there are no significant bodies of water above ground. Cenotes were used as water sources for communities but were also dedicated religious places for rituals and ceremonies, such as the great Sacred Well at Chichén Itzá.

The thorough eradication of Cha'ak representation in the cave, underline the proscription of the old god by the priests of the new one. In Toltec mythology, Tlaloc was the Lord of the Third Sun, whose roots go back to Teotihuacán and, farther in time, to Olmec cosmology. Migrations from central Mexico explain the presence of Toltec ceramics and Xipe Totec carved stone censers at Balamkanché, the only archaeological

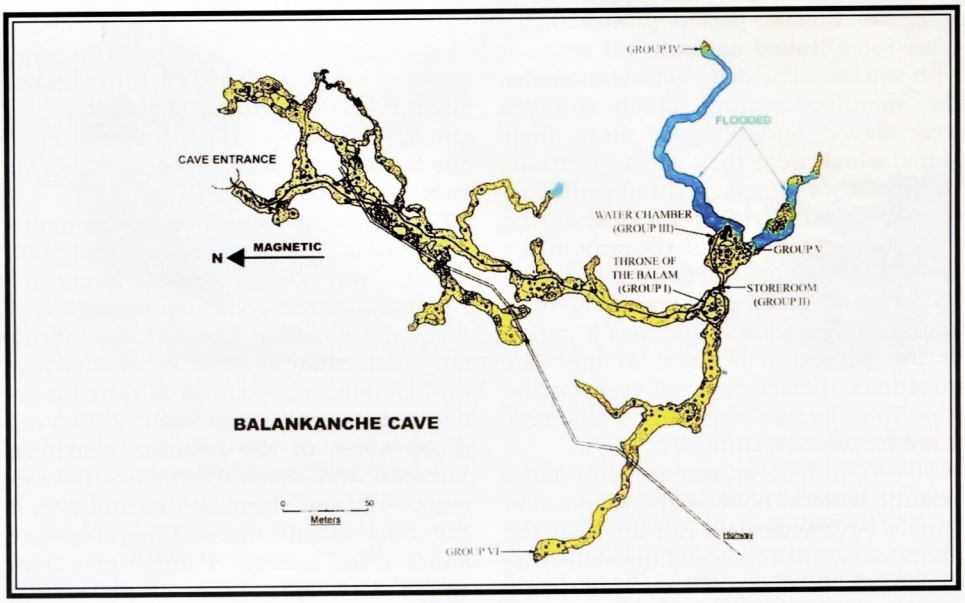
The Sacred Well

artifacts found in the cave. The Toltec migrants settled in power centers and towns, while traditional Maya-Yucatec deities remained unchanged in the countryside, as they are to this day.

Balamkanché's surface remains are seen scattered on the site above ground. The cave entrance, in the center of the complex, was surrounded by a 115 feet circular tulum or defensive wall, 12 feet wide at the base and raised 4 feet above the rocky top, surmounted by a 6-foot high enclosure made of perishable material, now lost to time. The reason for such a strong defensive wall is not known and may pre-date Toltec arrival.

The entrance today is located at the center of the circular walled area, which may not have been the location of the original entrance, nor was it the only access. From ground level, steps take one down to a depth of 30 feet, then the corridor branches off. (The cave map was redrawn from McKenzie, Riddell and Wiley, 1974).

The accessible part of the cave is made up of more than a mile of passageways, that vary considerably in shape and size, from broad and flat, as much as 30 feet wide and 15 feet high, to narrow crawling spaces; others are no longer passable. The cave is divided into six groups, known as Group.I to Group.VI. Group.V is closed, and so is Group.VI are closed; the second access to the cave may have been in Group.VI, where a second access to the cave may have been found. Archaeological data and remains beyond Group.IV were mapped; a few ceramic artifacts, complete or partially broken, have been recovered in that area.



Cave Map

The corridors and steps for visitors are well built, lit and maintained; they make for an easy walk, but there are limitations to admission in the cave (age over 65 or health conditions or physical impediment may prohibit entrance). Sections of the main tunnels cannot be visited; some reach 70 feet below the surface in at least four places. The water depth varies with seasonal rains and entrance may be suspended due to sudden downpours. There is another corridor under the main one, half submerged and very difficult of access but for trained deep cave archaeologists.

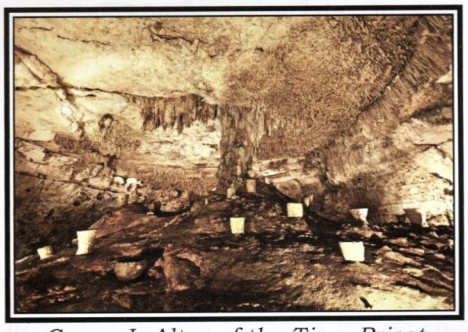
The main chamber is Group.I, a huge and impressive circular room with thousands of stalactites covering the ceiling. The floor, naturally raised as a mound, holds massive twin columns made of both stalactites and stalagmites linked at the center, as forming the shape of a massive tree trunk.

The cave is a strikingly beautiful work of nature; the high place of a culture now seen and partly understood through the foggy veil of time, that consigned its myths and beliefs in Cha'ak and other deities to the mineral world.

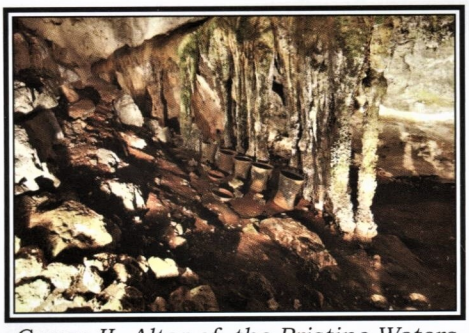
The central column is a reminder of the trunk of the ceiba tree, the mythological Wakah Chan, or "Tree of Life" set in stone, with branches reaching to the heavens, while its roots sink deep into the underworld. The veneration of the "Altar of the Jaguar Priest" in Group.I, at the foot of the "tree of life" can only be understood in the context of the vision of a dual perception of life, and its close association with the field of opposites. Of note is the fact that the field is independent of any belief in gods or deities, but identifies exclusively with the chain of life, the ancestors.

This impressive sanctuary in Group.I, created by nature but conceived by man as an altar for its deities, was walled in about 942AD, toward the beginning of the Maya Terminal Classic phase (800-1000AD). In 1959, large numbers of ceremonial ceramic and carved stone effigy censers were found here, as well as mini-metates (grinding stones) set into cavities in the complex stalagmitic formation, and simply laid on the floor.

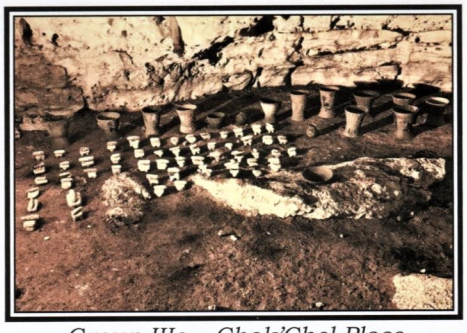
The ceramics are representatives of non-Maya deities from the central plateau of Mexico. Twenty nine large Tlaloc ceramic bi-conical effigy censers and limestone censers dedicated to Xipe Totec, the "flayed one", were found on



Group I- Altar of the Tiger Priest



Group.II- Altar of the Pristine Waters



Group.IIIa – Chak'Chel Place

The Water Chamber

the mound of the altar, together with mini-metates and manos, ceramic plates and other offerings, dated from the Florescent (625-800AD), to the Modified Florescent (800-950AD) phases.

The presence of Tlaloc censers is understandable given its common mythological attributes with Cha'ak, but that is not the case for Xipe Totec, the prominent life-death-rebirth Aztec deity from the Classic period (250-950AD). Xipe Totec linked agricultural renewal with warfare. The deity got his name for the sacrifices during which captives were flayed and stripped from their skins, which were then worn in rituals, by the deity's priests. A ritual dedicated to the vegetal world's rebirth when the rain comes symbolic of the way maize seeds lose their outer layer before germination, and of snakes shedding their skin, in other words, the manifestation of the perpetual renewal of life. The questions, however, is what were the Xipe Totec items doing at Balamkanché, if not for warfare rituals?

Group.II, known as "Altar of the Pristine Waters" holds a special place in rituals. Archaeologists call the altar the "storeroom." At the foot of the stalactite-stalagmite columns are ceramic urns, set there to collect the virgin water called zuhuy'ha in Yucatec, that drips from the stalactites above. Zuhuy'ha is perceived as the most sacred water in Maya rituals, since it is collected from stalactites, called the "Nipples of the Earth". The water is sanctified because it never touches the ground and, being transferred directly from Nature (the rock) to Culture (the manmade urns), acquire the highest ritual value.

The importance of the rain god Cha'ak mythological multiple aspects in Mesoamerica, like that of his successor Tlaloc, essentially revolves around a simple word: water, pillar of agrarian societies. That is why the paramount god in these communities was so important; so much so that he has worn a thousand faces, from the pre-Classic (2500BC) to our days.

Known manifestations of the god among many others, are those that govern the four cardinal directions. As recorded in 16th century Yucatán, they are: Cha'ak Xib Cha'ak the Red Cha'ak of the East; Sak Xib Cha'ak, the White Cha'ak of the North; Ek Xib Cha'ak, the Black Cha'ak of the West and Kan Xib Cha'ak the Yellow Cha'ak of the South. Among rituals still practiced today by peasants in the Maya lowlands, is the Ch'a Cha'ak ceremony. Together with incantations, prayers and gifts of local produce and sometimes fowls in pleas to the god for rain, young boys crouch at the four corners of a makeshift altar in the fields, croaking like toads calling for rain.

In traditional Maya and other communities of the Americas past and present, one of the most important functions of the gods has been that of rain maker. Today, Yucatec Maya farmers differentiate distinct aspects of rain and clouds, represented in ranking-ordered deities. Chichén Itzá lies 20.5 degrees north of the equator. Northern Yucatán and lands further southwest, enjoy only two seasons: dry and wet. If the rains do not come on time, crops are short or fail entirely. Famine may then ensue with its retinue of malevolent deities and social disruptions together with hunger, and the fear of tomorrow.

Of note is the fact that even though Cha'ak and Tlaloc have identical mythological attributes, those did not reflect their respective environment. Tula's latitude is similar to that of Chichén, 20.6 degrees north. However, Tula from where Tlaloc originates, enjoys a benign climate and predictable rains at 6595 feet above sea level, with three major rivers. The opposite, however, is found in the Yucatán, which has a dry climate, 30 feet above sea level, and is devoid of rivers in its northern half.

The paradox between the two gods is that their environment, a major factor in shaping ancient mythologies and religions, is so different as to seem incompatible but for the fact that they are from agrarian communities. Both are, indeed, agrarian gods. But while Tlaloc overcame Cha'ak in urban areas, it didn't do so in the countryside where its rituals did not spread. Political control of the state by the Toltecs therefore, appears to have prevailed with the assistance of Xipe Totec, the god of warfare.

On the underground lakeshore of Balamkanché is Group.IIIa with a peculiar arrangement of small ceramic censers, plates and small spindle whorls, as well as stone mini metates, and manos. This cache represents the largest number of offerings in the cave. How and why they were displayed is not known, nor the reason for the assemblage and their respective original number. The display seen today is that of archaeologists. The small size of objects is particular to Tlaloc offerings, and points to their use by small children. But, could they not have been the toys for aluxes, plural for Maya elves?

Several Ethnographic accounts throughout Mesoamerica document miniature objects as offerings, often associated with rain-making rituals. Young children, particularly girls, were favored by Tlaloc. The presence of spindle whorls underlines the symbolic significance of weaving that has been documented to be associated with females and with Chak'Chel ("great rainbow" or "red rainbow"), the aged goddess of curing and childbirth, in Classic times. She is also known as the youthful Ix Chel ("lady rainbow"), from her shrines on the islands of Isla Mujeres and Cozumel. Chak'Chel and Ix Chel were also respectively associated with the waning moon

The World Above and the World Below

and the rising moon.

The "Waterway" or Group.IIIb is now mostly flooded, because it is located close to the top of the water table. The underground lake extends about 115 feet from the shore, then dips below the ceiling of the cave and turns northeast for another 330 feet, before rising again above the water table and reaching Group.IV, not accessible today.

Investigators found ceramics and stone censers in the water and on limestone outcrops in this part of the cave. At the end of the elongated lake is a chamber that seems to be the limit of human penetration in this direction. The average depth is 5 feet with about half that depth in mud. On the muddy floor of the waterway were scattered offerings, such as Tlaloc effigy censers, studded censers and a variety of pottery offerings, with a distribution densest near the shore (Andrews, 1970:12-13). It is probable that the chamber at the end of the waterway was used for particular rituals. The data is insufficient and does not allow for a coherent hypothesis for this part of the cave.

As mentioned above, long before Tlaloc, Balamkanché was used for the same purposes by its predecessor, the Maya Cha'ak. The cave was "returned" to the Maya deity during a complex and elaborate ritual ceremony, the "Reverent Message to the Lords", which started on the early hours of October 13, 1959. Gifts of balché (grain alcohol), sacrifices of live fowls, the lighting of candles, together with rituals and incantations were directed by master h'men or shamans from villages in the vicinity of the cave. The ceremonies and ancient rituals took place over three days and nights to also "pacify the deities, the Yum Balames "to safely allow non-Maya to enter the hallowed precinct during the ceremony" (Andrews, 1970:72-79).

Pyramids were representatives of the "world above" as the counter images of caves, the "world below" sanctuaries of the endless cycle of life and death. Each morning the rays of the sun, coming out of its travel in the "world below" lit the top of the pyramid first, as the blessing of Culture by Nature. An event that was believed to sanctify the powers vested in the lords and the priests by the gods.

Caves were believed to be the birthplace of humans at the beginning of time, and symbol of the "world below," where they will return at the end of their days. Ancestors dwelling in caves are believed, together with gods and deities, to interact with both worlds. No less than the sacred earth, caves were understood to be the meeting grounds between humans and the divine. ■

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