

Pre-hispanic ritual use of caves in the rio La Venta region, Chiapas, Mexico.

Davide Domenici

Dipartimento di Paleografia e Medievistica, Università degli Studi di Bologna (Italy).

Associazione La Venta.

via Nosadella 45, 40123 Bologna (Italy)

tel & fax. 051-6446857

davide.domenici@bo.nettuno.it

The knowledge of archeological remains in natural caves of the Rio La Venta area, Chiapas (Mexico), has notably increased since 1993, when La Venta Exploring Team began his long-term spelological exploration. The Rio La Venta Archaeological Project, stemmed by the speleological one in 1997, is currently drawing up a catalogue of archeological caves of the area, once inhabited by Zoque indians. Analysis and excavations of ritual activity areas (offerings, burials, child sacrifice, etc.) is showing their wide distribution and their chronological variations, always related to the cult of water deities paid by indians groups living in a highly karstified area extremely poor in surface waters. The article resumes the results of our work and deals with the main lines of ongoing research.

Previous Researches

The rio La Venta region lies in the municipalities of Ocozocoautla, Cintalapa and Jiquipilas, in western Chiapas (Mexico), an area traditionally inhabited by Zoque indians since Preclassic times. The analysis of the many archaeological sites of this region is providing useful data to understand the pre-hispanic development of this particular branch of the Mixe-Zoquean family, still poorly known despite the fact that its relevance for the early mesoamerican cultural development had been convincingly demonstrated (see, for example, LOWE, 1977; LEE 1986). In this paper we will deal only with the archaeological remains located inside the many caves that dot this highly karstified region.

The presence of archaeological remains in the natural caves of the rio La Venta region was first reported in 1945, when Matthew W. Stirling visited caves and open-air archaeological sites of the area during various excursions made while he was excavating at Piedra Parada (Ocozocoautla, Chiapas). Stirling described the archaeological features he saw in the caves and wrote a brief report about them in a letter sent to *American Antiquity* (STIRLING 1945) and a slightly longer one in an article for the *National Geographic Magazine* (STIRLING 1947). His complete field notes remained unpublished since 1989, when Maricruz Pailles translated and published it with an analysis of the ceramic material collected by Stirling (PAILLES 1989).

Stirling visited 5 caves on both sides of the rio La Venta canyon (and the local inhabitants told him about various others) and all of them contained huge amounts of pottery vessels, a typical kind of offering that we call "massive offering". Diagnostic ceramic types such as White-rimmed Blackware and Incised Blackware in the form of bowls with flaring sides suggest that these offerings had been deposited mainly during the Early Classic period (ca. 250-600 d.C.). Apart from the amounts of bowls, the caves contained various modeled censers and the inner room of one of them (Cueva de los Cajetes) was separated from the outer one by a dry-wall of limestone slabs with a little, central, access.

In 1947, Mr. Arnold Snell and Mr. Wallace Miner, two U.S. citizens engaged in a hunting trip in Chiapas, visited eight caves and an open-air archaeological site in the vicinities of Cintalapa and the rio La Venta canyon. They collected some of the archaeological remains found in the caves and brought them to the U.S., where they were studied by Arden R. King (KING, 1955). All the cavities contained Classic period pottery and the most interesting material were from a large rock-shelter at the base of the La Venta canyon, where they collected various specimens of Incised Blackware and a large wrapping of fibrous

sheaves called "shaman's bundle". The bundle contained various fragments of cords and textiles, *copal* balls, vegetables, two oyster shells (*Ostrea* sp.) and a thorn awl from a palm (*Acrocomia mexicana* or *Pyrenoglyphis balanoidea*) wrapped in a handle of palm boot fiber and probably used as an autosacrifice implement. The materials collected by the two hunters showed one of the most important characteristics of the dry caves of the area: the perfect conservation of perishable materials in spite of the surrounding lush tropical forest environment.

In 1953, Robert Russell explored part of the jungle area near Piedra Parada and discovered three monumental complexes. In the note he sent to *American Antiquity*, apart from describing the ruins, Russell states that "The entire area is liberally [sic] dotted with caves. Those I visited are carpeted with sherds, in one to a depth of over one foot. This suggest that the caves were used for religious rituals over a very extended period" (RUSSELL, 1954).

In 1958, Frederick A. Peterson, Field Director of the New World Archaeological Foundation, "was assigned the awesome task of making a survey of the many caves and archaeological sites reported for the Ocozocoautla-Cintalapa subregion, in the Rio La Venta drainage" (LOWE, 1959). In five months of field-work Peterson explored over fifty caves with archaeological remains, collecting pottery specimens and describing the archaeological contexts in his field-notes, unfortunately still unpublished. Scanty descriptions of his work can be found in a couple of popular articles (PETERSON, 1961a, 1961b), in publications devoted to other works he made in western Chiapas (PETERSON, 1963a, 1963b) and in brief mentions of his colleagues (LOWE, 1959; LOWE & MASON, 1965). From this references we can assume that the majority of caves he explored contained Early Classic materials, often in the form of "massive offerings"; one cave contained more than 20.000 whole vessels of White-rimmed Blackware.

In 1968, Thomas A. Lee began a survey of the area for the New World Archaeological Foundation. He studied three caves in the Rio La Venta region and made excavations in the large rock shelter previously visited by Arnold and Snell, now called Cueva de la Media Luna, where he detected a Late Preclassic-Protoclassic occupation (ca. 300 BC- AD 250); during this period, a plastered and painted platform was built in the cave, supporting a wattle-and-daub upper structure composed of various rooms; nineteen offerings were buried along the platform front and stairway, consisting in palm-fiber bundles and couples of pottery bowls put in a mouth-to-mouth position and wrapped in palm fiber. The bundles contained cords, fiber and *copal*, while the mouth-to-mouth offerings contained fibers, *copal*, gourd pendants and human hair. A pit near the platform

contained the burials of four individuals, associated to other seven fiber bundles and covered by a massive offering of 519 White-rimmed Blackware pottery bowls. A later—and less understood—Late Classic frequentation was identified on the base of the presence of few ceramic material and by the probably contemporaneous red geometric rock paintings on the cave walls. The other caves explored by Lee were the Cueva Colmena, containing a massive offering of hundreds of Late Classic pottery bowls and a child skeleton, and Cueva Cuatro Hacha, with a red rock-painting depicting an “ax” with four inner dots (LEE, 1985); similar painting are quite common on the canyon cliffs and in various caves and *simas* of the region.

Between 1969 and 1993 the Rio La Venta region has been the object of various speleological expeditions organized by the Accademia dei Lincei (Italy), Circolo Speleologico Romano (Italy), Speleo Club Mottois (France), Gruppo Speleologico Bolognese (Italy), MUCC (Canada), Speleo Club Martel (France) and various sardinian speleo clubs; in this same time-span was carried out the first expedition by some the founders of the La Venta Association who, in 1990, made the first complete descent of the Rio La Venta (see DE VIVO & GIULIVO, 1999, for a synthesis of the speleological history of the area and for specific bibliographic references). Many of these expeditions found archaeological materials and reported them in their publications. Among these, two are the main results worth to be mentioned here: the discovering of the cave named Tapesco del Diablo by the members of the Speleo Club Martel and the first descent of the river made by the La Venta Association members.

The Tapesco del Diablo, a cave located 50 meters on the vertical cliff over the river bed, was excavated by mexican archaeologists with the technical aid of the french speleologists. In this cave, whose access was closed by a wooden grid (“tapesco”), they found some of the most important archaeological materials ever found in the area. In the cave main room they found a stone-slabs structure containing the burials of three individuals; associated with the burials they found a stone ax with the original wooden handle, textile fragments, conch pendants, calcium-solphate needles, maize cobs, a grinding stone, various potteries and five fiber bundles. One of the bundles contained a basket inside which they found a little wooden chest-mask covered by mother-of-pearl and representing a death god in the form of a human skull, a bone needle probably used for autosacrifice, forty perforated conch-shells and various seeds, mainly cocoa’s. Another bundle contained a child sandal, a comb, 23 gourd pendants and a wooden chest-mask depicting the face of an old man. The floor of the main room and of the main gallery of the cave were literally covered by pottery vessels (some of which stuccoed and painted) and grinding stones; in the gallery a two-meters wide platform was built against the rocky wall and a small lateral chamber toward the end of the cave contained a group of three stuccoed and painted vessels, three onix vessels and two alabaster tripod vessels, together with a bone pendant in the form of a crouching jaguar, 3 conch pendants, two net ponds and an obsidian blade. All the materials recovered in the Tapesco del Diablo are of Late Classic date (SILVA RHOADS & LINARES VILLANUEVA, 1993; LINARES VILLANUEVA, 1998).

In the meanwhile, the evaluation of the spelological and archaeological potential of the canyon by the La Venta Association members during their descent of the river led to the organization of the long-lasting Rio La Venta Project.

The Rio La Venta Archaeological Project

In 1993, after the first descent of the river, the Rio La Venta Project won the Rolex Award for Enterprise that permitted the organization of the first grand-scale expedition in the area. More than thirteen expeditions had been carried out since then, giving a fundamental contribution to the geographic, speleological and archaeological knowledge of the area. Leaving aside the important speleological results (cf. BADINO et al., 1999), let’s concentrate here on the archeological ones.

During their 1993-1996 explorations the italian speleologists identified 32 caves containing archeological materials such as pottery, human bones and walls dividing the caves’ chambers. Many other caves of archeological interest were seen on the canyon cliffs during the descent of the river. These findings and their close relationship with the spelological and hydrogeological context of the area led them to the idea of trying to give impulse to a formal archaeological research.

A first attempt to contribute to the archeological investigation of the area was made in 1994 when the La Venta Association members brought the mexican archaeologist that excavated the Tapesco del Diablo to El Castillo, a big rock shelter they had discovered 80 meters high on the canyon cliff, located in one of the most impressive turns on the canyon. The big shelter (40 meters wide and 14 meters deep) contains a group of artificial, stone-built and stucco-plastered terraces, arranged as an “amphitheatre” around a central horizontal lithic slab that seems some sort of altar. A niche-like seat overlooks the canyon, and a fine-line incision, representing two face to face individuals with *máxtlatl*, necklace, earrings and feathered headdress, was found on the stuccoed surface of one of the terraces. Unfortunately, the archaeologists only made a collection of surface pottery fragments (LINARES VILLANUEVA, 1998).

The occasion for a long-lasting archaeological investigation came in 1997 when the La Venta Association organized the first campaign of the Rio La Venta Archaeological Project, directed by the italian archaeologist Giuseppe Orefici and by Thomas A. Lee, Eliseo Linares Villanueva and Carlos Silva Rhoads. Since the next year and till today the project has been directed by Thomas A. Lee and the author of this paper, who took part to the first expedition as field archeologist (OREFICI, LEE & DOMENICI, 1999).

During the 1997 expedition, the archeological project—apart from exploring and mapping some impressive open-air monumental sites not described here—focused on the excavation of three caves in the canyon: Cueva del Lazo, Camino Infinito and El Castillo (OREFICI, 1999; DOMENICI & LEE, 1999, 2000 in press).

The Cueva del Lazo is located on the canyon cliff, 250 meters over the river bed. On the inner surface, covering an area of about 250 square meters, there were textile fragments, cords (“lazos”) and pottery fragments, among which a modeled three-dimensional jaguar from a censer lid. The excavation carried out in the cave led to the discovery of ten burials of childrens of an age comprised between six months and two years and a half, with only one of them aged between seven and eight yeras; many of the childrens (nine, at least) were wrapped in textile funerary bundles tied by fiber cords and showed textile turbants on their heads. Three of the child showed artificial cranial deformation. One of the child skulls had the *foramen magnum* artificially enlarged, probably to extract the cerebral mass (DRUSINI, 1999). Among the items associated with the burials there were a bone perforator, a horn of a young deer, fiber bracelets with conch beads, a necklace with two conch and one bone pendants and an implement made with little animal teeths probably used for tattooing or skin scarifying.

The child burials were associated with Late-Terminal Classic ceramic materials and they were intruding in a floor exposed in various parts of the cave. Below this floor, a little test pit revealed another floor, probably belonging to the first occupation of the cave. The surface presence of Late Preclassic and Early-Middle Classic materials could give a hint on the possible chronology of the previous and scarcely investigated occupations of the cave.

Various vegetal remains were recovered by the excavation such as beans (*Phaseolus sp.*), chili-peppers (*Capsicum sp.*), avocados (*Persea sp.*), *xicama* (*Pachyrrhizus sp.*) and cotton (*Gossypium sp.*). The presence of maize (*Zea mays*) was very high, with a total of more than 1200 corn-cobs weighting 4.8 kilos (PIACENZA, 1999).

The Camino Infinito cave is located on the right-hand cliff of the canyon and its 60 meters high access opens at 350 m above the

river-bed, on the top of a big detrital cone whose ascent is very hard and risky ("camino infinito" means aptly "neverending trail"); for this reason we had to reach the cave descending from the top of the 500 meters high cliff with the aid of ropes. The big main room was almost free of archaeological remains, apart from an amount of pottery fragments near the end of the cave. The excavation of this "mound" brought to light three ladle censers with stamped interior and stamped handles (with images of a monkey, a jaguar paw and a fantastic animal resembling a dragon or a canid) and an architectonical basalt sculpture in the form of a jaguar's head. These items, together with the amount of pottery fragments, laid over an ash lens containing fragments of a child's skull. All the pottery seems to be from the Late-Terminal Classic period.

The third cave explored was El Castillo, where a surface material collection had been already made in 1994 (cfr. *supra*). Apart from drawing a better topographical map and completing the surface collection, two small test pits were excavated in the central terrace. Among the items found on the surface there were an handle of a ladle censer in the form of a dragon and a fragment of a child skull, the last one located inside a little crack in the rear rock wall. All the pottery recovered from El Castillo is of Late-Terminal Classic date.

In the following field-seasons, the Rio La Venta Archaeological Project devoted mainly to the study of the open-air sites located in the tropical forest above the canyon, in order to have a better understanding of the wider cultural and social context of the ritual activity areas identified inside the caves (DOMENICI & LEE, 1999, 2000 in press). Anyway, during the several field-seasons we had the opportunity to explore other seven caves with surface archaeological material. Two of them, explored in 2000, were particularly interesting: the Cueva de las Calaveras contained various whole and broken Early and Middle Classic pottery specimens and, in the final gallery, a big amount of human skeletons (surely more than ten individuals) spared on the ground; in the Cueva de José Juan, also explored in 2000, almost 200 whole White-rimmed Blackware bowls of Early Classic period were deposited at the feet of a calcitic formation hanging from the rocky wall of the cave.

Some observations about typology and chronology of cave use

We are aware that the 62 archaeological caves reported by the above mentioned investigators (and we should add the "more than fifty" caves explored, but not published, by Peterson) represent only a minor part of the total number of caves with archaeological remains in the rio La Venta area. Many others had been seen but not explored on the canyon cliffs (for example, caves sealed by man-made walls) or had been mentioned by local inhabitants or spelologists. Despite the fact that our sample is indeed not completely representative, we think that the available data permit us to trace a rough sketch of the typological and chronological variability of the ancient use of caves in the region. The following sketch must be hence considered as a preliminary one, that need to be tested by future researches.

We think that the available data point to a mostly ritual use of the caves; this kind of use fits well with archaeological and ethnohistorical data from the zoque-speaking area and from various other mesoamerican regions. The presence of utilitarian wares and implements such as the grinding stones in caves of very difficult access has led various investigators to propose that the caves could have been used as temporary refuges in periods of warfare. We cannot rule out this possibility, but we think that these utilitarian implements could also be considered as traces of long permanences in the caves linked to their ritual function, for example during some kind of ascetical retreats. Moreover, the many contemporary open-air sites of the region—where surely the Zoque indians usually lived—do not show any defensive feature that suggests a warlike social environment.

The difficult access to some of the caves, mainly the ones located on the canyon cliffs, need some more consideration. Various

caves can today be reached only with the aid of modern climbing technical material and we can only guess how risky was for the ancient indians to reach them and we must imagine that they had a good climbing ability. In some cases, such as El Castillo, one can observe small natural terraces running along the cliff that were protected with a low wall in order to walk on them to reach the cave. We suspect that the very activity of reaching the caves was part of some kind of ritual training.

The comparison of the local data with extra-regional ones allows to think that most of the ritual carried out in the caves were linked to the underworld water deities, whose role in a so highly karstified area (very poor in surface water) can be well imagined. These water-related rituals seems to fit well with archaeological contexts such as bowls deposited near or under stalactites in order to collect the dripping water, a custom that was also common among the mayas who used this "virgin water" for ritual purposes. Many of the "massive offerings" are also located near calcitic formations.

The same relation with water deities seems to be evident in the many child burials (Cueva del Lazo, Camino Infinito, Cueva Colmena), as we know that many mesoamerican groups related child with the cold-forces of watery underworld. As we will see, local ethnohistorical data seem to confirm the non-ordinary character of these child burials.

Another kind of use of the caves is the funerary one (eg. Tapesco del Diablo, Cueva de las Calaveras, etc.), but again we cannot know if these burials were ordinary-ones or if they were instead intended as some kind of offering. We know that the open-air sites contain burials, but our knowledge of this matter is still too poor to give us a good idea of the ancient funerary patterns of the region.

Various kinds of man-made structures had been located in the caves. There are walls dividing different rooms with low accesses (eg. Cueva de los Cajetes, Las Cuevas, etc), walls completely sealing some cave on the canyon cliff, low terraces (Tapesco del Diablo, El Castillo) or solid platforms (Cueva de la Media Luna). In general terms, we can suggest that archaeological materials such as massive offering, censers, child burials and shaman's bundles containing thorns, needles, copal and minerals, point to rituals such as ascetical retreats, medical treatments, divination, offering, sacrifices and autosacrifices, all them well established in the mesoamerican religious tradition.

These ritual activities surely changed over the time. The most ancient evidence of archaeological materials in a cave comes from the Cueva de la Media Luna, where the first occupation dates to the Late Preclassic period (ca. 300 BC). Probably the use of the caves began even earlier, since the oldest open-air sites of the region date back to the Early Preclassic. After the first poorly known frequentation of the cave (represented by some pottery fragments and hundreds of sweet-water shrimps), during the same Late Preclassic period, the Zoque indians of Cueva de la Media Luna built the platform and the upper wattle-and-daub structure and buried their offerings and burials. On the base of the kind of offerings, we suspect that the cave could have been the seat of some shaman or priest.

The main period of cave is the Early Classic (AD 200-600), when the most common activity seem to be the "massive offering" of bowls. The number of caves with this kind of offerings, as the number of vessels deposited in every one of these, is really impressive. We do not know the reason for this apparent ritual "intensification" and "specialization", and we can only suggest that it must be related with cult of water and rain deities.

The deposition of "massive offerings" seem to have come to an end toward the end of Middle Classic period (ca. 600), since the only later example known to us is the Late Classic one in Cueva Colmena. This strong change in the ritual activities between Middle and Late Classic is surely linked to the wider social and cultural development of the area, that during Late and Terminal Classic shows an abrupt change in various cultural aspects. The Fine Orange ceramic pastes originated on the Gulf Coast completely replaced the old Blackware tradition and a new, monumental architectural style (with beautifully built stone

structures) had a wide diffusion in the jungle over the canyon, replacing the old tradition of earthen mounds. This new cultural phase seems to cover the period between AD 600 and AD 1000, that is, corresponding to Late and Terminal Classic periods, with the possibility of an Early Postclassic extension. We will limit to note here that we don't believe in a "physical" replacement of the local inhabitants and that this change is probably related to a strong cultural influence coming from the Mayan people settled on the Gulf Coast.

The Late-Terminal Classic ritual activities show a strong tendency towards child burials and sacrifices (Cueva del Lazo, Camino Infinito, Cueva Colmena, El Castillo) that, as we already noted, could be related with water petition to the rain gods. In this same period the rich offerings of the Tapesco del Diablo were deposited and the El Castillo's structures were built.

We lack any data concerning the use of caves during the Postclassic period, an epoch scarcely represented in the open-air sites too. Anyway, we suppose that ritual activities in caves must have continued uninterruptedly, since various colonial documents show that they continued at least until the beginning of the XIX century.

In fact, in a recent work Dolores Aramoni cites acts from trials against zoque Indians accused of sorcery. In 1685, the zoque woman María Sánchez from Jiquipilas witnesses that her father, who was a famous *brujo* (sorcerer), wanting her to know "what is inside the mountain", took her various times in a cave where she met supernaturals. She says also that her father and his companions used to bring dead childrens, *copal*, candles and flowers in the caves as presents for the "devil". Still in 1801, the zoque Tiburcio Pamplona from Quechula, accused to be a *brujo*, said that the *naguales* (shamans' alter-egos) lived in a place called Ipstec ("Twenty Houses"), a place corresponding to the mountain ridge on the north side of Rio La Venta (today called Veinte Casas); he said also that when the *naguales* want to kill someone they used to throw him in the Rio La Venta canyon (ARAMONI, 1992).

Future Researches

An agreement has been established with the New World Archaeological Foundation in order to get access to Peterson's unpublished field-notes and materials, in order to add his data to the ongoing cataloguing of archaeological caves of the area. Future field-research of the Rio La Venta Archaeological Project will concentrate on the identification and excavation of ritual activity areas in dry caves.

Despite the fact that more than forty years have passed from Peterson's work, the big amount of still unexplored caves force us to conclude with his same concluding words: "we should [...] go back and do some more exploring" (PETERSON, 1961b).

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