

ScienceNews

MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY FOR SCIENCE & THE PUBLIC

Feature

Archaeology

Sacred Secrets of the Caves

Archaeologists go underground for enlightenment on ancient Maya



by Bruce Bower
January 24, 1998

The Classic era of Maya civilization, from A.D. 250 to A.D. 900, has yielded majestic remains that jut out of the tropical forests of southern Mexico and Central America. At several dozen major Maya settlements, stairways run up the sides of massive temples, and inscribed stone monuments recount the histories of royal families and their bloody escapades in warfare. Immense plazas, elaborate buildings reserved for powerful officials, and ball courts on which some type of organized game was played appear as regularly as shopping malls in suburban neighborhoods.

Yet new insights into the religious beliefs and economic practices of the Classic Maya may lie beneath the surface of their imposing structures--in caves. Ongoing archaeological investigations suggest that ancient Maya settlements were strategically placed on top of and around numerous caves, both natural and man-made, and that these caverns served as landmarks of political power and spiritual meaning.

Caves located in crucial spots sanctified each Maya site and served as central points in a "sacred landscape," proposes archaeologist James E. Brady of George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Kings and nobles used these subterranean spaces in ways designed to fortify their hold on power, Brady suspects.