

Chapter Five

Pilgrimage and Caves on Cozumel

by Shankari Patel

Spanish sources document a rich history of pre-Columbian pilgrimage at Cozumel, centered on the Maya deity, Ix Chel, the goddess of fertility, childbirth, divination, and medicine. Yet despite this well-documented evidence, previous archaeological interpretations of Cozumel have focused exclusively on the island's assumed significance to Postclassic trade. Although a review of the model employed by the Harvard Arizona Project to study the island demonstrates data did not support such an interpretation, Cozumel is often cited as an example of a Maya trading center. Focusing on trade has structured subsequent research away from the examination of those features that might be expected to be associated with pilgrimage.

My recent research into the caves and *cenotes* of Cozumel documents the widespread cultural modification of these features, which highlights the importance of these natural landmarks in the religious life of the ancient Maya. It also suggests that the original pilgrimage circuit may have been laid out around landscape features such as caves and *cenotes* that were known to have been associ-

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ated with the Maya goddess, Ix Chel (Milbrath 1999). The landscape approach adopted by this project appears to hold promise for illuminating pre-Columbian pilgrimage at Cozumel.

HISTORIC BACKGROUND

Because of Cozumel's proximity to Cuba, it was a favored supply stop for the conquistadors. Juan de Grijalva, who commanded the second expedition to Yucatán in 1518, explored the island's interior along paved roads known as *sacbeob* finding an abundance of fish and honey products in the empty towns (Wagner 1942). Hernan Cortés' 1519 expedition regrouped at Cozumel after being separated by a *norte*. Naum Pat, the lord of Cozumel, kept his people neutral when bargaining with the Spaniards. He provided Cortés with information on the two shipwrecked Spaniards living on the mainland in exchange for a document protecting the islanders from future harassment.

Lopez de Gómara, who chronicled the Cortés expedition described the island, known as *Acuzamil*, as consisting of three towns with an estimated 3000 residents. The natives were expert fishermen who also produced maize and honey. There were numerous temples throughout the island where the Maya offered copal and fruit and occasionally sacrificed birds, dogs, children, and adults to the idols. A temple near the coast, with a hollow ceramic idol fastened to the temple wall with mortar, appeared different than the rest. In the back of this idol, an entrance allowed the native priests to converse directly with the worshippers. The multitude of chapels and temples attracted a great number of "devout and superstitious" pilgrims who came from distant lands to worship at Cozumel. When Cortés destroyed the idols at the coastal temple and replaced them with images of the cross and the Virgin Mary, Gómara (Simpson 1964) recorded that the islanders enthusiastically brought the same offerings of birds, fruit, and copal to the image of the Virgin Mary that they had provided to their own idols.

According to the Bishop Diego de Landa, Cozumel served as a pilgrimage center devoted to the goddess Ix Chel, the deity of the moon, fertility, childbirth and medicine. Landa wrote, "And they held Cozumel and the well of Chichén Itzá in the same veneration as we have for pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Rome, and so they used to go to visit these places and to offer presents there, especially to Cozumel, as we do to holy places" (Tozzer 1941: 109).

Ethnohistoric sources record that Cozumel received pilgrims from distant lands. Diego de Contreras Duran, who inherited the island from his father as part of his *encomienda*, noted in 1579 that the Maya journeyed in great numbers from Tabasco, Xicalango, Champoton, and Campeche to worship Ix Chel (Roys et al. 1940: 5).

The pilgrimage center at Cozumel was so important that Spanish sources suggest that *sacbeob* on the mainland were constructed expressly to accommodate religious traffic to the island. Diego López de Cogolludo noted (in Tozzer 1941: 109) that,

There are remains of paved highways which traverse all this kingdom and they say they ended in the east on the seashore where it crosses an arm of the sea for the distance of four leagues which divides the mainland from that island. These highways were like the *caminos reales*, which guided them with no fear of going astray so that they might arrive at Cozumel for the fulfillment of their vows, to offer their sacrifices, to ask for help in their needs, and for the mistaken adoration of their false gods.

Cozumel continued its tradition of supplying the conquistadors during the conquest. Francisco de Montejo's fleet stopped in Cozumel in 1527 on their way to secure the Yucatán peninsula. The fleet received supplies from Naum Pat, the Maya lord who had assisted Cortés. When Montejo and his men ventured north, Naum Pat, who was on the mainland attending a wedding, reportedly saved them from starvation (Clendinnen 1987: 21). The cooperation of the Cozumel Maya throughout the conquest (and the island's location along the periphery of the Maya realm) resulted in little Spanish interference with native religious practices during the colonial era (Roys et al. 1940: 8).

Although the early conquistadors may have made a display of casting down idols and replacing them with the icons of Christianity, the Maya continued to practice their native religious rituals well into the colonial period (Lothrop 1924). Many of the colonial letters to the crown reported Cozumel's Indians continued adherence to native rituals at sanctuaries "hidden" within the forest. Requests from officials for the appointment of a priest to instruct the Cozumel Maya in Christianity rarely yielded results.

There is little information concerning Cozumel during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The island suffered from piratical raids in the late sixteenth century, which is thought to have led to the Maya abandoning the island in the eighteenth century (Antochiw and Dachary 1991). Court documents describe two towns on the island in 1673, yet maps from 1766 and 1801 list the island as uninhabited (Roys et al. 1940: 10).

Spanish sources paint a vivid picture of Cozumel Island as a religious center that drew pilgrims from all parts of Yucatán. Indeed, Cogolludo's description seems to suggest that the *sacbe* system in the interior of the peninsula was transportation infrastructure specifically constructed to serve pilgrimage. Furthermore, the economy appears to have been oriented around subsistence with maize and fish, listed as the principal products (Simpson 1964; Wagner 1942). The frequent references to the production of honey on the island could be tied specifically to the brewing of the ritual alcoholic beverage, *balche*. Interestingly, no mention is made of the importance of markets or trade centers. Thus, according to the conquest and ethnohistoric records the island's economy appears to have facilitated pilgrimage and this is what structured secondary production as well.

A HISTORY OF MODERN INVESTIGATION

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Cozumel's fame as a pilgrimage center lured John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood to the island in 1842. Barred from the interior by vegetation and encountering no occupants, Stephens and Catherwood assumed it to be uninhabited and confined their investigations to the ruins of San Miguel on the west coast (Stephens 1962: 236–246). William Henry Holmes (1895: 66) spent time at the west coast shrine known as Miramar whose interesting feature was a sculptured pillar of a kneeling woman grasping her abdomen in a birthing position (Figure 5.1). A similar column in the interior of the island also caught the attention of George Howe (1911: 449–550) (Figure 5.2).

Channing Arnold and Frederick J. Tabor Frost visited Cozumel in 1908, searching explicitly for what they described as “the Mayan Mecca.” Because only ruins accessible from the port of San Miguel had been described, they reasoned that previous explorers had seen just a fraction of the pre-Columbian architecture. They were convinced that the true pilgrimage center lay in the “heart of the island” hidden by the dense forest. If Cozumel was the “*Isla Sagrada*,” Arnold and Frost expected to find elaborate architecture rivaling or surpassing structures on the mainland. Over the course of several weeks they hacked through miles of thick brush searching for religious architecture eventually discovering San Gervasio, the largest site on the island. Nevertheless, the explorers were disappointed with San Gervasio, which could not compare in size or grandeur to Chichén Itzá (Arnold and Frost 1909).

Additional sites on Cozumel were recorded by the Mason–Spinden Expedition to Yucatán led by Gregory Mason and Herbert J. Spinden and described in the *Silver Cities of Yucatán* (Mason 1927). This expedition accessed the north part of the island by anchoring at Punta Molas. Venturing inland they came upon a lagoon with the remains of an ancient *sache* described as,

A viaduct made of great stone slabs, which had been built by ancient Mayas. It was raised two feet above the water. For a quarter mile it could still be used, but the balance was disintegrating for a considerable distance. The slabs had either been worn smooth by pedestrians or had been chosen for their smoothness to the bare feet of pilgrims coming to Cozumel's shrines as Greeks sought the shrine of Apollo at Delphi (ibid.: 276).

The nineteenth and early twentieth century saw a steady stream of explorers attracted to Cozumel because of its reputation as a great pilgrimage center. Most left frustrated by their inability to penetrate the dense jungle and discouraged because the architecture was not on the grand scale they had expected. This led later archaeologists to dismiss Cozumel's religious history, and focus instead on the island's role as a pre-Columbian trading center. These modern studies mark a new period of exploration centered on economic models.

Harvard University and University of Arizona initiated an extensive island-wide archaeological project in 1972. Over the course of two field seasons, over 30 sites were carefully examined in order to understand “the role of long-distance



FIGURE 5.1. “La Parturienta Columna” at Miramar (from Holmes 1895).

trade in the rise, maintenance, and fall of Mesoamerican civilizations” (Sabloff and Rathje 1975). The project’s elaborate mercantile model, constructed before the investigation, remains the most influential and most frequently cited interpretation of Cozumel and will be discussed in detail later.

Excavations at San Gervasio continued into the 1980s (Robles Castellanos 1986) and 1990s (Azcárate Soto and Ramírez Ramírez 2000; Ramírez Ramírez and



FIGURE 5.2. "La Parturienta Columna" at Santa Rita (from Howe 1911).

Azcárate Soto 2000, 2002) to restore the site for the growing number of tourists visiting the island and to test a number of ideas regarding its political and economic autonomy. Rather than seeing Cozumel as a port controlled by the Toltec at Chichén Itzá during the Early Postclassic, INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia) archaeologists sought evidence to prove the island prospered not from the fall of Chichén Itzá, but as a result of increased maritime trade after Coba collapsed (Sierra Sosa 1994; Sierra Sosa and Robles Castellanos 1988).

THE MERCANTILE MODEL

Because sources state that the island received pilgrims from key trading ports on the mainland and because of its seemingly convenient location along the Maya sea trade route, the Harvard Arizona Archaeological Project assumed Cozumel's chief function was in relation to trade. Since previous archaeological surveys had documented occupation extending from the Late Preclassic to the conquest, it was also believed that the island's importance to the trading system was quite ancient. Cozumel had persisted while its notable neighbors, such as Coba and Chichén Itzá, had been abandoned. Cozumel appeared to be the ideal place to test how mercantile systems adapted to change and to understand aspects of the larger trading network.

The project hypothesized that Cozumel would have first operated as a neutral port-of-trade controlled by Toltec Chichén Itzá during the Early Postclassic. After Chichén Itzá collapsed it was thought that the island reemerged as an independent trading port during the Late Postclassic. Because Cozumel would no longer be protected by Chichén Itzá, the project speculated that security “Was reinforced religiously through the institution of a pilgrimage route which exactly paralleled the principle trading route” (Sabloff et al. 1974: 403). The trading port was thought to predate the pilgrimage tradition and therefore the investigators explicitly predicted that the pilgrimage center at Cozumel would not date to a period earlier than the Late Postclassic (Sabloff et al. 1974: 414).

A close examination of both the assumptions and the results of the Harvard Arizona Project raise serious doubts about the mercantile model. The basic premise that Cozumel’s location made it a natural and important port is highly questionable. Although the island lies only 20 km from the coast, a deep channel with a strong current separates it from the mainland. As Edwards (1957: 13–14) warns,

Through the channel, called the Canal de Cozumel, flows a swift, north-setting current of from four to six knots, and small craft which ply between mainland ports to the north and the harbor at San Miguel must hug the coast of the peninsula as far south as Playa del Carmen before attempting a dash across the channel. If the wind or motor fails, the navigator may find himself rapidly carried back towards his last port of call.

The Maya were well aware of this difficulty. Colonial documents note that, “When they have to cross over to the town of Polé, which is on the mainland, they employ many superstitions before embarking and crossing that strait, which flows with greater velocity than a mighty river” (Roys et al. 1940: 9). The settlement surveyors of the Harvard Arizona Project similarly concluded, “The channel separating Cozumel from the mainland is difficult and dangerous to cross even with modern craft” (Freidel and Leventhal 1975: 65). The difficulty in reaching Cozumel needs to be stressed because the island produced the same goods that were readily available on the mainland, so its importance as a trade center has always rested primarily on its seemingly ideal location for seafaring trade. Since sailing to the island was more hazardous than staying close to the coast, what was the incentive for traders to risk their wares in getting there? Trade alone appears to be an inadequate explanation.

Archaeological data suggest that the initial port-of-trade model cannot be applied to Cozumel for a number of reasons. The first assumption that all of Yucatán had been under the central control of Chichén Itzá during the Early Postclassic proved to be incorrect based on subsequent work in Yucatán and Quintana Roo in the late 1970s (Andrews 1983; Robles Castellanos 1980). Ceramic evidence from the mainland indicated that the peninsula had been divided between two distinct political and commercial spheres of Chichén Itzá and Coba, with Cozumel most likely falling under the influence of Coba (Phillips 1979: 261). Although Peto Cream ceram-

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ics recovered from subsequent excavations at San Gervasio reveal an Itzá link, Andrews (1990: 164) believes the evidence is insufficient to confirm an Itzá commercial or military presence on the island. Furthermore, Andrews and Robles Castellanos (1985: 67–68) note the problems involved in applying Thompson’s historic arguments to the archaeological record,

Another fundamental problem is our adherence to quasi-historical sequences of events which offer felicitous, but somewhat simplistic, accounts of the arrival of foreign groups in northern Yucatán in the ninth and tenth centuries of the Christian era. Because such reconstructions fail to clarify the archaeological record, we must assume that a far more complex series of events took place. In this respect, we are not alluding to the old Quetzalcoatl-Kukulcan migration myth, but rather to the more intricate ‘Putun models’ proposed in the early 1970’s (Thompson 1970: Ball 1974). These models offer only a superficial explanation of the social, economic, and political processes underlying events, and fail to deal adequately with the interaction between foreign groups and local polities in the course of those changing times.

In addition, the central proposition that Cozumel had been an important trading center in the Early Postclassic proved untenable. The majority of the material recovered by the project dated to the Late Postclassic. A lack of secular remains from the Early Postclassic led David Phillips (1979: 257) to conclude that “Cozumel was not a major center before the Decadent period” and evidence for trade could only be found in Late Postclassic lots. Phillips (*ibid.*: 263) found that,

The lack of pre-Decadent remains on Cozumel belies the supposed importance of the island in Early Postclassic trade; because of strategic factors, it may be that Cozumel was not as advantageously sited relative to trade routes as it was during the Decadent. In other words, Cozumel is not the ideal place to test the port-of-trade model.

The conclusion of the ceramic analysis sounded a similar note. Connors (1983: 365–374) says,

Ceramic evidence does not strongly support the dynamic port of trade model as proposed by the investigators (Rathje and Sabloff 1973; Sabloff and Rathje 1975). The absence of ceramics indicating the presence of foreign groups on the island in Early Postclassic times tends to reduce the likelihood that Cozumel was a port of trade in the purest sense, as defined in the Cozumel research design.

Not only did the archaeological remains negate the hypothesis that Cozumel was an early trading center, they also did not support the expectation that the pilgrimage cult was a late development. All of the material recovered from earlier lots was “biased towards ritual” (Phillips 1979: 235) indicating a ceremonial significance to Cozumel before the establishment of trade in the Late Postclassic. An analysis of the artifacts suggests that the market on Cozumel may have been significantly different than those found on the mainland in being structured around pilgrimage

activity. The most common artifacts recovered were net sinkers (ibid.: 246) and plugs for hollow log beehives (ibid.: 251) confirming the conquistadors' accounts that fish and honey were the island's main products (Maudslay 1996; Pagden 1986; Simpson 1964; Wagner 1942).

Unfortunately, the mercantile model never acknowledged that their evidence for mercantile activity resembled a secondary development associated with pilgrimage. Furthermore, the bulk of the data recovered suggest an economic system structured around servicing the needs of pilgrims. While the mercantile model was unable to provide a convincing explanation for developments on Cozumel, it has regrettably shifted attention away from the religious function of the island. Thus, Cozumel was classified as an example of a typical Late Postclassic trading center, which took advantage of its prime location along an important sea trade route to participate in the commerce of the region (Sabloff 1977, 2001; Sabloff and Freidel 1975; Sabloff and Rathje 1975).

PILGRIMAGE AND TRADE

Despite the fact that the ethnohistoric sources identify Cozumel as a pilgrimage center, an archaeological project has yet to investigate the implication. This appears to reflect a wider anthropological bias. Victor Turner (1973: 209) criticized anthropology for neglecting pilgrimage as an important area of study citing anthropology's obsession with "pragmatics" over "symbolics." Yet it is the symbolic that draws people to sacred centers and, in the process, creates a number of cultural systems of interest to even the most pragmatic anthropologist. Pilgrimage centers embrace both spiritual and secular activities. As a phenomenon that attracts some of the largest gatherings of people on the planet (Morinis 1992), pilgrimage encourages mercantile activities. Large transient populations engaged in any type of activity require food, lodging, and items acquired in markets. Sacred centers stimulate the trade of ritual and utilitarian items, incorporating financial activities into the ideological interests of the center (Rinschede and Sievers 1987; Sopher 1967).

In addition to providing goods and services to pilgrims, religious markets have an impact on local and regional economies (Rinschede and Sievers 1987). As Rinschede (1992: 65) notes,

On the whole, the economy of an entire city and its surroundings (Fatima and Lourdes) and sometimes of an entire country (Mecca in Saudi Arabia) can be influenced by the pilgrim stream. Until the end of the Second World War, when the oil industry developed dramatically, the income produced by the Mecca pilgrims was the backbone of Saudi Arabian economy.

Wensinck (1966: 32) points out the close relationship between religious celebrations and economic activity. He notes that, "Great fairs were from early times associated with the hajj, which was celebrated on the conclusion of the date har-

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vest.” Besides utilitarian goods, pilgrimage markets also provide pilgrims with ritual objects for use on site or as mementos, ideological symbols embodying the ideals of the center. Richardson (1997: v) views the trade of religious articles as inevitable “since the sacred has a physical presence, copies can be made, and if copies can be made, they can be sold and a profit turned.” This need for mementos appears to be universal and has been called the “cult of traces” (Morinis 1992: 6). As Coleman and Elsner (1995: 100) elaborate, “One of the most characteristic aspects of pilgrimage art in all the world religions is the proliferation of objects made available to pilgrims and brought home by them as reminders and even as tangible channels of connection with the sacred experience.”

The connection between pilgrimage and commerce has been recognized in the Mesoamerican area as well. It is interesting to compare Maudslay’s description of Esquipulas over a hundred years ago to Wensinck’s analysis of the hajj cited previously. Maudslay (quoted in McBryde 1947: 83) says,

The great festival of the year is held in January, and then for a week or more the usually half-deserted little town of Esquipulas swarms with pilgrims. In old days its fame was so great that it attracted worshippers all the way from Mexico and Panama and the fair, which was carried out at the same time, was the great commercial event of the year. Thither the English merchants from Belize brought their wares and carried on what was practically the whole of the foreign business of Honduras, Salvador and Guatemala, taking in exchange the native grown indigo.

Interregional commerce has been linked to the fairs and fiestas surrounding pilgrimage sites in Guatemala (McBryde 1969: 248–249). Adams (1991: 120) observed that institutions like pilgrimages do not stand alone, but are a part of other social processes. Among the Tzeltales and Tojolabales he noted that, “A market was held concurrently which included products from throughout the catchment area, as well as products from Taiwan and other foreign countries. This market, its co-occurrence with the pilgrimage, and the range of products offered for sale again point to the economic functions of pilgrimages” (Adams 1991: 113). Thompson (1970: 138) believed that modern religious markets in Guatemala most likely mirrored pre-Columbian practices. As with other areas of the world, Mesoamerican pilgrimage and markets were symbiotic. “Pilgrimage devotion, the market, and fair are all connected with voluntary, contractual activities (the religious promise, the striking of a bargain, the penny ride on the merry-go-round)” (Turner and Turner 1978: 37).

In the model that I have developed, it is clear that, cross-culturally, pilgrimage produces markets that are only explainable in relation to the sacred site. The dominant trend has been to study trade on Cozumel independently from the pilgrimage function. In reviewing the data analyses from the Harvard Arizona Project it is interesting that little evidence of trade is produced and the data recovered point to religious activity. The project concluded that “Although Cozumel’s role as a pilgrimage shrine is made quite clear in the ethnohistoric literature, its role as a trading center is more ambiguous” (Freidel and Sabloff 1984: 179). With the close associa-

tion between pilgrimage and economic activity in Mesoamerica, it makes more sense to see trade on Cozumel as an outgrowth of religious traffic surrounding pilgrimage to Ix Chel. By investigating the ideological reasons for traveling to Cozumel, we would gain a better picture of its mercantile activity.

THE CAVES OF COZUMEL

Landscape features figured prominently in Mesoamerican pilgrimage sites. A number of these sites consisted of caves and *cenotes*, which received offerings in propitiation of the rain or water deities (Martínez Marin 1972; Turner 1973). A review of the literature indicates that there is considerable evidence of cave utilization on Cozumel. For instance, several of the early explorers described altars and structures that were built in, over, or next to caves (Arnold and Frost 1909; Mason 1927). Davidson (1967) also recorded a number of small cave shrines that seem to be situated in relation to water found deeper within the cave. In describing the temple at San Francisco cave, Davidson (1967: 52–56) noted,

Northwest of Cedral three-fourths of mile inland from Punta Tunich is a filled-in *cenote* which has a cave ruin in one side. Due to the protection afforded by the cave, the structure is in excellent condition, and painted figures are clearly visible to the left of the door. The small oratorio, which measures thirty inches long, twenty-four inches wide, and seventeen inches high, guards the potable water found deeper in the cave.

Wyllys Andrews IV (1955–1956: 8) documented a *cave/cenote* temple at Chen Pita, in the southern portion of the island. The site consisted of two caves, each containing large pools of water. Within the sheltered overhang of the caves a number of fire opals, sourced to an area hundreds of kilometers away from the island (Phillips 1979: 290), were cached under an altar. The pattern of building miniature temples and platforms in caves and *cenotes* on Cozumel has counterparts at other sites along the east coast (Andrews and Corletta 1995).

Several archaeological surveys and projects have recovered religious artifacts from the island's *cenotes* (Luna Erreguerena 1989) and INAH has identified several of the island's caves as serving a ceremonial function (Velázquez Morlet et al. 1988). An underwater archaeological project in the 1980s discovered ceramics and jade axes dating to the Late Classic Period (Delgado 1998: 276) within the *cenote* at Chankanaab (Luna Erreguerena 1989: 150), while divers exploring the *cenote* of Chu-Ha near the airport in 1996 found intact ceramic vessels (Sterner 1997). The Island Caves Research Center (ICRC) has spent the past twenty years mapping an underwater cave system on Cozumel known as Cueva Quebrada. At a surface opening in this system, 5,000 m from the west coast entrance, divers discovered pottery, human bones, and a number of other artifacts. As they exited this cave entrance they were surprised to discover a previously unrecorded surface site (Bozanic 1991).

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Based on the literature, I suspect that a pilgrimage circuit involving landscape features was once the focus of religious devotion on Cozumel and that these features may hold critical data on the importance of the Ix Chel cult. Therefore, I chose to reexamine a number of caves on Cozumel precisely because they had been so badly ignored in the past. The cave sites I visited were accessible to areas restored for tourism and exhibited evidence of ancient ritual use.

SAN GERVASIO

San Gervasio, one of the larger settlements on Cozumel, served as the main administrative and ceremonial center (Freidel and Sabloff 1984; Sierra Sosa and Robles Castellanos 1988: 9). Although only a fraction of the site has been excavated, there are three prominent caves in the restored section of the site. During the restoration, archaeologists collected human bones, ceramics, and conch shells from the floors of these caves (Sierra Sosa 1994: 80).

The first cave I investigated was directly behind Structure 30a near the entrance to the San Gervasio archaeological zone.¹ This building was identified as an oratory. A culturally modified hole in the bedrock gives access to the cave. This opening may have been the only entrance during the pre-Columbian period (Figure 5.3). The cave consists of a single chamber with a collapsed ceiling. Sierra Sosa (1994: 80) proposed that a masonry wall once encircled the interior of the cave. During my examination, I noticed masonry blocks strewn around the cave's interior but only the western wall remained discernable. Because this cave yielded a large ceramic sample the Harvard Arizona Project speculated that it had been used "extensively as a dump" (Gregory 1975: 97).

In a smaller cave located 72 m east of the first, Sierra Sosa (1994: 80) noted the presence of a staircase providing access to the surface. Although I noted a number of masonry fragments against the southern wall that appear to suggest its existence, the staircase is no longer obvious. Other architectural features observed included two field walls terminating at the cave's northern and southern boundaries. Adjacent to this cave were two unexcavated masonry structures. A third cave, 120 m east of the second contained masonry modifications to its interior but given the poor state of deterioration it was difficult to determine the original form of these alterations.

In addition to the three caves, a *cenote* temple was also examined at San Gervasio. The Harvard Arizona Project speculated that this *cenote* "played an important role in the activities of the center" (Freidel and Sabloff 1984: 154) because a *sacbe* terminated at a staircase descending into it. Although the staircase is gone I noted that structures 37a and 38a, which appear to be temples, were adjacent to this *cenote*. Structure 38a, which was not excavated or included in the San Gervasio restoration plans, towers over the western wall of the well. Aside from a prominent looters' hole, structure 38a is still in good condition. The placement of this temple is reminiscent of the *Casa del Cenote* at Tulum (Lothrop 1924: 109–111). The only



FIGURE 5.3. Cave entrance in relation to San Gervasio structure (photo by S. Patel).

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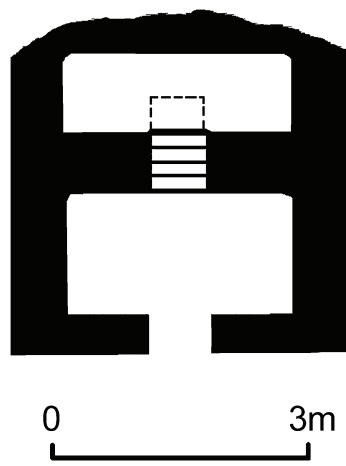


FIGURE 5.4. *Celerain I. Map of cenote temple (from Sanders 1955).*

other building in the vicinity is structure 41a, one of the larger temples on the island, constructed during the Late Classic period. Freidel (1975) speculated that this temple housed Ix Chel's oracle at San Gervasio.

CELERAIN I

Celerain 1, in the Punta Sur Ecological Park at the southern point of the island (Punta Celerain), is another

cenote historically associated with both a temple and *sacbe*. Hebert Spinden and Ludlow Griscom described the *cenote* shrine in 1926 as "A temple built over the entrance to a cave which contained a permanent fresh pool. Stairs from the doorway descended to the cavern" (Mason 1927: 278). When Sanders mapped the site (Figure 5.4) in 1954 he noted that, "A special feature is a four-step stairway which goes 1.2 meters under the floor of the back room and has its entrance in the back room doorway. It descends into what evidently was a *cenote* below the temple, now filled with rubble" (Sanders 1955: 191–192). Sanders collected fragments of incense burners from the floor of the temple. When Davidson (1967: 52–53) visited the site, also known as Chen David, in 1967, the temple structure had collapsed but the staircase was clearly visible. Other than Sanders's map and the descriptions given previously, there is little written about this site.

Following Sanders's distances from the modern lighthouse, the remains of the site were relocated in 2001. The temple has been completely destroyed, its masonry blocks scattered around the *cenote*, which still contains water (Figure 5.5). A wooden bridge now provides a walkway over the water. A sizable mound of rubble frames the southern portion of the well. Two additional entrances to the *cenote* were located along the southeastern and southwestern boundaries of the cave. Its companion temple, Celerain II, has also deteriorated into obscurity and efforts to relocate it failed. Neither site was included in the restorations plans for the ecological park.

DISCUSSION

The archaeological evidence for the importance of cave/*cenotes* is not limited to architecture found within them or artifacts recovered from them. The presence of powerful landmarks, such as caves and *cenotes* was a matter of first importance in any decision about land utilization, especially for religious purposes. Although the



FIGURE 5.5. *Celerain 1* (photo by S. Patel).

Harvard Arizona Project investigated the island for information on trade, their settlement analysis found the majority of masonry structures to be religious constructions. Not surprisingly, these buildings were associated with an island-wide *sacbe* network, which outlined a ceremonial circuit tying together the island's sacred geography (Freidel and Sabloff 1984: 183). The project also noted a number of religious structures adjacent to, within, or above the island's caves and *cenotes*. In addition, an extensive field wall network demarked space throughout much of the island. A number of these walls were not only near caves but actually appeared to delimit many of the large *cenotes* (ibid.: 33). Thus, a number of lines of evidence suggest that caves and *cenotes* were features of first importance that structured the utilization of space around them.

Religious activity may have persisted at *cenotes* on Cozumel even after the Maya resettled the island in the 1850s. A female statue situated at a *cenote* (Figure 5.6) near the island's Late Classic center received offerings up until its removal in the 1940s for display at the museum in San Miguel. The idol described as “*La Xnuc*,” “*La Vieja*,” and “*La Virgen de Santa Rita*,” held a special place of veneration among the people of Cozumel and local informants attested the *cenote* had received patrons for at least fifty years before the idol's removal from the site (Escalona Ramos 1946: 559–560).

CONCLUSIONS



FIGURE 5.6. *La "Xnuc", "La Vieja"* (from Escalona Ramos 1946).

The results of my recent cave survey on Cozumel indicate that these features were far more important than currently appreciated. The time and effort involved in modifying such landmarks seem out of keeping with previous archaeological interpretations, which list the Cozumel caves as dumps, quarries, or places of refuge (Freidel and Sabloff 1984: 71; Gregory 1975: 97; Rathje and Phillips 1975: 77; Sierra Sosa 1994: 80). There appears to be a pattern of widespread cultural modification directly associated with caves and *cenotes* on Cozumel. Architecture was built in or above these features and staircases facilitated access. The failure to appreciate the significance of the association between shrines, caves, *cenotes* and the cult of Ix Chel at sites like San Gervasio and Celarain I is a central reason that religious motivation did not receive greater attention. The thinking of the Harvard Arizona Project was clear in stating that, "structures within the architectural comparative type of shrine have been located upon *sacbeob*, next to *cenotes*, and along the coastlines of both Cozumel and the east coast which seem to be unlikely locations for structures with solely a religious purpose" (Freidel and Leventhal 1975: 72). Yet we now know that these are precisely the places where sacred landmarks are expected and this relationship has been extensively documented on the east coast of the mainland at Xcaret, Tulum, and Tancah (Andrews and Andrews 1975; Miller 1977).

Pilgrimage figured prominently in all activities on the island and according to the Spanish records was the incentive for Maya travel to Cozumel. The Harvard Arizona Project also recovered evidence that established the ritual center at Cozumel before the trading activities of the Late Postclassic. My recent reexamination of cave features on Cozumel has shown that they are the focus of a degree of modifi-

cation that is inconsistent with their supposed utilitarian and domestic functions. Instead, they appear to be integrated as focal points of ritual/ceremonial architectural complexes. This is consistent with the growing literature on Maya caves suggesting that they were among the most important landmarks in the ancient sacred landscape. These features were accessible from the *sacbe* network, whose primary function according to Freidel was to provide a ceremonial circuit for pilgrims to Cozumel. These data give tentative support to the hypothesis that an ancient pilgrimage circuit was once laid out in relation to the island's caves and *cenotes*. These findings indicate that the landscape approach may be the most profitable means for investigating and re-conceptualizing pilgrimage at Cozumel.

NOTE

1. The structure nomenclature is taken from the Harvard Arizona Project.

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