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Joel Skidmore
Editor
joel@mesoweb.com

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# A Glimpse into the Watery Underworld


JORGE PÉREZ DE LARA


Standing by the hole in the ground that the Spaniards had re-worked into a colonial *noria* mouth,[1] a narrow stone well fades into darkness as it drops vertically some 45 feet into the stony crust of the Yucatan. When I find out we will be lowered through that very hole with a rope manned by a couple of helpers, my excitement at diving in a *cenote*[2] once used for ancient Maya rituals falters somewhat.

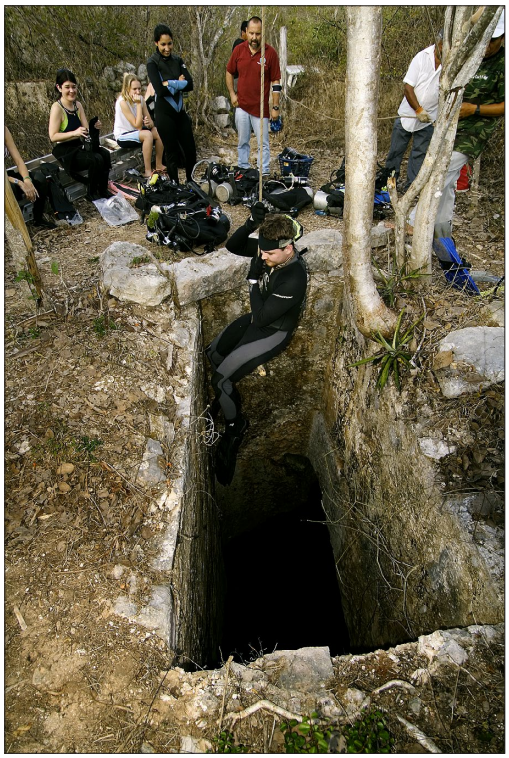

**Figure 1.** Access to a cenote is gained by being lowered on a rope through an old colonial wellhead cut in the stone of the vault of an ancient cenote.

I have come here hired as a photographer by *Archaeology* magazine to help them in covering the exploration work carried out in a large number of cenotes by underwater achaeologist Guillermo de Anda. De Anda's project, which started some years ago as a survey of cenotes that may have been ritually used in ancient times, is taking a very exciting turn: it is zeroing in on the possibility of finding evidence specific to rituals that were documented at the beginning of the colonial period.

It is fairly well known that friar Diego de Landa, realizing Franciscan efforts to mass convert the Maya of Yucatan were not being very successful and that the new converts had never really abandoned their old religious practices, started a brutal persecution aimed at terrorizing the populace into Christian compliance. Scores of people were rounded up. Confessions were exacted even from those less than willing to come forward with testimonials of their acts of heresy. What earned this persecution its notorious place in history was the infamous *auto da fé*, cel-

[1] A *noria* is a water-extracting mechanism worked by a mule (or sometimes a human) circling around a wellhead.

[2] The word *cenote* is a Spanish corruption of the Mayan word *dzonot*, meaning a sinkhole that occurs naturally in the karstic landscape of the Yucatan. Cenotes were considered, among other things, to be entrances into the watery underworld and, as such, were the focus of much ritual activity and offerings for at least the past two millenia.

**Figure 2.** View of the vault of a cenote, looking up from the water towards the wellhead. A diver from our team dangles from a rope as she is lowered some 45 feet from the wellhead to the water.

**Figure 3.** An ancient building block found in the depths of a cenote. The ritual calendar day name 3 Ix can still be made out quite clearly. Why this and a great many other building blocks were thrown into this cenote remains a mystery.

ebrated by Landa at the town of Maní, in which an unknown number of Maya holy books were mercilessly burned, an action that not only caused the Maya enormous grief, but also deprived the world of incalculable information regarding ancient Maya civilization.

De Anda is working with the confessions recorded by the Spanish interrogators working in the towns of Homun and Sotuta. His team is painstakingly scanning these documents for references to cenotes and ceremonies carried out in connection with them. Their main aim is to try and find mentions of cenotes and their names. The tricky second step is to then try and identify which are the actual cenotes mentioned, so as to look for evidence in them that will link the content of the historical documents to actual finds.

Our diving day starts with picking up the air tanks that have been filled the previous night at the only place in town that provides the service. Then we set out in a van filled to the gills with diving equipment, ladders and ropes. It takes a while to leave behind the fast growing sprawl of busy Mérida, but once we do we plunge straight into the timeless space of rural Yucatan. Narrow but well kept roads lead us through charming villages. The one thing they all have in common is spartan stone churches built with a limited architectural repertoire, but limitless fantasy in the way of using it.

The cenotes we are diving in this week are normally not far from some of these towns, but to get to most of them we still have to go through unpaved dirt tracks to places that are really out of the way. So normally we don't reach a particular day's cenote before one or even two in the afternoon, and then a good hour and a half goes by while access gear is assembled. This typically consists of some sort of makeshift timber structure for lowering both divers

**Figure 4.** Ancient skull resting on the sandy bed of a cenote once used by the Maya for ritual offerings, among other things. It is also usual to find pottery in cenotes with evidence of ritual usage.

**Figure 5.** Mandible that possibly once belonged to the skull shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 6.** Remains of an animal that possibly was sacrificed in a petition ceremony. Alternatively, animals may fall into cenotes by accident.

**Figure 7.** Two human long bones in their watery final resting place.

and diving gear with a pulley. Another good deal of time goes into tying the four sections of ladder that will allow us to climb out once the dive is over. When everything is in place, we suit up, check our lights and photo gear for one last time and we're off, riding the "Maya elevator" (i.e., the rope) deep into the guts of the Earth until we reach the water table. Equipment goes down after us and we put it on while floating in the gloom of these fantastic flooded caves. While we wait for the diving gear to be lowered, the beams of our diving lights reveal glimpses of the cave's high ceilings, overhung with stalactites and the enormous roots of thirsty trees that reach down to the water. When we are finally all ready, we let the air out of our bouyancy compensators and begin our incredible journey into the very real watery Underworld of the Maya.

Depending on the importance that each cenote may once have had, we are able to find more or less abundant evidence of the presence of the ancient Maya. The most isolated one we dove in during my brief week as the project's photographer was a spectacular crack in the earth, out of which huge trees grew, pushing upward at the sky. Nobody had ever dived in it, so it was thought to be quite promising. Yet, perhaps because of its isolation, next to no cultural remains were evident on the bottom's sediment. Other cenotes that have been known forever are littered in varying degrees with bones, wood, ceramics, even carved stones. We once found a clearly readable "3 Ix" date on a large stone block that was part of a large pile of dressed stones which had inexplicably found their way deep into the water (see Figure 3). One cenote even had a handsome pair of time-darkened skulls with very evident tabular elongation that gave them away as belonging to Late Classic people, most probably elite. What was even more striking about this was the fact that they seemed arranged on a natural underwater stone "shelf," which would seem to suggest they

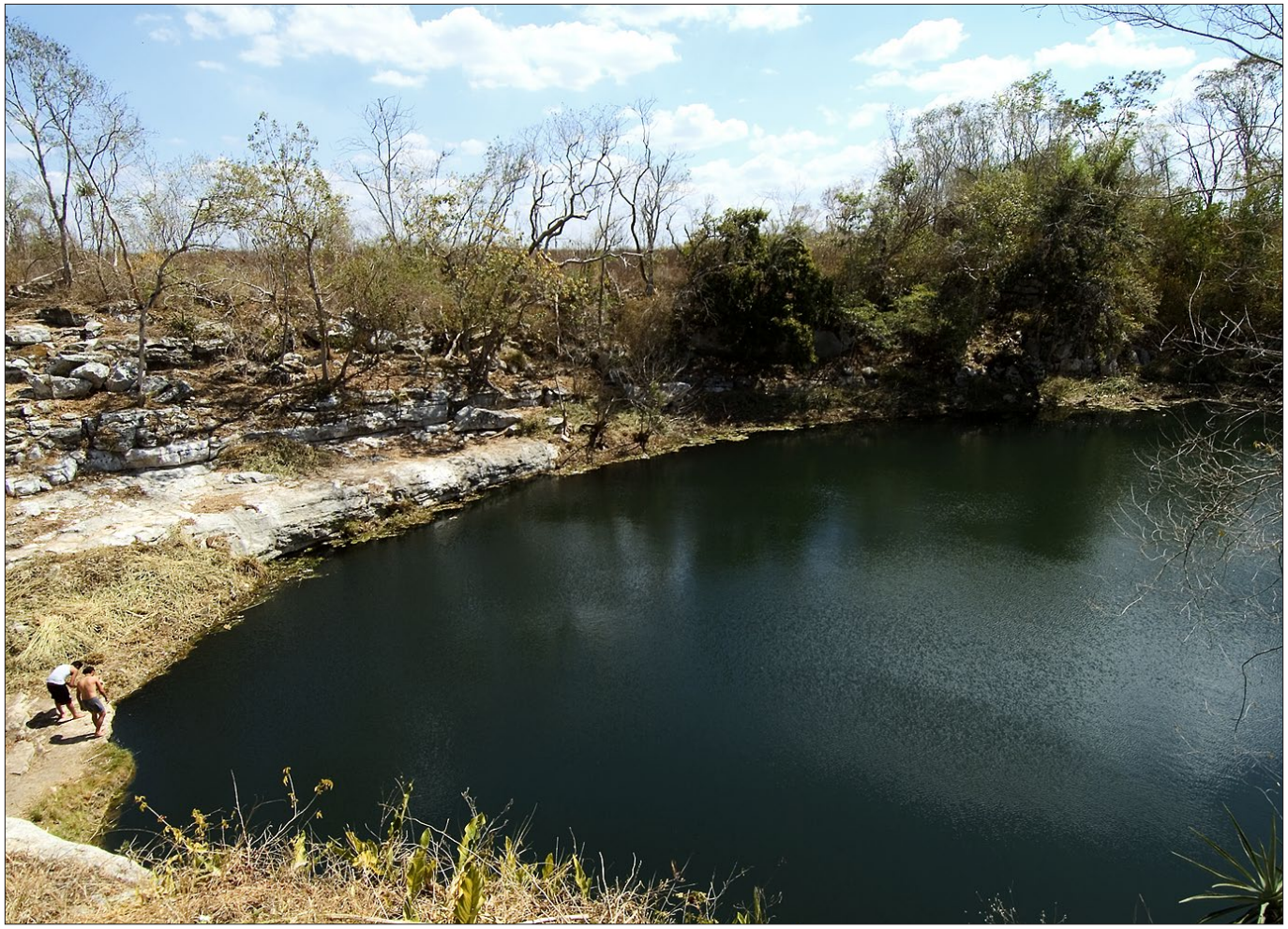

**Figure 8.** An open cenote allows ready, less claustrophobic access. Notice the dark color of the water that gives away its great depth of more than 100 meters.

were carefully placed there by ancient Maya… divers.

Cenote archaeology is probably the trickiest kind of archaeology. Aside from the obvious technical limitations of having to operate while wearing cumbersome equipment, cenote bottoms almost always have heavy layers of silt and sediment, so most of what could be in them lies buried, hidden from the eyes of divers. Moving this sediment in water without creating utter chaos and losing all possibility of scientific recording is extremely tricky. Then there is the problem of conserving any artifacts that may be worth retrieving. Not only do they have to be decompressed, but they also have to be physically stabilized, lest they disintegrate when removed from the water they have become accustomed to in the last several centuries.

And yet, despite its very real difficulties, this is a very promising subfield worth exploring for answers to the greater Maya puzzle. The survival of wood artifacts, for example, is fairly rare above water, because of the action of the tropical environment that actively promotes the decay of this kind of material. Nonetheless, water preserves wood so well that finding it in cenotes is not a rare event at all. One of the things in the confessions De Anda's team is very excited about is the well attested enthusiasm for crucifixion as a form of sacrifice by the contact-period Maya. It would seem to bear a close resemblance to the so-called "scaffold sacrifice" which is known because of artifacts from Classic times. This practice is a prime example of what careful, scientific cenote exploration could uncover: a direct physical connection (in the form of wood, nails and human remains with certain, specific markings) between the historical texts and the evidence that could be retrieved from these watery time capsules. In a very real way, cenote archaeology is an exciting frontier: the frontier between our world and the Maya Underworld.