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Report of the working group* of the event: Cave Manifestations in Mexico: The Cave as a Sacred Space

International Year of Caves and Karts

The University Institute of Latin American Studies has been developing since 2020, the teaching innovation project "Rock art in Latin America", where researchers present their proposals and the development of their research. The project opens a space for debate with a seminar and various activities of scientific-divulgate character, to write and listen to live lectures. On this occasion and in commemoration of the International Year of Caves and Karts by UNESCO, we emphasized the caves with cave paintings in Mexico, as a symbolic and ritual place manifested in rock art.

1. Objective

- The dissemination and learning of prehistoric and archaeological studies on cave painting in Latin America around the caves and their religious implication in the past, with the objective of bringing the scientific community and the public closer to understanding the impact not only of research, but also the social impact of rupestrian manifestations inside caves.
- The reflection and analysis of information about the paintings and engravings as well as the cave itself and what measures have been adopted for its conservation.

2. Activities

The institutions represented for the activities were: IEAL- Universidad de Sevilla (Spain), Institut de Paleoecología Humana i Evolució Social (Spain), Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Mexico), Asociación Coahuilense de Espeleología (Mexico), Grupo Espeleológico Ajau (Mexico).

2.1. Virtual Seminar

From April 9 to May 21, 2021, lectures were given by various researchers who have studied caves in Mexico and other parts of the world. The objective was to cover the entire country with strategic areas where the country’s karst zones, or caves of scientific interest are located.


Ramon Viñas Valverdú, gave an overview of caves and karst with rock art in the world and Latin America. With the lecture *The subterranean world and its symbolic connotations.*

Enrique Chacon of the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Chihuahua, referred from an ethnoarchaeological point of view to *The conception of cave space among the Tarahumara and its relationship with rock art.*

Yuri de la Rosa Gutiérrez of the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Coahuila and member of the Coahuila Association of Speleology reflected on archeology in *The caves of Coahuila and the connection with the natural and supernatural.*

Carlos Viramontes. National Institute of Anthropology and History in Queretaro. He referred to *El Tepozán, an emblematic place in the Painted Caves of the ancient Xichú de Indios in Victoria,* Guanajuato, Mexico.

Lourdes Hernández Jiménez, of the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Veracruz, conceptualized *The role played by the indigenous communities and the use of the Cueva de Palancares,* as a threshold of the dual principle of the peoples of the rubber land in southern Veracruz, Mexico.

Sandra Liliana Ramírez Barrera described *The images and spaces of cave paintings in Oaxaca, Mexico* as a use of the natural environment as a cultural expression.

María José Gómez Cobá of the Grupo Espeleológico Ajau. She told us about *The Mayan graphic-rock art manifestations: The ritual caves of eastern Yucatan.* And how these are protected and managed by speleological groups in the region.
Finally, Martha Cabrera Guerrero, pointed out the Olmec imaginary in the caves of the state of Guerrero, Mexico.

2.2. Scientific Dissemination Project

Emphasizing that Scientific Dissemination is a commitment to society in general. The project was integrated into the European Researchers' Night, a European project of scientific dissemination promoted since 2005 by the European Commission within the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions of the Horizon 2020 program, which takes place simultaneously in more than 371 European cities in more than 30 countries.

The proposal, coordinated by the Descubre Foundation, brings together the participation in consortium of thirteen Andalusian scientific institutions in Spain.

2.2.1. Children’s workshop: Art in your hands: paint and discover the animals of Latin American cave art

In this experimental archeology workshop, we will make replicas, casts and molds of animals that were captured in American rock art and at the same time they will be able to discover species that are probably unknown, extinct or in danger of extinction. A talk was given to the public about where rock art is found, including caves and karst in Latin America and the impact that humans have on the conservation of these and the fauna inside the spaces where they are located. With this
we will understand why it is important to act in favor of the climate and protect areas where ancient species live.


2.2.2. Documentary: Rock Art in Latin America
This video-documentary is aimed at disseminating and learning about rock art studies in Latin America, bringing the scientific community and the general public closer to this knowledge.

Researchers from various Latin American and European institutions participate in the scientific documentary "Rock Art in Latin America. Some areas or topics of research in Mexico, Venezuela, Peru, Chile and Argentina are described.

Two investigations of caves were integrated by Dr. Ramon Viñas Vallverdú in Cueva Pintada, Baja California, Mexico and La Caverna de Chan Xaan, Yucatan, Mexico by Dr. Luis Alberto Martos Lopez.


3. Printed materials
3.1. Infographics
Infographics about caves were made in accordance with the International Year of Caves and Karst by UNESCO, to make known the karst system of Mexico, as one of the largest in the world. It describes its formation, the characteristics of a cenote and its relationship with cave contexts.

This was done in English and Spanish.

Free download:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354067814_Infografia_Cuevas_carsticas_en_Mexico

3.2. Scientific articles
A workbook on caves and rock art in Mexico and Latin America is being developed and will be presented to the International Union Speleology as this year's official entity.

4. Reflections and Conclusions on Cave Art in Caves
Through the diverse activities around the international year, we listed several points regarding the guidelines that are being taken towards a definition and conservation of cave art in caves in Mexico and of the cave itself as a living and study environment for the world.

We gather the following points:

4.1. Definitions of cave and karts with rock art sites
The definition of the National Institute of Anthropology (INAH) regarding what a cave is and whether these are in line with the concepts used by UNESCO and the International Union of Speleology.

4.2. How is heritage and biodiversity being protected in caves with rock art in Mexico?
We believe it is necessary to know which caves are physically protected the INAH has for conservation and site management issues, to integrate personnel to watch over the protection of the site.

We have analyzed that there are two types of defenses of these biological and cultural spaces in Mexico and that this can be an indicator that can guide us for this objective. The first is protection by INAH personnel and an emphasis on those declared by UNESCO as world heritage sites. On the other hand, the protection of the communities where these spaces are part of their cosmovision, their religiosity or for tourist issues with remittances to the villages.

This should then understand that all those that do not have this form of safeguarding, surely have been affected by anthropic issues, environmental damage, among others.

4.3. Sites registered by INAH
In this regard, we know that since 1985 a registry of rock sites and/or deposits was carried out and that these are thousands of sites. The disjunctive as researchers today, is that this first classification did not have well defined concepts and that at present there is no generalized access to them. This leads to a diversity of concepts used in
Mexico and that on many occasions does not generate more than confusions. So far we know that there are more than 6 definitions used.

4. What is the protection legislation and what has been done to conserve them?
The impact suffered by the caves as a living environment, the biosphere inside them, and the cultural contexts are places with a strong degradation in Mexico. It seems that there is no legislation for the protection of caves and karst in Mexico and therefore this leads to the lack of existence of the rock art found inside them.

5. Proposals for the International Union Speleology - UNESCO and INAH
The assembled researchers propose the following objectives as a working group in collaboration with INAH, as the highest entity for the conservation of Mexico's national heritage and the institutions represented by each researcher:

1. To update the cédula for rock art. Define concepts for a site. To understand that a karst phenomenon presents certain characteristics to define them and that these definitions of other disciplines can be perfectly compatible with the archaeology developed in Mexico.

2. To list the sites that for scientific consideration and for the study of rock art in Mexico should be protected by INAH in a physical way (personnel guarding the site).

3. Propose that caves could be declared World Heritage as a group of caves, with the purpose of having greater protection at the UNESCO level.

4. Creation of a webmapping starting with what we consider caves, which we know should have protection and which of these already have damages. Coordinated by Aline Lara y Martha Cabrera.

5. Involve the INAH restoration team and have them tell us about their experiences with the sites in which they have intervened.

6. To propose good practices for the conservation of caves with rock art for rural communities.

6. Future projects
1. Propose to the International Union Speleology to join to direct these proposals and to support us in the definitions and or concepts.
2. To hold a seminar where these reflections of point 5 are debated, and that from this the appropriate definitions for the registration card are generated.

3. To look for support from the European Union to develop a scientific study of caves and karts with rock art in Mexico.

In Seville, Spain on December 20, 2021.

Aline Lara Galicia
alara8@us.es

Coordinator of the Teaching Innovation Project: Cave manifestations in Latin America.
University Institute of Latin American Studies. University of Seville.