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### Title

Pray for Rain

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# PRAY FOR RAIN

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JOANNA WENDEL  
with HOLLEY MOYES

Humans have been drawn to caves since the Neanderthals buried their dead and left handprints in the darkness tens of thousands of years ago.



There's something about the quiet....

...the otherworldly  
expanse of cave walls  
and rock formations...

As an archaeologist, I study how humans interacted with caves through the millennia. I examine artifacts, cave art, built structures and more.



...the dark depths that  
capture our imaginations  
and lure us deeper down.

Holley Moyes,  
Archaeologist  
at the  
University of  
California  
Merced

Around the world, across an infinite variety of cultures, religions and belief systems, humans have used caves in very similar ways.



The entrances of caves, for example, were often seen as portals or entrances to an underworld or a world inhabited by gods.



In the deepest and darkest part of a cave, people of many different cultures performed religious or other significant rituals.



In Mesoamerican cultures, which Moyes studies, archaeologists find offerings to gods or even human remains.

As early as 3000 years ago, long before the Spanish invasion, indigenous people in Mesoamerica built thriving cities. These peoples associated caves with water, agriculture and fertility.

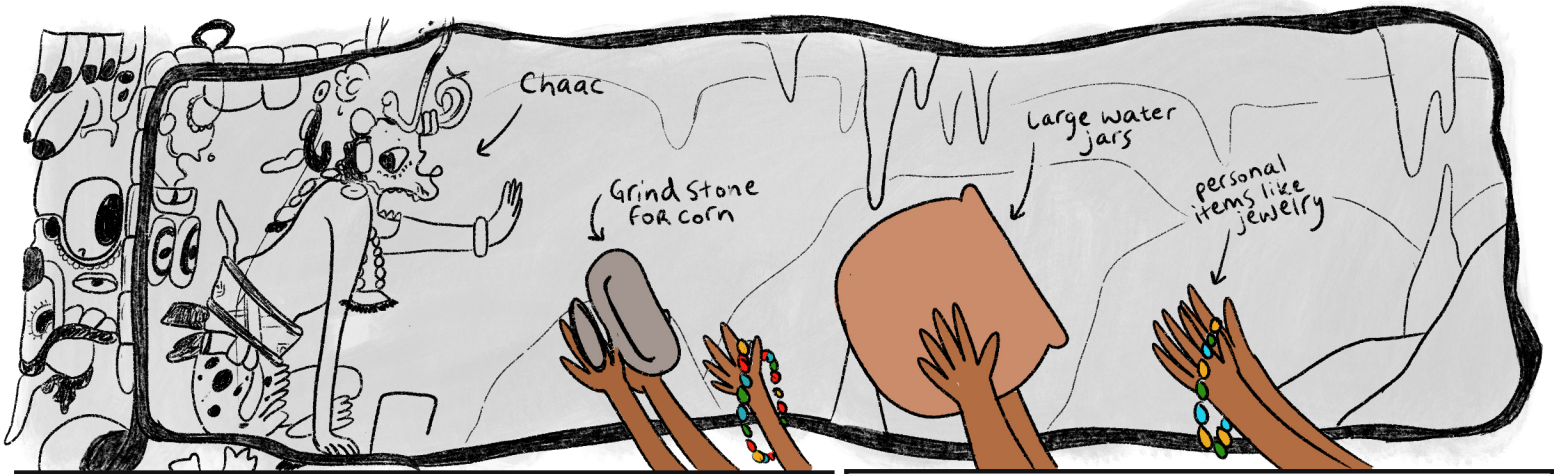


Over the last 25 years, my team and I have been studying a period of ancient Maya history called the "Late Classic," between 650 CE and 950 CE. In caves all over the modern country of Belize, we've found large water jars seemingly left for the gods.





During the Late Classic period, the ancient Maya faced a centuries-long megadrought. We think that these jars and other artifacts were offerings to the Maya rain god, Chaac.



Maya cities were ruled by divine kings that ensured the safety of the people. They were thought to have direct connections with the gods that controlled rain.



Crops failed during the long-term drought and people went hungry. Warfare increased, trade routes suffered, and people lost faith in their divine kings.



Researchers suspect that in response to this megadrought, people turned to religion to cope with these crises. Religious leaders tried to help their people by performing new kinds of rituals and leaving offerings in caves.



But how do researchers know when the megadrought occurred? The caves hold clues.

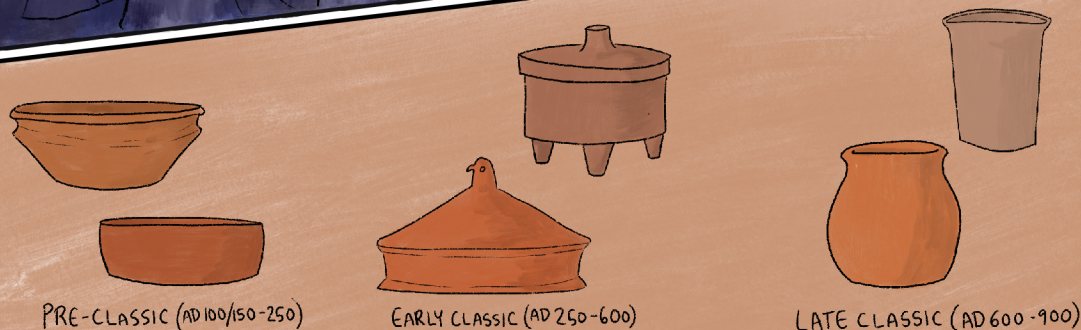
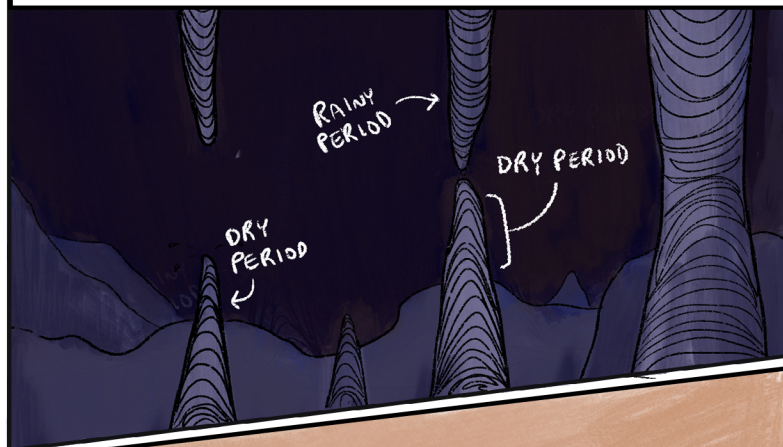




Stalactites and stalagmites form when water evaporates, leaving minerals behind. They take thousands of years to grow.



Inside, they look like tree rings. The chemical makeup of each mineral layer holds information about what the climate was like when the water evaporated.



The archaeologists already know the age of the jars from their form and type, sort of like how car styles change over time. So they know these jars were placed in the cave around 2500 years ago. And data from the cave formations show that 2500 years ago was right in the middle of a megadrought, telling the researchers that the ancient Maya knew their world was changing and tried to do something about it.

Prayers may not make it rain, but gathering to celebrate a common cause reduces stress and conflict while promoting unity and understanding. Studying how some ancient Maya confronted an uncertain future can perhaps inspire us today in our own changing world.

