Yalahau region presents an analogous situation and serves as an eloquent statement regarding the preciousness of cave water.

Speleothem Breakage and Removal

The breakage and manipulation of speleothems has received increased attention from archaeologists and is the focus of a detailed review and study by Brady et al. (1997). Stalactites and stalagmites, which have been erected as monuments outside of caves, cached at surface sites, and used in altar construction within caves themselves, were imbued with sacred qualities and likely functioned as portable symbols of the caves’ power (Brady et al. 1997).

The practice of speleothem removal and breakage was identified in nearly every cave in the survey (see figure 4.8.4 and 4.8.5; see also figure 7.5 for an example from a nearby cave in Yucatán). Contrary to the findings of Brady et al. (1997), intensive breakage was recorded both near and far from cave entrances. It should be noted, however, that the caves in the Yalahau region are typically single-chambered affairs and the entrance is usually visible from all areas of the cave. Nevertheless, a number of caves, such as Actun Tsub, have been almost completely denuded and soda straws can be seen hanging from the stumps of earlier stalactites (which, incidentally, were removed from the cave). Quite often, even the smallest of speleothems in the most inaccessible of alcoves have been removed. This latter discovery lends support to the ceremonial value of more remote speleothems suggested by Brady et al. (1997:727–728).

The most compelling evidence for the sacred nature of speleothems is their inclusion in ceremonial contexts (see Brady et al. 1997:736–740). At El Naranjal (figure 7.6), a stalactite was found inside a Postclassic shrine (Lorenzen 1995:60) and recent excavations at the site have recovered a number of small speleothems from offertory contexts (Karl James Lorenzen, personal communication 2000). There is little doubt that additional excavations associated with both civic-ceremonial and domestic structures throughout the region (combined with a watchful eye) will establish the practice of speleothem caching as a common cave-related tradition.

It is unclear whether or not utilitarian activities account for at least some percentage of the speleothems removed from caves in the Yalahau region. Certainly, their apparent “harvesting” from several caves begs for a satisfactory explanation. Even though speleothems represent a finite resource, their use as a source of calcite temper for pottery manufacture (also discussed but not endorsed by Brady et al. [1997]) cannot be entirely ruled-out without further investigation. However, the economic need for calcite (in lieu of pedogenic sources) would not explain the massive speleothem fragments lying on the floor of Actun Tacbi Ha. Also of interest in Actun Tacbi Ha is the use of speleothems for the construction of a stairway in the cave (Rissolo 1995). Such a use, however, should not be considered utilitarian in nature, as the stairway was apparently used for the ritual procurement of water from a small cave pool. Not all caves in the Yalahau region