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## Recently Discovered Hawaiian Religious and Burial Caves

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### Abstract

This is a brief report to accompany diagrams, maps, and overhead projections to illustrate the ancient Hawaiian use of the upper lands in the Puna and Wao Kele O Puna areas of the Big Island. This area has been extensively explored in recent years by me and by others, but the findings have not been published until now. I will present a personal, in-depth report concerning the findings of the exploration of these religious and burial caves.

This is primarily a photographic presentation of an extensive cave system which runs for miles under the Puna forest reserve. The tropical rain forest here is one of the most beautiful in the world and is a unique example of the diverse fauna and biological microsystems that exist in Hawaii. The lush foliage and thick ohia forests make finding caves difficult and sometimes surprising.

This paper focuses on one of many caves located in this area. This particular cave has fascinated and inspired me. I have spent hundreds of hours exploring its many stone fortifications, crawl spaces, and miles of winding passage. I was amazed to find detailed rock work, seashells approximately eight miles from the seashore, torches, underground altars, burial chambers, and human remains in extensive sections of this lowland forest cave.

The cave's bedrock is primarily pahoehoe lava, with intrusions of red aa. It is part of a massive flow that swept northeast from the southeast rift of Kilauea volcano. My findings indicate that nearby areas in the higher elevations were used for crop production to balance the food needs of the coastal people. I am convinced that these people worked the land, and that this cave was used for religious purposes as well as a refuge site. Massive amounts of rock work in the form of fortified entrances, heiaus, altars, hidden artificial crawl spaces, and large quantities of seashells all reflect a sizeable work force and a cultured society. It is clear that the Hawaiians used and developed this area as an integral part of that society.

I firmly believe that this cave system should be protected and preserved. To accomplish this I have nominated it for national historic preservation.

As seen from the air, the topography of Wao Kele O Puna forest reserve is one of dense jungle surrounded by fields of orchids and wild grasses. Recent intrusions are drilling rigs used for exploratory drilling in the Geothermal Subzone.

One feature of this jungle is a sunken area with a well-laid set of stone steps leading down to a completely rock-filled round area (Figure 1). This sink is divided directionally, with stone walkways leading underground through fortified crawl



*Figure 1—Stone steps leading into the first sink  
(Photo by Brad Lewis and Tom Seal).*

spaces. Well-fitted stone walls lead underground to a series of smaller stone walls, dividing underground chambers into possible living areas.

Farther uphill are many opihi shells strewn about the floor, the remains of many fires, and many different bones and teeth of various animals. Also seen are stacks of torches lining both sides of the cave. Careful inspection reveals teeth with holes drilled through the shank, used for jewelry.

Four hundred meters west is an underground altar four meters in diameter. On this altar are a pounder and stone bowl as well as additional seashells. In the center of the altar is a meter-long pit. The altar is constructed of red cinder and is situated in the center of the lava tube.

Farther uphill the cave is larger, with a high vaulted ceiling covered with stalactites and many patches of gold, silver, and crimson fungus-like material. High on a ledge in this large chamber is a crawl space that leads to a chamber where a torch four meters long lies burned, probably for religious purposes. I have found skeletal remains lying atop such burnt torches in other parts of this cave.

Still farther uphill is a large rock rubbed with seashells until white. Four giant cowry shells sit on this rock. Holes were drilled in these shells for fishing. This fishing technique is still used today in the harvesting of octopus.

One kilometer uphill is the first hidden crawl space. The Hawaiians who built these fortifications knew what they were about. Its entrance is well concealed by rubble from cave collapses in the area. From the cave the crawlway is invisible; this was



*Figure 2—First fortified entrance (photo by Brad Lewis and Tom Seal).*



*Figure 3—Opihi shells and rock platform under three skylights (photo by Brad Lewis and Tom Seal).*

accomplished in part by using a ledge that runs up the side of the tube. The rocks are fitted on each side of the passageway so that only one person at a time can fit into this narrow space. Travel must be single file through this passageway that is approximately 50 meters long. All loose rubble has been cleared to allow an easier passage.

Cold air flowing downhill leads the way uphill. At each opening out of the lava tube the sink areas are fortified (Figure 2). In the fourth of these areas are three natural skylights that illuminate another stone platform such as a heiau might have (figure 3). The platform area is divided directionally, similar to that first described.

This chamber is the most makai burial location in this cave. The skeletal remains of a small child are on a ledge adjacent to the platform area. Under what appears to be rubble is an adult burial chamber. There are skeletons of four adults, one much larger than the others.

Farther back in this area is another hidden crawl space. The same construction techniques were

used and great care was taken to conceal and camouflage the entrance.

The features of this cave system are still being discovered. Further studies will give better understanding of the people who did such an immense amount of work in fortifying and using this cave system in the Puna forest reserve. The cave runs through a Geothermal Subzone and

may be harmed by further unregulated geothermal exploration.

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