

ARCHAEOLOGY

City Built Over Caves To be Explored in Mexico

ONE OF Mexico's strangest Indian cities—a city that stood on a mountain-top and used caves underfoot for its mysterious subterranean halls—is to be explored by Mexican archaeologists, beginning this month.

The ruined city is called Xochicalco, meaning Flower-House Place. Although only 60 miles south of Mexico City, it has eluded scientific study because of its isolation, which a new road to the summit now ends.

Brush-clearing activities on the flat top have already brought out ancient streets, house foundations, rooms, and other suggestions of city plan. The ruins have long been distinguished by a handsome sculptured pyramid of great undulating feathered serpents.

In the heart of a grottoed limestone region, Xochicalco has under its foundations eerie caves which the ancient inhabitants made into vast interior halls. The entrances were left at crawling height, supposedly for easy defense. Xochicalco also had man-made subterranean chambers, stone-lined, and resembling big narrow-necked bottles. Some archaeologists believe these were underground astronomical observatories for watching star movements and for calculating time.

Much interest attends the excavations, because the city is recognized a key spot in Mexico's unknown ancient history. On walls of the bird-snake pyramid, sculptured priests sit precisely like gods on Mayan Indian temples far to the south. Hieroglyphic writing on this pyramid closely resembles that found at Monte Alban, ancient city half-way south to the Mayan zone. The meaning of these relationships will be sought.

The excavations are part of a long-time research plan of Mexican government archaeologists. By thoroughly studying representative sites, they aim to determine the exact nature of the Mayan and Toltec civilizations of ancient Mexico, and to trace their relationship by excavating ruins that lie between, such as Monte Alban and Xochicalco.

As part of this project, excavations have been resumed at El Tajin, where ruins of an advanced culture lie in the lowland jungle of Vera Cruz. A more primitive site in the north-central state of Zacatecas, called La Quemada, will be worked at in the hope of finding out how far north the Toltec nation spreads.