



Social identity and geographic origin of Maya burials at Actun Uayazba Kab, Roaring Creek Valley, Belize

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ABSTRACT

Bioarchaeological investigations at Actun Uayazba Kab (AUK), in west-central Belize, sought to characterize the nature of the site's mortuary use by reconstructing aspects of social identity. Skeletal analyses provided data related to the age, sex, health, diet, and geographic origins of individuals buried within the rockshelter-like entrance to AUK. Changes in the site's ritual use were contextualized with current archaeological data from the surrounding region, demonstrating that burial activity was initiated in the Late Preclassic and was likely by a local kin group. Cessation of primary burial sometime around the 3rd century AD generally coincides with the construction of monumental civic-ceremonial architecture in the area, after which activity at the site appears to have shifted to rituals pertaining to the propitiation of rain. While small cave and rockshelter sites typically receive little research attention in Mesoamerica, the data from AUK illustrate how ritual activities at small, non-elite sites are indeed dynamic and can inform broader models of social and political organization.

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1. Introduction

Investigations into cave use increasingly are recognized as important for broadly informing models of ancient Maya sociopolitical organization. References to caves in Maya iconography, epigraphy, mythology, and ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources attest to the ideological importance of these spaces, and also allude to their use for a wide variety of social and political functions (see Bassie-Sweet, 1991; Brady, 1997; Brady and Ashmore, 1999; Helmke, 2009:76–193; Stone, 1995; Vogt and Stuart, 2005). Cave research in the Maya area has focused primarily on the inner

chambers of large caves. These spaces often demonstrate complex artifact assemblages sometimes containing abundant and exotic offerings, as well as diverse activity areas associated with architecture, art, and/or human skeletal remains. Such complexity suggests appropriation of these sites by elites to carry out specialized, labor-intensive rituals (Brady et al., 1997:357; Morton et al., 2015; Moyes, 2006:45).

Small caves and rockshelters with evidence of ancient use are ubiquitous on the karstic landscape of the southern Maya Lowlands, but traditionally have received relatively little research attention. This may be explained in part by assumptions about their ostensible ordinariness and the unrestricted nature of their use; they appear in overwhelming numbers, are easily accessible, often contain sparse and/or mundane artifact assemblages, and are usually without water. For these reasons they are generally thought to be locations for simple, small-scale rituals conducted by non-hierarchical social groups, such as early hunter-gatherers

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or non-elite segments of society (Gibbs, 2000; Glassman and Bonor Villarejo, 2005:289; Helmke, 2009:183; Moyes and Brady, 2012:161; Peterson, 2006:13; Rissolo, 2003:134; Saul et al., 2005:298; Scott and Brady, 2005; Wrobel and Tyler, 2006).

Non-elite contexts in general tend to receive less attention from Maya archaeologists based on assumptions about their inability to inform models of political organization (Marcus, 2004). This is particularly true of Maya cave studies, in large part because of the heavy reliance that is typically placed on the approach afforded by ethnographic analogy. In essence, ethnographic analogy assumes behavioral continuity between the ancient and post-Contact or modern Maya, and in this way can provide a powerful means of interpreting the material culture record of past behavior (see Brady and Prufer, 2005). However, a common critique of ethnographic analogy is it often ignores the specific differences between the past and present that are particularly pertinent to archaeological inquiry, treating behavior (especially that of non-elites) as timeless and static (see relevant discussions of this issue by Helmke, 2009:65–74; Prufer, 2002:72–80). Thus, if non-elite ritual behavior in small caves and rockshelters is assumed to be independent of dynamic social and political contexts, these sites would not be useful in providing relevant data for asking broader questions about sociopolitical organization. As a result, discussions of small caves and rockshelters are typically brief and descriptive, and researchers rarely attempt to identify changes in the nature of site use over time or relate evidence of ritual behavior to broader dynamic sociopolitical processes.

A recent intensified focus on cave research in the Maya area has stimulated regional cave surveys that often include documentation of small caves and rockshelters (see Awe, 1998; Awe et al., 1998; Bonor Villarejo and Sanchez y Pinto, 1991; Bonor and Martínez Klemm, 1995; Brady, 1997:610; Hardy, 2009; Helmke et al., 2012; Ishihara-Brito et al., 2011; Peterson, 2006:36–7; Prufer, 2002; Rissolo, 2003; Slater, 2014; Spenard, 2006, 2014; Wrobel et al., 2012). Some of these sites contain evidence of complex ritual behaviors similar to those typically associated with larger, dark zone cave contexts. The presence of specialized deposits (Prufer, 2002), prestige goods (Awe and Helmke, 2015; Helmke et al., 2012; Morton et al., 2012), diverse mortuary activities (Glassman and Bonor Villarejo, 2005; Michael and Burbank, 2013; Prufer and Dunham, 2009; Saul et al., 2005; Spenard, 2006:128; Wrobel et al., 2007, 2009, 2013), rockart (Griffith and Jack, 2005; Helmke and Awe, 1998; Helmke et al., 2003), architecture (Awe et al., 1998:226–9; Prufer, 2002; Rissolo, 2003:133), and association with nearby elite construction (Awe and Helmke, 2007; Halperin, 2005; Helmke and Halperin, 2001; King et al., 2012; Morton, 2015; Prufer, 2002) imply that the use of small caves and rockshelters was highly variable and likely served a broader range of social groups than often assumed. Furthermore, though stratigraphy is generally difficult to discern, analyses of artifact and burial assemblages from many such sites have often demonstrated long and dynamic histories characterized by changes in the intensity and forms of ritual use. Thus, far from being static, the use of small caves and rockshelters likely reflects deliberate actions by local groups relating to broader social, political, and economic structures in which they were active agents.

The use of cave spaces (including rockshelters and cenotes) in mortuary ritual is also widespread, and thus human skeletal remains from these contexts offer a particularly important source of data for interpreting the role caves played in Maya culture. However, sampling biases that relate to poor preservation and to diverse and immensely complex mortuary programs generally hamper analysis and interpretation of skeletal data (see Wrobel, 2014a for detailed discussion of these issues). Few sites containing formal cemeteries have been found in the Maya area prior to European contact, and instead individuals are typically placed isolated or in small groups in a variety of constructed (civic-ceremonial

architecture and housemounds) and natural (caves, rockshelters, and cenotes) features. Furthermore, extended mortuary programs often result in dissociation and movement of elements within and between sites. As a result, traditional bioarchaeological approaches that seek to characterize the biology of populations are not well suited to the Maya area, where skeletal assemblages generally reflect mortuary and taphonomic processes, rather than a representative sample of a general population. Instead, bioarchaeologists have increasingly utilized a social identity approach, in which biological data inform theoretical models describing the intersection of specific mortuary behaviors and sociopolitical and economic organization (Knudson and Stojanowski, 2008). Such studies on Maya caves have focused largely on interpreting the nature of mortuary ritual in specific contexts or site types by identifying shared bioarchaeological markers of social identity among individuals placed within them.

2. Actun Uayazba Kab

One of the most intriguing rockshelter sites documented in the Maya area is Actun Uayazba Kab (AUK), meaning “Handprint Cave” in Yukatek Maya, located in the Roaring Creek Valley of Central Belize (Fig. 1). The Western Belize Regional Cave Project (WBRCP) conducted archaeological research at AUK during the summers of 1997 and 1998 following reports of looting. These investigations recovered complex deposits of artifacts and human remains comprising both primary burials and secondary deposits of scattered bone, and documented an extensive corpus of petroglyphs, pictographs, and handprints on the walls of the rockshelter and the associated small cave chambers.

Thus far, most of the interest in AUK has focused on its rock art (Helmke and Awe, 1998, 2001; Helmke et al., 2003) and osteological analyses of the human skeletal assemblage, which were featured in an MA thesis by Gibbs (2000), as well as in two earlier research reports (Ferguson and Gibbs, 1999; Gibbs, 1998). In addition, Lucero and Gibbs (2007) included AUK in their speculative discussion of caves as possible repositories of ritual murders related to accusations of witchcraft by Maya communities. These studies focused primarily on contrasting the simple, funerary nature of burials at AUK with the presumed sacrificial contexts found in the dark zone of Actun Tunichil Mucnal (ATM or “Stone Sepulcher Cave”), a large and impressive ritual cave located less than a kilometer to the north of AUK (Awe et al., 2005). Additionally, Jack (2004) included burials from AUK in her regional study of dietary isotopes from caves and rockshelters, contrasting her results against data from Naj Tunich. Finally, a recent case study from AUK provided Late Preclassic to Early Classic period dates on the bones and identified skeletal indicators of scurvy on one of the individuals (Wrobel, 2014b).

This paper contextualizes the mortuary data from AUK within current models of Classic period social and political organization in central Belize. Building upon previous analyses, we present slightly revised age and sex estimates and new data from isotopic and dental histological analyses. We conclude by presenting an elaborated interpretation of the mortuary site that draws upon a broader range of relevant comparative contexts to include recent work at surrounding caves and settlements in the area conducted by the Central Belize Archaeological Survey (CBAS) project, among others. Our analysis demonstrates how use of this small site shifted as the social and political landscape of the region changed over time.

2.1. Site description

The east-facing entrance of AUK is formed by a shallow light zone rockshelter, which is approximately 18 m in height and divided by a

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