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The Canoe in the Cave: A Foundational Shrine at Uxbenká?

Interim Report



Research Year: 2007

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Late Preclassic

Location: Toledo District, Belize

Site: Kayuko Naj Tunich

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Introduction

The following is a brief interim report on salvage operations conducted at Kayuko Naj Tunich (Kayuko Cave) by the Uxbenká Cave Project (UCP). The cave was reported in 1996 by the Uxbenká Archaeological Project (UAP). It is located 2.3 km due south of the site of Uxbenká in a cliff face over 200 m above the valley floor ([Figure 1](#), shown below). Based on a brief reconnaissance, the site proved to be heavily looted but was found to contain a carved wooden canoe-like object, stone architecture, and a masonry feature thought to be a tomb. This year's six-week season of salvage operations investigated these features and collected material for further analyses.

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Interim Report

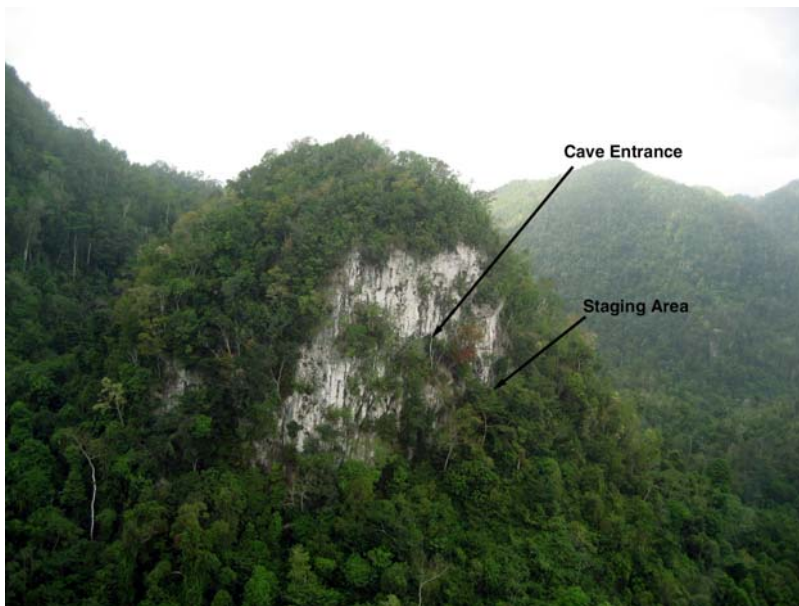


Figure 1. Aerial photograph of the karst cliff containing Kayuko Naj Tunich. Locals refer to the tower in Mopán as *Suk Tunich* or White Rock.

Access to the site proved more difficult than originally anticipated. To ensure the safety of the crew and allow us to carry equipment back and forth, Maya community members constructed a system of ropes and ladders across the cliff face leading up to the cave entrance ([Figure 2](#), shown below).

At the cave entrance an ancient Maya stone stairway leads up to the cave's main chamber. The blocks are not modified but were clearly chosen for their flat surfaces from the Río Blanco River located over 2 km from the cave. The importation of these building materials attests to the human labor costs involved in the construction of the site.



Figure 2. On the left, Maya community members construct the ladder system. On right, I am shown negotiating the slope near the cave entrance.



Figure 3. Top: Stone steps leading to the cave's main chamber. Below: Mark Aldenderfer holds a similar stone from the Río Blanco.

Chamber 1 had been badly looted probably as recently as five years ago ([Figure 4](#), shown below) and some Maya community members claimed to have seen it before its destruction. According to our consultants, there was a masonry "tomb" structure built against the south wall of the cave. An ancient wooden object that many described as a "canoe" sat on top of the structure. Our investigations demonstrated that there was in fact such a structure--Structure 1, that did in fact appear tomb-like ([Figure 5](#), shown below). It was placed at the southern terminus of Chamber 1 built into the sloping wall. The cave walls formed three sides of the roughly rectangular structure and stone blocks were stacked in front to create the fourth wall. The feature was plastered on top and on the exterior of the stone wall, but no plaster was present inside. We excavated into the loose sediment found inside of the structure walls but found little cultural material. The absence of human bone, even in the looted context, suggests that this was not a tomb but rather may have functioned as an altar. The wooden object clearly sat on top of the structure for a prolonged period of time. A stain in the shape of the object was noted on the surface of the remnant plaster and small wood fragments were found in the matrix of the stain.



Figure 4. Holley Moyes and Mark Robinson inspect the pile of rubble left by looters in the center of Chamber 1 at Kayuko Naj Tunich.

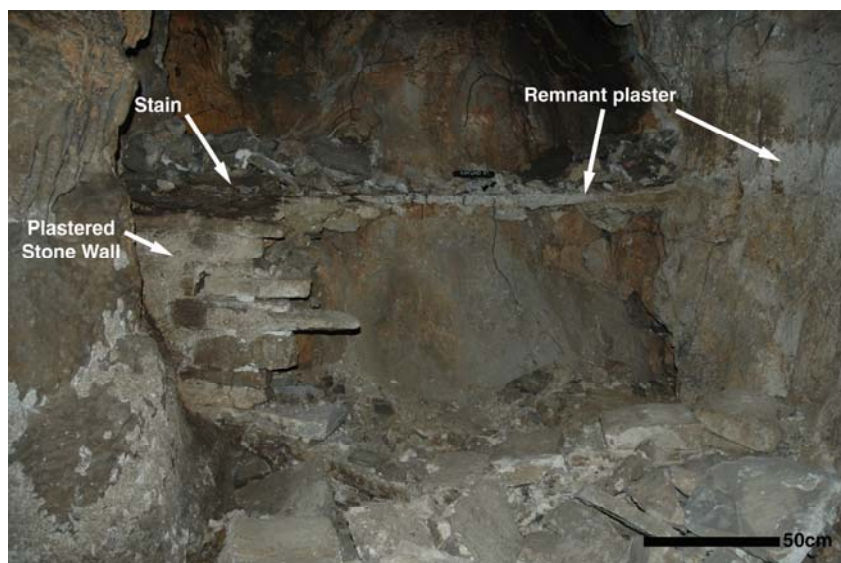


Figure 5. Structure 1 abuts the northern terminus of the cave. The feature has been destroyed but remnant plaster can be seen around the edges and on the exterior of the front wall.

Data from the salvage operations enabled us to investigate construction techniques, analyze building materials, and will help to establish an absolute chronology. Chamber 1 was filled with limestone blocks and river stones. These were shored up with wood retaining walls, some of which are still in position. The stone fill was covered by smaller cobbles and topped with a thick layer of plaster ([Figure 6](#), shown below).



Figure 6. Illustration of remnant plaster floor illustrating construction technique.

The chamber was partitioned into at least three rooms. Eight vertical wooden posts were set in the floor adjacent to the cave walls and corresponding to the constructed wall partitions. In many places the plaster abutted the posts and still adheres to the cave wall. The bases of the posts were found in situ and the height of the posts can be inferred from the plaster remnants ([Figure 7](#), shown below). Each of the wood posts was sampled for species identification and radiocarbon dating. Dating of the posts is expected to provide some data as to whether the rooms were a single construction or were modified over time.

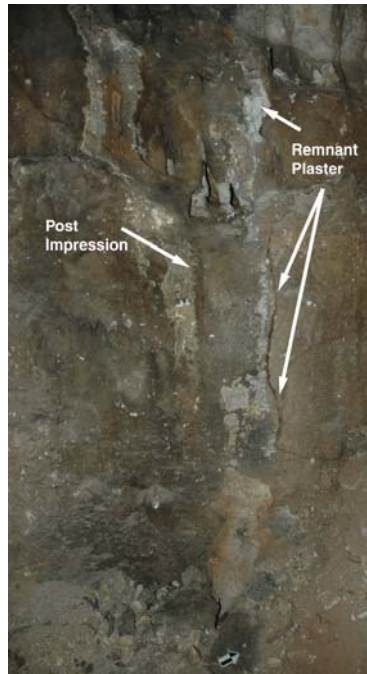


Figure 7. This post was placed in a natural depression in the cave wall. Plaster abutted both sides.

Although the cave was recently looted, we noted evidence of catastrophic burning within the site suggesting that it was terminated or sacked in antiquity as well. We removed one partially-intact heavily-charred post, burning was noted on cave walls, and charcoal and ash deposits were found in the excavated areas around the peripheries of the rubble. Heavy charring can be seen on the cave wall adjacent to the platform at the entrance to Chamber 1 ([Figure 8](#), below). Rubble on this small platform contained thousands of crystals or spar from broken stalactites located throughout the site. These were discolored and friable indicating that they were heavily burnt.

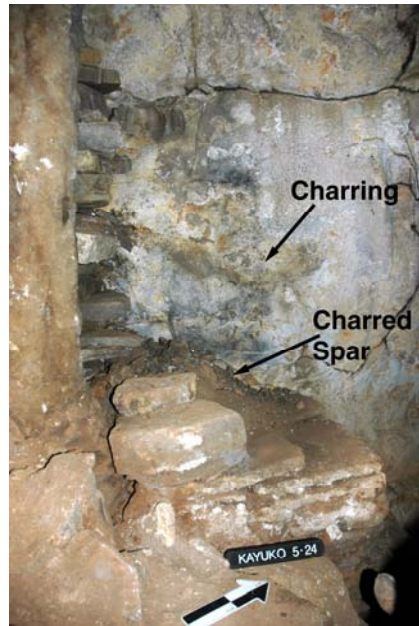


Figure 8. Charred wall adjacent to platform near entrance to Chamber 1. The platform surface was covered with burned spar.

Evidence thus far suggests that the site dates to the Late Preclassic period consistent with the earliest dates from the nearby site of Uxbenká. A single radiocarbon date from the wooden canoe-like object returned a date of 1845 ± 20 rcybp, which calibrates using OxCal3 at 2σ to A.D. 120-240. The date agrees well with ceramic styles from excavated sherds that include Sierra Red slips and Late Preclassic forms consistent with those of the Barton Creek phase at Barton Ramie and with Late Preclassic examples from the Petén. ([Figure 9](#), shown below). The absence of Late Classic ceramics suggests that site was used solely during this early period. Dating of the wood posts and additional dates from the wooden object should confirm or refute these preliminary analyses and aid in determining if the site was a single construction.



Figure 9. Examples of Sierra Red ceramics from Kayuko excavations. These may be cross dated with the Late Preclassic examples from the Belize Valley and in the Petén.

Although few artifacts were found within the looted architecture, a cake of resinous material, probably copal resin mixed with grasses was found in a secluded alcove in the rock face. The cake was associated with Late Preclassic ceramic sherds suggesting its antiquity. Analysis and direct dating of the organic material is underway.



Figure 10. Copal cake found in a secluded alcove.

The wooden canoe-like object was removed from the cave and exported to the Arizona State Museum at the University of Arizona in Tucson for analyses and

conservation. Because of the poor state of preservation, it may not be possible to determine exactly what the object was meant to represent, but this year's salvage operation did determine that it was an element of ritual focus in the cave and the Late Preclassic radiocarbon date substantiated its antiquity. It is likely that the object functioned as an altarpiece or container for offerings. By obtaining a species identification and analyzing the manufacturing techniques it may be possible to infer its function. Testing for residues is also planned because the presence of organic residues may prove to be some of the only remaining evidence as to the site's overall function and provide clues as to the rituals that were performed there.

Finally, while searching for looter's debris on the slope directly below the cave entrance, the project discovered a small architectural group approximately 150m below the site. The group consists of three mounds ([Figure 11](#), shown below). Structure 1 is a flat platform-like construction oriented on a N/S axis that measures 7m x 10m. Structure 2 is upslope from Structure 1. It is oriented on an E/W axis and measures 9m x 11m and is the tallest structure standing 2.5-3m in height. There is a large looter's pit in the top of the structure. A tree grows in the pit suggesting that the site was looted quite some time ago. Structure 3 is upslope from Structure 2. It is oriented on a NE/SW axis and measures 8m x 11m. Both Structures 1 and 3 do not show signs of looting.

The group warrants further testing but its presence and proximity suggest that the site is related to the cave. It is unlikely the structures are a residential group due to the poor soils on the karst tower on which it sits. Additionally, if the steeply-sloped surface was farmed, it would have had to have been heavily modified to accommodate fields, but there is no evidence of terracing of the area other than around the structures themselves. Finally, the closest water source to the site is the Río Blanco River, a rigorous 2km hike descending into the valley.

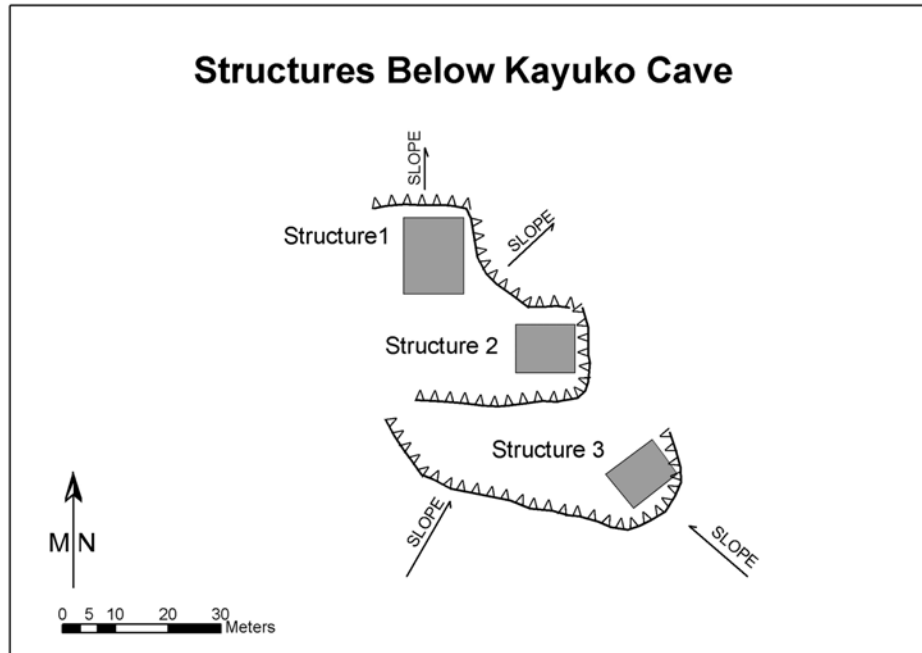


Figure 11. Map of Kayuko Mound Group.

It is only with excavation that we will be able to determine if the site is contemporaneous with the cave's Late Preclassic use, but if so this suggests that the cave and accompanying structures comprise a Late Preclassic mountain shrine complex. Although mountain shrines are well-known ethnographically, this would be the first complex of its type to have been discovered archaeologically.

The construction effort and labor investment within the cave suggests that not only was it an important ritual site, but one constructed and controlled by the local elites. The addition of a surface component to the complex would strengthen this argument. The political nature of caves is slowly coming into focus and there is accumulating evidence, which indicates that caves were not only sacred space but functioned in political arenas as well. As excavations continue at the site of Uxbenká and more is known of the site's history, it will be possible to link the data obtained from this season's salvage work to a broader context. It is only through this kind of research that cave archaeologists can hope to understand the true function and meaning of archaeological caves and that those investigating surface sites may obtain a complete picture of both the ritual and political life of the cities they study.

A more complete reporting of the research and results of analyses will be presented in final report to FAMSI in 2008.

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