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**Temporal Changes in the Mortuary Ritual Use of the Caves Branch
Rockshelter, Belize**



Research Year: 2007

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Preclassic – Classic

Location: Cayo District, Belize

Site: Caves Branch Rockshelter (CBR)

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Abstract

AMS dates derived from human skeletal remains at the Caves Branch Rockshelter revealed a mortuary sequence spanning nearly 800 years. The assemblage of whole vessels, which were interred as grave goods, is entirely restricted to the Late Preclassic period. The AMS dates confirmed the ceramic chronology proposed by Reents (1980) and Gifford (1974) and were also instrumental in demonstrating that the mortuary use of the rockshelter persisted for hundreds of years after people discontinued leaving diagnostic ceramic grave goods. Almost no grave goods were found with later burials, suggesting a change in mortuary ritual. The long span of the site's mortuary use matched the time span of scattered ceramic sherds found throughout the matrix, which also extend into the Late-Terminal Classic period. These ceramic offerings may be viewed as material culture used in rituals related to the site's mortuary function. In addition, the lack of grave goods is often used as indirect evidence of sacrifice for contemporaneous individuals found in dark zone contexts and thus the rockshelter seems to provide evidence that this variation in mortuary ritual is not necessarily indicative of sacrifice.

Resumen

Las fechas del AMS, que derivaron de los restos esqueléticos humanos en las Caves Branch Rockshelter, revelaron una secuencia mortuoria que atraviesa casi 800 años. La reunión de navíos enteros, que fueron enterrados como bienes (mercancías), está restringida al Último Período Preclásico. Las fechas de AMS confirmaron la cronología de cerámica propuesta por Reents (1980) y Gifford (1974) y contribuyeron decisivamente a la demostración para la cual el empleo del mortuorio de rockshelter persistió durante unos cientos de años después de que la gente descontinuara el diagnóstico de los bienes. Casi ninguno de los bienes fue encontrado en entierros posteriores, sugiriendo un cambio del ritual mortuorio. El largo espacio del empleo del mortuorio del sitio se asoció con el lapso de tiempo de sherds cerámica encontrado en todas las partes de la matriz, que también se extienden en el Período Tardío Terminal Clásico. Estos ofrecimientos de cerámica pueden ser vistos como la cultura material usada en rituales relacionados con el sacrificio para individuos contemporáneos encontrados en contextos oscuros de la zona y así el rockshelter parece proporcionar evidencia de que esta variación en el ritual mortuorio no es necesariamente indicativo de sacrificio.

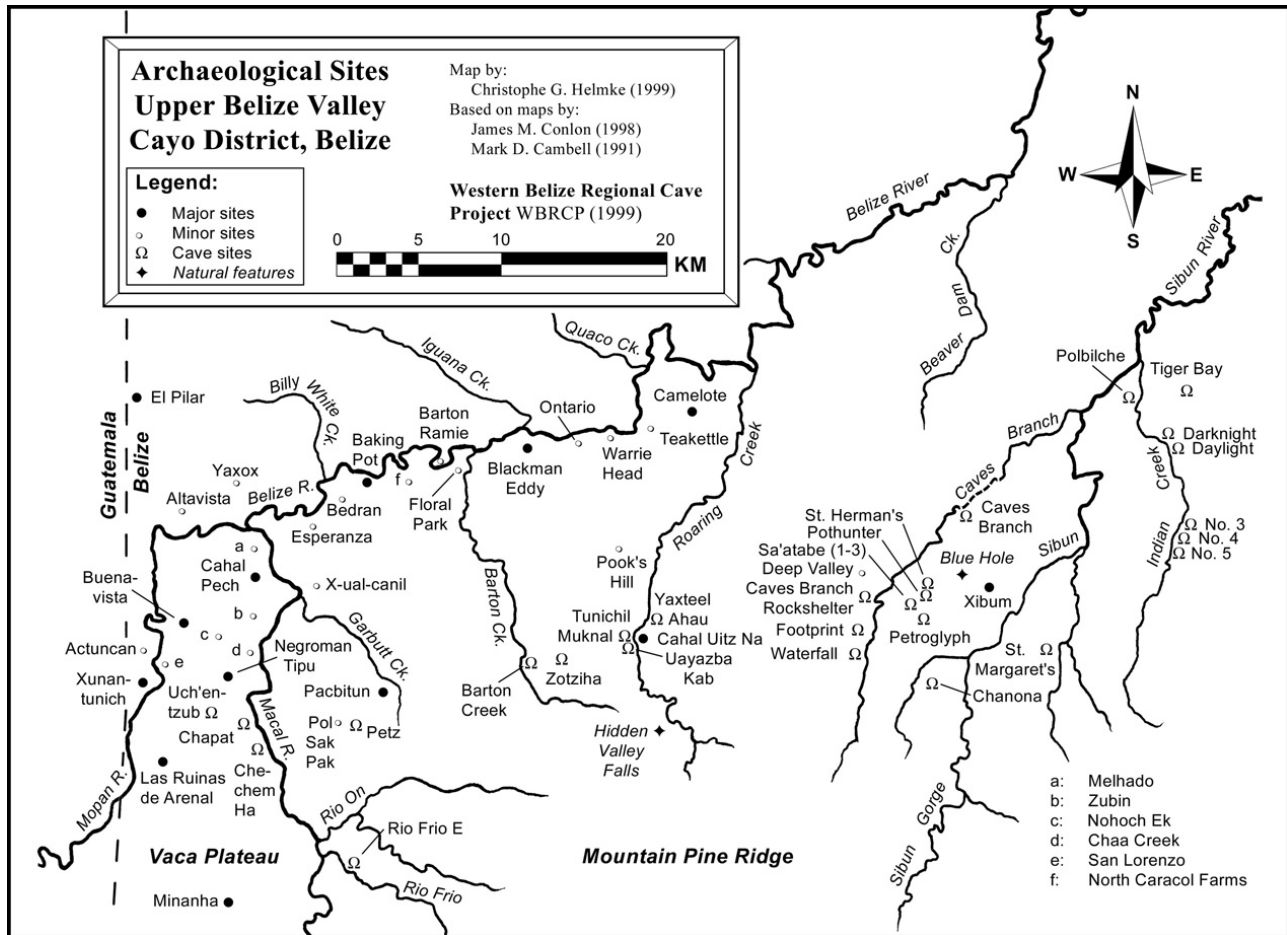


Figure 1. Location of the Caves Branch Rockshelter (courtesy of Christophe Helmke).

Introduction

The Caves Branch Rockshelter (CBR) site is located approximately 20 kilometers southeast of Belmopan, in the Caves Branch River Valley (Figure 1). The rockshelter is relatively unique because it contains the remains of a large number of human skeletons and had a long history of ceremonial use by the Formative period and Classic period Maya. Following preliminary excavations in 1994-96, Bonor estimated that the site contained 150 burials (Glassman and Bonor 2005). Recent work by the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project (2005-2007) revealed that the site's use was more extensive than previously believed, and likely contains over twice Bonor's estimate. The numerous ceramics dating to the Floral Park / Hermitage / Spanish Lookout and New Town Complexes demonstrate the continued ritual importance of the site over a large span of time. The research foci of the Caves Branch archaeological project are 1) exploring the changing role of cave ritual at the site, 2) analyzing the skeletal population, and 3) documenting the utilitarian Late Preclassic ceramic assemblage. These are each further discussed below. AMS dates on burials were taken and these data aided in defining and characterizing the site's use over time.

Maya Mortuary Ritual in Caves

The recent CBR excavations by the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project (BVAR) generally followed the objectives described by Awe (1998:1) for his investigations of ancient Maya cave use in western Belize. These objectives include determining the time span of cave use and the variation in cultural practices associated with caves. The CBR represents an unusual context since it represents the most extensive investigation of a Maya rockshelter, which have generally received little attention. The artifact assemblage found at the CBR includes only a few exotic items, such as small simple marine shell adornos ([Figure 2](#)), carved faunal bone, and small broken pieces of jadeite. The more typical artifacts consist of utilitarian material of local manufacture, suggesting a local village population used the site. These artifacts include complete vessels (discussed below), scattered potsherds, burnt animal bones, freshwater jute shells, and small lithic fragments. The modest social status of the group using the CBR is also consistent with Peterson's (2006: 13) model from the neighboring Sibun Valley, in which she suggests that the elites were able to appropriate the larger more impressive caves for their rituals, leaving commoners with smaller caves and rockshelters.



Figure 2. Carved shell adorno.

The CBR is particularly unusual because of the large skeletal population interred there. The ancient Maya in general are not thought to have used cemeteries until the Colonial

era, instead burying their dead within residential structures and urban “ceremonial locations” (Welsh 1988; Whittington 1991: 172). Recently, increased attention has been paid to the importance of caves as mortuary locations. While human remains are often found in caves, mortuary use of most caves, like ceremonial architecture, generally is limited to a few individuals based on their special social roles in life or their sacrificial roles in rituals specific to caves (Scott and Brady 2005, Gibbs 2000, Brady 1989, Brady 1997). Many of the reported caves with larger numbers of burials usually date to the Middle Formative period and appear to be culturally and geographically peripheral to the Maya (Brady 1997, Healy 1974, Rue et al. 1989). Others have been not been thoroughly investigated, and seem to consist of largely secondary contexts (Blom 1954). A recent unpublished thesis by Minjares (2003) shows extensive use of caves as mortuary locations in the Pasion Region of Guatemala, and Gibbs's (2000) review of mortuary cave use in Belize also shows variation in the number of skeletons and diversity in the ages and sexes of those placed there. Rockshelters also seem to show such variation, though studies of these types of formations are considerably limited. Excavations at rockshelters in the Maya mountains of southern Belize (Prufer 2002, Saul et al 2005) and central Belize (Ferguson and Gibbs 1999, Gibbs 1998, Griffith 1999), though less extensive than at CBR, also showed dense, overlapping interments implying that the Maya in the Caves Branch River Valley were not unique in using rockshelters as a repository for generations of its families.

There is growing evidence that some caves and rockshelter do house large numbers of burials, so the CBR offers a unique opportunity to investigate mortuary practices in a rural, non-domestic context that is not typically the focus of archaeological investigation, but that is obviously an important facet to ancient Maya ritual. In addition, the ceramic evidence from the site shows that the CBR maintained its ritual importance for over 1000 years. Thus, the site offers an excellent opportunity to study changes in ritual, which are perhaps related to larger political and economic transformations in Maya society.

The CBR Skeletal Population

Another important and unusual aspect of the CBR is the large number of skeletal remains buried at the site. Following the 2007 excavations at CBR, the remains of over 100 primary burials had been exhumed. While the wide variety of potsherds found at the site spanned over 1000 years (Middle Preclassic - Terminal Classic), the only ceramics clearly associated directly with the graves were whole vessels resembling types identified by Reents (1980) and Gifford (1976) that they dated to the Late Preclassic period. Though proportionally few individuals were associated with diagnostic vessels, the relative lack of variation in burial treatment at CBR and the tight clustering of bodies suggested that the mortuary use of the site was socially and temporally limited. Burial 66 was the only possible exception to the Protoclassic period association, since it was in close proximity to a Lowe spearpoint, a type attributed to the Late Archaic period (2500 - 1900 BCE) by Lohse et al (2006).

Determining the temporal range of the CBR burials is deemed important since this could represent one of the largest samples of Maya skeletal remains from a single context. None of the burials display elaborate mortuary furnishings or treatments, suggesting that the group using the site was not particularly affluent. The lack of early urban settlements in the area also supports the idea that the skeletal population comes from a rural agrarian community. Large Maya skeletal populations composed of non-elites are rare, and those that exist come from urban centers like Copan (Whittington 1991). The early date of the CBR burials also is unusual, even compared to similar contexts. Rockshelters containing mortuary components include examples from Actun Uayazba Kab in the Roaring Creek Valley (Gibbs 1998) and the Ek Xux Valley in the Maya Mountains (Saul et al 2005). Burials from these sites generally date to the Late Classic period. Unfortunately, the only rockshelter site that appears contemporaneous with CBR is Mayahak Cab Pek, in the Ek Xux Valley, which has yielded only a single articulated individual and a pit filled with disarticulated commingled remains (Prufer 2002). Several caves with large numbers of human remains have also been noted. Many of these are located in Honduras and date to Middle Formative contexts, making their association with Maya culture uncertain (Brady 1997, Healy 1974, Rue et al. 1989). Others, dating to Late Formative times, may temporally overlap with CBR, but have smaller numbers of individuals and seem to have been used primarily by elites from nearby urban centers (Brady 1989, Garza et al. 2002). Minjares's (2003) analysis of skeletal material representing an estimated 100-150 individuals from the caves surrounding Dos Pilas demonstrated the extensive mortuary use of these contexts by surrounding populations. He found evidence for several types of depositional activity including primary and secondary deposition, though he was unable to determine "whether the remains deposited within these caves represent a select group of individuals, an ancestral lineage, or individuals drawn from the general population" (p. 120). For a summary of human remains from cave and rockshelter sites in the Maya area, see Scott and Brady (2005) and Gibbs (2000).

The Vessel Assemblage

The whole vessels associated with many of the burials at CBR are consistent with those described by Reents (1980) and by Gifford (1976) as dating to the end of the Preclassic period and the transition to the Early Classic. Most assemblages of whole vessels from this time period come from tomb settings and thus are represented by elite "Protoclassic" wares (Pring 2000). At present, the Protoclassic period is poorly understood and much of the discussion about this period is focused on ceramics. Indeed Brady and colleagues (1998) have recently defined the Protoclassic as a ceramic, rather than cultural period. Pring's (2000) recent analysis points to the need for defining key elements and clarifying "such basic issues as what constituted the Protoclassic, when and where it materialized, and what was its role in the development of Maya culture" (p. 3). Pring (2000) also points out that Maya society was becoming increasingly socially stratified by the end of the Preclassic, and the elaborate ceramics from the Protoclassic were socially restricted, a view consistent with Chase and Chase's (2006) data from Caracol, where they showed an elaboration of elite caches and graves beginning in the Preclassic. However, regarding the current picture of this time period,

the view is decidedly elite-focused, consisting primarily of ceramic styles found in tombs. Thus, the CBR collection is an excellent opportunity to expand the focus of such studies to include a rural, non-elite context.

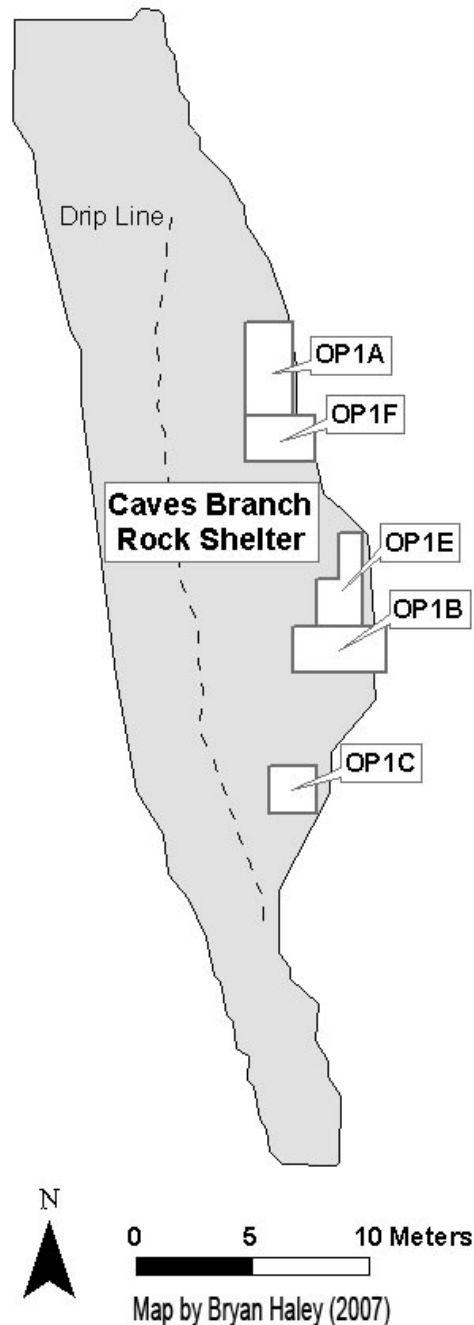


Figure 3. Map of Caves Branch Rockshelter excavation units (courtesy of Bryan Haley).

The more utilitarian styles found at CBR are typical of ritual cave sites in the area described by Reents (1980), including Succotz Striated and Cocay Appliqued, and these dates are based on Gifford's chronology, rather than on chronometric data.

Secure dates for the contexts from which these vessels stem can aid in addressing the important ceramic and social issues discussed by those working with Protoclassic period, such as how representative Protoclassic ceramics are (see description by Brady et al. 1998). For instance, Pring (2000) notes that in the analyses of Protoclassic ceramics from most sites “many of these complexes might better be described as subcomplexes, since it is clear with hindsight that we are not talking about a full complement of pottery items, but rather a limited distribution of high quality goods” (p. 34). The current project addresses many of these issues by securely dating ceramic and mortuary contexts in an effort to define specifically non-elite ritual at the moment of transition into the Classic period. Burials used for AMS dating were chosen based on preservation and on their stratigraphic relationships to other burials. These *in situ* individuals were chosen as best representing the earliest and latest interments in the northern and central portions of the rockshelter ([Figure 3](#)). These areas were dense with primary burials and in most cases, the stratigraphic relationships between the interments were clear.

Results and Discussion

Moyes (2004, 2006) has pointed out that few Maya cave studies have focused on change over time and the current data from the CBR presents an excellent opportunity to address this deficiency. The burials from the excavation in the north and central parts of the rockshelter showed an unexpected range of variation with individuals in both areas falling clearly within the Late Preclassic (300 BCE – 300 CE), the Early Classic (300-600 CE), and the Late/Terminal Classic (600-900 CE) periods. As discussed earlier, complete vessels at the site seem to have been mortuary furnishings, and all have forms dated to the Late Preclassic periods. Again, this consistency strongly suggested that mortuary activity was temporally limited. In fact, several of these Late Preclassic vessels were found in shallow, intrusive graves that appeared to be late in the site's burial sequence. Several burials with vessels and burials that intruded through burials with vessels were dated in order to confirm the hypothesized discrete timeframe. In most cases, these burials were early, ranging somewhere between the first and fourth centuries. However, in the case of Burial 59, whose head rested directly on Vessel 10, a tetrapodal red slipped jar ([Figure 4](#)), the AMS date was between 2σ 690-950 CE. The grave of this Late Classic individual was very shallow and had intruded on several other individuals. Likely, the vessel was from one of these earlier interments that were disturbed when the grave of B59 was dug. The vessel was either moved and reinterred with the B59, or was left *in situ* in the bottom of the new grave. In addition, there are no other examples of vessels being placed under an individual's head, again suggesting that the relationship between the body and the vessel was likely not intentional.



Figure 4. Vessel 10.

Burial 66, which was associated with the Lowe spearpoint ([Figure 5](#)), was of particular interest, since a Late Archaic (2500 - 1900 BCE) date would have made it one of the oldest confirmed burials in Mesoamerica. In addition, the derived date would help to more securely contextualize the use of Lowe points in the area, which currently is based on only the attribution of an Archaic date to the Lowe point type by Lohse et al (2006) is based on stylistic similarities with other Archaic points, and on two radiocarbon dates, both from loosely associated contexts. AMS showed this individual to be clearly Late Preclassic. The CBR point was broken with a missing “tang” (lateral inferior edge). We can speculate that the individual had found this lost or discarded point and kept it for use as a tool. Another possibility is that this represents a case of curation of discarded objects, perhaps for use as divination / divining tools or personal *sacra*, as discussed by Brown (2000) for both ancient and modern Maya ritual practitioners. This later date is more consistent with Vessel 8 ([Figure 6](#)), which was also found in close proximity to Burial 66. Vessel 8 belongs to the Fowler ceramic group defined by Gifford (1976: 155-6), and may represent the latest of the complete ceramic assemblage. The orange-red slip on the surfaces of this vessel appears transitional between Terminal Preclassic Paso Caballo Waxy Ware types and Early Classic Peten Gloss Ware types (Terry Powis, p.c.).



Figure 5. Lowe Spear point associated with Burial 66.



Figure 6. Vessel 8.

The few other examples of non-ceramic grave goods also seem to be limited to the earlier phases of the cemetery's use. For instance, Burial 83 ([Figure 7](#)) was interred with a pair of bone hairpins, and dated to the Early Classic period (2σ 430-640 CE). Burial 58 had a carved bone with the woven mat motif ([Figure 8](#)), but this too is early since it was intruded upon by a Late Preclassic burial with a diagnostic vessel. Thus it appears that the inclusion of vessels with burials is limited to Late Preclassic, after which grave goods were nearly absent. Since the types of grave goods included with the burials are not particularly expensive or exotic, this shift in ritual seems unlikely to be related to differences in wealth, but rather to a change in the mortuary rituals performed at the rockshelter.

The temporally broad ceramic assemblage at CBR shows that it was the focus of ritual activity for a period of over 1000 years. The mortuary patterning shows some diversity in treatment and even status indicators, though relatively little compared to most burial assemblages found in nearby monumental centers. While Glassman and Bonor (2005) recognized that the ceramic evidence suggested a long duration for the cave's use, they did not speculate specifically about the time frame of the burials. In a later analysis, I noted that the taphonomy of the skeletons showed that many of the individuals were fully decomposed at the time they were disturbed by later burials, and the layering of these burials suggested a time span of at least a few hundred years (Wrobel and Tyler 2006). However, since all diagnostic ceramics associated with graves were similar to forms found at other sites attributed to the Late Preclassic period, I hypothesized that the mortuary use of the cave was still limited to that time, with possibly some overlap in the first part of the Early Classic. It is clear, however, that the AMS dates do not support this hypothesis and that mortuary ritual was likely the primary focus of the CBR's use.

27 July 2007
Caves Branch Rockshelter
Oper 1E
Unit 19J
Level 3
Burial 83 (Lot 550)
G. Wrobel

Datum 1B



10 cm

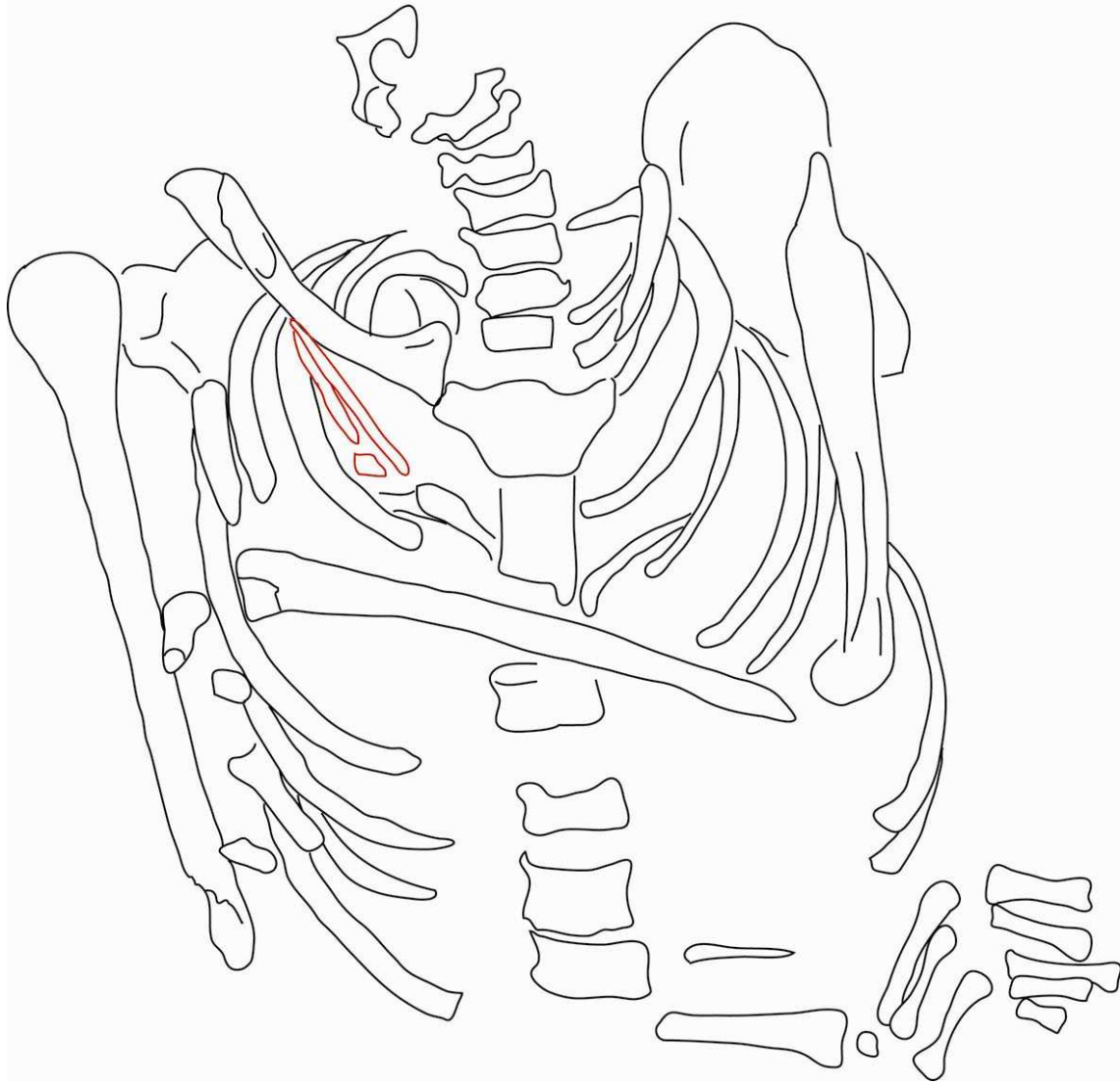


Figure 7. Burial 83, including a pair of bone hairpins.



Figure 8. Carved bone with woven mat motif, with Burial 58.

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[Figure 5](#). Lowe Spear point associated with Burial 66.

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[Figure 7](#). Burial 83, including a pair of bone hairpins.

[Figure 8](#). Carved bone with woven mat motif, with Burial 58.

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