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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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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.

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.

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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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.

Figure 2. On the left, Maya community members build a 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.

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.

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

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

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

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.

Figure 10. Copal cake found in a secluded alcove.

Figure 11. Map of Kayuko Mound Group.