Ceramics of Las Cuevas and the Chiquibul: At World’s End

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The identification of site specific ceramic complexes utilizing standard types, varieties, and modes has the advantage of informing on the temporal placement of the occupation at Las Cuevas in the Chiquibul. However, the choices made to name the ceramic types that comprise these complexes are not without implied meanings about broader regional and inter-regional connections. While Las Cuevas is only 14 km. from the large polity of Caracol, the nature and extent of Caracol’s influence over a site such as Las Cuevas, and other smaller communities in the region, remain to be determined. The purpose of this paper is to ascertain if the ceramics from Las Cuevas are more similar to Caracol and the Petén region to the west, than to the Belize Valley and Vaca Plateau to the north, or to sites farther south in the Toledo District, the Xibun, and east along the Belize coast. Ceramic spheres are not static constructions and their spatio-temporal boundaries, which change through time, serve to highlight these connections, particularly during the Late Classic Period. What can we say about the ways in which these ceramic spheres overlap that might inform on interactions between Las Cuevas and these other sites and regions? An analysis of more than 16,000 sherds after two seasons is suggestive of a more complex story than might be expected. If ceramic spheres are a reflection of these interactions, then Las Cuevas may in fact be at world’s end in more ways than one.
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http://faculty2.ucmerced.edu/hmoyes/las_cuevas/
Introduction

The Las Cuevas Archaeological Reconnaissance Project conducted preliminary work at the Las Cuevas site in 2011, and returned in 2012 for a longer season. This is the first major project at the site since it was investigated in 1957 by British archaeologist Adrian Digby and A. H. Anderson, who at that time was Commissioner of the Belize Department of Archaeology (Digby 1958a; 1958b). The site, also known as “Awe Caves,” is a medium sized center, located in the Chiquibul Reserve, in the Mountain Pine Ridge area of Belize, approximately 14km east of Caracol (Moyes et al. 2012; Figure 1).

In 1938, mahogany cutters employed by Emilio Awe stumbled upon the archaeological site and cave below. A.H. Anderson did a brief reconnaissance of the site but other than chicleros passing through, no formal work was conducted until 1957, when Adrian Digby joined Anderson for a British Museum funded expedition. They planned a three month dry season excavation, however, delayed by rain, the rising Macal River, and poor logging roads, the season lasted only seven weeks. Anderson was tasked with excavating a small mound above the cave, while Digby conducted excavations on one of the platforms in the cave, as well as producing a map of the site. Digby also reported the presence of “broken urns and bowls for burial or for storage” in the cave as well as lids that he described as covers for three-pronged incense burners (Digby 1958a: 274-5).

The site (Figure 2) consists of two large temples sitting on the eastern (Str. 1) and western (Str. 4) sides of a central plaza, a southern ball court (Structures 5 and 6), and a second plaza bounded by a large temple (Str. 7), as well as a series of low platforms that ring a sinkhole. The cave entrance is located on the west wall of the sinkhole, directly beneath the eastern temple. Investigations in 2011 focused on mapping the surface site and the cave, as well as test
excavations at the surface site, largely in the ball court, and excavation in the cave, that produced an extremely small sample size of only 1728 sherds (Moyes et al. 2012). In 2012 we continued the program of both above ground and cave excavations. Surface excavations focused further work on the ball court as well as on the eastern temple (Str. 1) in the main plaza (See Figure 2) in an attempt to define better the chronological sequence of the site. Cave excavations continued as well and the 2012 season produced a much larger sample of 14,989 sherds. Thus, what follows are some preliminary thoughts on prior ceramic research in the Chiquibul, and the Las Cuevas ceramic typology. Throughout we will be attempting to use the concept of the ceramic sphere as a framework to help elucidate inter-site and inter-regional connections between Las Cuevas and other sites and regions.

Prior Ceramic Research in the Chiquibul

There has been little published ceramics-focused research on smaller sites in the Chiquibul region of Belize despite the long history of ceramic research elsewhere, especially in the Belize Valley. However, the largest site in the region, Caracol, has a well documented epigraphic, archaeological and ceramic record, with many articles and season reports by Arlen Chase and Diane Chase and their colleagues that are too numerous to cite here in their entirety (see for example Chase and Chase 1987).

North of Las Cuevas on the Vaca Plateau, decades-long research at the site of Minanha by Gyles Iannone (2005) has reported extensively on the architecture and site history. Research at the site of Mountain Cow and the nearby region by John Morris (2004) provides some comparative ceramic information. Jaime Awe (1985) conducted the most extensive ceramic research in the area at the site of Caledonia providing excellent vessel form illustrations and
preliminary type designations for comparative purposes. Additionally, in the 1960s and early 1970s, David Pendergast, under the auspices of the Royal Ontario Museum, conducted research in Actun Balam and Eduardo Quiroz caves, and documented Anderson’s work in Rio Frio Cave (Pendergast 1969; 1970; 1971). Pendergast’s monographs provide superb ceramic illustrations for comparative purposes, although he did not utilize the standard type: variety mode descriptions that would make inter-site comparisons easier.

Elsewhere in Belize, Patricia McAnany’s regional project in the Xibun has produced a number of reports that include ceramic data useful for comparative purposes, principally Ellie Harrison-Buck’s thesis (2007) on the Terminal Classic, as has Elizabeth Graham’s work (1994) in the Stann Creek District. South of the Chiquibul early work in the Toledo District at the site of Lubaantun by Hammond (1975) produced an excellent site ceramic typology for the Late Classic, and Heather McKillop’s extensive research on salt production and trade along Belize’s southern coast and cayes, has documented ceramic typologies that also demonstrate regional similarities with Las Cuevas and the sites of the Chiquibul (McKillop 2002, 2007).

**Methods**

Most ceramic research in the southern Maya Lowlands has attempted to work within the frameworks and typologies created for three regions, due to the fact that their publication came early in the history of Maya archaeology and the extensive descriptions they provided. These include the ceramics from Uaxactún in the Petén (Smith 1955), and typed by Smith and Gifford (1966); the ceramics from the Pasión region at Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1971) and Seibal (Sabloff 1975); and the ceramics of Barton Ramie in the Belize Valley (Gifford 1976). The identification of site specific ceramic complexes utilizing standard type: variety mode
designations for Maya pottery, has the advantage of informing on the temporal placement of the occupation and construction history of a site, as well as allowing one to place the site in a regional and inter-regional context. However, the choices made to name the ceramic types that comprise these complexes are not without implied meanings about broader regional and inter-regional connections. Additionally type: variety designations foreground the importance of surface characteristics, and they become less useful as a tool when analyzing eroded material. In the absence of well-preserved surfaces, modal characteristics such as rim and lip shape, vessel form and visual paste and temper characteristics are also extremely useful in pottery identification, and are too often ignored.

For the purposes of this paper we will focus on one of the more useful comparative concepts in Maya ceramic research: that of the ceramic sphere (Willey, Culbert and Adams 1967: 306). The definition of the ceramic sphere concentrates on typological similarities and dissimilarities between ceramic complexes and “exists when two or more complexes share a majority of their most common types” and “makes possible the recognition of two degrees of content similarity: high…and little or none” (Willey, Culbert and Adams 1967: 306). Diagnostic types are abundant and widely shared among the ceramic complexes that constitute a sphere and are therefore quantitatively rather than qualitatively defined by their abundant, shared presence in numerous complexes. As elucidated by Joe Ball in his summary of the pottery of Barton Ramie (in Gifford 1976: 323-30), definite full sphere membership means that about 60% or greater content similarity is present between two complexes. Peripheral sphere membership or exclusion occurs when there is roughly 40-50 percent content similarity, and definite exclusion from a sphere occurs if there is 40% or less content similarity. Therefore ceramic spheres can map inter-site and interregional connections, based on content similarity of pottery, and are
dynamic rather than static in time and space. Unfortunately any examination of ceramic continuity or change carries a number of serious limitations as numerous studies (see Rice and Forsyth for examples) have shown that ceramic change is not always mirrored by socio-political or economic change or vice versa. In this preliminary study we will attempt to describe the Late Classic ceramic sphere or spheres in which the inhabitants of the site of Las Cuevas participated, as it is the only time period for which we have a sufficiently large sample size.

**Las Cuevas Ceramic Complexes**

The complete sample of ceramics totaling 16,717 sherds from two seasons was analyzed using standard type: variety mode designations where possible. The excavations produced only minimal in situ Late Preclassic ceramics, and smaller quantities of Early Classic and early Late Classic Tepeu I (Tiger Run in the Belize Valley) pottery redeposited in fill. The vast majority of the pottery and construction at Las Cuevas dates to the late Late Classic Tepeu 2/ Spanish Lookout 1 time period, though a small quantity of Tepeu 3/ Spanish Lookout 2 ceramics have been identified in the surface and collapse of both Str. 1 and the ball court, as well as in the cave.

Thus the late Late Classic is the first time period at Las Cuevas with a large enough sample size to begin any meaningful discussion of the ceramic sequence at the site. The late Late Classic ceramics from Las Cuevas present something of a puzzle. One of the most striking aspects is the complete absence of unslipped striated jars, which are usually a large part of Classic period ceramic assemblages, though why they are absent from Las Cuevas is unknown. The largest component of the assemblage, some 30%, is comprised of Belize Valley Pine Ridge Carbonate Ware monochrome red bowls (Figure 3), that in form and surface finish are more similar to the Belize Valley types of the Vaca Falls and Garbutt Creek Red Groups, than to those
of the Tinaja Red Group identified at Petén and Pasión River sites. The Las Cuevas assemblage also includes examples of the Belize Red Group, approximately 11% of the assemblage (see Figure 3); its soft, sandy volcanic ash paste is a particularly useful diagnostic, whose origins likely lie in the Belize Valley near the site of Baking Pot based upon the high frequencies within the ceramic assemblage of the site. Despite the overlap in some formal characteristics between the Belize Valley types and the Tinaja Group, few if any of the Las Cuevas bowls exhibit the circumferential impressed or incised decoration or fillet on the exterior shoulders of incurving bowls, characteristic of the Tinaja Group found at Petén sites. In the late Late Classic period many of the ceramics of the Pine Ridge Carbonate Ware and the British Honduras Volcanic Ash Ware that were made and used at Belize River Valley sites were distinctly different from coeval ceramics from sites in the Petén not just in paste composition but also in surface finish.

The Las Cuevas assemblage is comprised of only small quantities of Petén Gloss Wares, approximately 13% of the assemblage, including the Tinaja Red, Achote Black, and Tialipa Brown Groups (see Figure 3). It seems clear that in the Belize Valley, beginning in the late Late Classic, the ceramics of the Spanish Lookout Complex are a local manifestation marking increased regionalization. While the Tepeu Sphere ceramics maintained their importance at Petén sites, the Spanish Lookout Complex appears slightly peripheral to it in terms of the major content of its ceramic types. This is certainly the case at Las Cuevas where Belize Valley Pine Ridge Carbonate Ware ceramics out number Petén Gloss Wares by almost 3 to 1.

The Uaxactún Ware unslipped jars at Las Cuevas are within the range of those from either the Cayo Unslipped Group in the Belize Valley or Cambio Unslipped in the Petén and Pasión, and comprise 27% of the entire assemblage (see Figure 3), though as mentioned previously there are no striated jars. Additionally there are a significant number of scored
incised incensario fragments and censer prongs, comprising 9% of the entire assemblage. Similar material has been found at other sites in the Chiquibul. Awe (1985) describes this material as “Chiquibul Scored-Incised” at Caledonia. There are no examples of Pedregal Modeled incensarios, and only three partial Miseria Appliqué censers in the final collapse of the eastern temple, Structure 1.

Of particular interest to any discussion of Las Cuevas’ role in regional ceramic spheres is the presence of relatively large quantities of unit stamped and comb stamped ceramics, comprising 10% of the late Late Classic assemblage (see Figure 3). Unit stamped types were originally included in Petén Gloss Ware (Hammond 1975; Sabloff 1975), however visual paste examination of the Las Cuevas examples suggest that they do not fit well within the gloss ware tradition, though future technological studies may address better this question. For the purposes of this analysis all unit stamped examples have not been included in either Pine Ridge Carbonate or Petén Gloss Wares as it is not clear from where they may originate. Furthermore, surface finishes of unit stamped ceramics at Las Cuevas are not similar to the Petén Gloss Wares.

Unit stamped pottery was first identified as the Pantano Impressed: Stamped Variety in the Tinaja Group at Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1971). Sabloff (1975) also found it at the site of Seibal in the Pasión River drainage, along with the Chaquiste Impressed: Stamped Variety in the Subin Group. Pantano Impressed is mentioned as occurring at Tikal in minor quantities and Culbert (1993) suggests that they are trade pieces. It is present at the site of Caracol as well (Chase and Chase 2001: Fig. 16bb), and is similar to examples found in the Petén and Pasión regions. Hammond (1975: 301-5) reports that unit and comb stamping in the Remate Red Group at Lubaantun is an important part of the assemblage, and there are significant quantities in southern Belize along the coast, where McKillop (2002; 2007) calls it Warrie Red. Unit
stamping also is reported at Barton Ramie in the Belize Valley with vessel forms similar to those of Kaway Impressed (Willey et. al. 1965: Fig. 233b). Kidder (1954) reported similar unit stamped pottery at Mountain Cow, and David Pendergast (1969; 1970; 1971) notes its presence in the cave excavations at Rio Frio, Eduardo Quiroz, and Actun Balam.

At Las Cuevas unit stamping occurs mostly on incurring monochrome red bowls although there are some examples of jars with both unit and comb stamping (Figure 4). The stamped decoration on the Las Cuevas pottery shares motifs more in common with those found in the Toledo District and along the southern coast than with Pantano Impressed in the Tinaja Red Group at Petén and Pasion River sites. Unit stamped vessels of the Pantano Impressed type on the ceramics from the Pasión sites of Altar de Sacrificios and Seibal are quadripartite and abstract in design, and the “S” pattern prevalent at Las Cuevas and in southern Belize is absent. However, the more elaborate stamped designs of monkeys and birds, and complex dots present on those from Lubaantun and the southern coast are absent at Las Cuevas. Comb stamping also appears on vessels from both Lubaantun and Las Cuevas, while both unit stamping and comb stamping appear to be minor decorative features of pottery in the Petén. Hammond (1975: 305) has suggested that the origins of unit stamped pottery may lie in the south in the region of the site of Lubaantun, or perhaps even farther south along the coast.

Even the dating of unit-stamped pottery evokes disagreement among ceramicists. Adams (1971) dates unit stamping to the late facet of the Boca Complex (or Terminal Classic/ Tepeu 3) at Altar de Sacrificios, as does Pendergast (1969; 1970; 1971) for the caves in the Chiquibul, although Hammond (1975: 305) suggests that it appears earlier at Lubaantun, starting in the late Late Classic (or Spanish Lookout 1/ Tepeu 2). Unit stamping co-occurs at least with Spanish
Lookout 1/ Tepeu 2 material at Las Cuevas, and would seem to confirm the Lubaantun data, based on our small sample.

Conclusions

In the Late Preclassic and Early Classic, pan lowland Maya pottery spheres characterize most sites and regions. However, beginning in the Late Classic the Belize Valley became peripheral to the Petén, where new polychromes were still manufactured (Willey, Culbert and Adams 1971: 301). During the Late Classic the flow of pottery influences from the west, eastward into the Belize Valley seems to have abated, with the exception of small quantities of Petén Gloss Wares. So, while in the Late Classic period Belize Valley sites appear to be peripheral to the Tepeu Sphere centered on the Petén, what about a site like Las Cuevas and others in the Chiquibul region?

Caracol, the largest site in the Chiquibul region, is a major center with large quantities of Petén Gloss Ware pottery, as well as smaller amounts of Belize Valley types, most notably Belize Red. Although Las Cuevas is only 14 km east of Caracol, the Late Classic ceramic picture at Las Cuevas is much less clear. During the beginning of the Late Classic, the Tepeu Sphere dominated the north-central Petén, but like the Belize Valley, Las Cuevas may have been only peripherally affiliated.

But what do ceramic spheres, and sphere affiliation actually mean in terms of cultural affinities, economic and social ties, and geopolitical networks? Do ceramic spheres tell us something real about prehistoric Maya behavior? As Rice and Forsyth (2004: 53) have suggested, the participants in a ceramic sphere must have shared ideas about what was appropriate or customary, copying vessel shapes, surface colors, or decoration, within a region
through trade, exchange, and travel. However, while “elite wares” may change relatively rapidly through gift giving or exchange, basic utilitarian serving, cooking, and storage vessels are likely less sensitive to change.

At Las Cuevas, located geographically peripheral to the Belize Valley and to the Petén region, we found that the content of the late Late Classic ceramic assemblage contains a greater quantity of Belize Valley types (a total of 41%, including 30% Pine Ridge Carbonate Ware and 11% British Honduras Volcanic Ash Ware) than Petén types (13% Petén Gloss Ware). However based on the definition of full ceramic sphere membership (greater than 60% content similarity) or ceramic sphere exclusion (less than 40% content similarity), Las Cuevas does not belong to the Petén sphere and is barely peripheral to the Belize Valley. Throughout the Late Classic the ceramics of Las Cuevas are a mix of Belize Valley Pine Ridge Carbonate Wares, Petén Gloss Wares, and unit stamped ceramics marking the site as peripheral to the Petén, to the Belize Valley, and to sites in southern Belize as well. However, we must be careful in interpreting what this may mean because prior studies (see Rice and Forsyth 2004) have demonstrated that patterns of ceramic styles do not necessarily correspond to patterns of sociopolitical or economic organization. Las Cuevas may have been a relatively minor center, albeit with a ball court, that sits above a large and likely important cave, and thus served as a locus for ritual activities and pilgrimages during the Late Classic. However, whether at any time any polity dominated Las Cuevas remains questionable as evidenced by its multi-regional ceramic connections. Las Cuevas may sit at the crossroads, or intersection of many overlapping regional networks or spheres, or it may have been at world’s end in more ways than one.
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Captions of Illustrations

Figure 1. Regional map of southern Belize showing the location of the site of Las Cuevas (Courtesy of the LCAR).

Figure 2. The site of Las Cuevas showing the location of Str. 1 and the Ball Court (Strs. 5 & 6) (Courtesy of the LCAR).

Figure 3. Relative frequencies of ceramic wares during the late Late Classic at Las Cuevas.

Figure 4. Examples of unit and comb stamped ceramics from Las Cuevas (Illustrated by M.B. Schumacher, Courtesy of the LCAR).
Archeological Sites
- lacandon
- Cave Sites
- Surface Sites
- Major Rivers

Map Courtesy of Anabel Ford and Belize River Settlement Survey
Revised by H. Isbell 2006
British Honduras Volcanic Ash Ware (11%)
Pine Ridge Carbonate Ware (30%)
Petén Gloss Ware (13%)
Unit Stamped (10%)
Uaxactun Unslipped Ware (27%)
Incensarios [Unspecified Ware] (9%)