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Joaquin González Echegaray (1930–2013) by Lawrence G. Straus 161

The Fate of the Neandertals by Fred H. Smith 167

Conceptions of Nature in Iran: Science, Nationalism, and Heteroglossia by Satoshi Abe 201

The Geopolitics of Emerging Maya Rulers: A Case Study of Kayuko Naj Tunich, a Foundational Shrine at Uxbenká, Southern Belize by Holley Moyes and Keith M. Prufer 225

The Hard Work of Small Talk in Ethnographic Fieldwork by Henk Driessen and Willy Jansen 249

Book Reviews 265

XXXV JAR Distinguished Lecture: Fred Smith on Neandertals & Folks Like Us plus Iranian Greens, A Maya Ritual Cave, & Small Talk
THE GEOPOLITICS OF EMERGING MAYA RULERS
A Case Study of Kayiikl Naj Tunich, a Foundational Shrine at Uxbenká, Southern Belize

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Cross-culturally we find that emerging leaders in agrarian societies create ritual ties to the land as a political resource in gaining and maintaining political power. Based on research in ancient Maya caves, we argue that this strategy was followed by emerging Maya kings, who used ritual practice in caves to establish their relationships with deities associated with the earth and its resources. These rites bolstered their legitimacy, supported their right to rule, and established a natural political order. This is borne out both ethnochronologically and ethnographically, by examples in which caves figure prominently in the foundation of communities and in establishing geopolitical boundaries that serve to spiritually anchor leaders to the land by providing the most important ritual venues for the propagation of local deities. In this paper we demonstrate that this practice has a deep history by examining an Early Classic cave site in southern Belize, Kayiikl Naj Tunich, and argue that it served as a foundational shrine for the polity of Uxchenki.

The foundation of kingship is a topic that has long interested historians, classicists, sociologists, anthropologists, and archaeologists. Cross-cultural studies suggest that kingship is deeply embedded in the sacred and developed in contexts in which politics and religion were not autonomous. Declan Quigley (2005:9–11) draws on the works of Sir James George Frazer and Arthur Maurice Hocart to argue that, historically, kings were not simply political leaders but were charismatic forces that embodied the transcendent for the promotion of life and fertility. The distinction between the political and the sacred is novel to the West, but many have argued that ideological power and control of cosmological forces is at the heart of kingship in all centralized nonindustrial societies (e.g., Blendeis 1978; Helms 1999:199–200; Hocart 1976:98–99; Oakley 2006:4; Quigley 2005).

Comparative studies illustrate that political and social control by individuals or groups is legitimated by their associations with “cosmological primacy” (Helms 1999:200), through the veneration of ancestral forebears, perceived associations with deities or supernatural forces, and the claims to manipulate the workings of nature and the universe. The ideals and the practices associated with them are by
no realms isolated and are often interrelated. In many cultures the land itself is
animate and populated by supernatural forces. To inhabit the land requires special
relationships between humans and the supernatural agents dwelling therein. One of
the many paths to political power and legitimacy is the creation of ancestral ties
to the land by coopting sacred features within the landscape.

Nowhere has this been better reported than in oral histories and historical
records from Africa. An excellent example of how power is initially established
in this way can be found in Buya communities in Tanzania, a group that composes
of the landscape as alive and animate (Giblin and Maddox 1996; Wagner 1996).
Political as well as ritual power was initially established when early settlers
created ties to the land via an institution of earth priesthood called the matale.
Members belonged to particular lineages that claimed to be the first settlers
initially responsible for establishing rapport with the local, indwelling, earth
spirits (Wagner 1996:181–83). Matale derived their power from these spirits and
performed rituals for them at specific locations such as on hills, at auspicious
places in rivers, near boulders, springs, ponds, anthills, or in caves. Over time,
these sites came to be regarded as shrines that were the homes of particular spirits.

As the intermediary between the earth spirits and humans, the mafale
historically directed the human community in environmental matters and began to
acquire social power, which was passed down from father to son. They exercised
authority over resource disputes and boundary conflicts and also made decisions
regarding who was allowed to join the community. Thus, this group became both
the spiritual and political leaders based on their close ties with the earth deities.

We suspect that the development of leadership in the ancient Maya world may
have had much in common with the Buya.

While much is known about ancient Maya kings of the Classic period (AD
250–900), until recently, comparatively little has been gleaned of early kingship
or how kings established their authority and power (Estrada-Belli 2011:35–66).
Part of the problem has been the lack of direct evidence (such as royal burials)
to demonstrate the presence of the earliest kings. Preclassic (1000 BC–AD 250)
tombs are difficult for archaeologists to locate because they are both rare and,
when present, often buried deeply under Classic period overburden. Generally,
burial practices may have been quite different during the earlier parts of the
Preclassic period, making inferences more difficult to recognize as elite or royal.
However, indirect evidence such as the reorganization of buildings, construction
of monumental architecture, early writing, and a complex ideology suggest a high
level of social organization and the presence of kings prior to AD 250.

It has been argued that the roots of ancient Maya kingship lay in ideological
factors such as the politicization of ancestor veneration (Elkins 2001; McAnany
1995:166) or the ability of emerging leaders to co-opt existing household rituals
(Lucero 2003), particularly those related to the control of water (Lucero 2006).

Despite these arguments, little attention has been paid to the role of the natural
landscape in the establishment of elite power, yet Foucault reminds us that the
control of space is “fundamental to any exercise of power” (1986:252).

Years ago, David Freidel and Linda Schele (1988) suggested that the position
of elan or sacred kingship was invented in the Maya Lowlands in the first century
BC to accommodate contradictions in a transitional Maya society that was moving
from an egalitarian to a more hierarchical social structure. They argued that rather
than relying on traditional ritual practices, the new leader was at pains to break
with these traditions. This new form of leadership was likely influenced by earlier
developments in the southern Maya highlands and Pacific coast regions that
included situating the royal personage in time and cosmological space. German
to our argument is that at this time early leaders begin to situate themselves within
a symbolic landscape that had its basis in real-world, large-scale, geographic and
astronomical features. Physical entities such as mountains, caves, trees, and
bodies of water were represented as architectural elements in built environments
(Freidel et al. 1993:158–72). This does not detract from human interactions with
the land itself or the sacrality of the real-world features upon which these images
were based; rather it reinforces how integral natural features were to ideological
systems that supported rulership (Brady and Ashmore 1999). Landscape features
were at the core of an ideology of agriculture that depended on the land itself
and the reigning climatic conditions for their survival. Our research at Uxchenka
suggests that landscape existed not just as an ideological construct but as a physical
manifestation that was employed in ritual practice to legitimize political power.

Features of the landscape served yet another function in the establishment
of place by emerging rulers because they aided in reifying territorial and
political boundaries. Ethnohistoric data suggest there is copious evidence for
the importance of boundary marking based on the many disputes that arose over
boundary encroachment in legal documents and reports (see McAnany 1995:64–
110). Among the Classic period Maya, it is very clear that boundaries were of
major concern to the state, evidenced by the emblem glyph that named both
the ruler and geopolitical unit in larger Classic period sites (Martin and Grube
2000:17). Additionally, toponyms or “place names” identified by David Stuart
and Stephen Houston (1994) were also commonly employed in titles, such as
“lord of such and such a place,” associating the ruler with a specific place.

Glyphs for caves are often incorporated into emblem glyphs or toponyms
(Vogt and Stuart 2005), suggesting that they are important in marking and defining
place. This makes a great deal of sense when we consider the importance of caves
as primordial power places in Mesoamerican thought (Brady 1989, Heyerdahn
1975; Mayan and Brady 2013, Thompson 1973). Caves also featured prominently in
rituals of community foundation reported in ethnohistoric documents (Kiiciwa-Zambrano
1994). These foundational rituals not only defined and maintained boundaries but
also spiritually anchored a community by establishing the leader’s relationship
with local, indwelling earth deities. Toward this end, leaders selected caves to
serve as ritual venues for the propitiation of these deities. The development
of this special relationship also bolstered the leader’s power over the cosmological
forces of nature and the land itself.

Because of their likely role in community foundation, the archaeological
residues of cave rites provide a unique window from which to view the rise of
elites and establishment of polity in ancient Maya society. Cities appear to have
taken root in the tropical lowlands of Mesoamerica by the end of the Middle Preclassic (ca. 400 bc; Estrada-Belli 2010), with continuing proliferation of centers over the subsequent 1,200 years (Sanders et al. 2003). In this paper, we begin by reviewing what we know from ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources regarding community establishment and the importance of boundary making. We mined these documents for data that addressed ritual practices and the use of caves in founding communities so as to establish expectations for recognizing foundational shrines in the archaeological record. We then turn to a consideration of the ancient Maya polity of Uxchenka and the associated Kayakno Naj Tunich Cave (or Canoe Stone House), comparing our expectations with our findings. Based on the cave’s context, contents, and a suite of radiocarbon dates collected from both the cave and surface site, we argue that Kayakno Naj Tunich is an Early Classic foundational shrine that played an important role in the first displays of power and authority at the site, and that the ceremonies and practices associated with the cave were integral to the initial establishment of the Uxchenka polity.

MODELING MAYA GEOPOLITICAL UNITS

Beginning in the 1950s settlement pattern analysis became an important area of study in the Maya lowlands, one that intensified in the 1960s (Ashmore and Willey 1981). In such studies archaeologists sought to define “sites” at various scales and to classify them as types that could be used as heuristic devices to understand the patterning in the archaeological record. Visible architecture was the primary data source and analyses tended to focus on “hotspots” of occupation (Ashmore 2003). As archaeologists we are of course conscious of the fact that “sites” are our own analytical constructs and, as with all typologies, may only partially, weakly, or may not at all express cultural realities. In order to understand settlement patterns it is important that our analytical models better parallel human behavior and cultural norms. Wendy Ashmore suggested that recent interpretive models are becoming more “socially informed” (2003:9) but cautions that more often analytical models need to include ideology, cosmology, and cultural logic. So, how does one go about creating more socially informed models?

In 1983 Joyce Marcus advocated the use of ethnohistoric and epigraphic data to create culturally specific models testable in the archaeological record. This was put into practice in her research when she and Kent Flannery (Marcus and Flannery 1994) resurrected the Direct Historical Approach for analyzing Oxkixtan temple assemblages. Indeed, creating models based on local and historical data sources more closely approached modeling from an emic perspective. This was helpful because it provided a guide for modeling behavior that could aid in eliminating competing, less tenable possibilities and help reduce “noise” in archaeological interpretation.

When we begin to understand behavior it becomes apparent that decision-making processes are not based solely on functional or economic concerns but that underlying cosmological beliefs in a sacred and animate earth are salient guiding principles among Mesoamerican peoples. Brady and Ashmore (1999) have been instrumental in bringing to our attention the role of the landscape in settlement studies, noting that archaeologists seldom consider natural landscape features in their formulations. They advocate not only the inclusion but the primacy of natural features as focal entities in a cognized landscape. In Mesoamerican religion, the earth is not a neutral entity but a powerful force in the universe that represents the nexus of all creation and destruction. The sacred earth was ratified in many features, such as rocks, trees, and rivers, and caves (Brady and Proffit 2005; Meyers and Brady 2005; Proffit and Kondon 2005). For arguments supporting the existence of a Classic period analog for the Highland Maya Earth Lord in relation to cave use, see works by Brady and Proffit (1999, 2005) as well as Healy (2007).

As both an agrarian and a profoundly spiritual people, the modern Maya are concerned with their ties to the land and the deities associated with it. The earth is “owned” by spirits that inhabit the land itself and its features. These spirits are neither good nor evil but must be treated with respect, honored, and propitiated so as to ensure reciprocity for their good will. The work of William Hanks (1998) has been integral to our understanding of the relationship between the Maya and these protector deities. From his studies in Yucatan, he found that every kind of space has a janaal or “lord, owner” to whom it belongs (1998:388). This is true of all spaces at all scales from that of the cosmos to the oxin (farm plot). The deities are guardians of particular places, maintaining fixed positions, and are responsible for that space. Although people may transform land through labor and inhabit it, they share ownership with the “lord owner.” The bond between owners and land defines the rights and responsibilities of both spirits and owners. When respected, the deities protect living spaces such as oxin, houses, and towns.

These guardian deities are often associated with the four cardinal directions. Ethnographers report that the Maya earth itself is thought of as a four-sided horizontal flat plane with a point marking the center, commonly referred to as the quincunx model (Gossen 1974:34; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962:144; Vogt 1976:13). Each side of the model corresponds to one of the cardinal directions, and the center is considered to be the center of the world. According to Hanks (1990:299-300), this model is invoked in ritual discourse creating a framing effect or a “microkosmos” in every ritual act, at varying spatial scales. The concept, described as a “frame” by Mary Douglas (1966:63-64), divides reality, both temporally and spatially, between that which is within the frame and that which is outside of it. Hanks (1984:316) recognized that the directional principle was the cognitive spatial model at the heart of all ceremonies performed by shamans and noted that the quincunx model is the basic spatial model used in contemporary Maya ritual (Hanks 1990:299-301).

Maya people today differentiate between inhabited and uninhabited lands, with guardian deities inhabiting cultivated space (Hanks 1980:306). The forest or k'aal is considered to be dangerous and unpredictable because it is "outside the realms of the guardian spirits posted at the cardinal directions and marked perimeter of all social defined spaces" (1990:306). Spaces that lack perimeters have no unity and are therefore "potentially dangerous" (1990:349). In ceremony, circumambulatory rites that create a ritually bounded space for the
entire community are reported by Barbara Tedlock (1992:82) at Los Cipréses in highland Guatemala where the priest-shaman makes a four-part pilgrimage to the mountains surrounding the town to "stabilize" the community; by Redfield and Villa Rejas (1962:176) in the village of Chau Koon in the Ijo, a curing ceremony in which the participants traverse a ritual circuit to each of the four entrances of the village; and by John Scoa (1985:343, 344, 451, 452) in the town of Yalcope in the hab chak, a nighttime ceremony to propitiate the cave-dwelling deity Yum Ballam, who protects the populace from evil winds that cause disease. On a smaller scale, in rites that employ an altar such as the chau chak or "bring rain" ceremony, through shamanic discourse, guardian deities are placed and secured in each of the cardinal directions, "binding" the space and producing a safe enclosure that protects the perimeter from wayward, evil, or erranting spirits (Hanks 1990:336-38).

Boundaries are not only protective, they also served to define usufruct rights granted by their protector deities. For instance, Ewen Vogt (1969:375-91) reported that at Zinacantan in highland Chiapas, the sacred world is characterized by a strong emphasis on mountains, caves, cenotes, and sinkholes. Mountains are considered to be homes of ancestral deities, and caves are the places where one communicates with deities of the earth. These features were visited by cargo holders during ritual circuits that circumscribe and boundary the community, functioning as boundary maintenance mechanisms within the social system. Importantly, the circuit symbolically designates property rights and marks crucial space.

Ancient Maya politics may have operated similarly, as is evident from ethnohistoric records. Ethnohistorian Nancy Fardis (1984:129, 148) noted that in Yucatan at the time of contact, the provinces were not just random collections of towns; they all possessed internal ties and well-recognized boundaries. Boundaries were vigilously defended, resulting in armed clashes that were eventually replaced by the Spaniards with courtroom battles. Land titles were guarded assiduously by the Maya elites, who were the repositories of collective memories, oral traditions, and historical use-rights. Land was held corporately by communities, and usufruct rights for milpas were adjudicated by alteciles. Boundaries were not delineated in a Western sense of ownership, but rather were based on use-rights of natural features. Problems arising over boundary issues usually involved the clearing of milpas on the boundary or within the territory of another community. While boundaries appeared vague to the Spaniards, they were not to the Maya, for whom documents and discussions about land tended to emphasize particular landscape features and who had the rights of use. The Maya knew the location of "every small savanna, every rock outcrop, ceiba tree, and cenote (sinkhole) in the district, and each little section of bush had its own name" (Fardis 1984:274). The earliest land deeds were brief documents that would mention a territory or chalan (translated as "place" or "site") deriving its name from a waterhole or cenote with which it was associated. No indications were given as to size and no detailed property boundaries were mentioned. Early in the period the Spaniards and Maya shared the use of land, but conflicts began to develop over the destruction of crops with the incursion of cattle into Maya milpas. As more Spanish immigrants arrived, land became more valuable and land-use rights gave way to ownership in the Western sense. Spaniards were intent on fixing the boundaries of their lands and asserting exclusive rights to them.

In his work on early Spanish land titles housed in the National Archives in Mexico City dating from 1520 to 1550, Angel Garcia-Zambrano (1994) clarifies how indigenous boundaries were established and maintained by ritual action. He began by describing the criteria used by immigrants in deciding where to settle. The ideal location was based on cosmological principles that mirrored the quinqueans or model of the cosmos, creating a primordial landscape where the earth's fundamental elements interacted. The most sought-after landscape consisted of a valley surrounded by four mountains, one for each cardinal direction, irrigated by waterholes, rivers, lakes, and/or lagoons. The horseshoe-shaped valley was called a rinconada or axcanal (water-corner) and marked the edges between the human and natural worlds. A fifth mountain representing the center of the model protended in the middle of the valley. This central mountain ideally contained caves and springs. Within the central mountain a natural cave containing water provided the water used for community rituals. Once consecrated by the leader, the cave became the heart of the new town, providing "the cosmographic referents that legitimized the settlers' rights for occupying that space and for the ruler's authority over that site" (1994:218). It then became the ruler's duty to guard and keep the territory. The special function of caves in the ideal cosmological landscape helps to explain why cave symbols are often incorporated into Classic period toponyms or politically charged emblem glyphs of Maya sites (Stuart 1999; Vogt and Stuart 2005).

Clearly not every landscape was ideal, so in practice the landscape could be modified to resemble the model more closely. For instance, pyramids could substitute as mountains. If there was no nearby cave, a clay olla could be buried in the town plaza to symbolize it. Additionally, natural caves could be modified to enhance their resemblance to the group's mythological cave of origin, such as the seven-lobed Chichemontoc known from Aztec sources. This has been demonstrated archaeologically at the Maya site of Uxmal, where a multi-lobed, man-made cave rises beneath the site core (Binedy and Voss 1992), and also in central Mexico at Acatzingo Viejo, where seven small, man-made caves were carved into a hillside, arguably representing Chicomontoc (Aguilar et al. 2005).

Furthermore, caves and wells were often located on the community's peripheral boundaries at the corners of the north-south axis of the quincuors. Garcia-Zambrano (1994:223-27) suggests that this configuration related the north-south axis to water and the underworld, whereas the east-west axis symbolized the sun's path and the celestial realm. He offers two examples, one from the town of San Mateo Itzahuacan (Estado de Mexico) dating to 1530 and one from Santa Cruz Xayakukal in Yucatan dating to 1540. In both instances cenotes and springs marked the north-south axis and in the southwest corner of each community was a cave. The documents from Xayakukal clearly state that the cave contained water, whereas at Itzahuacan Garcia-Zambrano is unsure but thinks it may have, based on toponyms from surrounding towns containing the suffix apo, meaning "near the water."
Ethnographic examples and historical reports suggest a number of criteria that could be used to explore community boundaries in the archaeological record by examining natural features that may be "foundational." In the case of caves, one might expect to locate some very specific features. First, a foundational site should show evidence of ritual use. Its earliest usage should be coeval with or predates the site's earliest deposits or possibly date to a later expansion, assuming that a political reorganization was initiated either by an incoming group (think K'mich Yax K'uk Mo' at Copan) or a local political faction. We also expect the foundational cave to be centrally located (within the site core) or, as in the cases of Ixilhuacan and Yaxkukul, found in a peripheral area to the south of the core. Finally, we might expect to find water or a water feature within the cave, though it is unclear as to whether the Ixilhuacan site actually contained water.

**SETTLEMENT AND CHRONOLOGY AT UXBENKÁ**

Uxbenká is a monument-bearing polity located at the base of the Maya Mountains along the eastern periphery of the Maya lowlands in southern Belize currently under investigation by the Uxbenká Archaeological Project (UAP), directed by Keith Prufer (Figure 1). The site features monumental architecture, 22 carved stelae, and 41 plain monuments (Figure 2). Based on both Early Classic artistic styles and epigraphy (Prufer 2005a, 2005b; Wasley 2003:5), and bolstered by extensive radiocarbon dating (Culleton et al. 2012), it has proven to be one of the earliest major centers in southern Belize. A rigorous program of AMS radiocarbon assays suggests that Uxbenká was occupied by at least 60 in and perhaps earlier, and that a significant modification to the site occurred after the first monumental architecture was constructed prior to 300. At this time, the location of the original agricultural village (Group A) was leveled and reorganized to form a public monument garden and the center of political authority throughout much of the Classic period (ca 400–800), beginning the community's evolution from a corporate to a network style of governance (Prufer et al. 2011). AMS dates reported in this paper were prepared at the University of Oregon Archaeometry Facility and the University of California Irvine's Keck Carbon Cycle AMS Facility (KCCAMS) (for details see Culleton et al. 2012). All results are reported (Figure 3) as conventional radiocarbon ages corrected for isotopic fractionation with measured δ¹³C values according to the conventions of Stuiver and Polach (1977). Calibrations were made with Oxcal 3.61 (Bronk Ramsey 2001) using the IntCal09 curve (Reimer et al 2009).

The Group A Plaza or "Stela Plaza" is located on a hilltop at the site's highest point (see Figure 2). Excavations conducted in the plaza suggest that when initially settled, Uxbenká was a small agricultural village with residential structures constructed of mud and dirt and capped with thin planter floors. These buildings would have been situated around the perimeter of the hilltop and inside what was eventually modified to become the Stela Plaza. Excavations using cut stone blocks began later (Figure 3). Excavations within structures in Group A produced a number of pre–AD 250 dates, but the earliest stone structures are estimated to date to between cal AD 60 and 220 (Culleton et al 2012). Charcoal collected from the base of a stone wall in the center of the plaza dated to between cal AD 136 and 324 (UCIAMS 33400). The base of Structure A6 dated to between cal AD 222 and 381 (UCIAMS 46297), Structure A1 produced basal dates between cal AD 120 and 336 (UCIAMS 56360, 56359), and Structure A4 produced basal dates between cal AD 255 and 425 (UCIAMS 42806, 46299). The context for the date from the base of Structure A1—a burned surface beneath the structure—is particularly compelling because it may represent the clearing of the surface or a ritual event performed in preparation for constructing the building. We have suggested elsewhere (Prufer et al. 2011) that the inception of the building program represents a new, more complex social hierarchy and political transition.

**KAYUKO NAJ TUNICH**

Kayuko Naj Tunich is unusual for a number of reasons, the first being that access to this site is extremely difficult. It is a small dry cave situated within a sheer limestone cliff face more than 200 m above the valley floor, just 2.3 km due south
Figure 2. Map of Group A (Stela) Plaza, location of the original settled village and ancestral monuments during the Classic period (courtesy Uxbenká Archaeological Project).

Figure 3. Comparison of AMS radiocarbon dates from the Uxbenká site core and Kayanuk Nah Tunich Cave.

Dates shown are 2-sigma calibrated ranges (95.4% probability) with discontinuous ranges bracketed. Modified from a plot produced in Oxcal 3.01 (Bronk Ramsey 2005). Some of the dates shown here are not discussed in the text.
of the Stela Plaza (Figure 4). The white cliff face containing the cave opening is a known geographic marker for local people, who refer to the karst tower as Suk Witz in Mopan, or “White Mountain or Hill.” It is easily viewed from the plaza and the plaza from the cave mouth (Figure 5). Despite its precarious location, the cave has undergone extensive architectural modification. These modifications, including infilling of the cave floor, construction of walls and steps, and plastering of the entire construction, represent a tremendous amount of labor, which is somewhat unusual for caves in general. Though caves often contain small constructions, few caves contain massive building projects.

According to locals, the steep free-climb to the cave mouth discouraged modern visitors until approximately five years ago, when the cave was heavily looted. Looters destroyed most of the architecture and exposed the floor fill (Figure 6). Artifacts, rocks, and plaster, thrown out the cave entrance, landed on the steep slope below. During salvage operations conducted by the Uxchenka Cave Project (UCP) in the summer of 2007, we were able to virtually reconstruct the site and, owing to the excellent state of preservation in the dry cave, were able to collect a number of radiocarbon samples of construction wood and charcoal for dating.

Figure 4. Map Illustrating location of Kayuko Naj Tunich to Uxchenka site core.
Insert photo of cave entrance in karst tower or Suk Tunich (photo by Holley Moyes, Uxchenka Cave Project).
To ensure the safety of the crew and enable us to carry equipment back and forth, we negotiated the cliff face via a system of ropes and handmade ladders constructed by Maya community members. Shards lined the approach to the cave, and Alcove 1, located west of the entrance, contained a fragment of a copal cake dated to between cal AD 537 and 602 (UCIEAMS 42804), the most recent date for the cave complex, which was likely deposited well after the cave’s primary use. The ladder system led to the cave mouth where a course of ancient, relatively intact steps led up a 48° rise to Chamber 1. The stairway was constructed of medium-size, unmodified tubular blocks from the Rio Blanco, located in the valleyKey In The Diagram:
- Walls
- Projected Walls
- Person
- Tabular Stone
- Limestone Boulders
- Pot
- Brecia
- Spatulate
- Quartz
- Remnant Plaster
- Remnant Mortar
- Plaster Floor
- Wooden Rafters

3 m in diameter with a variable ceiling height of 0.5 to 1.5 m. A north-facing "window" looks out onto the valley below and another overlooks the stairway; at one time both had been walled up with tabular stones and mortar to create a private area or dark zone. Although these walls had been almost completely destroyed, fingermarks could still be seen in the remnant mortar. The ceiling was covered with spars and the white cortex had been chipped away to reveal a yellowish crystalline structure beneath, creating a beautiful glistening crystal dome. This room had been so heavily looted that no datable material could be recovered.

The Chamber 1 floor had been leveled off with medium-size to large limestone boulders and tabular river stones. The stone fill was overlaid by cobbles and topped with a layer of plaster 10 cm thick. Wood beams and stone retaining walls sloped up the fill, and a fragment of a wood beam (unburned) from the base dated to between cal AD 240 and 339 (UCIEAMS 42799). One of the earliest samples collected from the site, its context as a retaining feature suggests that the site was constructed at this time.

Figure 5. Profile map of Kayuko Naj Tunich (courtesy Uxbenka Cave Project).
Chamber 1 was partitioned into two or possibly three rooms (Figure 8). Each had plaster floors, and in Room 2 the walls were plastered as well. Eight vertical posts set in the floor adjacent to the cave walls corresponded to in situ stone alignments, suggesting that they were part of the wall partitions. The tallest post was 2.2 m high, and the posts measured between 8 and 10 cm in width. In three instances plaster abutted the posts and still adheres to the cave wall. Remnant wood was found at the bases of five of the posts. Three posts were radiocarbon dated. Post 5 was burned and appeared to have fallen from its plaster post mold onto the floor. It dated to between cal AD 257 and 392 (UCIAMS 42803). Posts 1 and 8 were located directly across the cave from each other, suggesting that they were a “pair.” However, Post 1 dated to between cal AD 427 and 535 (UCIAMS 42801) and Post 8 to between cal AD 341 and 461 (UCIAMS 42800). There is no overlap in the radiocarbon ranges of the posts, and because they have such small diameters it is unlikely that the dates represent an “old wood” problem. We have therefore concluded that they were part of continual modification and maintenance of the site.

Structure 1 was a bench-type feature at the southern terminus of Chamber 1, at the highest and most remote area relative to the entrance of the chamber. The cave walls formed three sides of the roughly rectangular structure, and 14 courses of stone blocks were stacked in front to create the fourth wall. The structure measured 1.3–2 m along its north-south axis and spanned the width of the cave, 2.23 m on its east-west axis. The structure was plastered on top and on the exterior of the stone wall, but no plaster was present inside. There was no visible evidence of a beam supporting the top, so the structure may have been completely filled at one time. Although the structure initially appeared tomlike, the absence of human bone—even in such a looted context—suggests that it was not. Rather, the structure served as a focal point in the shrine and was more likely to have functioned as an altar.

A wooden canoe-like object was found leaning against the wall next to Structure 1. According to local informants it was originally placed on top of the structure. This was evident from a dark stain in the shape of the object on the surface of the remnant plaster, which was coated with wood dust and small wood fragments. The object resembles a small canoe in that it was hollowed out from a single piece of hardwood. It measures 1.5 m in length, 40 cm in width, and was 15 cm thick (Figure 9) and fit perfectly on the top of the bench, suggesting that it was constructed specifically for the space as altar furniture. This supposition is bolstered by the fact that the outside edge of the wood, which would be the outer tree ring suggesting the date at which the tree was harvested, returned a radiocarbon date range of between cal AD 231 and 382 (UCIAMS 46295), contemporaneous with the first construction of the shrine. Therefore we argue the object is an altar piece that was integrated both symbolically and functionally into the shrine’s earliest design.

Although local people described the object as a canoe, it does not correspond well to Western models of a boat or to modern Maya examples of dugout canoes. The altar piece is flat-bottomed, shallow, and smaller than most canoes. The object corresponds in size and shape more readily to a hene or washbasin. The
confusion regarding the term can be explained by consulting the *Diccionario
mayo Cordemex* (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980), which includes among the list of
Maya cognates of the Spanish word *bote* the word *chum che*, a large basin used
for washing or, secondarily, a handmade wooden canoe used for crossing a river.

The example shown in Figure 9 (below) belongs to María García of the San
Antonio Village Maya community. This basin has been in her family for three
generations. She reports that these objects often begin as small canoes for short
river crossings or as children’s canoes. When they wear out, start to leak, or are
outgrown, they are presented to women, who use them for bathing children,
making *halche*, or doing other household chores. Ethnographically, we find that
similar objects are used in ritual contexts. Raphael Girard (1995) reported that
among the Chortí, a wooden basin filled with water referred to as a “canoe” in
placed beneath altars during cosmological renewal rites.

The Kayuko altar piece may have been similarly employed. There are no
visible residues to suggest that the vessel was a receptacle for offerings. If food
offerings were placed inside, one might expect some residue to be evident owing
to the excellent preservation of other organic material at the site. Although further
analyses are warranted, we tentatively suggest that the altar piece may have held
water and that this could easily have represented the interior water source so often
associated with ritual cave sites.

**DISCUSSION**

When contextualized within the Maya ideological framework, the settlement
pattern, cave contents, and radiocarbon dates indicate that Kayuko Naj Tunich
was a foundational shrine constructed by the rising elite class of Uxbenká. First,
the proximity to the site core and clear sight lines created a natural connection
between the cave and the Stela Plaza. Not only was there a distinct sight line, but
the cave is located due south of the site core, a pattern similar to that found in
ethnographic settlements and recognized by García-Zambrano (1994) as salient
cosmological underworld symbolism in landscape use.

AMS radiocarbon dates from Kayuko Naj Tunich Cave and the site core
suggest the construction of the shrine was contemporaneous not with the earliest
known settlements at Uxbenká, but with the social and political reorganization
that accompanied the building of the first stone architecture in what was to become
the Stela Plaza (Culleton et al. 2012). The most secure early date from the cave
derives from the wooden retaining beam found in situ at the base of the floor fill
(cal AD 240–339, UCIAMS 42599). It is supported by two additional dates, the
outer edge of the wooden altar piece (cal AD 231–382, UCIAMS 46295) and the
charcoal found beneath the burned crystals on the step (cal AD 230–335, UCIAMS
42802). These dates correlate nicely with dates from samples collected directly
beneath structures in the Stela Plaza that fall between the first and fifth centuries
AD. The wall in the center of the plaza may have been built slightly prior to the
three buildings (Structures A1, A4, and A6), which were most likely constructed
between cal AD 255 and 402 (UCIAMS 42806, 46299, 42805, 42807, 46297).
CONCLUSIONS

Based on ethnohistoric documentation, Mesoamerican settlement choices focus on the importance of natural features in the establishment of geopolitical landscapes. Features such as trees, rocks, springs, waterholes, and caves not only help to define geographic boundaries but are also the spiritual manifestaions of a sacred and living landscape, thus defining spiritual boundaries as well. Ideas of unassignable rights are inherent in Mesoamerican religious beliefs; land cannot be "owned" by people but could be used by humans only by the good graces of the local deities dwelling on or within the earth. Without the cooperation of the earth spirits, human enterprise is doomed to failure. In such a system, natural features become points of contact between people and spirits, who must be honored and gifted. Caves, as natural entrances into the earth, were a salient ritual context because of their association with mountain spirits, the earth, and underworld deities. Charismatic leaders developed these ties with the indwelling spirits early on and were thereby tied to the land they governed. This not only enhanced their prestige but was also integral to the acquisition of power within the prevailing ideological system. It is with this in mind that we have approached our work at Uxbenká.

We have argued that Kayukó Naj Tunich is a "foundational" shrine for the Uxbenká polity based on the geographic position of the cave in relation to the site core, the presence of monumental architecture that required organized labor, and the coeval construction of the cave shrine with the building of the first stone architecture at the site core. Although an indigenous population lived in and around the site core prior to the erection of the shrine, the cave exhibited no use prior to the reorganization of the site, coeval with the construction of the first monumental architecture. This may have implications for ethnicity and may even suggest that the ruling elite may have come from elsewhere, along with their own maínos, craftsmen, and ideologies. It also suggests that cave rites and ceremonies were preemptive acts in the establishment of political hierarchies and in the formation of the Uxbenká polity as a geopolitical entity.

The political nature of caves is slowly coming into focus and the evidence is accumulating to suggest that caves were not only sacred spaces 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 events occurring at the cave to a broader context. It is only through this kind of research that cave archaeologists can hope to understand the function and meaning of archaeological caves, and that those who are investigating surface sites can obtain a complete picture of both the ritual and political life of the communities they study.

NOTE

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THE HARD WORK OF SMALL TALK IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

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In this article we explore the importance of small talk in the context of ethnographic fieldwork. Our examples derive from more than thirty years of research experience in Spain, Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, and The Netherlands. We argue that small talk is a central, yet taken-for-granted, ingredient of ethnographic fieldwork. We claim that this skill should be reflected upon and given a more consistent role in supplementing and correcting data obtained by other techniques. It is in our conviction that it can and should be taught in courses on research methods and techniques.

Recent books on ethnography pay attention to the wealth of fieldwork practices past and present—among many other features, to edginess, ambiguity, agency, risk, adventure, boredom, friendship, sexuality, distance and involvement, mid-career field site shifts, and suspense (Boronska and Hammersild 2009; Driessen 2013; Fashion and Macean 2009; Gotlieb 2012; Robben and Shaka 2007). Yet, they rarely take into systematic account what we call the hard work of small talk, which we consider to be the hidden core as well as the engine of ethnographic research, whether “at home” or “abroad.”

We argue on the basis of our own field experiences and those of many colleagues with whom we have talked over the years, often on the margins of conferences and meetings, that the art of making small talk, in daily life a basic social skill, is an important if not central ingredient of working in the field. It belongs to the systematic “hanging around” which still is the core of fieldwork in spite of recent changes in fieldwork practices (Goetz 1998). Making small talk is in our view and experience far more important in terms of the production of field notes than doing interviews, although there is a thin and fluid boundary between open and informal interviews and small talk.

In this article we explore what the hard work of making small talk actually means in the context of doing ethnographic fieldwork. The examples we evoke cover more than thirty years of our research experience in different places, but mainly in Spain, Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, and The Netherlands. We argue that it can be taught in tandem with other techniques, such as interviews, focus group


