Report of the 2006 Field Season in the Toledo District, Belize, Central America

Edited by Keith M. Prufer

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Chapter 7: Results of the 2006 Cave Reconnaissance in the Rio Blanco Valley Karst "Rock Patch"

By Keith M. Prufer, Holley Moyes, Bethany J. Myers, and Mark Aldenderfer

Archaeological reconnaissance was conducted during the 2006 field season resulted in the identification of 5 new caves and revisiting of 1 cave previously noted by the UAP. Here, we describe those caves and offer preliminary data on two of the most important.

The Uxbenká Cave Project, a component of the Uxbenká Archaeological Project, initiated a pilot survey of caves in areas surrounding Uxbenká during May and June, 2006. The purpose of this study was to determine the feasibility of conducting a longer term study of prehistoric use of caves in the area in and around Uxbenká. The results of this preliminary field study have formed the basis for grant applications to expand our archaeological research at Uxbenká to include a cave/landscape component in 2007 and beyond.

During this short pilot study caves were examined in two areas. The first is the karst hills to the south of Uxbenká and the modern community Santa Cruz, locally referred to as "rock patch" (Figure 7.1). In this area we conducted a pedestrian survey in selected areas adjacent to and above the Rio Blanco valley. Much of this preliminary survey was guided by information provided by local informants from Santa Cruz. The second location is a small (<1m diameter) cave opening noted but not mapped by the UAP in 2005. This cave opening is located approximately 1 km north of the site core at the base of a low hill atop which are located several small residential structures.

Part of this initial project involved sampling natural cave formations for dating, compositional analyses, and oxygen isotope studies related to paleoclimatic reconstruction, in collaboration with the University of Oregon. This study was conducted at a cave named Yok’ Balum. Results of the climate study are reported in Chapter 8 and a description of archaeological contexts from the cave are presented here.

Caves were primarily identified and visited as part of a pedestrian survey. The single exception is an already identified opening located north of the Uxbenká site core and indicated on Figure 7.1. During the survey several hillsides, cliff faces, and valley floors were inspected for cave openings. While we encountered several interesting caves sites, we suspect, based on examination of topographic maps, descriptions by local informants, and the results of previously published geological and archaeological studies, that there are numerous additional caves within the survey area.

The Uxbenká Cave Project investigated six caves in its two-week 2006 field season. Of these five were found within the karstic ridge that runs on an east/west axis approximately 2km south of the site core (Figure 2). The data presented here is strictly descriptive. Drawings, plans, and other maps are still in production, and more data are required from these caves in order to make any functional or chronological determinations.
Figure 71. Cave sites in the 2007 Uxbenká Cave Project survey area.

Kayuko Naj Tunich (Canoe Cave)
Kayuko Naj Tunich was the most heavily utilized cave encountered. The cave's entrance is located on a sheer karst face 352km above sea level. It is due south of the Uxbenká site core on the north side of the karst ridge 2.3km from the Stela Plaza. Its entrance can be seen from the site and the Stela Plaza is visible from the mouth of the cave (Figure 3).

Initial reconnaissance of the site occurred in June. Locals reported that there was a canoe inside the cave. The site is difficult to access and currently can only be reached via a 60m climb by rope. Upon entry we confirmed the presence of the canoe and also found that the cave contained a large masonry tomb structure, similar to those reported at Naj Tunich cave in Guatemala. To our disappointment we also found the cave had been badly looted. According to our local guides, the looting occurred within the last five years. Those who had previously visited the site reported that the canoe once sat on top
of the crypt. They also stated that it had contained a brown mud-like substance, possibly cacao.

Looting of the site involved smashing of the masonry tomb and breaking the canoe. Despite this vandalism, the canoe remains partially intact (Figure 4). We opted to leave the canoe in its current position because the cave provided a dry and stable environment and because the site is very difficult to access. Despite the site’s condition the project is confident that with careful excavation we will be able to recover valuable archaeological data including organic and human remains.

Kayuko measures approximately 24m in depth and 4m in maximum width. From the top climb, the cave entrance is a constricted up-sloping tunnel accessed via a sandstone block stairway. The tomb structure is constructed of limestone block, mortared in place, and coated with white lime. Handprints are visible in the mortar. Sections of the natural cave walls, formed from travertine or flowstone, have been chipped to remove the rough limestone cortex revealing the crystalline interior and giving the site the appearance of a crystal room.

Site: Yok’ Balum (Jaguar Paw Cave)
Yok’ Balum consists of a both a rockshelter and deep cave. The rockshelter exhibits Maya usage but the cave does not. The shelter is located north of the entrance to the deep cave. It has a large southwest facing entrance that measures approximately 20m across and is approximately 14m deep from the drip line. There are at least two rock alignments in the shelter, one of which borders part the east wall blocking a niche. Jute shell was found on the surface adjacent to the alignment.

A large stalactite that resembles a foot hangs from the ceiling near the front of the shelter, hence the name “Jaguar Paw” or in Mopan Maya Yok’ Balum. There is a large stalagmitic formation beneath the feature which measures 5m x 2m. A few potsherds and jute are located on the ground on the southeast side of the stalagmite. Jar sherds were also found stashed on a shelf in the ceiling probably having been placed there recently.

The cave system is deep and although we traveled for approximately an hour, we never found the end. Reports from locals suggest that there is another entrance on the north side of the mountain which contains pottery.

Speleothem samples were collected from the cave. At the entrance stalactite (#SB004) that exhibited prior breakage was harvested from the twilight zone. The dark zone was entered via a 3m crawl and an unusual cave pearl was collected from this area (#SB003). It looks amazingly like a popcorn ball. Smoother cave pearls were also collected in the crawl space (#SB001). A piece of stalactite from the entrance chamber that was broken during the paleoclimate study was collected as well (#SB004).

Site: Rok’Eb Ha (Cenote Water)
This cave is a large southwest-facing cave located on the Rio Blanco River. It is located in the cleft in the mountains to the south of Uxbenkà. The river runs beneath the cave 40-
60 meters below an interior cliff. It re-emerges at Hokeb Ha Cave at the beginning of Blue Creek. Keith Pruffer has canoed the entire passage which took 19 hours. To the east of the entrance is a huge cenote-like pool. On the bank of the pool is a shell mound of jute that appears to be natural.

The site has a huge dramatic entrance with stalactites resembling teeth hanging from the cave mouth. The cave is entered via a large area of breakdown. Some sherds and jute are present among the boulders, but the cave has clearly been heavily looted. An inspection of the sidewalls of the looters pits suggests that there is no cultural material in the subsurface deposit in this area due to the lack of charcoal.

This cave is prone to flash flooding as evidenced by the logs lodged in the ceiling. Sticks, leaves, and twigs are located throughout the system. A small dark zone that extends approximately 100 meters is present on the east side of the site. An alcove entered via a crawl space on the northeast wall of the cave contains pottery. A number of sherds were probably recently placed on a shelf. The floor of the area consists of a yellow silty loam matrix. No charcoal was noted in the area and an informal subsurface trowel test suggested that there is no subsurface deposit. The presence of sticks and leaves in the back of the alcove suggest that the deposits were washed in.

Due to the hydrology, heavy looting, and lack of evidence for good stratigraphy, the cave is not a good candidate for excavation. Two stalactites were collected from the dark zone area along the northeast wall (#SB006) and one was harvested from the northwest area near the cliff that drops to the river (#SB005).

**Site: Chi sa li tzuul (Through the Mountain)**
Upon leaving Rok’Eb Ha we hiked to the karst face that can be seen from Uxbenká above the mountain cleft. We took a short cut via a tunnel running through the mountain. Most of the tunnel could be traversed standing though some areas had a low ceiling height that required short crawls. The tunnel was well decorated but contained no obvious cultural material. Two speleothems were collected #SB008 and #SB0009.

**Site: K’op’op’o (Last Frog Cave)**
This was the third cave visited on 6-3-06. It was located on the westernmost cliff face to the west side of the V-shaped cleft. The face can be viewed from Uxbenká. We reached the base of the cliff and made an almost vertical climb to a ledge. Locals had conveniently placed a rope in the uppermost part of the climb to facilitate access.

The shelf measured approximately 5m x 3m and faced due north. An area of breakdown, approximately 2m high, located on the west side of the shelf, leads to an entrance crawl. Upon entry the interior dropped approximately 2m into a passage that measured approximately 6m in length, with a maximum width of 2m and ceiling height of 3-4m. The passage ran roughly north/south. The terminus was the only dark zone area. At the terminus of the passage was a small stack of pottery place on top of a shelf on the north side of the passage. The sherd stack consisted of about 20 sherds and although I did not
further investigate the stack, they appeared to be primarily jar sherds. A stalactite was harvested from the area near the terminus (#SB007).
The cave was called Last Frog because a small frog was crouched in a niche near the terminus of the passage. The night before our trip Don Lewis was lamenting the extinction of the area's frogs.

Site: Zotz Cave (Bat)
Zotz cave was so named because of the presence of large numbers of bats throughout the system and the site is covered in fresh guano. The cave is located approximately 1km from the Uxbenká site core and the hill in which it sits can be seen from the site. The cave runs beneath a plazuela group that sits on top of the hill. The cave is located near Florencio Coi's milpa in wamil.

The cave opening is small, 2-3m across, and descends approximately 3m into a chamber that opens up onto the cave passage. The headroom in the passage ranges from approximately 3m to 50cm crawl spaces. It took about 1hr to traverse the passage and we estimate that is about 200m in length. The width of the passage is no more than 2-3m and both side walls are lined with mudstone. A stream begins about half way through the passage which creates gour pools and rimstone dams. These were filled with water on the day we were there. It had been raining heavily so this was no surprise. The cave terminates in a 3m drop that leads to a sump.

The cave has been flooded repeatedly in antiquity. We suspect that when the sump in the rear of the cave floods, it may produce enough water to fill the entrance chamber. Therefore, the entrance may form a pool under these circumstances. There are a number of sherds in the mud matrix of the floor with a higher density in the entrance area and fewer toward the back. A informal surface collection included Early Classic, Late Preclassic, and Late Classic examples. The Late Preclassic bowl fragment could be earlier but I am unfamiliar with the local ceramic sequence.