2  WHO IS LAS CUEVAS?

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The Late Classic site of Las Cuevas is located in the Chiquibul, just 14km from the site core of Caracol. Initial survey and excavations by the Las Cuevas Archaeological Reconnaissance project targeted the culture history of the site to determine the basic characteristics of the polity. Despite the expansion and regional dominance of Caracol in the Late Classic, inter-site comparison reveals a distinct identity for Las Cuevas from that of its larger neighbor. Excavations from the first three years of the project are discussed to characterize identity markers within the broader regional landscape.

Introduction

With a neighbour as large, wealthy, and politically active as Caracol, one would be forgiven for assuming that the small site of Las Cuevas was directly controlled by the nearby polity. However, three years of research by the Las Cuevas Archaeological Reconnaissance (LCAR) project (2011-2013) paints a different picture. Excavations targeting the site’s culture history and ritual practices reveal a distinct identity from that of Caracol and other polities in the region, suggesting a high level of independence for the community. This paper focuses on the surface excavations of the LCAR project to characterize Las Cuevas and offer inter-site comparisons.

Archaeology as a discipline is forever evolving and changing as new ideas and interpretations are proposed and critiqued, and technological innovation opens new avenues of questioning. At the broadest theoretical level the history of archaeological thought has been defined by phases of antiquarianism, culture-history, processual archaeology, and post processual archaeology, with each new paradigm seeking to offer greater interpretive power to the discipline (Trigger 2006). Although the theoretical and methodological developments are integral to the advancement of the discipline, the basis of all modern archaeology will always be rooted in culture-history; the what’s, where’s and when’s of the archaeological record. What is present? Where these phenomena and materials occur? When were they used? These base data provide the platform to ask the “why” questions about past human behavior.

At the core of culture historical archaeology is the identification and classification of the remains of the past and the definition of cultural groupings. As more sites are characterized, a broader dataset is constructed that allows the comparison of material remains across the landscape, determining similarities and differences amongst locations and defining the geographic extent of certain traditions (used to great effect by the genre defining scholars V. Gordon Childe in Europe, and Alfred Kidder in the USA). These basic characterizations have formed the backbone of discussions of inter-site relationships and processes of exchange. In the Maya area, two of the most notable examples of the utility of culture-historical data are in ceramic and architectural analysis. The development of type-variety ceramic analysis, and in particular the concept of ceramic sphere, is based in the identification of inter-site relationships as evidenced by the distribution of specific ceramic traits (Gifford 1976). These distribution patterns have then been used to suggest various socio-political phenomena, such as political alliances, trade routes, and technological innovation. Likewise, the presence of distinct architectural forms, for example the Teotihuacan style talud-tablero, has been used as evidence of the relationships between polities (see Braswell 2004 for discussion on the relationship amongst the Maya and Teotihuacan).

Questions of culture history were the focus for the excavation strategy at Las Cuevas in the initial years of the LCAR project as we sought to form a base knowledge of the site, determining what was present and when the site was occupied (Kosakowsky et al. 2013; Moyes et al. 2012). These characterizations also allowed comparison within the broader region, and it is these descriptions and inter-site comparisons that are the basis of this paper.

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The Site and Setting

Las Cuevas is located in the hills of the Chiquibul National Forest in southern Cayo District (Moyes et al. 2012; Figure 1). The site is reached via a spur off the Caracol road, with the site cores of the two centers only 14km apart. The distance between the two communities is drastically reduced when you take into account the surrounding settlement associated with each site. Sixteen structures have been identified in the site core across the two plazas (Figure 2). The site core is somewhat typical with a main plaza dominated by an east/west pyramid complex and north/south range structures. A secondary structure (Structure 2) in the northeast corner is linked to the northern structure by a one course high platform. A second plaza, to the southeast of Plaza A, takes a more unusual form. The western end is bounded by the ballcourt with an inset staircase on the backside of the eastern ballcourt structure (Structure 6), facing into the plaza. The eastern end of the plaza is bounded by a pyramidal structure. The north and south, are formed by a series of low linear platforms, the northern set ringing the top edge of a sinkhole that leads into a large cave that runs directly under the site core. The opening to the cave system is below the eastern structure of Plaza A, in an ideal vertical arrangement of the sacred cosmological landscape, stretching from the underworld to the heavens.

The entrance chamber to the cave itself is cathedral like, and incorporates extensive architectural modifications, including stairs, walls, and platforms. A spring in the entrance chamber provides a constant water supply as well as being a focal point within the cave (See Moyes 2012). A handful of uncarved possible monuments are present at Las Cuevas, including two potential altars in Plaza A and two possible stelae in front of the inset staircase of Structure 6 in Plaza B. Limited settlement survey has identified a range in domestic architectural size and complexity, including an elite plazuela group on a platform behind the western structure of Plaza A. Recently obtained LiDAR data will guide future settlement research.

Archaeological History

Prior to the LCAR project, archaeological research at Las Cuevas was limited to a single short season in 1957 conducted by Adrian Digby of the British Museum, with the then Archaeological Commissioner for Belize, A.H. Anderson. During the season Digby excavated in the cave and Anderson surveyed and mapped the surface site core, excavating a single trench Structure 2. Digby presented his initial findings at the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1958, and published a journalistic article in The Illustrated London News (Digby 1958). The early research notes a general similarity to other Maya sites, but highlights the presence of the unusual complex of low linear structures and the relationship between the surface architecture and the cave below.

The Wider Region

Caracol dominates the region with a sprawling settlement that housed a large population (Chase and Chase 1998). The stratified society supported a monumental architectural program including the construction of large temples and palaces, the construction and maintenance of reservoirs, agricultural terraces, and causeways, and the use of skilled
 artisans to decorate architectural friezes and inscribe stelae and altars (Chase and Chase 1998, 2001; Healy et al. 1983). One site of note is the large cave, Naj Tunich, across the modern international border into Guatemala. Of particular importance is the presence of a tomb and wall paintings, including a glyphic text that directly refers to Caracol, strongly suggesting the use of the cave by the Caracol elites (Stone 1995; Colas 1998). Beyond the extensive research at Caracol, the broader region has been subjected to limited archaeological investigation. Notable exceptions come from the research projects conducted by Dr. John Morris and Dr. Jaime Awe of the Belize Institute of Archaeology. Awe (1985) excavated at Caledonia, and Morris (2004a, 2004b) conducted excavations at the site of Mountain Cow, 12km northeast of Caracol, finding clear links to the larger polity including a causeway connecting it to Caracol’s site core and a stela bearing the Caracol emblem glyph.

Monkey Tail, a similar sized settlement to Las Cuevas, is located 3km to the east of Las Cuevas towards the Monkey Tail branch of the Raspaculo River. Brian Woodye undertook preliminary excavations at the site and the LCAR, with the assistance of Josue Ramos of the Belize Institute of Archaeology, surveyed the site in 2012 (See Ramos 2012). The site survey illustrated similarity to Las Cuevas site layout (albeit minus the cave) and future excavations at the site will seek to determine the relationship between the two communities and to the local socio-political and environmental landscape.

Anderson’s work in caves in the region were reported by Pendergast (1970, 1971), showing a range of ceramics, including unit-stamped pottery at Rio Frio and Eduardo Quiroz, a distinctive southern Belize tradition.
Mountainous terrain to the south of Las Cuevas has left the area undeveloped in modern times. An increasing number of archaeological projects in southern Belize have identified a complex and heterogeneous regional identity that incorporates both common Maya traits, as well as distinctive features (Braswell and Prufer 2009; Leventhal 1992; McKillop 2002).

Excavation at Las Cuevas

Excavation usually solely provides culture-historical information and can be designed to be multi-purpose to pursue a variety of questions. A targeted excavation strategy at Las Cuevas sought to determine the basic characteristics of the site, address features pertinent to the local environmental context, assess the presence and absence of common ancient Maya ritual practices, and ultimately, gather data to understand the broader socio-political landscape. A broad excavation program was begun in 2011 to investigate the site core, including architectural excavation at structures in both plazas, and test pitting of the plazas (Moyes et al. 2012).

Structure 1

Eastern structures are often the most important ceremonial building for the Maya, frequently used as ancestral shrines, linking the deceased with the rising sun and cycles of creation, life and rebirth (Chase and Chase 1998). As such, eastern structures often contain elite burials. Sub-floor caches are also common dedicatory features in front of structures and under floors and staircases, containing a wealth of chronologically and geographically sensitive material. Located above the cave opening, the 12m tall eastern structure of the Plaza A at Las Cuevas is in a particularly cosmologically charged location. Excavations at Structure 1 undertaken in 2012 and 2013 sought to uncover the construction history, chronology, architectural form, and ritual practices, including potential burials and ritual deposits (Figure 3).

A vertical “phone booth” excavation through the center of the structure in 2012 encountered four construction phases, as determined by intact plaster floors. Each additional construction phase expanded the previous structure with the addition of a layer of gradated dry core fill, consisting of limestone boulders, the largest of which were located at the base of each construction level. Pebbles and small cobbles covered the boulders in each construction phase to provide support for the plaster floors. The excavation continued to 5.5m below the top surface and was abandoned due to
safety concerns. Large boulders were present below the earliest floor, suggesting this was part of an extensive initial construction phase. Following the initial construction, an extensive remodeling of the structure took place adding 2.24m of vertical height. After this, two smaller construction phases added 0.29m and 0.4m of height. No burials or sub-surface deposits were present. Although the excavation contained few material remains, all diagnostic ceramic sherds throughout the structure dated to the Late Classic (A.D. 600 – 850; Kosakowsky et al. 2013).

The terminal construction at the summit of the structure consisted of a 2m deep open front platform, with a step up through a 2.25m wide central doorway into an 8m by 1.5m vaulted inner chamber (Figure 4). Although the roof had collapsed, the presence and location of extensive fragments of moulded stucco confirms the presence of a frieze that was likely to have been placed above the doorway across the front of the building. The iconographic program for the frieze remains undetermined, but a tooth element suggests a potential witz earth monster was depicted (Figure 5). The presence of a frieze at such a relatively small site substantiates the importance of the polity and the ability of the builders to mobilize highly skilled labor.

Six clusters of ceramic fragments were present on the terminal floor on the top platform outside the temple chamber. The vessels consisted of red slipped dishes dating to the late part of the Late Classic period (Spanish Lookout phase/ Tepeu 2/3), with no Terminal Classic (A.D. 850 – 900) markers present. A large 4.5m wide amorphous marl deposit, 0.6m tall, placed against the back wall of the temple chamber blocked access to the temple (Figure 4). The deposit incorporated large fragments of freshly broken ceramics dating to the Late Classic. The top of the deposit was burned. Vessel fragments on top of the deposit, in a mixed context with structural collapse and tree roots, included a Belize Red bowl and a Misena Appliqued vessel. Sometime after the placement of the marl deposit, ostensibly closing the temple, additional vessels deposited. The presence of a Misena Appliqued vessel atop the marl suggests the later event dated to the Terminal Classic period.

In 2013, excavation was expanded to expose and penetrate the front of the building to refine structural form and sequence, and also search for potential sub-surface deposits beneath the stairs. In front of the building was an unusual 3m wide low platform rising only 40cm above the plaza floor. Three partially intact staircases were uncovered, each characterized by a distinct masonry style. The most recent style incorporated a mosaic of different sized limestone blocks, including upright limestone slabs and smaller stacked blocks (Figure 6).
This masonry style is repeated across the site. The earlier staircases utilize more standardized limestone blocks.

A 4 x 4 meter unit excavated to bedrock on the centerline at the front of Structure 1 abutting against the front edge of the building, revealed the construction of the plaza floor, including two plastering events. Small boulders and pebbles were laid atop the naturally undulating landscape to create a flat surface,
which was then plastered. A second plastering event underlain by 5cm of pebbles, raised the plaza slightly. Although no sub-floor cache was present, a cluster of Late Classic ceramic material and two obsidian blades were encountered on top of the terminal floor, in front of the first riser of Structure 1.

**Ballcourt**

The pan-Mesoamerican ballgame is characterized by distinct formal architecture consisting of two parallel structures. The game likely had many variants and other sporting, combative, and performance events also took place in the court. Although a ballcourt is easily identifiable, courts across the region show variability in size, form, and orientation (Ferguson 1999; Taladoire 1981). Due to the variability in ballcourt design and as a focus for ritual and performance, the ballcourt was an ideal place to look for inter-site similarities that may suggest socio-political relationships. The ballcourt at Las Cuevas sits on top of a constructed platform that levels the uneven terrain. Excavations focused on the eastern structure of the ball court (Structure 6) as a series of horizontal exposures to reveal architectural form. The playing alley incorporated a 4m wide alley, a shallow sloping playing surface, with a 1m wide low bench abutting the back wall (Figure 7). The base of the back wall was characterized by the same distinctive masonry style present on the terminal construction of Structure 1, with a mosaic of different sized limestone slabs and blocks. The flat top of the structure did not support masonry architecture, although a perishable superstructure cannot be ruled out. The backside of the structure forms the western boundary to Plaza B, incorporating an inset staircase that rises to the top of the structure. The southwest and southeast corners were both excavated revealing squared corners. The playing surface was trenched to the back wall, showing a single construction phase that included the platform that the ballcourt sits on. Figure 8 is an artistic reconstruction of Structure 6 based on the archaeological data.

**Linear Structures**

The linear structures of Plaza B are a distinctive feature of Las Cuevas. The northern series of structures ring the southern and western edges of the sinkhole, creating a formal boundary between the plaza and the sinkhole, continuing behind Structure 1. Excavations on Structure 9, 10, 11, and 25 revealed a similar architectural pattern with each rectangular structure incorporating an upper back platform, although the dimensions vary between buildings. The landscape of the sinkhole behind each structure also varies, with a flatter area and gentler slope behind Structure 11 and the western end of Structure 10. A steep drop off is present behind Structure 9, 25, and the east end of Structure 10.

Structure 9 abuts Structure 10 and Structure 25, forming an unbroken chain of buildings. Structure 11 is a discreet structure with narrow access routes to the sinkhole at either end. Excavation behind Structure 11 shows a distinct difference to the formal plastered plaza. A high density of eroded ceramic sherds suggested a potential pathway down the slope to the cave entrance.

All the linear structures appear to be of a single construction phase. They were constructed using dry core fill incorporating few artifacts. Structure 10 and 11 were part of the original plaza conception, with the core of the structures added before the plaza floor was completed. Structure 9 and 25, were added after the plaza was constructed, evidenced by the plaster of the plaza floor continuing underneath the structures, although a short back wall was put in before the plaza was plastered. All construction events took place in the Late Classic, but finer chronological understanding of the sequence of construction and the timing between the construction of the Plaza, Structure 11, Structure 12, and Structure 9 and Structure 25 cannot be established at present.

Three linear structures are present on the south side of Plaza B. Each structure shows a similar form, with an upper back platform. The southern platforms are orientated the same way, but staggered, narrowing the plaza toward the ballcourt. The landscape drops away behind the structures, with an aquada behind Structure 18 that today is the home to the critically endangered Morelet's tree frog (*Agalychnis moreletii*).
The linear structures served multiple purposes. They bounded the formal constructed space of the plaza and directed and restricted access to the sinkhole. As a formal building they also would have served an as yet undetermined function, perhaps supporting administrative, spectator, or commercial endeavors. None of the structures supported masonry superstructures, although perishable superstructures cannot be ruled out.

Ceramics

Aside from a handful of late Preclassic (Sierra Red Group) and a few Terminal Classic sherds (Miseria Applique and diagnostic large Cayo Unslipped jar rims), the Las Cuevas assemblage, and by extension, the site construction, dates to the Late Classic period (primarily Tepee 2/3, Spanish Lookout). Interestingly, there is a lack of a single ceramic sphere affiliation for the Las Cuevas material (Figure 9; Kosakowsky et al. 2013). The assemblage includes distinctive markers from the Belize Valley (including Belize, Vaca Falls, Garbut Creek, and Dolphin Head Groups), the Petén (Tinaja Red Group), southern Belize (Remate Red Group), and local types (Chiquibul Scored-Incised).

The high proportion of unit stamped Remate Red bowl and jar sherds is of particular
note (Figure 10). Although the tradition is also present in the Pasion Region at Seibal (Sabloff 1975) and Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1971), the stamp design style, dominated by the S-scroll, is distinctive of the southern Belize tradition, as found at Lubaantun (Hammond 1975) and on the coast (McKillop 2002). Examples of unit stamped pottery are documented at Rio Frio Cave to the north in the Mountain Pine Ridge, and Eduardo Quiroz Cave close to the logging camp of Millionario (Pendergast 1970, 1971). However, aside from a few solitary examples, the tradition is not found outside of this narrow corridor from southern Belize through the Maya mountains, with Las Cuevas being the largest site with a sizable sample in the north. Of particular note is the near absence of unit stamped pottery at Caracol.

Comparisons and Discussion

Site identity can be understood in regards to a community’s internal characteristics and their similarities and differences to other communities. Similarity suggests a shared identity manifested through socio-political and economic networks, whereas differences suggest non-participation in an exchange sphere and a separate identity. At Mountain Cow, Morris (2004b) noted the imposition of Caracol’s identity in the Late Classic as Caracol expanded. The previously distinct characteristics of Mountain Cow were brought in line with the larger polity as Caracol exerted socio-political and economic influence, creating a wider community with a unified identity, as identified through connecting causeways, architectural orientation, caching practices, shared material culture, and a monument tradition including references to the ruler of Caracol (Chase and Chase 1992; Morris 2004b).

Morris (2004b) discussed the complexities of identity in the Chiquibul in relation to the changing socio-political landscape through time and the history and evolution of site planning. The independent histories of a site’s layout created a unique configuration on top of which later architectural programs were built. The earlier signature is often apparent in later formations, although changing styles help trace the timing and extent of shifting regional dynamics. Mountain Cow underwent stylistic change as Caracol exerted control over the region in the Late Classic period, geographically linking communities with a network of formal causeways and imposing stylistic features, such as a change in architectural focus from the north to the east, and a monument construction program that glorified the central authority of the Caracol king, Tum Ohl K’inch (Chase and Chase 1992).

At this time of regional identity unification, Las Cuevas was established. As such, Las Cuevas was something of a blank slate upon which a dominant identity could be imposed without having to accommodate prior configurations. Despite the proximity of Caracol to Las Cuevas, the centralized authority of Caracol did not encompass the smaller site. Although some similarities exist, the differences between the polities, in regards to architectural style, ritual practices, and ceramic sphere, confirm a level of independence from Caracol and an identity for Las Cuevas that is distinct from other spheres of influence in the wider region.

Site layout at Las Cuevas was designed around the natural landscape, with the sinkhole and the cave of central focus. The unusual linear structures of Plaza B formalized the conceptual boundaries between the natural and the built world, emphasizing cosmological concepts of the ordered and the wild landscape. Large scale landscape modification was also required to flatten out the undulating terrain, creating space to accommodate public places. While the eastern focus of architecture is present at Las Cuevas, the absence of burials or sub-surface ritual deposits is in marked contrast to the ritual program employed at Caracol (Chase and Chase 1998). The lack of burials negates in-depth discussion until other structures in the main plaza can be excavated and the context better understood. Further data on the presence or absence of internments in the site core will enable speculation as to formulation of political hierarchy and question why no one claimed the eastern structure as a tomb.

The absence of carved monuments, references to Caracol, ballcourt markers, monuments at the summit of the eastern structure, and rounded building corners, lacks
the distinct ties expected if Caracol controlled the site and as are evidenced at polities that did come under Caracol’s sway (Morris 2004b). The distinct masonry style, utilizing a mixture or upright limestone slabs intermixed with smaller blocks further characterize Las Cuevas and suggest the deliberate assertion of an individual identity through architectural design.

The Las Cuevas ballcourt shows both similarities and disparities with those at Caracol. Just as the Las Cuevas ballcourt forms the western boundary of Plaza B, Caracol’s Group B is bounded by a ballcourt. Both courts run north-south as is most common across much of the Maya area; exceptions to this norm include the east-west courts at Quirigua, Seibal, Rio Bec, and locally at Baking Pot in the Belize Valley (Ferguson 1999). Both courts also incorporate a low bench. The rounded corners of the Group B ballcourt at Caracol, and common throughout the site, are notably absent at Las Cuevas. Also, the two staircases are vastly different, the inset stair of Las Cuevas contrasting to the outset stair of Caracol. Even though teams from each site may have played at each other’s court, Las Cuevas was not bound by a centralized architectural tradition.

Although ballcourts are not always a feature at sites the size of Las Cuevas, the presence of a ballcourt is not surprising. The presence of the structure does support the performance and ritual function of the site. The association of a ballcourt and a cave on the landscape draws parallels with the stories recorded in the Popol Vuh (Christensen 2003), with the Hero Twins ultimately defeating the underworld lords after a series of ballgames. The ritual specialists at Las Cuevas likely drew from the themes covered in the Popol Vuh, using performance and public spectacle to reenact the trials and triumphs of the Hero Twins.

Perhaps most telling of all is the ceramic assemblage at Las Cuevas and the mixture of ceramic sphere affiliation. The strong representation of the distinctive unit stamped Remate Red pottery, all but absent at other polities in the region, evidences participation in a distinct trade network stretching through the Maya Mountains to southern Belize that establishes the independent socio-political and economic identity of Las Cuevas. The presence of Belize Valley and Petén types demonstrates that Las Cuevas was not excluded from other exchange spheres, but was situated at an exchange crossroads (Kosakowsky et al. 2013).

Summary

As a previously unknown entity, initial excavations at Las Cuevas have targeted the site’s culture-history, revealing architectural expression, and the presence and absence of ritual practices and material culture. Inter-site comparisons characterize the site as distinct from the unified identity imposed on the region by Caracol, revealing a distinct identity that evidences individuality but participation in multiple cultural spheres. These data provide the base to build anthropological lines of inquiry that can flesh out the site’s identity.

Important questions remain unanswered that are integral to understanding Las Cuevas’s identity. Who settled the polity? Who was the dynamic leader who could mobilize a population and skilled workers in the face of the large Caracol polity? Were the settlers from the south, bringing trade connections with them? Was Las Cuevas established by a member of the Caracol court? If so, why did they establish independent style and economic ties? If they were exiled, why did the Caracol elite tolerate the growth of the site in such close proximity? Was Caracol’s attention focused on the political theatre to the north with the ongoing conflicts with Tikal and Naranjo, and alliances with Calakmul? Why did Caracol not co-opt the Las Cuevas cave? Did Naj Tunich already fulfill the cave requirements for Caracol’s ritual circuit? Who did use the Las Cuevas cave? Was Las Cuevas a pilgrimage center, drawing people from across a number of ceramic spheres? Was Las Cuevas administered by ritual specialists, controlling activity in the cave, but unable to claim divine rule and burial in the eastern pyramid?

The further development of a characterization of Las Cuevas’s identity will incorporate a refined understanding of the political and economic landscape, but will ultimately be based in the socio-environmental relationship between the cave and the surface site. The location of the cave directly under the site core distinguishes Las Cuevas from other
politics with the relationship amongst the natural landscape, the built environment, the community, and cosmology defining the function and identity of Las Cuevas.

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