

An Introduction to the Archaeology of Central Belize and our Focus of Study

1.1. A Word of Caution

A number of scholars, most notable among them Sir J. Eric S. Thompson (2005 [1975], 1990), and James E. Brady (2005a, 2005b), have emphasized the primacy of ritual/religious behaviour practiced by the ancient Maya within the cave context. The veracity of this position is not under question here, nor could it be. Indeed, at its most basic, this book is about ‘caves.’ This book, also, is about ‘ritual.’ Nonetheless, I would start this discussion with a word of caution: that is, that it is all-too-easy to allow the term ‘ritual’ to homogenize or essentialize our view of this extremely varied archaeological context. It should not be assumed, *a priori*, that activities occurring and objects found within the cave context are of either ritual or religious significance though this likely accounts for a majority of those remains encountered. It is also all-too-easy to relegate ‘the cave’ to a secondary and isolated context when reconstructing our archaeological view of the past. Both are persistent issues of an otherwise vibrant and innovative specialization in Mesoamerican archaeology, representing a significant dearth in our articulation/interpretation of the cave context. While we may rightfully point to James Brady’s Petexbatun Regional Cave Survey, Takeshi Inomata’s work in the chasm of Aguateca, Jaime Awe’s Western Belize Regional Cave Project, Christophe Helmke’s (2009) dissertation work in the Roaring Creek Valley, and Jon Spenard’s (2014) dissertation in the nearby Barton Creek area (among others) as prominent exceptions, the fact remains that introductory texts on the Maya area continue to pay but lip service to the role of caves in ancient Maya society. Thus, we should be very careful indeed to ensure that discussions of the cave context, and the various human activities that were practiced in these settings, are not isolated from more ‘traditional’ surface contexts and their interpretation, but rather explicitly integrated. What should be abundantly clear by the end of this manuscript is that the study of ancient Maya cave use—in all of its complexity—is best accomplished with reference to the broader social, political, economic, and religious (etc.) milieu of the peoples under study.

1.2. Primary Question

The question that drives this study is this: ‘As integrated and varied ritual contexts, how do changing patterns of pre-Columbian cave use inform on the complex of historical, social, political, economic and related ideological processes in action during the inception, florescence, and collapse of Tipan Chen Uitz and other nucleated centres in Central Belize?’ Following a brief introduction

to the study region in this chapter, the remainder of this manuscript is divided into two broad sections. The first is structured along a chain of related concepts and datasets extending from the broad body of literature on ritual and religion, through discussion of the conceptual cave context drawn from epigraphic and iconographic sources, its invocation as recorded in contemporary (or at least, relatively recent) ethnographic contexts and earlier post-Columbian indigenous historic sources, and finally along the well-travelled paths of the archaeological study of caves. This forward section constitutes the web of theories, concepts, methods, and histories within which the rest of the study is caught, and as a synthesis should be of interest to both specialists and those more generally drawn to the literature of the ancient Maya cave context. The second section deals explicitly with my own primary research, conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation (2015a), in a number of caves located in Central Belize and defines a regional pattern of cave utilization; the stopping point for most studies of the Maya cave context. Thus defined, this manuscript will finish by turning from the dark passages of the Maya cave context to discuss what the ‘shadows cast upon the wall¹’ can tell us of the world beyond the cave mouth.

1.3. Introduction to the Regions and Cultures Discussed in this Work

As in many civilizations, for the ancient Maya, ritual served as one of the principal mediators between religion and politics—between the state and its people. In this book, our interests focus on processes of development and change in an ancient polity, and on the rites so associated. Our study is focussed on emergent Maya centres in Central Belize during the Late Classic (ca. AD 700-900)—their origins, florescence, and decline—though in absolute terms, the material assemblage analyzed spans a much broader period, from the Middle Formative through the Early Postclassic periods (ca. 600 BC-AD 1000). Specifically, in this book we explore the material remains of various types of subterranean activities practiced within the ‘*ch’e’en*,’ glossed ‘caves,’ ‘rockshelters,’ and ‘sinkholes’ of the study area. The majority of these activities are unquestionably of a ritual nature. We seat this discussion within that of cross-cultural studies of cave use, specifically, in neighbouring areas of Mesoamerica, Lower Central America, and the Caribbean, with additional references drawn from further afield. We discuss the various roles of subterranean site

¹ A reference to this document’s epigraph.

use—particularly vital contexts perhaps tied to political accession, legitimization, social incorporation, boundary maintenance, agricultural fertility, etc. (see Bassie-Sweet 1996; Heyden 1976, 2005; Prufer and Brady 2005; Vogt and Stuart 2005)—in the naturalization of the socio-political structure of the state, in the constitution, and re-constitution of community and social structure, and as coping mechanisms for the stresses of socio-political and economic change associated with this period. The point that I wish to emphasize above all others is that for ‘cave archaeology’ to remain a viable sub-disciplinary specialization, it must *actively articulate* with broader archaeological contexts. While the historical processes, and physical contexts of this study are particular to the ancient Maya, I see this research as broadly applicable to our understanding of public liturgy, of the relationships between religion and state, of ritual/rite as an adaptive strategy, and of the developmental processes of polity growth and decline in general, particularly when these changes occur over relatively short spans of time.

Regional Definition—Broad

Socio-Cultural

Surrounded by other cultural groups, each with their own deep and complex roots, the Maya area stretches south

from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and includes the whole of the Yucatán Peninsula (Mexico), much of Guatemala and Belize, and parts of El Salvador and westernmost Honduras (Figure 1.1). To be clear, the ‘Maya area’ is little more than an archaeological and ethnographic convenience, demarcating a geographical region within which historical indigenous inhabitants speak/spoke one of some 28-or-so related languages (Sharer and Traxler 2006, 23), not including the outlying pocket of Wastek speakers of Veracruz. However, the ancient Maya, as indeed the modern Maya, have never been a monolithic group. Significant and deep-seated socio-cultural, political, religious, and economic differences, not to mention the linguistic differences already noted, serve to differentiate these groups one from the other and likely served as the basis for inter-group differentiation and interaction in the past. A rich assemblage of portable material culture and architectural form, not to mention of hieroglyphic and iconographic representation, marks these differences in the ancient past. Despite this variety, Maya peoples constitute a distinct cultural group within the much broader Mesoamerican culture area, which extends from northern Mexico into Central America, and at times may have spread as far as the American Southwest (Adams 1991b) and Lower Central America (Blanton et al. 1993, 5). Indeed, both the Maya area and broader Mesoamerica are best thought of, not as definitive geographic regions,

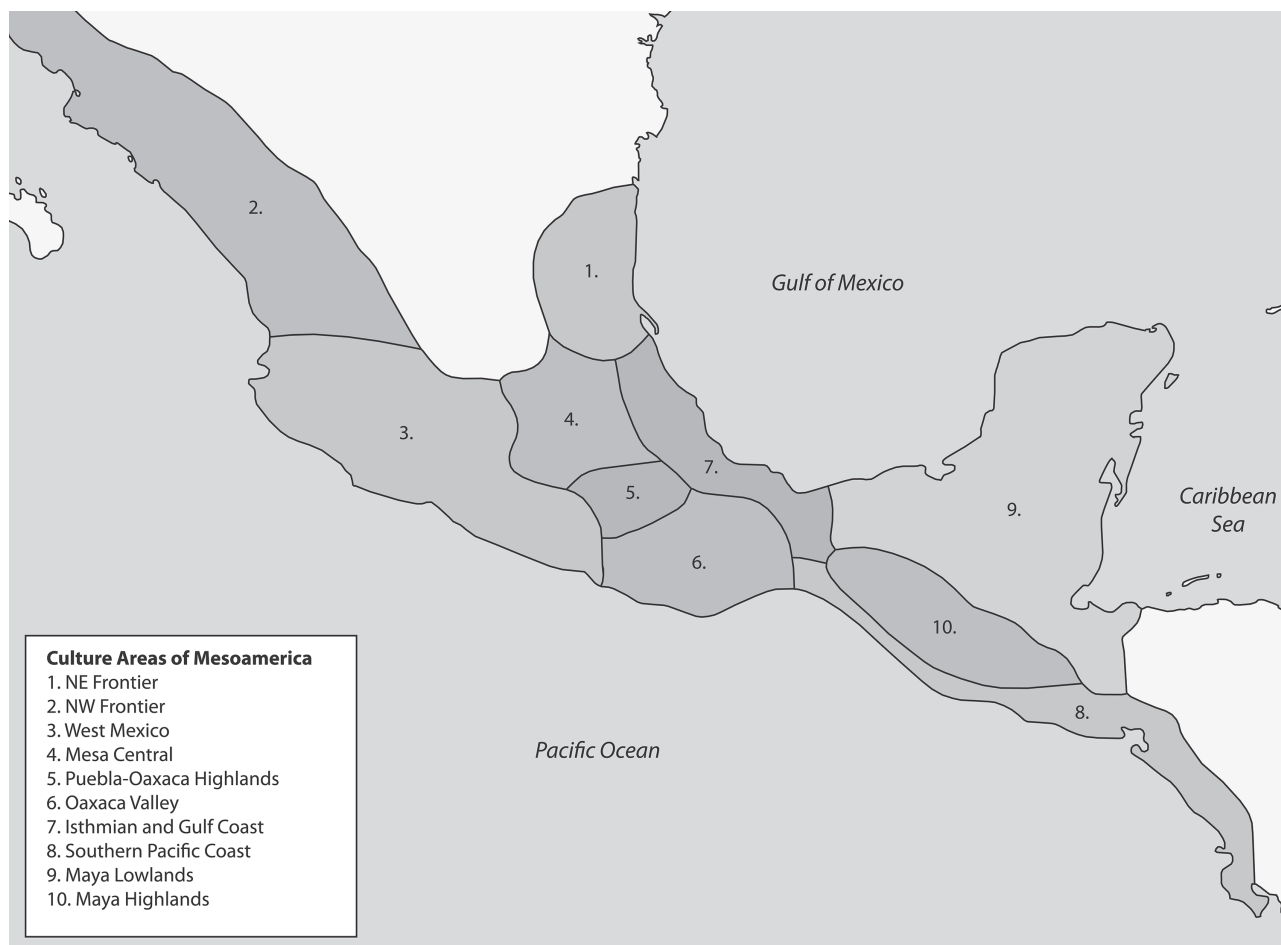


Figure 1.1. Map of Mesoamerica highlighting the Maya area.