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REGIONAL VARIATION IN MAYA CAVE ART

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The Maya area is well endowed with cave art, one of the rarest art forms known in the world. Over 25 caves with paintings and handprints have been documented in a recent survey by the author, and an undetermined additional number contain carvings. In this paper, I outline regional differences in the corpus. For example, cave painting in the Puuc area of western Yucatan has a relatively coherent style and subject matter, distinct from contemporary cave painting in the Southern Maya Lowlands. Cave painting in southern Belize is stylisticaly heterogeneous. I consider the issue of stylistic variation in Maya cave art from a functional and chronological perspective.

In this paper, I will focus on regional variation in Maya cave art from the Puuc Hills of western Yucatan and a zone encompassing southern Belize and southeast Peten in Guatemala. The cave art under discussion is broadly divided into two groups: pigment-based and sculpted. Beginning with these typological distinctions, I will explore differences in the style and subject matter of cave art from the two regions. Differences may be the result of a number of factors, including functional, climatic, and chronological variation and the relative strength of ties to the elite segment of Maya society at local surface sites.

Any seasoned Maya archaeologist knows that, along with temples, palaces, and tombs, caves are rich repositories of ancient Maya material culture. And in terms of preserving wooden objects dating from the more remote archaeological epochs (e.g., Velázquez, 1980), caves are far and away superior. Caves also have significant ethnographic import. That the Maya continue to use them in some of the same ways as their forebears is a testimony to the persistence of Precolumbian culture into the present day, even in the face of unrelenting modernization. This persistence not only colors our view of contemporary Maya, but also sheds light on ancient cave practices (Thompson, 1959, 1975) in ways that are beyond the reach of ordinary archaeology.

Caves have played a role in Maya religious life at least since 1000 B.C. as indicated by ceramic artifacts found in caves as geographically distant as Loltun Cave in Yucatan (González-Licón, 1986) and Petroglyph Cave in Belize (Reents-Budet and MacLeod, 1986; Stone, 1992). The Late Classic (ca. 600-850 A.D.) saw an unparalleled expansion of the cave ritual complex in the Maya area, no doubt a consequence of explosive population growth which ultimately contributed to the downfall of Classic Maya civilization. Although Pendergast (1970: 51) suggests that the Late Classic was "a restricted period of ancient Maya ceremonial use of caves in general," I would characterize it as one of intensive and far-flung utilization of caves across the Maya Lowlands.

The archaeological wealth of Maya caves extends to some rather interesting wall art. By wall art, parietal art, or rock art, terms which are, for all practical purposes, interchangeable, I mean art created on any natural rock surface not intended to be moved (Meighan, 1981). Cave art is a distinct sub-class of parietal art and by definition must exclude all art of the "portable" variety, even modified speleothems if they have been moved from their *in situ* geological setting by the people who made the art in the first place.

Like all rock art, Maya cave art can be divided into two technologically distinct groups. One consists of pigment-based art: paintings, drawings, and imprints. For the Maya, paintings were often rendered with brushes, although the actual implements have not survived. Drawings seem to have been made with charcoal or hard pieces of clay used as crayons. The most typical colors found are black and red. Visual inspection suggests that black was usually derived from charcoal, although other black pigments, like manganese may have been used. The red (usually an orange-red) comes from iron-rich clays found in the caves themselves, as well as ground hematite (a bright, deep red), known, for instance, from Dzibichen, in the state of Yucatan (Stone, 1995). Yellow and blue are rare, the former occurring at Joloniel Cave in the state of Chiapas (Riese, 1981; Stone, 1995) and Cueva de Galón in Guatemala (Mayer, 1995), and the latter, at Tixkuytun in the state of Yucatan (Stone, 1995: 69-71, Pl. 5). Maya caves also contain positive and stencilled handprints and, more rarely, footprints, both positive and negative (Strecker, 1982).

Sculpted cave art constitutes the other major group. Rock carvings, or petroglyphs, are made by incising, abrading, and pecking, the most common techniques employed in the production of Maya cave sculpture. Another class of cave sculpture includes three-dimensional images modelled in unfired clay, a rare and very fragile art form. Indeed, these sculptures are frequently destroyed not long after discovery.

The pigment-based and sculpted cave art exhibit pervasive differences that go well beyond the use of different media and techniques. In fact, they vary so dramatically that they seem to have different motivations as well as different artistic sources. Pigment-based art is more likely to follow the pictorial conventions of Maya high art. Paintings typically portray symbols and naturalistic forms, particularly animals and humans, seen in the scribal art tradition, such as in pottery painting and monumental relief sculpture. While a small percentage of the sculpted cave art also was inspired by elite Maya art, the bulk

of it is technically crude and seems to lie outside of the high art tradition. For instance, cave petroglyphs often consist of meandering geometric patterns and simple frontal faces, nothing at all like the grand sculptures of the great Classic Maya cities. The crudeness and inscrutable designs of Maya cave sculpture do not make it any less important, however, as evidence of past human behavior. Indeed, the diversity of sources and styles of Maya cave art is a signal of the cave's functional complexity in Maya society.

It would be difficult to pin down the total number of Maya caves known to contain wall art of one kind or another. In a recent monograph, I documented 25 caves with pigment-based art (Stone, 1995). Since this synthesis was published, one new painted cave has come to light (Mayer, 1995) and a new set of paintings has been found in Actun Kaua, in the state of Yucatan, previously only known to contain handprints (Allan Cobb, personal communication, 1995). A rigorous count of caves with sculpted art has not been conducted, but it is easy to imagine the total number of Maya caves containing some form of wall art reaching, if not surpassing, 50. This number is not extremely impressive—remember that there are over 250 Paleolithic cave art sites in Europe—but it is also not a trivial one when we consider that the world has not seen many "cave art cultures" in its entire history; and when the criterion of decorating deep caves is added, the global list shortens considerably (Stone & Bahn, 1993). Here again the Maya qualify with such spectacular deep painted caves as Loltun (Zavala Ruiz et al., 1978) and Naj Tunich (Stone, 1995). To my knowledge the only non-Maya cave in Mesoamerica with deep art is Juxtlahuaca in the state of Guerrero, Mexico, which has Olmec-style paintings located about a kilometer from the entrance (Gay, 1967). In terms of our current understanding, cave art appears to be more abundant in the Maya area than any other part of Mesoamerica.

The corpus of Maya cave art is large enough to permit observations with respect to regional variation, although with caution owing to the limited sample available in most regions. The geographical distribution of decorated caves as it now stands is rather lopsided with the majority being found in the Northern Maya Lowlands, more narrowly defined by the state of Yucatan.

YUCATAN, MEXICO

A recognizable style of Maya cave art is one that I call the "Sierrita de Ticul" style. Geographically, it includes caves found along the eastern range of the Puuc Hills of western Yucatan, known as the Sierrita de Ticul. The style is exemplified by four caves: Loltun (González-Licón, 1986; Zavala-Ruiz et al., 1978; Stone, 1995), Acum (Strecker, 1980, 1984a; Stone, 1995), and Ch'on (Stone, 1989; 1995), all located in relatively close proximity, and Tixkuytun (Stone, 1995) which lies about 20 kms to the south (Fig. 1). Sierrita de Ticul painted cave art is characterized by the use of thin paint, usually black or red, the latter probably taken from the cave's own lateritic clay

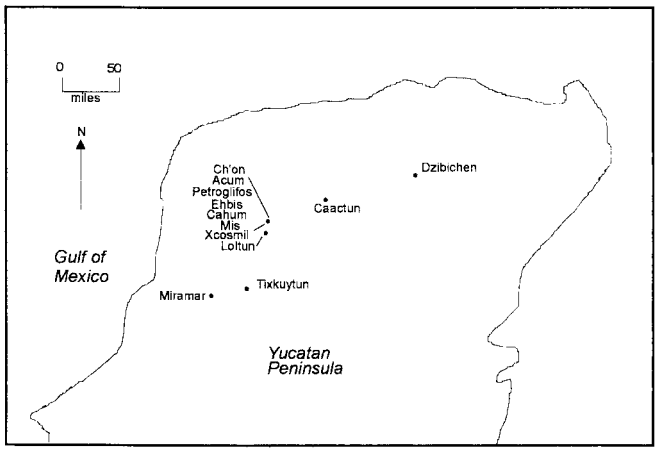

Figure 1. Map showing selected cave art sites in the Sierrita de Ticul (Puuc Hills) of the western Yucatan Peninsula.

deposits. The paint is generally applied with a firm hand in a broad line that defines simple, flat shapes (Fig. 2). The line is not the modulated, whiplike line used in Maya pottery decoration but tends to be wide, of even width, and rigid. Some paintings are filled with solid areas of pigment. The blunt ends of the line suggest that these paintings were not executed with a brush.

Sierrita de Ticul cave art also has a characteristic inventory of motifs. One recurrent image is a large human head, ranging in size from a half to over a meter in height. Loltun has at least seven such heads (Fig. 3). Two appearing in Edward Thompson's (1897) nineteenth-century study of Loltun are the first published examples of Maya cave painting. The nearby cave of Acum, a major cave art site surveyed by Matthias

Figure 2. This painting in black of a death demon from Acum illustrates typical traits of Sierrita de Ticul painting. Notice the broad line, emphasis on flat shapes, and lack of fine detail. Areas are filled in with paint. The painting is fairly large, though exact measurements are not available. Photo courtesy of Matthias Strecker.

Figure 3. Painted head from Loltun, Yucatan, measuring over a meter in height. The black patch over the eye and spots on the cheek may identify this head as that of a death god.

Strecker (1980, 1984a), has five heads, which are on the whole smaller. The heads are barren of detail, although they sometimes have an earflare or the suggestion of a headdress (Stone, 1995: Fig. 4-49). In one case at Acum the eye is closed, suggesting a moribund being. The heads are often clustered in one area. At Loltun, for instance, four of the seven heads are located in one chamber.

An interesting variant of the human head can be seen at Acum: large painted skulls, five of which have been documented (Fig. 4). Several include part of a skeletal body (Stone, 1995:Fig. 4-44). Some of these skulls and skeletal beings measure over a meter in height. As obvious death figures, they recall one of the large heads from Loltun with a blackened eye and spots on the cheek (Fig. 3). This possibly depicts a youthful death god known by students of the Maya as God A'. It may be that the heads, both fleshed and skeletal, have some connection with death and by extension, ancestors. Such an idea could account for the Acum head with closed eye which may be a deceased ancestor.

Another typical Sierrita de Ticul motif is the isolated symbol or glyph-like element, again painted at a fairly large scale in a broad, simple line. These symbols include some well known in Maya art and writing; for instance, the *k'an* cross (meaning "yellow" or "ripe"), the *ik'* symbol (meaning "breath, wind, or spirit") and the *pop* symbol (meaning "mat" and by extension "throne") (Fig. 5). One section of a corridor at Acum has *k'an* crosses and *ik'* symbols, measuring about a half a meter on a side, painted at eye level in a row (Fig. 6). In the Chamber of Acum the ceiling is painted with a *pop* symbol, smoke scrolls, and other large symbols, some in a stencil technique (Stone, 1995: Fig. 4-53). Acum has a number of other isolated symbols, some with bar and dot notation, but otherwise unidentifiable.

The large *k'an* cross is featured at Tixkuytun in some interesting variations. The cave has one plain *k'an* cross, reminiscent of the Acum examples, but also one with four concentric crosses. The most novel has bar and dot notation along the edges, the meaning of which presently eludes interpretation (Fig. 7). Like Acum, Tixkuytun has two *pop* symbols but is lacking the *ik'* symbol (for Acum examples see Stone, 1995:Figs. 4-43, 4-53). Tixkuytun cave art also includes sim-

Figure 4. One of the painted skulls in black from Acum, Yucatan, measuring 1.10 m high. Photo courtesy of Matthias Strecker.

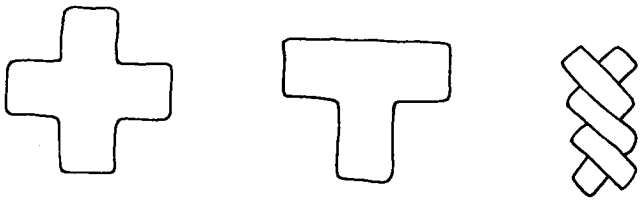

Figure 5. Standard form of *k'an* cross (left), *ik'* (middle), and pop (right) symbols.

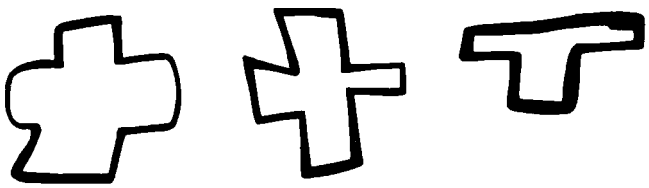

Figure 6. Two *k'an* crosses and an *ik'* symbol in black from Acum, Yucatan, measuring about half a meter on their long side. After Stone, 1995: Fig. 4-43.

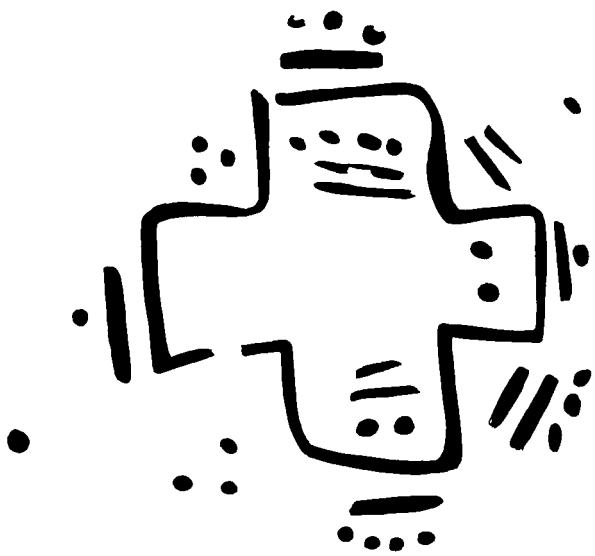

Figure 7. A *k'an* cross painted in red with bar and dot numeral notation from Tixkuytun, Yucatan. The painting is on the ceiling and has no obvious up-down orientation.

Figure 8. Black painting of a turtle, long-necked bird, and a possible deer from Acum, Yucatan. After Stone, 1995: Fig. 4-50.

ple circles, sometimes concentric circles; occasionally the centers are filled making them look like breasts or eyes. These circles often appear over the low entrances to side chambers. Both Acum and Tixkuytun have paintings of animals: a deer at Tixkuytun (Stone, 1995: Pl. 5), and a turtle, long-necked bird, and a deer head at Acum (Fig. 8). Again, the painting style is simple and bold.

While handprints have a wide distribution in Maya cave art, the imprints (both hand and foot) in Sierrita de Ticul caves are distinct and very abundant. They therefore seem to have special importance in this region. Acum, for instance, has more handprints than any other site in the Maya area, perhaps in Mesoamerica, with 135 handprints (Strecker, 1982). Loltun is not far behind with 85 handprints. Quantity is not their only striking feature, as the stencil handprints are of exceptional complexity. At Loltun, for instance, two hands and a thin rod attached to the tip of the index fingers were stencilled as a unit (Stone, 1995: Fig. 4-34). The most amazing negative handprints are those forming animal heads at Acum (Fig. 9). Also seen at Acum are two-handed negative handprints with the fingers retracted, creating interesting, odd patterns. At Tixkuytun some negative handprints in red are encircled by a carefully drawn black line, a motif also observed in a nearby cave at Akil (Lisa Rock, personal communcation, 1990). Interestingly, a graffito in Group 5E-11 at Tikal shows three positive handprints encircled by a line, but in this case thick and crudely drawn (Orrego and Larios, 1983: Lam. 5b).

Thus far I have omitted Ch'on from the discussion (Stone, 1989a, 1995). Ch'on has a much smaller corpus of paintings than the others, and only two exhibit style traits of the Sierrita de Ticul group. One is an isolated glyph with a bar and dot numeral prefix. The placement of the glyph on the ceiling recalls paintings from Acum. The other elaborate painting is a scene consisting of three figures; the central one, bound and

Figure 9. Black stencil handprint forming an animal head. The little finger creates the "ear", from Acum, Yucatan. Photo courtesy of Matthias Strecker.

nude, appears to be a prisoner (Stone, 1995: Fig. 4-38). Multi-figure narrative scenes, such as this, are rare in all of Maya cave art; yet the manner of painting in simple, flat silhouettes and the large scale of the Ch'on figures is fully consistent with the Sierrita de Ticul style group. It is worth mentioning that this style of painting, although generally conforming to Late Classic pictorial conventions (e.g., the way profiles are rendered and the use of certain symbols), and although surely contemporary with some mural art in the vicinity, such as the paintings of Chacmultun (Barrera-Rubio, 1980: Figs. 5-6), has a character that is different from art of regional surface sites. For example, at none of the nearby Puuc sites (Pollock, 1980) do we find large heads, concentric crosses, or animal figures of the type found in the caves. This suggests that Sierrita de Ticul painting enjoyed some degree of independence from the surrounding urban centers. This is likely due to the unique function of the cave art in associated ritual activities; yet we do not know precisely what these functions were.

Strecker (1984b, 1985) located several caves with petroglyphs in the Sierrita de Ticul: Mis, Petroglifos, Ehbis, Xcosmil, and Cahum (Fig. 1). In addition, Loltun has long been known to contain petroglyphs (Thompson, 1897: Figs. 8-9). One famous petroglyph sits astride Loltun's Nahkab entrance. This portrait of a ruler accompanied by hieroglyphs relates technologically (as bas-relief) and iconographically to contemporary monumental stone carving from the Protoclassic period, around 100-200 A.D. (Proskouriakoff, 1950: 104, Fig. 38b). A question is raised in my mind as to whether the Loltun bas-relief should be classified as cave art in the truest sense. First, it is found outside the cave proper, on an exterior wall. Second, the relief's similarities to monumental stone carving relate it more to open-air rock art than to cave sculpture *per se*, and, so, I would liken it to the former.

Other petroglyphs deep inside Loltun compare to petroglyphs found in nearby caves. They are generally formed from deeply pecked lines. One common type seen at Xcosmil, Cahum, Petroglifos, Ehbis, and Mis shows schematic, frontal faces, some of which have a skull-like appearance. At Ehbis heads of this type were carved on a stalactite (Strecker, 1985: Fig. 1). Another type of petroglyph, found at Xcosmil, Cahum, Petroglifos, and Loltun, consists of a meandering line, which forms curlicues, boxes, circles with connecting lines, and ladder-like designs (Fig. 10). Little of this can be interpreted, although some from Petroglifos have been identified by Strecker (1987) as skeletal figures. Further north in the Sierrita de Ticul, near Calcehtok, Actun Ceh also has crude linear petroglyphs of schematic faces and the outlines of a deer (Rätsch, 1979: Abb. 5).

The cave petroglyphs in the Sierrita de Ticul have little in common stylistically or iconographically with the paintings. Is this simply due to a lack of contemporaneity? The paintings obviously have more in common with Maya art prior to the conquest, and those of Acum, Ch'on, and Tixkuytun appear to be Late Classic. The situation is more complicated at Loltun. One group of paintings is Protoclassic, contemporary with the

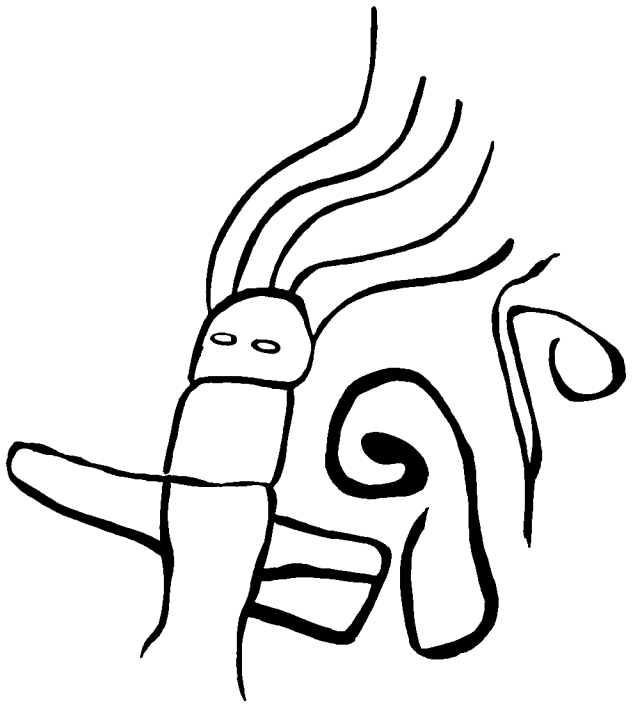

Figure 10. Petroglyph showing volutes, rectangles, and circles from Loltun, Yucatan.

entrance relief (Stone, 1989b: Figs. 22-3 & 22-4); the large faces appear to be Late Classic. Some paintings may also date from the Colonial period. Unfortunately, the petroglyphs are impossible to date as they bear no relationship with securely dated styles. Furthermore, these caves would have been accessible to local populations since the Preclassic. In other words, the petroglyphs could date from almost any period.

Differences between the paintings and the petroglyphs could also be accounted for by the different social contexts of their production. The paintings appear to be the work of more highly trained individuals. On the other hand, the petroglyphs may represent a vernacular art practiced only by "common folk." I will return to this notion of a vernacular art below, since it is critical in sorting out the radically different styles represented in Maya cave art.

Once we move away from the Sierrita de Ticul, Yucatecan cave art becomes more sparse and what there is lacks areal consistency. There are two important sites in central Yucatan, Dzibichen (Stone, 1995) and Caactun (Stone, 1995) (Fig. 1). Caactun overlaps with the Sierrita de Ticul style in its abundance of handprints and, especially, the stencilled prints that make unusual patterns. Caactun is also unique in having Early Classic incised wall art. Dzibichen has Colonial cave drawings in charcoal; these include Hapsburg eagles and a type of circular face found in Colonial manuscripts. Colonial cave art, including Hapsburg eagles (Fig. 11), is also known from one cave in the state of Campeche, Miramar (Stone, 1995), also called Actun Huachap (Reddell, 1977). In general the Dzibichen art recalls simple forms of drawings from the

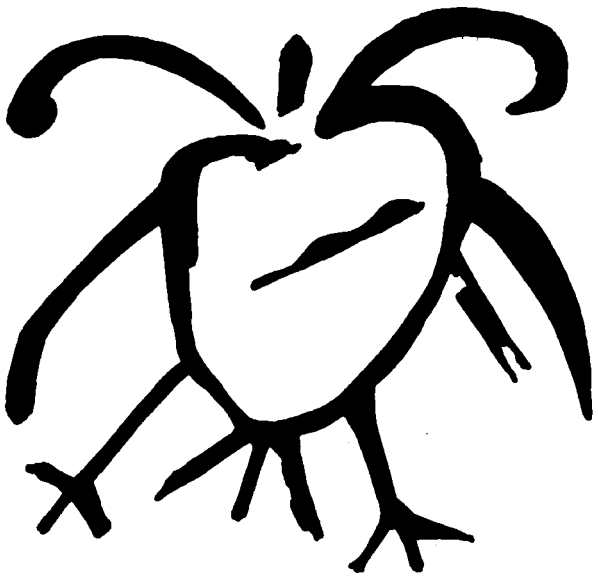

Figure 11. Two-headed eagle painted in red from Miramar, Chiapas. After Stone, 1995: Fig. 4-86.

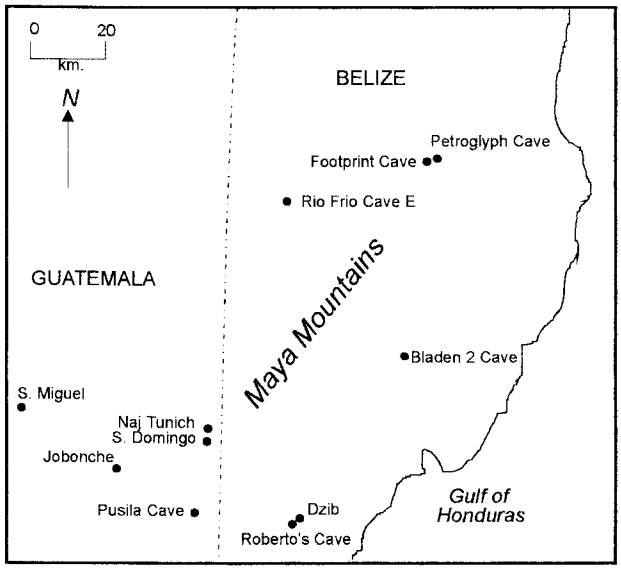

Figure 12. Map of the Maya Mountains region with cave art sites mentioned in the text.

codices. It also shows vernacular iconography in depicting the female pubic region, or "vulva" as it is usually called in rock art literature, as triangles with slits at the base. The vulva motif is also found in the rock art of Chalcatzingo, in the state of Morelos (Apostolides, 1987).

Peten and Belize

The Maya Mountains of southern Belize and southeastern Guatemala (Fig. 12) are surrounded by a major karst zone with some of the biggest caves in Central America. The most massive are on the northern flanks in the Caves Branch River Valley, such as Petroglyph Cave (Reents-Budet & MacLeod, 1986) and on the Vaca Plateau in the watershed of the Chiquibul River (Miller, 1989). Although many of these caves are richly endowed archaeologically, they are notable for lacking cave art (McNatt, 1996). A few exceptions can be found in the Caves Branch Valley. For instance, Petroglyph Cave contains, as its name implies, petroglyphs: volutes and glyph-like forms incised into rimstone dams in the entrance (Reents-Budet & MacLeod, 1986). Waterfall Cave houses a petroglyph of concentric circles (Barbara MacLeod, personal communication, 1994). In addition, until the late 1970s when it was destroyed, a grotesque face sculpted in a clay deposit was located in Footprint Cave (Graham et al., 1980: Fig. 3). Since the clay sculpture lay in its original deposit, it can be considered nonportable cave art, as are the famous Paleolithic clay bisons from Le Tuc d'Audoubert, France (Bahn & Vertut, 1988: Fig. 61). Only one other clay sculpture of this type has been reported in a Maya cave, and rumor has it that it was also destroyed: a lifesize deity sculpted in clay in a cave in the Peten (Stuart & Stuart, 1977). One might also designate as cave art a human-looking stalagmite from Río Frio Cave E in the Mountain Pine Ridge of central Belize, which has cuplike depressions carved into the "stomach" (Pendergast, 1970: Pl. 3). However, the stalagmite is not in its original position, disqualifying it as nonportable art. Caves found in the vast karst zone north of the Maya Mountains exhibit a noticeable lack of pigment-based art. In fact, the first examples have only recently been discovered in Actun Uayazba Cab, near Roaring Creek in the Belize River Valley (Jaime Awe, personal communication, 1996). Among them are the first examples of handprints reported from a cave in Belize. This dearth of painted art may have to do with intermittent flooding which reaches catastrophic proportions in many of these caves and which would obliterate fragile wall paintings.

Cave art is more common around the southern reaches of the Maya Mountains in Belize and Guatemala (Fig. 12). On the Belizean side are two caves with painted art: Actun Dzib and Roberto's Cave (Walters, 1988). While Roberto's Cave has a mere handful of fragmentary paintings, Actun Dzib is far more significant in housing a large collection of paintings in a vernacular style. Most are linear, schematic images of toad-like, lizard-like, and insect-like creatures, spirals, human stick-figures, comb-like, and inverted T-shaped forms (Fig. 13). Some resemble certain pottery and textile motifs from the Classic period but otherwise they have no relationship with known styles of Maya art. Interestingly, one figure painted away from the two panels of stick-figures is in the Classic style. This figure resembles one from a cave painting site, known as Bladen 2, recently discovered by Peter Dunham (personal communication, 1993) in southern Belize. Actun Dzib thus houses two entirely distinct styles of art, one that seems vaguely Classic and another that is idiosyncratic but may again reflect a vernacular style of drawing coexisting alongside Classic Maya art.

Figure 13. A typical painting from Actun Dzib, Belize. Note the schematic lizards, human figures, and spirals.

On the Guatemalan side of the southern Maya Mountains are several caves in a fairly restricted area with paintings or drawings (a technical distinction sometimes hard to make). The preeminent cave in this region is Naj Tunich (Stone, 1995). Related to it is Santo Domingo, about four hours away on foot (Brady & Fahsen, 1991). Santo Domingo has preserved a single painted hieroglyphic text (Stone, 1995: Fig. 4-111), while Naj Tunich has dozens of hieroglyphic texts and figures, as well as some handprints and about a half dozen incised petroglyphs (Fig. 14). Refined, calligraphic painting of this sort is what the Maya might have been expected to produce in many more caves with Late Classic occupation. Yet, there are few painted caves of this caliber. Apart from Naj Tunich and Santo Domingo, the cave Yaleltsemen in the state of Chiapas also has a painting using the modulated whiplike line characteristic of fine Late Classic painting (Stone, 1995: Pl. 7).

The elite context of the art of Naj Tunich and the richness of the archaeology (Brady, 1989) are testimony to the importance of this cave as a holy place. The texts show that the cave was a pilgrimage shrine attracting elites from surrounding sites. Even a ruler from the major Classic Maya city of Caracol, 60 kms to the north (Chase & Chase, 1987), is mentioned in the texts, as Stephen Houston has observed (letter to Nikolai Grube, 1991). One wonders why the elite of Caracol were not utilizing caves closer to home in the same way.

The third painted cave in the area is near Pusila, Guatemala (not to be confused with Pusilha in Belize), about 10 kms south of Naj Tunich and Santo Domingo (Siffre, 1979). The cave has drawings of a seated figure, a profile face, and other curious concentric circles, and meandering lines that appear to be rendered in charcoal. Handprints and footprints are also found there. The figures are Late Classic, making them roughly contemporary with Naj Tunich and Santo Domingo, but the quality of drawing is much inferior. Another cave painting site in the general region of these three, but lying further to the northwest, is San Miguel (Siller, 1989; Stone, 1995: Figs. 4-112-113). The paintings, however, do not appear to be coeval with either Naj Tunich, Santo Domingo, or Pusila art.

Siffre's (1979) cave explorations in southeast Peten uncovered several caves with petroglyphs taking the form of crude faces with deeply drilled eye holes carved into flowstone protrusions or stalagmites. One is the previously mentioned Pusila cave (Siffre, 1979: Fig. 38). Others include Jovelte, Poxte, and a cave Siffre calls Canchacan (Siffre, 1979). Brady (n.d.) carried out a systematic study of the latter cave which he has renamed Jobonche. He notes the presence of four carved faces with large staring eyes with deeply drilled centers, prominent brows, and thick, squared lips (Fig. 15).

These roughly carved faces might be thought of as a type of vernacular cave art. Brady (n.d.) argues that carved stalactites, such as these, might have functioned as "idols" and discusses literature demonstrating that stalactites functioned in this manner, either in caves or removed from caves and used in surface contexts. Crude faces carved in calcite deposits represent a type of vernacular cave art seemingly restricted to caves. They may relate, as Brady suggests, to certain types of associated ritual activities and may have functioned in a manner similar to the crude human sculptures, sometimes found in caves, such as at Quen Santo in highland Guatemala (Seler, 1901).

There is one other petroglyph site southeast of the Peten-southern Belize zone. Around Lake Izabal, near the Atlantic

Figure 14. Drawing 69 from Naj Tunich, Peten in black, measuring 19 cm. high, painted in a refined Late Classic style reminiscent of vase paining. This style of paining is known from few caves in the Maya area. Photo courtesy of Chip and Jennifer Clark.

Figure 15. Detail of a head sculpted in a flowstone concretion at Jobonche, Peten. Crude heads of this sort represent a class of sculpture especially prevalent in the southeast Peten. Drawn after a photo by Siffre, 1979.

coast of Guatemala, the Cave Agua Caliente contains crude incised petroglyphs. One can be identified as a monkey, but the others are vague and cannot be dated stylistically (Voorhies, 1969: Fig. 7).

CONCLUSIONS

Two regions emerge in the Maya area where cave art is relatively common: the Sierrita de Ticul in the Puuc Hills of Yucatan and the southeast Peten-southern Belize zone. Elsewhere cave art occurs sporadically. The painted art in these two regions clearly differs, even though it is largely contemporary. The fine Classic painting found in southeast Peten, most importantly at Naj Tunich, may have been influenced by local traditions of painted ceramics. Conversely, the lack of intricate, narrative pottery painting in the Puuc area might have some bearing on the stiff painting style of Sierrita de Ticul cave art. This could also explain differences in scale, those in the Puuc area generally being much larger than Classic paintings in the Peten. The small scale of the Naj Tunich paintings again seems tied to a ceramic painting tradition. Perhaps the Naj

Tunich artists were ceramic painters who conceived their compositions in a diminutive scale, while the Sierrita de Ticul painters adjusted their images to the vast wall space.

Right now, the overall picture is one of idiosyncracy in cave decoration. In some cases we have only one cave representing a style, as at Actun Dzib, Belize. The Sierrita de Ticul is an exception with a cluster of caves with comparable imagery. The close proximity of these caves and their easy accessibility may have contributed to the proliferation of a single style of cave art in this area. Sculpted cave art is far more likely to be in a crude vernacular style than the painted art, which, on the whole, shares more with the elite art of surface sites. Some of the sculpted art may have been the focus of propitiatory rituals. The human-looking stalagmite from Río Frio Cave E, for instance, has a carved depression near the head found to contain burnt wood, charcoal, and carbonized sherds (Pendergast, 1970: 8). These kinds of sculpted "idols" are probably widespread in Maya caves and have largely gone unreported.

In conclusion, wall art is one of the most interesting expressions of ancient Maya material culture found in caves, although it is still relatively unknown to scholars. Our ability to understand why regional styles of cave art developed can only improve in the future as the corpus grows; new cave art is being discovered annually. One factor to consider is preservation, which might explain the lack of pigment-based art in Chiquibul and Caves Branch caves. A hypothesis worth testing is whether regional variation is tied to functional variation, not just in the rites performed in caves but also in the status of those who used them. For example, if elites patronized caves in one area, then the art might assume a certain character, more like the ceremonial art of surface sites. If only the peasantry were using a particular set of caves, then the art might take on a vernacular character. Classic period vernacular cave art demonstrates that Maya art was not monolithic, but that there were concurrent artistic traditions whose expressions depended on social and spatial context. Regional variation may also be linked with chronological variation. For instance, Colonial cave art has been found only in the Northern Lowlands to date. It is also possible that Maya cave art will turn out to be relatively idiosyncratic from site to site owing to the private nature of cave use. Our grasp of regional variation in Maya cave art is truly in its infancy; only continued research will give it a more solid form.

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