

# Balam Na Cave 4: Implications for Understanding Preclassic Cave Mortuary Practices

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*ABSTRACT: Investigations of several small caves near the community of Poخته, Peten, revealed one that contained a number of small alcoves blocked by walls of unshaped stones. All appear to have been looted in antiquity but the recovery of human bone along with beads of jade and pyrite suggest that the alcoves served as tombs of special individuals. The ceramic assemblage, dominated by waxy wares, indicates that the complex dates to the Late Preclassic. The presence of similar tombs at Naj Tunich points to a previously unnoted Preclassic burial practice that does not appear to continue into the Classic period.*

The presence of human osteological material in caves is one of the few topics in Maya cave archaeology to have received early theoretical discussion. The earliest was George Gordon's (1898) suggestion that the burials in Gordon's Cave #3 at Copan represented evidence of Brinton's Nagualist cult. Oliver Ricketson (1925:394) in his review of ancient Maya burial practices, mentions that caves were not the "usual burying-place." Mary Butler (1934) argued convincingly that the burials in Gordon's Cave, as well as other caves, were not related to the Nagualist cult but does not offer an alternative explanation. Frans Blom (1954) presented a number of examples of cave burials or ossuaries in Chiapas. In his discussion of Maya funerary practices, Alberto Ruz (1968) considers caves as simply another burial context but his few cave examples were never closely examined. J. Eric Thompson (1959, 1975) also mentions the presence of osteological material in caves but saw them as the remains of individuals who might have died while conducting rituals at the site. Systematic attempts to deal with cave osteological material were finally attempted by Brady (1989) and by Ann Scott (1997) in which a range of possible explanations was explored.

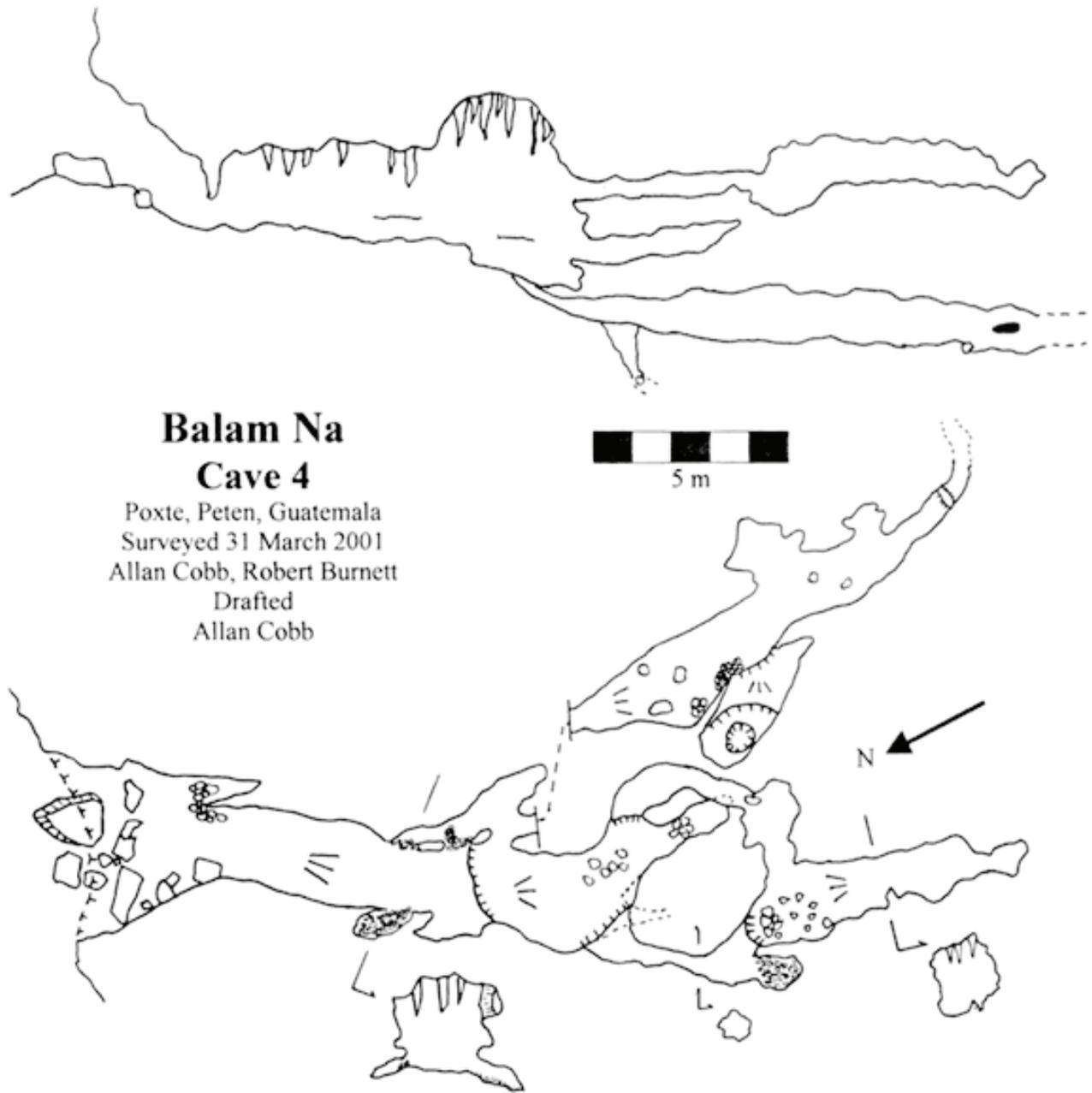
At the time of Brady's synthesis, few indisputable examples of cave interment in the Maya lowlands could be found. Among

those noted were the High Priest's Grave at Chichen Itza (Thompson 1938), the ossuary in Gordon's Cave #3 at Copan (Gordon 1898), the rock lined crypts at San Pablo Cave (Lee and Hayden 1988) and the elaborate, masonry tomb burials at Naj Tunich (Brady 1989). After the work at the Cave of the Glowing Skulls, Scott (1997) argued that the ossuary burial noted at Gordon's Cave is



**FIGURE 1**

Map of Guatemala showing the location of Balam Na and the major cave in the area, Naj Tunich.



**FIGURE 2**  
Plan and Profile views of Balam Na Cave 4.

part of a Honduran burial tradition rather than reflecting lowland Maya patterns. Recent discoveries, however, are radically changing our understanding of Maya burial practices. Excavations by Juan Luis Bonor (1995, Bonor and Martínez Klemm 1995, Bonor and Glassman 1999) at the Caves Branch Rockshelter and work by Keith Prufer in the Maya Mountains appear to document a regular pattern of interment in rockshelters. Prufer notes that San Pablo Cave is actually a rockshelter and so these burials are part of the emerging pattern of rockshelter interment. Thus, the only recognized Maya burials in true caves are the High Priest's Grave and the tomb burials at Naj Tunich. In each case the context is unique and so one would have to conclude that each is an idiosyncratic feature of their particular site rather than reflecting an actual pattern of cave interment.

#### BALAM NA, CAVE 4

In the spring of 2001, a California State University, Los Angeles archaeological project, working under the Atlas Arqueológico de Guatemala, discovered a number of burials in a true cave in southeastern Peten. The site is one of at least seven caves in a small isolated hill called the Balam Na located 16 km northwest of the town of Poptun [Figure 1]. Time permitted the investigation of only four of the caves. The burials were found in the last of these, which was designated Balan Na Cave #4. [Figure 2]

The entrance to Cave 4 is low, only 89 cm high, requiring one to enter on hands and knees. There is also a considerable scatter of large stones at the entrance suggesting that it may have been blocked at one time. A metate, [Figure 3] with a mano set in the bowl, was found buried 26 cm below the surface at the entrance. Eight large sherds representing at least three different Preclassic Waxy Ware vessels were found stacked in a niche to one side of the entrance. The deposit appears to be recent work of looters.

A narrow entrance passage, approximately 5 m long, stretches from the mouth of the cave to a small circular chamber, 2 m in diameter. A number of passages and alcoves radiate off of this chamber. At ground level at the northern end of the chamber is the entrance to a small alcove 74 cm high by 80 cm wide and 230 cm long. The alcove runs parallel to the entrance passage and stone walls appear to have once closed the alcove off from both the entrance passage and the circular chamber. Both of these walls have been pushed over and the soil within the alcove is very disturbed. The soil on the surface contains numerous fragments of human bone suggesting that this space had once served as a tomb. The recovery of a jade bead indicates that the burial may have been richly furnished. All of the ceramic recovered appears to date to the Late Preclassic.



**FIGURE 3**

*A metate with the mano set in the bowl was found buried at the entrance to the cave.*

Above this alcove is a second smaller alcove with a very restricted entrance, only 77 cm high and 93 cm wide. It appears to have been blocked by a stone wall at one time. The large amount of human bone recovered in the alcove suggests that it once held a burial. In the process of looting, the contents of the burial appear to have been spilt onto two flat shelves in front of the alcove entrance. The upper shelf, 58 x 26 cm, contained several human bones including a finger bone. The lower shelf, 60 x 35 cm, held a good deal of human bone and a jade bead. The soil on these shelves had not been

recently disturbed suggesting that the looting was ancient.

A third set of burials is reached by a low opening at floor level on the eastern side of the circular chamber. A passage slopes downward to a series of lower passages. Most, but not all, of the artifacts were concentrated in the first 5 m of sloping floor. Large quantities of human bone were found but also ceramics, chert, jade, and pyrite beads. Because the bone has been covered by mud over time it does not appear that the looting was recent. At the bottom of the sloping floor, a fragment of long bone was found lying at an angle against the cave wall. The bone was cemented by dripping calcite to the floor where it had fallen, indicating, once again, that the scattering of the bones had occurred some time ago.

Several passages lead off the southern end of the circular chamber. A high passage along the western cave wall contained both human bone and artifacts. The area is badly disturbed but it appears that a body had been placed in the passage at some point.

To summarize the archaeological findings, human skeletal material was recovered from four badly looted alcoves or short passages that, at one time, had been blocked by stone walls. The bone was badly broken and deteriorated so it is not possible to say if only a single individual had been placed in each place without a through analysis. The bone is embedded in a hard clay matrix that covers the original floor. The clay appears to be slowly washing out of the ceiling of the cave where it is interbedded with the limestone. The process appears to be slow enough that it indicates that the looting occurred in antiquity. Since the primary goal of the project was site survey, the amount of soil moved was minimal. Nevertheless, nearly a dozen stone, jade and pyrite beads were recovered suggesting that these burials may have been richly furnished before their looting. All of the ceramic recovered from the cave appears to date to the Late Preclassic.

## DISCUSSION

Interment in alcoves blocked by walls of unshaped stone has not been mentioned in the previous theoretical discussions as a Maya burials type. Nevertheless, Balam Na is not the first site to report this type of architectural feature. At Naj Tunich, several burials placed in natural alcoves and closed off with walls of crude, unshaped stones were described. Brady (1989:354-355) says:

The remaining three structures, if that term can be loosely used to include alcoves which have been blocked by a single wall, have produced no elite goods but seem to date to an earlier period than the formal structures. Thus it is not certain whether the lack of more sophisticated architecture and grave offerings is a reflection of common status or the Preclassic/Protoclassic date of the burials.

The Naj Tunich examples had not been given a great deal of attention because they appeared to be idiosyncratic features at a site that contained a number of unique occurrences. The Balam Na finds are significant in providing a second example of such burials that clarify a number of details at Naj Tunich. Balam Na Cave 4 appears to be a single component, Late Preclassic site. The Late Preclassic/ Protoclassic ceramics recovered from the Naj Tunich structures are, therefore, broadly contemporaneous with those at Balam Na suggesting that the features at Naj Tunich are in fact early.

The early date is significant in suggesting that, prior to the Classic Period, several sites in this area were utilizing natural cave features in much the same way to inter their dead, indicating that we are probably dealing with a formal burial pattern. These early burials appear to be part of an antecedent tradition that was continued and elaborated at Naj Tunich. In the Early Classic, a much larger alcove at Naj Tunich was blocked by a wall of shaped rectangular blocks and stuccoed with a yellow mud "plas-

ter.” Finally, during the Late Classic, elaborate free-standing masonry tombs were built and some were stuccoed with lime plaster. While these elaborate Classic Period masonry structures have no counterparts in known caves, it is now possible to recognize these unique finds as an outgrowth of an established cultural tradition.

Like the Naj Tunich structures, the Balam Na burials had also been looted in antiquity as well as in modern times so the lack of rich burial offerings may reflect nothing more than thorough looting. The quantity of jade, pyrite and stone beads at Balam Na Cave 4 is sufficient to make it clear that they do not represent the pattern often noted with the burial of commoners, that is the placement of single beads in the mouths of the deceased. Rather, the small quantity recovered appears to reflect our very limited sampling of the midden associated with relatively rich grave offerings. The occupants of the tombs, therefore, appear to have held elite status. This is certainly consistent with the tradition as it was elaborated during the Classic Period at Naj Tunich. The burial in Structure 1, dating to the Early Classic, contained jade beads and the remnants of several basal flanged bowls with elaborate, modeled lid handles (Figure 4). The rim of a ceramic vessel bearing a hieroglyphic inscription dealing with high political office was recovered from Structure 2, a Late Classic tomb (Figure 5). Thus there is little doubt



**FIGURE 4**

Elaborate jaguar head lid handle from Naj Tunich Structure 1.

about the high status of the occupants of the later Naj Tunich tombs.



**FIGURE 5**

An inscription referring to royal succession on a Late Classic vessel from Naj Tunich.

The impression of elite status at Balam Na is reinforced when one examines the entire hill as a complex. Hills are important features in Maya sacred landscape (Vogt 1969:375) but this hill would have stood out by virtue of the large number of caves that it possessed. The most important appears to have been Cave 1, which, perhaps not coincidentally, is located highest on the hill. The cave is unusual in that the two entrances allow one to pass through the hill, a feature that seems to have impressed Mesoamerican people. The principal entrance is marked by rock art including a sophisticated jaguar face, a painted *akbal* glyph and some 40 other petroglyphs. Thus, there appears to be a good deal of elaboration of the cave which may reflect its appropriation by a nearby population center. The entrance of Cave 2 is located just below the rear entrance to Cave 1. Immediately inside the entrance, a Late Preclassic plate was found just below the surface. Upon removal, it was found to overlay the bottom of a large inverted red bowl and that was, in turn, covering a small incensario. Human bones had been packed around the vessels in the original hole. Lack of time prevented our excavating the bones. In another place, a cache containing a number of human skulls and another incensario were uncovered but not removed. While the ceramics from Caves 2 and 4 are contemporaneous, the treatment of the human bone is markedly different suggesting that the occupants of each cave held different social positions. Cave 3, located at the base of the

hill, was the smallest and only contained sherds of an unslipped vessel.

In reviewing the archaeology, the hill of Balam Na contains a number of caves that appear to have decidedly individual artifact assemblages and sets of modifications. The most likely explanation is that each cave had a separate function while together forming a single ritual complex. Cave 1 appears to be unusual in the presence of a relatively sophisticated rock art jaguar face and a recognizable hieroglyph. Cave 4, on the other hand, appears to have been the place of interment of the most important members of society.

Another interesting feature of the Balam Na evidence is that the pattern of elite burial in blocked cave alcoves appears, on present evidence, to be temporally restricted to the Late Preclassic. We have outlined the continuity of the tradition at Naj Tunich but it needs to be stressed that the elaborate Late Classic structures at that site have no counterpart at any cave now known from anywhere in the Maya lowlands. Why did the practice cease? Evidence is rapidly accumulating that caves were subject to pillage after military defeats and often the targets of termination rituals. There may have been a stone wall blocking the principal entrance to Cave 1 and the entrance to Cave 2 was blocked at the time of its discovery. We know that the bones of royal ancestors were also targeted. When Naranjo defeated Yaxha in A.D. 710, the bones of a previous ruler were exhumed and scattered about (Martin and Grube 2000:76). It may have been this type of practice led to the discontinuation of the Preclassic burial custom. We would speculate that the interment of ancestors or revered settlement founders within caves simply made them far too vulnerable to desecration by hostile neighbors. During the Classic Period the most important individuals were interred in artificial caves inside of artificial hills, that is, in tombs within pyramids. The bones of revered ancestors were thus afforded greater protection by being deeply buried in the heart of the population center.

## CONCLUSIONS

A review of the cave literature has shown that there has been a long discussion but little agreement over the role of caves in Maya burial practices. When contextual data were examined in detail (Brady 1989, Scott 1997), little good evidence of cave interment in the southern lowlands was found. Instead, many of the examples appeared to be disposal of sacrificial victims. In the five years since Scott's (1997) synthesis, however, the use of rockshelters as ossuaries has become well established. The recent investigations at Balam Na Cave 4 suggest that a second interment pattern may be recognizable. It appears that important individuals were interred in natural cave alcoves, which were then closed off with walls of crude, unshaped stones. The practice appears on present evidence to be temporally restricted to the Late Preclassic. Since both sites where the custom has been identified are in southeastern Peten, it is also possible that this is a regional practice but additional data are needed to resolve this issue. Finally, we have speculated that cave burial may have been discontinued after the Late Preclassic because the remains of revered community founders were too vulnerable to desecration. The tombs at both Naj Tunich and Balam Na Cave 4 appear to have been looted in antiquity. We have noted that the Classic Period practice of burying rulers in tombs inside pyramids represents a symbolic continuation of the Preclassic pattern only the hill and the cave are artificial.

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