Mountains, Caves and Cosmovision: Preclassic Rural Settlement in Southeastern Peten

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The California State University, Los Angeles Archaeological Field Program in Guatemala has investigated rural caves and settlement in Southeastern Peten since 2001. The program of mapping and exploration has focused on sites near the modern settlement of Poxte, located some 16 km northwest of the town of Poptun. The 2001 and 2002 seasons focused on the investigation of four caves in an isolated hill named Balam Na (Brady et al. 2003). The heaviest utilization of the caves appears to have occurred during the Late Preclassic. The discovery of a number of looted burials in natural alcoves was of particular interest because they were similar in concept and construction to burials found at Naj Tunich. The presence of pyrite, jade and other stone beads in the soil matrix with the bone indicates that elaborate offerings had once accompanied the burials and suggests that these individuals had held high status (Garza et al. 2001). A reconnaissance of the hill top failed to located the remains of residential architecture making it difficult to relate the finds to surface settlement. While conferring with the new landowner in 2004, Brady was shown a small surface settlement located on a complex of modified natural hills, which had been recently cleared of forest. The complex, named Sabalam, is located 1.2 km northeast of the hill of Balam Na.

This area was investigated by the Atlas Arqueológico de Guatemala as part of a survey of the Rio Poxte drainage in the early 1990s. It is known that Wanda Valdizon (1995) investigated several of the caves at Balam Na and it is assumed that she recorded the presence of the settlement at Sabalam as a rural outlier of the secondary site of Poxte 1 or Poxte 2. During the Late Preclassic the area was most likely dominated by Curucuitz, located approximately 5 km to the northeast (Laporte and Mejia 2000:176-197).

Sabalam

Sabalam forms a "natural" unit in that it consists of a group of closely spaced hills surrounded on all sides by flat bottomland. At the same time, it is part of a larger settlement system with other hilltop settlements located within a half a kilometer. Both the discreteness and the interconnectedness are emphasized by current land use in which the hills appear as forested islands within a sea of pastureland. Assuming that the forest had been cut for *milpa*, these settlements would have dominated the horizon.

Sabalam is visually striking because it presents itself as a complex of four hills laid out in a neat square. The approach from the east is open with the broad, relatively flat space between the hills forming a plaza 60-70 meters on a side. This space may have been leveled by the Maya but we were unable to verify this point since we did not have permission to excavate. The layout of the hills adds to the impressiveness of the complex. The hills on the southern and the northern sides of the plaza [Hills A and D

respectively] are the lowest. The western side of the plaza is closed by a single long hill with a depression in the center that forms two discrete peaks which we have labeled Hills B and C. These two higher hills have the greatest amount of modification and architecture.

Architecture and Modifications

All of the hills have been modified. The top of Hill A appears to have been leveled and two small platforms were made of unshaped stone. Hill B shows even more leveling and has a single very large platform. Hill C is the most elaborate with a series of low platforms constructed around a small plaza. The western end of the plaza is closed by the largest platform at the site. Since the western and southern edges of the platform extend down the slope of the hill, very large quantities of fill had to be brought in for this construction. The tangle of tree trucks on the slope in this area from the clearing of the hill prevented us from measuring the actual depth but it was clearly more than three meters. The northeastern hill, while the lowest was also divided for recording purposes into Hills D and E. Both show leveling of their tops and each has a platform.

Caves

A total of nine caves are recorded on the map and several additional caves were not placed on the map either because we did not have time to verify them or did not map their exact locations. Multiple cave openings were found on all the hills except Hill C. All of the caves appear to have had their entrances blocked in antiquity. Many of these blockages are still in place and were not investigated because we did not have the permission of the Institute of Anthropology to open them. Three caves that had been opened in recent years were explored and mapped. The longest, Cave 2 on Hill B, is interesting because the blockage in the northern entrance had been removed but the blockage at the southern entrance was still in place. The three caves that were mapped are all low, narrow and short. While the caves are not physically impressive, all begin at or pass through the center of their respective hills and thus appear to have a relationship with surface architecture.

Very few artifacts were encountered. An almost intact Sierra Red vessel and several sherds were noted in Cave 1 on Hill B. At this point we cannot explain the dearth of artifacts. It is possible that over the last two millennia enough silt has washed in bury the original use surface but without excavation this possibility cannot be evaluated.

It is interesting that Hill C, which is the most elaborated architectonically, is the only one where no natural cave has yet been found. Two architectural caves have been discovered here that are clearly aligned with architecture. These will be discussed in greater detail by Dr. Brady.

Before leaving the subject of caves, it should be noted that in the process of mapping the surface architecture, pieces of speleothem, that is, cave formations, were noted on the surface.

Dating

Because our activities were limited to mapping and no excavations were undertaken, few sherds were recovered. All of the perhaps two dozen sherds appeared to date to the Late Preclassic. While this is very thin evidence for dating the entire site, we would note that Late Preclassic material was also noted on several other hills so that it appears to be the time when this area was utilized.

Discussion

After being shown the Sabalam complex, the project immediately reformulated its goals to undertake a preliminary investigation of the complex because it appeared to relate to so many issues being discussed in Maya archaeology. As already noted, the complex is a rural outlier of a secondary center, which was in turn, controlled by a primary center. Thus, Sabalam would appear to reside a considerable distance, both physically and politically, from the center of great power. Nevertheless, the residents of the hill were clearly able to recruit enough labor to transform the hills into a microcosm of those centers. We are not going to speculate here on who resided at the site or their relationship to the power elites in the political centers since we have collected no data on those issues.

We focused instead on the fact that this rural settlement incorporated so many of the elements of site validation that cave archaeology has pointed out in major centers. The caves in Hills B and E run through the center of the hills and under the architecture on the surface. The alignment of the artificial caves on Hill C with architecture indicates that this was a matter of importance for the residents so we should assume that the Maya had at least a general idea of where the caves tunnels were in relation to surface features.

This type of study has not been attempted with rural settlement in the past so it is not possible to say how common the incorporation of caves into architecture was outside of centers. Even in centers, however, the placement of architecture over caves appears to be more than simply an elite strategy designed to legitimate claims to royal status because non-elite examples have been documented. At Pusilha, Joyce (1929:440-443) mentions settlement on the top of a hill some three-quarters of a kilometer from the central plaza. Mounds, which are described as “hut-foundations” were arranged around a chimney-like cave entrance into which offerings had been thrown. Unfortunately, a map of the settlement was not provided so no discussion of layout is possible. At Dos Pilas, the Petexbatun Regional Cave Survey documented a number of residential structures constructed over small caves. In most cases, these were simple housemounds where the relationship between cave and structure was obvious. In the most elaborate example, the asymmetrical spacing of three structures on a platform provided access to the cave entrance behind the platform (Brady 1997:610). Brady has argued that chultunes are actually artificial caves. Chultun 4F-3 at Tikal is interesting because the neck is angled to reach the main chamber of the chultun, which was located under Structure 4F-3, a housemound. Clearly these urban, non-elite examples suggest that the practice resonated with far more fundamental values in Maya society and so cross-cut class distinctions. If this is true we would expect to find many more rural examples.

It is noteworthy that all the settlements in this area appear to be located on the karst hills that protrude from the valley floor. The hills that contain caves would be considered by the modern Maya to be the home of the Earth Lord, whose Maya name would literally mean "hill-valley." The hills are alive and sentient and therefore sacred. These are the focus of community identity as can be seen from the town of Quetzaltenango whose Maya name, Xelaju', means "at the foot of the ten" and refers to the ten sacred mountains surrounding the town (Berrera Vásquez 1945:184). The importance of hills is also seen in the fact that "…the idiom for referring to human construction is often a metaphor for "hill" (Stuart and Houston 1994:86). At Sabalam the reason for the identification of architecture with hill is clear as architecture is built into and becomes an extension of the natural hill.

As noted earlier, the other outstanding feature of the Sabalam complex is the quadripartite arrangement of the hills. This clearly models the ideal Mesoamerican cosmogram. As Redfield and Villa Rojas (1962:114) note, "The world, the village and the milpa are thought of as squares with four corners lying in the four cardinal points of the compass and with defined central points." To this could be added the house as well and it is well documented in Maya folk religion in the use of the *mesa* (Sharon 2003). Eliade (1979:335) suggests that the quadripartite model has an even more fundamental appeal in observing that:

> The foundation of the new city repeats the creation of the world; indeed, once the place has been ritually validated, a fence is erected in the form of a circle or a square broken by four doors which correspond to the four cardinal directions... Cities, like the cosmos are divided in four; said another way, they are a copy of the universe.

We have stressed the folk application of the quadripartite model because it is our contention that the layout of Sabalam would have had a magnetic affect when the first rural settlements were being established in this area. While our data do not allow us to address the issue, it would be interesting in the future to see if the earliest settlement in the immediate area was located on this hill. Our observations must remain very tentative at this point but while our exploration of hills in the immediate area located other settlements, none showed the formal elaboration noted at Sabalam. We would suggest that the decision to elaborate this complex was based on its close correspondence to the Maya cosmogram. It is plain from ethnography that cosmological models play a central role in the definition of the most basic human constructions, the house and the *milpa*. While these may leave only the most vestigial remains in the archaeological record, early sites like Sabalam remind us that cosmological models are clearly visible and playing an important role as soon as formal architecture appeared even in rural settlement. This suggests that Classic Period elite architecture was simply elaborating on a much older folk paradigm.

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