



Figure 1. The karstic topography of the upper Macal Valley. Photo courtesy of Marius Jovaiša.

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## The Text and Context of the Cuychen Vase, Macal Valley, Belize

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The foothills of the Maya Mountains form a landscape rich in caves that were intensively utilized by the ancient Maya. The favorable preservation afforded by the shelter and stable microclimate of caves—a quality that has increasingly attracted the attention of archaeologists—has unfortunately also marked these sites as profitable targets for looters. Thus when the opportunity presents itself to investigate a recently discovered cave, archaeologists have to act fast to foil prospective plunderers. Precisely such an opportunity arose in July of 2010 when an unlooted cave was discovered in the Macal River Valley of western Belize.

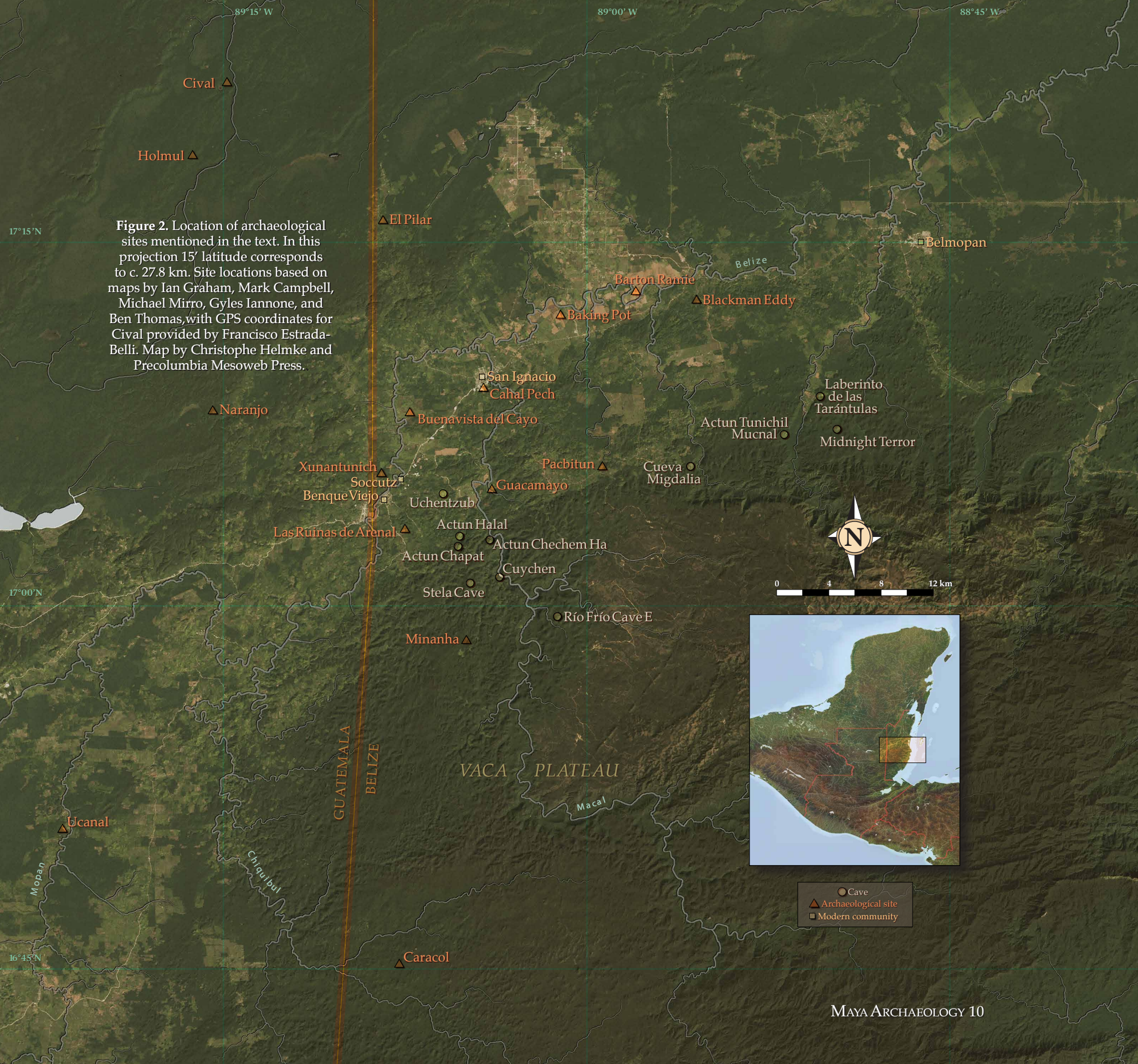
Remarkably, this small cave had escaped the attention of looters due to its remote location and very difficult access. The cave, perched high in a cliff face overlooking the Macal River Valley, contained a well-preserved assemblage of ceramics and a stunning and otherwise unique polychrome vase. Here we present the results of the work we conducted at this site,

which we named Cuychen, *kuy-ch'een*, “owl-cave,” and provide a summary of the epigraphic analyses of the polychrome vase found within.<sup>1</sup> In so doing we elaborate on the provenience of the Cuychen vase and attempt to reconstruct in broad strokes the ritual events that the ancient Maya celebrated within this site.

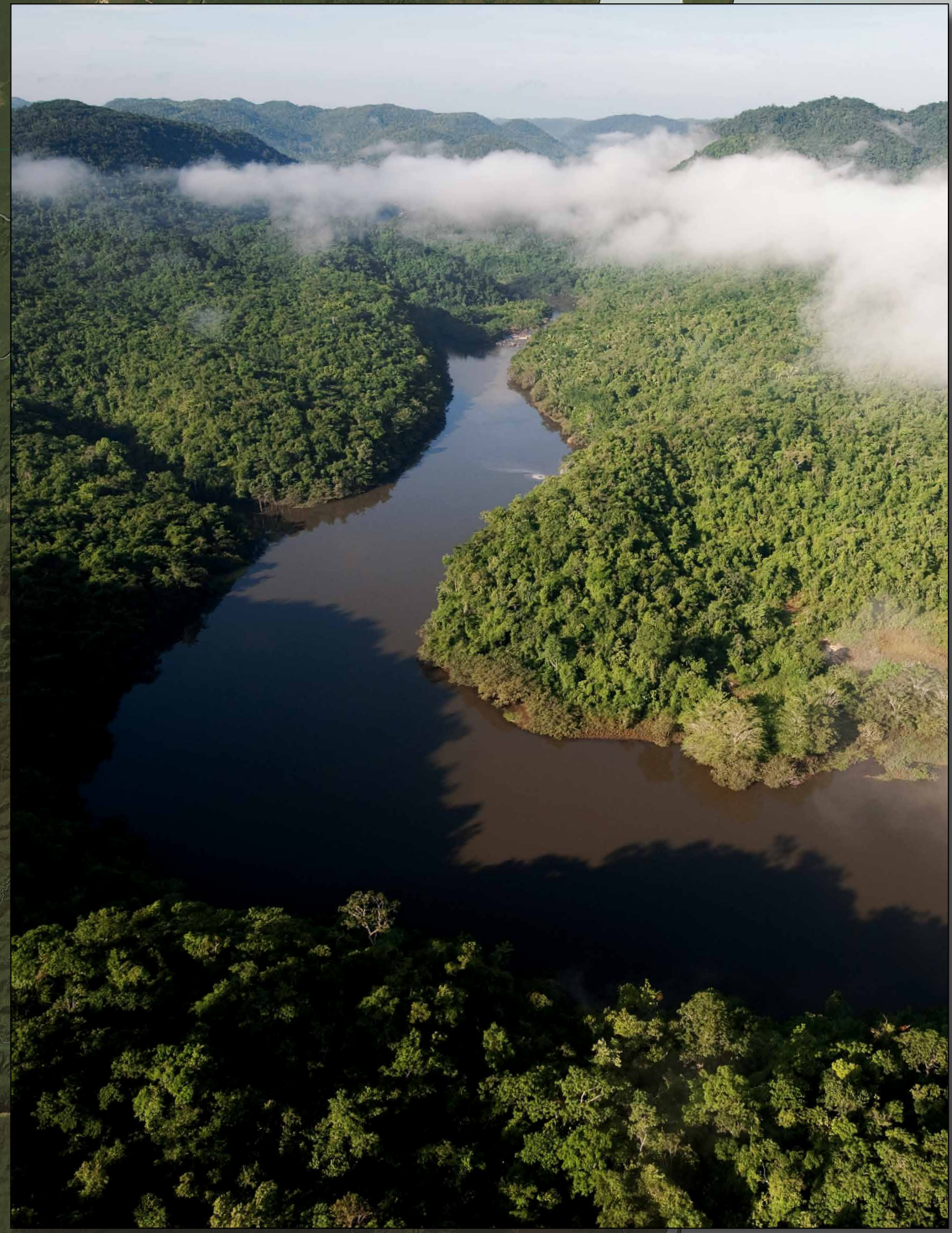
### Site Setting and Description

Cuychen is located near the middle of the Macal Valley of west-central Belize (Figure 2). The small cave is set within the limestone cliffs that border the western bank of the Macal River and overlooks what is today the Vaca Falls hydroelectric dam

<sup>1</sup> The name of the cave stems primarily from the observation that it served as the lair to a raptorial bird of prey, the many small rodent bones in the guano of the cave floor suggesting that it had been inhabited by owls. In addition, the name makes playful reference to the glyphic text of the vase found within, wherein the names of the father and mother of the vessel's owner contain, respectively, the segments *kuy* “owl” and *ch'een* “cave.”



**Figure 2.** Location of archaeological sites mentioned in the text. In this projection 15' latitude corresponds to c. 27.8 km. Site locations based on maps by Ian Graham, Mark Campbell, Michael Mirro, Gyles Iannone, and Ben Thomas, with GPS coordinates for Cival provided by Francisco Estrada-Belli. Map by Christophe Helmke and Precolumbia Mesoweb Press.



(Figure 3). The site is ringed by a series of caves that have already been the subject of intensive archaeological investigations undertaken by Peter Schmidt, David Pendergast, and more recently by members of the Western Belize Regional Cave Project (WBRCP), under the direction of Jaime Awe. Some of these sites include Uchentzub, Actun Chechem Ha, Río Frío Cave E, Stela Cave, Actun Chapat, and Actun Halal. Nearby surface sites include Minanha, Las Ruinas de Arenal, and the as-yet-little investigated site of Guacamayo. Although we cannot conclusively demonstrate this at present, we surmise that the ancient users of Cuychen may have come from Minanha, the nearest known surface site, not least since the cave is located within the northeastern territorial limits of this small polity (Helmke and Awe 2008:78; Iannone 2006). This assumption rests also in part on the contemporaneity of the two sites, with the added caveat that future investigations in the area may change the picture considerably. From a broader vantage, Cuychen can be described as located nearly equidistant from the major centers of Naranjo and Caracol, and as such the cave is located less than a day's walk from either of these sites.

**Figure 3.** For most of its course the Macal River sweeps through lush subtropical rainforest. Photo courtesy of Marius Jovaiša.



**Figure 4.** The setting of Cuychen. The cave is located within the cliff near the middle of the photograph. Note the milpa in fallow in the hanging valley behind the hill in which the cave is found. Photo courtesy of Marius Jovaiša.

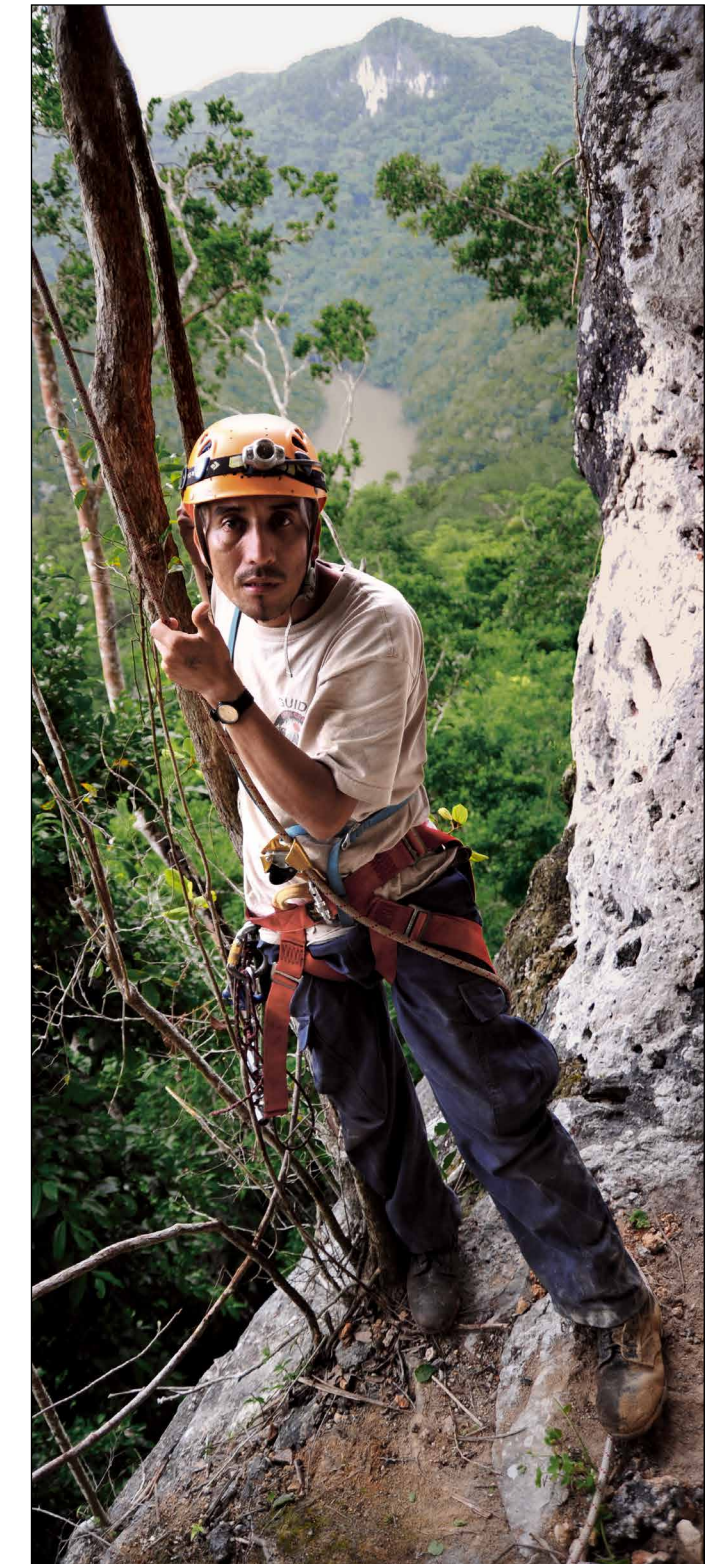
The karstic topography bordering the Macal River is in many parts characterized by a series of prominent cliffs (Figure 1). Formed through the seepage of groundwater, many caves are found in this area, especially along these exposed cliff faces. Cuychen follows the same pattern, and it is clear that it was formed by slow-flowing water, seeping through a horizontal cleavage plane between two strata of limestone conglomerate.

Cuychen is found near the summit of a prominent hill.

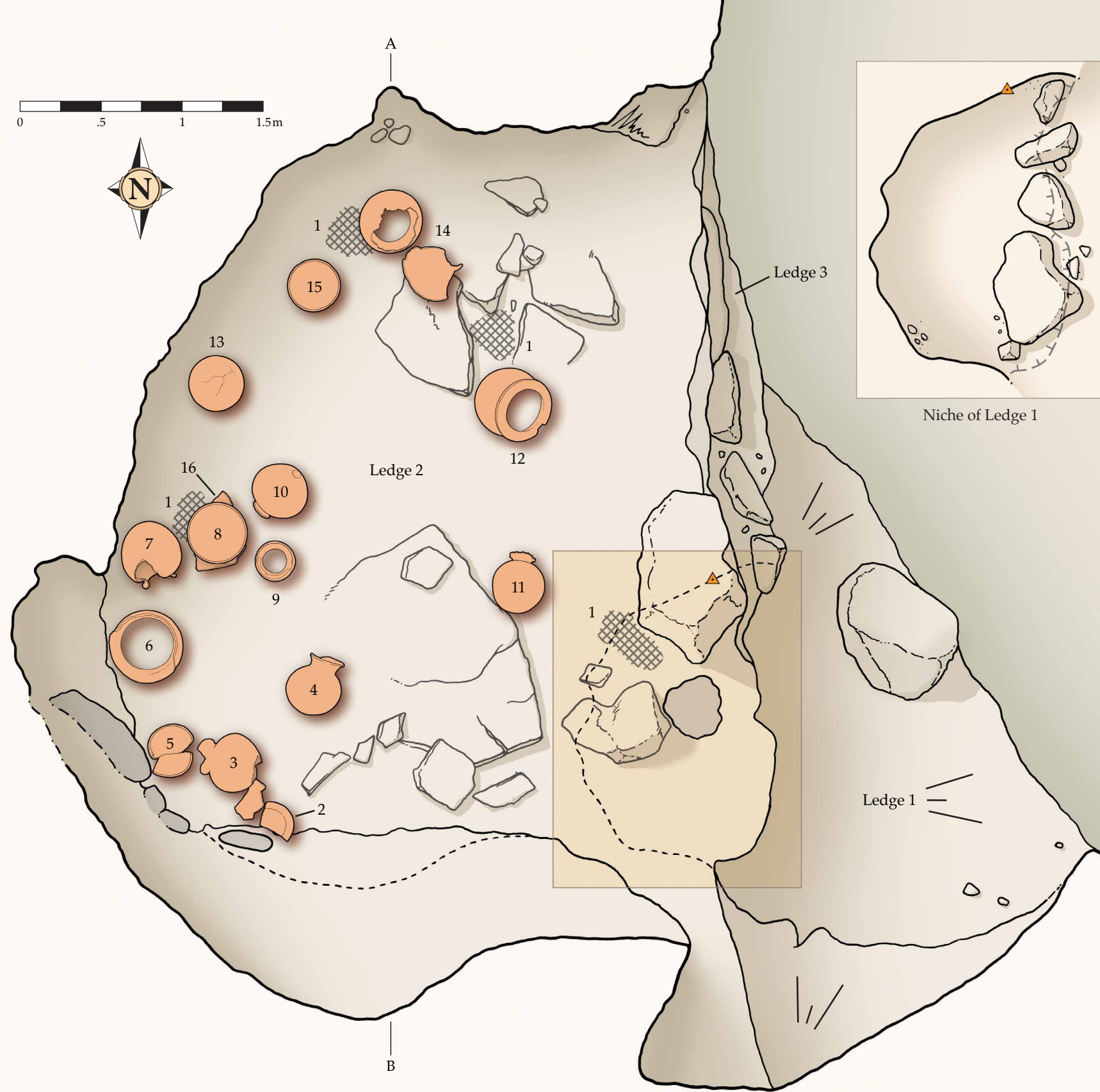
The eastern face of this peak exhibits a series of sheer cliffs, each interrupted by horizontal shelves, giving the cliff face a stepped appearance (Figure 4). The uppermost rock face is no more than 5 m high and gives way at its base to a sloping shelf before dropping off some 30 m to an additional shelf. Cuychen perforates the central face of this cliff. The base of the lowest shelf aligns more or less to the top of the subtropical canopy. The third and lowest cliff is estimated to be 22 m high, based on the



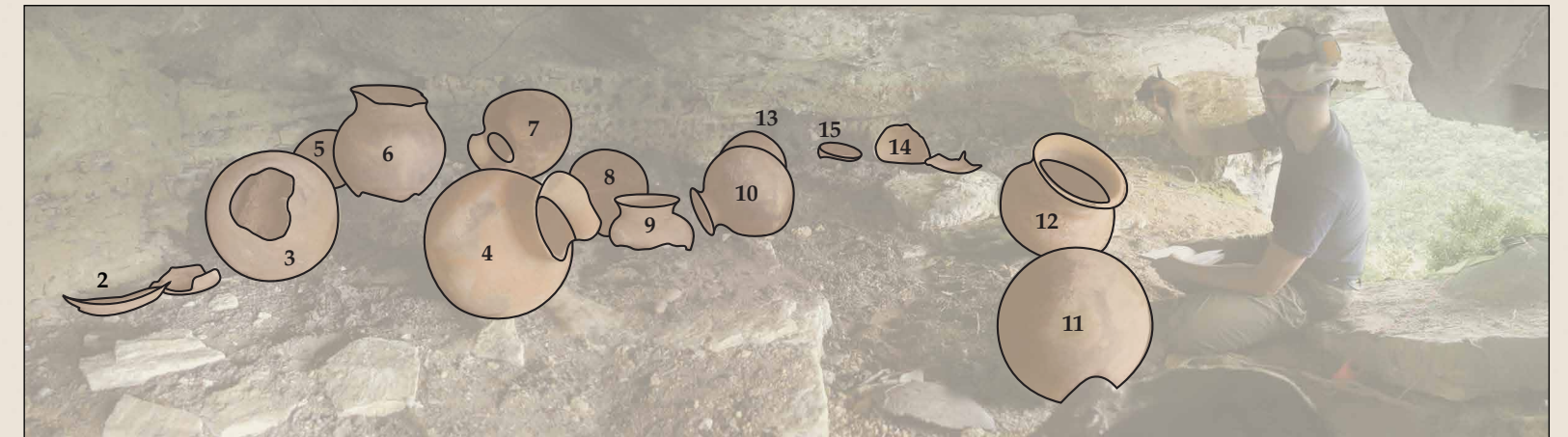
**Figure 5a.** View from Cuychen out onto the Macal Valley, with Marcos Cucul rappelling into the entrance. Photo: Shawn Morton.



**Figure 5b.** Abel García at the mouth of the cave bracing the belay line. The Macal River courses in the background between the karstic hills. Photo: Christophe Helmke.



**Figure 6.** Plan of Cuychen outlining Ledges 1, 2, and 3. Note the niche of Ledge 1 that is shown as an inset. Cross-hatching marks the sherd clusters of the polychrome vase (Vessel 1, “The Cuychen Vase”). All other ceramic vessels (Vessels 2 through 16) are indicated by their numerical designation. Survey: Shawn Morton, Christophe Helmke, and Nazario Puc (2010). Plan: Shawn Morton and Christophe Helmke. Grid North is 2° 53’ E of N.



**Figure 7.** General view of Cuychen, upon first entry, looking northwest. The numbers correspond to those in Figure 6. Photo: Christophe Helmke.

average height of canopy in the area. From there the 120+ m high talus slopes evenly downwards to the course of the river. Access to the site is difficult and requires rappelling 15 m down from the edge of the uppermost cliff (Figure 5). We suspect that access in antiquity was gained by means of a broad wooden ladder built up from the shelf immediately below the cave entrance.

Cuychen itself has been subdivided into three main areas (Figure 6). The first is Ledge 1 and constitutes the small and sloping entrance landing, encompassing no more than 5.1 m<sup>2</sup>. The largest area of the cave is Ledge 2 and constitutes the cave proper, which is raised at least 1.7 m above the other portions of the site. The mostly flat area of Ledge 2 measures 5.75 m north-south and 4.54 m east-west and encompasses 19.2 m<sup>2</sup> in all, with ceiling height measuring on average 1 m. Along the eastern portion of the cave a series of small shelves step down from Ledge 2, which collectively have been designated as Ledge 3 (c. 0.9 m<sup>2</sup>). All in all Cuychen encompasses no more

than 26.8 m<sup>2</sup> and is thus not only one of the smallest caves that we have investigated, but also a small cave in terms of other subterranean sites in the Maya area as a whole. For the sake of illustration, the surface area of the relatively small and nearby Stela Cave is at least 25 times larger than Cuychen, and just to the northwest is Actun Chapat, boasting more than 500 m of mapped passages, while the total passage lengths of both Naj Tunich and Actun Tunichil Mucnal measure in excess of 3 km. Nevertheless, Cuychen’s size proved advantageous as it allowed us to map and excavate the site in its entirety, rather than limiting us to a minute sample as is otherwise the norm.

#### Circumstances of Discovery and Summary of Investigations

The site was first brought to the attention of the authorities by Dennis Martínez, a local farmer. He first entered the cave on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June, 2010, and found an unlooted site with a series of ceramic vessels and sherds of an exquisitely painted polychrome



**Figure 8.** The fragmentary Cuychen vase as found in situ. These sherds together constitute the eastern cluster (see Figure 6).  
Photo: Marcos Cucul.

vase (Figures 7 and 8; see also Figures 11 and 12). Having collected the two largest pieces of the vase, he contacted Gyles Iannone, director of the Social Archaeology Research Program. Realizing the importance of the find, Iannone contacted Jaime Awe, director of the Belizean Institute of Archaeology, and made arrangements for the pottery to be delivered to the authorities. In response to this discovery Awe promptly put together a team headed by freelance mountaineering experts Marcos Cucul and Mario Pérez, who, in collaboration with David Larson (of the Xibalba Mapping and Exploration Team), returned to the cave on July 4 to recover more pieces of the polychrome vase (Figure 8).

Motivated by the fact that the cave remained unlooted, and considering the uniqueness of the vase, it was decided to assemble another team to return to the cave, map the site, document the archaeological remains found within, search for additional fragments of the vase, and initiate excavations. At the end of July we had gathered the necessary team, this time composed of Abel García and Esperanza Gaitan (caving experts from Caves Branch Lodge), Catharina Santasilía (staff member of the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project), Gonzalo Pleitez (senior guide of River Rat Tours), as well as father-and-son team Bruce and Alex Minkin, in addition to two of the authors. We were able to gain access to the cave and begin the mapping of the site (Figure 9) as well as the documentation of the sixteen whole or reconstructible ceramic vessels found on the surface. We were also able to recover select matrix samples and one additional sherd of the vase.



**Figure 9.** Shawn Morton taking notes on the azimuth of the baseline to begin mapping the site. Vessel 11 is in the foreground.  
Photo: Christophe Helmke.

It was not until October 13—by which time the rainy season had subsided—that we were able to return to the cave with Cucul and Mario Portillo of Belmopan. At this point we finished the mapping of the site, recorded the cross-sections of the cave, and also completed the bulk of the in situ documentation and analysis of the ceramic vessels. The following day we returned with Nazario and Marvin Puc, two experienced excavators from Soccutz, to undertake the excavations. Fourteen excavation units were laid out across Ledge 2, according to

**Figure 10.** Plan of Cuychen showing layout and distribution of excavation units. Survey: Shawn Morton, Christophe Helmke, and Nazario Puc (2010). Plan: Shawn Morton and Christophe Helmke (2011). Grid North is 2° 53' E of N.

0 .5 1m

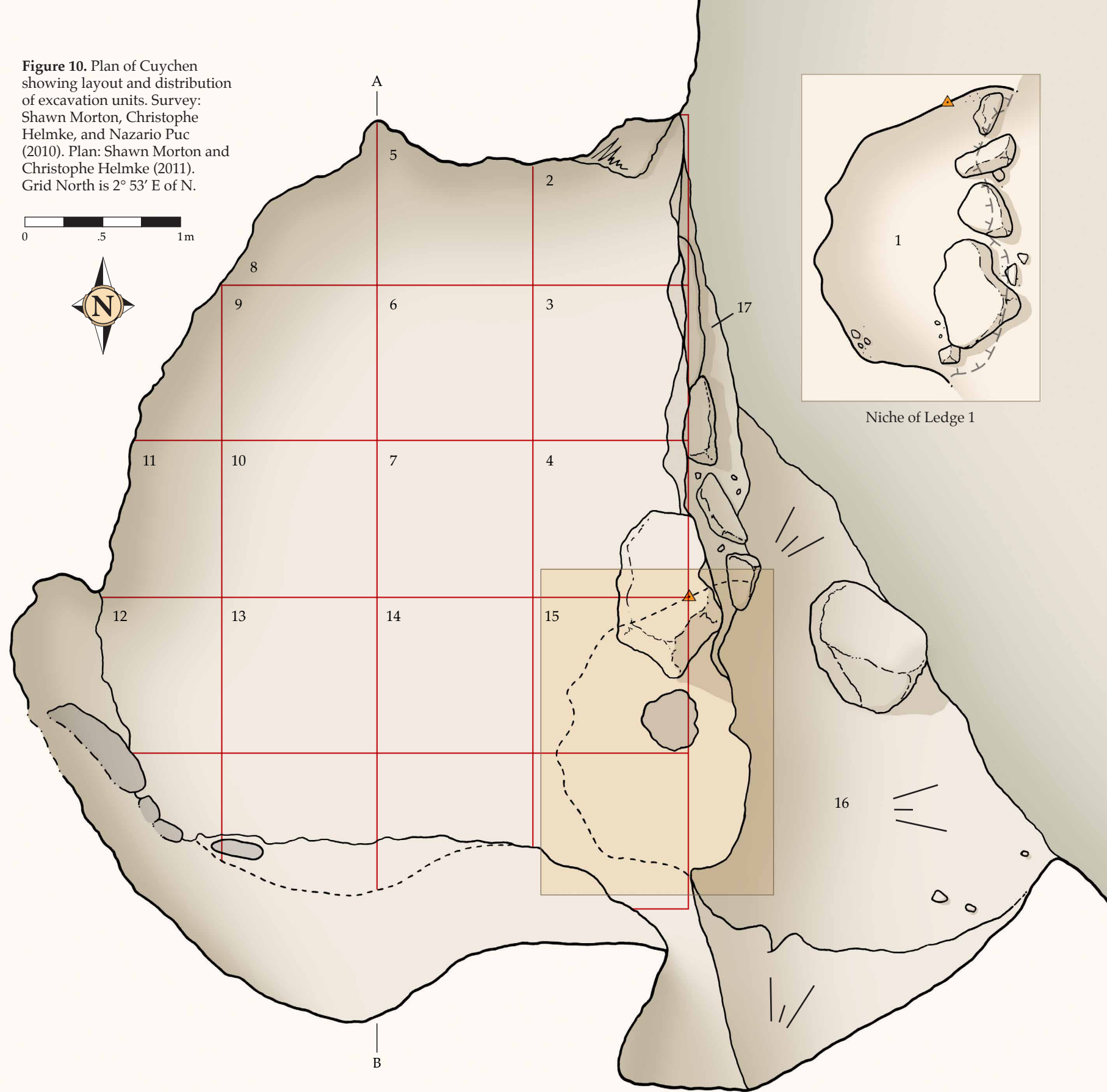




Figure 11. Two of the recovered fragments of the Cuychen vase. Photo: Christophe Helmke.

a 1 x 1 m grid (Figure 10). All the archaeological materials recovered were brought to San Ignacio for further processing and analysis. By mid-October we had completed the excavations and the archaeological investigation of the site.

#### Ceramic Dating

Through stratigraphic data and the dating of ceramic materials, we were able to document that Cuychen witnessed multiple phases of utilization during the Classic period. The ceramics found atop the thin stratum of guano deposited on Ledge 2 can be squarely assigned to the Spanish Lookout ceramic complex (see Gifford 1976:225-288), which typologically corresponds to the Late Classic. All the artifacts recovered as part of the excavations of the underlying matrix predate the deposition of the more complete vessels. This conclusion is confirmed by analyses of the ceramic sherds recovered from the excavations, since these can be identified as belonging to the Hermitage, Tiger Run, and Spanish Lookout complexes, corresponding respectively to the Early Classic (Tzakol 3), Middle Classic (or more properly speaking Tepeu 1), and Late Classic periods (most likely restricted to Tepeu 2). Thus there was an uninterrupted, if periodic, utilization of the cave from the late Early Classic to the latter part of the Late Classic (c. AD 450–830), which fits the most intensive occupation documented for nearby Minanha. Nevertheless,

it is possible that the site was used during the Terminal Classic, although the ceramic evidence remains mute on this point. However, based on archaeological investigations conducted at the sites of Uchentzub, Tipu, and Minanha, there is good evidence for continued occupation into the Terminal Classic and later, making later use of Cuychen a possibility.

#### Archaeological Synthesis

The investigations of Cuychen contribute to the growing body of data on ancient ritual activities that transpired in caves. The site's isolation and difficult access, as well as the rapid response to the find, meant that we had the unique opportunity to investigate a wholly unlooted cave site. Thanks to its small size, we were able to conduct exhaustive excavations, thereby providing us with no small window onto the activities that the site witnessed over the course of its use. As a result, we are now in a favorable position to reconstruct the history of the site as well as to contrast this record against other caves in the region. Our work at the site has shown that the material culture reflects a set of human behavior that favorably compares with datasets from other cave sites. The utilization of Cuychen therefore matches the practices documented for caves in the region. Although many aspects of Cuychen's utilization will have to await future study, we hope to have aptly set the stage for a complete analysis of the truly exceptional polychromatic vase that was discovered at the site. A monograph-length treatment of Cuychen is currently in preparation, where greater detail will be provided in terms of archaeological, iconographic, and epigraphic analyses (see Helmke in prep.; Helmke et al. in prep.). With this framework the vase now has not only clear provenience, but also a dynamic ritual setting in which it actively functioned as a key instrument.

#### The Cuychen Vase

The Cuychen vase is a relatively large vessel, measuring as much as 27.3 cm high (Figures 11 and 12). The vessel's flat base is slightly wider (22.2 cm) than its mouth (19.8 cm), resulting in gently insloping sides. Based on the typological attributes of the vase and the quality of the surface treatment, the type-variety of the vase can be identified as Zacatel Cream-polychrome: Cabrito Variety (see Ball 1993:249-252, 1994:364-365; Gifford 1976:251; Gifford and Kirkpatrick 1996:160; Smith and Gifford 1966:164).

Dorie Reents-Budet sampled the vase shortly after its discovery and Ron Bishop of the Smithsonian Institution

conducted Instrumental Neutron Activation Analysis (INAA) of the samples. Although the vase was found to have an idiosyncratic chemical profile, the analysis suggests that it fits within the broader Holmul ceramic paste tradition (Dorie Reents-Budet, personal communication 2010). Although this is not the place to discuss the iconography of the Cuychen vase, it should be remarked that the vase displays the well-known "Holmul Dancer" iconographic program (see Houston et al. 1992; Reents-Budet 1991) (Figures 13 and 14). This iconographic program is typical of ceramic vessels from the eastern central Maya Lowlands, and as a result the iconographic associations were evident even before the INAA analyses were conducted. As we will see, additional evidence can be brought to bear on the origin of the vase, on the basis of epigraphic data recorded in the glyphs.

#### Dedicatory Segment<sup>2</sup>

We will not provide an analysis and description of the iconography of the vase, and its associated glyphic captions, since they are presented in detail elsewhere (Helmke in prep.). Instead we will focus on the primary text of the Cuychen vase, which originally consisted of 29 glyph blocks, and we are fortunate that parts of 21 subsist today. The first half of the text adorns the rim of the vase, leading to the second half that was rendered in a double column that strikingly separates the iconographic field.

The dedicatory segment of the vase, or Primary Standard Sequence (PSS), is highly abbreviated and was compressed into four glyph blocks (see Boot 2005b:1; Coe 1973; Grube 2006; MacLeod 1990; MacLeod and Reents-Budet 1994:109-119, 123-128; Stuart 2005b:118-154) (Figure 15). The first (A1) provides the so-called Initial Sign, the reading of which remains debated, but which may serve as the demonstrative pronoun *alay* "here" (Boot 2005b; MacLeod and Polyukhovich 2005). Alternatively, the Initial Sign may be read *aliiy* "it is said" (Lacadena 2003), thereby functioning essentially as a quotative, wherein the *ya* syllabogram spells the temporal deictic *-iiy*; for his part, David Stuart (personal communication 2009) has suggested that the main sign may simply carry the logographic value *AY* "there is." The undeciphered dedicatory verb, although quite eroded, was recorded as the second glyph block (B1). This idiosyncratic verb was used preferentially at workshops in the northeastern

<sup>2</sup> This article adopts the proposals for glyphic representation recently developed by Lacadena and Wichmann (2004); see also Kettunen and Helmke (2005).



Figure 12. Composite rollout of the Cuychen vase. Scanning and graphic editing: Christophe Helmke.

Peten, including Río Azul and Xultun (Grube 2006:65; Stuart 2005b:152), providing us some added evidence as to the origin of the vase. The following glyph (C1) records the typical emic vessel type for cylindrical vases, namely *y-uk'-ib* "his-drinking-implement" (Boot 2005a; Helmke 2009:617-618; Houston et al. 1989; MacLeod 1990:313-362; MacLeod and Reents-Budet 1994:115, 127; Stuart 2005b:126-127). The final element of the PSS is quite faded but can be made out as recording the contents and reads *ti tzij* "for *tzij*." Although doubts remain as to what type of beverage *tzih* ~ *tzij* refers to, it may refer to a maize-based drink that was especially popular in the northeastern Peten, at sites such as Xultun and Río Azul (Stuart 2005b:143-144).

### Impersonation Statements

The next segment of the rim text records not the name of the original patron or owner of the vase, as would otherwise be expected, but two impersonation statements rendered in an intriguing couplet construction, an exceptional feature of the Cuychen vase. Impersonation statements record ritual events in which elite individuals, presumably in a trance state, took on the attributes of a particular god (see Houston and Stuart 1996:297-300; Stuart et al. 1999:54-56). At times individuals undergoing this rite also wore the attire of the god they impersonated, and some glyphic texts make it clear that intoxication played a key part in these events (Grube 2004a:68-69; Nehammer Knub et al. 2009:190-193; Zender 2004b:4-5, 8). In its fullest form the impersonation expression can be read as *ubaahila'an ta k'uh*, which can be succinctly translated as "it is his/her portrayal as a god" (Nehammer Knub et al. 2009:186).

The syntactic structure of clauses recording such ritual events is consistent and is initiated by the impersonation expression, followed by the name of the god, and closed by the name of the human agent who assumes the godly person. Several other impersonation statements are known from the texts rendered on ceramic vessels, which has led David Stuart (2005b:158) to suggest that these vases were specifically

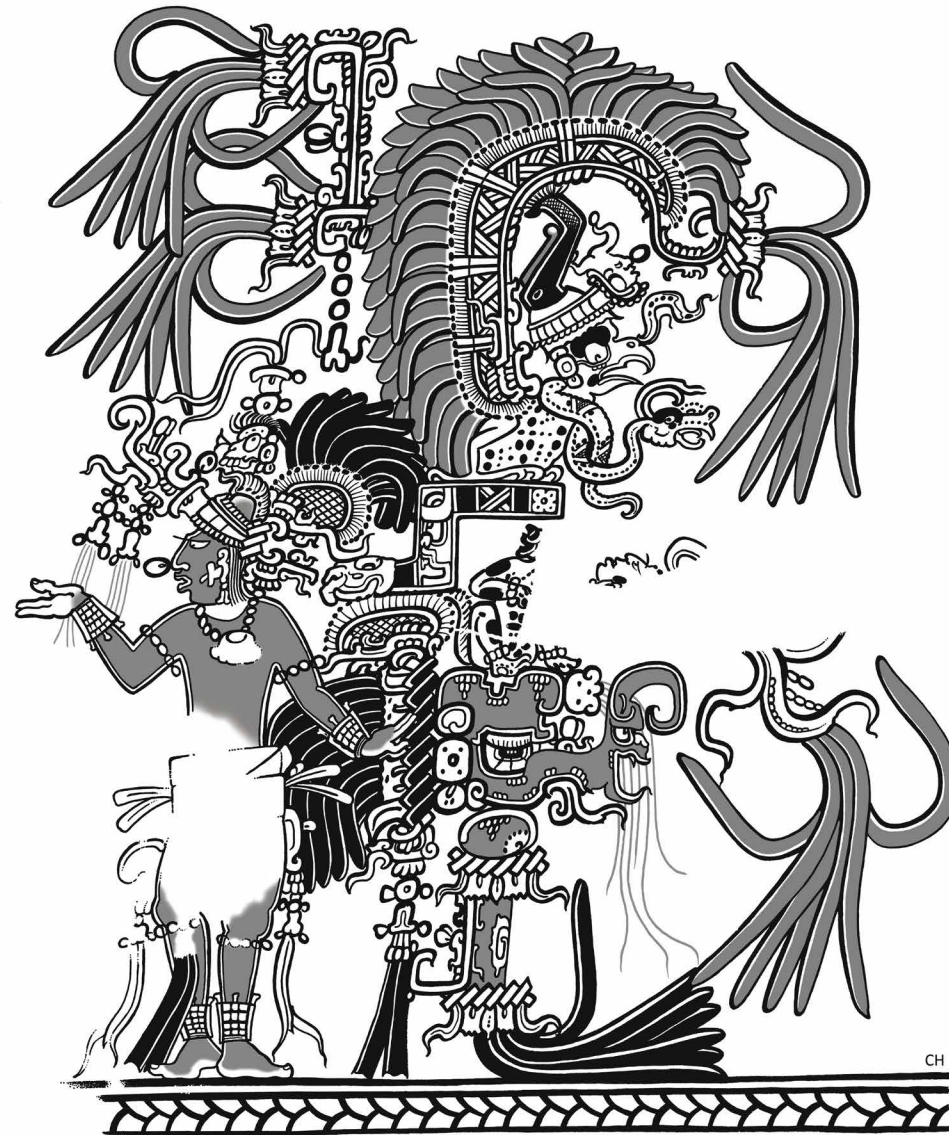


Figure 13. Composite rendition of the maize gods on the Cuychen vase. Note the silhouetted figure seated in the backrack, known as the maize god's "burden." Drawing: Christophe Helmke.

intended "for drinking in rituals that involved ceremonial role-playing." Nonetheless, most examples are embedded in the titular segment of the vessel's owner, rather than recording an event in itself (Nehammer Knub et al. 2009:187). Apparently the distinction and honor of impersonating a deity was sufficiently great to record for posterity as a type of title. On the Cuychen vase, however, the syntactical structure of the impersonation statements is at odds with these titular constructions, in preceding the nominal section and forming rather a sentence in its own right, and as such would serve to record an actual event, in keeping with the historical records of monumental texts.

The first impersonation statement on the Cuychen vase (E1-I1) is headed by the usual expression, here written **u-BAH[AN]-na** (Figure 15). The spelling

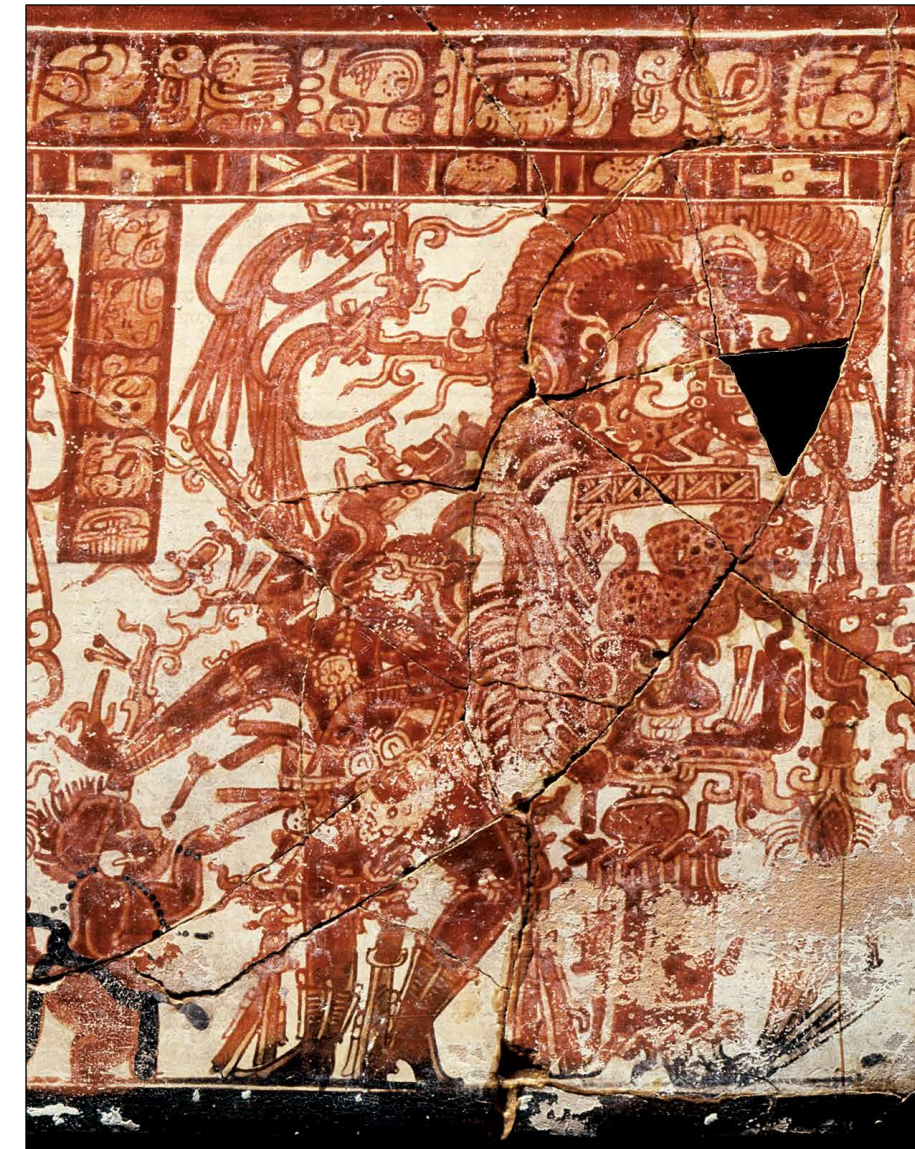


Figure 14. Detail of unprovenanced vase produced in the Naranjo workshops in the "Holmul Dancer" style. Note the glyphic caption associated with the dancing maize god, one of three on the vessel. Detail of photograph K633 © Justin Kerr.

of this expression has several unique particularities, including a heretofore unknown allograph of the vocalic sign **u**, representing a series of stacked deer hooves. The other is the synharmonic spelling of the existential particle with a phonetic complement **na**. In a study of the various diachronic spellings of the impersonation expression it was hypothesized that the existential particle evolved phonologically over the course of the Classic period—thereby affecting the consequent spellings—from *-a'an* > *-aan* > *-an* (Lacadena and Wichmann 2004:128, 137; Nehammer Knub et al. 2009:181-183). The same study found that the existential particle was preferentially complemented with **nu** between AD 692 and 791, leading to the realization *-a'an*; thereafter the logogram **AN** received no complementation to mark a short vowel and

the loss of glottalization. The complement **na** on the Cuychen vase results in the phonetic realization *-an*, thereby supporting this model, and also suggesting that the vessel was produced sometime after AD 791. The following three glyph blocks (F1-H1) record the name of the divinity impersonated, in this case the epithets of the so-called Water Lily Serpent (see Schele and Miller 1986:46; Stuart 2007c). The full name is written **YAX-CHIT-ti** / **?-WITZ' / NAH-KAN-na** to be read as *yax chit juun witz' nah kan*. Although some elements of this theonym resist translation, it essentially describes the Water Lily Serpent as the "first master" among great and ancient snakes, and the one who splashes or sprays water. As such, the Water Lily Serpent can be seen as a personification of bodies of running water, perhaps related to misty waterfalls (see Stuart 2007c). The Water Lily Serpent was the second-most commonly impersonated deity during the Classic period, and both males and females took its guise, probably on account of the snake's asexual characteristics (Nehammer Knub et al. 2009:190). The last glyph of the first impersonation statement is clearly written **ti-AJAW-le**, *ti ajawlel*, or "in kingship," usually found in the monumental texts as part of accession expressions in which a ruler is said to have been installed into the office of kingship.

The second impersonation (J1-M1) is again initiated with the expression **u-BAH[AN]-na**, and a very rare allograph of the vocalic sign **u** is utilized to provide the pronoun, here rendered as three superimposed leaf-like elements (Figure 12). The theonym of the impersonated deity follows (K1-L1) and records the name of one particular martial aspect of the sun god: **7-CHAPAT[TZ'IKIN] / [K'IN]AJAW-wa**, read *uhuk chapah't tz'ikiin k'inich ajaw* (Boot 1999, 2005c:250-259; Taube 1992b:50-56, 2003:410). This name can be translated as "seventh centipede-raptorial bird, radiant lord" and was the most commonly impersonated deity in the Classic period, but on account of marked masculine and martial traits was the exclusive prerogative of male impersonators (Nehammer Knub et al. 2009:189). As such, it seems clear that the original owner or patron of the vase was male. The impersonation statement is closed by a beautifully executed flint-and-shield expression (M1) written **ti-TOK'-PAKAL**, to be read *ti took' ti pakal*, which is usually seen in martial



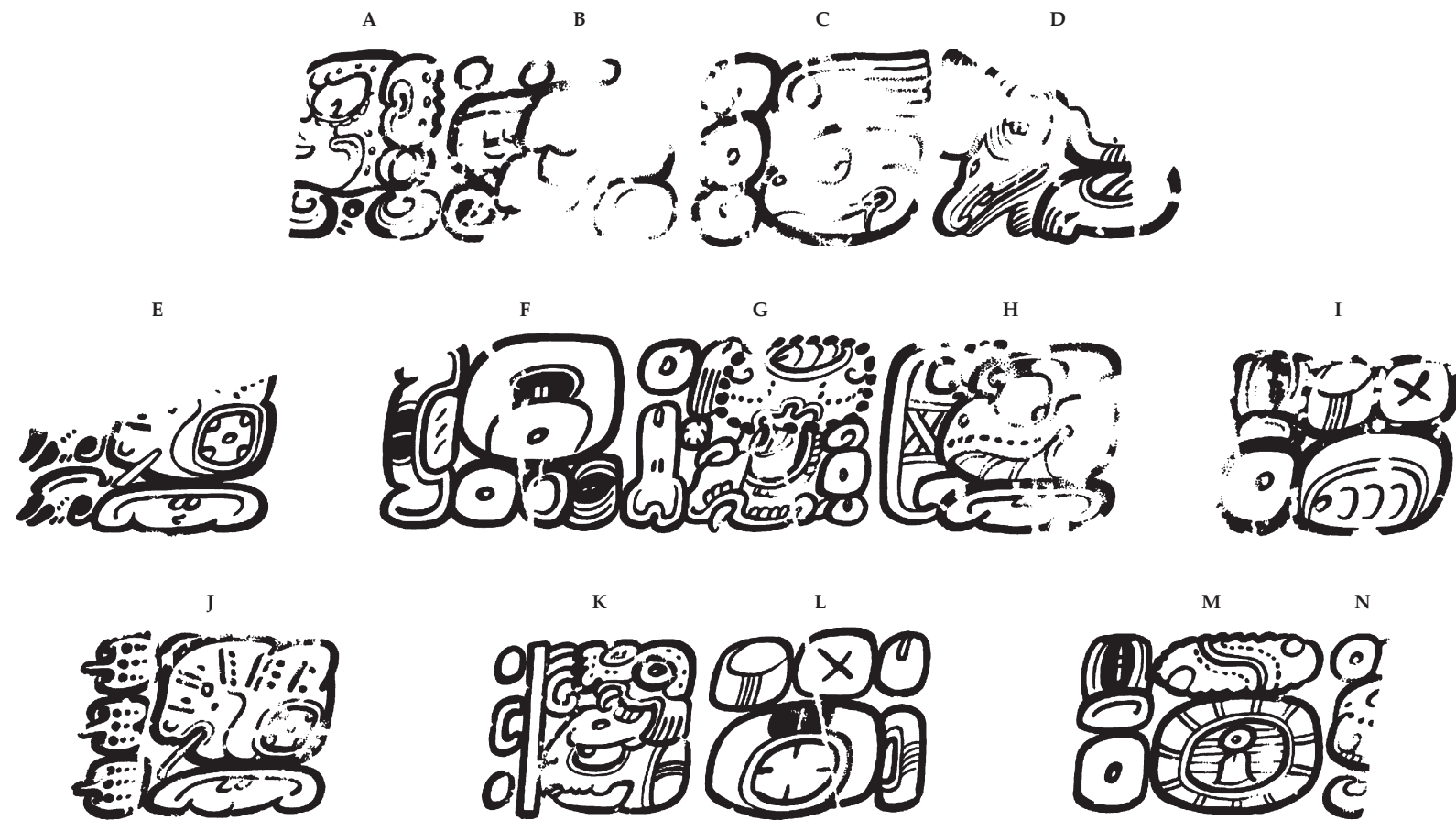


Figure 15. The dedicatory segment of the primary text (A1–D1) and the two impersonation statements (E1–I1 and J1–M1). Drawing: Christophe Helmke.

expressions (Houston 1983; Martin 2001:178-179; Schele and Miller 1986:210, 221). Thus, on the whole the impersonation statements form the following couplet or parallel construction (see Hull 2003:390-395; Lacadena 2009:34-35), allowing us to gain a better overview of the literary trope employed in these passages:

| impersonation | name of deity                       | prepositional construction |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| u-baah-il-an  | yax chit juun witz' nah kan         | ti-ajaw-lel                |
| u-baah-il-an  | u-huk chapaht tz'ikiin k'inich ajaw | ti-took' ti-pakal          |

The rare use of the preposition *ti* with *took'* and *pakal* aligns the Cuychen vase with the few other known examples from Bonampak (Room 1, Initial Series text), Chinkultic (undesignated stela), Yaxchilan (Hieroglyphic Stair 3), Dos Caobas (Stela 1), Xunantunich (Panel 2), and Sabana Piletas (Hieroglyphic Stair 1) (Grube et al. 2009:101; Helmke et al. 2010:104; Stephen Houston,

personal communication 2011). Intriguingly, an identical construction involving the same rare variant of the logogram **PAKAL** is also seen on K5022 (a vessel in Justin Kerr's database at [www.mayavase.com](http://www.mayavase.com)), wherein K'inich Laamaw Ek', a lord of Río Azul, is said to impersonate the same aspect of the solar deity. In typical martial contexts the couplet expression, or *difrasismo*, *ti took' ti pakal* is usually translated as "by the flint, by the shield" to emphasize the weaponry of the agent, or alternatively "with the flint, with the shield" in reference to the garb of the subject, dressed in the attire of a warrior. In this case the latter reading may apply to the Cuychen vase as well, to record that the agent impersonated the martial aspect of the solar deity "as a warrior." In turn, we are left to similarly interpret the *ti ajawlel* segment of the first phrase to relate that the protagonist impersonated the Water Lily Serpent "as a king." As a result, it can be seen that the impersonations record the agent as having taken the guise

of these prevalent deities, thereby heightening the two idealized and complementary aspects of ancient Maya rulership.

### Patron and Parentage Statement

Considering the regular syntactical structure of impersonation statements, what can be expected to follow is the name of the human protagonist, the one who personified the supernatural entity just cited, who in this case is also the owner of the vase. As luck would have it, the following eight glyph blocks (O1–P4) that would have recorded the names and titles of the patron have escaped recovery. Only one small part that seems to initiate the name of the owner survives (N1) (see Figure 15), and despite best efforts no clear reading can be provided for this segment although multiple possibilities present themselves. However, in the absence of additional sherds such interpretations cannot be tested.

The final segment of the text is notably better preserved and records a parentage statement or pedigree by citing the names and titles of the owner's mother and father, in that sequence (Figure 16). The last part of the mother's name (Q4) represents a main sign that has as its diagnostic element a sun sign (T544) followed by a phonetic complement *na*. Together this probably spells **CH'EN-na** for *ch'een* and forms part of an otherwise well-attested female name Ix Yohl Ch'een "lady of the heart of the cave." Paleographic analysis of the **CH'EN** logogram (Helmke 2009:536-576) indicates that the allograph that has the sun sign as its diagnostic element was utilized between AD 684 and 820, indicating that the Cuychen vase was likely produced during this interval. Although *ch'een* is used in several anthroponyms throughout the Classic period, it is noteworthy that the sites that preferentially employed this type of name form a contiguous area, spanning from Dzibanche in Quintana Roo to Naranjo in the Peten. Upon closer scrutiny, the mother's site of origin can be narrowed down even further by noting that *yohl ch'een* only names women from Xultun (Caracol Stelae 13 and 16; K5976) and Holmul (bone pins from Naranjo; K8019) (Grube and Martin 2004:36; Helmke 2009:586-599; Matteo and Krempel 2010).

The following glyph block (P5) provides the mother's only title, which is formed by the numeral 7 prefixing a sign written T501[544]—likely functioning as the syllabogram **so** (Zender 2011)—and subfixed by the syllabogram **ni**. Based on these parameters, the reading of the full title may have approximated *huk soon*. Analogous numbered titles are known for the remainder of the Maya Lowlands (Figure 17a-e), and although these are infrequent, there is enough evidence to suggest that they may conform to some regional distribution (Tokovinine 2008:253-255, 263-264). The title 4-T501[544]-**ni** that is found at Bonampak and Motul de San José may form the basis for identifying the region in which that particular title occurs. In contrast the 5-T501[544]-**ni** title occurs predominantly at Naranjo (Stelae 13 and 30) and Río Azul (K1383 and K2914). Most importantly to the case at hand, an example

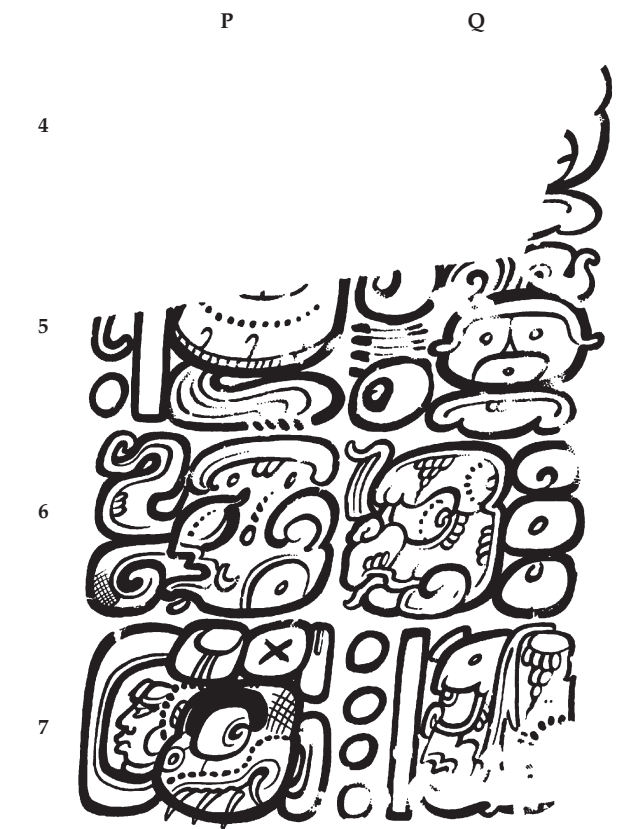
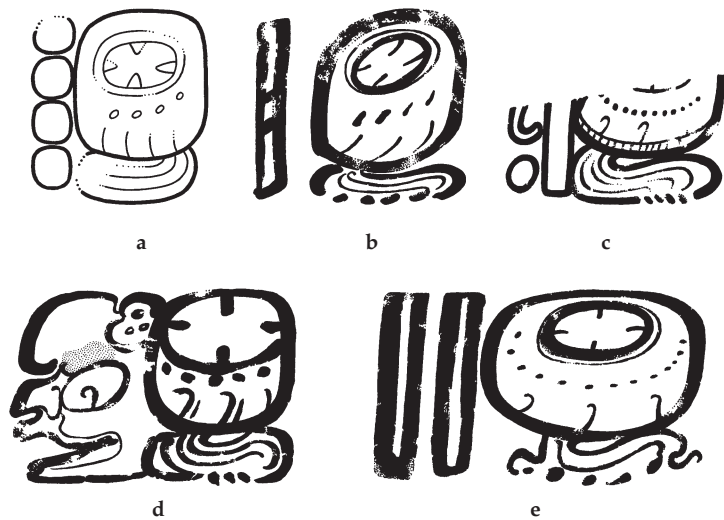


Figure 16. The parentage statement that closes the primary text on the Cuychen vase (Q4–Q7). Drawing: Christophe Helmke.

of **HUK-T501[544]-ni** is found in the texts of Naj Tunich (Drawing 82), where it might title a person from Xultun (Figure 17d), whereas another possible example is found captioning a captive named Bohb depicted on Stela 19 at Aguateca. Cumulatively, on the basis of the spatial patterning governing the mother's anthroponym and title, Xultun emerges as the best match for her site of origin.

The father of the vessel's owner is introduced by the kinship term **u-MIJIN-na**, *u-mijiin* "child of (father)" (Coe and Van Stone 2001:87; Jones 1977; Kettunen and Helmke 2005:32; Schele and Grube 2002:65) (Q5). The name of the father follows (P6–Q6), rendered in a confident and elegant hand as **K'AK'-u-TI'** / **ku-yu**, *k'ahk' uti' kuy* or "fire is the mouth of the owl." From several other ceramic vases we know that the nocturnal *kuy* was also considered to be a spiritual co-essence or *wahy* of the kings of Motul de San José and possibly also those of the site of Huacutal (see García Barrios and Velásquez García 2010; Grube and Nahm 1994:703-704; Helmke



**Figure 17.** Numbered titles found in Classic Maya texts: (a) Motul de San José Stela 4; (b) K1383 of Río Azul; (c) Cuychen vase, title of owner's mother; (d) Naj Tunich, Drawing 82; (e) unprovenanced vessel K7042. Drawings: Christophe Helmke.

and Nielsen 2009; Stuart 2005b:160-165). Although there is not necessarily a connection, the name of the owner of K8966 begins with a similar rendering of **u-TI'** with the following signs eroded and partly repainted. As such there is an outside chance that the father named on the Cuychen vase owned K8966 (Simon Martin, personal communication 2011). Unlike the name of the mother, anthroponyms that make use of *ti' kuy* are rarer and less spatially restricted, with key examples known from La Florida (Altar G), Yaxchilan (Lintel 45), Xultun (K3500, MS1839), and possibly Naj Tunich (Drawing 65). As a result it is not possible, on the basis of onomastic patterns, to make a proposal as to the father's site of origin.

Nevertheless, some clues come from the following glyph blocks that record the father's titles. The penultimate glyph block (P7) provides an emblem glyph, written T239-[764]**AJAW-wa** marking the bearer as an *ajaw*, or "king" (Figure 16). Technically-speaking this is a partial or so-called problematic emblem glyph since it is not prefixed by the logogram **K'UH** that provides the qualifier *k'uhul* "godly" to the title (see Grube 2005; Houston 1986). The main sign T764 represents the head of a snake that in other contexts carries the value **CHAN**, which initially suggested that this might record the emblem glyph of Calakmul (see Martin 2005a) (Figure 18a). Nevertheless, there are several key features that argue against this interpretation (Simon Martin, personal communication 2010). For one, considering the exalted status of Calakmul kings in the Late Classic the emblem glyph always carries the prefix *k'uhul*, which, as said, is notably absent in this case. For another, since the snake head involved in the

Calakmul emblem records an archaic form of the term "snake," *kan*, it is systematically prefixed by the syllabogram **ka** to cue this reading. Again this prefix is absent in the Cuychen case. Finally, the emblem on the Cuychen vase is prefixed by T239, an undeciphered sign representing a human head (outside of this context usually read as **XIB**) within a circular cartouche. The T239 sign is never actually found in the emblem of Calakmul, although it is seen as the main sign of other emblems such as that of Altar de Sacrificios (Houston 1986:2-4; Stuart and Houston 1994:19-20, Fig. 20) and also serves as part of the name of GIII, one of Palenque's triadic patron gods (Berlin 1963; Stuart 2006b) (Figure 18b, c). As a result we are left to conclude that the emblem glyph painted on the Cuychen vase records a heretofore unknown regal title. Since at present no additional examples of this emblem are known in the written corpus, we cannot suggest to which particular archaeological site this title was tied.

The final glyph block records the second title carried by the father, written **9-tzu[ku]**, probably read *baluun tzuk* (Q7). Numbered *tzuk* titles (first identified by Grube and Schele 1991:2-3) are otherwise most commonly prefixed either by the numeral 7 or 13, again making the Cuychen vase exceptional. Here *tzuk* can be translated as "partition," but probably serves as the term for "province" as is supported by entries found in Acalan Chontal <*tzuc*> "province" (Smailus 1975:132) and the Motul dictionary of Yukatek <*tzuc*> "cuenta para pueblos," <*tzucub*> "provincia," and <*tzucul*> "pueblo pequeño, parcialidad, o parte de pueblo" (Martínez Hernández 1929:266-268). As has been demonstrated by Dmitri Beliaev (2000), these numbered *tzuk* titles tend to be shared by sites within spatially contiguous areas, with *huk tzuk* "seven province" connected to Motul de San José, Yaxha, Naranjo, Holmul, and Kokom, whereas *uxlahjuun tzuk* "thirteen province" was borne by lords of Tikal, La Honradez, Xultun and Río Azul (Figure 19). Thus, despite their disparities and nominal independence, many sites appear to have been subsumed under the same larger province, or *tzuk* to use the emic term. While the origin and extent of this system of territorial division of the Maya Lowlands remains unknown, the provinces designated by the numerals 7 and 13 are sufficiently well-documented to allow us to reconstruct the border that separates the two. Another feature of note is that lords of 7-*tzuk* made a further distinction by prefixing the title with either *ochk'in* "west" or *elk'in* "east." Motul de San José and Yaxha, sites that carry the prefix "west" are indeed located in the western half of 7-*tzuk*, which leads us to suspect that the toponym Kokom, which is prefixed by "east" (K2730), probably corresponds to a site located in western Belize (see also Beliaev 2000:65; Houston et al. 1992:508).

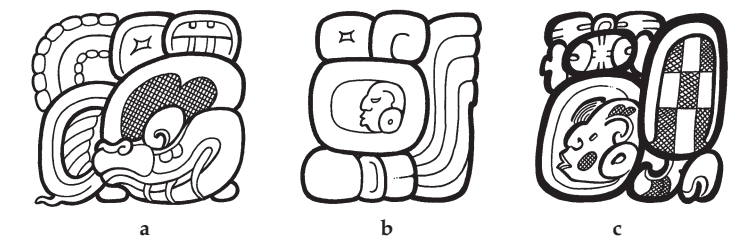
However, one additional example of the title *baluun tzuk* is known from a fragmentary polychrome dish recovered at the

site of Dos Hombres in northwestern Belize (see Robichaux and Houk 2005). On this example it serves as the first title of an individual who is tied to the toponym *witzil mulnib* "where there are mountainous hills."<sup>3</sup> While it cannot be proposed with any degree of certainty that Witzil Mulnib refers to Dos Hombres it remains a possibility to be investigated further. Most intriguingly the patron of the dish is said to be the *yajaw* or "vassal" of another higher-ranking individual. Only a part of the numeral 18 is preserved in the name of the latter individual. Returning to the *tzuk* title, if one assumes that the vessel indeed mentions a local lord, it has several important implications, not the least of which is that 9-*tzuk* may have encompassed the region to the east of 13-*tzuk* and to the north of the eastern part of 7-*tzuk*, essentially most of northern Belize (Figure 19). On the basis of present data this suggestion has to remain tentative, but it is hoped that more data can be brought to bear to corroborate or refute this hypothesis. However, assuming that 9-*tzuk* has been placed in roughly the right region, this would imply that the father of the patron of the Cuychen vase was a lord of a site in northern Belize.

#### Epigraphy: Summary and Conclusion

In this analysis of the Cuychen vase we have attempted to narrow down both the time period during which it was created and to identify the most plausible workshop of manufacture. On the basis of paleographic data and diachronic spelling patterns it seems likely that the vase was produced sometime between AD 791 and 820, although continued analysis could probably narrow down this range further. Nevertheless, this dating accords perfectly with the stratigraphic evidence and the associated ceramics found within the cave, since the deposit which yielded the vase has been dated to c. AD 700–830. On the basis of spatial patterning governing the name and title of the patron's mother, it was determined that she likely hailed from the site of Xultun, whereas we have tentatively suggested that the patron's father governed a site in northern Belize. But what of the original owner? Vexingly, the relevant section of text is missing and as a result we are left with precious little information concerning the patron. However, based on the names and gender categories of the deities impersonated, it seems likely that the vase was originally owned by a male individual. Furthermore, considering that Classic Maya society was strongly patrilocal, it stands to reason that the patron also ruled over a site in northern Belize, perhaps the same site indicated by the emblem glyph in the final part of the text. As to the workshop where the vessel was

<sup>3</sup> For comments on the *-nib* toponymic suffix see Boot (2009a:6) and Helmke et al. (2010:104-107).



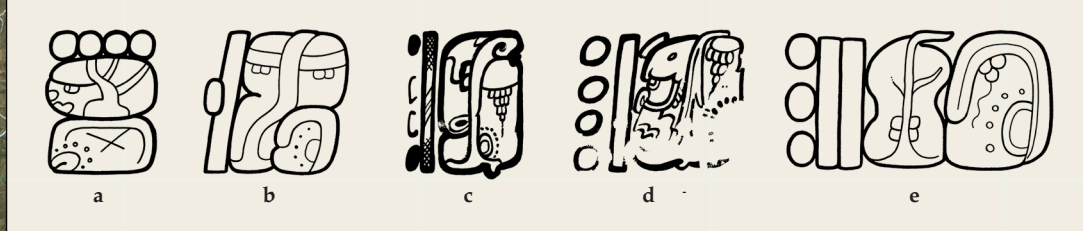
**Figure 18.** The snake and human head signs from the parentage statement in other contexts: (a) emblem glyph of Calakmul; La Corona, Element 3; (b) emblem glyph of Altar de Sacrificios; Itzan, Stela 17; (c) name of Palenque's patron God III; Temple XIX, west face of platform. Drawings: Christophe Helmke.

originally produced, at the intersection of complementary lines of evidence it seems most probable that the vase was produced in a workshop associated with the greater Xultun area. The idiosyncratic chemical signature of the vase points to a production area outside of well-documented samples, which is why the Holmul attribution is called into question.

Much remains unknown about the workshops and regally-sanctioned artisans of the northeastern Peten, but recent studies are now beginning to shed some light (Krempel and Matteo 2011; Matteo and Krempel 2010). As a source of analogy in the interim, we can turn to the highly prolific workshop maintained by the rulers of Naranjo, who over the centuries commissioned a series of outstanding polychrome ceramics. The workshop manufactured vessels both for the local royal household as well as items that were gifted to vassals. Significant examples include the Jauncy vase discovered at Buenavista del Cayo—although it was originally made for Naranjo's thirty-eighth ruler K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chaahk—and another vase that was produced for "Itzamnaaj" Bahlam of Ucanal (K1698-MS1684; see Houston et al. 1992:504, 506; Reents-Budet 1994:300-302). In the latter case the vase was probably produced after AD 698, by which time Naranjo had defeated Ucanal and made "Itzamnaaj" Bahlam a subservient vassal. As a result, the production and gifting of polychrome ceramics testify to intricate socio-political maneuverings that usually took place after the cessation of military engagements. As such, the Cuychen vase may equally well have been produced to foster ties between a northern Belizean vassal and his overlord. Based on the historical records of the ancient Maya we know that marital ties frequently followed martial actions and served to cement alliances between erstwhile antagonists. Take, for example, the marriage of Naranjo's K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chaahk to Ix Unen Bahlam, princess of Tubal (Nakum?), a site conquered at the start of his reign in AD 693 (see Martin and Grube 2008:76-77). A similar state of affairs may have involved Xultun and the elusive



**Figure 19.** Map of the eastern central Maya Lowlands showing the distribution of sites associated with different numbered *tzuk* titles (solid triangles) and approximate borders between the different “provinces”: (a) 4-*tzuk*; Yula, Lintel 1; (b) 6-*tzuk*; Nimli Punit, Stela 2; (c) 7-*tzuk*; Naranjo, K1398; (d) 9-*tzuk*, Cuychen vase; (e) 13-*tzuk*; Dos Pilas, Hieroglyphic Stair 2. Glyph drawings: Christophe Helmke; map: Christophe Helmke and Precolumbia Mesoweb Press.



northern Belize site, an alliance reaffirmed during the son’s reign by the commission and ritualized gifting of the Cuychen vase.

Considering the vessel’s final resting place, a cave in western Belize, in a foreign *tzuk* or “province,” several possible scenarios emerge. Nevertheless, the dating of the vase and the ceramics found within Cuychen suggest, whatever the historical circumstances, that the vase was not utilized for more than a few decades before it was deposited within the cave. One scenario posits that the original owner further gifted the vase to a local lord ruling in the vicinity of Cuychen, who eventually terminated the vase in the cave as part of a ritual action. At this juncture it bears remarking that the texts of Naj Tunich represent testimonials of elite figures who undertook rituals there, some of whom came from as far afield as Caracol (53 km away), Huacutal (125 km away), and Xultun (140 km away) (see Helmke 2009:140-141; MacLeod and Stone 1995). As such it is not inconceivable that the posited northern Belizean ruler physically partook in a joint ritual action at Cuychen, resulting in the deposition of the vase. Similarly, a sherd of a late Middle Classic bowl (c. AD 550–650) bearing the toponym Sak Ha’al was found in a cave, known as Actun Halal, located just 4.3 km north of Cuychen (Helmke et al. 2003). The place name Sak Ha’al, possibly tied to Laguna La Blanca in the Peten (Beliaev 2000:73), would name a site located 40 km to the west, and comparable historical circumstances may account for the deposition of the Cuychen vase and the Actun Halal bowl. Finally, the possibility should not be excluded that the Cuychen vase was forcibly obtained by local lords and as such constitutes war booty seized via a martial action against a northern Belize site (see Houston et al. 1992:509). Smashed and scattered within an isolated cave, the vase lay dormant and waited for over a millennium before it was discovered and could once more be appreciated. Whereas several key questions still shroud a complete understanding of the Cuychen vase, the present

analysis forms the foundation for further studies of this exceptional vessel.

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