

THE RITUAL USE OF A CAVE ON THE NORTHERN VACA PLATEAU, BELIZE, CENTRAL AMERICA

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Research conducted on the Northern Vaca Plateau in west-central Belize has discovered numerous caves that were utilized by the Maya. In particular, Ch'en P'ix appears to have been used for religious activities, including autosacrificial bloodletting. A constructed platform in the cave was excavated in 1998, and a nearly complete tripod plate (the Ch'en P'ix Tripod) was recovered. This plate depicts a seated single figure that appears to be catching blood dripping from his right hand, in a vessel held in the left hand, and on a loincloth spread in front of the figure. We think that the Ch'en P'ix Tripod was probably used for collecting blood scattered during ritual events conducted on the platform, and we offer the following interpretation. A platform was constructed within Ch'en P'ix (with a speleothem-bordered path leading from the entrance drop to this platform) that was used for ritual activities. One ritual activity involved bloodletting, and a plate depicting autosacrificial bloodletting (the Ch'en P'ix Tripod) was used during this ceremony. The Tripod plate not only depicts the scene, but we also think it was used for collecting blood during the ritual. Upon completion of the ritual, the plate was broken on the platform as an offering. These events might have taken place in Ch'en P'ix sometime during the Late Classic period.

The Northern Vaca Plateau, in west-central Belize, is a well developed karst upland containing an abundance of karst features including sinkholes, dry valleys (valleys without active surface streams), residual limestone hills, and caves. The Vaca Plateau Geoarchaeology Project (VPGP) has conducted archaeological, geologic, and geographic research in this area since 1990. During the course of this research, nearly 200 caves have been discovered, explored, and mapped. One of these caves, Ch'en P'ix, is the focus of this article.

A two week archaeological investigation was completed in Ch'en P'ix during March 1998. Ch'en P'ix (Fig. 1) was selected because of its very high density of artifacts and its location. No surface sites have been recorded within 1.6 km of the cave, yet it contains an abundant, diverse collection of artifacts (Reeder *et al.* 1998: 40). The natural corollaries to this observation are the questions: 1) Why was this cave selected as a depository for the profusion of artifacts it contains? 2) What activities took place within the cave, and how are they related to the artifacts found there? We hope to clarify what activities occurred in Ch'en P'ix, and to seek evidence for relations with other sites, such as the large Mayan city of Caracol, only 15 km south of Ch'en P'ix.

DESCRIPTION OF CH'EN P'IX

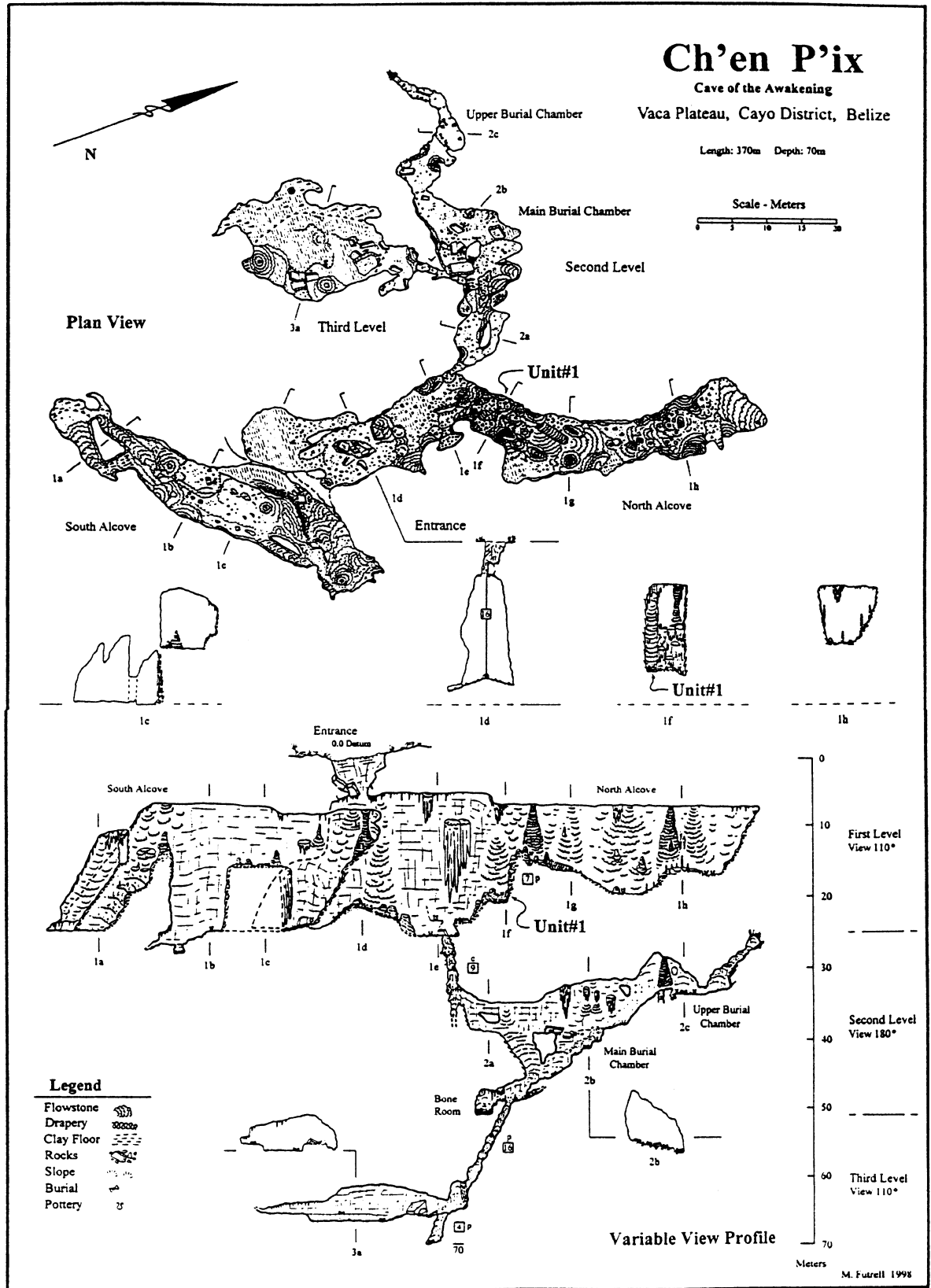
Ch'en P'ix contains three distinct levels, has a total length of 370 m, and a maximum depth of 70 m below the entrance (Fig. 1). The entrance is located in an 8 m deep, 10 m wide surface collapse feature. The entrance is 1.5 m x 1.0 m, and

extends 16 m vertically into a 70 m-long chamber that has an average ceiling height of 15 m. The cave extends both southwest and northeast from the point below the entrance drop. To the southwest, an 8 m wide passage slopes down to a flat floored room that contains numerous pottery shards. This room connects to another 8 m wide, 12 m high, northeast trending room that contains numerous pottery shards and intact pots. An upper level alcove can be reached by a steep traverse up a flowstone formation.

The passage northeast of the entrance shaft is 8 m wide and slopes downward to a flat floored room that contains numerous pottery shards. Perched upon a large flowstone formation on the east side of the passage are eight intact pots exhibiting kill holes. Lithic artifacts also litter the floor in this area, as do shards of broken polychrome pottery. This is the location, 20 m below and 15 m north of the entrance, of the excavation (Unit #1) upon which we based our interpretations. Located higher up on a ledge within the same flowstone are two more intact pots. A steep traverse up the flowstone leads to an upper level passage ~40 m long, trending nearly due north.

Along the west wall of the entrance level passage, just below our excavation site, is a one meter square hole that leads to two lower levels of the cave. After climbing down 6 m, one gains access to a horizontal passage extending to the northwest, or a 15 m deep vertical shaft that leads to a lower level room containing human remains and numerous pottery shards. The northwest trending horizontal passage extends for ~25 m before intersecting a series of small alcoves that contain human remains, intact polychrome pots, ceremonial boot pottery, lithic artifacts, and shell, jade, and turquoise jewelry.

Figure 1. Plan and cross-section map of Ch'en P'ix, with the location of Unit #1 indicated.



UNIT # 1

Because of time limitations, only one feature was excavat-

ed. The location of this unit was chosen for two reasons. First, because there appeared to be a leveled platform bounded on three sides by cave walls, that was thought to be a tomb.

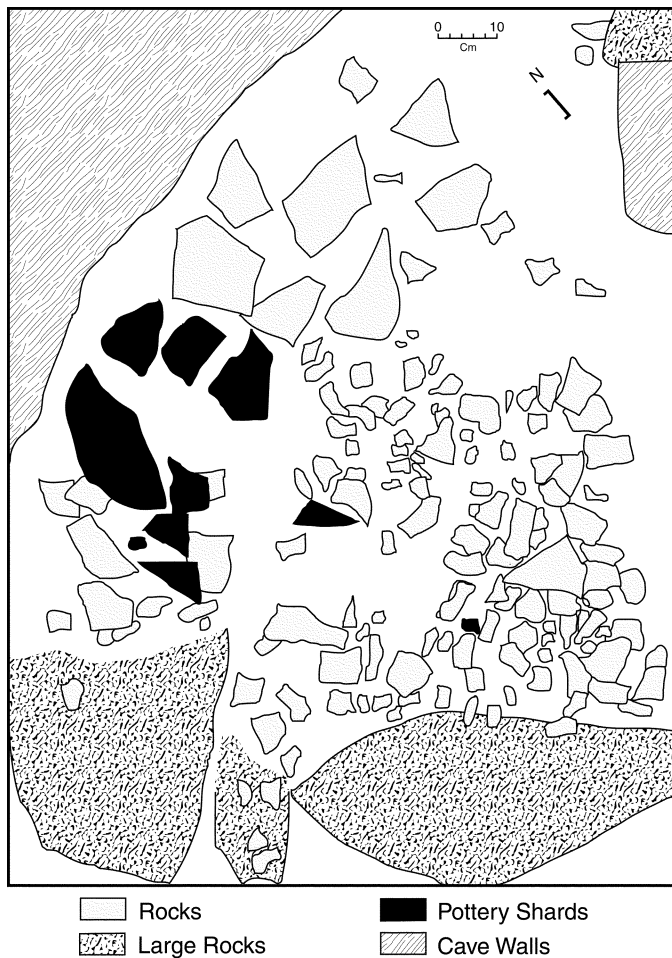


Figure 2. Plan view of the assemblage of artifacts on the surface of the platform where Unit #1 was excavated in Ch'en P'ix.

Because this feature was obviously constructed by humans visiting the cave, we wanted to determine whether it was a tomb, and what significance the platform and associated assemblage of artifacts had for Mayan cave use. Second, the density of monochrome and polychrome pottery shards found within the area that became Unit #1 (an area of 1.6 m x 2.4 m) is the highest in Ch'en P'ix (Fig. 2). Eight polychrome pottery shards, which were eventually determined to be the most elaborate polychrome examples found thus far in Ch'en P'ix, were all located within the bounds of Unit # 1. Also, a number of cached speleothems form a kind of path that extends from the bottom of the entrance drop, steeply upward toward the platform feature. Brady *et al.* (1997) have found that broken speleothems were often deliberately cached in caves, and that they may have had spiritual and/or other meanings. In Actun Tunchil Muknal, a cave recently under investigation by Jaime Awe (Awe *et al.* 1997), numerous speleothems are cached between large pieces of ceiling breakdown. This combination of rocks and speleothems forms a clear path leading to a hidden sepulchre that contains an intact calcified skeleton (Awe

pers.comm. 1997). Awe interpreted this construction as a sort of ritual path that connected various features within the cave (Awe pers.comm. 1997). We suggest that a similar path was constructed within Ch'en P'ix to connect the area below the entrance drop with the platform feature where Unit #1 was excavated, and/or the passage adjacent to the platform, which connects to the lower levels of the cave.

Adjacent to the platform where Unit # 1 was excavated, and 51 cm lower, is a second platform feature (1.3 x 1.3 m) containing a large, intact pottery vessel and a nearly complete Dichrome Tripod plate. All the plate's feet were intact and one foot contained a bead. An 8.6 cm obsidian blade was noted lying on a large pottery shard next to the Tripod plate. This second platform feature was not excavated, although a drawing of the tripod plate was completed. The placement of the obsidian blade adjacent to the platform where Unit # 1 was excavated may prove important in the interpretation of this structure because obsidian blades often functioned as bloodletting instruments (Brady 1989: 324), although they could also be used for "cutting meat or leather" (Brady 1995: 35). A large number of obsidian blades found in Naj Tunich (Brady 1988: 51; Brady 1989; Brady & Stone 1986) and in other caves are thought to imply bloodletting as an auto-sacrificial rite (Awe 1997; Brady 1995: 34).

ARCHAEOLOGY

The platform feature where Unit # 1 was excavated is a northeast/southwest trending, 51 cm high, 112 cm x 112 cm structure nestled between cave walls (Fig. 2). At the southwestern end of the feature, ten large rocks have been placed to span the distance between the cave walls. At the feature's northeastern margin, a number of smaller rocks had been placed on the surface to form a kind of border. Lying in a niche behind these small rocks were several obviously cached, large, ceramic shards. Thus, this feature formed a natural unit; a platform, bordered by intentionally placed stones to the northeast and southwest, and bounded by cave walls on the two remaining sides.

Artifacts recovered from the surface of this platform feature consisted exclusively of pottery shards. Ten of these were polychrome shards clearly belonging to a plate-like object that was smashed at the platform. Ritual smashing of plates is not unusual, especially in front of constructed areas within caves (Graham *et al.* 1980; Stone 1995: 129). This pattern of ceremonial destruction is widely known, but has not as yet been fully explained.

Most of the shards were of an unslipped monochrome type of pottery. A complete ceramic analysis of Unit # 1 has not yet been undertaken, but we plan to complete such an investigation during a future research expedition. In this article, we focus only upon the polychrome shards from Unit #1.

The unit was excavated in 5 cm vertical increments. Below level No. 6, the excavation was terminated when the solid rock floor of the cave was encountered. Except for a 36 cm x 10 cm

speleothem fragment that was encountered in Level 4, all artifacts were recovered from Level 1 (the upper 5 cm of the unit). All of the recovered artifacts were pottery fragments, and with the exception of two shards found below the surface within Level 1, all polychrome shards were found on the surface of the unit. The five levels below Level 1 consisted almost entirely of gravel to clay sized, clastic fill material. Less than 1 g of charcoal was recovered from the entire unit.

The archaeological investigations conducted within Ch'en P'ix reveal that the feature into which Unit #1 was excavated probably functioned as a platform, which appears to have been created by filling in the space between two cave walls. The presence of a speleothem in Level 4 does not contradict this interpretation because it has been shown that speleothems can function as "construction material in caves" (Brady 1989: 132; Brady *et al.* 1997: 731). Hence, no special meaning need necessarily be attached to this speleothem. Based upon the assemblage of artifacts found in Unit # 1, we propose that it functioned as a platform for specific ritual activities. This suggestion is discussed below.

THE CH'EN P'IX TRIPOD

The Ch'en P'ix Tripod is a nearly complete polychrome vessel that was recovered from Unit # 1 (Fig. 3). Ten of the shards used to reconstruct the plate were recovered from the surface of the unit, and two were contained within Level 1 of the excavation. The vessel is best described as a red, black, and gray on cream, polychrome Tripod plate.

The fact that the vessel is a Tripod plate is evident from marks on the underside where attachment points for feet are clearly visible. The Tripod has a diameter of 29 cm (Fig. 4), but its height cannot be estimated because the feet have not yet been recovered, although we have searched for them. It has been observed in other Belizean caves that Tripod plates and their feet may sometimes be cached in different spaces for reasons that are, at present, unknown (Awe pers.comm. 1997).

DATING

The dating of the polychrome Tripod plate is problematic because it was not possible to establish its stratigraphic context. All the shards, with the exception of two, were discovered on the surface of the first level. Charcoal was found mixed within the fill material in underlying levels, but funding was not available for AMS dating to establish a maximum age for the tripod. Thus, the only way of dating the Tripod plate is by comparison to other, already established, ceramic sequences. A detailed ceramic sequence for Caracol has been established by Arlen Chase (Chase 1994), which is appropriate for comparison to Ch'en P'ix artifacts because Caracol is only 15 km to the south. The ceramic sequence for Uaxactun, established by Robert Smith (Smith 1955), is also referred to in discussing the Ch'en P'ix Tripod.

We think that the Tripod plate can be securely placed into the Late Classic Period (AD 650 -AD 900). At Caracol, tripod plates excavated from tombs first appear during the Late

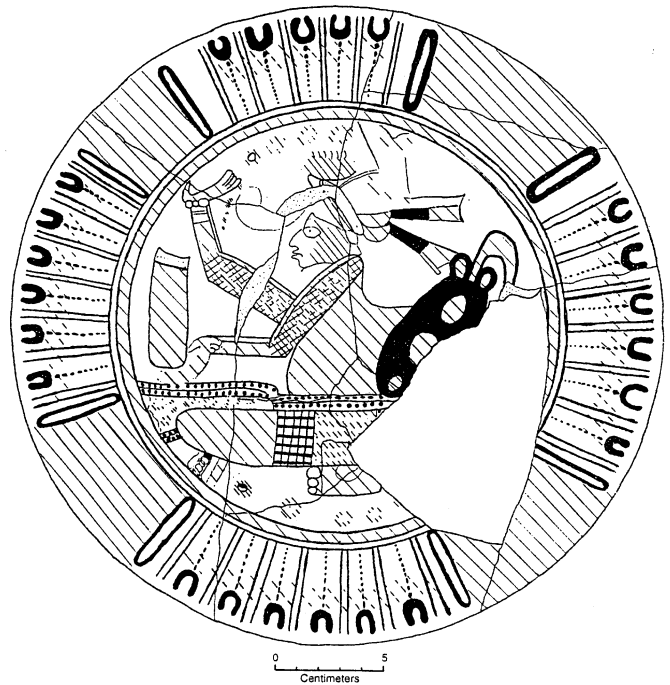


Figure 3. The images painted inside the Ch'en P'ix Tripod.

Classic, specifically in the second Late Classic subcomplex (Chase 1994: 170). Between Caracol's second and third subcomplex there are examples of red-and-orange-on-cream polychrome Tripod plates. In the last phase of the Late Classic Period, the tripod plates appear as Belize-Red Tripod plates with oven shaped feet (Chase 1994: 170). The provenance of Tripod plates at Caracol clearly marks them as belonging to the Late Classic ceramic complex (Chase 1994: 170).

The Ch'en P'ix Tripod exhibits many similarities to the Late Classic Tripod plates found at Caracol. The black-and-gray-and-red on cream polychrome of the Ch'en P'ix Tripod fits into the junction of the second and third ceramic complexes at Caracol. This correlation places it in the Late Classic. Although the Ch'en P'ix Tripod displays an additional grayish color compared to the Caracol Complex, this additional color may just be a variant of black. Because this style first appeared at the end of the second ceramic complex at Caracol, the Ch'en P'ix Tripod should fit into the third ceramic complex, because the red-and-orange-on-cream ware did not appear before the junction of the second and third Late Classic ceramic sub-complexes (Chase 1994: 170). Additionally, the general shape (29 cm diameter) fits into the third complex.

Using the ceramic sequence established for Uaxactun by Smith (1955) provides a very similar date range for the Ch'en P'ix Tripod. At Uaxactun, a vast number of monochrome and polychrome Tripod plates were discovered (Smith 1955: Figs. 9n; 9p; 12m; 51a1, b1; 53a, b; 54e; 55b; 58b, c; 59k; 74h). All the polychrome tripod plates were classified as Tepeu II or Tepeu III, a ceramic phase that has been dated between 9.13.0.0.0 (A.D. 692) and 10.3.0.0.0 (A.D. 889) (Smith 1955:

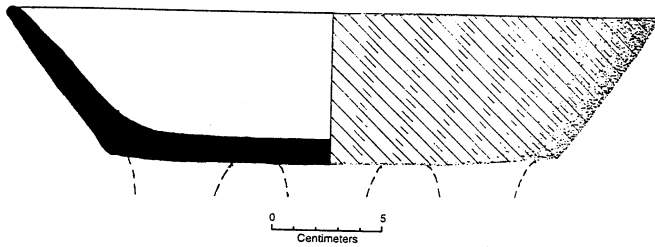


Figure 4. Profile view of the Ch'en P'ix Tripod.

106).

The Ch'en P'ix Tripod displays a pattern of paired lines and dots, similar to a Tripod plate found at Uaxactun (Smith 1955: Fig. 55a) that was placed securely into the Tepeu Late Classic phase. The black-and-red on cream colors of the Ch'en P'ix Tripod are also found on polychrome Tripod plates in the Late Classic ceramic sequence from Uaxactun.

Comparison of the Ch'en P'ix Tripod with established ceramic sequences makes it clear that the vessel belongs to the Late Classic ceramic complex. Furthermore, this comparison indicates that it can be securely placed into the late phase of Late Classic, bordering the Terminal Classic. This means that it probably was produced between 9.13.0.0.0 and 10.3.0.0 (A.D. 692 - A.D. 889).

DESCRIPTION OF THE CH'EN P'IX TRIPOD

The following section contains the description and analysis of the Ch'en P'ix Tripod. By comparison with other ceramics, we hope to clarify the plate's painting, and its significance as part of the platform feature in Unit #1, which in turn may indicate the platform's function within Ch'en P'ix.

The outside rim covers almost one third of the Tripod's surface, and the pattern appears to provide only simple decoration. Painting on the inner portion of the rim is a repetitive set of horseshoe-like half circles and small dots which are separated by two paired lines, that separate the half circles and dots. The half circle set above the figure's head shows only five horseshoe-like half circles with dots, whereas the other three sets display six half circles with dots. The way the dots are painted, the lack of any bars, and the break in the regularity of these sets suggests that no mathematical system is concealed within the painting on the rim. We propose that the painting on the rim is purely geometric with no special meaning.

The interior base of the Tripod is not entirely preserved because lower right part of the scene is weathered away. The main object in the inner base of the Tripod is a human figure. The figure's right foot is shown underneath the left leg, which apparently indicates that the figure is sitting cross-legged, and it has three toes rather than the five that would be expected for the image of a human.

The front leg is painted red, and black vertical and horizontal stripes divide the lower leg. The leg is separated from the main body by what appears to be a string or belt associat-

ed with some type of clothing. The main body is painted red, and the figure has a notably thick abdomen. The figure's shoulder is awkwardly extended to an object that is being carried on, or leaning against, the back.

The left arm is painted gray, except for part of the upper arm that displays a sinuous red line. The lower arm is painted in base color, and is decorated with a bracelet. The right arm is painted gray, except for a sinuous red line almost identical to the one found on the left arm. The upper arm is painted in base color. Similar to the left wrist, a bracelet encircles the right wrist. Both hands are painted red, with the right hand being much more elaborate, possessing four clearly visible fingers and a thumb.

The upper part of the figure's head is not discernible due to fading. The face of the figure is evident, and it possesses an eye, nose, and mouth that are all in the base color. The face from behind the eyes, toward the back of the head and down the neck is painted red. The figure appears to be wearing some type of a headdress. The figure also appears to have a large, oval, black painted, bag-like object with three red shaded circles located along its midline either attached to or just behind his back. The lower part of this object cannot be seen because the shard containing this information is too weathered.

The figure holds a very striking object in his left hand. This object is 1.6 cm wide and 5.5 cm high, hence it is almost four times higher than wide. Approximately 90% of the object is painted red, with the upper 10% left in base color. This upper 10% is divided almost equally by a black dotted line that extends from one side of the object to the other. The figure is holding his right hand above this object and a series of six red dots are directly below the smallest finger of the right hand. These dots are drawn in a arcing pattern, curving inward toward the figure's wrist and forearm.

INTERPRETATION OF THE CH'EN P'IX TRIPOD

The following section contains our interpretation of the scene depicted on the Ch'en P'ix Tripod. We first offer an interpretation based wholly upon the Tripod itself. This is followed by a comparison to other ceramics, which is intended to reinforce our interpretation. We realize that alternative interpretations may be possible. Because we cannot provide a definitive interpretation for the painting on the plate's rim, which in our opinion displays solely decorative dots and lines, we will directly proceed to the interpretation of the interior base.

First and foremost, it should be noted that the scene depicted on the Tripod plate contains a single figure located in the center of the scene. The figure is apparently sitting cross-legged, with his right foot shown below its left leg. Most of the figure's body appears to be painted red, with exceptions being the front of the face and portions of the arms, which remain in the gray base color, and the lower torso which appears to be clothed. A black dotted belt extends from the figure's waist, and seems to split, with part of this feature obscured by the fig-

ure's left leg. A similar pattern, also noted to extend across the figure's thigh, is considered to belong to the figure's dress, as are the red circles and dots located between the split portions of the black dotted belt. We believe that the figure is wearing a belt and loincloth, which appear to be draped in front of the figure.

The small circles around the figure's wrists may represent pearls worn as decoration. Half of the face is painted red, as are the figure's hands and forearms, excluding the wrist area where the pearls are located. Both upper arms are painted with a red sinuous line that appears to be some form of decoration. We suggest that the objects above the figure's head are part of a headdress, which is possibly adorned with feathers.

The object at the back of the figure may be a bag being carried by the figure. This interpretation is equivocal because no attachments joining the bag to the figure are visible. A second possibility is that this object represents a kind of cushion (Nikolai Grube pers.comm. 1998), which is very often shown on ceramics in association with seated rulers (Schele & Miller 1986; Reents-Budet 1994), and, if that is the case here, it may indicate elite status.

The figure holds in its left hand an object that could be a vessel, nearly filled with a red liquid. The lower 90% of this object is painted red, perhaps to indicate that the contents inside the vessel are red. It is, of course, also possible that the object was painted red for decorative purposes. The interpretation of this object as a vessel containing a red liquid becomes more apparent after examining the six red dots below the figure's right hand. It is possible that these red dots represent blood dripping from the figure's hand. Presumably the vessel in the figure's left hand is being used to collect this blood. All of the red circles displayed on the Tripod might in some way relate to the red dots below the figure's right hand, and thus to drops of blood. This is especially true of the red circles on the figure's loincloth. These may represent blood spots that dripped from the figure's bleeding hand, and were collected on the cloth draped in front of the figure. The Ch'en P'ix Tripod may, therefore, represent a ritual autosacrificial bloodletting event. If the Ch'en P'ix Tripod does display a bloodletting event, then it is possible that the platform was a place where bloodletting ceremonies were conducted. This idea is further strengthened by the presence of obsidian blades adjacent to the platform.

BLOODLETTING DEPICTED ON CERAMICS AND IN CAVES

Bloodletting events are widely distributed throughout Mesoamerica (Schele & Miller 1986). The Lintels from Yaxchilan show many bloodletting scenes, as do the walls in Bonampak (Miller 1986), which also present hieroglyphic inscriptions that feature many verbs referring to bloodletting (Schele & Miller 1986). Bloodletting scenes are also shown on murals from the Naj Tunich caves (Brady 1988; Stone 1989; 1995). It should be noted however, that bloodletting events are rarely displayed in public areas (Schele & Miller 1986), rather they are mostly presented on hidden lintels or in

caves.

Bloodletting was mainly conducted by the elite "to bring the gods into man's presence" (Schele & Miller 1986: 182). Through bloodletting the Maya sought visions such as the serpent at Yaxchilan. These manifestations may result from massive blood loss affecting the brain and inducing hallucinogenic experiences (Schele & Miller 1986: 177). These experiences allowed the elite to communicate with ancestors and supernaturals (Schele & Miller 1986; Stross & Kerr 1990), thus establishing their divine status within society. Bloodletting events were undertaken on special occasions, either celestial occurrences or on period endings in the Calendar Round such as baktun, katun, and tun endings. Bloodletting events were also undertaken by the elite in connection with childbirth, marriage, death of parents, inauguration of buildings, and most important, accession to thrones (Schele & Miller 1986: 180).

It must be emphasized that the Ch'en P'ix Tripod presumably depicts an autosacrificial bloodletting event. Of all the rituals recorded from caves, bloodletting seems to be one of the most important. It has been documented in Honduras (Brady 1995: 36), in Belize (MacLeod & Puleston 1978), and most importantly in Naj Tunich, where overwhelming evidence for autosacrificial bloodletting rituals is recorded on cave walls (Stone 1985: 26; 1989: 328; Brady 1989: 432).

Presuming that a bloodletting ritual is displayed on the Ch'en P'ix Tripod, it should be emphasized that "flat-bottomed plates with slanting sides and three rattle feet (like the Ch'en P'ix Tripod) are the type of bloodletting bowl used in Late Classic times to hold torn paper and receive the bloody rope" (Schele & Miller 1986: 194). Such a Tripod plate, decorated with a Quadripartite Monster from the Late Classic, which was used for collecting blood, is shown in Schele and Miller (1986: 207). The polychrome Ch'en P'ix Tripod stylistically corresponds to this Tripod plate as both were made during the Late Classic period. It could be that the Ch'en P'ix Tripod functioned as a bowl for collecting blood during rituals performed within Ch'en P'ix. The plate may also depict the ritual itself.

Comparing the Ch'en P'ix Tripod to other ceramics displaying bloodletting events reveals no equivalent to the Tripod plate's image. The Maya Vase Books (Kerr 1989; 1990; 1992; 1994; 1997) provide no single example that is even roughly equivalent to the Ch'en P'ix Tripod. One example of bloodletting from the genitals can be found on a cylindrical vase that depicts the so-called "Fat Cacique" (Reents-Budet 1994: 97). He is sitting inside a palace watching dancers perform a ritual dance while they let blood from their genitals, which drips onto panels tied under their loincloths. All persons, presumably lords (Schele & Miller 1986: 193), to the left of the "Fat Cacique", are performing the same ritual. All their faces are painted in a "two tone pattern" (Schele & Miller 1986: 193), that resembles the colors of the figure's face on the Ch'en P'ix Tripod.

Another cylindrical vase (Schele & Miller 1986: 202) depicts two bloodletting scenes. The first depiction is the

accession of a Lord, and the second scene displays two people occupied in a ritual bloodletting event that was probably associated with the accession (Schele & Miller 1986). The Lord, who has acceded to the throne, is about to perforate his penis with a lancet, while the person to his left, presumably a noble (Schele & Miller 1986: 180) is pulling a rope through his already perforated tongue and is collecting the blood in a bowl.

The above mentioned scenes depict bloodletting from the tongue or the genitals, which are the parts of the body that were mainly used for ritual bloodletting. The Ch'en P'ix Tripod, however, displays a ritual bloodletting event from the hand. An example of ritual bloodletting from the veins of the hands and feet is given by MS 0075 (Reents-Budet 1994: 353). This vase depicts a vision-quest rite (Reents-Budet 1994: 270) with one human being, the central figure, flanked by two supernaturals. All wear blood-splattered clothing and scarves of autosacrifice. The blood seems to primarily come from the figures' hands and feet. The tips of all the figures' hands are also painted red. This vase might therefore provide an indication that hands and fingers also functioned as prominent body parts for the letting of blood.

Another example of a ceramic vessel depicting a human figure with blood dripping from its hands is a cylindrical polychrome vase found at Naj Tunich, which shows a seated figure with liquid falling from his hand. "This posture is generally thought to depict the ceremonial scattering of blood following autosacrifice" (Brady & Stone 1986: 24). The figure in this example is sitting cross-legged like the figure on the Ch'en P'ix Tripod. The figure holds his left hand up and liquid is dripping from his hand and fingers in a stream, in contrast to the Ch'en P'ix Tripod where the liquid appears to be dripping from the hand in drops. The figure from Naj Tunich does not hold an object in his right hand, as does the figure on the Ch'en P'ix Tripod, and both hands are decorated at the wrists, like the figure on the Ch'en P'ix Tripod. The Naj Tunich figure seems to sit on an object that is not clearly identifiable, and the figure's face is not discernable. We think that the scene from the cylindrical vessel from Naj Tunich displays a very similar ritual bloodletting event to the one displayed on the Ch'en P'ix Tripod.

Bloodletting from the fingers is also depicted in the still unpublished colonial book *Chilam Balam of Kaua*. On pages 11, 12, 14 and 21, the phrase "k'ik'el yich'ak" appears (Miram & Miram 1988: 667). K'ik'el yich'ak can be translated from Yucatec into Spanish as "sangre de las uñas del hombre" (Martínez Hernández, 1929), which translated into English means "blood from the fingers of a human being". This phrase appearing five times in the book, in the context of bloodletting, indicates that bloodletting from the fingers is also possibly attested to in this ethnohistorical source.

Victoria Bricker and Helga-Maria Miram point out that the walls at Bonampak provide an example comparable to the phrases in the book of Kaua (Miram, pers. comm. 1998). We think that the phrases in the book of Kaua are further evidence that blood dripping and blood letting from fingers and hands

are a more widely distributed phenomenon in the Maya area than previously considered. A complete, detailed analysis of the phrase from the book of Kaua must await its publication, however.

CH'EN P'IX AS A PLACE FOR RITUAL BLOODLETTING

A large obsidian blade was found close to where Unit #1 was excavated. This implement could have functioned as a bloodletting instrument. Unit # 1 yielded no evidence that it was a burial site, but it does appear to have been a small platform constructed of fill material. Thus, this feature may have been a ritual bloodletting platform. The obsidian blade and the depiction on the Ch'en P'ix Tripod both suggest that this activity may have taken place within Ch'en P'ix.

We offer the following interpretation. A platform was constructed within Ch'en P'ix (with a speleothem bordered path leading from the entrance drop to this platform) that was used for ritual activities. One ritual activity involved bloodletting, and a plate depicting autosacrificial bloodletting (the Ch'en P'ix Tripod) was modeled for use during this ceremony. The Tripod plate not only depicted the scene, but was also used for collecting the blood during the ritual. Upon completion of the ritual, the plate was smashed on the platform as an offering. These events might have taken place in Ch'en P'ix sometime during the Late Classic period.

CONCLUSIONS

If the Ch'en P'ix Tripod does depict a bloodletting ritual, then another piece has been added to the puzzle of Maya cave ritual. Indeed, bloodletting seems to have been a major ritual conducted in caves. Such events must have been important to the Maya because they recorded themselves carrying out these rituals in caves, the best examples being the drawings on the walls of Naj Tunich. In Ch'en P'ix, we suggest that an entire structure, with a path outlined by placed speleothems, was built specifically for ritual activities, which included bloodletting. Just such an event seems to be depicted on a polychrome Tripod plate that was found broken on the surface of the platform. The discovery and analysis of this plate provides a rare insight into Maya ritual cave use.

Several other platforms are present near the one where the Ch'en P'ix Tripod was found. It is possible that these structures also served specific ritual purposes. We hope that further research will clarify not only the uses of these platforms, but also the functions of other cave passages as well. The discovery of Ch'en P'ix, and analysis of the plethora of artifacts it contains, will add more information to existing knowledge regarding ritual Maya cave utilization, especially on the Northern Vaca Plateau of Belize.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful to James Brady for providing us with additional information about Naj Tunich. We also extend our

thanks to Nikolai Grube and Kai Delvendahl for their input regarding the importance and interpretation of the image on the Ch'en P'ix Tripod. We are deeply indebted to all members of the Vaca Plateau Geoarchaeology Project, especially Bill Reynolds, Mike and Andrea Futrell, and Brian Nichols. Finally, we appreciate editorial suggestions made by three reviewers who read an earlier draft for this journal.

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