



VESSEL WITH A PRIMARY STANDARD SEQUENCE IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT IN A CAVE ON THE NORTHERN VACA PLATEAU, BELIZE

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The Vaca Plateau Geoarchaeological Project has conducted more than ten field seasons of systematic multidisciplinary research on the Northern Vaca Plateau. The first phase of the study has primarily focused on the geology, hydrology, and physical geography of the region. While exploring the caves an abundance of evidence for human utilization was disclosed within those caves. Therefore the second part of the project is now turning to the archaeological remains the caves contain.

Figure 1: Photograph of sherd (Pierre Robert Colas)

The most important cave discovered so far, Ch'en P'ix, contains a high density of artifacts and bones that suggest extensive ritual activities in that cave. Preliminary studies have been conducted during the past years (Colas, Reeder, Webster 2000), that show complex rituals have been undertaken in the cave in the Late Classic. However, quite a number of caves contain evidence of human utilization without humans necessarily moving around in those caves. Such evidence is mostly found in vertical caves. These show a large pile of artifacts at the bottom of the drop, implying that artifacts have been thrown into the cave (Reeder, Brady, Webster 1998). Far from being simple dump deposits, these caves might have served special rituals where offerings were thrown into the caves; offerings for ancestors or special supernatural beings.

One such cave, containing a pile of ceramic sherds at the bottom of the 3m drop has been called by the project with the apt name "Pottery Hill Cave". The cave was discovered in 1991 and is less than 20m long. One of the surface sherds of this cave shall hereby be published (Fig. 1).

The sherd is 14,2cm wide, 12,8cm high, and 0,5cm thick. It is part of a vessel whose top diameter was 22,3cm (see Fig. 2). It is a slipped polychrome red and black on orange coloured ceramic, equaling the Tepeu 1-Tepeu 2 style at Uaxactun (Smith 1955), thus being dated into the Early Late Classic.

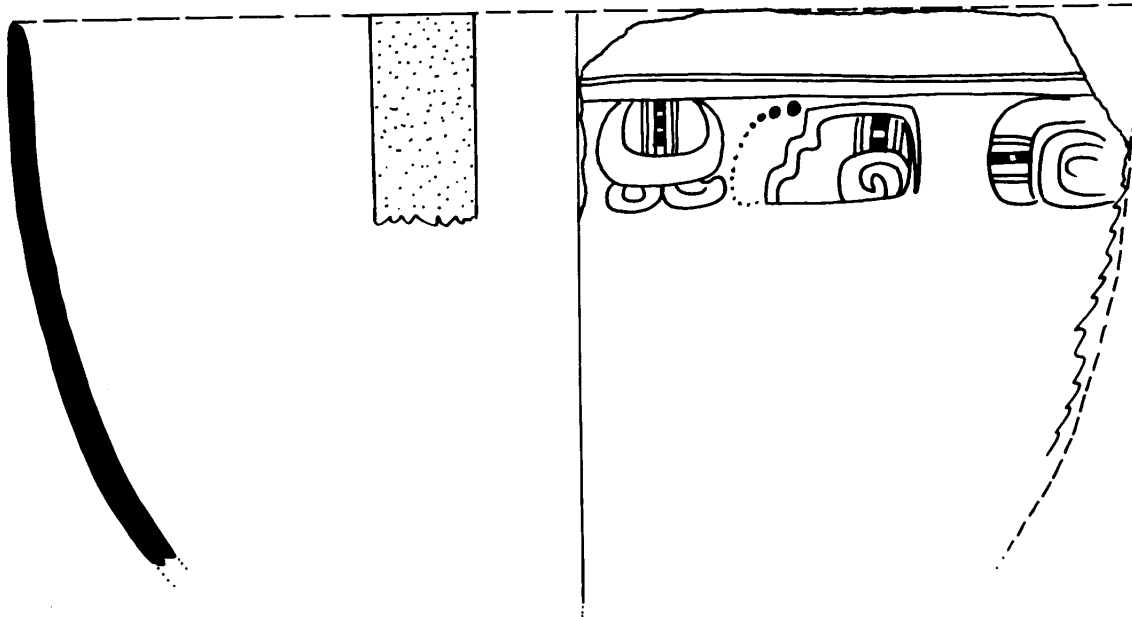


Figure 2: Reconstruction-Drawing of Vessel (Pierre Robert Colas); inking (Christian M. Prager)

The iconography of the sherd shows the glyphs and several long objects. The several longish objects may well be parts of a headdress worn by certain figures. Alternatively, they may be parts of bird feathers, depending upon what was shown on the sherd.

The hieroglyphic inscription features three hieroglyphs that are well known to epigraphers. They constitute the beginning of the so called Primary Standard Sequence that often occurs on vessels. This repetitive sequence of glyphs functions to denote the vessel type, its content and its owner. In this case the first three glyphs are visible on the sherd.

The first glyph, the so called initial glyph (Stuart 1989: 15) denoting the beginning of the inscription. Several suggestions as to its reading have been made (MacLeod 1990a). The most likely being *alay*, due to a clear substitution on K8123 as **a-la-ya**. However, the sign varies so much, that no secure decipherment can be proposed. Its semantic meaning as "here starts" may be employed. The next hieroglyph is the so-called step glyph (MacLeod 1990b), that most often substitutes for the God N head.

Several readings for this glyph have been posited as well, the most likely so far being *t'ab* "to ascend" (Stuart 1998: 417), meaning "to finish". The last hieroglyph on this sherd is readable as *y-ich* "its surface" referring to the surface of the vessel. The whole inscription thus reads "Here starts the finishing of the surface". These glyphs are normally followed by the denotation of the vessel type, the content and the owner. The here presented inscription thus constitutes the beginning of the well known Primary Standard Sequence on vessels.

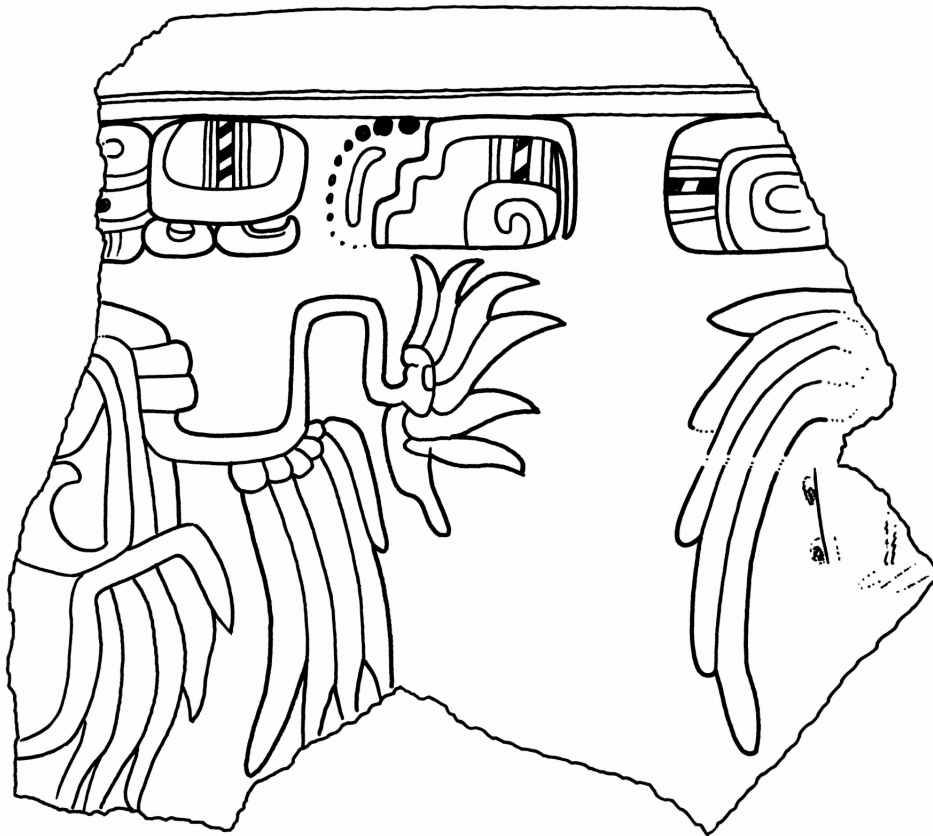


Figure 3: Drawing of sherd (Pierre Robert Colas); inking (Christian M. Prager)

The style of the glyphs strongly suggests that they come from the region around Naranjo, probably produced in one of the workshops there (see Reents-Budet 1994: 212). As Naranjo is in a distance of only 50km as the parrot flies, it is quite possible that a vessel from a Naranjo workshop found its way into a cave on the Northern Vaca Plateau. As the cave Ch'en P'ix also contains ceramics from even more distant Tikal, this is a likely possibility. These facts show the more than regional importance of the caves on the Northern Vaca Plateau in Belize.

The hereby represented inscription constitutes an unusually fine example of a Primary Standard Sequence that adds to the known corpus of Primary Standard Sequences. What makes this example very special however, is that it ranks among the few found in archaeological context. The ceramic, whatever its original function, found its final utilization as an offering thrown into a cave, probably offered to some ancestors or mythological beings.

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