This paper presents a synthesis of recent work in the Caves Branch River Valley, which has focused on the many cave and rockshelter ritual sites and the core of the monumental center Deep Valley. These results are supplemented by data generated from prior investigations in the that allows us to establish that small stable communities in the valley beginning in the Middle-Late Formative period and continuing through the Late Classic period were the norm. This pattern was abruptly broken in the Late-Terminal Classic with a brief period of annexation of the valley into a broader political and economic sphere. While the limited settlement data seem to point to increased population sizes during the late period, the main body of evidence comes from variations in the ritual use of caves and rock shelters, which increases dramatically and shows evidence for changes that can be interpreted as demonstrating increased social complexity within local populations and as reflecting less provincialism. In addition, the hastily constructed site of Deep Valley clearly reveals the late presence of some type of centralized administration. Taken together, these data suggest a late and significant influx of migrants into the valley, followed by a sudden depopulation concurrent with similar abandonment’s at nearby centers.

Introduction

The last three years of work (2005-07) by the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance project in the Caves Branch River Valley has produced a diverse set of data from both settlement and ritual cave sites, adding significantly to the story based on previous studies in the Caves Branch Valley, as well as other valleys in the surrounding region. In the first phase of this research in which we focused on determining the basic chronology of human occupation, documenting the extent and variation of ritual cave use, and finding evidence for the rise of sociopolitical complexity. This paper will review our work in these areas, and will conclude with interpretations and future research directions. The data from our study come primarily from an extensive excavation of the Caves Branch Rockshelter cemetery site, testpit operations at several other non-mortuary rockshelters, and a mapping and testpit examination of the central plaza from Deep Valley (Figure 1).

Chronology

Chronological evidence for occupation in the Caves Branch Valley comes from caves. Earlier studies of cave sites in the valley include MacLeod and Puleston’s (1973) preliminary investigation of Petroglyph cave, research at Petroglyph Cave by Reents (Reents and MacLeod 1986; Reents 1980, 1981), Graham et al’s (1980) studies of Footprint cave, and Juan Luis Bonor’s (2002; Bonor and Martinez Klemm 1995; Glassman and Bonor 2005) salvage work at Caves Branch Rockshelter and several small caves nearby. Reents' (1980) thesis on Petroglyph cave has provided a ceramic sequence spanning the Protoclassic through Terminal Classic periods. At Footprint, Graham et al (1980: 156) report "intermittent cave use from Middle Preclassic to Postclassic times." This range of dates is typical of cave use in the area as documented by Awe's Western Belize Regional Cave Project in the Macal and Roaring Creek Valleys (Awe et al 1998) and Peterson's and McAnany's work in the Sibun (McAnany et al 2003, Peterson 2006), as well as most other researchers throughout the Maya region.

At Caves Branch Rockshelter, Bonor's (2002) preliminary analysis of the ceramics also showed a range of dates corresponding to the Formative through Terminal Classic periods, while ceramics from Pottery Cave and TeTun, small caves adjacent to the rockshelter, primarily dated to the Early Classic period. Hardy's ceramic analysis of the recent Caves Branch Rockshelter excavations matched Bonor's findings. Both Bonor and Hardy found a few Middle Preclassic sherds, which may be evidence for a slightly earlier start date of ritual use of the site. At Caves Branch Rockshelter, Hardy reported three examples of Jenney Creek complex ceramics: two Jocote...
Orange-Brown sherds and one Sayab Daub-Striated sherd. In 2006, we discovered a diagnostic Archaic Lowe point at the Caves Branch Rockshelter (Figure 2). This type of point dates to 2500 - 1900 BC (Lohse et al 2006) and could be offered as evidence for an even earlier occupation of the valley. However, in this case the point was not in situ in an Archaic context, but was instead placed with Burial 66, which provided a 2-sigma AMS date of AD 80-250, within the Late Preclassic period. We can speculate that this may represent a case of curation of discarded objects, perhaps for use as divining tools or personal sacra, as discussed by Brown (2000) for both ancient and modern Maya ritual practitioners.

Perhaps more interesting than the range of dates is the contextual and temporal distribution of ceramics, which give more specific information about activity patterns. Hardy’s recent analysis of the ceramics at Caves Branch Rockshelter and Deep Valley Rockshelter shows that the sequences are not as clearly defined in the Late Classic period, possibly suggesting a slight hiatus followed by a renewal in the Late - Terminal Classic transition period, represented by Spanish Lookout and New Town ceramic sherds. Caves Branch Rockshelter, in particular, evidences this Late Classic hiatus. Less than 3% of the ceramic sample was associated with the Late Classic period, compared to the 33% represented by Late-Terminal Classic sherds. No Late Classic sherds were present in the ceramic assemblage from Deep Valley Rockshelter, though 20% of the collection was identified as being of Late-Terminal Classic origin. The best represented Late-Terminal ceramic types at both
these sites were Cayo Unslipped, Puxcman Red, and Mount Maloney Black.

At Petroglyph Cave (Reents 1980:269) and Actun Tunichil Muknal (Griffith 1998: 55), Early Classic ceramics were more restricted and very little Early Classic material was found inside the cave, but instead was focused around the entrance areas. In the Macal River Valley, Moyes’s (2006) work at Chechem Ha showed clearly that while ritual peaked in the Early Classic period, Late Classic ritual was more dispersed, including new areas of the cave, which were harder to reach and had not been used by earlier groups. The WBRCP cave survey of the Roaring Creek Valley suggests that while Late Classic populations continued to use sites with Preclassic and Early Classic components like Actun Uayazba Kab and Actun Tunichil Muknal (Griffith 1998), they also expanded cave ritual to include a number of smaller, less impressive rockshelters and caves ignored by earlier groups in the area (Awe et al 1998, Mirro et al 1999: 13). This pattern also appears to hold true in Peterson's (2006: 62) survey of the Sibun River Valley. So, while Preclassic and Early Classic activity is ubiquitous, and in some cases quite intense, its distribution is more focused and thus not generally as extensive as Late Classic activity areas.

**Cave Excavation and Analysis of Ritual Use**

Much of the focus of the Caves Branch project has been on rockshelters, especially the Caves Branch Rockshelter, which was first investigated by Bonor in the mid-1990s (Bonor 2002, Bonor and Martínez Klemm 1996, Glassman and Bonor 2005). Bonor's investigations at the rockshelter revealed a diverse assemblage of material culture and human remains, including scattered bone and 32 primary burials. The large number of burials and the rather pedestrian quality of the ritual and grave goods led to an interpretation of the rockshelter as being "a ritual burial site used by lower-caste farming members of the neighboring areas" (Glassman and Bonor 2005: 289). The BVAR project began a bioarchaeology program at the Caves Branch Rockshelter in 2005 because of the extraordinary density of human remains and the relatively unique mortuary context of the site (Wrobel et al 2006). At present, over 100 primary burials have been excavated and, based on the size of the excavation area and the presence of scattered remains of dozens of more individuals throughout the matrix, this number likely represents only 1/3 or 1/4 of the total number of burials in the rockshelter.

Excavations were set up in different parts of the rockshelter to determine the extent of the cemetery and whether it grew radiating outward from a central point, as is typical of cemeteries (Figure 3). All excavations produced human remains, and thus the excavations did not manage to clearly define the cemetery's boundaries. An extensive excavation in the northern portion of the rockshelter (Ops 1A and 1F) revealed very dense and overlapping graves, as did the excavations in the central area (Ops 1B and 1E) around the cave entrance. In comparison, a 2m x 2m excavation in the southern section (Oper. 1C), revealed a looser, gravel matrix, with far fewer burials and less scattered bone, perhaps indicating the cemetery's southern limit.

![Figure 3](image-url). Map of the 2005-07 excavations within the CBR. (Map by Bryan Haley)
A detailed analysis of the primary burials and the highly disturbed remains from bone scatters is underway, so no accurate age / sex profiles are currently available. However, preliminary analyses of the skeletal remains have identified individuals of both sexes and all ages represented in ratios that we would expect from a small rural population, and thus are consistent with Bonor’s original assessment. The CBR burial population contains a relatively large number of infants (≤ 2 years) and comparatively fewer children (3-15 years). Among the adults, we see more young adults than old ones, and both males and females are represented. A possible influence on the mortality ratios is that neonates and infants are more often found placed against the rockshelter wall, which would seem to offer more protection from the elements. For this reason, it may be that the sampling from our excavations was not entirely random, since excavations rarely abutted the rock face. But overall, the population appears to be relatively healthy compared to urban populations: no severe infections, no healed trauma, very little and mild anemia, and mild caries rates.

The rockshelter excavations have also produced a sizeable collection of whole vessels. Including four vessels originally removed by Bonor, there are a total of 20 whole or at least nearly complete, vessels. All of the complete vessels encountered were Late Preclassic forms (Terry Powis, p.c.). Most are relatively simple, crude vessels, and few are slipped. With the exception of a single partial Sierra Red dish with a black cross on its base, described by Bonor and Martínez Klemm (1996: 253), all vessels were jars and bowls. Other examples of Sierra Red forms include three jars, Fowler’s Orange-Red or Macal Orange-Red varieties, one of which has four nubbin feet and post-slipped striations. Vessel 14 is a rare example of a complete Flor Cream jar (Figure 4). Most of the vessels found with burials are unslipped and often are decorated with appliqués and incised lines (Figure 5). These styles can be described as Cocay Appliqued (Reents 1980: 168-76) or Succotz Striated (Gifford 1976: 186-188). The jars typically have charring on the bottoms and sometimes the insides.

Since the whole vessels are the only chronologically diagnostic grave goods, our initial hypothesis was that mortuary use of the rockshelter was restricted to the Late Preclassic period and that later phases of the site’s use were simply limited to ritual deposition of objects, including the large amounts of scattered ceramic sherds. However, a series of AMS dates on burials from different parts of the rockshelter showed fairly conclusively that the mortuary use of the entire site in fact spans the Late Preclassic through Late-Terminal Classic periods. On the surface, this longevity does show some support for a static model of Maya cave ritual with continuity in ritual over an extended period of time. However, there appears to be an interesting contrast between the burials in the early and late phases of the cave’s use in that all of the grave goods come from Late Preclassic and Early Classic contexts. Other grave goods include a pair of bone hairpins with Burial 83, which dated to the Early Classic period. Another individual had a carved bone with the woven mat motif, but this too is early since it was intruded upon by a Late Preclassic burial with a diagnostic vessel. So, at the very least, the nature of the ritual does change over time, and this may indicate a change in who used the
rockshelter and how this context was viewed differently by later inhabitants of the valley.

Figure 5. Vessel 16, a Cocay Appliqued jar, from the CBR

**Settlement**

Previous research on settlement in the Caves Branch valley has not been extensive. The earlier cave projects all mention the presence of housemounds, but none were investigated until the late 1970s, when Davis (1980) mapped an elite residential complex and a small plazuela of the Deep Valley site, which were discovered during the construction of the Hummingbird Highway. Later, David Goldstein and Cameron Griffith, working with Bonor, mapped a small plazuela group, called Xubzulima, near the Caves Branch Rockshelter (Goldstein, n.d.). A small cache at the base of the northern structure contained a Sotero Red Brown: Sotero Variety vessel dating to the Terminal Classic period. Following Davis’ work, and in response to the amount of Hermitage ceramics found in the caves around Cave Branch, Reents (1980: 236) speculated that further excavations at Deep Valley would eventually turn up evidence of Early Classic settlement. This project represents the beginning of the first formal survey to test this hypothesis.

Jill Jordan (2008) recently completed her thesis on Baateelek (Figure 6), the major plaza group of the Deep Valley site, located on top of a hill approximately 1 kilometer from the residential group documented by Davis (1980). Baateelek is a medium-sized ceremonial center composed of at least 24 structures surrounding 4 nucleated plazas, covering approximately 2.56 hectares. The core configuration and size are consistent with major sites in the Belize Valley, like Cahal Pech (Awe et al. 1991). Work during the 2008 field season focused on mapping the site core, noting building stratigraphy in the baulk of looters’ trenches, and conducting test excavations in several of the plazas.

Figure 6. Map of Baateelek, the central plaza of the Deep Valley site. (Map by Jillian Jordan)

The testpit excavations provided information concerning how Baateelek was constructed. The site was essentially built on a vacant landscape and does not exhibit historical accretion (Webster 1998) like sites that had been utilized over long periods of time. Data from excavations and looters’ trenches suggest that both the plazas and structures at Baateelek were constructed with large limestone boulders, a construction technique similar to the sites of Xunantunich (LeCount et al. 2002), Hershey (Harrison-Buck 2007) and Cahal Uitza Na (Ehret and Conlon 1999). Small, fist-sized rocks were tamped down atop the boulders in order to...
provide an appropriate surface for plastering episodes. The structures consist of large boulders with a crudely cut limestone façade. The plaster floors were very eroded, or nonexistent in some cases, suggesting that the floors were thin and poorly constructed. Excavations in Plazas A and B and the clearing of two looters’ trenches (in Structures A2 and C3) revealed that Baateelek was likely constructed in only a few stages suggesting that the site was occupied for only a short amount of time. Also suggestive of a short occupation is the paucity of artifacts found on the surface and within the construction fill.

Only a few ceramics from Baateelek could be positively identified, and all dated to the Spanish Lookout Phase (670-900 A.D.), including Pine Ridge Carbonate, British Honduras Volcanic Ash and Uaxactun Unslipped wares. Types include Roaring Creek Red: Roaring Creek Variety (Gifford 1976: 240), Garbutt Creek Red: Garbutt Creek Variety (p. 230), Belize Red: Belize Variety (p. 226), Cayo Unslipped: Variety Unspecified (p. 279), and Alexanders Unslipped: Alexanders Variety (p. 283). These types are common in the area and are generally associated with late facet (ca A.D. 830-900) contexts (Harrison-Buck 2007: 230, 232, 401, 421-23). Though the majority of the dateable ceramics at Baateelek were from a single midden feature, it is unlikely that the structures date much before that time period as the excavations suggest quick construction and a brief occupation. The Late-Terminal Classic date for construction of Baateelek is consistent with the date of other surface sites in the Caves Branch River Valley (i.e., Deep Valley Lookout [Davis 1980] and Plazuela Xubzulima [Goldstein n.d.]), as well as the major sites in the neighboring Sibun Valley. McAnany et al (2003) report that settlement in the Sibun is similarly limited to the Late/Terminal Classic and was sudden and immediately complex, indicating a transplanted social hierarchy. She characterizes the area as "devoid of settlement" previous to this move. Peterson's (2006) later dissertation research on the caves and rockshelters in the Sibun was informative and like our research shows evidence for a much longer span of occupation than does the data from settlement.

Discussion

The recent work in the Caves Branch River Valley has been informative in that it has provided the basis for reconstructing the cultural history of the area. Not surprisingly, there are many parallels to the neighboring regions, such as the Sibun and Roaring Creek River Valleys. The sudden construction of a large ceremonial center, Deep Valley, in the Late Classic period suggests that this time is obviously a period of major change for the inhabitants of the Caves Branch Valley. Though no substantive settlement surveys have yet been undertaken, data from the Xubzulima plazuela indicates the presence of a contemporaneous social hierarchy extending beyond the new city into the rural landscape. Future settlement work will focus on the many housemounds dotting the river valley to determine the nature of this Late Classic transition and whether the sudden construction of Deep Valley was fueled by long term local population growth or by an influx of urban migrants into a sparsely populated, rural hinterland.

The extensive cave archaeology surveys conducted in West-Central Belize also point to a cultural transition in the Late Classic, which has generally been attributed to growing population pressure and increasing social complexity in the region. In the Late Classic there is an increase in the complexity of cave ritual with a focus on the deeper segments of larger caves and an expansion of ritual locations to include even the smallest of overhangs and crevices. The current popular cave model suggests that the ritual use of caves was dictated by social status, with elites having access to ("appropriating") the larger caves and non-elites relegated to small caves and rockshelters (Peterson 2006: 13). According to the initial settlement data, complex social hierarchies did not seem to exist in the valley until the latter half of the Late Classic period, suggesting that previous to this time patterns of cave use did not reflect status.

The recent rockshelter data from the Caves Branch region show continuity in the use of larger sites, such as Caves Branch Rockshelter and Deep Valley Rockshelter, and only later use of the smaller caves, rockshelters, and crevices nearby. This pattern may be interpreted as evidence of a greater number of
rituals being performed by the larger number of residents, and perhaps even as an indication of the appropriation of ritual sites by the new elite class and the subsequent marginalization of commoners. In addition, the data from the larger sites show variation in the nature of their use over time, which also may relate to this cultural and demographic transition. For instance, ceramic sherd counts point to a sudden escalation in the use of these sites during the brief Late-Terminal Classic period, a time when complex ritual is well documented in some of the larger, more impressive caves in the area. The fact that burials at Caves Branch Rockshelter no longer contain grave goods, even the types of non-exotic and inexpensive objects found there with earlier interments, more likely suggests a change in mortuary symbolism, rather than an indication of the relative wealth of the individuals buried there.

Conclusions

Diverse pieces of evidence taken from both natural and constructed ritual environments in the Caves Branch River Valley all point to a radical transition occurring during the Late-Terminal Classic period. While the cave and rockshelter sites show that permanent populations were present in the area at least by the Late Preclassic period, the earliest convincing evidence for the appearance of socioeconomic complexity dates to the latter portion of the Late Classic period. This cultural sequence is similar to those reported for the neighboring Roaring Creek (Awe et al 1998) and Sibun (McAnany et al 2003, Peterson 2006) River Valleys. Analyses of patterns of cave use generally support a model of culture change over time, likely related to the introduction of a larger, more diverse population in the Late Classic. Future work in the valley will focus on developing a broader picture of both cave and settlement sites by continuing and expanding investigations at Deep Valley and the surrounding settlement zone and by supplementing the rich tradition of cave archaeology in the area with data from a wider variety of cave sites.

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