Ritual Hunting Caches of the Highland Maya

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Introduction

Previous research by Dr. Linda Brown (2005) has led to the identification of at least 20 hunting shrines hidden among the volcanic mountains surrounding Lake Atitlan, Guatemala. These shrines mark the location where Mayan hunters would communicate with the guardian of the animals and deposit the curated remains of their successful hunts. Often located within caves or rockshelters, these shrines are composed of massive quantities of hunted animal remains. Many of these shrines have been abandoned in the past 50 years or are still currently in use. This past summer, a team of archaeologists and Mayan ritual practitioners came together to explore the activities of hunting ceremonialism through the study of the material remains associated with these sites. As a zooarchaeologist, a specialist in the identification of animal remains from archaeological sites, these hunting caches provided an excellent opportunity to explore the ritual use of animals within the Mayan world which are highlighted in the research goals and future research sections.
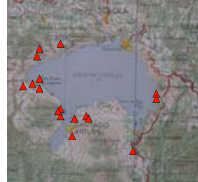
Image 1: Pa' Ruchi' Abaj

Image 2: Map of Lake Atitlán with the locations of known hunting shrines

Methods

- Focused on three sites: Pa' Ruchi' Abaj, Pa Sak Man, Pa' Ziguán
- Mapped each site and activity areas within each site
- Due to ritual nature of site, identifications were made on-site
- Identified faunal materials in terms of species, element, age, sex, pathologies, and taphonomy

Images 3-5: (Top-right) photo of Pa Sak Man, (Top-left) map of Pa Sak Man, (Botton-right) our team making identifications in the field

Photos taken by Dr. Kitty Emery

Research Goal

- The identification of the key characteristics of ritual faunal assemblages and the use of this "signature" to identify archaeological hunting ritual sites.

Results

Characteristics or "signature" of a ritual faunal assemblage:

1) High density bone assemblages in defined spatial
2) Very high OR very low (single or several species) taxonomic diversity emphasizing animals valued as food and then those of economic/symbolic value
3) Possibly high juvenile frequencies
4) Low element fragmentation rates and possibly low butcher rates
5) Low frequencies of high-heat burns ubiquitous over taxa and elements, but spatially discrete
6) Correlation of weathering/animal alterations with local taphonomy

Site	#Features	Range of Percent Sampled	Ave Percent Sampled	Range of NISP	Total NISP	Estimated Total Site # Specimens
Pa' Ruchi Abaj (surface)	1 (4 units)	10-100%	61%	68-515	1205	1968
Pa' Ruchi Abaj (subsurface)	--	25x25x10cm*3	0.2%	560-3988	--	597040*
Pa Sak Man	11(14 units)	20-100%	28%	1-1586	4853	17171
Pa' Ziguan	5 (5 units)	25-100%	49%	7-200	387	782

* (based on site volumetrics)

Figure 1: This graph provides information about the size of the faunal assemblages and how much of that assemblage we identified for each site. NISP (number of identified specimens) refers to the number of bones that we identified to at least the class level.

Taxonomy (% MNI)

= 45% Deer

= 11% Peccary

= 17% Armadillo

= 7% Coati

= 4% Paca

= 2% Rabbit, Opossom, Agouti

= 1.5% Large cat, Tapir

= 1% Raccoon, Brocket deer

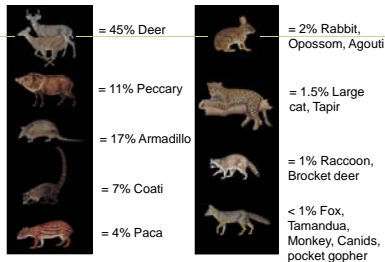< 1% Fox, Tamandua, Monkey, Canids, pocket gopher

Figure 2: This figure displays the overall percentage of each species taking all three sites into account. White-tailed deer, armadillo, peccary, coati, and paca are the dominate species.

Taxa	% Body Portion Representation	
Birds	87.5	*mainly forelimbs (wings)*
Opossums	37.5	*mainly cranial*
Armadillo	87.5	*missing distal forelimb [scutes not included in analysis]*
Raccoon	62.5	*missing distals and lower hindlimb*
Coati	87.5	*mainly missing distals (difficult to id)*
Cats	75	*all distal or terminal limb elements*
Tapir	100	*predominantly distal elements*
Peccary	100	*predominantly cranial*
Brocket deer	100	*missing antlers*
White tailed deer	100	*missing antlers*
Agouti	75	*mainly missing distals (difficult to id)*
Paca	75	*mainly missing distals (difficult to id)*
Rabbit	62.5	*mainly missing distals (difficult to id)*

Figure 3: This graph displays what bone elements (femur, cranium, etc.) we found within these caches for each species in terms of % body portion representation. For the most part, each species had all of their elements represented.
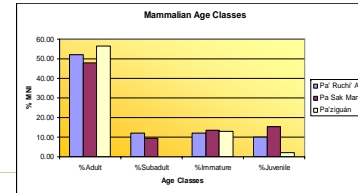
Mammalian Age Classes

Figure 4: This graph represents the relative percentage of each age class represented from each assemblage. Adults dominate at each site.
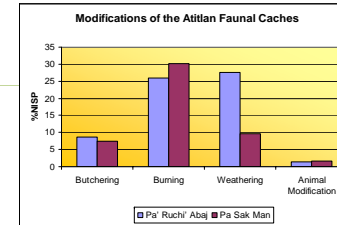
Modifications of the Atitlan Faunal Caches

Figure 5: This graph shows signs of butchering marks and animal modifications (carnivore/rodent gnawing) is low at these sites. This supports ethnographic evidence that these bones were to be handled with great care when returned to the guardian of the animals. On the other hand, the percentage of burned material is relatively high. The nature of this burning, however, suggests that this burning occurred during the rituals rather than from cooking. Weathering was more pronounced at Pa'Ruchi'Abaj, which is a direct reflection of the morphology of the rockshelter (it was more exposed to the elements).

Future Research

My master's research is focused on examining whether or not our signature for hunting ceremonialism can be used to identify other ritual faunal assemblages in the archaeological record. Currently, I'm examining known ritual deposits from caves at the sites of Dos Pilas and Las Pacayas in lowland Guatemala. This summer's project is an entry point into examining broader topics pertinent in Mayan archaeology such as the ritual use of animals within a cave context. Caves are particularly important to both modern and ancient Mayans. Ethnographic evidence attest to the belief that the "guardian of the animals" tends to wild animals on a finca inside a mountain which is entered a cave or a rock outcrop. Caves were also essential to ancient Mayan cosmology because were seen as the entrance into the Underworld (Brady and Prufer 2005).

Photo taken by Dr. Linda Brown

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Image 6: Mayan hunter displaying his hunting equipment: his dogs, spear, and incense burner

Image 7: Performers in the deer and jaguar dance in Santiago de Atitlán

Literature cited

Brown, Linda. 2005. Planting the bones:hunting ceremonialism at contemporary and nineteenth-century shrines in the Guatemalan highlands. *Latin American Antiquity* 16(2):131-146.

Brady, James and Keith Prufer. 2005. *In the Maw of the Earth Monster: Mesoamerican Ritual Cave Use.* University of Texas Press: Austin.

Acknowledgments

Photo taken by Dr. Linda Brown