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Planting the Bones: An Ethnoarchaeological Exploration of Hunting Shrines and Deposits around Lake Atitlán, Guatemala



Research Year: 2005

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Contemporary

Location: Guatemala

Site: Lake Atitlán

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Introduction

In this report, I present the results of recent ethnoarchaeological research focusing on Maya hunting shrines and ceremonialism around Lake Atitlán, Guatemala. Hunting shrines are sacred places in the landscape used for rituals to placate the lord of the animals before and after a hunt. From a material perspective, these sites are notable as they contain a unique feature indicative of their use in hunting-related rites—a ritual fauna cache—that would be recognizable by archaeologists after site abandonment. Ritual fauna caches consist of animal remains that are secondarily deposited at sacred sites in the context of a hunting ritual.

In previous research, we identified and mapped three hunting shrines (Brown and Romero 2002) with three additional sites identified yet not recorded (Brown 2005). With support from the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., (FAMSI) we returned to Guatemala during the summer of 2005 to focus on several broad goals: 1) identifying additional hunting shrines around the lake, 2) mapping all known hunting shrines and recording on-site features, and 3) conducting ethnographic interviews with hunters and ritual practitioners who used or remember the use of these sites. As a result of this research, we identified and mapped fourteen new hunting shrines bringing the current total of known sites to seventeen ([Figure 1](#)).

Hunting shrines are associated with both Tz'utujil and Kaqchikel communities around the lake. Three hunting shrines are still minimally active while 14 are abandoned. Interviews with locals confirmed that most sites were abandoned within the last 50 years.

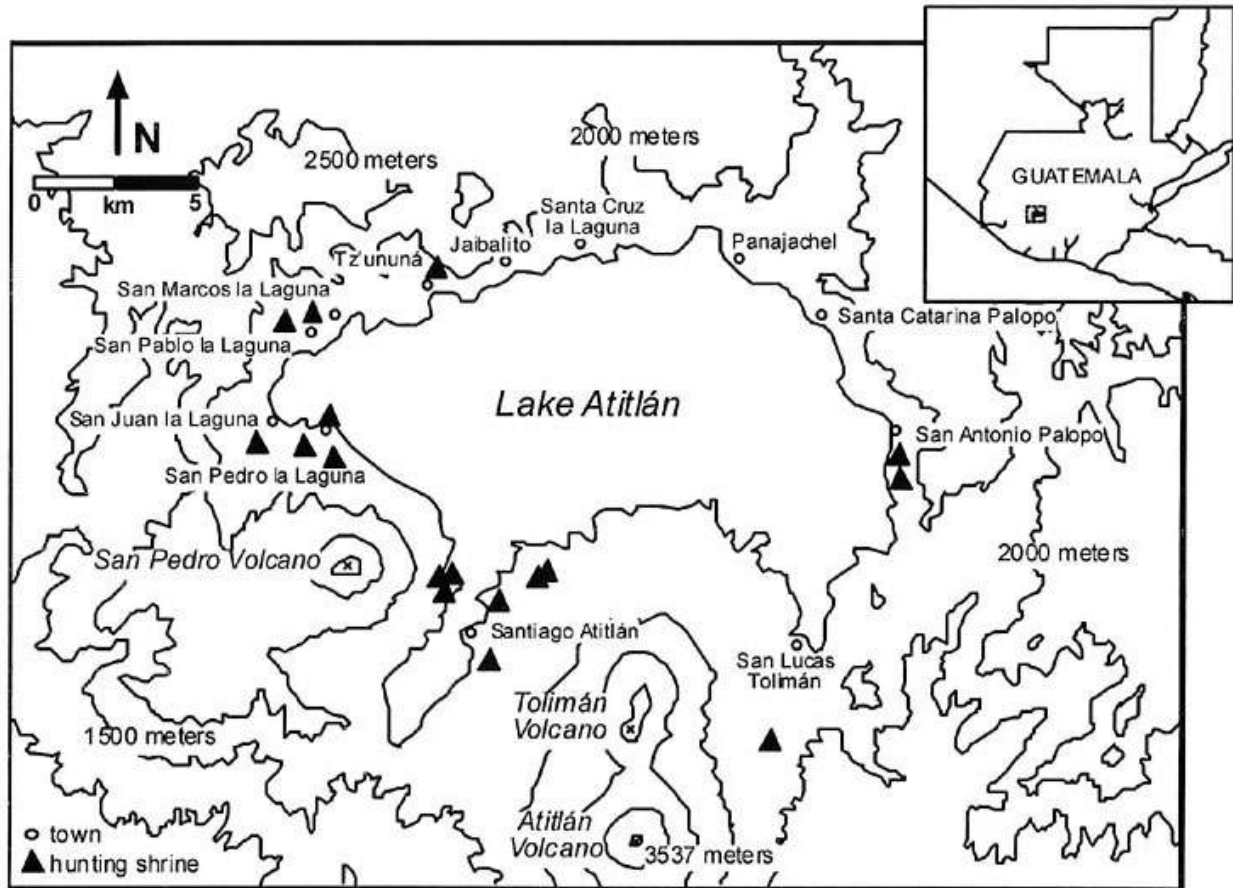


Figure 1. Map of Lake Atitlán showing the locations of known hunting shrines.

Where's the Archaeological Evidence of Hunting Rites?

Recent research indicates that Maya commoners, as well as the elite, drew upon a reservoir of supernatural knowledge in rites designed to sway and intervene with ancestors and deities. To date, three main categories of commoner ritual are inferred from the archaeological record: (a) mortuary rites and ancestor veneration, (b) dedication and termination rites, and (c) feasting (see Robin 2003 for a review). Archaeological investigations of Maya households demonstrate that ancestor veneration played an important role in group identity formation and socio-political claims for commoners, as well as the elite (e.g., Gillespie 2001; McAnany 1995; McAnany 1998; McAnany, Storey, and Lockhard 1999; Yaeger 2000; Yaeger 2003a; Yaeger 2003b). In addition to revered ancestors, commoners placed non-human dedicatory and/or termination caches under the floors of their homes and domestic features in rites intended to actively ensoul or release the animate energy of these lived spaces (Brady and Ashmore 1999; Garber et al. 1998; McAnany, Storey, and Lockhard 1999; Mock 1998; Robin 2002). There is ample evidence of the importance of Maya commoner feasts likely staged to coincide with certain calendrical dates and/or honor specific deities. These commensurable events probably functioned to solidify group identity

while expanding the social networks and socio-political influence of sponsors (Brown 2001; Brown and Gerstle 2002; LeCount 1999; LeCount 2001; Robin 2002; Tozzer 1941; Yaeger 2000; Yaeger 2003a; Yaeger 2003b).

The research reported here suggests that an important realm of ceremonial activity is absent from the previously mentioned categories of commoner rites in the Maya area. No hunting-related ceremonialism is identified. Yet references to the Lord of the Animals and hunting ceremonialism abound in the ethnographic literature (e.g., Alcorn 1984:88; Cabarrus 1998:47; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:187; Hofling 1991:136-153; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:117-118; Sapper 1897:268; Thompson 1930:88-89, 124-135, 308; Thompson 1970:308; Villa Rojas 1945:103; Wisdom 1940:72-73). Colonial period documents attest to the longevity of hunting ceremonialism in both the Maya highlands and lowlands (e.g., Clendinnen 1987:73; Cortes y Laraz 1958 [1768-1770]:119-120; Scholes and Adams 1938:63; Thompson 1930:124-135; Tozzer 1941:144, 162). Meanwhile, Pre-Columbian iconography and epigraphy attest to the longevity of this deity (Fox and Justeson 1984; Taube 1997; Taube 2003), while the ubiquity of archaeological faunal caches in non-domestic contexts suggests a great antiquity for animal-related ceremonialism (Brady 1989; Emery 2004; Pendergast 1969; Pendergast 1971; Pendergast 1974; Pohl 1981; Pohl 1983; Pohl and Pohl 1983). The resilience of belief in the Lord of the Animals who must be placated with material offerings before and after hunting suggests that the physical places used for hunting rites and associated ritual deposits should be visible in an archaeological context.

The Lake Atitlán hunting shrines provide us with the first glimpse at the material signature of hunting rites and the types of topographic features chosen for this ceremonial activity. In the following pages, I first describe the hunting shrines with associated features.¹ Then I present the results of ethnographic interviews with hunters and ritual practitioners who used these sites. Finally, I present a material model of hunting-related deposits that can be used for evaluating whether an archaeological deposit might reflect an ancient hunting rite.

Description of Hunting Shrines

Fourteen new hunting shrines were identified and mapped during the summer of 2005 (see [Figure 1](#)). Hunting shrines are associated with various communities around the lake including: Santiago Atitlán, San Pedro la Laguna, San Juan la Laguna, San Pablo la Laguna, Tz'ununá, San Antonio Palopó and the archaeological site of Chuitinamit.

Based on field work and ethnographic interviews, we identified two general types of hunting shrines: (a) personal hunting shrines used by a single hunter and (b) communal

¹ In-depth zooarchaeological analyses will be conducted by Dr. Kitty Emery in a subsequent phase of research. All species identified in this report are preliminary field identifications.

shrines used by multiple people or even the entire community.² Three hunting shrines can be securely classified as personal shrines while eight (more than half of the 14 newly recorded shrines) were confirmed to be communal shrines. Only one of the newly recorded communal shrines is still active.³ While some communal shrines were used for non-hunting-related ritual performances as well as hunting rites, most appear to have functioned primarily in hunting ceremonialism.

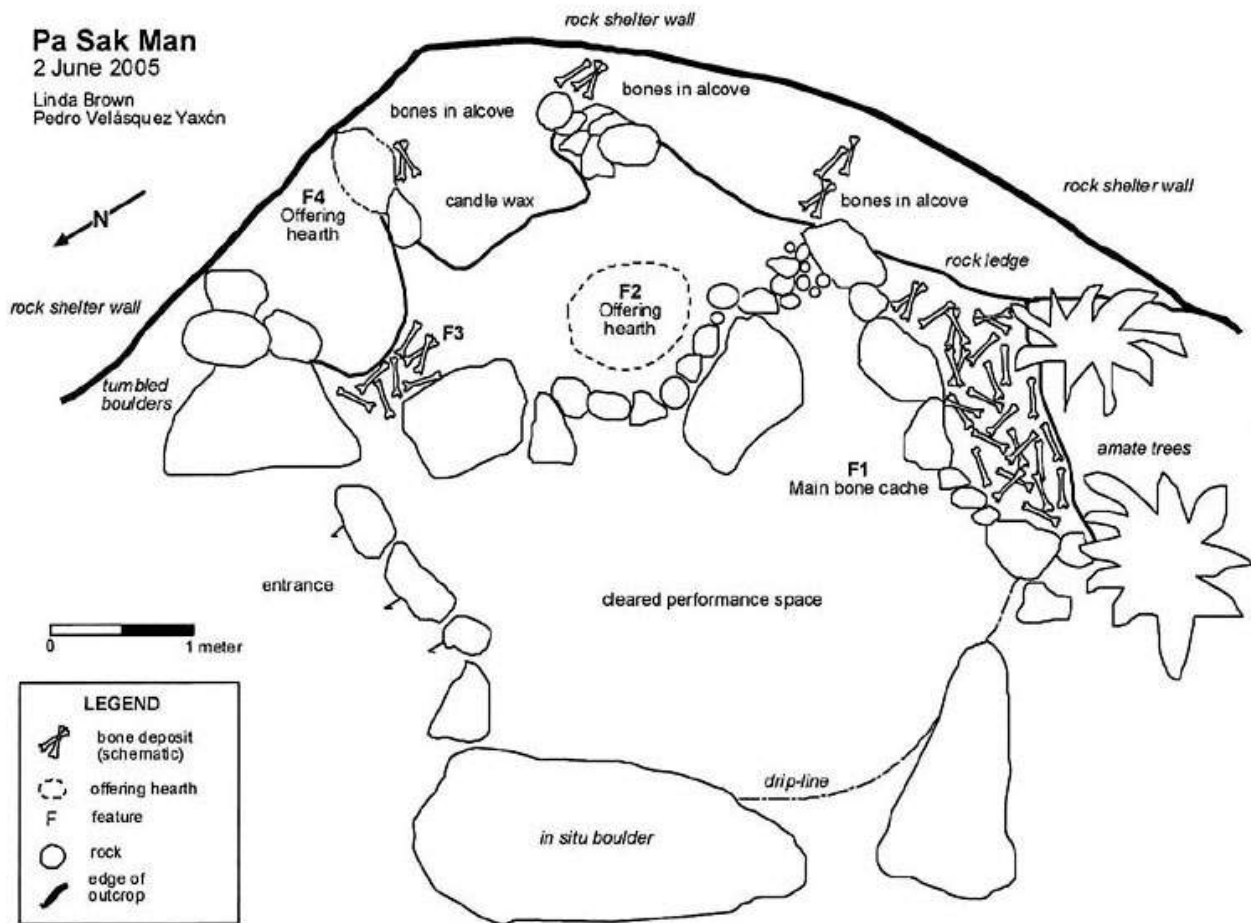


Figure 2. Plan view map of the active communal shrine of Pa Sak Man located outside of San Pedro la Laguna.

² Additionally, we recorded a number of abandoned sites where we did not have adequate ethnographic information or surface deposits to discern whether they were used by a single individual or multiple persons.

³ Another active communal hunting shrine was recorded in the year 2000 (see Brown 2005 for details).

San Pedro la Laguna

Three hunting shrines were recorded around San Pedro la Laguna. We confirmed that two of the sites were communal hunting shrines. However, we were unable to verify whether the third shrine was used by a single hunter or multiple community members.

Pa Sak Man ("Place of the White Bird")

Pa Sak Man is an active communal shrine site located approximately 400 meters south of San Pedro la Laguna. The site consists of a west-facing rock shelter used for various types of *costumbres* including hunting rites.

The most conspicuous features at Pa Sak Man are the bone deposits ([Figure 2](#), shown above). Two main fauna caches are present. Feature 1 consists of a large bone cache in the southern part of the shelter ([Figure 3](#), shown below). The cache consists of hundreds of bones carefully placed under an alcove within the shelter. Feature 3 is a smaller cache on an elevated ledge in the east part of the shelter. In addition to these discrete caches, bones were tucked into various small alcoves along the rock shelter's back wall (see [Figure 2](#)). Skeletal elements present in these caches include crania and post-cranial remains. Preliminary field identifications indicate that white-tailed deer, peccary, armadillo, tapir, coati, and agouti paca are represented.⁴

⁴ Preliminary field identifications were done by the author and Dr. Kitty Emery, who visited some of the communal hunting shrines in the summer of 2005.



Figure 3. Feature 1, the main fauna cache at Pa Sak Man.

In addition to the fauna deposits, several other ceremonial features are present including: an altar area, sacrificial offering hearths, and a cleared maintained space (see [Figure 2](#)). The natural rock ledge and boulders on the eastern wall of the rock shelter serve as an altar area for burning candles. Two sacrificial offering hearths are located nearby. Feature 2 is an offering hearth placed on a flat elevated ledge immediately below the altar area. A smaller hearth is in an elevated alcove (Feature 4) as is a small deposit of bones. Feature 5 consists of the cleared maintained swept area located under the drip-line of the shelter.

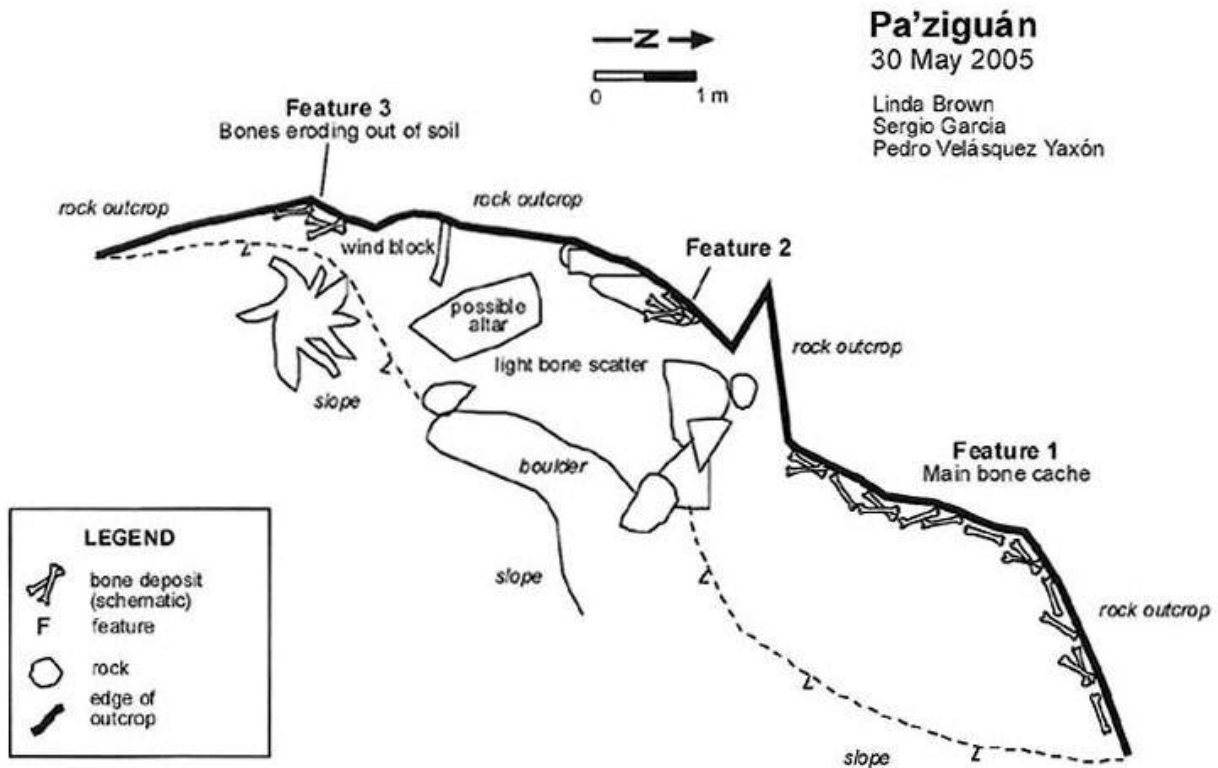


Figure 4. Plan view map of the abandoned communal shrine of Pa'ziguán located outside of San Pedro la Laguna.

Pa'ziguán ("The Hill")

Pa'ziguán is an abandoned communal hunting shrine located approximately 500 meters southwest of San Pedro la Laguna. The site consists of an east-facing rock shelter divided into two activity areas.

Feature 1 consists of the main fauna cache located in the northern activity area (Figure 4, shown above). Hundreds of bones were carefully tucked under a rock ledge in the northern part of the shelter (Figure 5, shown below). Feature 2 is a smaller bone cache (± 100 -200) left in the southern part of the shelter. Feature 3 consists of a small area where we observed bones eroding from the ground, suggesting a burial deposit is located in the southernmost section of the shelter. The fauna caches contain cranial and post-cranial elements and species identified include white-tailed deer, peccary and tapir.



Figure 5. Overview of the northern activity area and a portion of Feature 1 at Pa'ziguán. The bone deposit extends to the far end of the rock ledge.

Tzam Tawual ("Point of the Island")

Tzam Tawual is an abandoned hunting shrine located immediately north of San Pedro la Laguna. The site consists of a northwest-facing pile of tumbled boulders overlooking Lake Atitlán.

The site has two bone deposits ([Figure 6](#), shown below). Feature 1 consists of a fauna cache placed in the southernmost area while Feature 2 is located on the eastern side. Cranial and post-cranial elements are present and species identified include white-tailed deer, peccary, and tapir.

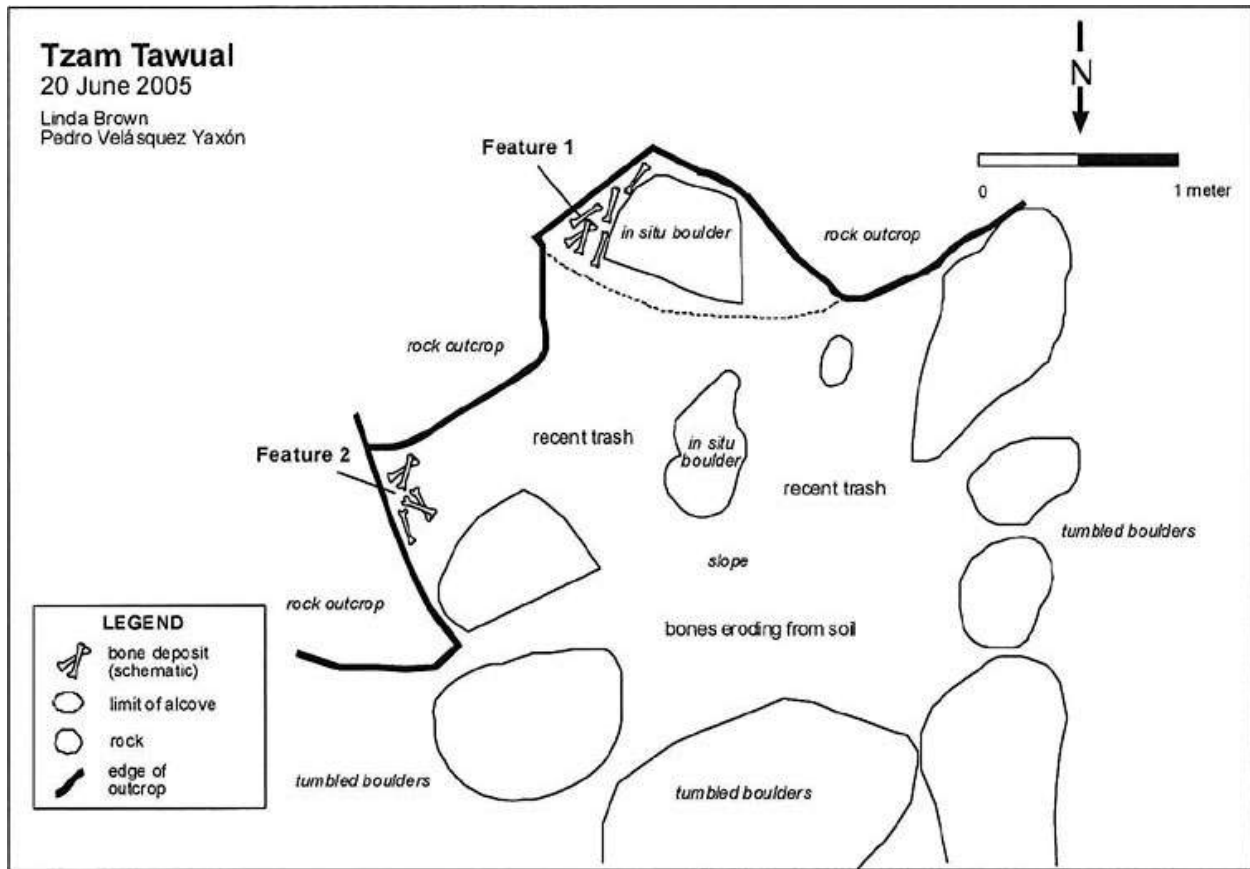


Figure 6. Plan view map of the abandoned shrine of Tzam Tawual located outside of San Pedro la Laguna.

Ethnographic Information

Hunters and older residents of San Pedro la Laguna provided information about the use of Pa Sak Man and Pa'ziguán. In the past, all the bones of wild animals were stored in large baskets and kept in household compounds until the Day of the Dead (November 2nd). On this day, hunters returned to a shrine to conduct a ceremony and deliver the bones to the animal guardian. The hunters also brought their hunting dogs, as the dogs were crucial participants in these ceremonies (Figure 7, shown below). A ritual practitioner presented all of the hunters and their dogs to the animal guardian and forgiveness was asked for all involved in the bloodshed. The curated bones were placed in on-site fauna caches and candles burned in front of these deposits. Apparently, ritual intoxication was a part of the ceremony and some older residents remembered drinking jocote liquor and stumbling home drunk after the rite.



Figure 7. Hunter from San Pedro la Laguna who returned bones to Pa Sak Man. In this photograph, he has chosen to pose with important components of the hunt including his hunting dogs, metal spear points that mount on wooden shafts, an incense burner and candles.

San Juan la Laguna

We recorded one communal hunting shrine associated with the town of San Juan la Laguna. The site is abandoned, although it is currently undergoing reclamation and limited use, as is evident from the pumice candle holders present.

Pa' Ruchi' Abaj

27 May 2005

Linda Brown
Sergio Garcia

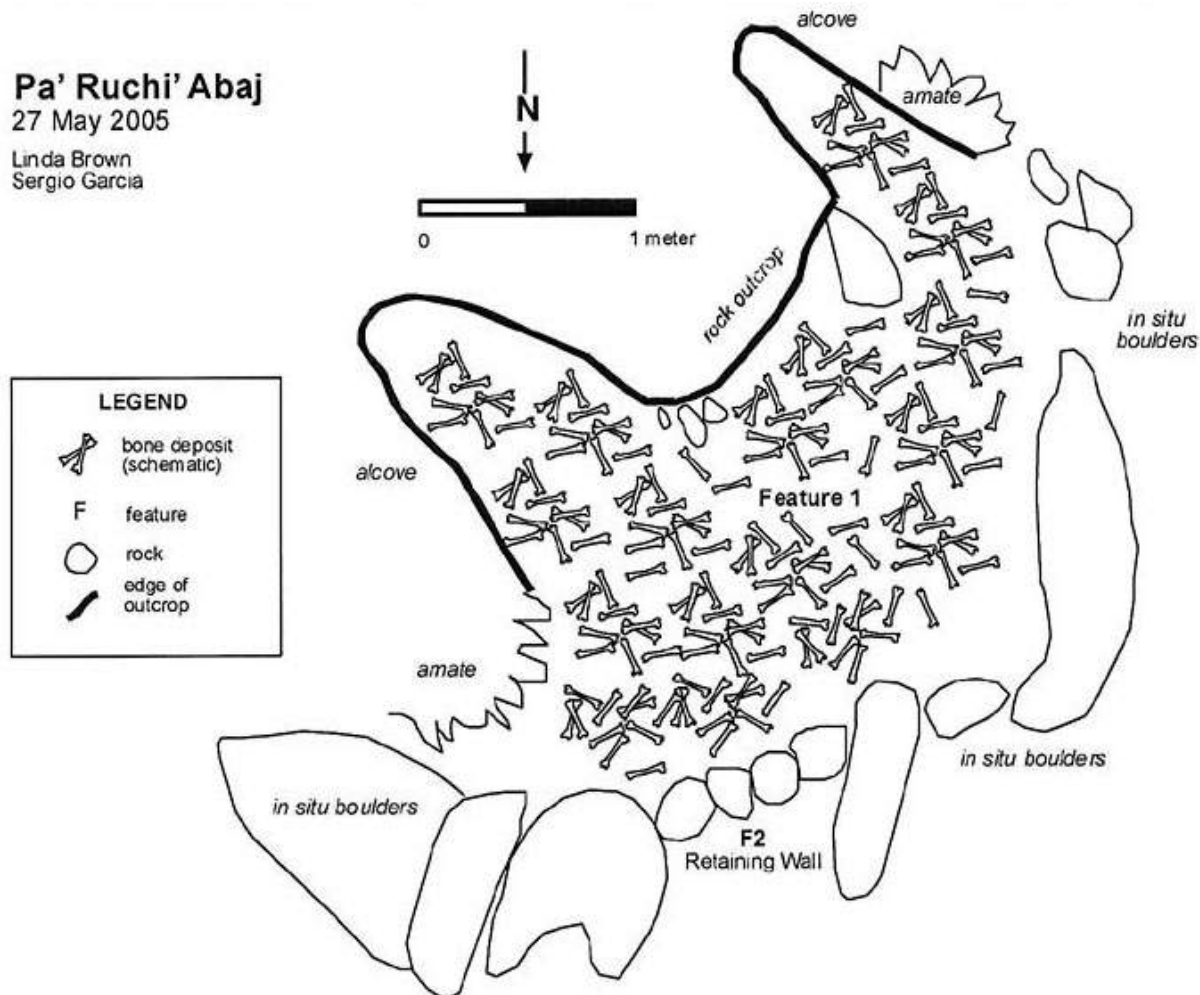


Figure 8. Plan view map of the abandoned communal shrine of Pa' Ruchi' Abaj located outside of San Juan la Laguna.

Pa' Ruchi' Abaj ("Mouth of the Rock")

Pa' Ruchi' Abaj is located approximately 800 meters southwest of San Juan la Laguna, along a footpath used as an old trading route. The site consists of a large fauna deposit on the northwest side of a boulder (Figure 8, shown above). Feature 1 consists of the dense deposit of bones cached at the base of the outcrop (Figure 9, shown below). Hundreds, if not thousands of bones and bone fragments are present. Complete and nearly-complete bones observed in the deposit overwhelmingly are from white-tailed deer, although some armadillo, peccary, and tapir were noted (Figure 10, shown below).



Figure 9. Overview of skeletal remains in a section of the large fauna deposit (Feature 1) at Pa' Ruchi' Abaj.



Figure 10. Detail of skeletal remains in Feature 1 at the abandoned communal hunting shrine of Pa' Ruchi' Abaj.

Ethnographic Information

Most people I spoke with in San Juan la Laguna did not remember the time when Pa' Ruchi' Abaj was in use. The exception was one 89-year-old resident who remembered attending a post-hunting ceremony at Pa' Ruchi' Abaj when he was about 10 years of age. As was the custom in San Pedro la Laguna, rites consisted of prayers of forgiveness for the hunters and their dogs. Candles, incense and alcohol were offered to the animal guardian. On-site ritual activities included communal intoxication and musical performances with wooden flutes and drums.

San Pablo la Laguna

Two communal hunting shrines are associated with San Pablo la Laguna. Xe Abaj is an active shrine located in a small cave approximately 300 meters east of town. This site, which was used for various rituals including hunting armadillo, is described elsewhere

(Brown 2005). A second communal shrine, Sak Bal Bak, was located and recorded during 2005.

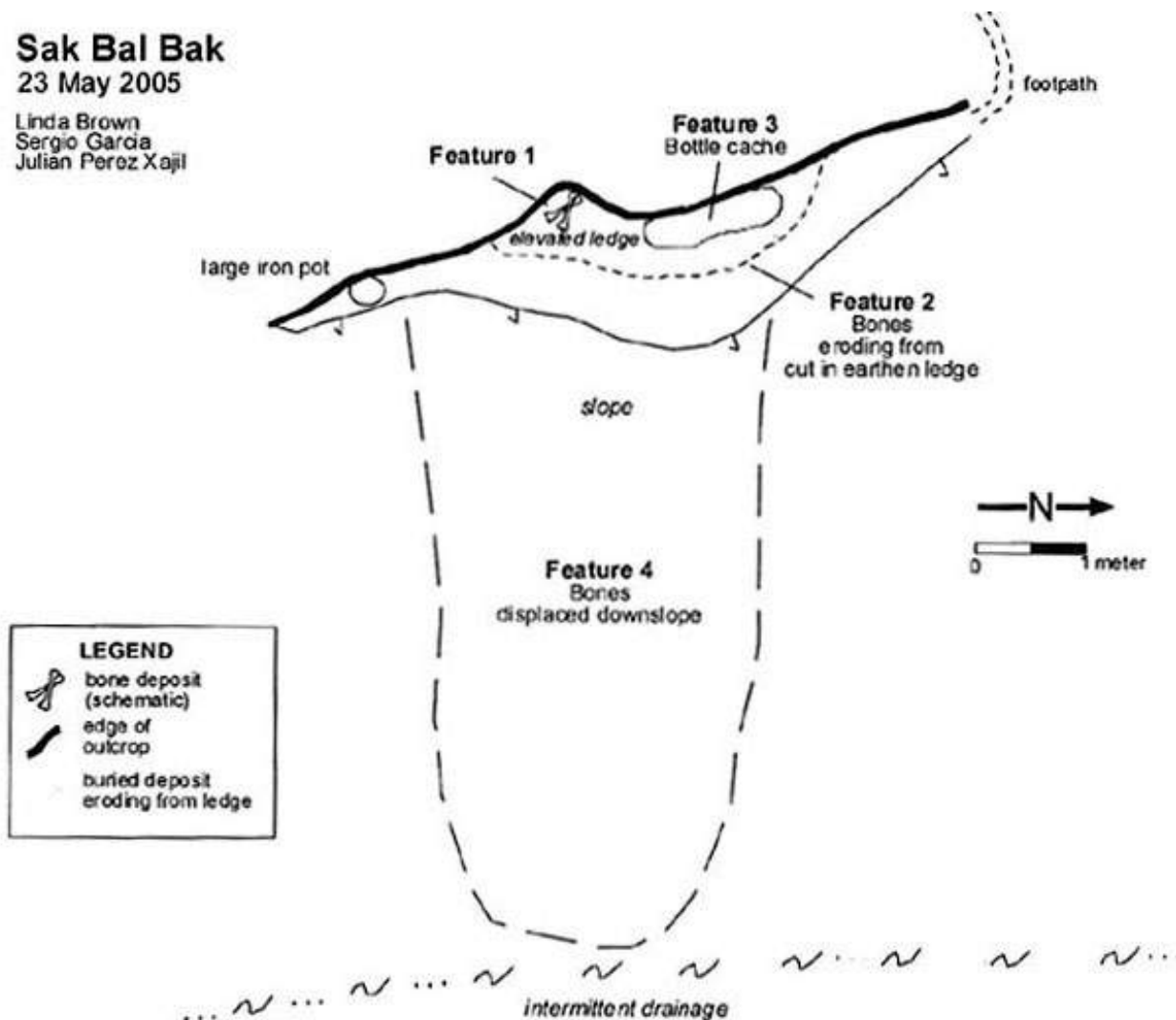


Figure 11. Plan map of abandoned communal hunting shrine Sak Bal Bak located outside of San Pablo la Laguna.

Sak Bal Bak ("Place of the White Bones")

Sak Bal Bak is an abandoned communal hunting shrine approximately 100 meters north of the town of San Pablo la Laguna (Figure 11, shown above). The site was placed at the base of a large upright angular rock located along an intermittent drainage.

Feature 1 consists of a ritual fauna cache placed on an earthen ledge under a sheltered area adjacent to the rock outcrop. The feature is disturbed and many bones have been displaced down slope. According to local residents, a heavy rain storm 30-50 years ago produced flooding that carried away many of the bones, thereby ending the site's use as

a hunting shrine. Crania and post-cranial remains were noted in Feature 1 and/or scattered along the slope. Species represented include white-tailed deer, peccary, armadillo and coati.

A buried bone deposit (Feature 2) was visible in a vertical cut in the earthen ledge where bones were previously deposited. The stratum of buried bones extends horizontally for 1.3 meters and has a maximum depth of 35 cm in the exposed cut. This feature likely represents a portion of the original bone deposit that was not displaced during the flooding.

Santiago Atitlán

Seven hunting shrines are associated with Santiago Atitlán. These sites include three private shrines, a communal shrine associated with agricultural rituals and hunting rites, and three abandoned sites for which we did not have adequate ethnographic information to classify them as being private or communal shrines.

Chu Pad Abaj ("In Front of Father Rock")

Chu Pad Abaj⁵ is a communal shrine located on a hillside approximately 500 meters southwest of Santiago Atitlán. According to the landowner, the shrine was used for ceremonies associated with the harvest and hunting. The site consists of a large zoomorphic-shaped boulder. Although the site was abandoned and covered in debris, it receives occasional use, as candle wax drippings were noted on a slab stone in the altar area.

Chu Pad Abaj has two activity areas, one to the north and the other to the south side of the main rock ([Figure 12](#), shown above). Beginning in the north, Feature 1 is a stone wall that delimits an elevated ceremonial space. A small bone deposit (Feature 2), including peccary and white-tailed deer crania and post-cranial elements, was tucked against the outcrop's surface in the northwest corner of this feature. Feature 3 consists of the two collared peccary crania and mandibles, and a white-tailed deer pelvis tucked into narrow alcove angled downward into the stone. Feature 6 is an elevated semi-circular rock construction that may have been an offering hearth, although we were unable to verify this with ethnographic information.

The southern activity area is defined by a stone wall with west entranceway. Feature 7 is an altar area composed of several flat stone slabs for burning candles. A small fauna

⁵ This site appears to have various names. Allen Christenson, who told me about the skulls at this site, visited the shrine with someone from Santiago Atitlán who called it Igelsia Abaj ("Church Rock"), a name I used in a previous publication (Brown 2005). In the summer of 2005, I was given two additional names for this site: Chu Queij Ajay ("In Front of Deer/Horse House") and Chu Pad Abaj ("In Front of Father Rock"). In this publication, I have chosen to use Chu Pad Abaj, as this name was provided by the landowner.

cache (Feature 4) was placed flush against the rock to the east of the altar area. Skeletal remains included cranial and post-cranial fragments from an unidentified large mammal.

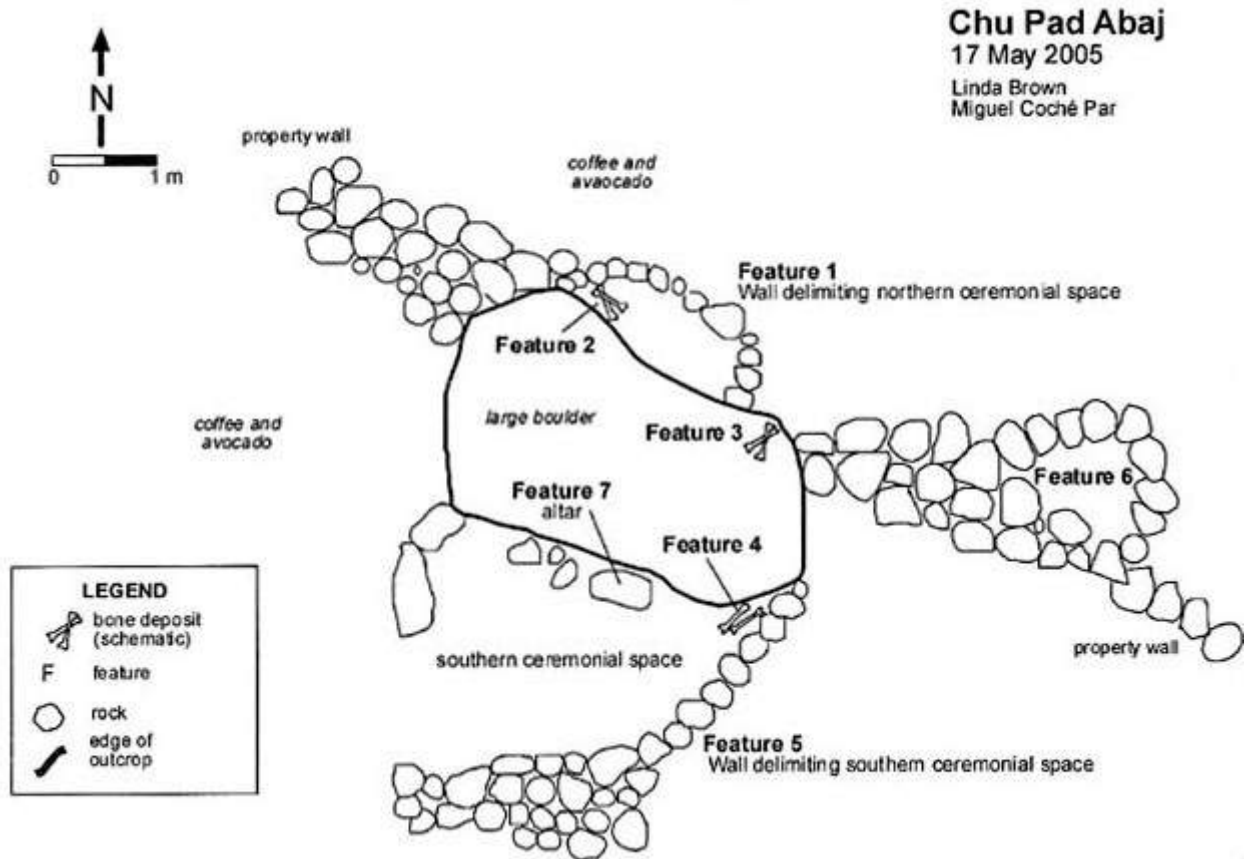


Figure 12. Plan map of abandoned communal shrine Chu Pad Abaj located outside of Santiago Atitlán.

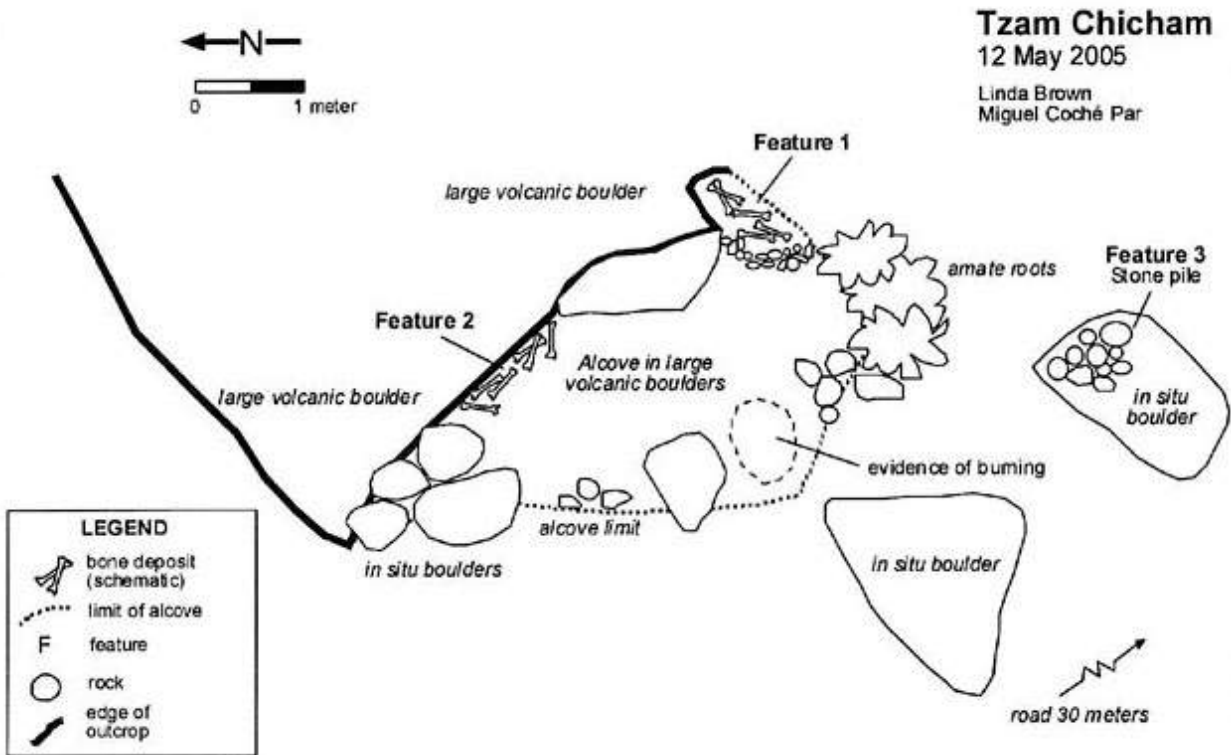


Figure 13. Plan map of abandoned hunting shrine Tzam Chicham located outside of Santiago Atitlán.

Tzam Chicham ("Point of the Smelly Water")

Tzam Chicham is an abandoned hunting shrine located 1 kilometer north of Santiago Atitlán in the area known by the same name. The site consists of a large boulder with an overhang that forms a sheltered alcove on its southwestern side. This site may have been a communal shrine used by hunters living in this area, although we were unable to gather ethnographic information to verify this interpretation.

Two main bone deposits are present (Figure 13, shown above). Feature 1 consists of a fauna cache (± 70) in a small eastern alcove inside the main protected space. Feature 2 is fauna deposit (± 40) located to the west. Both deposits contain cranial and post-cranial elements including white-tailed deer, peccary and agouti paca. In addition to discrete fauna caches, a light bone scatter is present throughout the alcove.

Feature 3 consists of an oval-shaped stone construction built on top of a nearby *in situ* boulder. The original function of this feature is unknown.

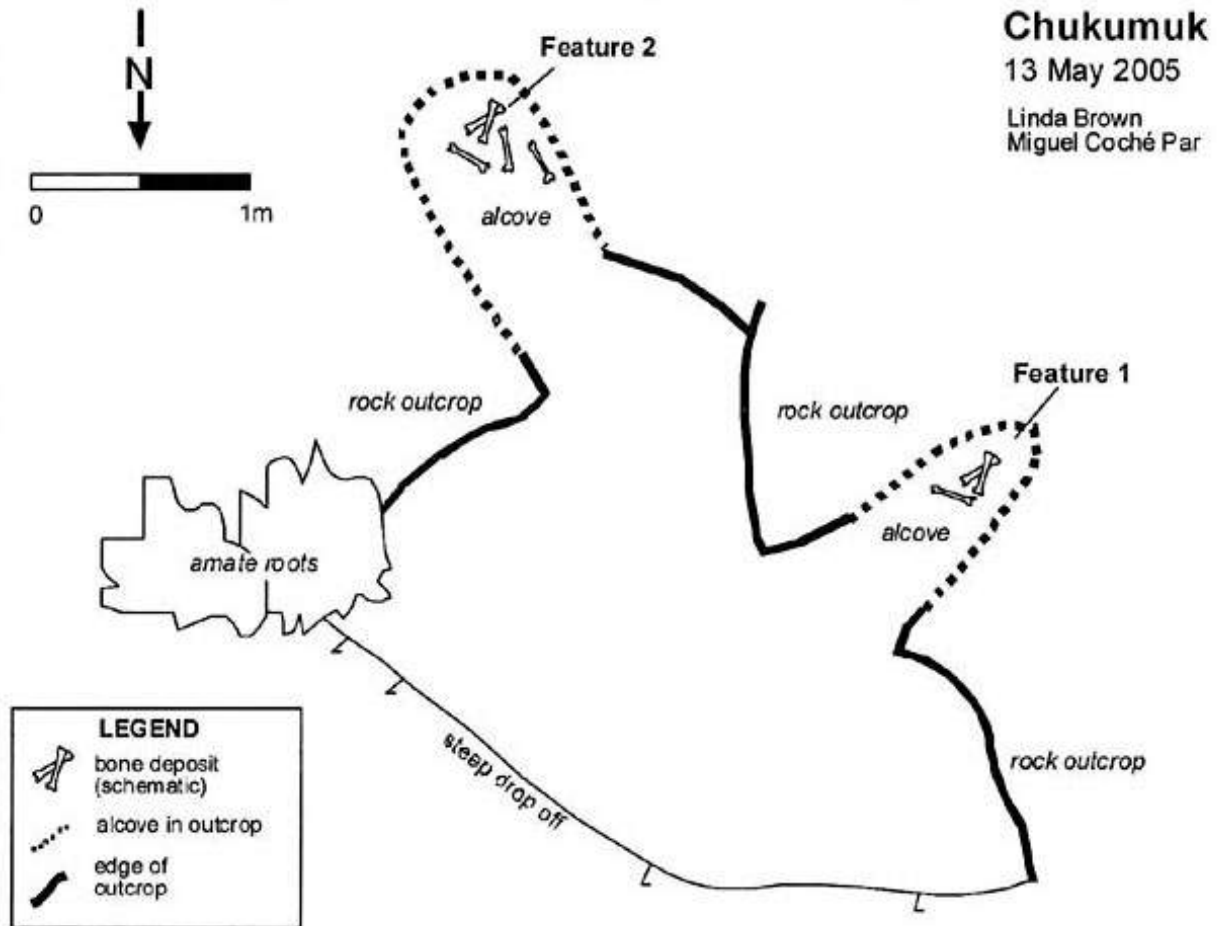


Figure 14. Plan map of abandoned hunting shrine Chukumuk located outside of Santiago Atitlán.

Chukumuk

Chukumuk is an abandoned hunting shrine located 2 kilometers northeast of Santiago Atitlán (Figure 14, shown above). The site consists of a northeast-facing rock outcrop on the hillside overlooking the archaeological site of Chukumuk.

The site contains a very light fauna deposit (n=25) placed in two rock alcoves. Most bones were post-cranial elements. Many of the bones were fragmented, but the few we were able to identify belonged to white-tailed deer. The light bone deposit suggests that Chukumuk may be the shrine of a single hunter, although we were unable to verify this through interviews.

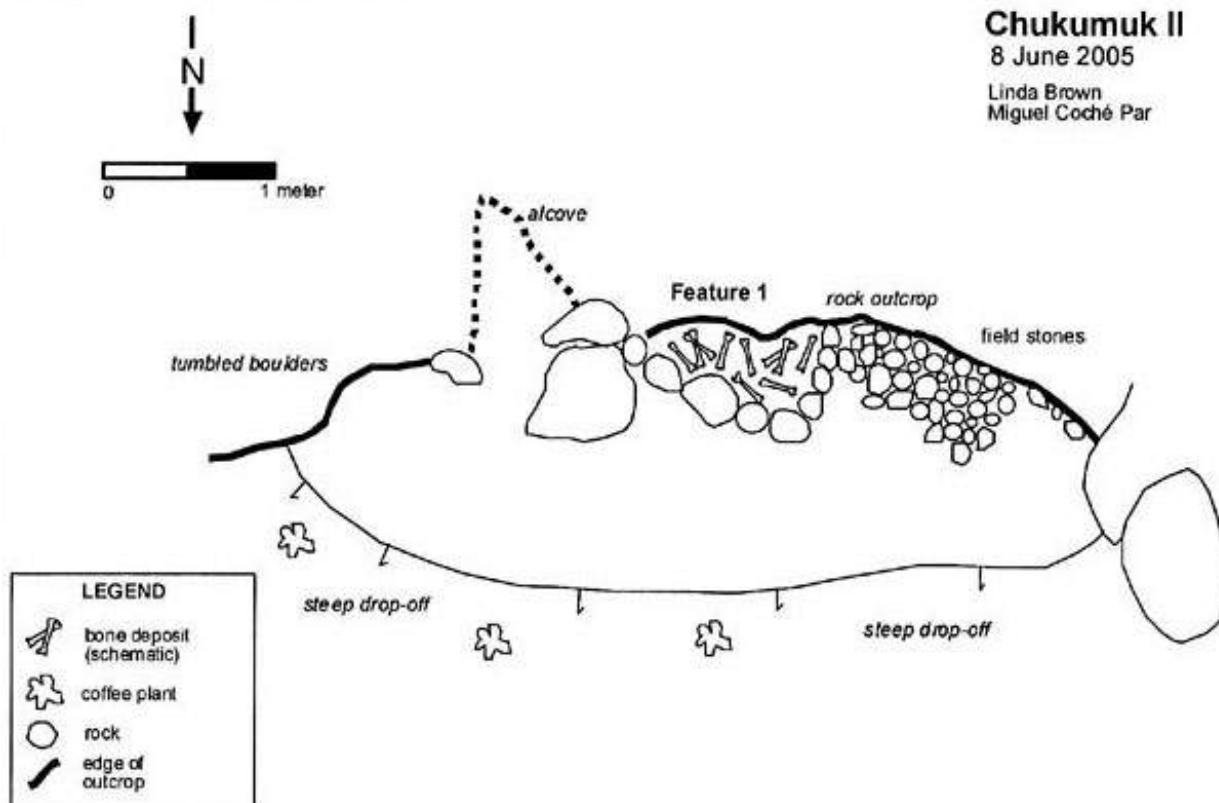


Figure 15. Plan map of abandoned hunting shrine Chukumuk II. This site was used by a now-deceased Santiago Atitlán deer hunter.

Chukumuk II

Chukumuk II is an abandoned shrine located 2 kilometers east of Santiago Atitlán on the same hillside as the previously-mentioned site. This shrine was used by a now-deceased deer hunter from Santiago Atitlán. According to the hunter's grandson, his grandfather returned bones to the shrine because, if he did not, then "he would not be able to catch anymore deer."

Feature 1 consists of deer bones placed under a shallow alcove in tumbled boulders in an elevated area framed with a stone wall ([Figure 15](#), shown above). All bones identified to species level belonged to white-tailed deer. While mandibles and post-cranial elements are present, no crania were identified suggesting these may have been returned to the Cofradía San Juan, as discussed more in the later section on bone caching practices.

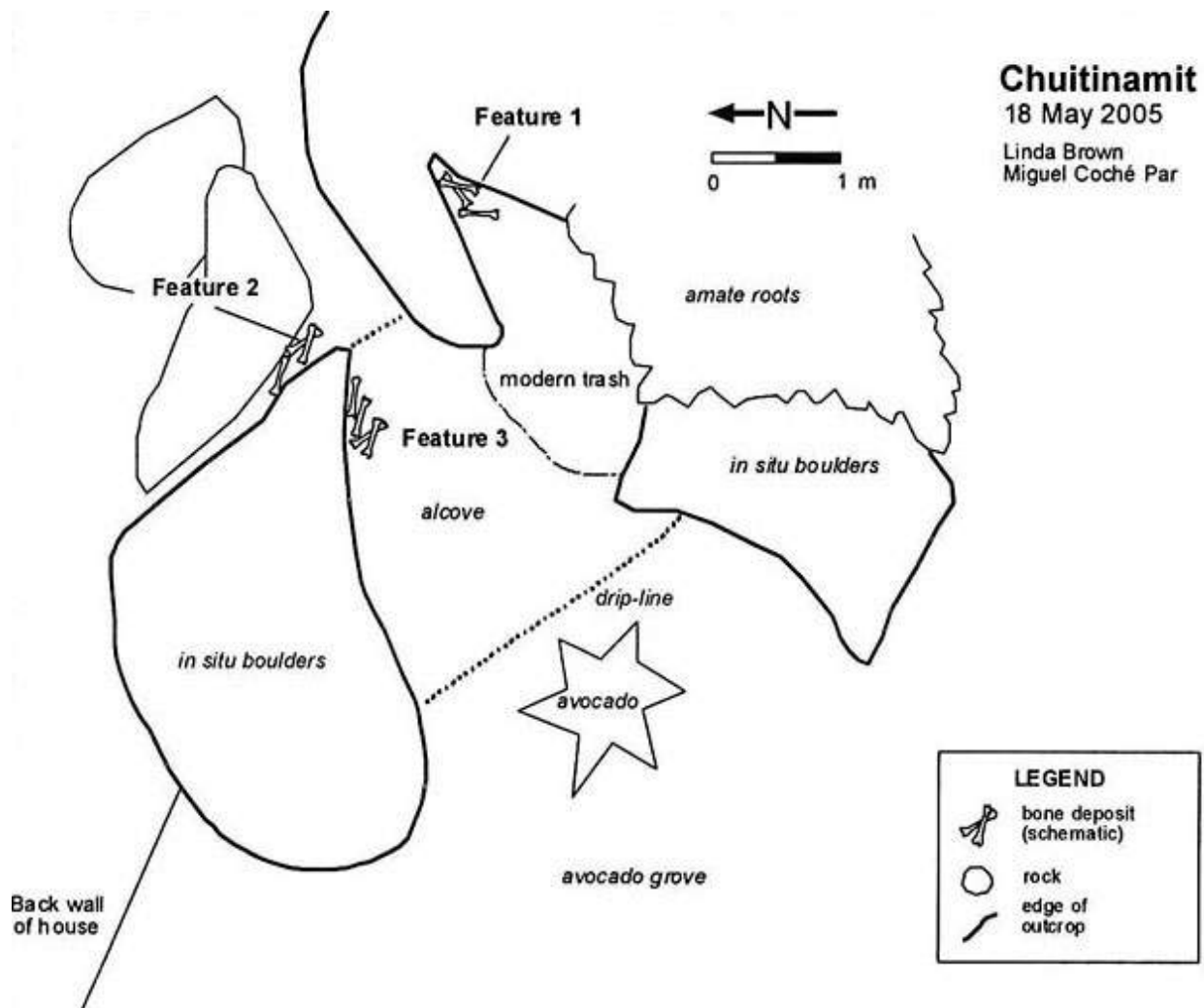


Figure 16. Plan map of an abandoned hunting shrine Chuitinamit. This site is very like the "sacrificial cave" recorded by Samuel Lothrop.

Chuitinamit

Chuitinamit is an abandoned hunting shrine located on a volcanic hill at the base of the San Pedro Volcano, across the bay from Santiago Atitlán. The site consists of a tumbled pile of boulders with a west-facing alcove where people deposited fauna remains.

Three distinct fauna caches are present (Figure 16, shown above). Features 1 and 3 are located within the main alcove. Bones present include cranial and/or post-cranial remains from peccary, white-tailed deer, tapir and armadillo. Feature 2 is located outside of the main alcove in a narrow protected space to the east. As with the deposits inside the shelter, crania and post-crania elements are present and species include coati, peccary, white-tailed deer, armadillo, and agouti paca.

I believe this shrine is the same site recorded by Samuel Lothrop (1933) as a "sacrificial cave." Lothrop excavated the hilltop post-classic archaeological ruins of Chuitinamit in the early twentieth century. While surveying an area lower on the hill, he noted a tumbled pile of boulders that contained a fauna deposit. A published photograph showing on-site topography and Lothrop's sketch map showing the location of the sacrificial cave lead me to conclude that these two sites are one in the same. In addition to the fauna deposit,⁶ Lothrop noted a "shrine" located down slope and to the east of the sacrificial cave. The presence of two activity areas containing features seen in communal sites suggests that Lothrop's sacrificial cave and its associated shrine area was a communal shrine used for hunting rites.

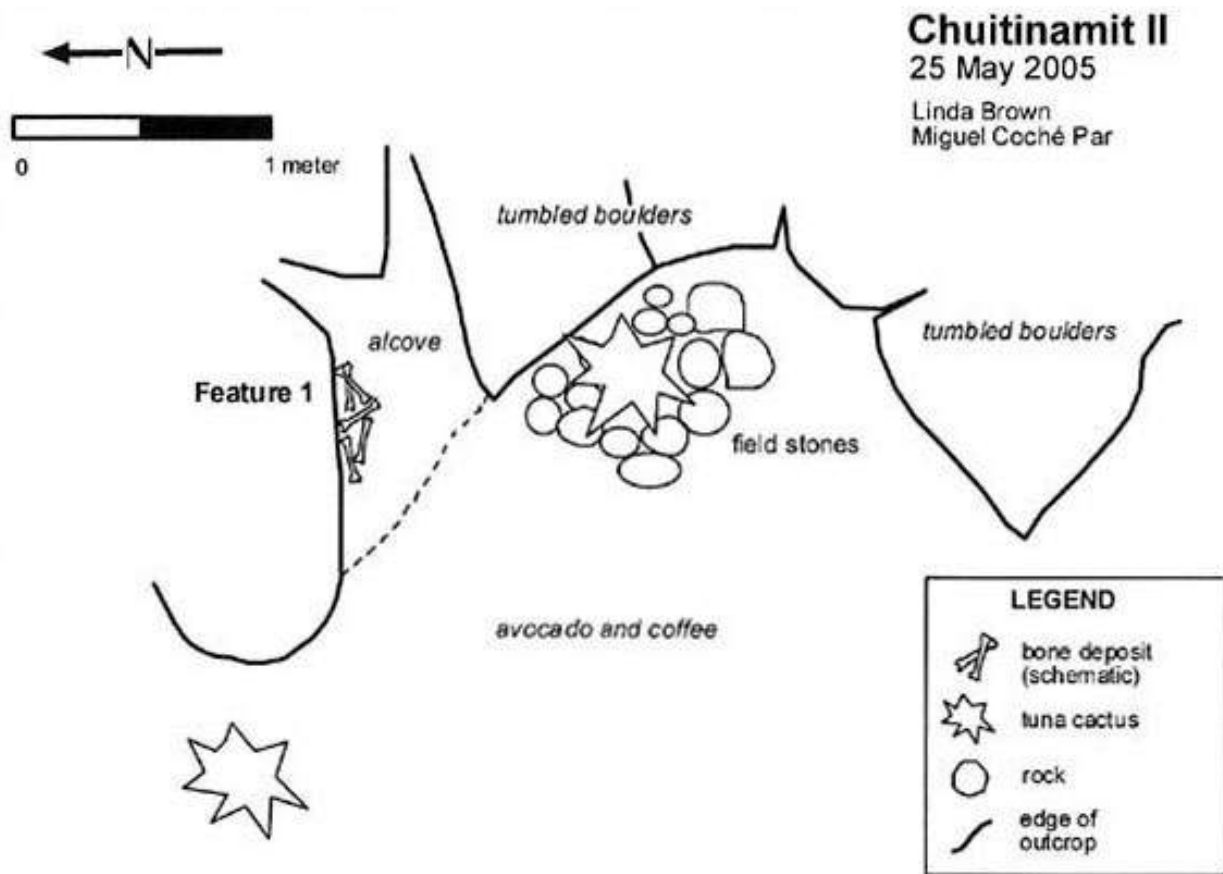


Figure 17. Plan view map of an abandoned private shrine on Chuitinamit II. This site and Chuitinamit III were used by the same hunter from Santiago Atitlán.

⁶ Lothrop (1933:83) reported that the fauna cache contained armadillo carapaces as well as the skulls and scapulae of "sheep or goat." I believe Lothrop did not have the opportunity to closely examine the deposit and his identifications were in error. Test excavations of this site would resolve the question.

Chuitinamit II and III

Chuitinamit II and III are personal hunting shrines used by the same now-deceased hunter from Santiago Atitlán. The sites are watched over by the hunter's son. Both shrines are located along northeast slope of Chuitinamit on land where the hunter planted his *milpa*.

Fauna deposits were placed in two rock alcoves formed by a large pile of tumbled volcanic boulders. Chuitinamit II is located on the east side of the outcrop (Figure 17, shown above), while Chuitinamit III is on the west side (Figure 18, shown below). Cranial and post-cranial elements are present in both deposits and the remains primarily consist of white-tailed deer with an occasional peccary noted.

Chuitinamit III

16 June 2005

Linda Brown
Miguel Coché Par

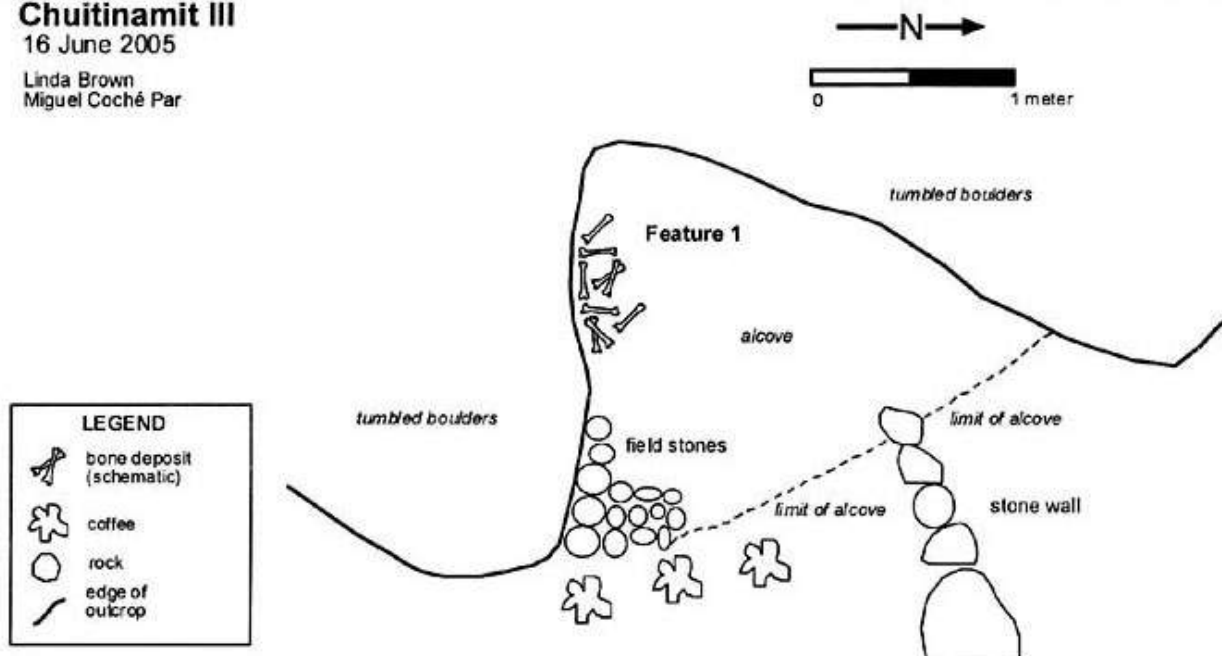


Figure 18. Plan view map of an abandoned private shrine on Chuitinamit III. This site and Chuitinamit II were used by the same hunter from Santiago Atitlán.

San Antonio Palopó

Two hunting shrines were associated with the Kaqchikel community of San Antonio Palopó. Both sites were communal shrines that are now abandoned.

Tzanimul
 11 July 2005
 Linda Brown
 Julian Perez Xajil

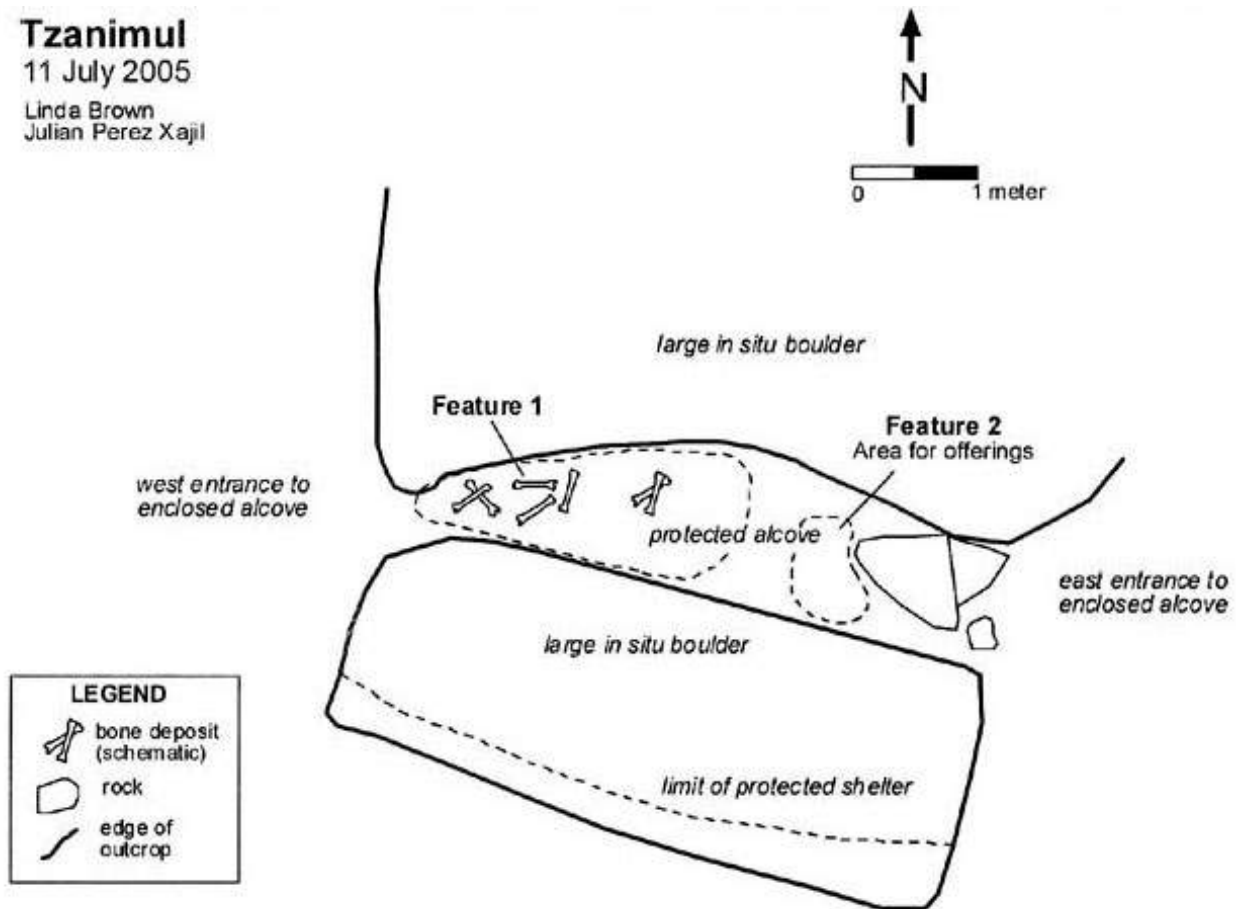


Figure 19. Plan map of abandoned communal hunting shrine Tzanimul located outside of San Antonio Palopó.

Tzanimul ("Place of Many Rabbits")

Tzanimul is located a kilometer south of San Antonio Palopó. The site consists of two large volcanic boulders forming a small protected alcove previously used for hunting rituals.

Feature 1 consists of a small bone scatter in the westernmost side of the alcove ([Figure 19](#), shown above). Species represented include coati, agouti paca, and white tailed deer, and crania and post-cranial elements are present. Feature 2 is an area east of the fauna deposit used for burning sacrificial offerings.

Ethnographic Information

A 71-year-old resident of San Antonio Palopó told us that when Tzanimul was active, it was used for two types of rituals associated with wild animals. One ceremony, conducted at the beginning of the planting season, asked the animals of the fields not to

dig up and eat the freshly planted seeds. The other ceremony conducted at Tzanimul was a hunting rite. According to our guide, hunters brought various types of offerings including copal, candles, liquor, beer, tamales, meat, pine needles and a live chicken for sacrifice, all payments to the animal guardian in a ritual conducted before hunting. When the curated bones were later returned to the site, no post-hunting rite was performed.

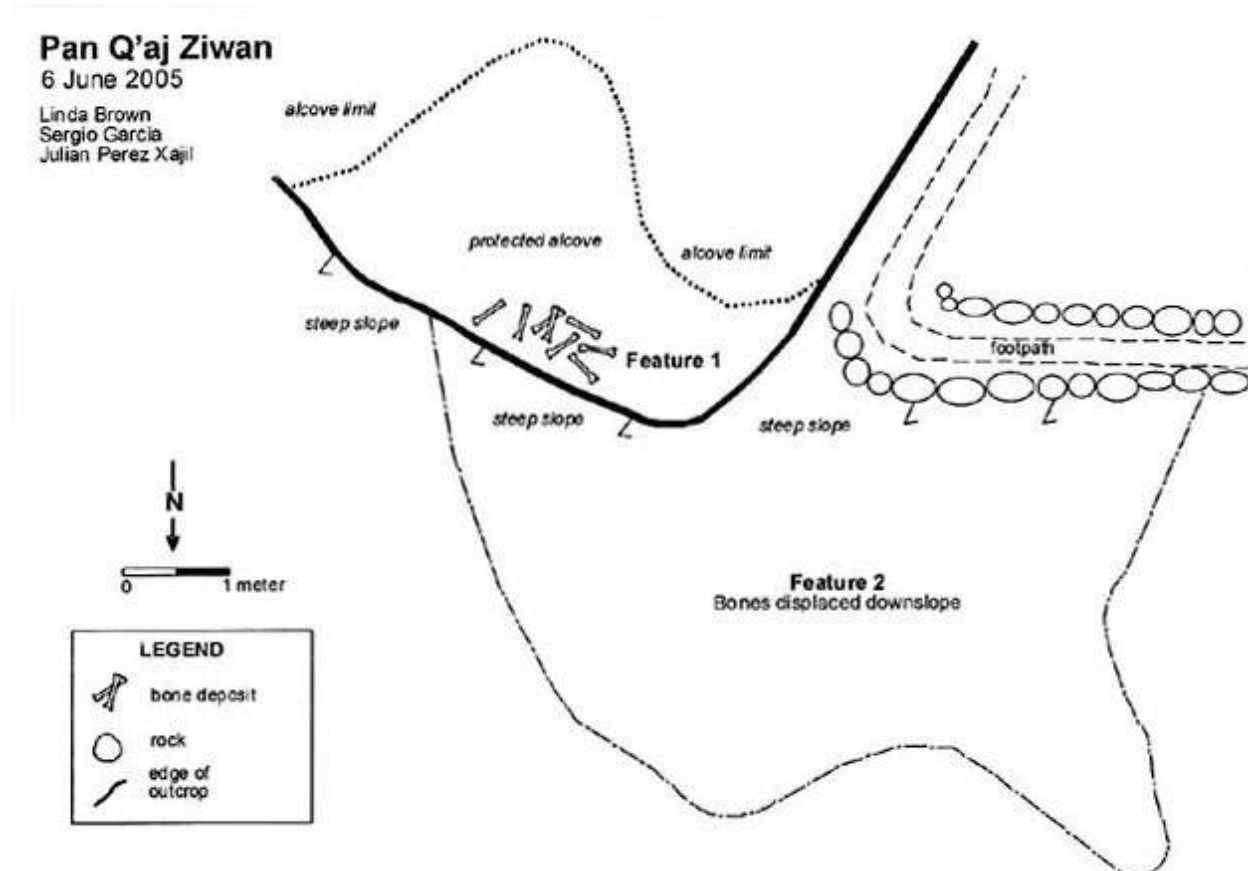


Figure 20. Plan map of abandoned communal hunting shrine Pan Q'aj Ziwan located outside of San Antonio Palopó.

Pan Q'aj Ziwan ("In the Middle of the Hill")

Pan Q'aj Ziwan is an abandoned communal shrine located approximately 500 meters south of San Antonio Palopó. The site consists of a large boulder with a small protective alcove beneath it where people deposited bones (Figure 20, shown above).

Feature 1 is a fauna cache located in the alcove. Currently most of the bones have been carried down slope by heavy rains and are scatter across the hillside. Crania and mandibles from peccary, white-tailed deer, coati, and agouti paca are present as are post-cranial remains from white-tailed deer, armadillo and tapir.

Ethnographic Interviews

From the outset of the project, it was clear that individuals selected certain taxa and elements for special deposition in ritual hunting caches. Thus, one of our goals was to better understand the decision-making process in which some animal remains were deemed appropriate for discard in household middens, while others were offered to the animal guardian at sacred sites. In addition to fauna caches, other materials enter an archaeological context at rural hunting shrines as sacrificial offerings. To elicit the full range of materials that might be associated with hunting ceremonialism, we incorporated ethnographic interviews into our research.

Our interview questions focused on three main topics: (a) what species should undergo specialized discard at sacred sites, (b) what skeletal elements should be deposited at shrines, and (c) what types of offering are deposited at shrines in rites before and after the hunt? Responses to the first two questions can illuminate the types of materials we would expect to find in hunting caches. Thus, these remains would not be discarded in household middens in communities with hunting shrines. Answers to the third question will help us build a more solid material model for the complete suite of deposits associated with hunting ceremonialism at sacred sites.

Animals who should undergo Specialized Discard

Mammals dominate the list of animals cited for specialized discard at hunting shrines ([Table 1](#), shown below). Of the twenty most mentioned animals, all are mammals with the exception of one. White-tailed deer was most frequently mentioned animal (92%) whose bones should be returned to a sacred site. Species mentioned by at least half of all respondents include important subsistence species, such as white-tailed deer, peccary, armadillo, agouti paca, coati, and raccoon as well as gray fox. In addition to food sources, the top ten most frequently mentioned animals include feline predators with historically important symbolic roles in Maya culture. Interestingly, one hunter we interviewed was curating legs and paws from an ocelot or margay (*tigrillo*), among other animal remains, for special deposition at a local sacred site ([Figure 21](#), shown below).

Table 1. The twenty most frequently mentioned taxa whose remains should undergo specialized discard at sacred sites in the landscape organized according to frequency

Rank	Taxon	# Respondents Mentioned (n=26)	% Respondents Mentioned
1	White-tailed deer	24	92
2	Peccary*	19	73
3	Armadillo	18	69
4	Agouti paca	18	69
5	Coati	18	69
6	Raccoon	16	62
7	Gray fox	14	52
8	Jaguar	11	42
9	Puma	11	42
10	Ocelot or Margay**	9	35
11	Squirrel	9	35
12	Coyote	8	31
13	Skunk	7	27
14	Opossum	6	23
15	Forest rabbit	6	23
16	Kinkajou	6	23
17	Central American agouti	5	19
18	Giant anteater	5	19
19	Turkey	4	15
20	Brocket deer	4	15

*Respondents did not divide peccary into white-lipped or collared.

**The name given was tigrillo, which is used for both ocelot and margay.



Figure 21. Curated animal remains awaiting return to a hunting shrine. Top row: agouti paca skulls. Middle row: ocelot or margay legs and coati skulls. Bottom row: armadillo and agouti paca feet and the tip of an armadillo tail.

Skeletal Elements that should be Deposited at Shrines

Our interviews also focused on the types of skeletal remains that should undergo curation and subsequent discard at sacred sites, rather than being tossed in the household trash or fed to dogs. As these interviews are on-going, the results presented here are preliminary. However, there does seem to be some variation in communities around Lake Atitlán concerning which skeletal elements are more important to return to sacred sites.

Interviews conducted to date allow us to identify three categories of symbolically important bones that should undergo specialized discard: (a) crania and mandibles, (b) bones of large animals, and (c) all bones of hunted mammals. In general, people living in the same community tended to report the same bones as being the most important to

return. A notable exception to this pattern is Santiago Atitlán, where several different discard practices were reported.

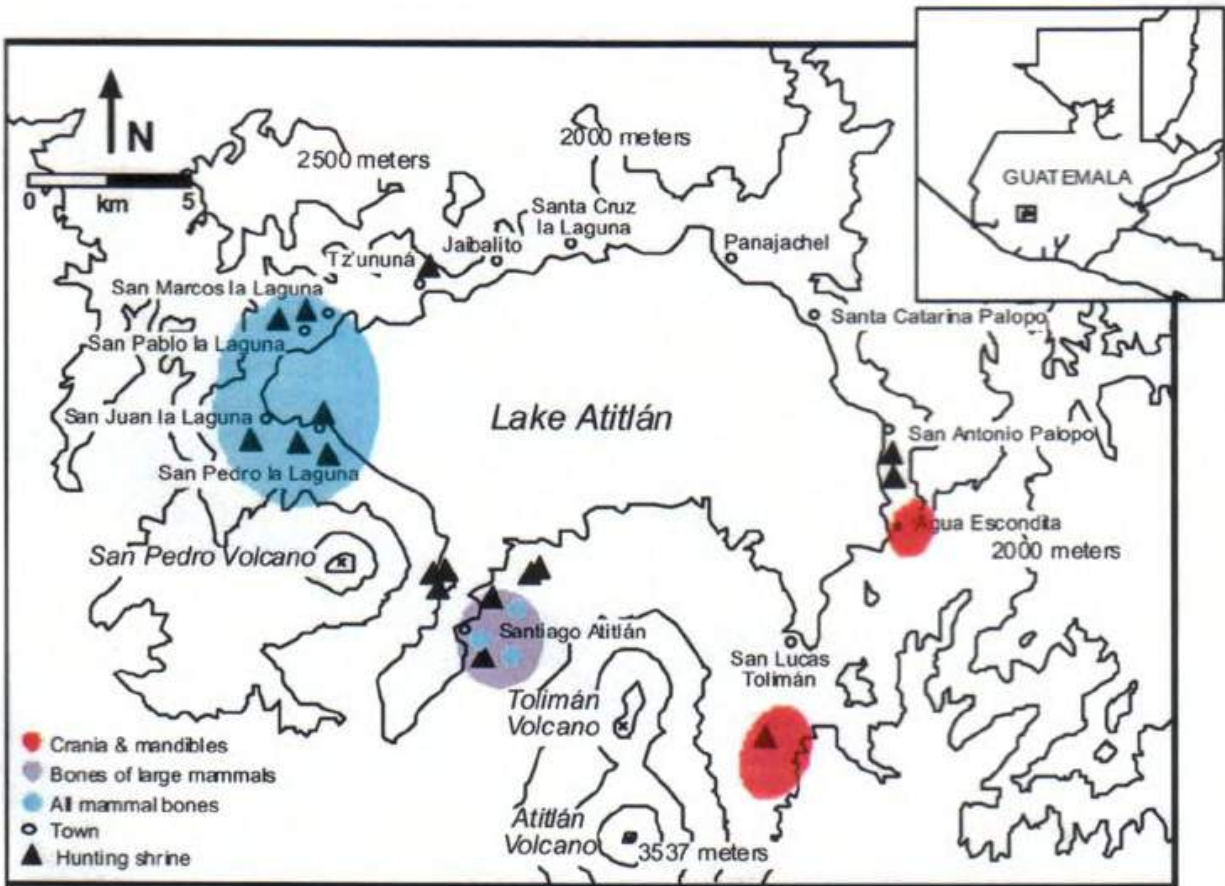


Figure 22. Indigenous understandings concerning the types of bones that should be returned to sacred sites as reported by individuals knowledgeable about hunting ceremonialism in various communities around Lake Atitlán.

Crania and Mandibles

Individuals in Kaqchikel communities along the east and southern areas of Lake Atitlán reported that crania and mandibles were the most important elements to return to sacred sites (Figure 22, shown above). As these elements were thought to represent the entire animal, their return was sufficient to placate the animal guardian.

Individuals in the Tz'utujil town of Santiago Atitlán also reported a specialized yet different life-history for the crania of wild animals. Here respondents reported that the skulls and skins of hunted animals should be returned to the Cofradía San Juan. Locally, San Juan is understood to be the Lord of the Wild Animals (Carlsen 1997:98). The cofradía serves as a repository for skulls and skins of various wild mammals, some of which are used as dance costumes during the deer-jaguar dance.

Bones of Large Animals

Some residents of Santiago Atitlán reported that only the bones of large animals needed to be returned to sacred places. Species cited as constituting "large animals" included: white-tailed deer, brocket deer, collared peccary, white-lipped peccary, agouti paca, coati and raccoon. Bones from smaller animals could be thrown in the trash or given to dogs.

All Bones of Mammals

People living in the Tz'utujil towns of San Pedro la Laguna, San Juan la Laguna and San Pablo la Laguna on the western side of the lake insisted that all of the skeletal elements of hunted mammals should be returned to sacred sites. As one man from San Pablo la Laguna explained, the animal owner "makes one new animal from each bone you return – even the smallest toe bone. That is why you have to return them all."

Some residents of Santiago Atitlán also reported that all bones of hunted animals should be returned to sacred sites, regardless of size. Individuals reporting this practice still stated that the preferred location for crania and skins was the Cofradía San Juan, while other remains should be taken to places in the landscape.

Offerings Entering Archaeological Contexts at Hunting Shrines

To understand the broad suite of materials entering archaeological contexts during hunting rites, we interviewed hunters and ritual practitioners about the types of offerings used during hunting rituals. As most individuals reported participation in pre- and post-hunting ceremonies, we first asked people to tell us all the types of offerings used in pre-hunting rituals. Then we asked individuals to name all the types of offerings left at hunting shrines in post-hunting rites.

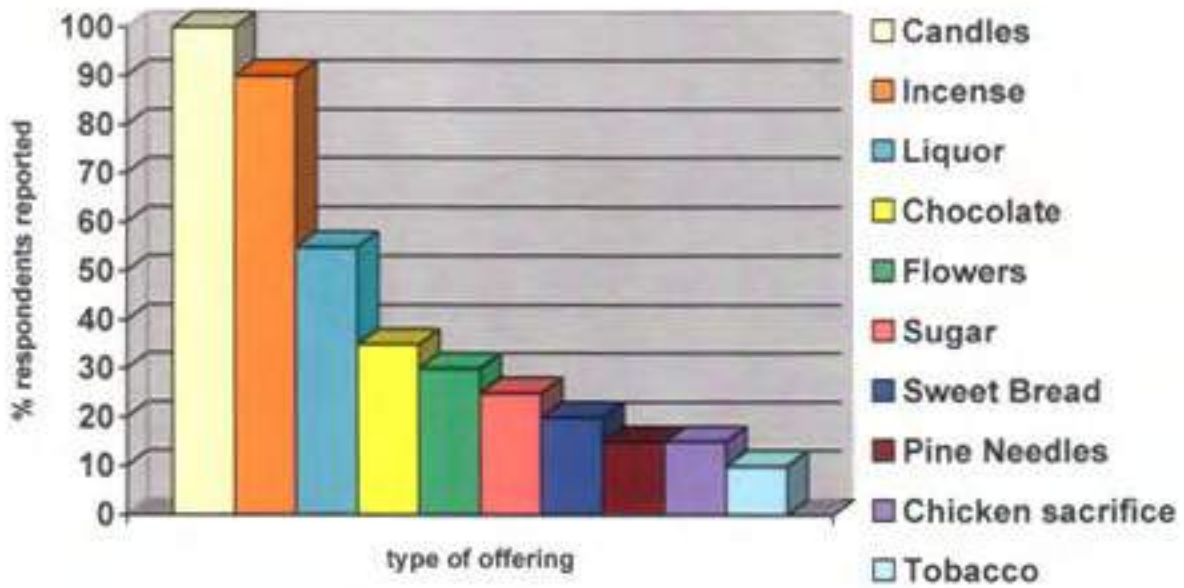


Figure 23. Offerings left in an archaeological context at shrine sites in pre-hunting rites.

Offerings Deposited in Pre-Hunting Rites

Candles were the most frequently cited offering used in pre-hunting rites (Figure 23, shown above). All participants who had engaged in ceremonies at hunting shrines reported burning candles to the animal guardian at these sites.⁷ In addition to candles, most people also burned incense offerings. Incense included copal as well as other resin-based plant products such as the balsamic resin called estoraque.

Slightly more than half of interviewees mentioned offering liquor at hunting shrines. Usually this was added to an offering fire or poured onto various features, such as altar areas and ritual fauna caches. About a third of the respondents burned chocolate in offering hearths and left flowers offerings on altars. Offerings mentioned by twenty-five percent or less of interviewees include sugar, sweet bread, pine needles, chicken sacrifice and tobacco.⁸

⁷ My focus here is on materials that enter an archaeological context at outdoor hunting shrines. Some individuals in Santiago Atitlán, San Pedro la Laguna, and San Juan la Laguna performed pre-hunting rites in *cofradía* buildings. Their responses are excluded from this discussion as these materials do not contribute to the future material record outdoor shrines.

⁸ Offerings mentioned by only one individual are not included in pre-hunting or post-hunting calculations.

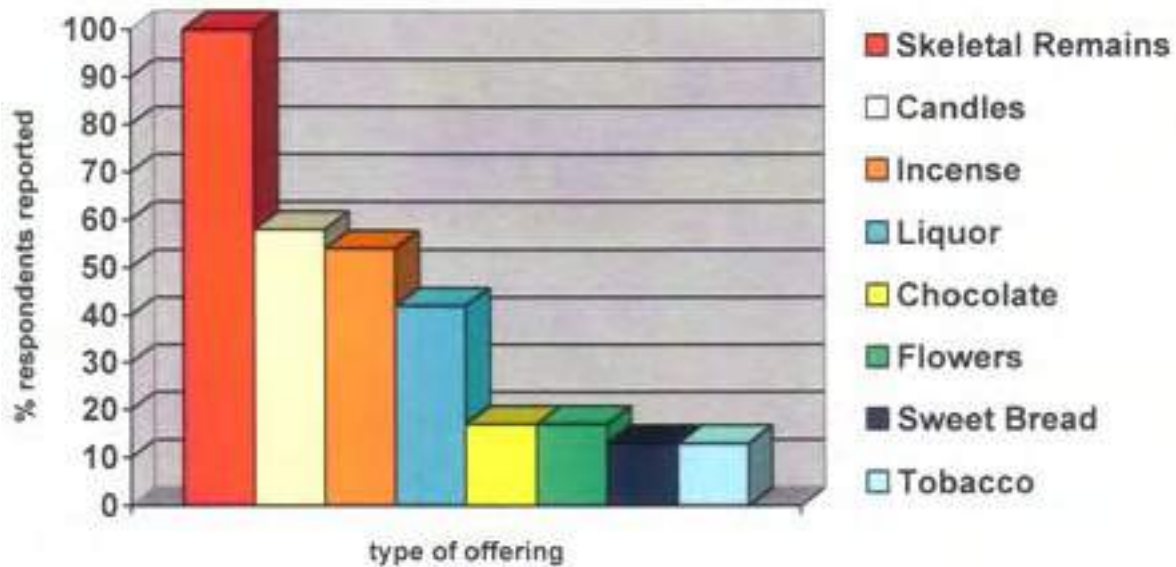


Figure 24. Offerings left in an archaeological context at shrine sites in post-hunting rites.

Offerings Deposited in Post-Hunting Rites

The most common post-hunting offering deposited at hunting shrines is the skeletal elements of hunted wild animals ([Figure 24](#), shown above). All 24 respondents who participated in hunting rites reported that some bones should go back to sacred sites. Slightly more than half of all interviewees also reported they burned candles and incense during post-hunting rites. Liquor offerings were reported by forty-two percent of respondents, while flowers, chocolate, sweet bread and tobacco were reported by twenty percent or less.

Archaeological Implications Recognizing Ancient Hunting Shrines

The most important feature that indicates a particular sacred site was used for hunting ceremonialism is the ritual fauna cache. Animal remains deposited in ritual fauna caches have unique life-histories that would make them recognizable as functioning in hunting ceremonies even after site abandonment. These criteria include: (1) types of species present, (2) types of skeletal elements present, (3) the condition of the remains, and (4) the topographic setting chosen for these deposits (Brown 2005). Archaeological bone caches matching these criteria would strongly argue for their function in ancient hunting rites.

Species Present in Hunting Caches

The type of species composing a fauna cache is one of the criteria in evaluating whether a deposit reflects hunting ceremony. Wild species dominate contemporary and recent hunting caches and interviews suggest that mammals are primarily chosen for special deposition.

Archaeological caches composed primarily of wild mammals including important subsistence species would be candidates for ancient hunting caches.

Skeletal Elements in Hunting Caches

In addition to taxonomic identification, the type of skeletal elements constituting an archaeological assemblage is important when evaluating whether a deposit may have functioned in hunting ceremonialism. When an animal is butchered, certain elements are selected and stored until the time when they are returned to sites. Thus hunting-related ceremonial deposits may contain a high number of specific skeletal elements, many unrelated bones, or even the remains of a single species, as seen at a cave associated with hunting armadillo (see Brown 2005). Ethnographic interviews suggest there may be local variation in the types of elements deemed more important for curation and deposition at shrines. Yet all deposits clearly represent human agency in the selection of certain elements for special deposition.

Condition of Bones Deposited in Hunting Caches

The condition of the bones entering archaeological contexts in hunting rites is another important criterion in the correct interpretation of these deposits. Skeletal elements chosen for curation are deposited whole and intact. Some hunters reported that they boiled skulls and mandibles to clean them before their return to the hunting shrine, but the bones are not charred in open fires. Other people told us they very carefully cut the meat off the carcass making sure not to cut through any bones. Interestingly, hunting taboos against cutting the bones of wild animals extends back to the colonial period. In Huehuetenango, Cortes y Larraz (1958 [1768-1770]:119-120) reported that people did not cut through deer bones because if they did, the lord of the deer would be angry with them. Similarly, interviews with hunters around Lake Atitlán suggest that while post-deposition processes will impact the condition of bones once on site, hunting deposits should contain a high degree of intact unburned elements.



Figure 25. Topographic features chosen for use in hunting ceremonies include single large boulders with alcoves, as seen at the site of Tzam Chicham.



Figure 26. Topographic features chosen for use in hunting ceremonies include tumbled boulders that form alcoves as seen at the private shrine Chuitinamit II.

Topographic Settings used for Hunting Rites

Finally, the spatial context of a fauna cache is important in evaluating whether a deposit functioned in the realm of hunting ceremonialism. In many communities, the supernatural animal guardian is perceived as living on a *finca* located inside of the mountain, where he tends his wild herds (e.g., Cook 2000:114-115; Hofling 1991:136-153; La Farge II 1947:50-51; Tedlock 1982:149; Wagley 1949:57). Entrance into this realm is through an actual cave (e.g., Taube 2003:474; Tedlock 1982:149) or a rock outcrop (e.g., Cook 2000:114-115; La Farge II 1947:50).

All hunting shrines recorded to date are associated with rock outcrops. Specific topographic features chosen for use in hunting rites include rock shelters, large and small alcoves in boulders, and upright stones that provide some protected overhang ([Figure 25](#) and [Figure 26](#), shown above, and [Figure 27](#), shown below). Given the associations between topography and the animal guardian mentioned above, these are logical choices for hunting shrines. Returning bones to be refleshed, pleading forgiveness for a life taken in the hunt, or asking permission to take more animals is

more efficacious when done before a "doorway" leading into the realm of the animal guardian.



Figure 27. Topographic features chosen for use in hunting ceremonies include large boulders with overhangs that provide protection from the elements as seen at Pa' Ruchi Abaj, an abandoned communal shrine outside of San Juan la Laguna.

Another point about sacred geography – often overlooked – is of importance here. Carlsen and Prechtel (1994) note that Tz'utujil *aj'kuna* (ritual specialists) in Santiago Atitlán associate body parts with elements of nature. Specifically, the head is associated "with the sun, the chest with the moon, genitals with the center of the day, *bones with rocks* (also ancestors)" (Carlsen and Prechtel 1994:92 italics added). It is notable that while all fauna deposits were associated with rock outcrops, in fact, many bones were deliberately tucked flush against the physical rock surface, the physical bones of the deified earth.

Conclusion

A review of the ethnographic literature from the Maya area, as well as other regions of Mesoamerica, suggests that the Lake Atitlán hunting shrines constitute the proverbial tip-of-the-iceberg. Ethnographic references suggesting similar hunting rites are scattered throughout the literature from the Maya area. In the first half of the 20th century, La Farge and Byers visited a cave in the Jacalteco region that contained "vast quantities of animal bones" (1931:243). In the 1950s, Grollig (1959:162) noted that people living in the Kanjobal town of San Miguel Acatán curated deer bones until the time that they were taken to a nearby cave. More recently, Cook (1981) reported that the K'iche' of Momostenango deposited deer skulls and bones at a sacred site containing a stone carved in the image of a jaguar. In the gulf coast of Veracruz, the Huastec curate deer bones to return them to a to'oom, a shallow hole encircled in stone (Alcorn 1984:88). Meanwhile, a passing conversation I had with a Kaqchikel man when crossing the lake one day last summer suggests the existence of two hunting shrines outside of Tecpán. Both were used for returning bones to the animal guardian and conducting hunting rites. It is becoming increasingly clear that hunting ceremonies involving the specialized deposition of animal remains at sacred sites is not limited to those Maya communities bordering Lake Atitlán.

Ethnographic information from broader Mesoamerica suggests similar ritual practices. The Mixe of Oaxaca curate bones of hunted animals until New Year's Day when they are returned to sacred sites in the mountains so the animal guardian can refresh them (Lipp 1991:95). In Guerrero, the Tlapanec curate skulls and mandibles of animals until they are deposited at a sacred site in the forest (Neff Nuixa 2001). To the north, the Nahuatl in Hidalgo return all the bones of animals taken in hunts to sacred places in the hills (Montoya Briones 1968). Meanwhile, the Lenca of Honduras deposit deer bones to mountain shrines (Chapman 1985).

Hunting ceremonialism involving rites in which animal bones are "delivered" to a supernatural animal guardian at sacred sites constitutes a wide-spread but under-recognized ritual practice in Mesoamerica. With generous funding from FAMSI, we are beginning to develop the material signature of hunting ceremonialism and deposits. It is my hope that this research and future investigations will provide a foundation for the examining (a) the geographical extent of this ritual behavior and (b) evaluating changes

and continuities in hunting ceremonialism over time from remains recovered in an archaeological context.

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