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## **Caves Branch Caves: Archaeological Field Report**



**Research Year:** 1997

**Culture:** Maya

**Chronology:** Middle Pre-Classic to Post Classic

**Location:** Cayo District, Belize

**Sites:** Petroglyph, Pothunters, Satabe, Footprints, St. Margaret's Cave and others.

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## **Abstract**

From 1994 to 1996, excavations have been carried out in the Caves Branch Region of Belize. This area is well known for the existence of many caves such as Petroglyph, Pothunters, Satabe, Footprints, St. Margaret's Cave and others.

Until now, little archaeological investigations have been done in the many caves in Caves Branch Region. The most important past work was conducted by Dorie Reents-Budet and Barbara MacLeod (Reents 1980, 1981; Reents and MacLeod, 1986) in Petroglyph Cave. Elizabeth Graham, Logan MacNatt and Mark Gutchen excavated in Footprint Cave (1980) and other investigators have focused their attention in the geology and morphology of Caves Branch Region. Nevertheless, extensive investigations have not been done for almost twenty years.

The initial goal of the work reported here was to retrieve data about a looted cave with evidence of burials. However, a later reconnaissance of this area allowed us to identify other caves, increasing both our knowledge and interest. After three seasons of work, we have developed the hypothesis that different caves within a small geographic area served specialized functions in the various rituals carried out by a single Maya community. A previously developed cave typology (Bonor, 1989:19-26) has proven to be a useful tool to evaluate what kind of activities were done in the various Maya caves without excavating them.

The three caves above discussed are Caves Branch Rock Shelter (C.B.R.S.), Te Tun Cave and Pottery Cave, all located North of the Hummingbird Highway (Cayo District, Belize). Although these caves are known to several people, I will not give their exact location due to the very real risk of looting. I am sure that looters also read scientific journals.

*Submitted 07/01/1998 by:*

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## **Caves Branch Rock Shelter (C.B.R.S.)**

In 1994 the Department of Archaeology of Belize was informed that a cave in the Caves Branch Region was being looted. During our first visit in May 1994, we determined that this cave was, in fact, a rock shelter with many ceramics and human remains. Looters' activities destroyed almost the entire central area of the cave and its only chamber. In

1994 with the generous help of the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project, test units were excavated in the cave to retrieve information about the chronology and burial patterns. Due to the large number of burials and the enormous archaeological potential of this cave, during June and July 1995 the Department of Archaeology of Belize organized the Caves Branch Field School, which furthered our understanding of the cave. The C.B.R.S. has been looted recently at least four times, complicating the planning of the project. However, with these salvage excavations we have retrieved important information about caves and ancient Maya burials. There are no more than fifty Maya caves with burials, and C.B.R.S. is assumed an important place among them because of the number of internments, its clear burial pattern, and its specialization.

Caves Branch Rock Shelter is located close to the Caves Branch River. In front of it, there must have existed once between 15 and 20 mounds, of which only five still remain in good condition due to current bulldozing. The rock shelter is 35 m. long, 15.20 m. in height and with a maximum depth of 10 m. from the drip line. Just above the C.B.R.S. there is a cave which was partially explored. This upper cave has been looted also.

An area of approximately 20 m<sup>2</sup> had been the center of attention of the "treasure hunters" as well as the near totality of the cave's interior. Hundreds of sherds and copious amounts of bone fragments were recovered from the outer part of the C.B.R.S., and the information that was therefore lost seemed to be considerable. However, the intensity of the looting was not enough to deprive us from some data, since the looters only destroyed the two uppermost levels of the four that were encountered.

### ***Excavation***

#### **Unit N. 1** (1 m. - 2 m.).

We found a concentration of human and animal bones on level two under which we came upon a burial (Burial N0. 1), located in the third level.

#### **Unit N. 2** (2 m. - 1.5 m.).

We located an infant's burial (Burial N0. 2). This excavation was situated in the cave's interior one meter from the entrance.

#### **Unit N. 3** (1.5 m. - 1.5 m.).

#### **Unit N. 4** (1.5 m. - 1.5 m.).

In these two units we only excavated the first two levels. Abundant sherds and human bones were found (mainly in Unit 3), but without a clear anatomic disposition.

#### **Unit N. 5** (2 m. - 2 m.).

It was situated in the north side of C.B.R.S., because we visually detected a small vessel rim on the surface. It was not a complete one and seemed to contain some bone fragment in its interior. In this unit we found few ceramic materials. The excavation was discontinued at 20 cm. deep.

#### **Unit N. 6.**

Located at the opening of the small C.B.R.S.s cave, it had the original measurements 1.5 m. by 2 m. At the end of the excavation these measurements were enlarged according to the amount of burials found. This unit was eventually joined with Unit 3.

LEVEL I: Surface level (0-2 cm.). Sedimentary earth in dark brown color. Pottery sherds, small stones and snails ("jute").

LEVEL II: Level (2-20 cm.). Big concentration of human bones, faunal material, sherds, some "adornos" and numerous freshwater snails. The burials were found in complete disorder and without a clear disposition. They may be secondary burials of, at least two individuals, one of them possibly a child. We did not observe any anatomic arrangement in these human bones.

LEVEL III: Level (20-45 cm.). Burials N0. 7, 8 y 9. The great quantity of small stones covering and surrounding the burials was characteristic of this level. The human bones were found in regular condition, and it was therefore possible to see them in an anatomic position. All of them had been inhumed having been placed one on top of the other without any specific orientation. A complete vessel and a fragmented one were found, the latter one being placed under a stone. These two vessels probably represent the only indication of ritual offering in the whole excavated area.

LEVEL IV: Level (45-?? cm.). We observed an almost total disappearance of the ceramic material and small lithic, that was previously present (in a burned state) in the upper two levels. In this level we encountered Burials 3 and 6, the latter one having been interred in a flexed position with the arms crossed and the legs pressed against the body.

#### **Unit N. 7 (1.5 m. - 1.3 m.).**

This unit was opened in order to corroborate the continuation of the profile from Unit 6; that is the small and burned lithic material and to see if this feature only occurred in the central area of the rock shelter. Within a few centimeters we encountered two burials and due to lack of time the unit was discontinued.

#### **Unit N. 8 (1.5 m. - 2 m.).**

It does not appear on the general plan of the rock shelter, but it was situated between Units 2 and 7. It was excavated until level two was reached. The stratigraphy corresponds with the one from Unit 6. Here we found two more burials in a regular state of preservation.

We documented 31 burials in a small excavation area (approx. 10 sq. m.) and estimate the number of individuals buried at the rock shelter at around a hundred, including those excavated by us, those destroyed by looters, those removed by the Maya in ancient times, and those that have not yet been excavated. As an indicator, Unit 6, with an excavated volume of a cubic meter, contained more than 7 burials. The ceramics obtained during excavations span from the Middle Preclassic Period (Jocote Orange-Brown and Joventud Red), early phase of the Jenny Creek complex (900-600 B.C.) [Gifford, 1976:61], through the Classic Period (Dos Arroyos Orange Polychrome and San Ignacio Brown on Red) Hermitage complex (300-600 A.D.), (Frenchmans Composite, Frenchmans Variety), Spanish Lookout complex (700-900 A.D.) and into the Postclassic period (Río Juan Unslipped) New Town complex, A.D. 900. Burial 26 was securely dated by an in situ Late Preclassic Red Sierra dish, with a black cross on its bottom. The dish covered the skull of the buried individual. Unfortunately, looters destroyed this burial before we were able to excavate it completely. Luckily we already had taken photographs, drawn the Burial, and removed the ceramic material.

As mentioned above only one Burial (Burial 26) can be dated confidently. The quantity of burials concentrated in such a small space caused not only the destruction and removal of the offerings found above or near the individuals buried previously, but also the partial removal of older interments to make space for the new burials.

The data from the Rock Shelter show an important difference between the rituals practiced by the ruling elite of powerful and large sites, and the rituals practiced by smaller communities lacking elite residents. These are two different rituals that reflect two different ways of envisioning the world, and two different ways of living in that world. The traditional way to see ritual even in the most insignificant things of the Maya existence does not work in the rock shelter, nor in this part of Caves Branch Region, where the religion and rituals were more "domestic" than we thought at first. The cave does not contain human remains from sacrifices (according to preliminary analysis), nor secondary burials. All of the burials are primary interments and the cave was evidently used as "cemetery" by the inhabitants of the settlement area located in front of it.

### **Pottery Cave**

This cave is only a few meters away from Te Tun Cave. Bigger than Te Tun and the C.B.R.S., it is a true cave of horizontal development. A three-dot face was carved on the left side of the small entrance (approx. 2 m. high and 1 m. width), and two big ollas were placed at some 15 m. of its access. Due to the intensive "Touristic Activities" in this area, most of the surface archaeological material has been moved from its original position. We collected some sherds from the entrance and the final chamber, including some polychrome sherds.

We think that the three-dot face is related with the propitiation of water, as is common in other caves in the Maya area. The existence of polychrome material in the cave's end is perhaps related with the worship carried out at Te Tun Cave. Most of the polychrome

material dates to the Early Classic Period, contemporaneous, we think, with the principal religious activities at Te Tun Cave.

## **Te Tun Cave**

Te Tun Cave or the "stone-tree cave" is one of the most splendid rock shelters that we have ever found. Despite its small size, it is important for its unique combination of features, including a natural column, several petroglyphs and one small entrance. Although it is only 2.6 m. wide and less than 3 m. high, Te Tun Cave contains and communicates an important iconographic message.

Concerning the petroglyphs, there are many caves throughout Mesoamerica containing petroglyphs or paintings. Of all the kinds of petroglyphs, those with faces have a clear connection with water. Generally, three carved points form the design, representing the eyes and the mouth. In the Yucatán, many of these faces are associated with the "stair motif" petroglyphs, and in all the examples that I know, the relation with water is totally clear.

In Te Tun Cave we found a stalagmite with petroglyphs on top of the artificially modified entrance (as an altar). All these features contribute to its very special character. The significance of the faces on the stalagmite was not clear until we discovered a natural spring in front of the cave. The faces are the "amulets" that will attract the water. In a dry cave like this, the faces become the idols to whom one asks for water. This data demonstrated that the tradition of carving faces inside caves is not restricted totally to the Northern Lowlands, but has much wider geographic distribution.

One intriguing element of the petroglyphs is not a face but the Quincunx symbol formed by five carved points (four on the corners and one in the center). For several authors (Lamb, 1982:37) the Quincunx (T585a) means be, (road, path), but for other specialists it does not mean road without an affix (Dorie Reents, personal communication, 1995). Others suggest that the Quincunx symbol is related with the idea of center and used as decoration of the elite earflares from Tikal and Caracol (Arlen Chase, personal communication, 1995).

As mentioned, the petroglyphs are carved on a stalagmite column, and some scholars have identified stelae with stalagmites (Bassie 1991). There may be some basis for this, because there are other examples of this relation: Maler describes a carved stalagmite at Yaxchilán, in Chechem Ha Cave (Cayo District, Belize); there is a plain stela made from calcite stone, in Actun Tunichil Muknal (Jaime Awe, personal communication, 1996); there are three stelae, one of them is now in the Department of Archaeology, and Pendergast (1970) described a carved stalagmite in Río Frio Caves (Cayo District, Belize). Finally there is the "Warrior" at the entrance of Loltún Cave (Yucatán), which although not a stela, reunites all the elements of the stela.

So, at Te Tun Cave, we have a cave with petroglyphs related to water; a calcite column with a clear stela parallel; a Quincunx symbol and finally we have a small entrance that

was probably artificially modified. To sum up, we can safely postulate that this cave was a place dedicated to water worship or rain petition. Excavations suggested two different uses of the cave. The above mentioned ritual and its use as burial place.

In some way, the stalagmite or calcite column reminds me of the representations at Palenque of the Yaxche, sacred ceiba or earth tree, that emerges from inside the Underworld and grows toward Heaven, connecting the nine levels of the Underworld with our world and the thirteen levels of Heaven. In this small cave at Caves Branch Area we find the clear syntheses of all these elements which we have mentioned above. It is a perfect representation of the Maya world not in movable objects such as pottery, stelae or altars, but within the natural space the cave creates. Of course, these are preliminary hypothesis, and we are open to comments and suggestions.

### List of Transparencies

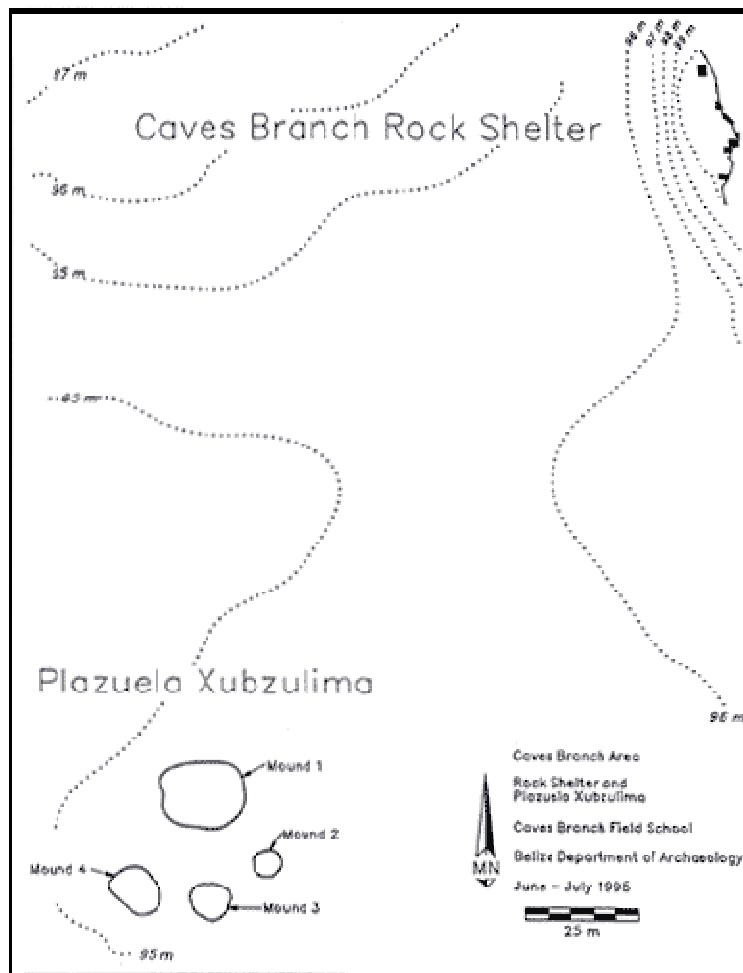


Figure 1. Mapa de C.B.R.S. y del Area de Asentamiento.

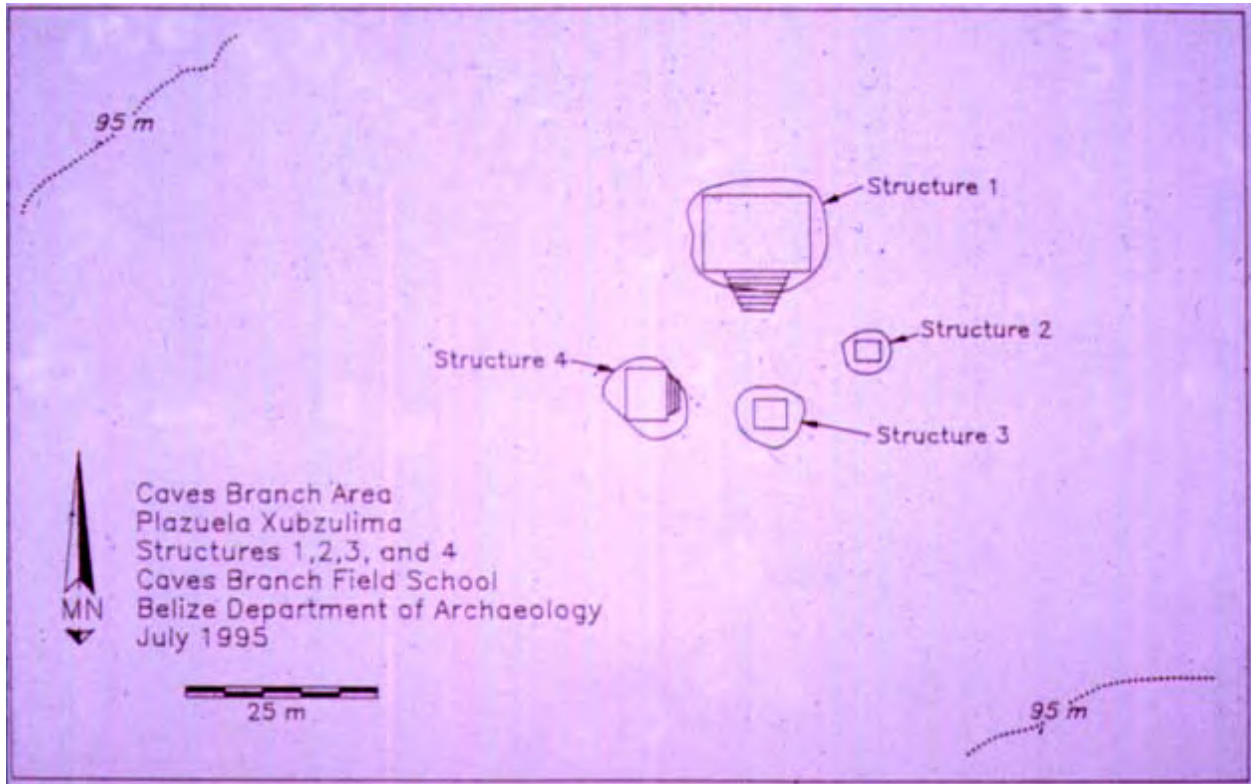


Figure 2. Grupo de Plaza , proximo a C.B.R.S.



Figure 3. Excavación en C.B.R.S. (1995).





Figure 4. Excavación en C.B.R.S. (1995).



Figure 5. Excavación en C.B.R.S. (1994).



Figure 6. Excavación en C.B.R.S. (1995).



Figure 7. C.B.R.S. Unidad 2, Entierro 19 .



Figure 8. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6, Entierro 24 .





Figure 9. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6, Entierro 21 .



Figure 10. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6, Entierro 24 .



Figure 11. C.B.R.S. Unidad 2, Entierro 23 .



Figure 12. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6, Entierro 15 .



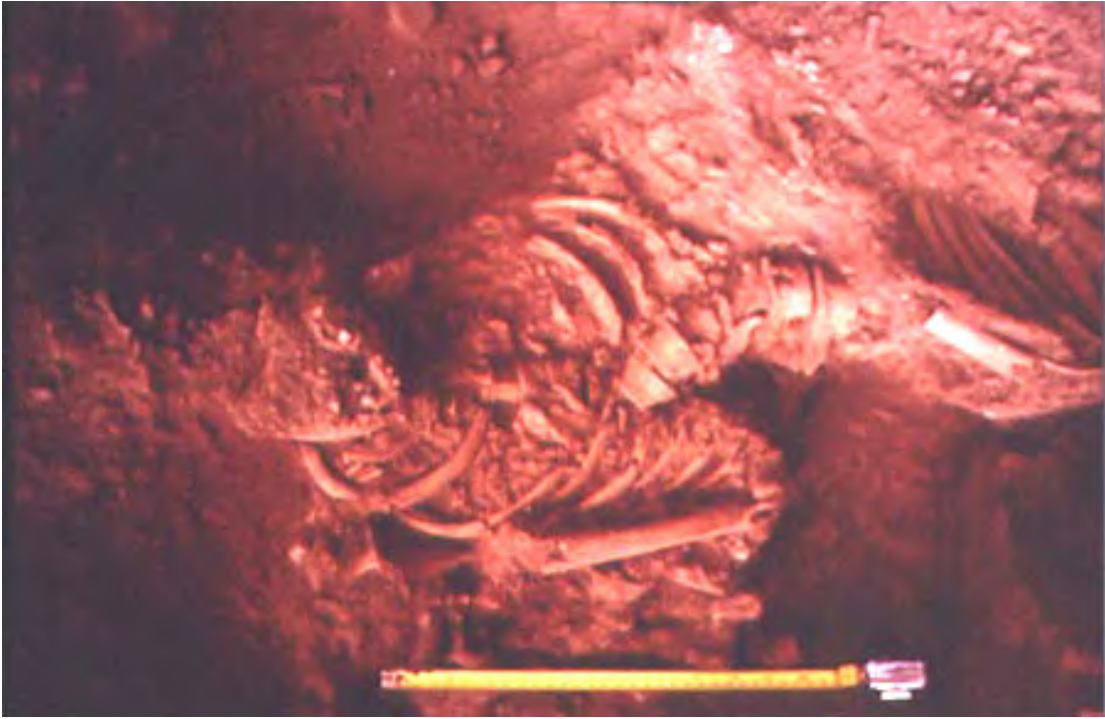


Figure 13. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6, Entierro 15 .



Figure 14. C.B.R.S. Entierro 4 .



Figure 15. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6, Entierro 10 .



Figure 16. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6, Entierro 11 .





Figure 17. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6, Entierro 11 .

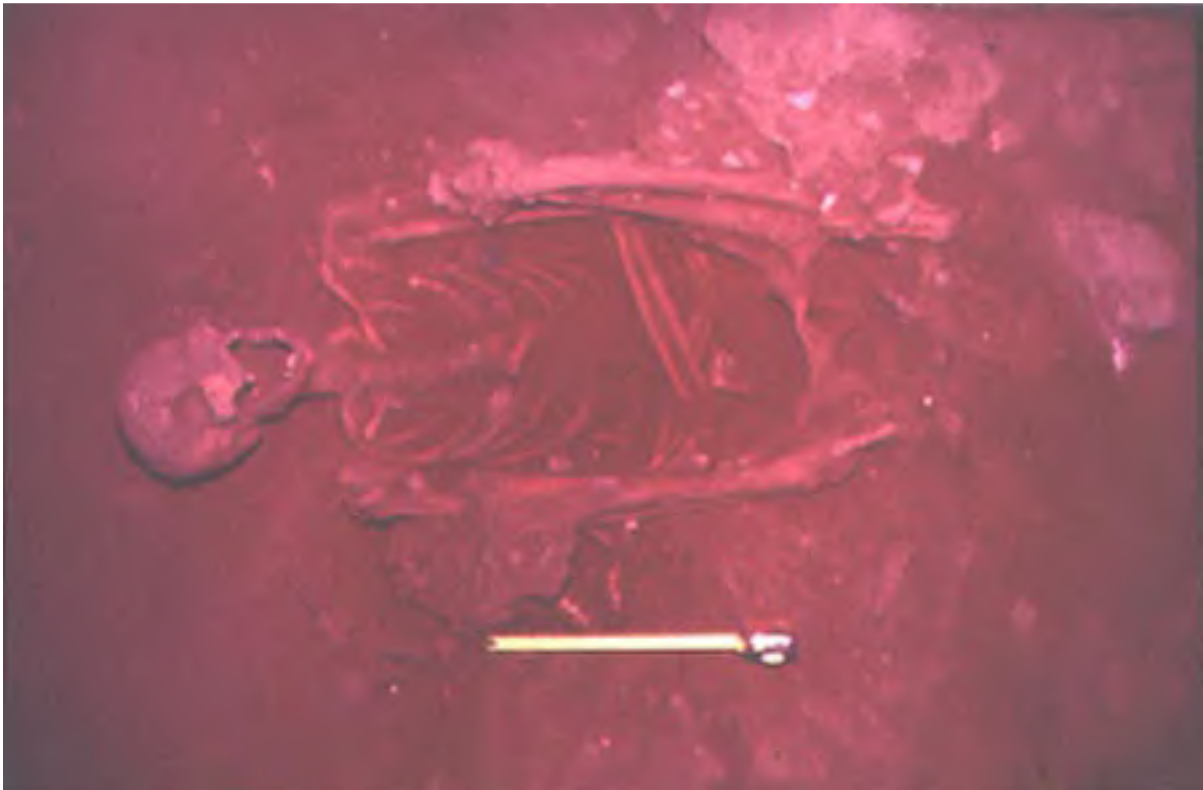


Figure 18. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6, Entierro 2 .



Figure 19. C.B.R.S. Offrenda Entierro 20 .



Figure 20. C.B.R.S. Vasija sin decorar en Unidad 5 .



Figure 21. C.B.R.S. Colgante de Concha .





Figure 22. Cuchilla de Obsidiana .



Figure 23. Vaso. Complejo Spanish Lookout (700-900 D.C.) (Tipo Frenchmans Compuesto, Variedad Frenchmans).



Figure 24. Vasija. Complejo Hermitage (300-600 D.C.) (Tipo San Ignacio Marrón sobre Rojo).



Figure 25. Cuenta tubular .





Figure 26. Adornos .

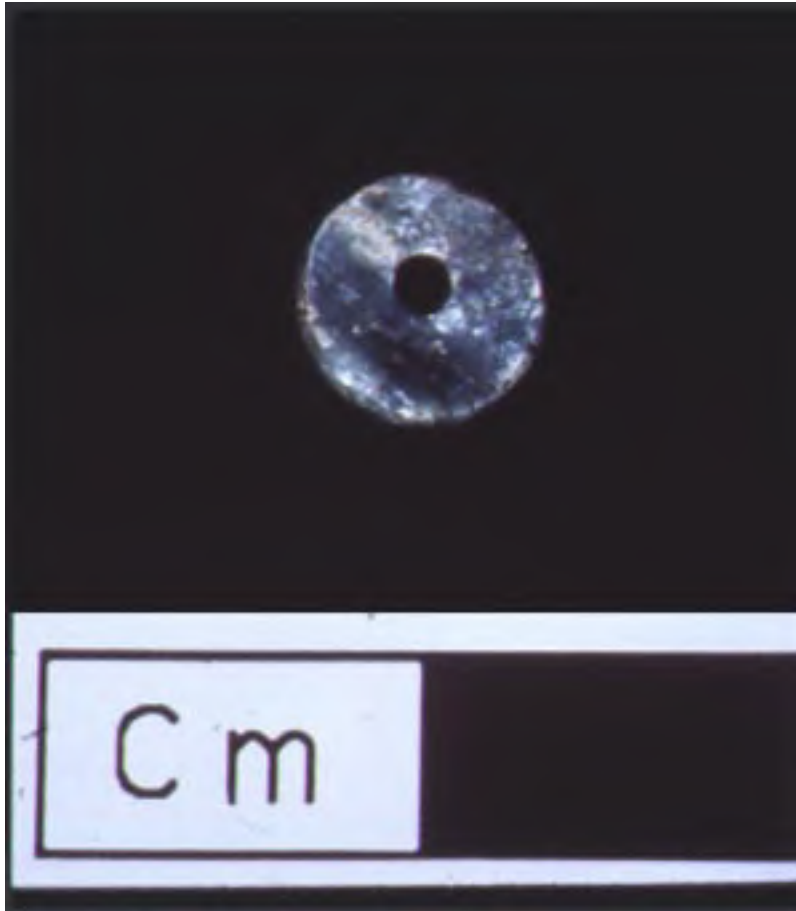


Figure 27. Adornos .



Figure 28. Adornos .



Figure 29. Concha trabajada .



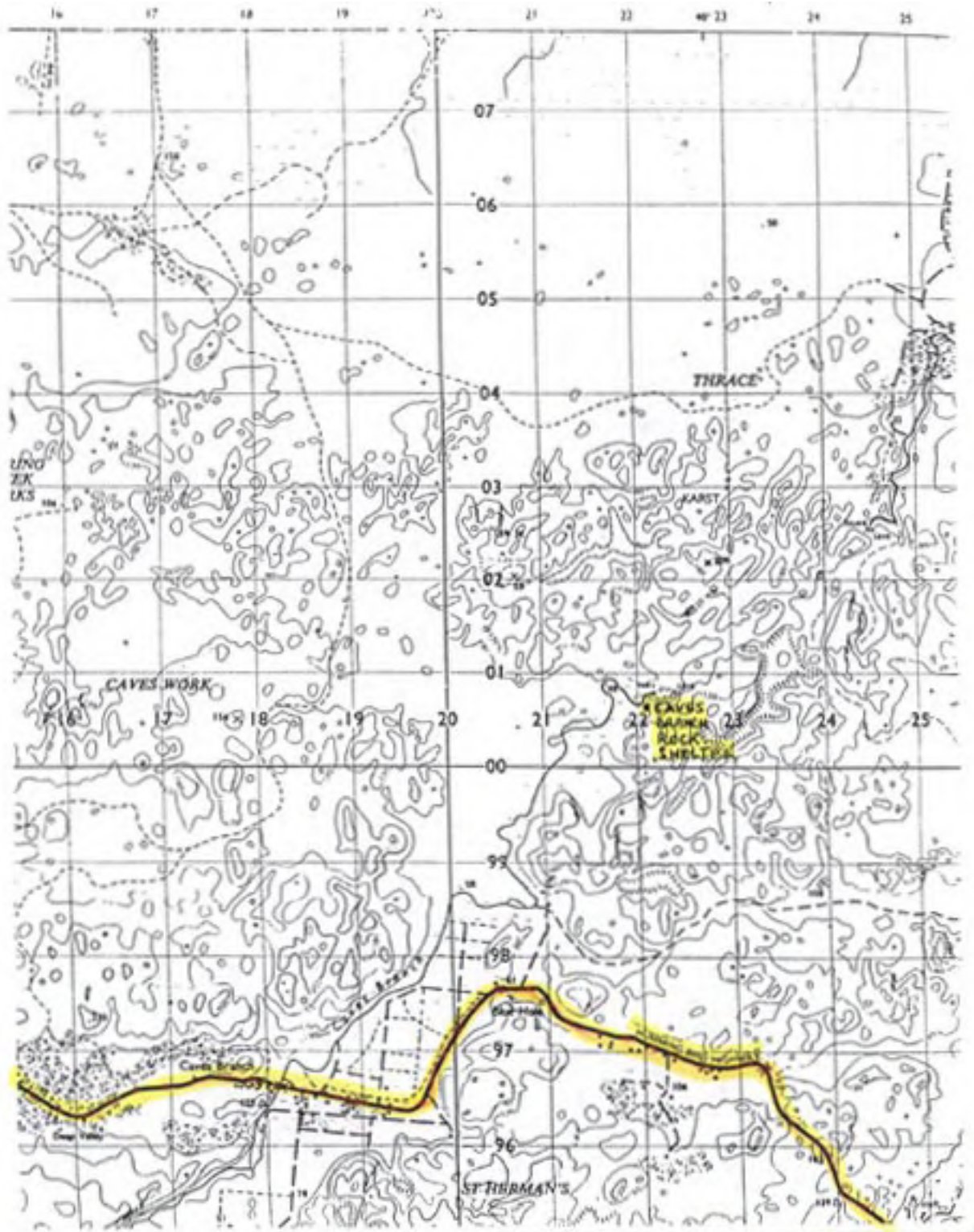
**Figure 30. Te Tun Cave .**



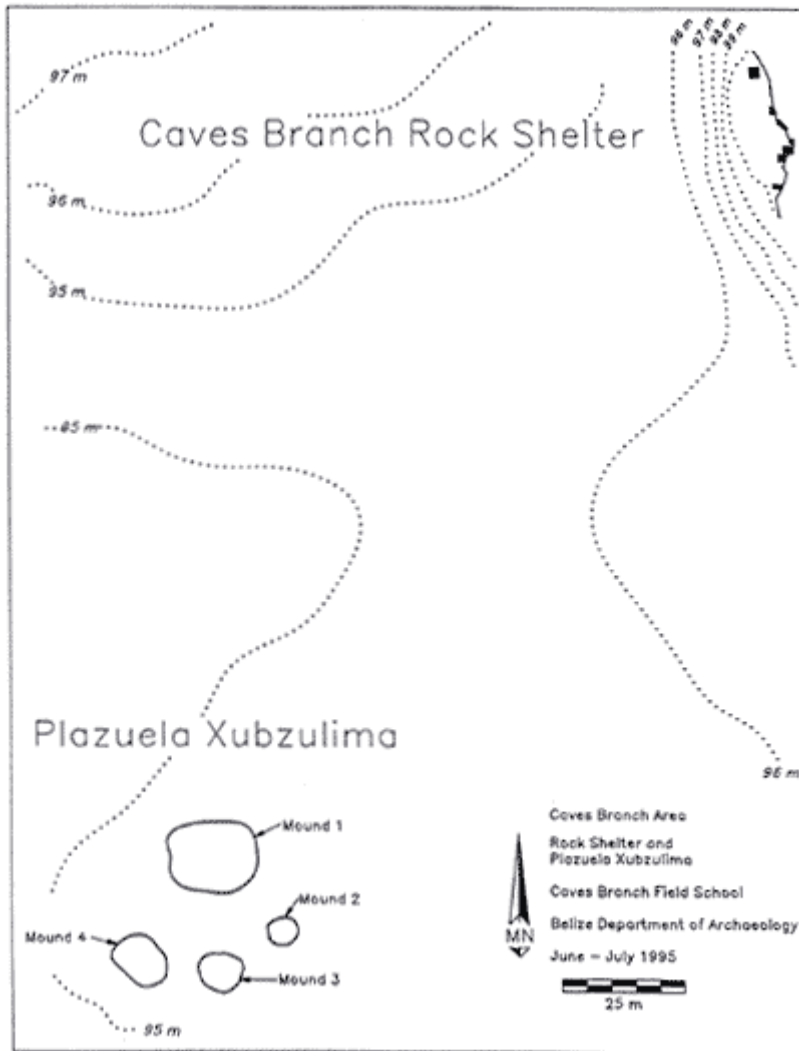
**Figure 31. Te Tun Cave . Column con Grabados.**



## List of Drawings

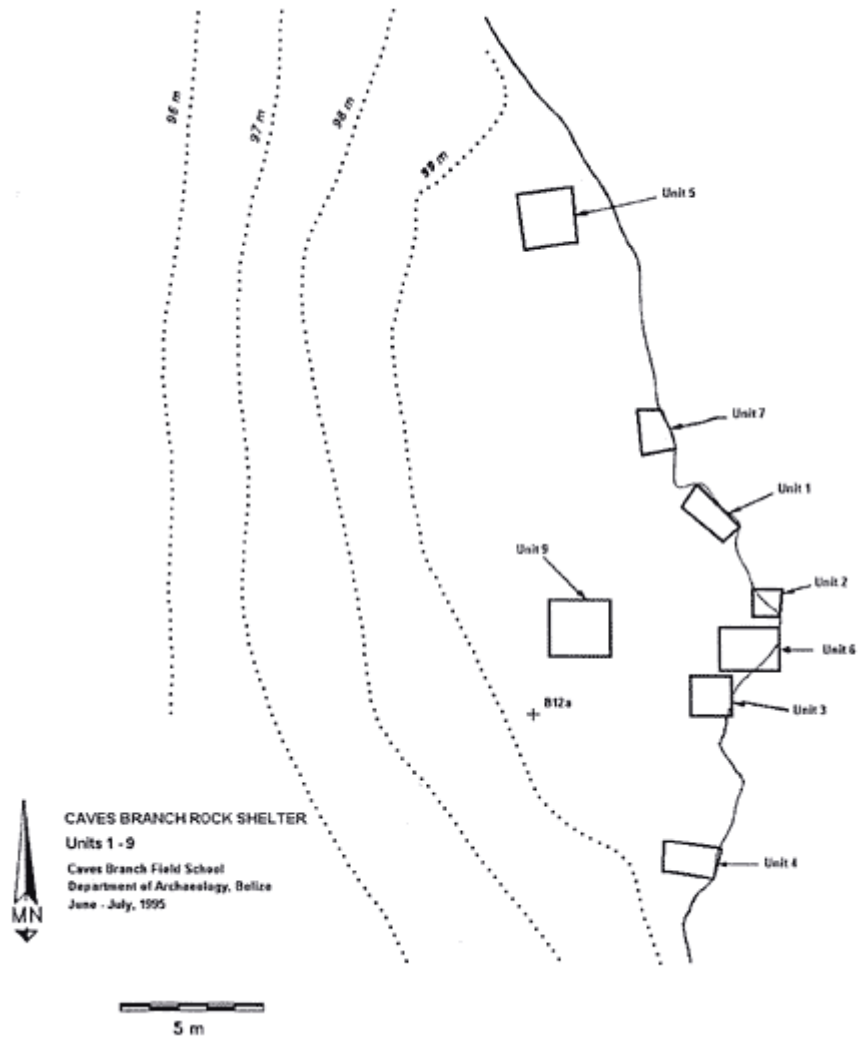


Drawing 1. Localización de C.B.R.S.

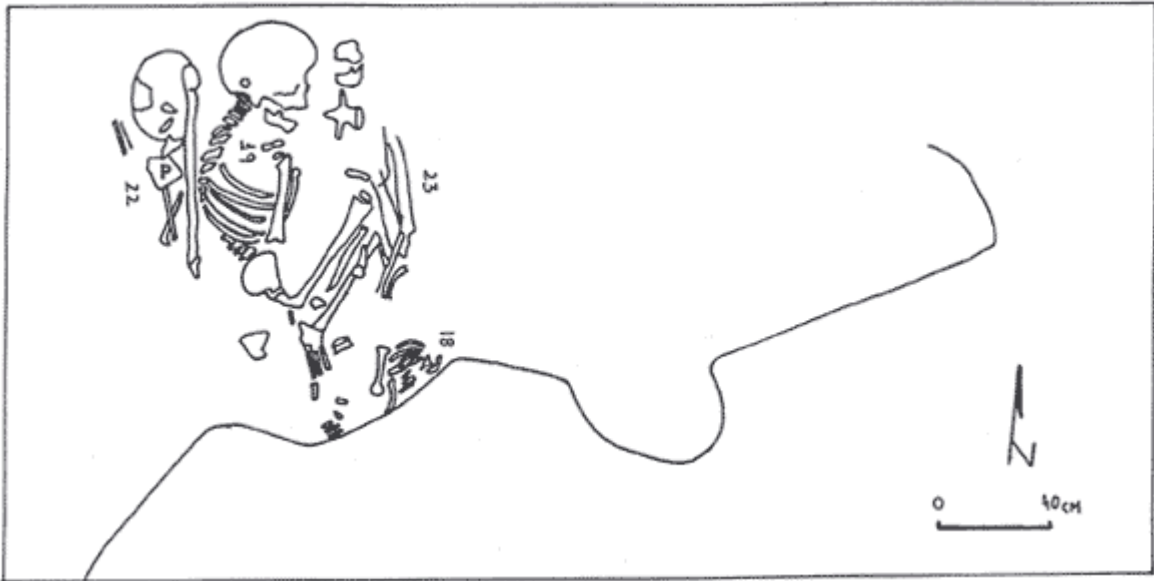


Drawing 2. Grupo de Plaza , proximo a C.B.R.S.

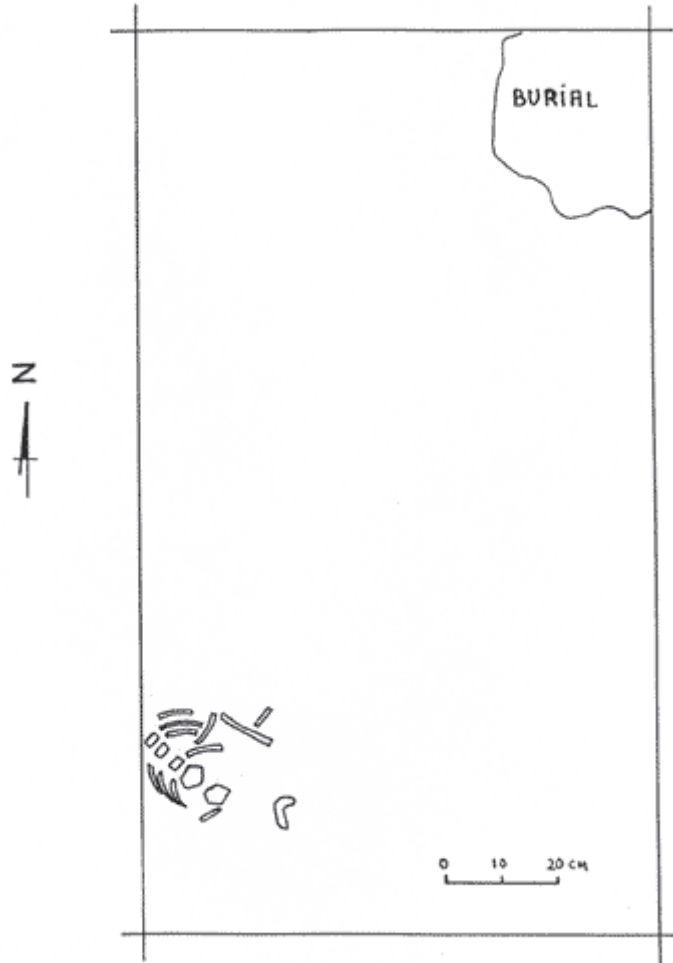




Drawing 3. Plano de C.B.R.S. con la localización de las unidades.



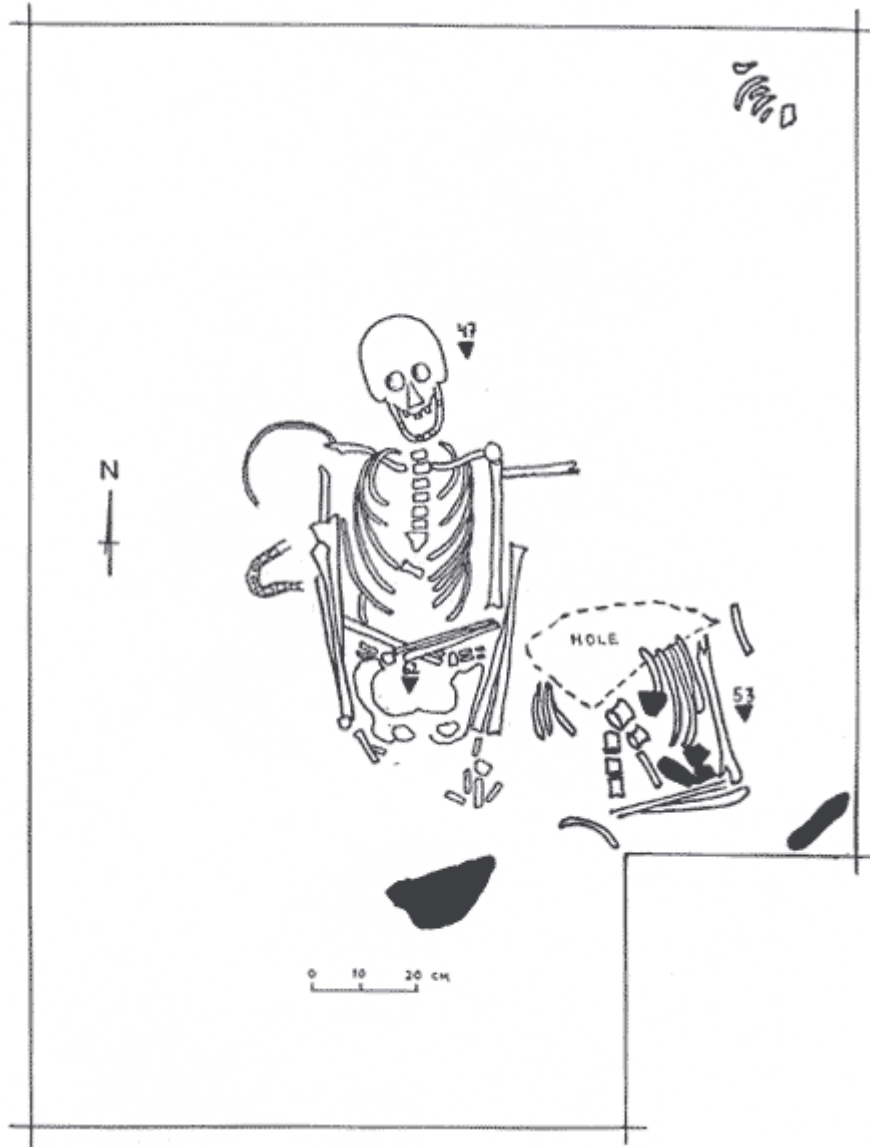
Drawing 4. C.B.R.S. Unidad 2 .



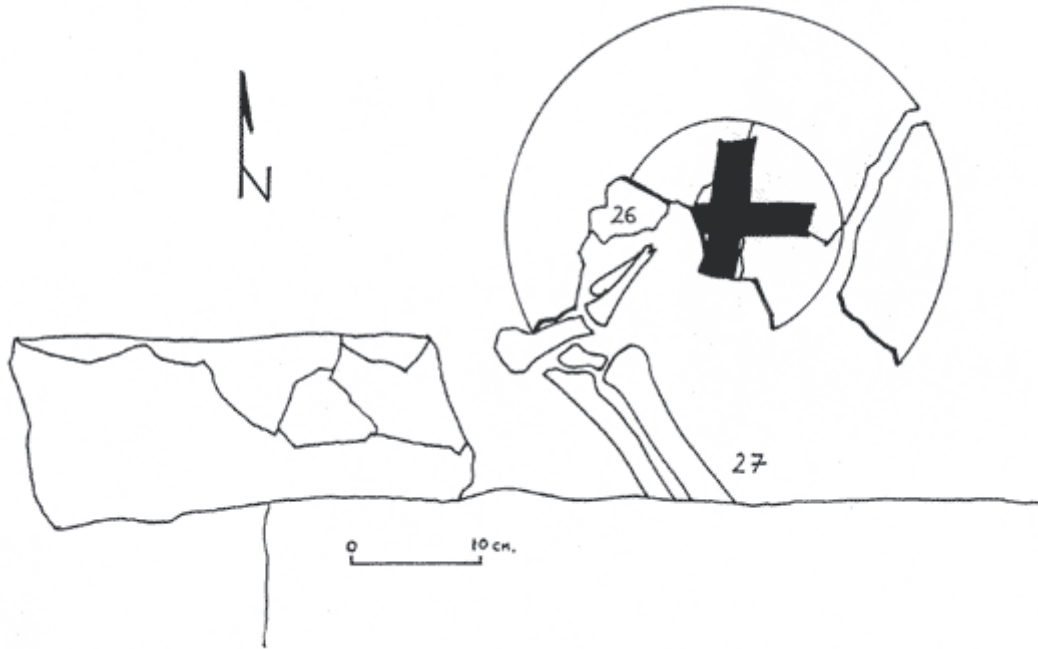
Drawing 5. C.B.R.S. Unidad 7 .



**Drawing 6. C.B.R.S. Unidad 5 .**



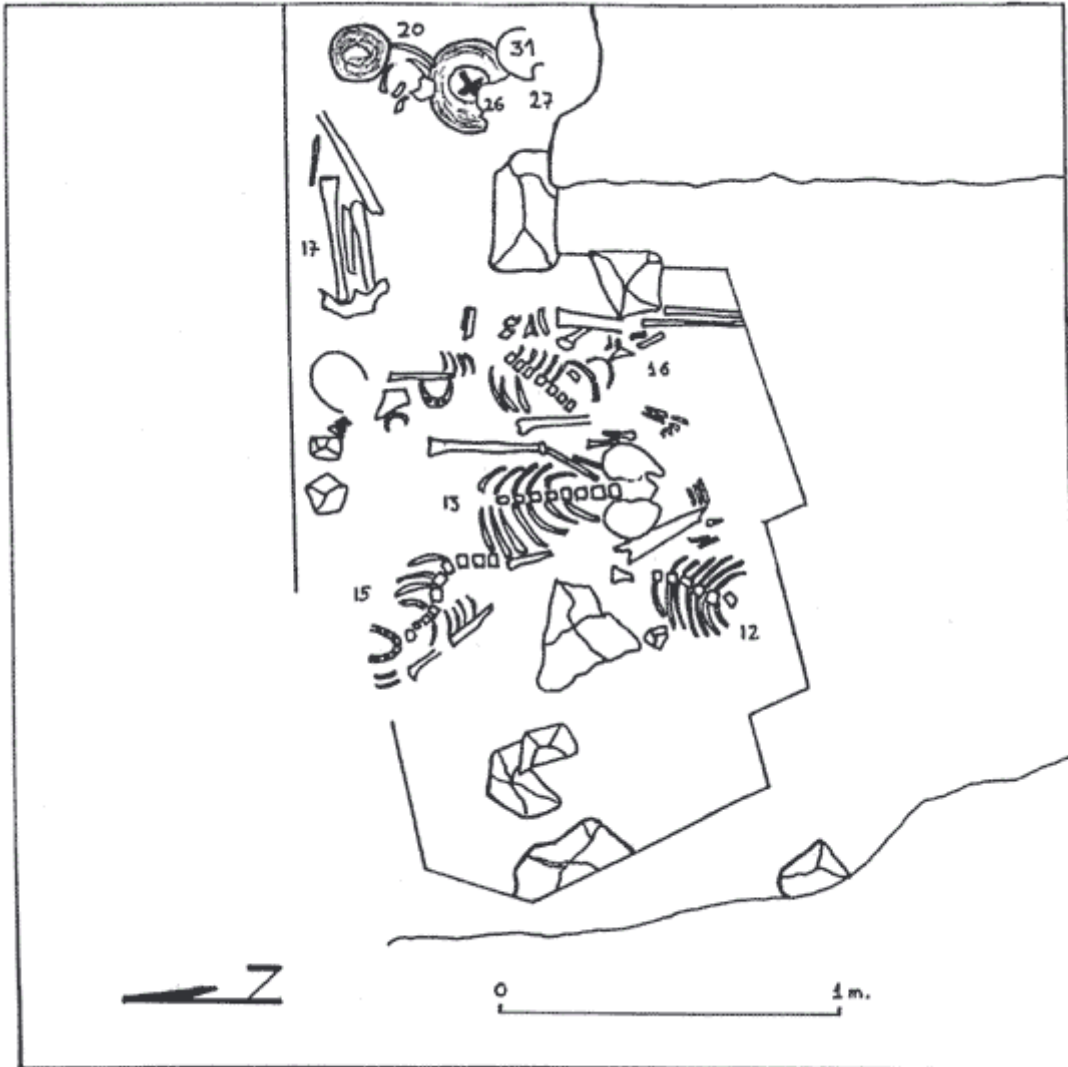
Drawing 7. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6. Entierro 2 .



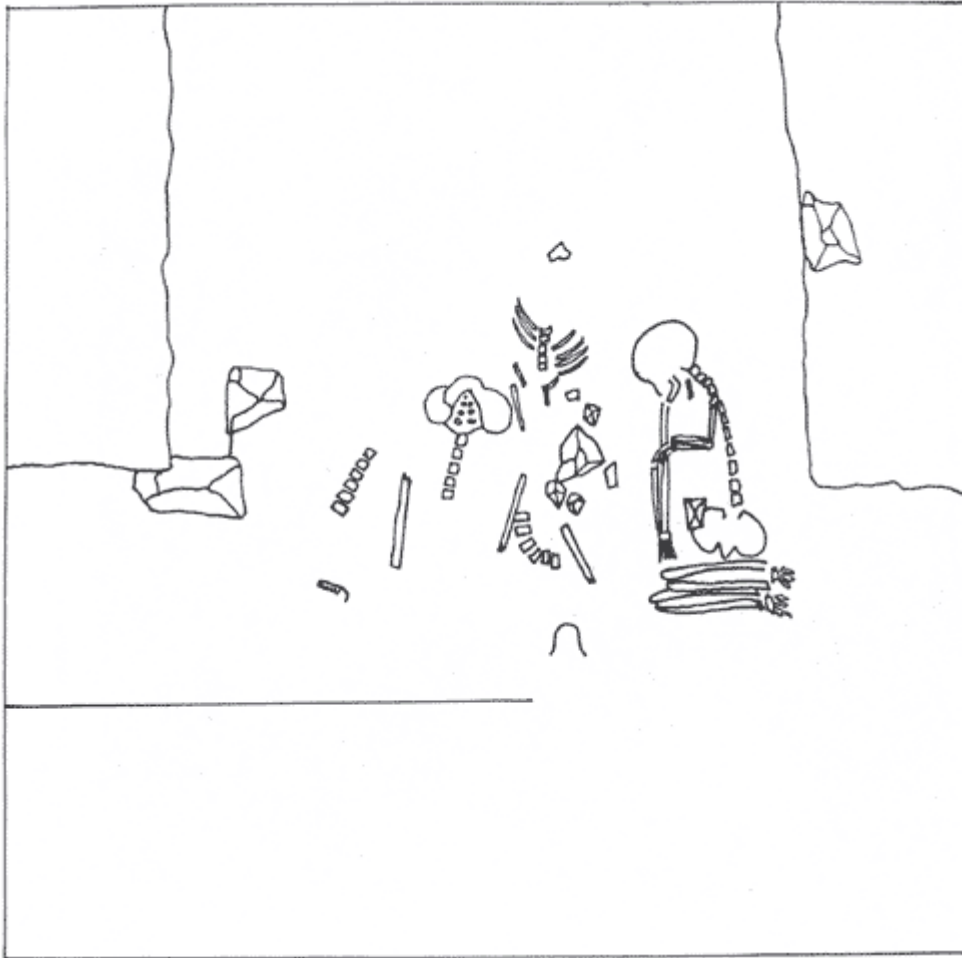
**Drawing 8. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6. Entierros 26 - 27 y ofrendas Plato Sierra Red.**



**Drawing 9. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6. Entierros 26 - 27 , después de remover las ofrendas.**



Drawing 10. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6 . Múltiples entierros.

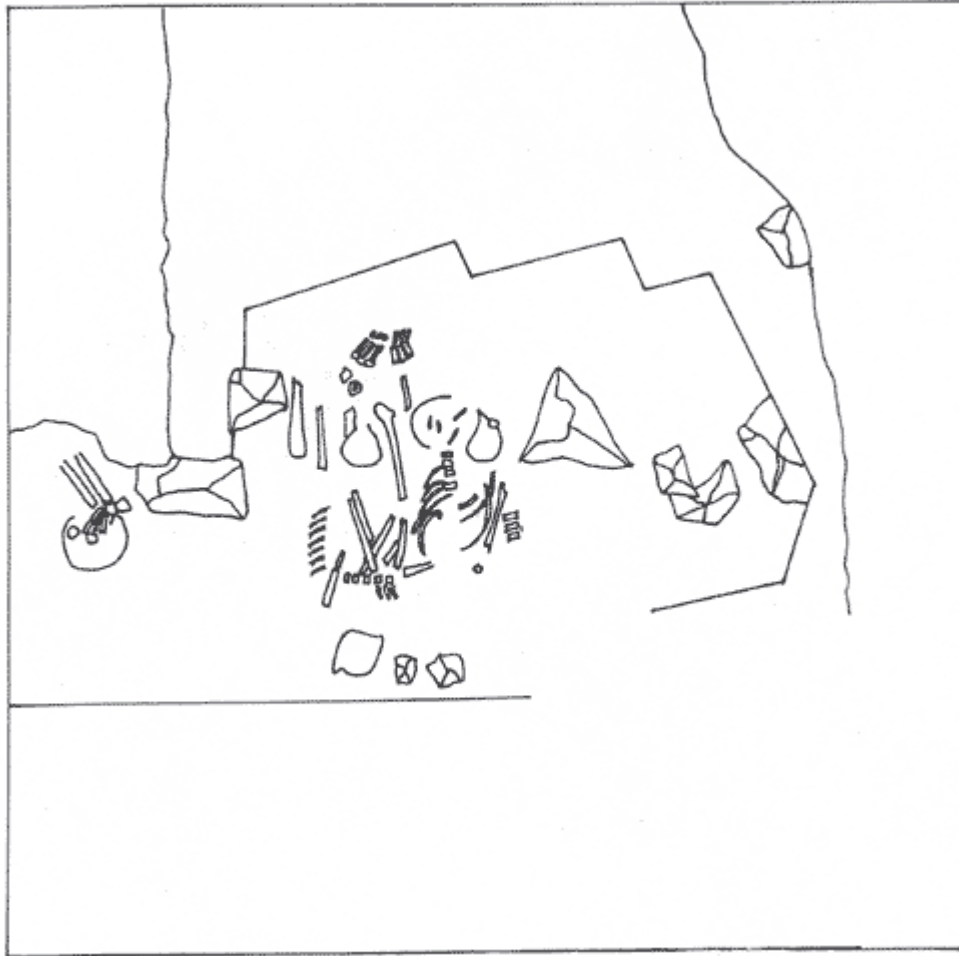


**Drawing 11. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6 . Múltiples entierros.**

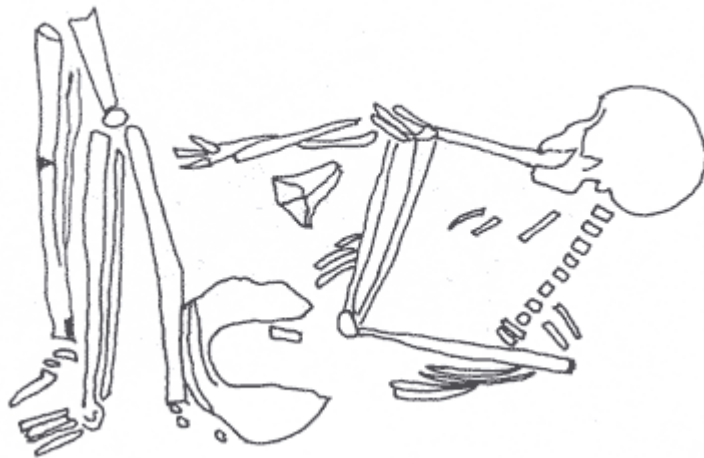




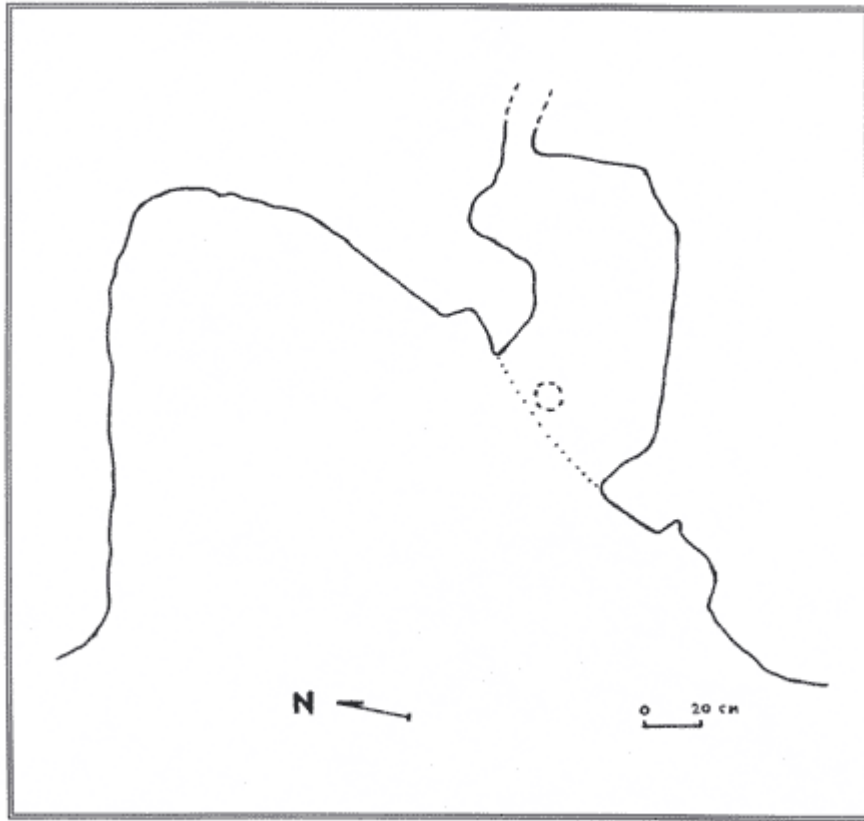
**Drawing 12. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6 . Multiples entierros.**



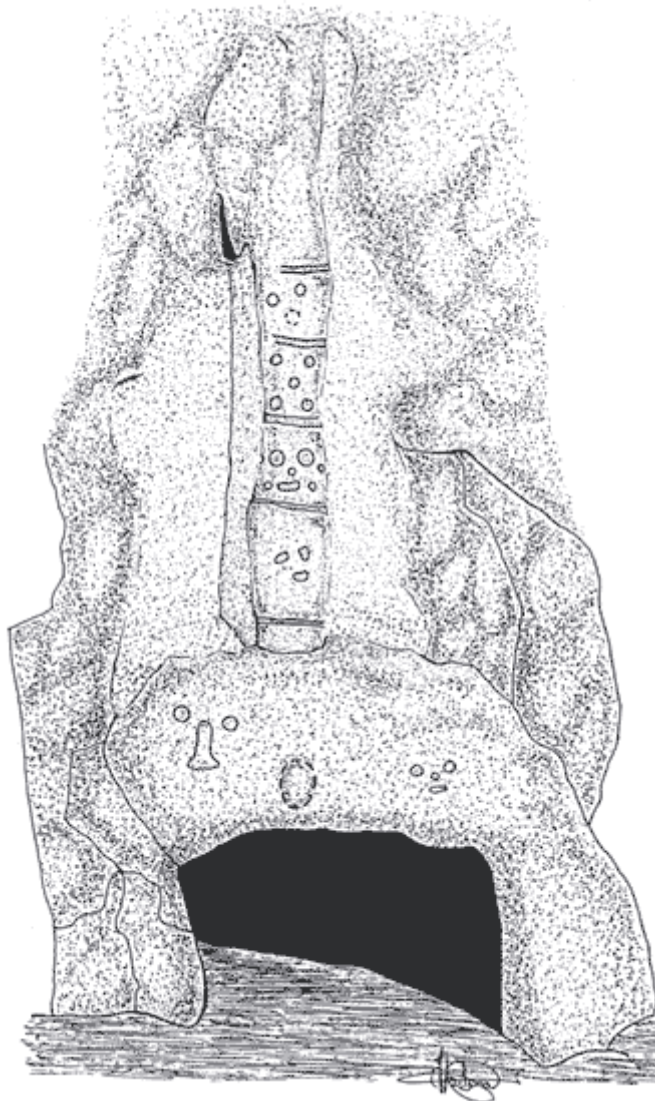
**Drawing 13. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6 . Multiples entierros.**



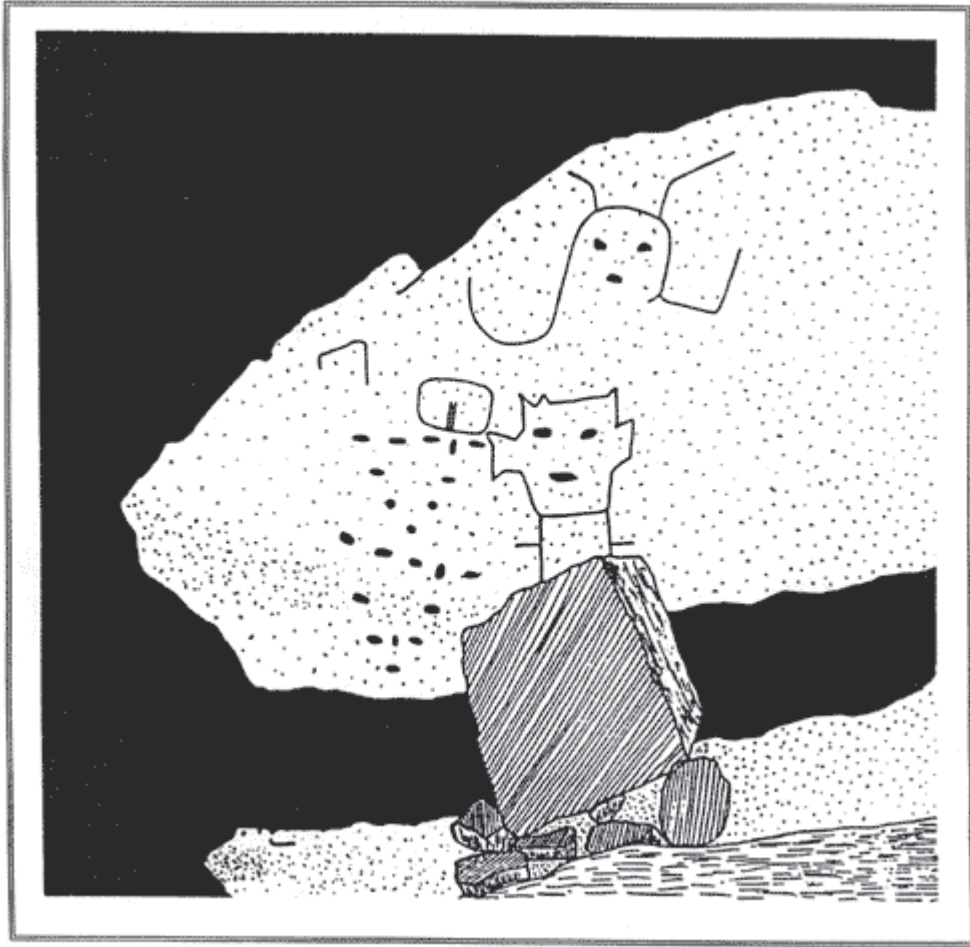
**Drawing 14. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6. Entierro 11 .**



**Drawing 15. Te Tun Cave . Plano del Abrigo.**



**Drawing 16. Te Tun Cave . Dibujo mostrando los petroglifos.**



**Drawing 17. Petroglifos comparativos . Aktun Ch'en Chin. México.**

## List of Photographs



Photo 1. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6. Entierro 11 .



Photo 2. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6. Entierro 11 .



Photo 3. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6. Entierro 2 .





Photo 4. C.B.R.S. Unidad 6. Entierro 2 .



Photo 5. C.B.R.S. Unidad 2. Entierro 22 .





Photo 6. C.B.R.S. Unidad 2. Entierro 22 .



**Photo 7. Caves Branch Rock Shelter (C.B.R.S.) .**



**Photo 8. Laboratorio de Antropología Física (Southwest Texas State University).**



**Photo 9. Pottery Cave . Fragmentos cerámicos. Actuncan Orange-polychrome.**





Photo 10. Pottery Cave . Fragmentos cerámicos. Cayo Unslipped.



Photo 11. Pottery Cave . Fragmentos cerámicos. Cocay Applied.



Photo 12. Pottery Cave . Fragmentos cerámicos.

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