

# Patron Deities and Ancestral Maya Ontologies: A Contextual Analysis of the Waka' Burial 61 Akan Effigy, Petén, Guatemala

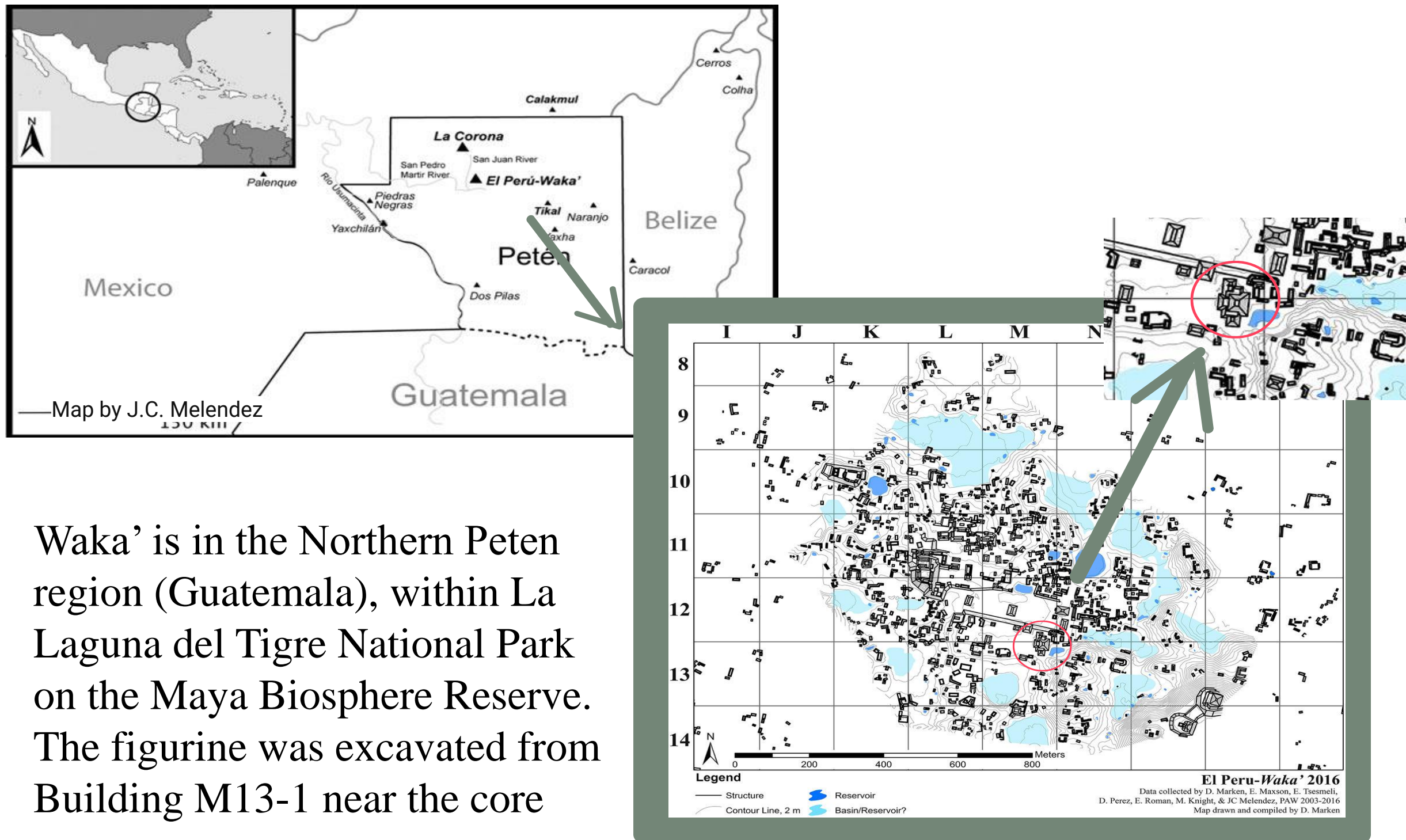
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## Research Goals

- Explore the nature of the Akan figurine in the context of an effigial figure, and to contextualize this nature in the sphere of ritual and spiritual themes present with the Classic Maya (more specifically at Waka').
- Discuss the importance of indigenous worldview in archaeology where they are available, and acknowledge the need for decolonized thought, analysis, and action

## 1. Location



Waka' is in the Northern Peten region (Guatemala), within La Laguna del Tigre National Park on the Maya Biosphere Reserve. The figurine was excavated from Building M13-1 near the core

## 2. Indigenous Ontology

- The Ancestral Maya believed in an interconnected world and placed great value in caring for the relationships between human life and the supernatural or other than human entities who frequently interact on varying scales (Taube 1992).
- The focus for this research involves interactions that would have occurred between deities which were considered patrons of a community and those in the community with the power and authority to conjure them.
  - The recognition of themes regarding divination, magic, sorcery, ritual, and ceremony, and the importance of connecting with the supernatural who inhabit the animated Maya world has led archaeologists to better understand and appreciate how material deposits represent/manifest these nuanced worldviews (Kurnick and Baron 2016).
- Upon contact, many aspects of Indigenous cultures were studied by the Spanish.
  - However, many had been incorrectly transcribed or misinterpreted, and influenced by the lens of Western beliefs during the 1500s which demonized and reduced cultural practice to misfortune and superstition or witchcraft.
- The goal of the Spanish conquerors was to root out the ideas and practices of Indigenous communities to establish their own religion. The impact of this reduction of Indigenous culture is particularly evident with the practice of sorcery and ritualism in the contact-Maya culture (Pohl and Coltman 2020:2-3).
- Until recent years, the effects of inadequately mapped Western ideals on an Indigenous culture's beliefs have still had a hold on the field of Maya archaeology, influencing how sorcery is thought about and hindering its further exploration within the archaeological community.
- Sorcery shaped the ancient Maya's political landscape, ideological principles, cultural values, interactions with ancestors and history, social interactions, and economics (Stuart 2021).
  - The antiquity of these practices are evident in iconographic sources, painted vases and oral histories. Sorcery's usage stretches across a broad swath of life, with ritualism touching elements of divination, curing, conjuring, and animating.
- These ideas all tied into interactions with a very living, very active world where objects again have agency, and are imbued with meaning and intention through proper practice of sorcerers, mirror conjurers, kings and queens, and even the average individual within the community (Pohl and Coltman 2020: 5-7, Houston and Stuart 1996).

## 3. Background and Landscapes

- In 2012, the tomb of a royal woman was discovered in a buried subphase of a central ceremonial building in the heart of ancient Waka'.
  - The interred was identified as Lady K'abel, the site's most significant Snake Dynast whose Calakmul origins and title of *Ix K'aloomte* (roughly translated to "lady supreme warrior") positioned her as superior in rank to her spouse, 6<sup>th</sup> century classic Waka' ruler K'inich Bahlam II.
- Situated in the pelvis of the interred, archaeologists discovered a roughly hewn figurine. The object seems to be made of soft carbonate stone and of small size.
  - This object has been interpreted as an effigy, depicting one the most significant of Waka's patron deities known as Akan, the god of drinking, disease, and death (Grube 2004).
- It cannot be emphasized enough that the Maya believed in the world influencing and acting on itself and their people with its own agency (Stuart 2021). This frames the exchange of power between the people in a community and the supernatural world they lived in, and created a deeply rooted practice that altered how the people in a community experienced their world.
- This interconnected belief system produced sacred themes and landscapes, informed by spiritual narratives, such as caves, mountains/hills, and water.
  - At Waka' the ceremonial deposits are the result of such ritualistic activities, conducted not only to maintain social hierarchy, but also in veneration of deities who impacted the community's ability to survive (Kurnick and Baron 2016:121-122; Stuart 2021). Additionally, the materials from these sacred places are imbued with the same sacred energy as the place itself, creating space for emulation and replication within the practice.
- Present at Waka' is the incorporation of memorable events into the anthropogenically modified landscape, including buildings, stelae, caves, and other constructs. The interconnectedness of ritualism and sorcery is indicated throughout material and iconographic evidence, alongside the evident connection between ruling power and the ability to perform acts of sorcery, conjuring, and divining.

## 5. Data

**TOP RIGHT:** Graph depicting the concentration (ppm) of calcium, note the decrease in calcium read near the shoulders/neck region, comparative to the elevation of mercury.

**LEFT BELOW:** Graph depicting the concentration (ppm) of mercury, notice the increase in concentration near the neck/shoulder region, supporting the decapitation element of the representation

**RIGHT BELOW:** An image of the Akan figurine, showing the 8 sample locations for the pXRF.

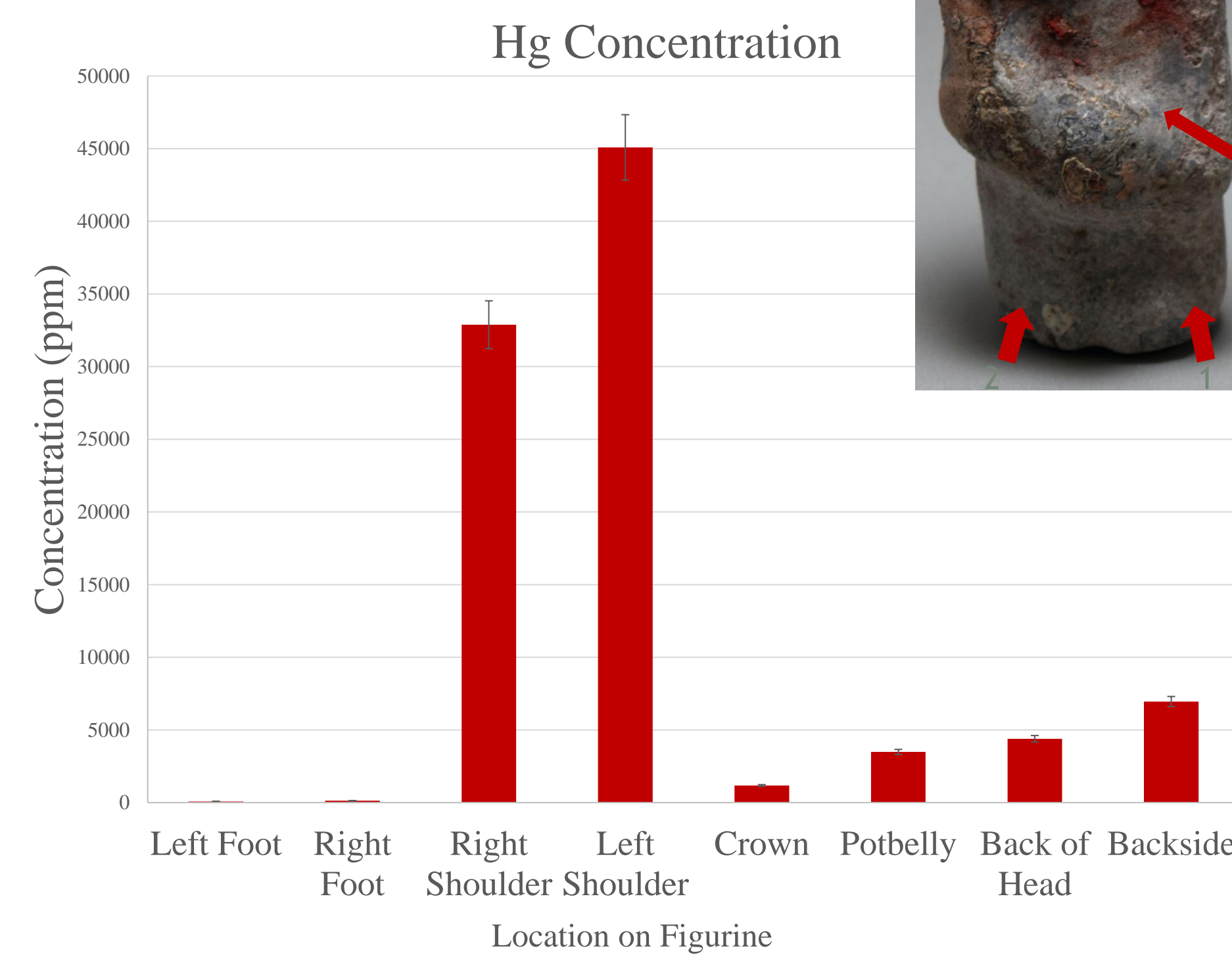
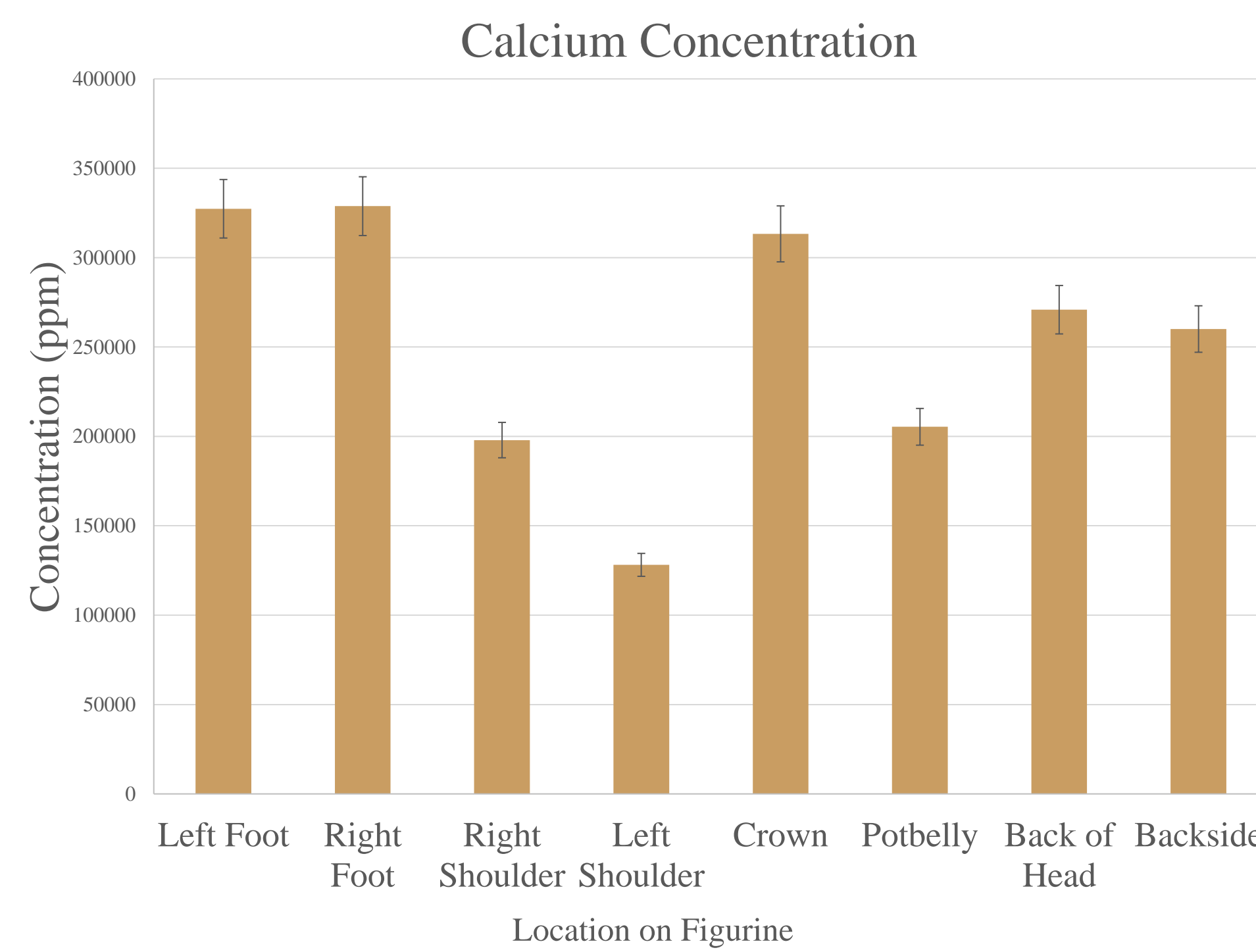


Photo by Juan Carlos Pérez Calderon

## 4. The Akan Figurine; Context and Composition

- Akan is one of the lesser understood gods of the Classic Maya for a multitude of reasons. The way Akan's name is constructed reflects the complex nature of Maya divinities, but the varying connected elements that relate to the Akan name requires further research to understand the relationship between them and the depiction of the set of attributes of a deity. With few, if any attributes concretely assigned to the deity, such as the act of decapitation, presence of a bloated belly, and more imply that there are multiple markers that can be argued to imply the presence of the Akan complex (Grube 2004:62-74).
- In addition to being hard to definitively identify (in an iconographic sense), Akan has also proven to be difficult to categorize and seems to be identified as a deity and a *wahy* spirit of a specific place and/or people during the late Classic Period (Houston 2021; Stuart 2021).
- This is supported at the city of Waka' with the presence of Akan being listed on Stela 16 and 44 as a patron and caretaker of the city.
- Creating effigies and other arts (ceramics, etc.), laying out offerings and sacrifices, and performing rituals are just a few of the devotional acts that the ancient Maya utilized to maintain the relations with patron deity (or deities) of the community (Kurnick and Baron 2016).

Under the assumption that this is an effigy, new questions arise. What is the figurine made of? Could it be from the unexplored cave? And the red pigment? Assumptions could be made that this figurine is a limestone painted with cinnabar, however testing needed to be done.

## 6. Methods

The methodology utilized for the material analysis of the Akan figurine is derived from David McCormick's process of pXRF analysis, standard with Yale University's lab protocol for the Vanta pXRF machine. Informed by the visually identifiable painted areas of the figurine, eight locations were chosen to ensure ample sample distribution, and to get a better general sense of the difference between the concentrated pigment application at the neck and shoulders, and the rest of the stone figurine. Utilizing Vanta's digital analysis program for the pXRF, researchers ran pXRF test intervals of thirty seconds, ensuring stability of the machine and verifying data points for errors between each reading.

## 7. Conclusions

My work with the Akan figurine has led to four conclusions:

1. Based on ritually and spiritually significant themes at Waka' during the Classic Period, my research supports the original assumptions that the anthropomorphic figurine located in Burial 61 of Building M13-1 is a representation of the Akan deity. Additionally, my research articulates the ritually charged nature of figurine usage in the Classic Maya and the connection to acts of sorcery and veneration of deities.
2. My research highlights the interplay between significant cosmological themes surrounding the Akan figurine, including patronage, multilayered worlds, personified diseases, and animate agency to non-human entities. I also argue that through ritual usage of figurines, this makes the Akan figurine a physical manifestation of these ideas. The significant ideas tied to this figurine are intrinsically connected with the structural concepts of Maya Cosmology, thus my research aids in articulating the multilayered and interconnected cosmology of the Maya.
3. According to the pXRF analysis conducted in collaboration with David McCormick, the figurine is composed of a carbonate limestone, formed through depositional sedimentary process. Additional results from this test revealed irregular patterns of mercury concentration, however, support a concentration of red cinnabar paint near the mouth and throat region, supporting the identity of Akan in the act of decapitation.
4. It is possible for the figurine to be a speleothem removed from the cave via human action due to the appearance of the figurine, however, the data collected in this research neither supports nor disproves this idea.

The work to understand the Akan figurine in not completed and there is much more to understand about the interactions between the Classic Maya at Waka' and their deities. The onsite cave should be investigated, to better understand the ritual life at Waka' in this aspect of the sacred landscape. In addition, further testing on the figurine's physical composition would need to be completed to continue the work of this study. However, due to the patrimonial significance and federal regulation on the treatments of an object like this, that form of analysis remains unlikely.



Photo by Juan Carlos Pérez: "Waka's Unexplored Cave"

## 8. Acknowledgements

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