

# Conservation of the Tulix Mul Mural

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## SITE

Tulix Mul is an Early Classic Maya site in NW Belize which is being investigated as a part of the 25 year- long field work in the area by Maya Research Program. This was the home of a locally important, lineage head group with at least two standing vaulted rooms. One of these was excavated in 2012 and 2013 revealing a plastered back wall with small pieces having exfoliated from this plaster. This has revealed the presence of an over-plastered polychrome, fine-line mural generally similar to that of San Bartolo in Guatemala. There are only few other known Maya murals and each has offered enormously important data regard Maya art, religious concepts, trade and interaction with neighbours.



Structure 2 with door entrance to mural

The mural is located in the vaulted room of Structure 2, which is part of a partially excavated building complex. The room was filled with large uncut stones at the beginning of the late classic and the room was sealed. Areas of the original room have now collapsed and room is protected by wooden roof and tarpaulin which also extends over the doorway to protect the wall painting from the climatic conditions.



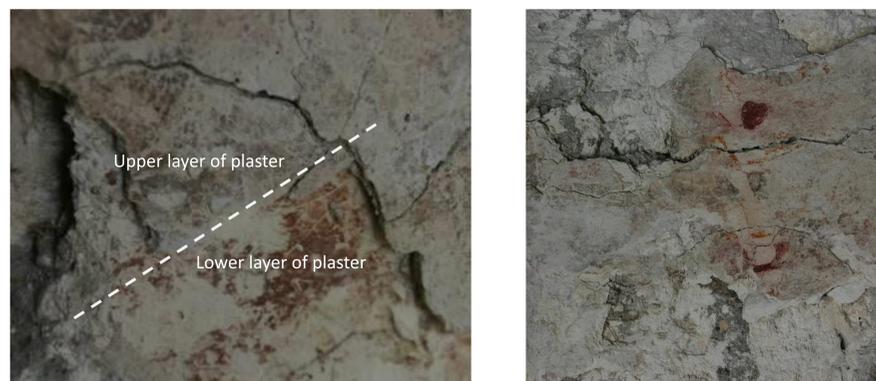
Mural over bench

The wall painting is 6m x 2m in size, the plaster once extended across the whole back wall but due had loss large areas over time.

## CONSERVATION

### Condition Assessment

Two layers of plaster are visible both with painted details, an older layer one and a newer layer two, the lower plaster level is further decorated with red and orange pigment, it could not be determined if this is a simple or elaborate design.



Paint layers with red and yellow pigment

On inspection of the wall painting in June 2014 it is clear that the much of the mural design has not been retained due to the environment and soluble nature of both the pigments and the plaster.

The majority of the images seems to have been concentrated on the central area of the wall, however very small and isolates areas of red colour can be seen at either end of the wall. The pigments are assumed to be naturally occurring ochres.

The surface of the mural was covered in decayed plaster, re-deposited calcium carbonate/sulphate from the plaster itself interacting with the water in the environment and bat droppings from bats which now inhabit the room.

### Conservation

Simple conservation techniques were carried out on site, due to the size and condition of the wall painting, it was decided to preserve in-situ as moving could cause damage.

As the greatest threat to the wall painting was loss due to plaster crumbling, consolidation was conducted prior to any cleaning of the surface. Loose or moving areas of wall painted were consolidated with 10 % Paraloid B72 (poly methyl-methacrylate/ethacrylate copolymer), applied with a syringe. The edges were also consolidated as cohesion between the plaster and the wall were weak. In some areas the consolidant has darkened the area but this will add stability to the very fragile areas so the benefit outweighs the aesthetics.

Consideration was given to the idea of removing some of the plaster from the top layer to investigate whether the lower layer painting was identifiable, however with the discovery of the graffiti and the unknown state of preservation of the lower pigment layers it was felt that this was too greater risk.

## GRAFFITI

Along with the previously identified areas of painted plaster, eleven areas were identified with raking light that contained crude graffiti, scratched into the surface, although mostly unidentifiable in nature, deliberate shapes and forms could be distinguished.



Unknown design



Fish design



Unknown design



Human knelling on platform/sun design

The graffiti has been carved into multiple areas and into both the top and bottom layers of plaster further indicating the poor state of the mural when buried.

The thickness of the lines are variable, but none are thicker than 2mm. The freehand style of the designs allows for the observation to determine directionality of the line drawn where the line thins at the end of each stroke. Due to the hard nature of the plaster and the cleanness of the lines, it is likely that a lithic tool would have been used to create the designs.

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