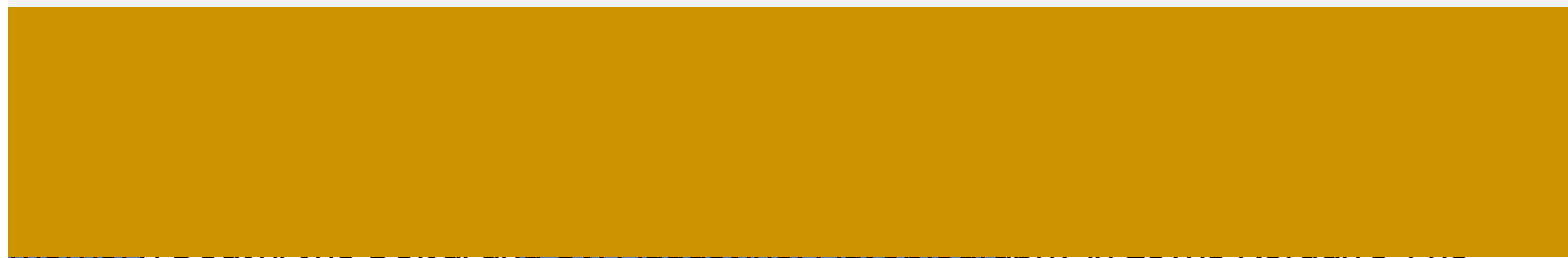
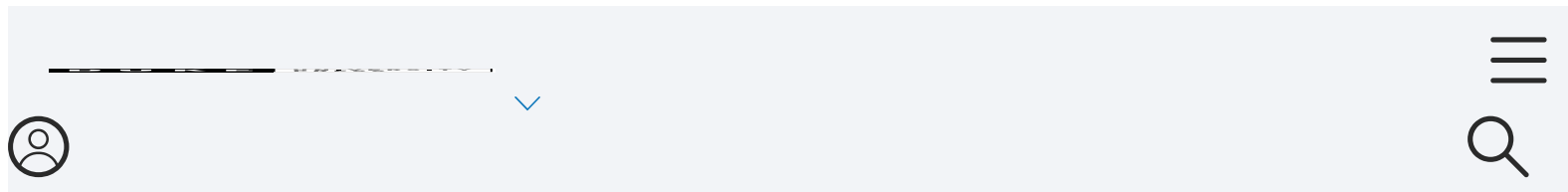


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Keith M. Prufer, W. Jeffrey Hurst

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Archaeological investigations at a mortuary cave in southern Belize recovered a bowl containing five cacao (chocolate) seeds dating to the fourth or fifth century AD. The context of both the burial and the cacao informs our understanding of the role of chocolate as a ritual substance in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Most archaeologists think of cacao as having an economic function as a form of currency or as a prepared beverage whose use was restricted to elites. However, a review of documentary sources at the time of Spanish contact as well as of ethnographic accounts indicates that cacao is an integral component in many rites of passage, including those associated with birth, social personhood, initiation, marriage, and death, as well as the initiation of shamans. As such it becomes an intimate ritual product implicated in areas of social identity and reproduction that transcend economic and political status. Its presence in a burial likely indicates that it was either an important possession of the deceased or intended to provide ritual sustenance during the passage into the afterworld.

Keith M. Prufer and W. Jeffrey Hurst

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