

11 FROM PRECLASSIC TO COLONIAL TIMES IN THE MIDDLE BELIZE VALLEY: RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF THE BREA PROJECT

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During ancient times, Maya settlements in the Belize River valley were economically linked with the large inland city centers of the Petén region, as well as long-distance trading networks of the Caribbean coast that reached as far north as Yucatan. Extensive archaeological investigations have been conducted in the upper reaches of the Belize River valley, where sites like Xunantunich and Cahal Pech show strong connections in architecture and ceramic styles with the Petén. Surprisingly, the eastern part of the Belize Valley, closest to the coast, remains largely unexplored despite the key role this section of the river valley played in the movement of coastal commodities and luxury goods. The Belize River East Archaeology (BREA) project has documented numerous settlements, both large and small, east of the Saturday Creek site that have a deep history, extending from Preclassic to colonial times. Further work in this area will reveal key boundaries of social interaction at this important crossroads and provide insight into how Maya society was impacted during periods of major cultural upheaval—first during the Classic Maya “collapse” period and later during the Spanish and British Colonial periods.

Introduction

The eastern Belize Valley appears to have a long history that extends from the Preclassic through Colonial times. Here, we summarize the results of our investigations carried out during 2011, our first season of the Belize River East Archaeology (BREA) project (see Harrison-Buck 2011 for more details). The BREA study area encompasses the eastern Belize watershed between Belmopan and Belize City (Figure 1). The study area encompasses roughly 6000 km². For the purposes of sampling such a large area, five transects were chosen for more intensive investigation. These boundaries ultimately became obsolete as our survey team quickly realized that ancient Maya settlement is virtually continuous along the banks of the Belize River. In this chapter, we present the results of our settlement survey season during the month of January in 2011, which was followed by a 5-week summer season of mapping and excavations at several of the sites in the middle Belize Valley, including Ma'xan, Hum Chaak, and Hats Kaab (Figure 2).

Several goals for the project directed our investigations in 2011. One of our long-term research objectives is to develop a more comprehensive settlement history for the eastern Belize Watershed and better understand its broader relationship with other parts of the Maya Lowlands, including the upper Belize Valley and Peten region to the west, as well as areas to the north and south. Another goal is to pinpoint the

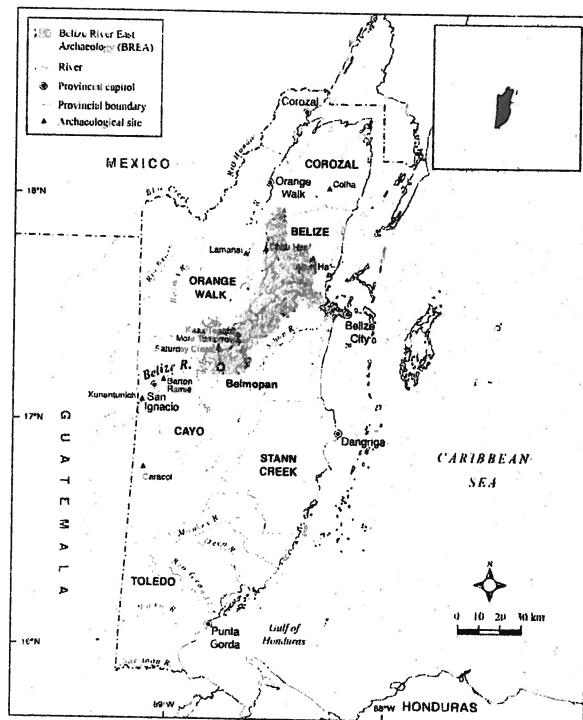


Figure 1. Map of the BREA study area (map prepared by M. Brouwer Burg).

location of a north-south overland route that stems from the headwaters of the New River that is noted in the Spanish ethnohistoric documents (Jones 1989). This route is believed to enter the middle Belize River around the site of Saturday Creek (Harrison-Buck 2010). An additional goal is to identify Terminal Classic occupation and examine the distribution of ceramics and architecture in this part of the Belize Valley.

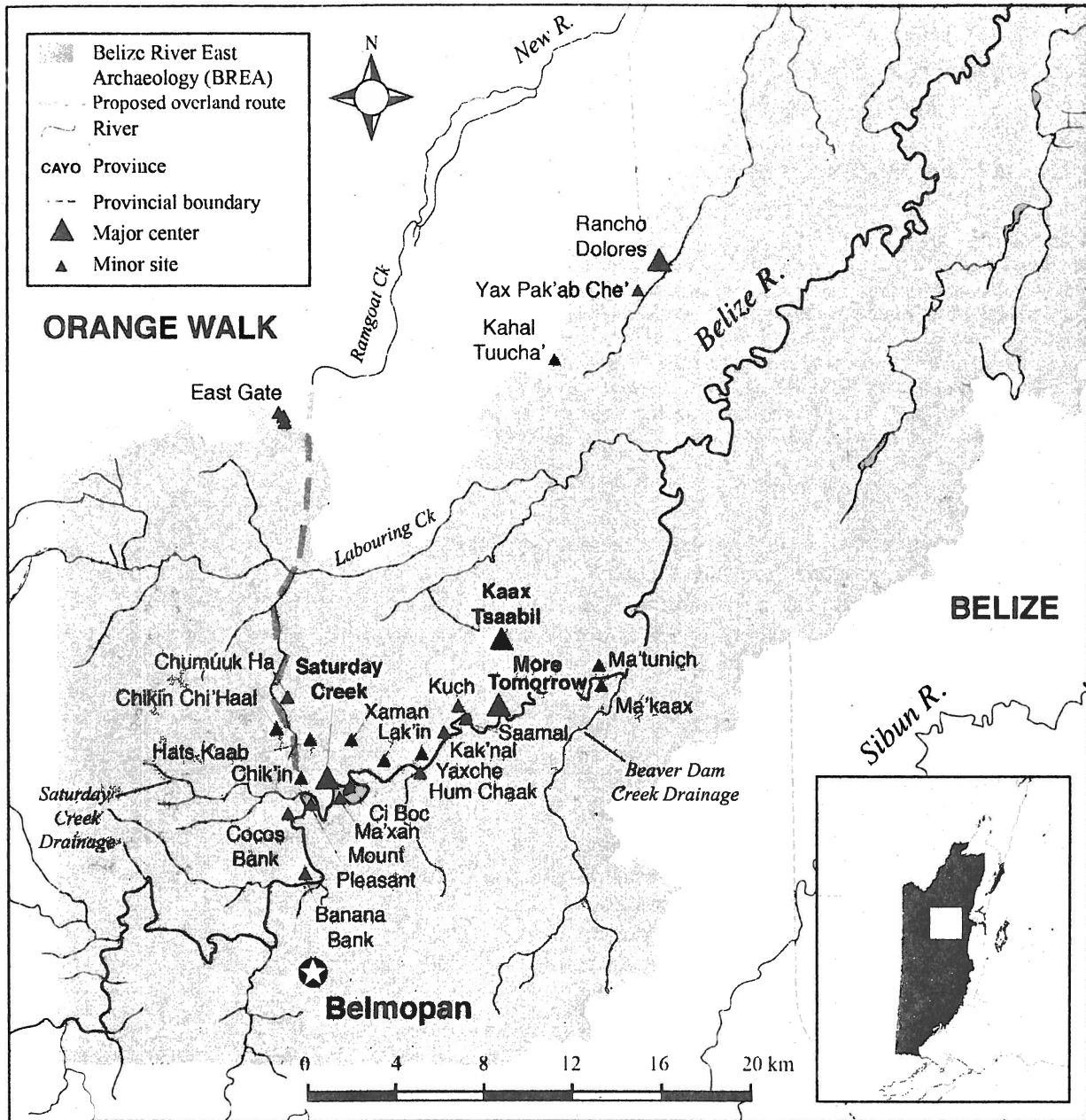


Figure 2. Close-up of the western half of the BREA study area showing sites discussed in text (map prepared by M. Brouwer Burg).

Finally, the BREA project also aims to better understand the colonial period occupation in the eastern valley and investigated several British colonial sites that were observed in our survey along the middle Belize River. Here we will provide an overview of our preliminary results from the 2011 season, with the exception of the colonial finds that are discussed elsewhere (see Kaeding et al., this volume).

Survey and Mapping

During the 2011 season, survey along the Belize River between Saturday Creek and the Beaver Dam Creek drainages revealed over 400 mounds that represent at least twenty discrete settlements with several others found farther to the north, proximate to the Labouring Creek and Spanish Creek drainages (Figure 2). In some cases, site boundaries were difficult to define as

the settlement along the main trunk of the Belize River is nearly continuous in many areas, particularly on the north side of the river. Here we identified three of the largest sites in the area, which include Saturday Creek, More Tomorrow, and Kaax Tsaabil.

The site core of Saturday Creek was mapped by Lisa Lucero and her team from 1998-2001 (Lucero 1999a, 1999b, 2002). The site is very large in aerial extent and we identified hundreds of smaller house mounds to the north, east, and west of the site center (what we refer to as Xaman, Lak'in and Chik'in, respectively). Directly across the river from the Saturday Creek site is another sizeable settlement that we have named Ma'xan (also known as the site of Never Delay). Adam Kaeding mapped this site with a Total Station during the summer season and we placed two excavation units there during that season. I discuss the excavations further below. The site of More Tomorrow represents another substantial Maya settlement that we located during the January 2011 season. The site is on the north side of the Belize River across from the modern village of More Tomorrow. Fortunately, the village residents have been good stewards for the site—it is in bush and has never been bulldozed or plowed and remains relatively undisturbed. We have plans to return to the site in the future to map it with a Total Station. More pressing, however, is the site of Kaax Tsaabil, which is located due north of More Tomorrow. The site is located on a ridge and the hilltops have been modified to create a series of plaza groups with sizeable mounds (Figure 3). Unfortunately, part of the site has been destroyed due to modern quarrying activity and at least one of the hills that apparently once held ancient structures has been destroyed. Even more unfortunate is that the site is still threatened due to more recent quarrying that has occurred in the last year and we are concerned about further damage to the site. We plan to return with the Total Station in January 2012 to map the site, hopefully before any further damage occurs. We are still trying to define the aerial extent of the site. As of now, we have identified at least three large platforms with multiple buildings, including range structures, a main central plaza group circumscribed by structures including a pyramid

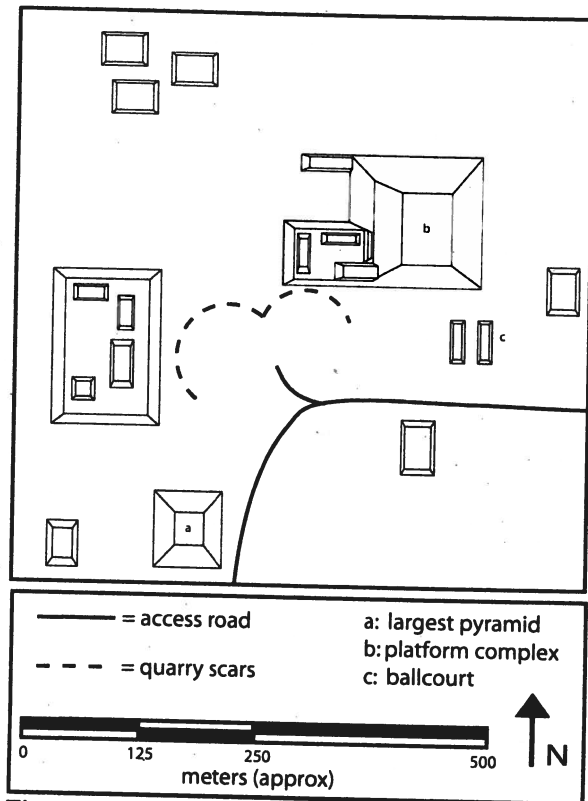


Figure 3. Preliminary sketch of the site center at Kaax Tsaabil (drawing by A. Kaeding).

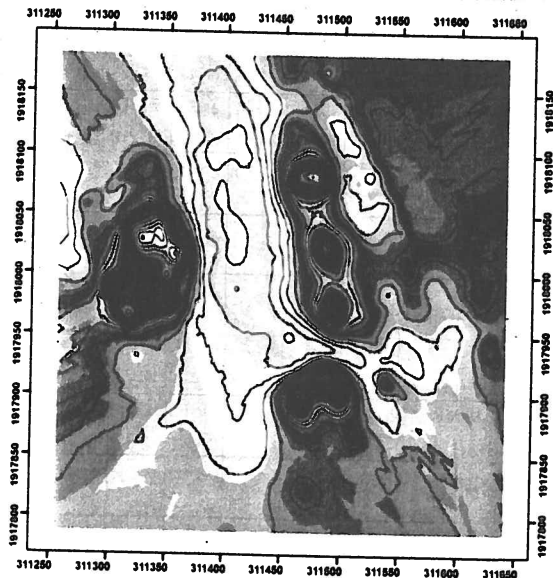


Figure 4. Topographic map and overlaid digital elevation model of Hats' Kaab (map prepared by S. Murata).

measuring about 12 meters in height and at least one ballcourt (Figure 3).

During the summer season, Satoru Murata headed up the mapping at the site of Hats Kaab—a possible E-Group found north of Saturday Creek (see Figure 2). The configuration of the site bears a strong resemblance to the layout of the E-Group at Uaxactun (compare Figure 4 with Aimers and Rice 2006:Fig. 1). The cluster of structures at Uaxactun consists of a pyramid to the west that is opposite three cardinaly oriented structures to the east. These three eastern structures sit upon a long platform, which defines the eastern edge of the entire plaza group. Frans Blom (1924) discovered that from the vantage point of the western pyramid, the sun rises directly over the central eastern structure on both equinoxes. He also found that the sun rises over the southernmost eastern structure on the winter solstice and over the northernmost eastern structure on the summer solstice. These conclusions led Blom to believe that the E-Group at Uaxactun was used as a solar observatory.

While the Uaxactun architectural complex and other Terminal Preclassic E-Groups may have functioned as solar observatories, by the Early Classic period E-Groups no longer appear tied to astronomical events. Guderjan (2006:97) concludes that these “pseudo” E-Groups “had become multipurpose parts of the sacred landscape of public architecture” (see also Aimers and Rice 2006 for further discussion of E-Group complexes in the Maya Lowlands). On the surface of Hats Kaab, we found both Preclassic and Early Classic material, which suggests the initial construction of the complex may be temporally coeval with the E-Group at Uaxactun, but the possibility of a later Early Classic component may indicate that any meaningful astronomical alignments have been obscured. During the 2011 summer season, we mapped Hats Kaab on the solstice on June 21st and started the day there at sunrise to see if we could observe any solar alignments. Clouds and a threatening thunder and lightning storm inhibited the visibility, but one quick view of the sun while standing on the highest point of the western mound suggested an alignment over the northernmost mound of the three eastern structures, which provides some support for interpreting the group as an astronomical complex. Unfortunately Hats Kaab has been

heavily disturbed by bulldozing and repeated plowing over the years so this assignment is tentative until further investigation is undertaken. One local informant told us that the western structure was once a tall pyramid but that bulldozing had removed a large section of the top and the fill was pushed into the plaza area. If so, any accurate astronomical observations may prove difficult. Excavations are planned for 2012 in the hopes of finding some remnants of standing architecture so that a firm orientation for the mounds can be determined, as well as any *in situ* diagnostic material to date the construction. Additionally, further solar observation will be carried out on the solstice in the summer of 2012.

During the summer season in 2011, Satoru Murata also produced a map of Hum Chaak—a small site located upstream from the village of More Tomorrow on the south side of the river (see Figure 2). This modest size settlement consists of two plaza groups, with the western plaza containing a distinctive all-stone structure (Figure 5). The main elite residence was badly looted several years ago and a tomb was encountered based on the remains of an extensive looter’s pit and heaps of backdirt containing evidence of human bone and broken ceramics. Another looter’s pit was intruding into the stone circular structure. During the summer of 2011 we placed a large excavation unit over this structure and revealed a building that resembles three other circular shrines that have been found to the south in the Sibun Valley (Harrison-Buck 2007, 2012). Our excavations and preliminary findings are described below.

Excavations and Preliminary Findings

Our excavations at Hum Chaak and Ma’xan both yielded evidence of Terminal Classic (ca. A.D. 780-900) activity in this part of the eastern Belize Valley, but in very different contexts. At Hum Chaak, excavations revealed a Terminal Classic circular shrine and at Ma’xan the Terminal Classic material was restricted to a termination deposit that marked the abandonment of the site. Prior to initiating the BREA project, the first author proposed a research model that suggested the eastern Belize Valley participated in a sphere of interaction in the Terminal Classic period with other areas in

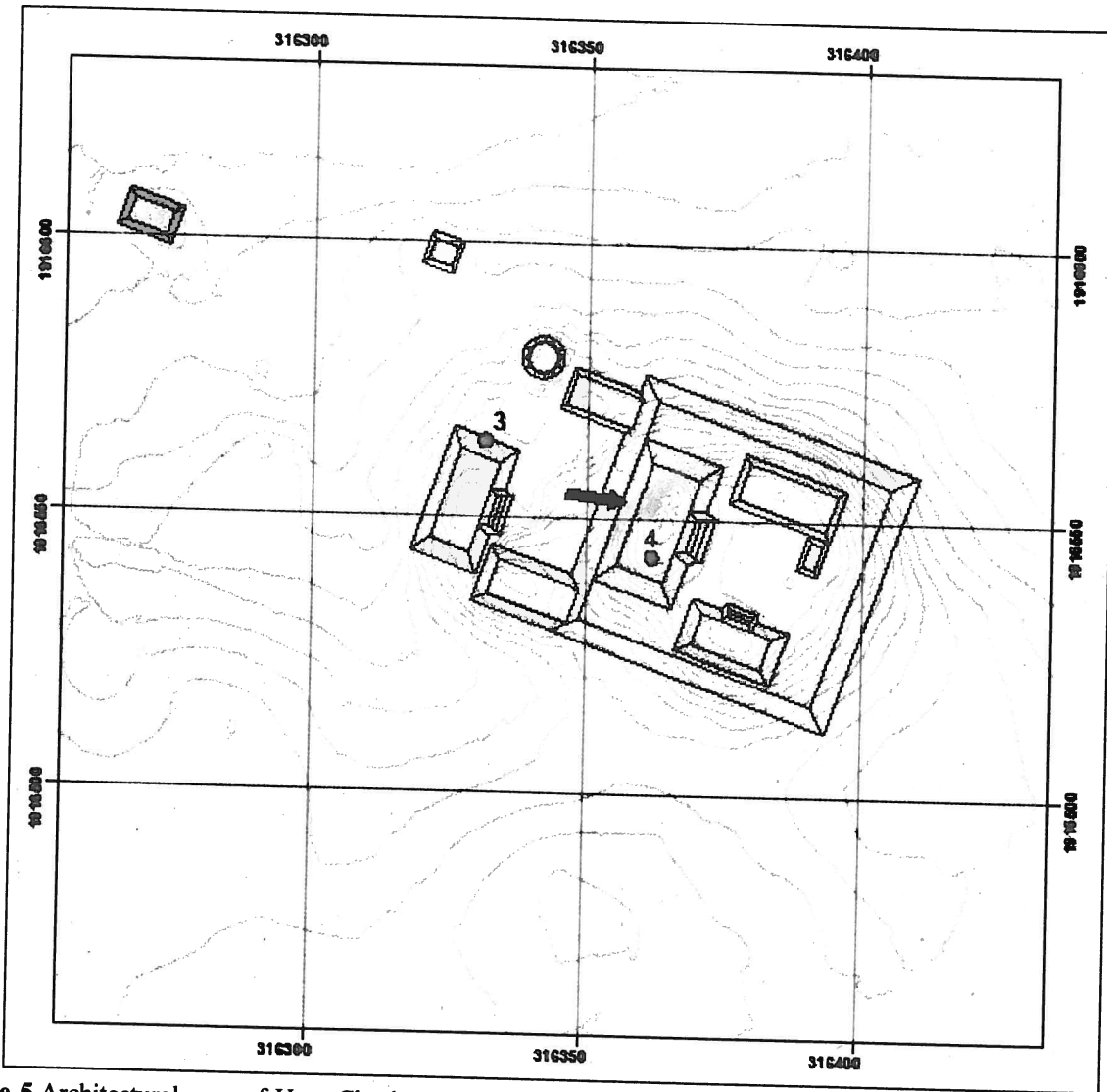


Figure 5. Architectural map of Hum Chaak. The arrow is pointing to the area where intensive destruction of the platform/mound has taken place (map prepared by S. Murata).

north-central Belize, including the Sibun Valley to the south and Lamanai to the north (Harrison-Buck 2010). This model was based on the circumscribed distributions of this distinctive Terminal Classic circular shrine architecture, as well as shared ceramic types that were defined as components of the Ik'hubil Sphere. One of the major goals of the BREA project is to examine this proposed distribution of shared Terminal Classic architecture and ceramics in the eastern Belize valley and our investigations during 2011 yielded a considerable amount of information with regard to this objective.

Elsewhere, the first author has defined the ceramic types that make up the Terminal Classic Ik'hubil sphere (Harrison-Buck 2007, 2010). Primary types of the Ik'hubil assemblage include Roaring Creek Red (and its close relative Daylight Orange: Darknight Variety) and Sibun Red Neck jars (see Harrison-Buck 2010: Figs. 4 and 5). Based on a preliminary study of the ceramics from Lisa Lucero's earlier excavations at Saturday Creek (Conlin and Ehret 2002; Lucero 1999a, 1999b, and 2002), Saturday Creek appears to be a member of the Ik'hubil Sphere and this site may mark an important east-west boundary in the Belize Valley (see

Harrison-Buck 2010:Figure 7). Belize Red types (and to some extent Mount Maloney Black ceramics) are ubiquitous at Barton Ramie, but relatively few of these types have been identified at Saturday Creek despite the close proximity to Barton Ramie (40 km downstream). Based on the artifact distribution of the Terminal Classic assemblages, sites to the east of Saturday Creek (farther downstream) appear to be members of the Ik'hubil Sphere while sites to the west are associated with the Spanish Lookout Sphere, first defined by Gifford (1976) at Barton Ramie. Other primary types from the Ik'hubil assemblage that we have found in high densities in the eastern Belize Valley (but not at Barton Ramie) are from the Kik Group, namely Indian Creek Polychromes and Fat Polychromes (see Harrison-Buck 2010: Fig. 6). Other more specialized types that are found in relatively high frequency in the BREA study area include distinctive black-slipped bowls, referred to as Achote Black (see Harrison-Buck 2010: Fig. 3). This season in our surface collections at sites in the BREA study area, as well as in our excavations at Hum Chaak and Ma'xan these primary types of the Ik'hubil Sphere predominated, so the pattern seems to be holding.

Additional Terminal Classic material associated with the Ik'hubil Sphere was found at Ma'xan, directly across the river from Saturday Creek (Figure 2). Astrid Runggaldier headed up the excavation of a 2 x 6 m unit on the central front axis of a small structure located on a platform that extends off to the west of Structure 1, the largest platform at the site that holds several structures. We aimed to test whether this small platform extending off the back of Structure 1 served as a service area for the elites living on Structure 1. The excavation exposed an extensive bed of sherds positioned along the central, front axis of the structure's south side (Figure 6). The deposit revealed a large quantity of reconstructable sherds and one whole vessel inverted on the bed of artifacts. One complete obsidian blade was found associated with the vessel and throughout the deposit were an array of artifacts, including fragments of ground stone and a large number of obsidian blade fragments. No animal bone was detected in the deposit, except for a high density of marine fish,

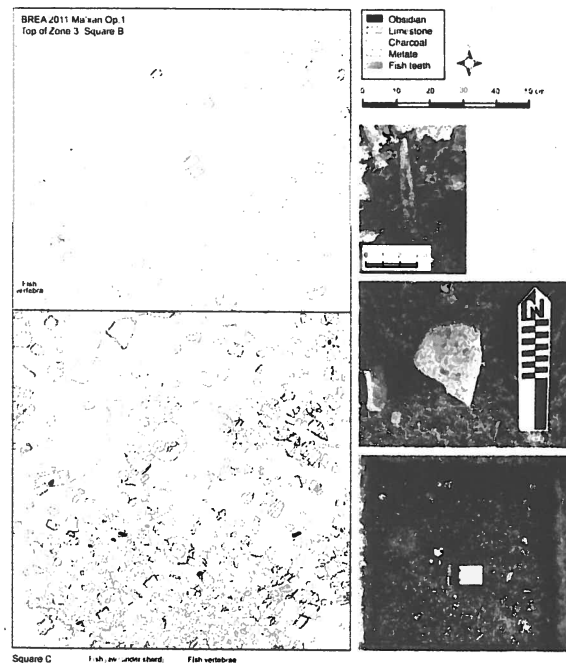


Figure 6 Termination deposit at Ma'xan (field drawing by E. Harrison-Buck; digitized by M. Brouwer Burg; photos by S. Murata).

including pharyngeal jaws from several species of marine fish, namely Parrot Fish and other reef-dwelling species. Surprisingly, no fresh water fish were identified in the assemblage, despite the close proximity of the Belize River. The location of the deposit (on the front side of a structure) and its contents are suggestive of a termination ritual, rather than a haphazard trash dump. The deposit appears to correspond with the abandonment of the building and dates to the Terminal Classic period based on the presence of the Ik'hubil ceramic assemblage. The presence of marine fish and smashed serving vessels suggests the deposit may be the remains of a feasting episode that ended with ritual termination.

Based on our excavation and surface finds at Ma'xan, the main site center seems to end with the Terminal Classic. However, a low mound group about 500 m to the east yielded evidence of later Postclassic occupation. A dense surface scatter of artifacts was recorded during the January season when the area had been recently plowed. Notably, this scatter contained around 400 pieces of obsidian, including 5 or 6 cores, and the ceramics

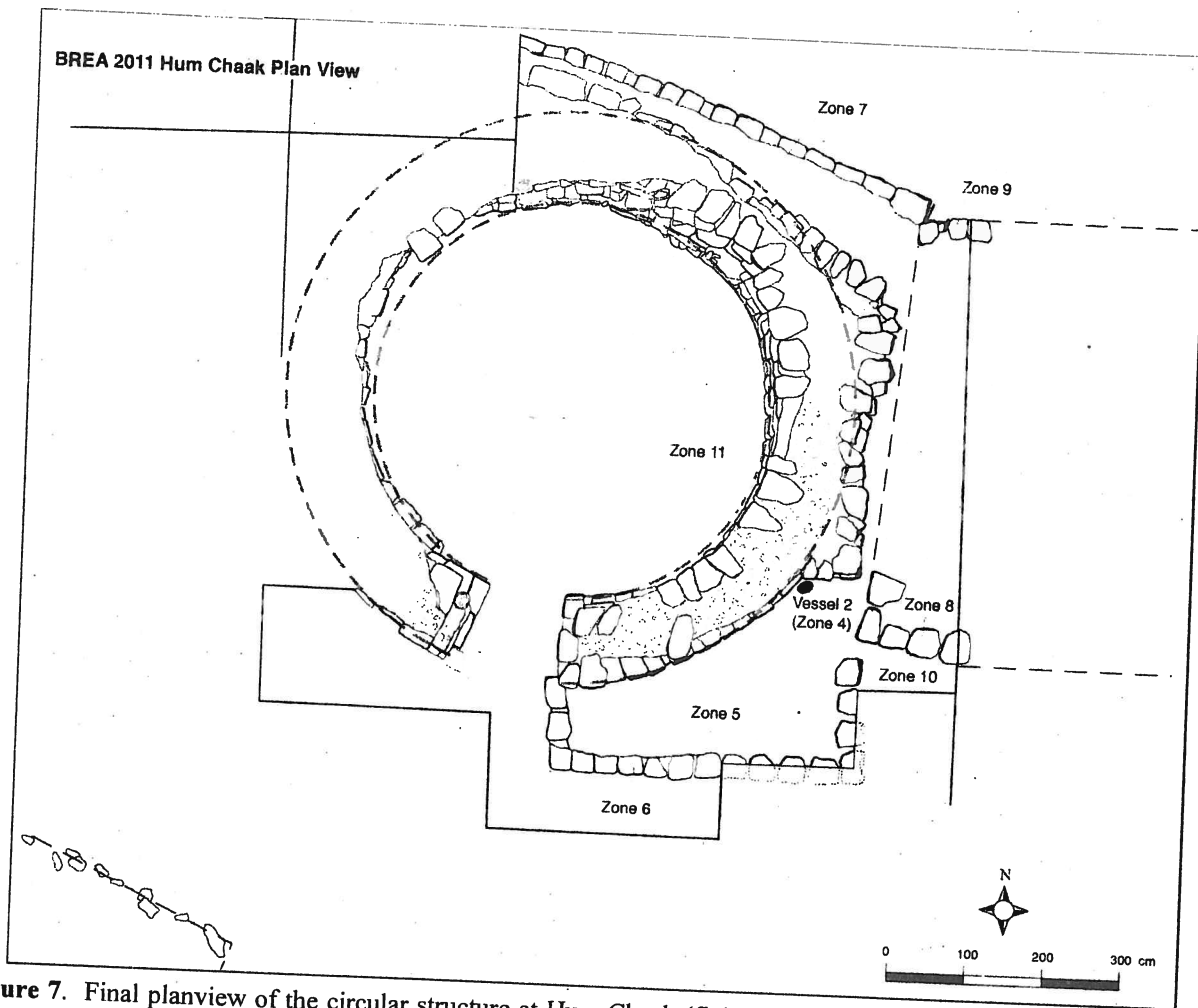


Figure 7. Final planview of the circular structure at Hum Chaak (field drawing by E. Harrison-Buck; digitized by M. Brouwer Burg).

appeared to date exclusively to the Postclassic. With our Trimble GPS we point-plotted the surface finds, including all the obsidian artifacts that we could see on the surface. During the summer season, we placed a 2 x 2 m excavation unit on the top surface of this mound, but found that the plowing had disturbed any intact Postclassic occupation. Our excavations showed that the structure was initially occupied in the Preclassic and was not re-occupied again until the Postclassic period when it functioned, at least in part, as an obsidian blade production area.

Farther down river, our excavations at the site of Hum Chaak revealed additional Terminal Classic occupation. In this case, the Ik'hubil assemblage was associated with a Terminal Classic circular shrine building that is

comparable to others previously reported from the Sibun River valley, just to the south in an area where we also find Ik'hubil-type ceramics (Harrison-Buck 2007). In the Sibun Valley, these circular buildings are perched on a low, circular plinth, but at Hum Chaak the circular superstructure is placed on a low rectilinear platform that we partially exposed in our excavations (Figure 7). Although some variation exists, particularly in the substructures of these buildings, the overall design of the superstructure, with a single doorway and interior room, are shared architectural traits at other sites in Belize with Terminal Classic circular shrines, such as Nohmul, the Rosita Group at Blue Creek, and the three examples from Sibun Valley, as well as others found in northern Yucatan at Uxmal and Chichen Itza.

Examining the shared construction style and the distribution of these buildings, some suggest that the famous Caracol building may have served as the template for these distinctive Terminal Classic shrines (Harrison-Buck 2007; Kowalski et al. 1996). The shared construction style and the distribution of these buildings found at sites along the coast and river courses in the eastern Maya Lowlands suggest that these shrine buildings represent a network of trading sites and may reflect growing Yucatec influence in the region by Terminal Classic times (for further discussion see Harrison-Buck 2012). In addition to Hum Chaak, another all-stone circular shrine building was identified in our survey of K'aknal – a similar size Terminal Classic site located 1.8 km downstream on the north side of the Belize River. I suspect that as our survey expands down river, closer to the coast, we will find more examples of sites with circular shrines in the future.

North-South Overland Route

Spanish Colonial accounts note that the junction of an important north-south overland route once connected the mid-section of the Belize River to the headwaters of the New River farther to the north. Based on a careful reading of the Spanish accounts, ethnohistorian Grant Jones (1989) suggested that the north-south overland route entered the Belize River at the site of Chantome—neither this site nor the overland route have been identified archaeologically. If located correctly, this Spanish Contact-period site and the north-south overland route are in the vicinity of the prehispanic site of Saturday Creek, perhaps just west near Chik'in or on the south side of the river near Mount Pleasant (Figure 2). This junction served as a significant crossroads, linking a series of prominent Contact-period centers, including Tipu, Lamanai, and Salamanca de Bacalar. These sites also have important connections during the Classic-to-Postclassic transition (ca. AD 780-900), suggesting that the north-south overland route is Prehispanic in date. Preliminary results from our work suggest that Jones' placement of the north-south overland route in the vicinity of Saturday Creek may be correct. In most cases, we have found that ancient Maya settlements

hug the main trunk of the river, but there are several sites that we have found that do not align with this settlement pattern. A number of Terminal Classic sites have been identified due north of Saturday Creek in the vicinity of Laguna Colorado such as Chumu'uk Ha and ChikinChi'Haal, and other sites have been found due south of Ramgoat Creek near the headwaters of the New River (labeled “East Gate” sites on Figure 2)—none of these are particularly close to navigable waterways and suggest that access to these sites was via an overland route. In surface collections at these sites we observed the primary types of the Ik'hubil ceramic assemblage, suggesting that the overland route may have served to link these sites. The first author has suggested that Saturday Creek and other prehispanic Maya sites found to the north and east along the mid-sections of Belize River were physically connected with Lamanai and sites to the north by this overland route (Harrison-Buck 2010). The boundary of the Spanish Lookout and Ik'hubil ceramic spheres may run along this north-south route and separated, to some extent, these two different interaction spheres as far back as the Terminal Classic period, if not earlier in time.

Conclusions and Future Directions

We will continue to survey for settlement along this north-south trajectory in hopes of pinpointing the location of the overland route. Our future work will continue to document the long history of occupation in the eastern Belize Valley from Preclassic to Colonial times and clarify the temporal and geographic extent of the social, economic and religious networks of interaction that occurred at this important junction in the middle Belize Valley. Our research is revealing a deep history of the eastern Belize Valley, beginning in the Preclassic and continuing through Colonial times. Given the continual occupation, this area offers an ideal context in which to review the changes taking place during periods of significant cultural transformation in Maya history—first during the Preclassic-Classical transition, then later during the so-called Classical Maya “collapse” period, and finally during the Spanish and British colonial periods from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries.

Through our archaeological investigations in the eastern Belize Valley, we are beginning to understand the complexity of these profound changes and how they may have differentially impacted Maya groups with regard to their social, political, and economic organization.

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