

**REPORT: 1997 FIELD SEASON OF THE VALLEY OF PEACE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL (VOPA) PROJECT**

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Introduction

The Valley of Peace Archaeological (VOPA) project seeks to address the question of how centers and hinterlands integrated economically, socially, and politically, especially during the Late Classic period (A.D. 600-900) when the Maya lowlands reached its height in both population size and sociopolitical complexity. Specifically, what was the basis of this interaction and integration? Did center elites own hinterland land? Did they provide protection? Was there some type of coercive force? Did they provide capital for subsistence improvement? Did they provide a sense of social membership and cohesion through their sponsorship of large-scale festivities? I hope to address these and other questions during the course of my research in Belize (see Lucero 1993, 1994, 1997, n.d.; Olson and Lucero 1995). The first phase (June 1 through July 5, 1997) of the VOPA project consisted of conducting the necessary preliminary investigations through mapping prehistoric Maya settlement as well as establishing an initial chronology.

Staff

The 1997 staff consisted of the PI, Lisa Lucero, California State-Northridge graduate student Andrew Kinkella, and part-time worker Zedekiah Scott of the Valley of Peace village. In addition, Dr. James L. Wakeman (Associate Professor, Surveying Department, New Mexico State University) and professional surveyor Lonnie Mehlin joined the project for ten days, June 11-June 21 to help with mapping.

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Background

The research area (Figure 1; 202 sq. km) is located in central Belize in the more hilly areas (40-120m) north of the Belize River. It is considered both geographically and socio-politically part of the eastern periphery of the central Maya lowlands. The area falls within the drier subtype of the humid tropics. Vegetation is classified as

Quasi-Rain forest, predominantly consisting of deciduous broadleaf forests with lime-adapted species and intermittent stands of high marsh forests (Lundell 1942; see Fedick 1988 for detailed soil and vegetation descriptions). As with much of the eastern lowlands, the study area lies on a limestone platform (Fedick 1988:76; West 1964).

Previous Research

To date, the only previous archaeological research carried out in the proposed research area was a salvage operation conducted in 1982 at the founding of the Valley of Peace village (see Awe 1984; Awe and Topsey 1984), where ceramics indicate occupation from the Early Classic through Terminal Classic periods (Morris 1984). Archaeological research in nearby areas have shown that the Belize River area was initially settled during the Middle Preclassic period (c. 1000-300 B.C.; Awe 1992; Ball 1993; Ford 1985; Garber et al. 1993; Leventhal 1994, 1995; Willey et al. 1965). Settlement concentrated in the well-drained alluvium adjacent to the river, as well as on the well-drained fertile, limestone-derived soils in the surrounding higher elevations (Ford 1990; Ford and Fedick 1992). During the Late Preclassic period (c. 300 B.C.-A.D. 250), settlement increased and spread throughout the well-drained upland areas. This pattern more or less continued through the Late Classic period (c. A.D. 600-900) when settlement spread into areas with poorer soils (slow-draining marly soils; Ford 1985, 1990). Preliminary analysis of the collected surface ceramics from the VOPA area indicate at least Middle Preclassic to Late Classic occupation.

Preliminary Mapping Results

The originally proposed survey strategy involved a new technique using a predictive model developed by Scott Fedick (Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, UC-Riverside) based on the distribution of soil type and agricultural potential (Fedick 1988, 1989, 1994, 1995, 1996; Fedick and Ford 1990). Initial results indicate that this method has been quite useful, as I will illustrate in the course of describing the mapped areas.

To map sites, we (myself, graduate student Andrew Kinkella, and Valley of Peace inhabitant Zedekiah Scott) used Suunto compasses, a 30 meter tape, a 5-power level, and a 2 meter stadia rod to map the sites and to tie them into the baseline (the road). The road itself was tied into UTM coordinates using a GPS and a total station operated by Dr. James L. Wakeman and professional surveyor Lonnie Mehlin. In addition, notes were taken on the terrain, vegetation, and general observations. Unless otherwise noted, all soil series are part of the Yaxa Suite.

The first area mapped was a milpa (Milpa 1) located in the eastern sector of the project area south of the major road going east-west (UTM 1917N, 309E); Figure 2). We mapped the milpa, approximately 500 meters long running east-west and 170 m wide. This settlement area consists of a dispersed distribution of various types of prehistoric Maya mounds, from single mounds to multi-mound platform groups (Figure 3). From a preliminary analysis of the ceramics collected from mound surfaces, the Early Classic period is noticeably represented, as well as Late Classic ceramics (see attached table). From the larger multi-mound group, we recovered obsidian and what

might be human bone. The type and class of soils (based on the use of hand cultivation techniques) of Milpa 1 has been identified as Spanish Lookout series, a Class IV type of soil. Based on Fedick's definition (see Fedick 1996), this soil has very severe limitations restricting plant choices as well as possibly requiring some type of conservation/management. Based on the architectural variability and the artifacts collected, an initial interpretation of Milpa 1 would be that this settlement area represents a community of at least some relatively well-off farmers. What about their location on poor soils? Milpa 1 happens to be located adjacent to the rich alluvial soils to the east towards the Belize River. It may have been the case where relatively dense (though dispersed) settlement focused in areas with poor soils near areas with fertile land for access as well as to prevent too much settlement on good lands.

The next area mapped is known locally as Cara Blanca. Cara Blanca consists of a series of pools along the base of limestone cliffs/ridges in the northern section of the VOPA area (UTM 1927N, 301E; see Figure 2). The impassable roads caused by the onset of the rainy season in early July made it impossible for us to completely map the area. As it was, the logging road we used to drive to Cara Blanca had not been maintained for quite awhile; logs and brush made certain parts impassable, not to mention the log bridge over Labouring Creek. However, an hour's walk brought us to one of the Cara Blanca pools (c. 100 x 75 m), the edges on which we noted substantial Maya mounds (e.g., c. 22 x 17m), some of which had been heavily looted (Figure 4). These mounds were built very close to the edge; as a matter of fact, one of the mounds was literally eroding into the pool. On the north side of the pool are steep cliffs and ridges, on top of which we have been told are large ruins; this awaits further survey. As the bush was very heavy (combined primary and secondary growth due to its former use as an illegal marijuana field), it was difficult to assess the surrounding settlement, which we were unable to survey due to rain. We did not collect any artifacts from this settlement area.

In our attempt to locate Cara Blanca, we walked about three kilometers east along the north side of Labouring Creek; this soil type, Seven Mile series (Class II) did not appear to have any settlement. This fact is interesting, especially when one compares it to, for example, the Belize River Archaeological Settlement Survey (BRASS) area, where highest settlement is located in Class II soils (based on hand cultivation; Fedick 1996). This may be due to the fact that during the rainy season, this area has higher than normal rainfall, and this soil type in the face of particularly wet rainy seasons increases the risk of planting. Furthermore, the sites recorded at the edge of the pool are located on a Class V soil, Cadena Creek series, which Fedick defines as typically not adequate for farming unless major reclamation and conservation techniques are used (Fedick 1996). Significantly, however, if indeed farming did occur in these areas with substantial prehistoric structures, the area at least would have been suited for dry-season farming. Finally, the surrounding ridges and cliffs which we were unable to survey are comprised of Piedregal hill series, a Class III soil with relatively severe restrictions regarding agriculture. However, if this area had been used for long-fallow shifting cultivation, only moderate limitations exist, as long as rainfall did not fall below normal during the wet season. Why then were the ancient Maya living in an area with such limitations? Although this question requires further survey and excavation, a preliminary suggestion is that the presence of the pools had something to do with the

Maya locating there, based on what we know about the sacred nature of pools (and their frequent association with the even more sacred caves; e.g., Bassie-Sweet 1996; Brady 1997).

The next area we mapped consisted of a cleared and fenced pasture that we named Terrence Flowers' Pasture (name of owner), approximately 620 x 220m in size (see Figure 2). This settlement is located in the northeast part of the Village of Peace village off the north side of the main east-west road (UTM 1917.5N, 305.5E) at the crest of a hill. It consists of a number of relatively densely packed one to two mounds of various sizes (Figure 5). There is also a noticeably larger mound (over 4 meters in height) on top of a platform, heavily looted. The mounds cluster east-west along the hillside and/or natural or manmade terraces. We found little or no settlement in the flat-lying areas below the hillside. From an initial analysis of the ceramics, it appears that this area was settled during the Middle Preclassic through the Late Classic periods (see attached table); other classes of artifacts did not appear to be represented: it should be noted, however, that this area is heavily used at present (habitation structures, pig pen, house garden, milpa field, and pasture for Brahma cattle).

The dense settlement in this pasture is located on Class II soils, where as I have mentioned earlier, the highest settlement was recorded for the BRASS area, specifically, those of the Chorro soil series. In the flat expanse below the sites, it is not surprising that we did not find any sites in the Class IV soils of the Spanish Lookout series, which are particularly clayey. In contrast to Milpa 1, where I suggested that settlement concentrated in areas with poorer soils, but near fertile land, the prehistoric inhabitants of Terrence Flower's Pasture lived directly in areas with good soils. However, the mounds mapped in the pasture for the most part were much smaller than those mapped in Milpa 1; thus, it is possible that the area was used for both living areas and house gardens, and that milpas were located somewhere else. This fact likely has to do with the area being hilly and rocky (limestone outcrops). In addition, the flat-lying areas are very clayey, and when dry are rock hard and when wet are difficult to work (or walk) and deep, conditions not suitable for living or planting. The noticeably larger structure on west side of the fenced pasture could have provided some local religious and/or political function for the densely packed community.

Old Tom's Milpa is another settlement area we mapped, and is located just under 3 km west of the 'spring' road (the road that heads north out of the Valley of Peace) in a heavily planted area with secondary growth (UTM 1919N, 301.5E; see Figure 2). The area consists of a series of hills and the surrounding flat-lying area. Settlement was found on top of a particularly high and steep hill, at the base of a series of hills, and in the flat area east of the hills. Again because of the rainy season starting, we were only able to map one large mound; the area in which we focused survey was approximately 300 x 100m, focusing at the base and top of a large hill (Figure 6). There was definitely more settlement beyond what we surveyed, and awaits future mapping. On top of the steep hill was a substantial mound over eight meters in height with two major looter's trenches. At the base of this hill were other mounds about 1.5 to 2 meters in height built into the side of the hill. We were unable to map any of the mounds in the flat-lying area, but there was a noticeable number from what we could see through the relatively heavy bush. We did not collect any artifacts from this settlement area. Regarding soil and class type, settlement was found on the two types present, Chorro series in the flat-lying

area below the hill (Class II) and Piedregal hill series (Class III) on the hill itself. The relatively rich Class II soils with only few limitations provides explanation enough for the location of settlement in the flat-lying area. As mentioned, this hill was quite steep, and the large mound mapped was on top of the hill, and no other settlement was noted on the side of the hill until we got to the base of the hill. This large structure could have provided local religious or administrative functions for the farmers living below.

The final settlement area we mapped was not in the VOPA project area proper, but is included here; it was important to include this settlement area because of the soil type on which it is found (one of the representative soil types that we needed to survey--alluvial). Because of the rains, this was one of the few areas we could still reach; the ferry was out near Roaring Creek, so we crossed the Belize River by boat at Banana Bank, where the owner of Banana Bank, John Carr, drove us the three kilometers to the settlement area. The settlement is called Three Sisters, a name designated by its owner, John Carr, who gave us permission to map it. The site is located about 5 km east of the Valley of Peace village and about half a kilometer west of the Belize River in a floodplain (UTM 1914.8N, 310.3E; see Figure 2). The settlement itself consists of dispersed mounds in a mechanically plowed field that appear to surround a protected (unplowed) minor center/monumental architectural complex (Figure 7). The large architectural features cluster together near a manmade or natural lagoon. The largest structure has at least four corbel-arch rooms, one collapsed. In contrast, the surrounding and dispersed settlement consists of one to two mounds/mound groups from .5 to 1.5 meters in height. It is important to keep in mind that the surrounding settlement has been heavily affected by plowing; as a consequence, many of the mounds have been 'spread' out and thus appear larger than they actually were. Surface collections from these smaller mounds suggest that prehistoric occupants had access to a variety of prestige or exotic goods, including pachuca obsidian as well as polychrome ceramics. Also, the ceramic types present indicate a noticeable presence of Early and Late Classic occupation (see attached table). The soils in this area-- Banana Bank series of the Melinda Suite are a Class III soil type -- indicate that hand-cultivation in this area required either reduced choices in what was planted, or the implementation of some sort of conservation practice, or both. However, if farming occurred during the dry season under conditions of long-fallow shifting cultivation, the area could still be farmed successfully. Furthermore, the fact that this area is located close to Class I alluvial soils, may indicate that the relatively dense, though dispersed settlement, concentrated in areas with less productive soils, and farmed the neighboring fertile soils. As for the function of the possible minor center, this awaits future study.

On a final note, even though time and weather constraints prevented us from mapping settlement in Class I soils (rich alluvial soils with few or no limitations to farming), we were still able to make certain observations in areas with Class I soils, especially in the mechanically plowed areas owned by John Carr and Mennonite farmers. In a very similar pattern to Three Sisters, we noticed that settlement in Class I soils appeared to consist of a concentration of monumental architecture (some quite substantial and which minimally would be defined as minor centers) surrounded by relatively evenly spaced dense settlement. In some instances, we noticed what appeared to be a settlement-free zone immediately surrounding concentrations of monumental

architecture (as similarly seen at Yaxox in the BRASS area). These types of settlement await future survey and mapping.

Summary

The mapping strategy used in the Valley of Peace in central Belize was not only successful in terms of implementing a new mapping technique, but also raised issues regarding social, economic, and political aspects of ancient Maya settlement. Specifically, although fertile agricultural land provided the means to support high settlement density, other factors also affected where the ancient Maya built their homes, and perhaps more specifically, where they built their temples and administrative buildings. Future research involving the continued mapping of the research area, and the eventual excavation of a cross-section of prehistoric Maya lifeways (as expressed in the wide variety of structure types) will provide the data necessary to address issues on: center-hinterland interaction and integration, regional political dynamics (e.g., relation with the largest Maya center in the area, Yalbac), and even ancient ritual practices. In accomplishing these goals, we will have a better appreciation of how the entire society interacted, and not just the hoi-polloi.

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