

A Study of a Housemound at the Site of RBS-2, Belize, Central America

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INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1998, I conducted excavations in northwestern Belize. The purpose of my excavations was to show that a small mound located next to a medium sized plaza group functioned as a Maya housemound and was contemporaneous with the Tepeu 2/3 plaza group, dating to the Late Classic from about A.D. 700 to 900. Our excavations uncovered the mound to be residential with two possible construction phases dating to the early and latter parts of the Late Classic.

My research was carried out during the sixth field season of a twenty-year project known as the Programme for Belize Archaeological Project, hereafter referred to as PFB-AP. The PFB-AP is a collaborative effort incorporating professional archaeologists, graduate students, and undergraduate students from many universities in the attempt to recover and gain more insight into the ancient Mayan world. The project focuses on the daily lives of non-elite Maya and the social and political organization of a large region, called the Three Rivers Area. The area gets its name from the three rivers running through it. They are the Rio Hondo to the north, the Boothe's River to the south, and bisected by the Rio Bravo. Although my research is only a small part of the overall project, it makes relevant contributions to our long-term goals.

The PFB-AP is located in the northwestern region of Belize on the Programme for Belize Reserve, a 229,000 acre archaeological and wildlife conservation area (Kathryn Reese-Taylor personal communications 1998). La Milpa, the third largest Maya site in Belize, is also located on the PFB property.

Jon Hageman, a Ph.D. candidate at Southern Illinois University, is working on his dissertation project in this area. My excavations were part of his project that focuses on the identification of individual lineages and their territories on the ground through a program of survey and excavations (Jon Hageman personal communications 1998).

The structure that I excavated is located adjacent to a medium sized plaza group known as RBS-2 or "Liwy's Group". Liwy's Group lies on the periphery of the larger site of Dos Hombres. The plaza group consists of four structures with two mounds adjacent to it. I worked on the larger of the two mounds. There was a second smaller plaza also nearby.



Figure 1: Map of Maya area. Site of La Milpa located in northwestern Belize (Adapted from Scarborough 1998:2).

METHODS

The recovery and research methods we used were based upon our one-month time frame, a crew of four to five workers, the equipment available, and most importantly our goals. Our crew consisted of myself; Jarius Beck, an undergraduate student at the University of Texas at Austin; site director Liwy Grazioso Sierra, of the Anthropology Museum in Mexico City, and a steady crew of Wisconsin and Texas field school students.

We began with finding the corners of the mound so that we could take measurements and map it. The mound measured about 2.5 meters by four meters and was oriented east/west. We had to extrapolate the west side because there were two huge trees on it that had caused major root disturbance. The mound was about 50 cm high along the north side and 100 cm high along the south side.

Our next step was to carefully set up two, one by three-meter units. The first unit was set up north/south perpendicularly to the south side, while the second unit was set up north/south perpendicularly to the north side. Later we opened up four more units of various measurements, ending up with units in the southwest and northeast corners, and also the center of the mound. In total, our excavation units transversed the entire north/south span of the mound.

We set up a 1/4 inch mesh screen to sift through the contents of the mound and began slowly taking the units down by cultural levels. We regularly assessed the unit profiles and composition to see if there was a change or consistency somewhere in the construction material, architecture, or fill.

RESULTS

On the surface of the mound we were able to see a few larger rocks that had probably made up a portion of the structure. We were careful at first to leave all of the rocks as we had found them so that we would not destroy any of the architecture. However, after studying the rocks we realized that many of them had fallen out of place and were acting as more of a hindrance than an aid in helping piece together the architecture of the mound. So, with the help of experienced archaeologists, we mapped and photographed the rocks, then removed them.

Just under the humus layer, along with some of the larger fallen rocks, we found irregularly shaped limestone rubble with a heavy, dark brown clay loam matrix throughout the units. In the first few lots there was a great amount of organic debris scattered throughout the soil, but it eventually vanished and limestone and other lithic debris became more common.

At 20 cm below the surface we encountered a scattering of irregularly shaped, melon-sized limestone rocks along with grapefruit sized cobbles and a fill matrix that was a medium brown with a sandy texture. Then golf ball sized limestone cobbles appeared at 33 cm below the surface along with a light brown, loose, sandy fill. This slowly turned into small pebbles at 37 cm below the surface with a fill matrix that was lighter in color and looser in texture. This was very interesting because the southwest plaza group was significantly different, being primarily constructed in large rubble, about 25 to 50 cm maximum in diameter.

The walls of the platform were made up of three to four courses of laid limestone measuring about 59 cm high along the north wall and 52 cm high along the south wall. The stones were irregularly shaped, except for the cut facing stones. On the north wall we noticed the biggest cut stones between 53 and 64 cm below the surface. These stones were all aligned with each other and stepped back slightly. They may have been used as a retaining wall. I did not notice this type of stepping on the south wall. The innermost course of stone on both

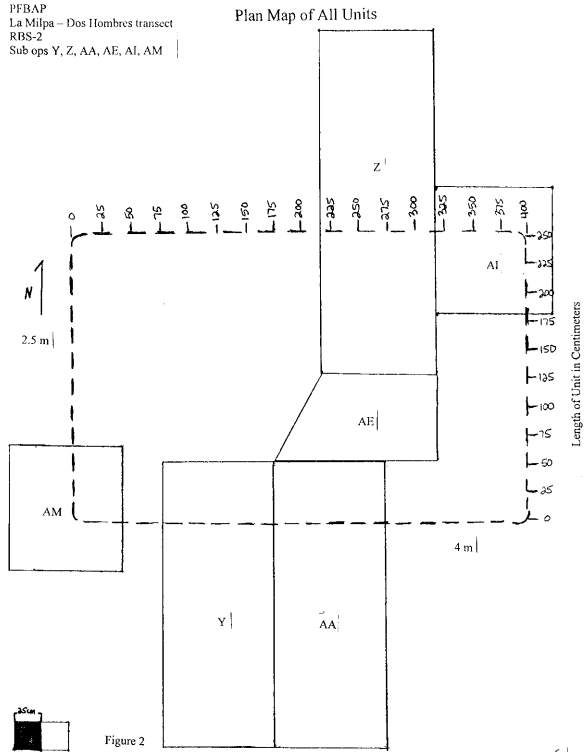


Figure 2

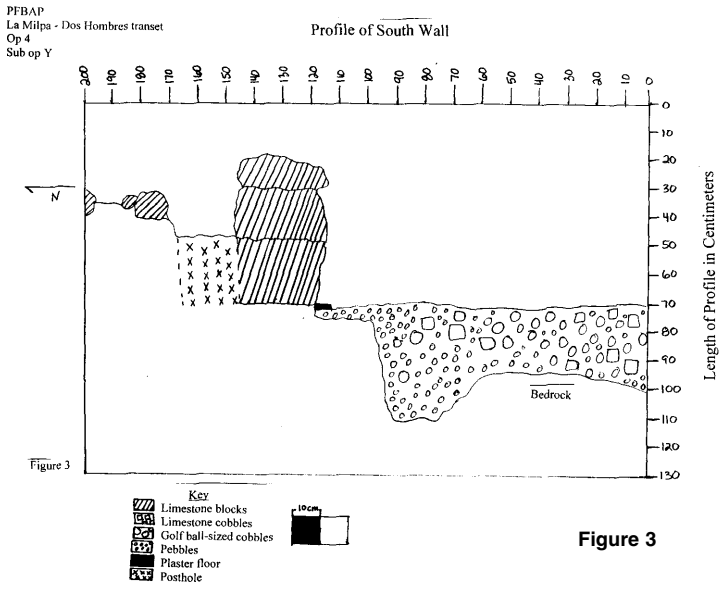
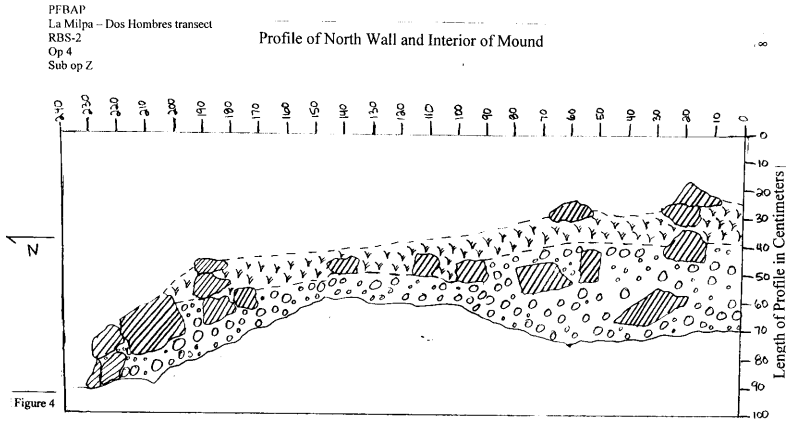


Figure 3



- Key
- Humus layer
 - Limestone blocks
 - Golf ball-sized cobbles
 - Pebbles



Figure 4

PFBAP
La Milpa - Dos Hombres transect
RBS-2
Op 4
Sub op Y
Lot 4 - 6
South Wall

Plan Map

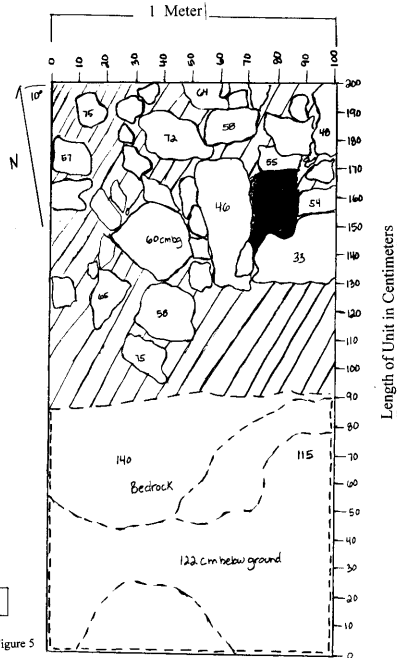


Figure 5

walls was either crudely cut or not cut at all and were smaller, about the size of a melon.

The northeast corner of the walls were fit together nicely. Bedrock was shallow on this corner of the mound, measuring on average only 54 cm below the surface and was used as part of the foundation. Limestone cobbles were placed on top of the bedrock, forming a solid corner. The bedrock did not seem to be reshaped at all. This was very different from the southwest corner. Here bedrock was much deeper and did not seem to be used for the wall construction.

We found one posthole. It measured 16 cm by 24 cm, and was 26 cm in depth. It was cut into the stonework on the south wall. This posthole was located almost in the center of the south wall, where there is about a 50 cm break in the wall. We interpreted this opening as a possible entrance. We opened up a unit in the southwest corner in hopes of finding another posthole.

Unfortunately, we did not.

As we excavated the inside of the platform we found few artifacts: some small ceramic sherds, fragments of chert, one crude biface, and obsidian microblades. The concentration was dispersed throughout the mound, although ceramic debris was especially heavy outside of the structure. We found no faunal or plant debris.

In the center of the mound we came down on a plaster floor at approximately 35 cm below the surface. This indicates that either there were two construction episodes to the platform or we encountered the plaza surface. Although the plaster had deteriorated a bit, we could tell that it had been smooth and very hard. The color was grayish. The construction fill was a light brown color with a pebbly to sandy texture. Less cultural material was recovered in this fill.

Interestingly, the plaster surface in the center of the mound had been broken away at some point. Since we found the plaster floor in the corners of the interior units, we presumed that it had extended throughout the center of the mound. As we assessed the center of the mound, we noticed that there was a slight depression where the floor had been punched out. The disturbed area measured 110 cm north/south and 90 cm east/west.

When we continued to dig on the floor of this same area, the construction fill changed to an off-whitish, loose, sandy matrix, and dirt began to slip through the cracks of the rocks. At

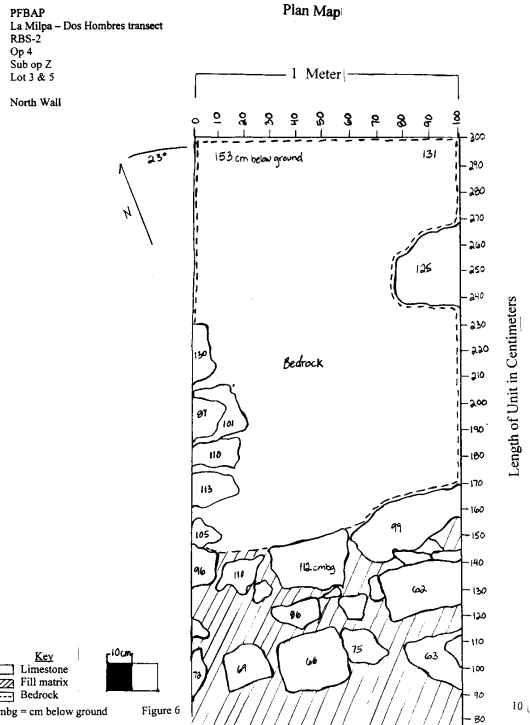


Figure 6

the bottom of this level, at 61 cm below the surface, the limestone cobbles had also gotten bigger, to approximately the size of a fist. We also noticed more cultural material.

The size of the disturbed area suggests a burial. Burials are commonly found in Maya housemounds beneath the floors. However, because we were at the end of our field season there was no time for proper recovery of a possible burial. Therefore, we terminated the excavations at 61 cm below the surface.

DISCUSSION

Our artifacts were few in numbers, but we were able to date the structure from the ceramics recovered. The ceramic analysis indicated that there were at least two construction episodes in the Late Classic, one dating from the early Late Classic, from about A.D. 700 to 800, and one to a latter phase in the Late Classic, from about A.D. 800 to 900. This interpretation is also supported by the ceramic data from the large plaza group.

An admixture of ceramic types from the Chicanel, 300 B.C. to A.D. 250; Tzakol, A.D. 250 to 600; and Tepeu 2/3, A.D. 700 to 900 (Smith 1955) spheres associated with the plaster floor and the disturbed area was found below the upper platform. This admixture was also recovered outside of the south wall at a depth of 45 to 64 cm below the surface.

The upper platform contains ceramics only dating to the Tepeu 2/3 period. Since both platforms contain Tepeu 2/3 ceramics, we know that the earliest possible construction of the structure was about A.D. 700, dating to the early Late Classic. While the second construction episode contains only Tepeu 2/3 ceramics, would date to a later phase in the Late Classic. This ceramic sequence shows that there were most likely two construction periods.

Bowl and jar sherds made up the majority of the forms found, but there was diversity in the type and variety of the ceramics. The jars probably had globular bodies with medium to thick sides and flat or ring bottoms. The bowls likely had flaring sides and a rounded lip. There were some basal flanges found in the Tepeu 2/3 period (Smith 1955).

Most of the ceramics were monochrome or dichrome slipped, but some were unslipped. Red, orange, and black were the most common slips. However, weathering may give inaccurate results of their true color.

Our lithics collected were mostly comprised of chert flakes and debitage. However, we did find one crude chert biface in the center of the mound, at 19 cm below the surface, just below the humus layer and above the light brown, fist size cobble fill. We also found seven fragments of prismatic obsidian blades in various locations. Four were found outside of the south wall, one outside of the north wall, and two in the center of the mound.

From ethnographic records and previous excavations in the Maya area, we know that the Maya built perishable structures atop small platforms. The walls of these perishable structures were constructed of upright poles daubed with plaster, or more likely mud. The roof was likely thatched (Abrams 1994).



Figure 7: contemporary Maya housemound (Whitlock 1976: 136)

This type of wattle-and-daub construction is very common throughout the Mayan world.

There are many reasons to believe that this mound was residential. First, in our excavations we found that the platform walls were three to four courses thick with cut facing stones, as well as thick retaining walls. Second, we found a posthole possibly indicating a doorway. Finally, we uncovered a plaster floor, something that would not be found in a storage building. The size and substantial construction of the platform indicate a significant investment of labor and resources. The Maya would not have invested this much time and means into a storage structure but would have in a household structure.

Wendy Ashmore and Richard R. Wilk (1988) define a household as “a social unit, specifically the group of people that shares in a maximum definable number of activities, including one or more of the following: production, consumption, pooling of resources, reproduction, coresidence, and shared ownership” (Ashmore and Wilk 1988: 6). According to Ashmore and Wilk, “households are fundamental elements of human society, and their main physical manifestations are the houses their members occupy” (Ashmore and Wilk 1988: 1).

As indicated by Diamanti (1985) and others, food preparation and consumption, craft production, and other activities were not being done inside of the houses. The artifacts we found were for utilitarian use and are found mostly outside of houses. As previously stated, the ceramic sherds were formerly jars, bowls, and other utilitarian vessels. Nevertheless, some of the small fragments were found inside the structure mixed in with the construction fill.

Very few artifacts or soil stains were found inside of the house structure also suggesting that the structure was most likely used mainly as a sleeping area, with all other activities taking place outside. The small size of the mound suggests that the house had only one room. According to Sheehy (1985) and Ashmore and Wilk (1988), single room structures were occupied by an average of five people, comprising a nuclear family.

Ashmore (1981a) defines this type of residential structure as a minimal residential unit. This structure type is the basic building block of the lowland Maya settlement. It refers to a single, small, structurally isolated building that serves as the residence of a single nuclear or biological family (Willey 1981).

When comparing the ceramic analysis and architecture of the house and nearby plaza group, it seems that they are contemporaneous with each other. Jon Hageman’s research of the plaza group uncovered the same type of ceramic distribution, revealing two construction episodes dating to the early and latter parts of the Late Classic. He also proposed that the plaza group is the residence of a lineage head because it is among the largest architecture in the area and contains a shrine on the east side (Jon Hageman personal communications 1998).

In conclusion, the data recovered from the excavations of this structure has led to the following interpretations: First, the platform served as a foundation for a perishable, single-room house likely occupied by a family of five. Second, the platform has two construction phases, one dating to the early part of the Late Classic period and one dating to a latter phase in the Late Classic. Lastly, the construction phases of this house are contemporaneous with those of the large plaza group.

Therefore, because of the housemound’s proximity to and contemporaneity with the plaza group, I propose that it was occupied by a nuclear family closely related to the lineage heads during both construction periods.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my co-excavator, Jairus Beck for working by my side everyday in the field. Thank you to Liwy Grazioso Sierra for guidance and support, and Jon Hageman for his correspondence and insight into our project. I would also like to thank Lauren Sullivan for conducting the preliminary ceramic analysis. I am gracious to field school directors Dr. Kathryn Reese-Taylor, from the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse, and Dr. Fred Valdez, from the University of Texas at Austin, for giving me the opportunity to work on this project. Special thanks to Kathryn Reese-Taylor for being a big help through it all.

My fieldwork opportunity was supported by an undergraduate research grant from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

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