Dugout Canoes and Airplanes, Too

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Chapter 8
Maya Research Program Regional Reconnaissance: 2016
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Introduction

In the summer of 2016, under the auspices of the Maya Research Program (MRP), the authors initiated the first season of the Maya Research Program Regional Reconnaissance Project. In broad terms, project objectives were to expand MRP’s coverage west towards the international border by locating and documenting previously unreported settlement. Prior to the work described herein, this area represented one of the few remaining portions of northwest Belize lacking archaeological study. Previous research in adjacent areas demonstrated the presence of relatively continuous settlement of varying densities, especially in areas of higher elevation (Adams 1999; Guderjan 2013; Guderjan et al. 1991; Houk and Lohse 2013; Kunen 2004; Robichaux 1995). A secondary objective was to locate a site suitable for serving as the focus of a future long-term research project by Kwoka. With the exception of work conducted in the Dumbell Bajo, the activities described below occurred over the course of a nine-day period spanning June 11 – June 20, 2016.

Methodology

Drawing on decades of Lowland Maya settlement patterns research, the authors eschewed a random sampling methodology in favor of a targeted approach that focused on pedestrian survey of areas with a high probability of settlement in the limited time available. As such, we avoided low-lying areas – or bajos – in favor of upland areas, especially those with intact forest. Based on the frequency with which non-residential landscape features (e.g., chert features, terraces, etc…) occur in association with bajos (Garrison and Dunning 2009; Kunen and Hughbanks 2003), a more systematic survey of the area at a future date would be ideal. Additionally, informant-based reconnaissance was utilized, as many of the local inhabitants have encountered archaeological settlements while clearing land for agriculture and pasture, or while logging in forested areas. A Garmin eTrex 20x GPS unit was used to record the locations of settlement or seemingly natural features that would have potentially been important to the ancient Maya.

Survey Areas

In order to facilitate description and data presentation, survey activities are grouped into three geographical areas that are referred to as Areas 1 – 3 (Figure 1) in the following paragraphs.

Area 1 – The Colby Property (Figure 2)

Prior to entering the field, the Colby property was identified as an area of interest due to a high concentration of intact forest and its close proximity to La Milpa; Kunen (2004) and Robichaux (1995) documented significant settlement along the northern border of the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area (RBCMA), extending into the Colby property.
Additionally, a local informant related a story of encountering a large site with temples while logging the area in the past. Permission to enter and reconnoiter the area was obtained from the watchman before work began, after which two daylong expeditions were made to the area. A plan was developed to utilize relict logging roads visible in the satellite imagery in order to minimize time spent traversing the property’s numerous *bajos*. In particular, composite imagery from Google Earth shows the presence of a meandering south-running road that originates from a gravel quarry just south of Pine Ridge Road. It was determined that the quarry and associated road would be ideal entry points into the interior of the Colby Property.

A number of issues hindered reconnaissance efforts, and it may be informative for future researchers to mention them here. First, there are actually two gravel quarries on the Colby Property, both south of Pine Ridge Road separated by a distance of 2 km. The western quarry is visible from Pine Ridge Road, but does not provide access to the main logging roads running south. A road that runs south does exist, but it is no longer accessible by vehicle. Conversely, the eastern quarry is not visible from the road – being obscured by a large ridge – but does provide access to the road network visible in satellite imagery. The second

Figure 1. Maya Research Program Regional Reconnaissance study areas 2016.
Figure 2. Survey Area 2 – “The Colby Property,” 2016.
obstacle is that there are numerous arterial roads diverging from the main logging roads, with the result that it is difficult to follow any particular road unless a prior pathway is plotted using GPS.

The western quarry was used as the jumping off point for the first day trip. The road running south was followed on foot for 1.5 km before diverging to the west to explore two small islands of upland forest sitting within a large bajo. No settlement was encountered in either of these areas. A path was then cut south through 700 m of scrub bajo in order to reach the next area of high elevation, but by this point time was running short and the decision was made to return to the vehicles via the road to the east. Three structures were documented while returning to the road.

The second day of reconnaissance was much more productive as the following were encountered: 14 individual structures, a courtyard group with a small shrine, a terrace, and a limestone quarry. All of these structures and features were encountered within a few meters of one of the main logging roads running through the area. The road itself is well-worn and remains in excellent condition – being predominately dry and compact – though it is littered with numerous tree falls, one of which completely blocks the road 800 m south of the courtyard group. Additional trips to the area will be made in 2017.

**Area 2 – Tz’unun** (Figure 3)

![Figure 3. Tz'unun Settlement Areas, 2016.](image-url)
Area 2, located along the border with Mexico, was identified as an area of interest in satellite imagery before entering the field due to the presence of two *aguadas* in a cleared field immediately adjacent to a large intact stand of forest. Again, permission to enter and reconnoiter the area was obtained from the watchman before work began. A sizable site was discovered on the first day of survey, and as such, the majority of the 2016 season was focused on this locale. A large number of hummingbirds were encountered while reconnoitering the area, and so with the assistance of Grace Bascopé the site was given the name Tz’unun, which is the Yucatec Mayan word for hummingbird (Stone and Zender 2011:209). Overlooking the eastern edge of the Alacranes Bajo, the 84 structures that have been identified to date are primarily situated atop a series of small ridges interspersed among numerous small *bajos*. For ease of description all settlement has been assigned to one of six groups; the site core consists of the Western and Eastern Groups, as well as the Northern Residential Zone. Three distinct satellite settlements were also documented within a 3 km radius and are considered part of Tz’unun. It should be noted that the survey of Tz’unun was opportunistic rather than systematic, and there are still gaps in coverage.

The entirety of Tz’unun’s site core remains covered by forest, and the majority of its structures remain intact and untouched, though a small number have been severely damaged by looters. This picture stands in stark contrast to the majority of the site’s residential areas, which are primarily located within recently cleared fields that are being actively utilized as farmland. This has resulted in the complete destruction of 40% (n=35) of the site’s 84 structures via bulldozer. The authors were fortunate to have visited the area just prior to planting when the ground was devoid of vegetation that would have otherwise obscured the remnants of the destroyed mounds.

**Tz’unun Site Core** (Figure 4)

*The Western Group*

At present, 33 structures and 3 plazas have been identified in the Western Group, including a large architectural complex on the eastern margin. This complex consists of five structures, including two large pyramidal structures, situated atop a basal platform. An extensive looters trench and tunnel penetrates the interior of the largest pyramidal structure from its southeast corner. Although numerous plastic five-gallon buckets were found nearby, the fact that the backfill (i.e., rocks and soil) was completely covered with lichen suggests that looting activities occurred quite some time ago. An additional large pyramidal structure, which is the tallest at the site, sits approximately 140 m west of this group. There is a looters’ tunnel near the apex that completely passes through the structure. Backfill from this tunnel was free of lichen and light in color, suggesting that looting activities had occurred relatively recently. The northern boundary of the Western Group is marked by what appears to be the largest structure at the site by volume, a multi-tiered rectangular structure of unknown function. Interspersed throughout the Western Group are multiple courtyard groups formed by 8 m or taller range structures.

*The Eastern Group*

Separated from the Western Group by a small *bajo*, the Eastern Group is comprised of at least 11 large structures that form three contiguous courtyard groups. Minimal looting has occurred in this area, though the largest structure in the group was heavily damaged by a looters trench placed along its centerline (Figure 5).
Figure 4. Tz'unun site core, 2016.

Figure 5. Guderjan and Kwoka in large looters trench, Western Group, 2016 (Photo: Colleen Hanratty).
The Northern Residential Zone

Just north of the site core along an upland – bajo transition were located the remnants of eight mounds that had been destroyed by bulldozing. While six of the mounds were represented by little more than limestone stains in the soil accompanied by artifact scatters, one of the mounds retained sufficient elevation to suggest that some subsurface architecture may be intact. Closer inspection of this mound revealed the presence of human remains on the surface. A morning was spent collecting all visible human remains along with a representative ceramic sample, both of which were cataloged and are currently housed within the MRP laboratory (Figure 6). A large ovoid biface (i.e., celt) that appeared to be of Colha origin was collected from one of the smaller mounds (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Northern Residential Zone, with locations of surface collections, 2016.

Figure 7. Ovoid biface from Northern Residential Zone.
Satellite Settlements

Satellite Settlement 1

Located in a cleared field on the north side of Pine Ridge Road and immediately adjacent to the international border, Satellite Settlement 1 is comprised of 27 mounds that have been destroyed by bulldozer. Settlement radiates outward from a small hill that has an extremely small intact stand of forest at its summit. The eastern half of the mound was destroyed by modern quarrying activities, while the interior of the western half is not accessible due to large piles of brush and stone from bulldozing. Using other small hilltops in similar settings as an analog, it is possible that the remnants of a household group are present inside the brush line. With the exception of a Colha-produced stemmed macroblade recovered from the surface of a small mound, no other artifacts were collected in this area (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Satellite Settlement 1 and provenience of stemmed macroblade.

Satellite Settlement 2

Satellite Settlement 2 consists of four structures located on a small ridge approximately 850 m east of the Eastern Group. The eastern most structure sits on a ledge overlooking a sizeable depression – likely an *aguada* – with the remainder of the settlement extending in a line to the
west. The mounds in this area were significantly larger than those in the Northern Residential Zone and other satellite settlements.

Satellite Settlement 3

Satellite Settlement 3 consists of nine intact small mounds situated around a small hilltop. While the apex of the hill remains covered in vegetation, the slopes and surrounding areas have been cleared and are actively being utilized as pasture. No surface collections were made in this area.

Area 3 – Eastern Margin of the Dumbbell Bajo

The authors, along with Hollie Lincoln, Thomas Guderjan, and Kim Cox, made a daytrip to the eastern margin of the Dumbbell Bajo to investigate a report of a possible lithic (i.e., chert) quarry in the area. No definitive evidence of a quarry was discovered, though multiple structures and landscape features were encountered and recorded (Figure 9). Five mounds and one patio group were located sitting atop a series of small hills overlooking the bajo. The area has been completely cleared, with the bajo being utilized for rice agriculture and the hills for pasture. The lone exception is a small stand of trees that covers the patio group (Figure 10), which has been severely looted (Figure 11).

Figure 9. Eastern margin of Dumbbell Bajo, 2016.
Figure 10. Patio group located within small tree stand, center background, 2016.

Figure 11. Thomas Guderjan in looters trench, patio group, eastern margin of Dumbbell Bajo, 2016.
A cave composed of at least two chambers was also discovered in the area (Figures 12-14). The cave entrance and interior of Chamber 1 is wide, though quite shallow with a low ceiling. Passage A diverges from the southeast corner of Chamber 1 and connects it Chamber 2. This second chamber has a diameter of only a few meters, but the ceiling raises so that a standing person can be accommodated. Passage B departs from Chamber 2 towards the southwest before turning a corner. It is approximately a meter in width, and almost entirely filled with loose soil and smalls stones, making it impassable. No cultural material was encountered on the surface the cave floor, though it is possible that the fill encountered is cultural in origin.

Figure 12. Looking northeast from interior of cave entrance. Kim Cox, left, 2016.

Figure 13. Cave entrance. From left to right: Thomas Guderjan, Hollie Lincoln, Kim Cox, 2016.
Conclusions

Though short, the 2016 was extremely productive. The authors identified and documented over 109 new structures, the majority of which comprise the newly discovered site of Tz’unun. Its large size and strategic location along the eastern margin of the Alacranes Bajo suggest that further investigation of Tz’unun is warranted. As such, the 2017 field season will be primarily focused on surveying and mapping the site.

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