

23 **ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECONNAISSANCE AT THE PEARCE SITES OF THE COCKSCOMB BASIN, STANN CREEK DISTRICT**

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In 2014, members of the Stann Creek Regional Archaeology Project (SCRAP) were approached by residents of Maya Centre regarding visiting some of the archaeological sites of the Cockscomb Basin Forest Reserve (CBFR) and Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (CBWS). The area is situated directly north of the Alabama site, where SCRAP has been conducting investigations since 2014. In 2016, SCRAP Co-Directors, Dr. M. Peuramaki-Brown and Dr. S. Morton were granted permission from the Belize Institute of Archaeology and the Belize Audubon Society to enter the reserve and assess the previously reported archaeological sites of Pearce Ruins, Kuchil Balum, and Huntul Mo', collectively referred to here as the "Pearce Sites." These sites are located within the East Basin of the Cockscomb, which consists of the upper watershed of the South Stann Creek. British and American explorers visited the basin as early as the late 1800s, and loggers were active from the early 1900s to the 1980s. In 1986, the CBWS was established and later expanded upon by the CBFR in 1990. This paper will 1) present the history of archaeological investigations at the Pearce Sites, 2) report on our 2016 reconnaissance trip, and 3) discuss future SCRAP research plans for the site and how they fit in with current research at Alabama.

Introduction

Since 2014, the Stann Creek Regional Archaeology Project (SCRAP) has been investigating the ancient Maya site of Alabama in the southern end of the Stann Creek District of Belize. Simultaneously, we have been attempting to help raise awareness of the unique archaeological past of the district, which is often overlooked by both Belizeans and foreigners alike despite explorations going back over 100 years and an entire book written on the subject (Graham 1994). Therefore, when we were approached by residents of Maya Centre village in 2014 with a request for us to visit some of the archaeological sites in the Cockscomb Basin, we were thrilled at the opportunity to learn about yet another set of fascinating sites within this little-known sub-region of the Eastern Maya Lowlands, known as East-Central Belize (Graham 2001; Peuramaki-Brown 2017).

In 2016, we were granted permission from the Belize Institute of Archaeology and the Belize Audubon Society to enter the Cockscomb Basin Forest Reserve and Wildlife Sanctuary to assess the previously reported archaeological sites of Pearce Ruins, Kuchil Balum, and Huntul Mo', collectively referred to here as the "Pearce Sites." This article outlines the history of archaeological exploration in the area, summarizes our own recent reconnaissance observations (Peuramaki-Brown and Morton 2016), and outlines future research plans for the sites and how they complement our ongoing

investigations at the neighbouring site of Alabama.

The Area

The Pearce Sites are located within the East Basin of the two adjacent geographic basins that make up the Cockscomb Basin—named after the Cockscomb Ridge of the Maya Mountains—which consists of the upper watershed of the South Stann Creek. British and American explorers first visited the basin in the late 1800s, and loggers were active in the area from the early 1900s to the 1980s (Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer Thomas 2012; Smith 2013). The Cockscomb received the designation of national forest in 1984; in 1986, the CBWS/CBFR was established and later expanded upon in 1990 (Nations 2006; Rath 1990).

The main area of the Pearce Sites is focused on the junction of the Sittee Branch at the Upper South Stann Creek (Figure 1). This area lies roughly 10 km north of Alabama, and if one were to travel through "The Gorge" (a gap in the Maya Mountains foothills) at the north end of the site (head of the Waha Leaf Creek), this leads to the Juan Branch of the South Stann Creek and, following, to Pearce. This route is still used today, albeit not always for legal activities, and had been a proposed (although ultimately abandoned) second entry and tourist backpacking trail for the reserve and wildlife sanctuary (Ernesto Saqui, personal communication, 2018). This direct link through



Figure 1. Watershed map showing location of Pearce and Alabama archaeological sites. (Site locational data collected by SCRAP, 2016; Belize watershed polygons retrieved from www.biodiversity.bz, 14 February 2017; Cartography by D. Blaine, Creating Context, Inc., 2017, using Arc GIS, Version 10.6).

the foothills between Alabama and the Pearce Sites was likely used in the past, and warrants investigation. The exact nature of the relationships between the Alabama Maya and the Pearce Maya remain unclear but has become a focus of SCRAP research.

The Pearce Sites: A History of Investigations

The Pearce Sites have been subject to five archaeological reconnaissance investigations, including our own. The following is a summary of their findings, with an attempt to ‘connect the dots’, so to speak, as there appear to be some confusion and discrepancies in the literature concerning site names, locations, and descriptions. This review is based on the few pieces of literature we have managed to assemble from the archives of the Belize Institute of Archaeology and the Geology & Petroleum Department, online databases, university libraries, and colleague collections and recollections, including conversations with

Dr. Elizabeth Graham, Dr. Peter Dunham, Dr. Keith Prufer, Mr. Brijilio Bolon, Dr. Scott Silver, Mr. Logan McNatt, and Mr. Ernesto Saqui—although, each admit their recall of the various expeditions is limited. We thank everyone very much for her or his assistance.

The British Museum Expedition (BME) - 1931

This expedition was led by T.A. Joyce (1931; unpublished ‘intermediate’ report) in March and April of 1931, less than half a year before the devastating Storm Five hurricane hit Belize. The team was following up on a report made to the Government of Belize by Mr. Lee Pearce, a mahogany contractor working in the area, of “large stone-built mounds” (p.1) along the Upper South Stann Creek. The expedition set off on March 12th from All Pines, an old sugar and logging community south of Hopkins near Cabbage Haul Creek, travelling inland by wagons and tractor, as no canoes were available to go upriver. Unfortunately, the promised map



Figure 2. Google Earth image showing locations discussed in article. Detailed locational data have been excluded.

and final report of the expedition were never produced, and the original excavation notes on file at the British Museum have been misplaced within the archives.

Old Pearce Camp

On March 13th, the crew stayed overnight at an old camp erected by Mr. Pearce the year before. This was located “about a mile from/below the junction of the Sittee branch with the South Stann Creek River” (p.3). We assume this was located on the north side of the river, based on mapped logging roads into Locust Bank and Red Bank to the east. On a Google Earth map, we measured out one mile to identify an approximate location (Figure 2). This served only as a temporary camp for the expedition, and a permanent camp was set up along “the river bank within reasonable distance of the site” (p.4). Presumably, “the site” referred to is that of the Pearce Ruins (reported by Mr. Pearce). No other location information is

provided. It took them seven days (March 20th) to establish the permanent camp.

BME-1

This is a “small, but very promising site” that Joyce identifies as situated “just below Mr. Pearce’s Camp, but on the other bank of the river” (p.4). A week was spent investigating the site toward the end of the expedition period. Joyce mentions that excavations encountered two slate-lined graves in one of the mounds, “which yielded some fine stone implements and a number of pottery vases (some of which had been painted in slip). The latter were so decayed that their removal was impossible” (p.6). This problem with ceramic preservation is an issue throughout the district due to the high acidity of local soils.

BME-2, Pearce Ruins

No location is given for the Pearce site proper, other than it was at a reasonable distance

from the permanent camp (for which we also have no definite location). However, as the Sittee Branch junction was used as a reference point for locating Mr. Pearce's Camp, we might assume it was in that vicinity. It is described as a "large site", consisting of a "double plaza surrounded by some fourteen stone-built pyramids and platforms" (p.4), and specifically identifies the architecture as composed of granite building blocks and slabs, as there are no significant deposits of limestone in this sub-region of the Maya world. Joyce noted difficulty in clearing and moving through the site to properly map due to the dense lianas (woody vines). While excavating at the site, the team came across "a number of fallen [granite] stelae, but all were plain, without inscriptions." Similar monuments have been found at both the Mayflower Sites and Alabama in the district. Joyce mentions, "excavations were carried on at selected points, and a compass survey of the ruins and the immediate neighbourhood was prepared" (p.5). What is meant by 'immediate neighbourhood' remains unclear.

BME-3

Finally, Joyce describes an exploring party as coming across a "small site on the Sittee branch, also built of granite, which yielded exactly similar results" (p.5), while operations at Pearce Ruins were underway.

The Stann Creek Project (SCP) -1976

As part of her district survey in the 1970s, Elizabeth Graham (1978, 1983:327-332, 1994:131-132) attempted to relocate the Pearce Ruins, based on Joyce's report, which she identifies as being located on the Sittee Branch of the South Stann Creek (Graham 1978:17). Although she made it to the area described in the British Museum report, "the mahogany camps had long been abandoned and the low stone-built platforms were sufficiently hidden in the thick bush so as to escape detection" (Graham 1978:18).

She notes that Pearce is reported to lie near the Sittee Branch of the South Stann Creek (based on Joyce 1931 and Thompson 1939:fig.100—incorrectly noted as "Pierce Ruins"). Graham also notes that the location of the site is not given in Joyce's report, and that

more than one group of structures was encountered. Interestingly, she suggests "the downriver group [BME-1] appears to be situated not far west of modern Red Bank on the north side; the upriver mounds [BME-3] are somewhere along the Sittee Branch, probably on the south side; and the main group [BME-2] also lies on the south side somewhere in between, not far from the confluence of the Sittee Branch with South Stann Creek" (Graham 1983:329; square brackets are authors' comments). Graham (1983:fig.2; 1994: fig. 1.2) provides a map with her guessed approximate location of Pearce, and we have placed it on our own map as *SCP Pearce*.

Graham (1983:330) mentions that the "detailed report of the work at the Pearce Ruins and the map promised... were apparently never produced", and laments over Joyce's vague descriptions offered in the intermediate report. Based on the similarity between Joyce's description of the site (re: granite platforms and stelae) and what Graham observed at the Mayflower Sites in northern Stann Creek, she proposed that the site dated to the Late Classic to Early Postclassic periods. Additionally, she points out that the slate-lined graves encountered at BME-1 were reminiscent of use of slate at the Kendal site along the Sittee River, and likely dated to the Late or Terminal Classic.

The Rabinowitz Expedition (RE) – 1983

In 1983, Alan Rabinowitz (1987) of the Wildlife Conservation Society found himself in the Pearce Sites area as part of his expedition to study jaguars in the region, eventually helping to establish the CBWS in 1986. At the time, he was looking for an overgrown skidder road to access deeper areas of the basin. During the search, he and his crew came across hewn granite blocks atop a hill, which they then identified as a 3-level mound about 50 ft. (15 m) tall. He identified the main timber road as being 50 ft. (15 m) to the north, and to the south the terrain sloped steeply to a large stream that joined with the South Stann Creek. He went on to mention that the "timber operation had cut their road through the ruin, and the rise over which I had driven so often in the past was probably part of the base platform for the site"

(Rabinowitz 1987:252). It is not made clear how far away from this cut the mound is located.

Rabinowitz reported the site to Mr. Logan McNatt, a Peace Corps volunteer and field archaeologist for the, then, Belize Department of Archaeology, who visited the site and described it as a “minor ceremonial centre” (Gundy and McNatt 1984). A sketch map was made of the location, although problematic, and of the site itself (Figure 3; both maps are on file with the Belize Institute of Archaeology), and the site was described as follows:

South of the logging road, there is one platform with two terraces on the north side. There are two mounds on top of the platform, one at the east end and one at the west end. A plain altar stone lies on the platform, to the west of the eastern mound. The platform appears to be on a natural hill, as it drops off steeply on the east side, apparently to a creek (running water was heard).

North of the platform (north of the logging road), two smaller mounds were noted, and two oval stones. These stones were symmetrical in shape, and were symmetrically placed a few feet apart.

The reported mound was described as a “temple mound” and their approach to its study was “radiating from the temple mound, we cut new trails and found two smaller mounds west of it... found a circular stone, almost five feet in diameter and a foot thick. It lay between the temple and the other mounds... it was an altar stone” (Rabinowitz 1987:253). The site was named *Kuchil Balum* (Place of the Jaguars). Rabinowitz (1987:256) mentions knowledge of the “Pierce Ruins” along the South Stann Creek, but does not suggest a location in relation to Kuchil Balum.

The Maya Mountains Archaeological Project (MMAAP) - 1995

This expedition, under the direction of Peter Dunham, conducted a season of reconnaissance and mapping in the Cockscomb Basin in 1995, including in the South Stann Creek watershed (Dunham et al. 1995). Two sites “of substantial size and complexity” were located and mapped along the South Stann Creek, near the Victoria Peak trail. A crew of

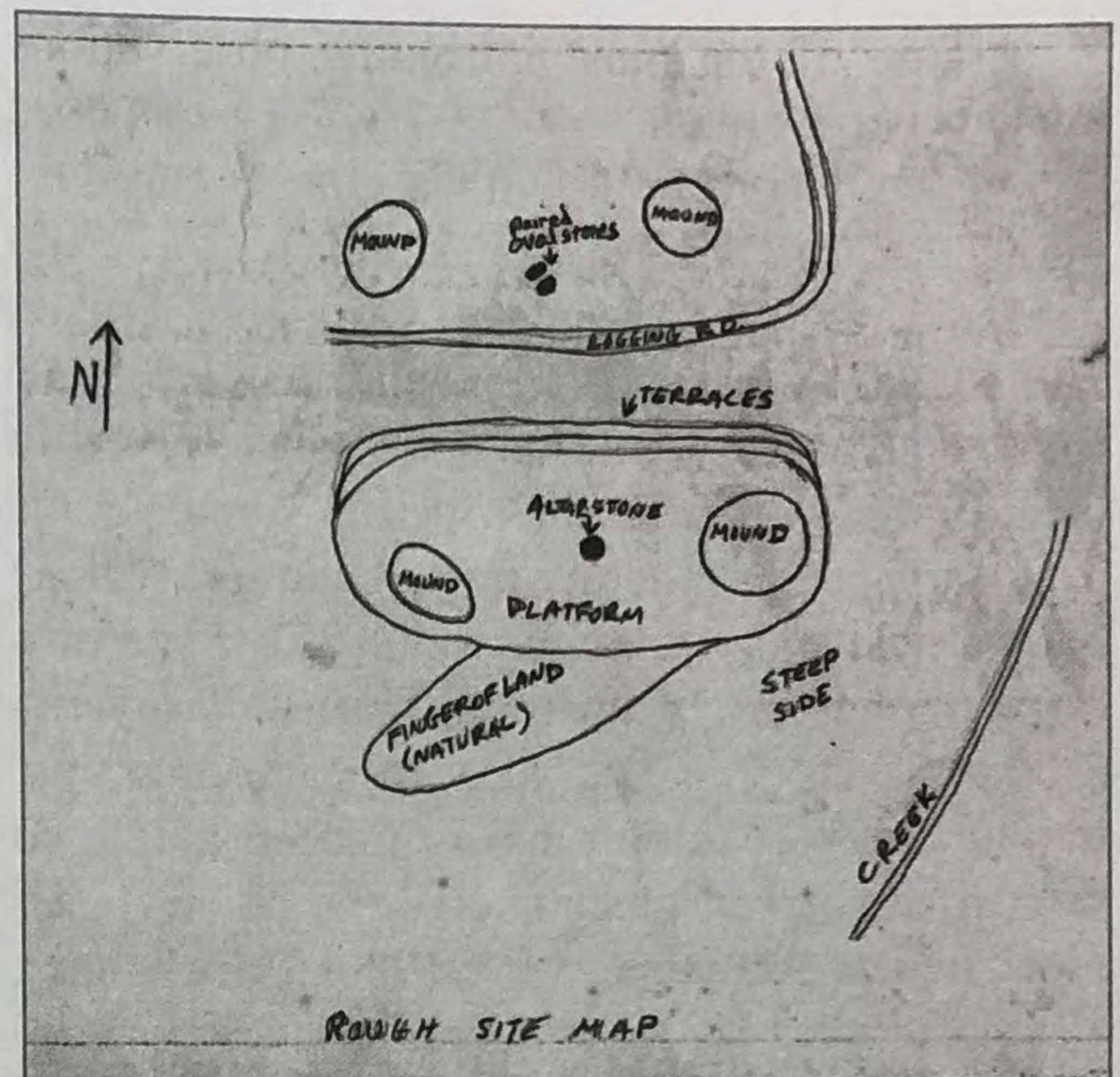


Figure 3. Gundy and McNatt (1984) sketch of Kuchil Balum (on file at the Institute of Archaeology, Belmopan, Belize).

roughly 15 local men accompanied the archaeologists and other specialists, who cleared the sites and helped with the mapping over a period of one month (Brijilio Bolon, personal communication, 2016).

MMAAP Pearce

The site was found “near the junction of the main tributaries” of the South Stann Creek (p.1), which Dunham et al. figured made sense as a logical point of access and control for the surrounding area. We assume they were initially using the suggested location offered by Graham as guidance. The site is described as being the size of Lubaantun, and “sitting atop a bluff... towers over a half dozen reservoirs, borrow pits from which fill was extracted for construction” (p.1). Such a description typifies many of the inland sites of East-Central Belize. Based on the size, complexity, monuments, and location, Dunham et al. suggested that it was the primary centre for the eastern Cockscomb, probably controlling resource movement through the upper South Stann Creek watershed.

The mounds are described as being “some of the tallest in the region”, and a ball court and four major courtyards were noted, with the main plaza said to be “the size of a football field.” They also counted ten plain granite monuments, including “a unique massive, egg-shaped monolith”.

One of the most intriguing observations made by Dunham et al. is a supposed “monument workshop” with a granite exposure immediately adjacent, consisting of “a large deposit of what appears to be broken monuments, finished blanks, and waste pieces” (p.4), with a “very unusual stone shaft carved in the form of an extended serpent,” which seems to clearly be a phallic representation (Ernest Saqui, personal communication, 2018; see also description and illustration in Wanyerka [2003:267-269]). The idea of carved granite monuments is exciting and is further supported by a relief carved piece showing a jaguar head, identified at Alabama in the 1980s (MacKinnon 1988), similar to another relief-carved piece photographed in the Pearce area by Dr. Scott Silver (photograph in possession of authors).

Dunham et al. note that the site had been looted in recent years, and that the damage was “minor, although entire buildings have been destroyed” (p.3). Unfortunately, park wardens report that following Dunham’s expedition, the sites (in particular, Huntul Mo’, discussed below) were again subject to looting—which they attribute to non-local workmen who originally visited with the team (Scott Silver, personal communication, 2018). A transit map was made of the core, likely at 1:200 (Peter Dunham, personal communication 2016). We have yet to access this map, as it was never published and does not appear to be on file at the Belize Institute of Archaeology, and Dunham has yet to digitize the large format drawing. A UTM point was recorded in an extended version of the final report.

MMAP Huntul Mo’

Dunham et al. then describe a second site up the Sittee Branch of the South Stann Creek, which they link to Joyce’s BME-3 site. They mention that it is close to Rabinowitz’ Kuchil Balum, and suggest that the sites are close enough that they might be the same, but clarifying that Gundy and McNatt’s sketch map and description did not fit what they saw at their site—so they may not have actually located Kuchil Balum.

The site consisted of “a large plaza with several plain granite monument slabs at one end, a substantial range structure to the side, and a

building almost as large as those at the Pearce Ruin and a borrow pit/reservoir on the other end” (Dunham et al. 1995:2). Because of the significant differences between Rabinowitz’ site and this site, they provided a separate name, Huntul Mo’ (One Macaw). They suggested that this was a lesser centre linked to Pearce, commanding the extraction or processing of resources in the headwaters. A transit map was also made of this site, likely at 1:200 (Peter Dunham, personal communication 2016). We have yet to access this map, as it was never published and does not appear to be on file at the Belize Institute of Archaeology, and Dunham has yet to digitize the large format drawing.

Surface remains at both sites were consistent with a Late to Terminal Classic date (ca. AD 700-900), as hypothesized by Graham. Construction materials (90%) at both sites were identified as consisting of the Triassic Cockscomb granite, distinguished by its porphyritic texture (2-3 cm euhedral alkali feldspar megacrysts). Granite bedrock and boulders were noted as subject to sheet-like exfoliation, which would essentially produce “prefabricated blocks and slabs for building use” (p.4). This is the same as granite sources noted by SCRAP at Alabama.

While the team was in the area, a filming crew was also present, led by Richard Foster, and they filmed scenes of people carrying palm fronds up the mound-platforms and felling trees (Brijilio Bolon, personal communication, 2016). We believe these were for the film *Jaguar: Year of the Cat* (Foster and Foster 1995), but the scenes never made the final cut; alternatively, they were used for a later film *Mysteries of the Ancient Maya* (Foster and Foster 1997) that aired on the National Geographic Channel (we have yet to access a copy).

The Stann Creek Regional Archaeology Project (SCRAP) - 2016

In the early morning of Saturday, 9 July 2016, we (the authors) met with Mr. Brijilio Bolon, a Park Warden with the CBFR/CBWS who had worked with Dunham’s crew when he was 16 years old, and Mr. Benedicto Choc, a tour guide from Maya Centre who specializes in trips to Victoria Peak in the Cockscomb Range, at the entrance to the CBWS. We had arranged

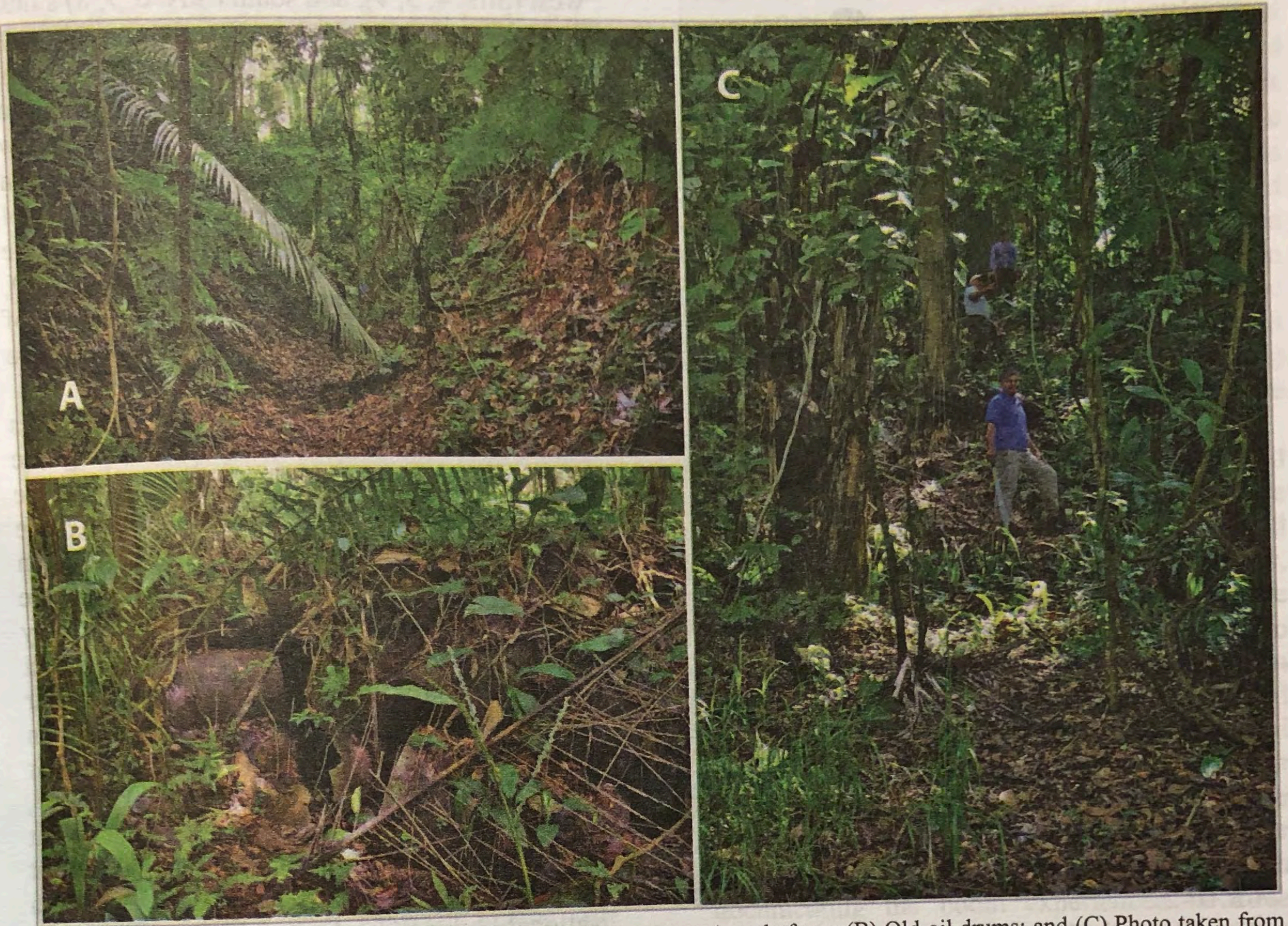


Figure 4. (A) Skidder road cut through alluvial terrace/site construction platform; (B) Old oil drums; and (C) Photo taken from bottom of reservoir, looking up to top of Str. 1, Pearce Ruins.

for them to bring us to the site they were familiar with, which they referred to as “Kuchil Balum”. We were armed with UTM points provided to us by Dr. Keith Prufer, an archaeologist working in Southern Belize and a former student of Dunham’s who was on the MMAP expedition. The two UTMs were from a database he had compiled, one labelled “Pearce” and the other labelled “Huntul Mo”, and he advised that the points might be a couple hundred meters off, as GPS was a new technology in the early 1990s. Only after our trip did we find an extended copy of the Dunham et al. report with the UTM grid coordinates recorded (discussed below).

We set off on an over 4-hour walk, approaching the South Stann Creek from the west and north along the Victoria Peak trail, passing Rabinowitz’s (1987:268-278) crashed plane, old logging equipment, ancient Maya housemounds, and even a cave. We veered off the main trail when we arrived closer to the

junction point of the Sittee Branch with the South Stann Creek, eventually crossing the Sittee Branch near the old skidder road just up river from the junction. By this point, we would have been further west of the place Graham had suggested to be the location of Pearce.

SCRAP-1

We climbed the southwest bank of the Sittee Branch where we crossed and followed the overgrown skidder road (now, more of a path) about 150 m, when we came across a trench (Figure 4A) where the road cut through what was thought to be an alluvial terrace; however, along the top edges of the cut and down into the trench we found shaped blocks of granite of the same porphyritic texture noted by Dunham. This was likely a natural terrace that had been modified as a main construction platform atop of which sits an entire site or a group of buildings. This was similar to the area

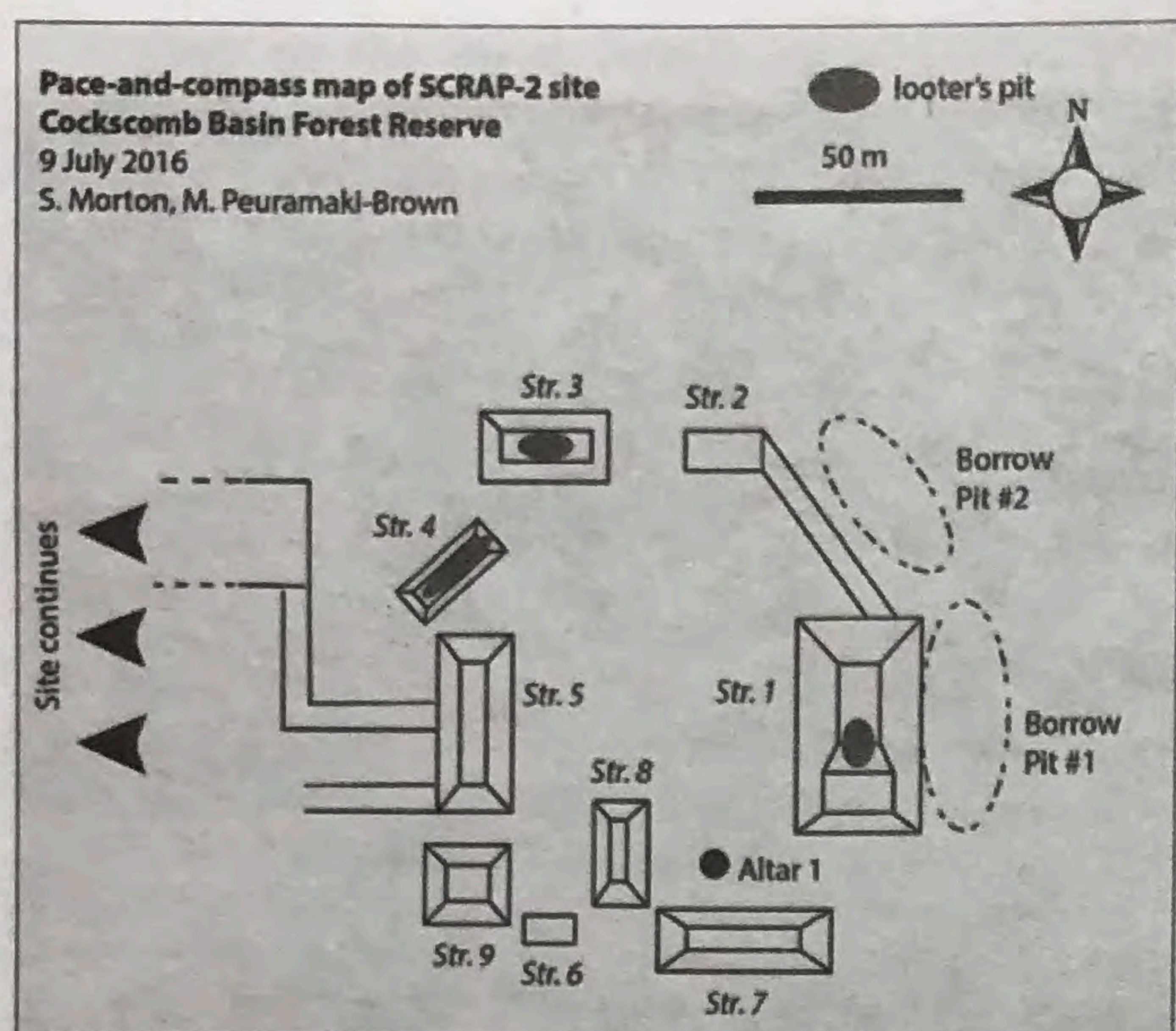


Figure 5. Pace-and-compass map of main plaza of SCRAP-2 site (Pearce Ruins).

description provided by Rabinowitz for Kuchil Balum. We climbed up to the top of the terrace, but the bush was so dense that we could not make out any mounds. We decided to keep going to the site that our guides were aware of, which was not far, and to the MMAP Pearce UTM point provided by Prufer (same as that recorded in the extended report).

SCRAP-2

We walked roughly 450 m WSW from the trench along a trail used by park wardens to patrol the area and came across old oil barrels/drums (Figure 4B) from the logging days. Just over 200 m SW of this point, we visited the spot where the MMAP project had camped for the month along the Cockscomb Branch. We then back tracked to the oil barrels and walked just over 150 m NW to the MMAP Pearce UTM, but could see no mounds. We continued another 200 m at which point we found large mounds and a massive plaza, which conformed to the couple hundred-metre inaccuracy Prufer had warned us about.

Our time at the site was spent investigating looter's trenches, observing wildlife, and making a rough pace-and-compass map of the plaza area (Figure 5), which was very difficult due to the thick bush.

The very large plaza (~100 m north-south x 70 m east-west) was surrounded by nine structures; these included a series of range and square-based structures on the north (Strs. 2, 3),

west (Strs. 4, 5, 9), and south (Strs. 6, 7, 8) sides, and a massive platform (Str. 1) on the east side—comparable in north-south length (~50 m), though half the east-west width and taller, to Alabama Str. 3—with two large borrow pits/reservoirs immediately off its east face. In general, the mounds are very similar to those of Alabama. We took a photo (Figure 4C) from the bottom of Borrow Pit #1 (where we saw a tapir), looking up to the top of the mound with three of us standing along the slope for scale, which we figured was about 10 m tall.

We investigated a wide and deep looter's trench that cut almost completely along the transverse axis of Str. 4, and recovered a couple ceramic sherds of red slipped Fine Orange-like ware, suggesting a Terminal Classic construction date. As at Alabama, very few artifacts could be seen in the red, sandy-clay fill, presumably quarried from the nearby borrow pits, but contained more alluvial cobbles. A similar description of construction core can be found in Joyce (1931). We also identified a circular granite altar (Altar 1) just north of Str. 7, partially covered in a mat of moss, similar to that described by Rabinowitz and to those visible at the Mayflower Sites in Mayflower-Bocawina National Park. We collected a sample of granite from one of the construction blocks in the plaza for our ongoing granite sourcing study, as well as a piece from the Sittee Branch crossing, but unfortunately, we forgot to collect clay samples from the area for our ongoing ceramic petrography study (Peuramaki-Brown et al. 2017).

After mapping the plaza, and noting that the site continued to the west, we assessed our time and schedule. We had hoped to make it to the second UTM provided by Prufer, the one labelled "Huntul Mo", but when we entered it into the GPS we saw it was over 10 km to the north. This did not make sense, based on the description in the MMAP report. When we returned home, we located it on a detailed map and found it was situated along the upper Sittee River to the north. We now believe this is actually the UTM for the site of Bats'ub (a.k.a. 25 Flight), which Dunham helicoptered into with the British for a brief (5-10 minute) stop to confirm the presence of mounds. When we plotted the UTM found in the Dunham et al.

extended report, it plotted just under 2 km north of the SCRAP-2 site, along the east bank of the Sittee Branch.

Although we had permission to overnight in the area, we decided to head out. A number of reasons factored into the decision: 1) we could in no way make it to the second (incorrect) database UTM that day or the next, in time to be out of the bush on Sunday evening, 2) the bush was so thick with lianas that mapping and movement was difficult, 3) we did not want to redo what had already been done by Dunham's mapping team, and 4) one of our party members was dealing with an ongoing illness made worse by our long trek that morning.

Based on the previous descriptions provided of the site plans, it is possible that SCRAP-2 is MMAP Huntul Mo', particularly the description of the large mound on the east end of the site with the borrow pit/reservoir; however, the location MMAP provides, up the Sittee Branch and serving as a resource extraction point from the headwaters, does not correspond to the SCRAP-2 site location. The proximity to Kuchil Balum, if SCRAP-1 is that site, would match the MMAP Huntul Mo' description. The SCRAP-2 site does not appear to entirely match the MMAP Pearce site description, but does match the BME-2 (Pearce) description, which is quite general. It is important to note that we were not able to view the entire site, which definitely continued to the west, due to the dense bush and our schedule. The SCRAP-2 site location does, however, match the MMAP recorded UTM for Pearce (both in the database and in the report), and its proximity to the junction of the Sittee Branch and South Stann Creek is similar to the descriptions offered by all expeditions. We therefore believe we were, in fact, at the Pearce Ruins site, as located by Dunham et al.

We recorded UTMs for both SCRAP site locations, as well as various features along our trek, and submitted them to the Belize Institute of Archaeology as part of our preliminary report filing prior to leaving the country in 2016.

Future Directions

As can be seen from the descriptions provided by the various expeditions, there are many areas of archaeological interest lying in

relatively close proximity to one another in this part of the Cockscomb Basin, that may well collectively represent one very large, extended site. The Sittee Branch of the South Stann Creek is also home to stands of 'wild' cacao, possible remnant populations of domesticates (Evans 1948:8; Prufer and Dunham 2009), and it would be well worth investigating the slopes of the area for evidence of ancient agricultural terracing, in addition to mound sites. We believe that the only way to effectively document the area will be through lidar (light detection and ranging) survey—which we are pleased to report will be conducted in the coming years.

The similarities between Alabama and Pearce, including orientation and layout of the monumental cores, apparent construction and occupation time of the Late-Terminal Classic, and proximity/connection through the foothills—perhaps related to desired access to the Placencia Lagoon saltworks—make it an appealing focus. Overall, we wish to understand the relationships between the people, places, and things of the area, and this is encapsulated in our three-pronged boomtown approach to our studies at Alabama—which we would adopt for any research at Pearce—focused on documenting the boom experienced in these locations and understanding why and how this occurred at a time when other areas of the Maya world were experiencing collapse.

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