

In the Shadows of the Big Houses: Non-Elite Settlements at Uxbenká

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Households inform us about social relationships in ways public-centered research might exclude. Studies of non-elite settlements also bring attention to the rich diversity that characterized pre-Columbian society. Surprisingly little is known about Maya commoners despite the recent influx of studies that address the residential areas of sites. Even less work of this type has been done in southern Belize where Uxbenká, the site studied, is located. Uxbenká's settlement system is characteristic of Maya sites, and includes residences, ancillary structures, burials, modified landscape features surrounding the household and related gardens and agricultural areas. Excavations were conducted in 2007 to assess the temporal occupation and functional use of space at one non-elite residential group at the site. The data collected are compared with other residential excavations conducted at Uxbenká and with other sites aiding in the development of a more comprehensive and contextual view of the occupation of the site. The 2007 excavations and analysis of this residential group settlement offer a fundamental component to our basic knowledge of the site.

Introduction

The study of human settlements and households are at the core of social science inquiry. They are basic units of most societies, where foundational activities such as production, consumption and reproduction take place. My research focuses on the prehistoric Maya site of Uxbenká. The ancient Maya occupied an area in Latin American referred to as "Mesoamerica." The ancestors of the Maya began as simple hunting and gathering bands and gradually developed into complex polities that reached its height during the Classic Period (AD 250-900).

Until recently, most Mayanists tended towards "top-down" research, primarily investigating large architectural complexes and monuments at site cores associated with a quantitatively small elite class. Using new approaches, Maya archaeologists over the past two decades have become interested in "bottom-up" studies of the daily lives of the prehistoric Maya (Robin 2001:18). Little work of this type has been done in southern Belize at Uxbenká so this project represents pivotal research in understanding the non-elite aspect of the polity's complex society.

Research, Results, Discussion, and Significance

The unique project consisted of archaeological survey, excavation and data analysis of a non-elite settlement group (SG 21) at Uxbenká (Figure 1). A Classic Period Maya settlement group generally consists of one or more dwellings, ancillary structures and spaces, which include storehouses, kitchens and gardens (Hendon 1987). SG 21 is a basic non-elite settlement group. The three research goals were to assess the functional use of space at SG 21, the temporal occupation of SG 21, and the extent of social variation of the prehistoric inhabitants of Uxbenká.

Parts of the three main structures and ancillary spaces of SG 21 were excavated to collect data about the settlement group. The structures were small and simply constructed platforms made of limestone and sandstone blocks. They were situated around a central flat cleared area. Ethnographic research and studies of prehistoric murals in Guatemala and Mexico indicate that platforms had wooden superstructures with thatch roofs (Wauchope 1934). The artifact assemblage of SG 21 represented the remnants of basic everyday activities. Chipped stone tools and lithic debris, metates, manos, ceramic sherds from bowls and jars, and hammerstones were recovered. Exotic items were found in low frequencies and include a figurine, a spindle whorl, polychrome pottery and modified jade fragments.

Excavations at SG 21 shed light on the lifestyle of the people who occupied the settlement group. Stone tools used for horticultural activities (Hendon 1987) and a burned corn cob were evidence of a small agricultural area.

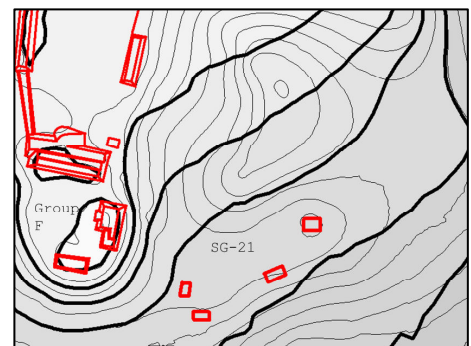


Fig. 1. Map of SG 21 and Group F, Uxbenká, Belize.

Excavations at Structures 1, 2 and 3 yielded a variety of utilitarian chipped stone tools, ground stone tools, and ceramic sherds indicative of domestic dwellings and food preparation areas. STR 1 and STR 3 each contained one subsurface crypt. The STR 1 burial was intact, but in STR 3, only the top one third of the body and capstones remained. The disrupted burial at STR 3 and the muddled building layout points to construction and later remodeling in that area. There is evidence from other sites that the ancient Maya remodeled their settlements (c.f. Tourtellot 1988).

AMS radio-carbon dating was the most effective way to determine the temporal occupation of SG 21. The known occupation of SG 21 is from AD 214-772. Two dated charcoal samples corroborated Late Classic (AD 600-900) dates for STR 3 and an associated midden (95.4% probability dates lie within AD 646-772). The third date, from the burial in STR 1 represents an earlier occupation, ranging from the Late Preclassic (300 BC-AD 250) to the Early Classic (AD 250-600) (95.4% probability dates lie within AD 179-334).

The ancient Maya who lived at Uxbenká belonged to different social groups. Excavation data determined SG 21 was a non-elite settlement based on the small scale buildings and the utilitarian production and consumption oriented artifacts. The two burials, with minimal and simple grave goods are also evidence of the non-elite status of SG 21 inhabitants. Compared to SG 21, artifacts from Uxbenká's civic and ceremonial core are more exotic and less utilitarian. Comparing Uxbenká to other Classic Maya sites and recent ethnographic information allowed a more comprehensive and contextual view of the occupation of the site (c.f. Ashmore 2007). Other Classic Maya sites exhibited the same general non-elite building construction, arrangement and size as SG 21. The utilitarian artifact assemblages and features, including middens and simple subfloor burials, are also strikingly similar.

The buildings and artifacts at SG 21 paled in comparison to elite and ceremonial structures at Uxbenká differentiating it from the upper crust of society. While the social stratification is obvious, it appears elites and non-elites were living in the same areas of the site. This find holds true across Classic period Mesoamerica. Generally, elite structures are found interspersed with non-elite residences (Haviland 1988). At Uxbenká, Group F was just up a steep hill from SG 21, but Group F had monumental architecture and all the buildings faced away from SG 21 as if denying visual and physical access from SG 21 (Figure 1). Whether or not the inhabitants of SG 21 and Group F represent complete social opposites is uncertain at this point. It is clear they represent different layers in the social strata of Uxbenká and their close proximity likely provided a constant reminder of the inhabitant's social identities.

Conclusions

Over the last couple decades, increasing work has been done with commoner households, but much more information stands to be learned about the domestic lives of the people who made up the majority of Maya society. My research at Uxbenká established when SG 21 was inhabited by the prehistoric Maya and how they used the buildings and spaces. The archaeological excavations added to the social variation of Uxbenká's ancient inhabitants.

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