Recent excavations at Uxbenka confirm that it is the earliest known center in southern Belize and extending settlements as far back as 200 A.D. or earlier. These data also suggest that Uxbenka began as a small hilltop community and only after 400 A.D. were buildings constructed of stone. The main Group A stela plaza was likely the location of the original village that was reconstructed to form the public monument garden and seat of political authority.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century archaeologists have speculated on the age of ancient Maya settlements in southern Belize (Gruning 1930; Joyce 1929, Joyce et al. 1927, 1928). The region (Figure 1) has been considered both peripheral to and engaged with cultural and political developments that were occurring in the Maya heartland in 300-800 A.D. (Leventhal 1990). In previous archaeological and epigraphic studies, sites in southern Belize have been linked to Copan and Quirigua (Braswell 2005; Grube et al. 1999; Marcus 1992), Tikal (Leventhal 1992; Prufer 2005; Wanyerka 2005), the western Petén region (Bill and Braswell 2005; Prufer et al. 2006), the southeastern Petén (Prufer 2005) and the Belize Valley (Braswell 2005; Prufer 2002). All of these accounts of economic and political interaction are placed within the period when the region was already at least partially developed, economically and politically, and essentially describe post-AD 400 interactions. What has been missing is an understanding of the origins and initial occupations in the region. Where were the first settlements in southern Belize, and when were they first settled?

Recent archaeological research at the Classic Period site Uxbenka has shed light on those early settlements, and they suggest humble beginnings for a region that rapidly grew to include over 12 monument bearing sites and almost 100 small communities. Since 2004 the Uxbenka Archaeological Project (UAP) has been investigating the political economy and settlement history and dynamics of this small, yet important regional center. Excavations conducted in 2006-2007 suggest that the site was initially settled during the 2nd or 3rd century A.D.,
making it the earliest known site in the region. Our data have important implications for understanding Pre-A.D. 500 settlement expansion in the southern Belize and the southeastern Petén and extend the age of the earliest known settlements in the region back by at least 200 years. In this paper we summarize previous theories advanced on the early settlement history of the region and present new data suggesting that there may have been small, possibly indigenous, populations living at Uxbenká prior to the 5th century spread of “Classic Maya” traditions from the central Petén.

Archaeological Research in Southern Belize

Previous studies suggested that southern Belize was occupied from 250 A.D. to 900 (or 1000). In the central Petén this is known as the Early, Late, and Terminal Classic periods, a terminological nomenclature that we will avoid in this article in favor of absolute date ranges, primarily because local developments do not correspond to those temporal phases as they are understood elsewhere. In general the prehistory of the region is relatively poorly understood. Archaeological work has been carried out in the area for over a century, but the majority of the work was conducted between 1925 and 1975 and was less than systematic and inadequately reported. The remoteness of the region and its peripheral location in relation to the central and western Petén “heartland” of the Classic Period Lowland Maya area has largely precluded it from significant archaeological examination until relatively recently.

The earliest periods of occupation are unknown. Prior to the work of the Uxbenká Archaeological Project, Leventhal (1992) and Dunham (Dunham and Prufer 1998) speculated that there may have been a small indigenous population living in the area prior to the Classic period. Subsequently, Prufer (2002, 2005) found clear evidence of human presence in the region utilizing cave sites in the Maya Mountains at least as early as 800 BC, while Kindon (2001) documented settlement dating to AD 200-500 at surface sites in the same area. Outside of this work in the Maya Mountains, no significant surface settlement predating AD 500 has been documented anywhere in southern Belize with the exception of Uxbenká. Despite the presence of retrospective dates on monuments indicating a dynastic history going back to AD 159, recent studies at Pusilha by Braswell (et al. 2005) suggest that the site was not occupied before AD 500. Along the coast of southern Belize two decades of work by McKillop (2004, 2006) indicate primarily post AD 500 mercantile seafaring and no significant earlier settlements, further underscoring the relatively late development of complexity in this region.

In adjacent areas Elizabeth Graham (1994) found substantial evidence of pre-AD 100 settlements along the coastal plain in the Stann Creek District to the north (Graham 1994). There is also evidence of pre-AD 500 settlements west of the study area at the sites of Sacul, Ixkun, Xutilha, Ixton, and others in the area of Dolores, Petén, Guatemala (Laporte 1994, 2001; Laporte and Ramos 1998).

Artifacts and monuments indicate ties between southern Belize and the central Petén between AD 370-500, probably via trade routes through the southern Petén and perhaps over the main divide of the mountains. However, during the subsequent AD 500-900 period there appears to have been a shift in interaction and affiliation in the region, with the suggestion of ties developing between southern Belize and sites located in the region currently known as the southeast periphery, especially Copan and Quirigua (Grube et al. 1999; Braswell et al. 2005; Marcus 1992). This shift is
extremely important in understanding local developments in the area during the Late Classic. Indeed after AD 500 the region consisted of several important monument-bearing polities that boasted of international ties (Wanyerka 2005), though archaeological evidence of these relationships is wanting. Materially, there is evidence of economic ties to the Belize Valley, located to the north (Prüfer 2002) and the Western Petén (Braswell 2005). The southern Belize apogee was a time of significant expansion and population growth in the region, and those developments lie outside the scope of this paper. By the 9th century the area was in decline, and there is little evidence of “Postclassic” occupation.

Uxbenká and the settling of southern Belize

Uxbenká (Figure 2) is the oldest known political center in southern Belize, with roots in the latter part of what central Petén chronologies address as the Late Preclassic (ca. 400 B.C.–250 A.D.). While Uxbenká’s rise appears to have been followed by the development of a number of other regional political centers sometime after AD 500, current data suggest that it may have been the only significant site in the region for 250 years. Uxbenká is located in what is today an exceptionally rich agricultural region with easy access to coastal and inland trade routes. The ancient community was situated between several larger polities, including Tikal, Copán, and Caracol. At the time when it was settled, Uxbenká was in a then culturally marginal region. Research from nearby southeastern Petén, Guatemala suggests a geopolitical landscape of competing rural elites, ca 100 - 600 A.D. Southern Belize remained only sparsely settled until after 550-900 A.D., when the region rapidly grew to include at least 10 monument bearing sites and over 100 smaller communities, some of which claimed, in hieroglyphic texts, relationships with cosmopolitan centers including Quirigua and Copán. Figure 2

Our 2006 and 2007 excavations focused on chronology building and the identification of the early components at the site. These excavations were conducted primarily in the main Stela Plaza group (Group A, Figure 3) of the site. Our rationale for focusing on this area was twofold: first, Group A is the location of several pre-500 A.D. stela, the oldest known for southern Belize (Prüfer 2005; Wanyerka 2005) and, second, the other groups with public architecture at the site appear to be post AD 500 constructions, based on architecture (ballcourt complexes) and preliminary observations of looter’s trenches that suggest single phase construction.

During our excavations we documented structural and off-structure contexts that date to prior to 220 A.D. and we feel confident that these represent actual settlements from early in the site’s history. Ceramics recovered from our excavations suggest an occupation sequence through 900 or 950 A.D.
In total, three of the six structures in Group A were excavated with test pits that proceeded to bedrock, illustrating the complete construction sequences of each (Figure 3). A fourth structure (A-5) had been so badly looted that there was no possibility of productive excavation. Figure 3. A profile was drawn of the looter’s pit, and carbon sampled from the profile. Additionally, six excavation units were placed in the plaza floor and excavated to bedrock. The goals of all these excavations were to date the earliest modifications to the hilltop that houses Group A and the earliest phases of construction of buildings.

Radiometric Dating of the Earliest Settlements at Uxbenka

In the eastern and southern end of the plaza excavation units produced AMS radiocarbon assays with 95.4% probably for dates earlier than 350 A.D. Further, excavations placed into structures produced radiocarbon dates as early as 73-211 A.D. (Table 1, KCCAMS # 42825). These dates and related interpretations of stratigraphy allow us to suggest that when initially settled Uxbenka may have been a small agricultural village with residential structures constructed of marl and dirt, possibly capped with thin (now highly degraded) plaster floors. These buildings would have been situated around the perimeter of the hilltop, and possibly inside what was later modified into the stelae plaza. Constructions using cut stone blocks began later, following 350 A.D. based on a date from the profile of the Str. A-5 looter’s pit that was bracketed between the earlier floor of a non-stone building and the later stone construction (Table 1 KCCAMS #33401, Figure XX). This single date is supported by two AMS dates from a test unit adjacent to Str. A-5. There, two carbon samples from stratigraphic layers between plaster floors produced 2° dates that fall within 143-391 A.D. (Table 1, KCCAMS #33403, 33404), suggesting either an earlier dirt platform or floor. It is interesting to note that in the upper levels of this unit diagnostic Protoclassic ceramics were recovered.

It is probable that during this time the Group A Plaza would have undergone significant modification. Excavations in the plaza reveal that what was once an uneven and likely conically shaped hilltop was significantly modified to create the flat open space used as the Stela Plaza. Excavations reveal part of this process. The central, southwestern, and northern portions of the plaza have very shallow fill, ranging from 15-50cm in depth. The soft underlying laminated mudstone bedrock would have been relatively easy to modify and, though quite hard, it tends to fracture easily along lamination planes. The high clay content of the mudstone would have rendered it relatively impermeable to water,
therefore we were not surprised that there was very little pooling of water during torrential rainy season deluges. One clue as to how this plaza drains has emerged from several test units and trenches excavated into the plaza that reveal possible drain channels cut along a N/S axis into the bedrock plaza floor. While these features cannot be directly dated, they likely coincide with the significant post-AD 350 modifications.

A separate indication that this was a time of significant site reorganization and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operation</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Lab #</th>
<th>δ¹³C</th>
<th>σ</th>
<th>¹⁴C age (BP)</th>
<th>±</th>
<th>95.4 (2 σ)</th>
<th>% ²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stela Group Plaza OpA Sub 7 L4</td>
<td>33400</td>
<td>-199.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1790</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>AD 137-259</td>
<td>0.8270</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela Group Plaza OpA Sub 6 L3</td>
<td>33401</td>
<td>-183.9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1635</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>AD 137-259</td>
<td>0.8270</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela Group Plaza OpA Sub 4 L4</td>
<td>33404</td>
<td>-198.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1775</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>AD 143-151</td>
<td>0.0090</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela Group Plaza OpA Sub 4 L5</td>
<td>33403</td>
<td>-193.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1720</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>AD 251-391</td>
<td>0.0090</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela Group Str. A6 Sub 07-3</td>
<td>42805</td>
<td>-190.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1700</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>AD 259-294</td>
<td>0.0090</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela Group Str. A4 Sub 07-2</td>
<td>42806</td>
<td>-193.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1725</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>AD 255-360</td>
<td>0.0090</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela Group Str. A6 Sub 07-3</td>
<td>42807</td>
<td>-192.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1720</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>AD 256-304</td>
<td>0.0090</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela Group Str. A1 Sub 07-5</td>
<td>42808</td>
<td>-193.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1725</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>AD 255-360</td>
<td>0.0090</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela Group Str. A1 Sub 07-5</td>
<td>42809</td>
<td>-169.1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1490</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>AD 545-609</td>
<td>0.0090</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela Group Str. A1 Sub 07-5</td>
<td>42825</td>
<td>-208.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1880</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>AD 73-143</td>
<td>0.8903</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settlement SG21 Str 3 Pit Fea</td>
<td>42810</td>
<td>-156.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1365</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>AD 646-671</td>
<td>1.0000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settlement SG21 Str 3 burial</td>
<td>42811</td>
<td>-147.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1275</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>AD 681-772</td>
<td>1.0000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settlement SG21 Str 1 burial</td>
<td>42824</td>
<td>-198.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1775</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>AD 179-185</td>
<td>0.0051</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNT Cave Wooden Canoe?</td>
<td>33402</td>
<td>-205.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1845</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>AD 90-101</td>
<td>0.0240</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ UCIAMS Kerk Carbon Cycle AMS Facility UC Irvine
³ Relative area under probability distribution

Table 1. AMS Radiocarbon dates from Uxenká. All results have been corrected for isotopic fractionation according to the conventions of Stuiver and Polach (1977), with d13C values measured on prepared graphite using the AMS spectrometer. These can differ from d13C of the original material, if fractionation occurred during sample graphitization or the AMS measurement, and are not shown.
landscape modification comes from a 17m long trench excavated in front of (west) Str. A-6 in 2006. This excavation revealed a low, 1-2 course sandstone wall seemingly unassociated with any extant architecture. A single AMS date from the base of this wall suggests it may have been constructed sometime between 137-323 A.D. (2°, Table 1, KCCAMS # 33400). This wall parallels but is located below the western edge of Str. A-6. In addition to the wall, several large flat sandstone pavers were found directly on leveled bedrock, suggesting modification of the plaza and an early floor placed directly on bedrock.

Excavations within structures in Group A also produced pre 250 A.D. dates and artifacts. These excavations suggest that (a) the earliest buildings at Uxbenka appear between 75-350 A.D., and most likely between 75-200 A.D. (Figure 4); (b) the earliest buildings lacked any significant stone or masonry in their construction, though they have thin plaster floors; (c) stone sub- and superstructures likely appear after 350 A.D. (d) these buildings show no evidence of any significant architectural remodeling (though they were frequently plastered); and (e) these early buildings were used into the ninth century.

Test units were placed into three buildings, A-1, A-4, and A-6 and excavated to bedrock. In all buildings there was evidence of burning in the very lowest levels suggesting preparation of the building surface or clearing activities prior to construction. In Str. A-1, a triadic E-Group style pyramid in the plaza, a series of 2x2 and 2x4 meter units were placed into the eastern flank. These revealed that much of the superstructure of the eastern side of the building was in fact shaped bedrock and that was modified through leveling and addition of a stone façade to give the appearance of a monumental construction. Below a large section of wall collapse that may have marked an interior room or chamber we found a well preserved inset stairway flanked by balustrades, characteristic of Preclassic architecture in the central Petén (Freidel 1979), albeit diminutive in size. The most numerous artifacts associated with the stairway were fragments of crude flanged and effigy JGU censers characteristic of Late Classic (500-850 A.D.) Belize Valley and central Petén elite contexts (Rice 1999:38-391; Taschek and Ball 1999: 220). At the base (landing) of the stairway, between two layers of plaster flooring a large deposit of carbonized wood fragments produced a date of 545-609 A.D. (2°, Table 1, KCCAMS # 42809), consistent with the ceramic deposits and later monument dates (Wanyerka 2005). Excavation into the eastern flank of the platform between two structures revealed degraded plaster floors with no stone constructions underneath them; and mixed fill below this produced two dates from small areas of burnt soils between 200 and 230 cm from the final use surface. One of these samples dated to 73-211 A.D. (2°, Table 1, KCCAMS # 42825) with a further .8903 likelihood of dating to between 73 and 143 A.D. making it the earliest known building in southern Belize. The second dates to 255-381 A.D. (2°, Table 1, KCCAMS # 42808) with a .9016 probability under the distribution of dating ranging 255-360 A.D. These suggest that the practice of building with stone on Str. A-1 did not begin until after the middle of the 4th century AD, well into the central Petén Early Classic period.

The Str. A-1 dates are supported by and can be extrapolated to the rest of the plaza based on excavations into structures A-4 and A-6. In both structures excavation units were placed into the summits and excavated to bedrock. Both units revealed stratigraphy suggesting that single phase construction stone platforms were placed
over earlier plaster topped dirt and rubble platforms. Further, at the base of each of these excavations areas of burning were encountered indicating possible clearing activities preparing for the initial building events or possibly dedicatory activities.

Generally, few artifacts were found in either of these excavations. Eroded censer fragments as well as diagnostic Fine Orange wares were found in upper levels within the stone construction and rubble fill, suggesting use after 500 A.D. A rim-to-base fragment of an orange slipped basal flange bowl characteristic of the central Petén Tzakol phase gloss wares was found in situ below the stone construction layers but above the early platform floors, suggesting an AD 250-500, or later, date for the cut-stone construction.  

In Str. A-4 a single AMS radiocarbon date was run from level 9, 260cm below the building summit and at the interface of degraded bedrock and the earliest construction. The sample came from a 1-2cm thick charcoal and ash layer that extended across the entire 1x2m unit (the excavation was larger when opened, but tapered below 150cmbd). The layer dates to 255-381 A.D. (Table 1, KCCAMS # 42806), an identical date to one of the early dates in Str. A-1 (Table 1, KCCAMS # 42808). In Str. A-6 two AMS samples date the interface between the earliest plaster floors and fill from later construction. Those dates suggest use of the earliest building at 259-402 A.D. (Table 1, KCCAMS # 42805) and 256-384 A.D. (Table 1, KCCAMS # 42807).

Discussion  

The data presented here suggest that Uxbenká was established sometime after AD 70 and persisted for at least two centuries as a small hilltop village complex. While the exact size of the founding community remains under investigation, current data indicates it was centered at the existing Group A plaza. The Group A hilltop is an ideal location for initial settlements in the region. The hilltop is defensible (though we have no evidence of conflict) and commands a view over the Rio Blanco Valley, is located adjacent to lands that are the most fertile and desirable for both slash and burn and mulching agriculture by modern Mopan Maya residents of the region, and is proximate to year round water supplies. Today, local farmers vie for access to these lands immediately surrounding the site which are favored for both milpa (slash and burn) and matambre (mulching) agriculture, allowing for two or more corn crops each year. In the small valley below Groups A and F farmers typically grow two crops of corn per year, and have marked this area on a local mapping project as the location of most productive lands (TMCC 1997). The hilltop is located near to several freshwater springs and a year-round creek.
While settlement excavations at Uxbenká are just beginning, a small residential group on a nearby hilltop produced a crypt burial dated 179-185 A.D. (2°, Table 1, KCCAMS # 42824) in a dirt mound that was likely later faced with stone. That residential group continued to be used through the 8th century based on dates from a burial in an adjacent residential structure (681-772 A.D., 2°, Table 1 KCCAMS # 42811) and a midden (646-671 A.D., 2°, Table 1 KCCAMS # 42810).

These same criteria that made this region favorable for early settlement would have continued to make this an ideal location for later developments at the site. Around 400 A.D. Group A underwent significant reorganization, including landscape modification, to its current configuration. Whether these later expansions represent an intrusive force entering the region or local adoption of regional developments is not yet known. This time period corresponds with the first dressed stone buildings (at least three of which were built atop earlier architecture), the first monumental architecture, and the first dated carved monuments (Stela 23 records an Initial Series date of 9.1.0.0.0 6 Ajaw 13 Yaxkin, 25, August 455, Prufer and Wanyerka 2005). It also likely represents a fundamental shift in the Group A plaza from a village settlement to a public ceremonial space.

Acknowledgements We are grateful to the Belize Institute of Archaeology, the people of Belize, and the residents and community governance of Santa Cruz Village for permission to work at Uxbenká. Funding for this project has come from the National Science Foundation, the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. and the University of New Mexico. Special thanks to Brendan Culleton, Amber Hardin, Richard Leventhal, Lillian Richards, Jack Sulak, and Phil Wanyerka.

Reference Cited


Freidel, David A. 1979 Culture Areas and Interaction Spheres: Contrasting Approaches to the Emergence of Civilization in the Maya Lowland American Antiquity, 44(1): 36-54.

Graham, Elizabeth A. 1994 Highlands of the Lowlands: Environment and Archaeology in the Stann Creek District, Belize, Central America Prehistory Press, Madison


Joyce, Thomas A., J. Cooper Clark, and J. E. Thompson

Joyce, Thomas A., T. Gann, E.L Gruning and R.C.E. Long

Laporte, Juan Pedro

Laporte, Juan Pedro and Carmen E. Ramos

Leventhal, Richard

Marcus, J.

McKillop, Heather
2005 In Search of Maya Sea Traders Texas A & M University Press, College Station

Pruter, Keith M.
2002 Communities, Caves and Ritual Specialists: A Study of Sacred Space in the Maya Mountains of Southern Belize, Doctoral dissertation, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Department of Anthropology.

Pruter, Keith M., Andrew Kindon and Phillip Wanyerka

Pruter, Keith M. and Philip J. Wanyerka
2005 A New Early Classic Stela from Uxenka, Belize. Mexico xxxii(6): 102-103

Rice, Prudence M.

Stuiver, M., and Polach, H. A.

Stuiver, M., and Reimer, P. J.

TMCC (Toledo Maya Cultural Council)

Taschek, Jennifer and Joseph Ball

Wanyerka, Phillip