

24 *SHIFTING DYNAMICS AND USE OF SPACE AT UXBENKÁ*

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The Classic Period Maya site of Uxbenká has a dispersed settlement system extending over 4km² with almost 60 documented household groups. Excavations at three large settlement groups (Group L, SG 25, and SG 37) suggest changing functions of large residential and administrative compounds during an 800 year occupation. We explore the variation between architecture and assemblages in each group. Shifting use of residential to public space, along with various landscape alteration and construction are also considered in the context of agricultural potential, water availability, and viewshed. Comparisons may demonstrate chronological, functional, or wealth differences between household groups, perhaps related to proximity to the elite site core.

Introduction

Variations between artifacts and architectural features within households can indicate differentiation in social status and power within a community. This paper examines three ancient household groups from throughout the Classic period (AD 250 – 900) site of Uxbenká, in the Toledo District of southern Belize. By comparing the architectural features and material goods present in domestic areas, we can examine the ways in which the social status of households changed over time in relationship to household function, why certain households were able to gain and maintain power over others, and the dynamic nature of relationships between households at the site. Uxbenká is an ideal area for studying the development and continued presence of social hierarchies, as it is the earliest and longest-occupied Maya center in southern Belize, with evidence of occupation from the Late Preclassic (BC 400 – AD 250) up through the Terminal Classic (AD 800/900 – AD 1000).

Uxbenká is a mid-sized Classic Maya polity, located in the foothills of the Maya Mountains in southern Belize. It is geographically circumscribed by the Maya Mountains to the west, pine barrens to the north, the Caribbean Sea to the east, and swampy bajos to the south. Nearby Maya centers in southern Belize include Pusilhá, Lubaantun, Nim Li Punit, and Xnaheb, situated roughly along a southwest to northeast axis running along a fertile upland ridge (Figure 1). Investigations into the political and economic interactions between the Maya polities of southern Belize are currently being undertaken by various

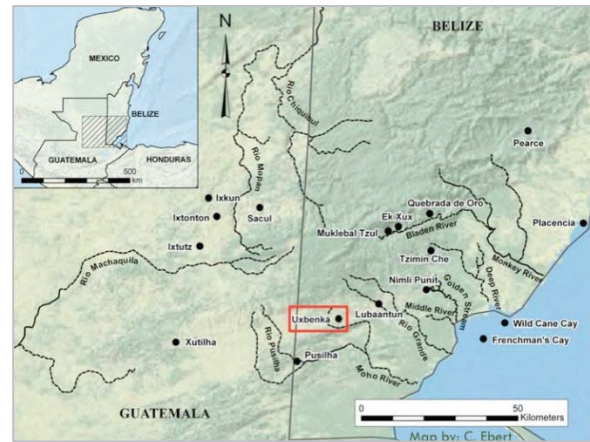


Figure 1. Map of the southern Belize region with the location of Uxbenká.

archaeological projects (Braswell and Prufer 2009). The spatial relationship between these sites, a shared carved stela traditions, their associations with distant centers (such as Tikal during the Early Classic), and similarities in architecture (e.g., lack of corbel vaults) suggest similar histories (Leventhal 1990, 1992; Braswell and Prufer 2009). Nevertheless, differences in ceramic assemblages and density of architecture in site cores have been suggested by Braswell and Prufer (2009) and others (Fauvelle 2012) to indicate a general lack of political affiliation between these sites.

While southern Belize has yielded Archaic Period artifacts, the earliest evidence of settled villages in the region is found in the Middle Preclassic (1000 BC – 400 BC) phase at Uxbenká (Prufer et al. 2011). Evidence of human occupation is present in paleosols of agricultural fields dating to the Middle Preclassic (Culleton 2009, 2010). Small household platforms were present at Uxbenká in

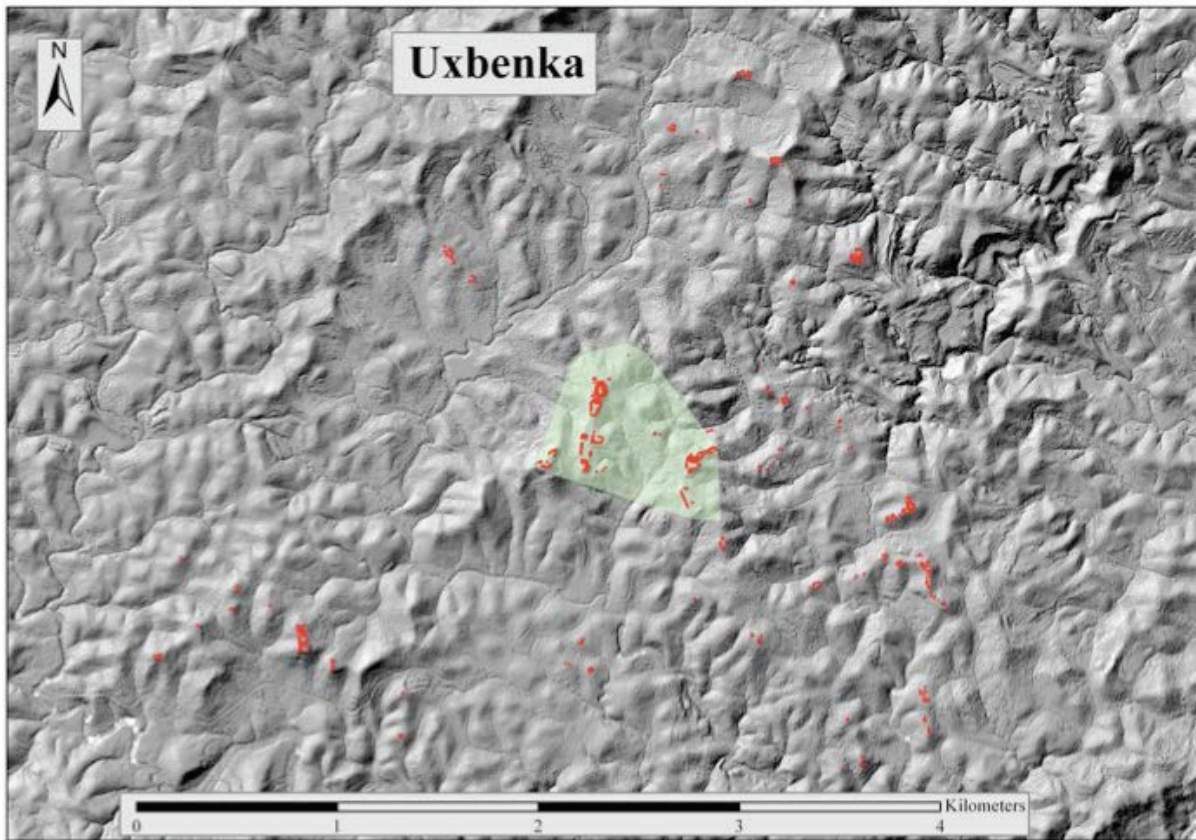


Figure 2. Location of settlement groups associated with Uxbenká.

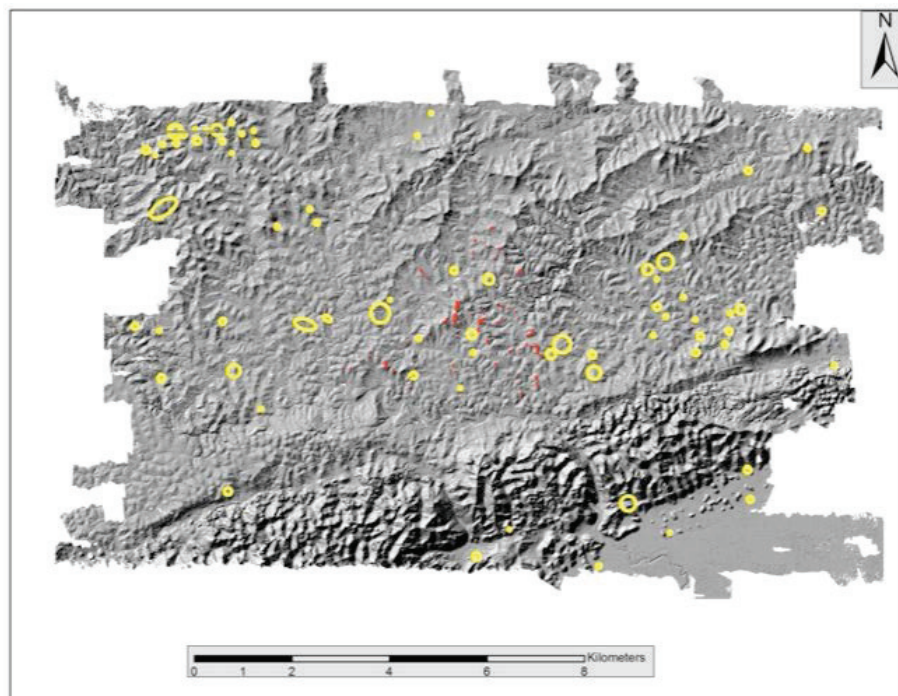


Figure 3. Proposed locations of un-surveyed settlement groups based on LiDAR data.

Group A, and Settlement Groups (SG) 18, 20, and 21 beginning in the Late Preclassic (Schrag 2008; Prufer et al. 2011). Large-scale hilltop modifications occurred in Group G prior to AD 80, suggesting organized construction works and investment of resources during the Late Preclassic (Thompson and Trask 2012).

The Early Classic (AD 250 - 600) was a time of population growth and centralization of the administrative areas at Uxbenká (Prufer et al. 2011). The site core expanded, as the first monumental constructions were completed in Groups A, B and D. The presence of elite residential areas at Group I, Group F, and SG 25 indicates that higher degrees of social and political variation were present among the residents of Uxbenká during the Early Classic period. The development of a heterarchical nodal power structure is evident, as the clusters of elite buildings at Group I and SG 25 are located approximately 2 km away from the site core, while Group F is located within the administrative area of Uxbenká. The Late Classic period included continued building episodes in the site core and increasing numbers of households in the peripheral areas. Continued expansion of populations in the hinterlands occurred during this period (Prufer et al. 2011). While the last dated monument at the site bears a date of AD 780, radiocarbon dating at SG 37 and SG 42 indicates that people were residing around Uxbenká through the Terminal Classic and possibly into the Postclassic period.

Recent Settlement Survey and the Use of LiDAR

Ongoing settlement survey and excavations have been a priority of the Uxbenká Archaeological Project (UAP) and are key to understanding the variations within and between domestic areas. To date, over 60 household groups have been identified (Figure 2) (Ebert et al. 2012), with archaeological testing occurring in the majority of these ancient house groups (Kalosky and Prufer 2012: 261). The intensive settlement survey undertaken by Ethan Kalosky and colleagues (see Kalosky and Ebert 2009, 2010; Kalosky and Prufer 2010, 2012; Kalosky et al. 2011; Kalosky et al. 2012) has been that settlements at Uxbenká are dispersed across the landscape, and situated entirely on hilltops.

Groups range in size from one or two buildings to groups with more than two dozen buildings situated among multiple *plazuelas*, and are located up to 2km from the site core. The architectural complexity of residential spaces also varies throughout the settled region at Uxbenká. Some households have simple, low-lying platforms with one or two courses of stone, while others have stepped platforms, walls consisting of several courses of cut stones, central stairways, and large connected patios. It does not appear that distance to the site core has any impact on the size of settlement groups or the architectural complexity of buildings, suggesting that households groups may have functioned as their own nodes of power, rather than being centrally controlled by the elite site core. Earle (1991) has proposed that the primary way emerging elites in chiefdoms mobilize labor and control resources is through property rights. This may be the case at Uxbenká where the occupants of large settlement groups represented local nodes authority.

In addition to understanding the variations in settlements located near the Uxbenká center and in the immediate hinterland, secondary sites located near Uxbenká have the potential to provide insight into fluctuating nature and location of power at the site. In 2011, UAP acquired Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) imagery for an area of approximately 135 km² around the site core of Uxbenká. LiDAR has also been used with great success at other sites in Belize, namely Caracol (Chase et al. 2011). The LiDAR data revealed several new settlement groups (Figure 3), as well as an outlying center that was previously unknown to UAP. The location of these sites will be ground-truthed in upcoming field seasons. Among the largest of the secondary sites identified is Ix Kukuh'il, located 6.7 km northwest of the Uxbenká site core (Figure 4). According to local sources, archaeologists investigated Ix Kukuh'il in the early 1990s, but information about the site was never formally reported. Therefore, UAP undertook a one-day reconnaissance of the site, which appeared to be a minor center. The site's primary plaza is larger than Uxbenká's Stela Plaza (Group A), measuring 108 m north-south while Uxbenká's Stela Plaza is approximately 85 m in diameter.

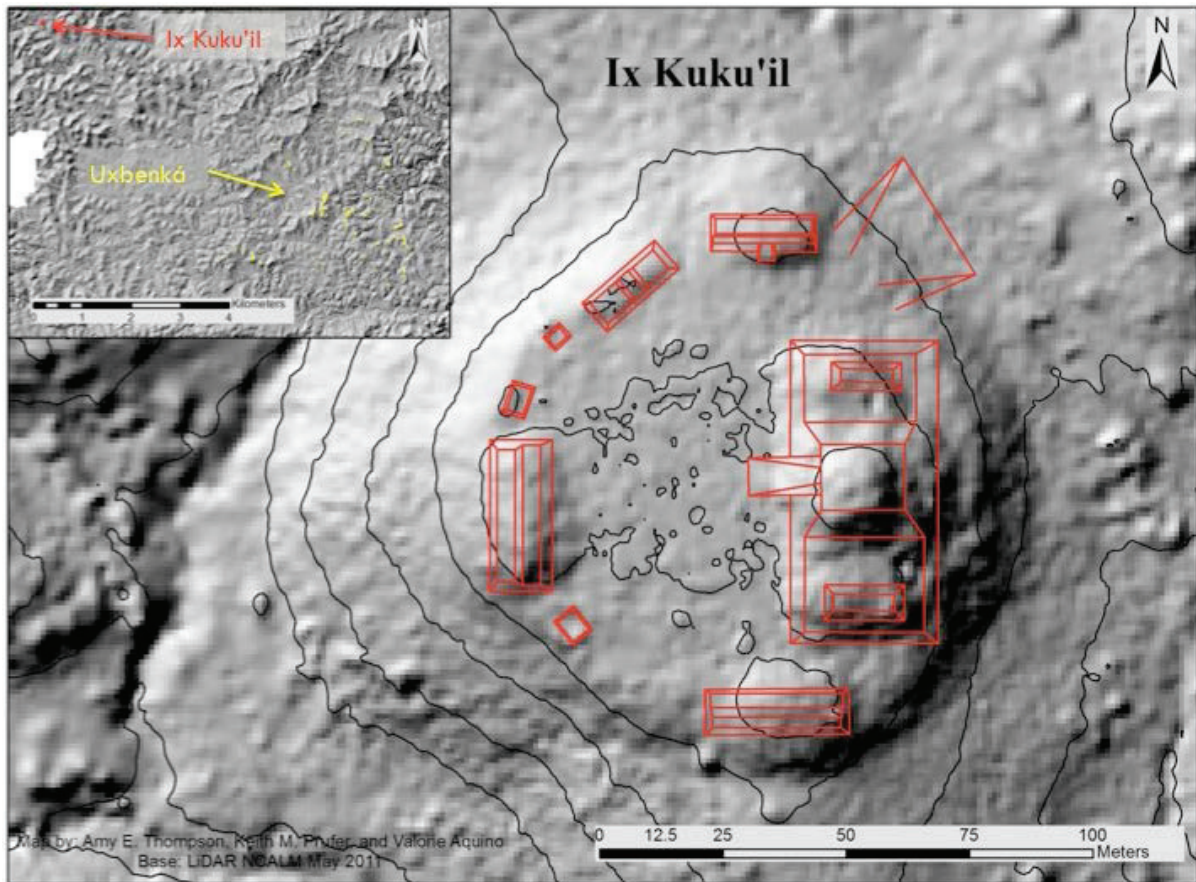


Figure 4. The location of Ix Kuku'il (inset) and plan view of the main plaza of Ix Kuku'il.

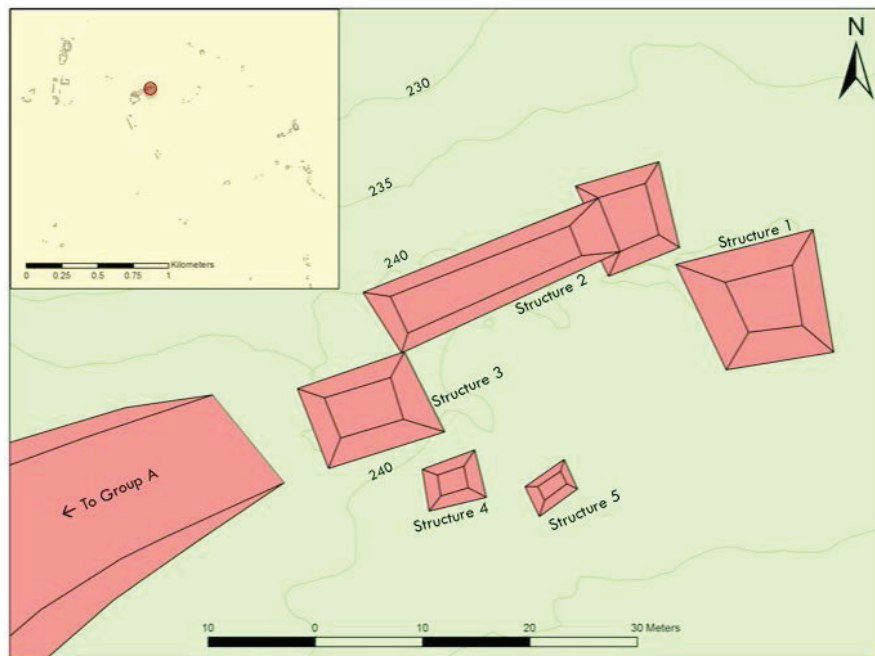


Figure 5. The location of Group Lin relation to the Uxbenká site core (inset) and plan view of Group L.

A single, uncarved stela measuring 4.2 m in length was located on the western edge of the plaza at Ix Kukuh'il. LiDAR data also showed several architectural groups on the hills surrounding Ix Kukuh'il. These sites present opportunities for future research on the populations at this smaller outlying center, and their interactions with both the occupants of Uxbenká and the broader region of the Maya lowlands.

Excavations in household groups located in the hinterlands of Uxbenká have been ongoing since 2008. In addition, in 2011 and 2012 test units were placed in areas hypothesized to be elite residential spaces, based on their architectural elaboration and proximity to the site core. The remainder of this paper will focus on the results from excavations in three residential areas: Group L, SG 25, and SG 37. These three residential groups date to different periods of occupation at Uxbenká. Excavations at Group L yielded Sierra Red ceramics suggesting Late Preclassic/Protoclassic occupations in several of the house mounds, as well as cream-colored polychromes, indicating Late/Terminal Classic activity in Tomb L2. SG 25 has produced two radiocarbon dates from the late 4th century AD and contained several polychrome sherds, suggesting late Early Classic through Late/Terminal Classic occupations. SG 37 dates to the Late/Terminal Classic based on 2- σ calibrated radiocarbon dates.

Group L

Group L is situated approximately 200 m east of Group A, the Stela Plaza. A freshwater spring is located 150 m south of Group L, providing year-round access to water (Kalosky and Prufer 2012). The close proximity of Group L to the Uxbenká site core and the presence of large, formally constructed house mounds up to 3 m in height in the group suggest that Group L served as a residential space for elites at Uxbenká, since most house mounds are relatively small in size (see proposed typology in Kalosky and Ebert 2009; Kalosky and Ebert 2010). Being located downhill from Group A, it lacks the viewshed of other areas at Uxbenká. Especially significant is the lack of a view of the administrative complexes associated with Groups B through F. However, certain

ideologically prominent areas are visible from Group L, including the important nearby ceremonial site of Kayuko Cave and a large cleft in a nearby cliff face. These two local landmarks both carry connotations of the underworld.

Group L was initially identified in 2006 as an elite residential area (Prufer 2007). During the 2012 field season, excavations at Group L focused on examining each structure located within the group with the exception of Structure 5, which had been almost entirely destroyed by looting activity. The five structures in the group are arranged around a formal plaza, with Structures 2, 3, and 4 restricting accesses from the Stela Plaza (Figure 5). Excavations in Structures 1 and 2 found evidence of extensive landscape modification. Bedrock in these excavations was covered with fill, representing an episode during which the early occupants of Group L enlarged the plaza by raising the slopes of the natural hill with crushed mudstone bedrock (*nib*) before architectural construction took place. The architecture in the group consists of stone platforms with packed dirt fill and floors; no plaster floors are present in Group L. The highest building is approximately 3 m tall from the plaza floor and the smallest building is approximately 0.5 m in height.

Excavations and survey in 1989 by Dr. Richard Leventhal (1990, 1992) identified a looted tomb in Group L. This tomb was documented by UAP as Tomb L1 in 2012. The tomb contained a stepped entryway; the unusually high level of formal construction in this feature suggests an increased amount of investment in commemorating the deceased. During the 2012 field season, two previously unknown tombs were also located in Group L, designated Tomb L2 and Tomb L3. Tomb L2 is located in Structure 2, in the same range structure as Tomb L1. Tombs L1 and L2 have the most complex architecture of any burials investigated at Uxbenká, including stepped entryways leading down into the burial chambers. Tomb L2 contained multiple individuals and vessels with complex intermixing of stratigraphic relationships. Ongoing analysis by project osteologist Willa Trask is focused on determining the exact nature of the tomb contents. Tomb L3, is located in

Structure 1 of Group L. Tomb L3 was excavated into the bedrock and then covered with cut-stone architecture. The interment contained two whole vessels, which appear to be of early, possibly Late Preclassic, ceramic styles, while the ceramics in Tomb L2 included a cream-slipped tripod vessel typical of the Late/Terminal Classic (Foias 1996). The simpler, earlier Tomb L3 can be contrasted with the more complex and later Tombs L1 and L2, suggests increasing labor investment in the final resting places of the residents of Group L, which reflects an enhanced social status of the residents over time.

While burial contexts can be informative, other types of deposits in residential structures can provide different types of evidence for the social status of ancient occupants. Features located within Structure 1 included a layer of ritually smashed vessels between two layers of rocks. An inverted *olla* and a lip-to-lip cache of Preclassic style Sierra Red vessels were found in this deposit (Figure 6a and Figure 6b). Another deposit, located directly on top of the bedrock in Structure 1 contained broken ceramics, several intact *candelarios*, and charcoal; this deposit is suggestive of household based ritual activities.

Evidence for the presence of high- status individuals at Group L includes both high-quality utilitarian items not found in smaller households at Uxbenká, as well as more prestigious goods. Shells beads (Figure 7a), jade bead fragments, a bone lip plug (Figure 7b), polychrome ceramics, a possible chocolate spout from a vessel, and ceramic figurines (Figure 7c) suggest elevated social status among the residents of Group L. Exotic goods such as conch (Figure 7d) and other marine shells and jade indicate long distance trade or perhaps elite control of craft production. In a comparable case at San Lorenzo, Yaeger and Robin (2004) suggest that the people who resided in the larger households were involved with the production of marine shell items (see also Webster [1989] at Copan and Aoyama [2005, 2007] at Aguateca). The presence of these exotic goods and the rarity of their presence among commoners indicate status differences between elite structures and other San Lorenzo residential spaces (Yaeger and Robin 2004). Similar trends may exist at Uxbenká. Large amounts of obsidian blades,



Figure 6a. *In situ* Sierra Red lip-to-lip cache in Group L Structure 1.



Figure 6b. Reconstructed vessel from the Sierra Red lip-to-lip cache from Group L Structure 1.

flakes, and core fragments, chert debitage with cortex, *jute* shells, and ceramics were found in the fill of Structure 1, suggesting the possible presence of elite artisans or local craft producers such as those discussed at the palace of Aguateca (Aoyama 2007:19). Structures 2, 3, and 4 contained significantly less debitage and debris, indicating a difference in function between these structures and Structure 1. Archaeologists have often noted a relationship between developments in craft specialization and the emergence of elites (Brumfiel and Earle 1987). Ideology legitimates elite power and authority, and is expressed through the possession and display of specialized items



Figure 7a. A shell bead from Group L Structure 1.



Figure 7c. A ceramic figurine from Group L Structure 1.



Figure 7b. A bone lip plug from Group L Structure 1.



Figure 7d. A conch shell from Group L Structure 1.

crafted from exotic raw materials or produced using complex technologies (Peregrine 1991).

SG 25

SG 25 was identified during the 2008 field season (Kalosky and Ebert 2009). The wide, bowl-shaped hill contains 36 structures and four formal *plazuela* groups (Figure 8). SG 25 is one of three architectural groups defined as a Type 5, the largest group, according to Kalosky and Prufer's (2012) settlement typology. A nearby river, locally known as the *Ha'il Ch'eb*, provides year-round access to water in this area and may have made this an ideal location for settlement

(Kalosky and Ebert 2009). SG 25 is located 1.3 km from the Group A Stela Plaza. The cleft in the cliff face and Kayuko Cave, both of which were ideologically important to the ancient inhabitants of Uxbenká, are visible from SG 25, as are the Uxbenká site core and the surrounding hinterlands. Currently, it is known that this group has a late Early Classic occupation based on two radiocarbon dates; one sample was taken from 90 cm below datum in Structure 15 (UCIAMS- 57043) and the other from Structure 8 (UCIAMS- 105374). The 2- σ calibrated date ranges for these dates are AD 546 - 618

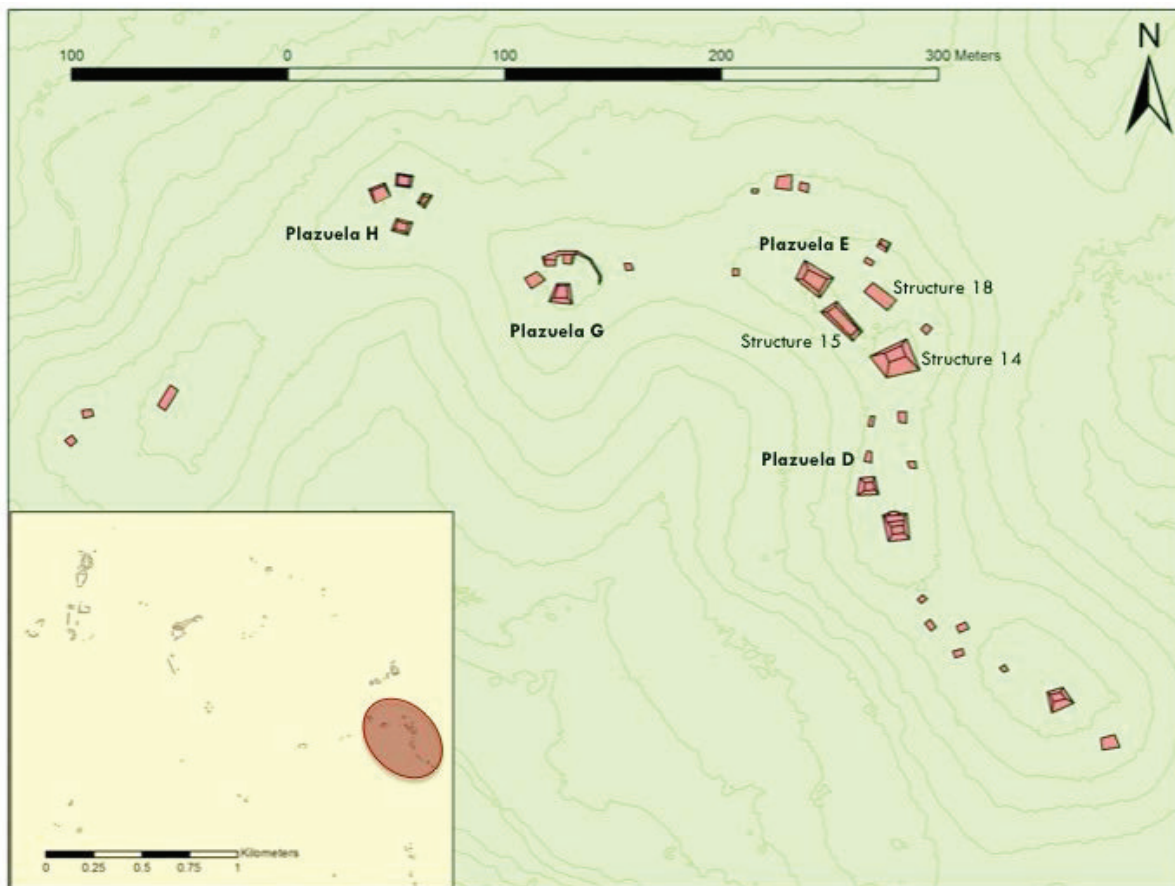


Figure 8. The location of SG 25 in relation to the Uxbenká site core (inset) and plan view of SG 25.

(UCIAMS- 57043) and AD 537 – 608 (UCIAMS – 105374). In addition to the C14 samples that reflect a late Early Classic occupation, the presence of cream-colored polychrome ceramics suggests a Late/Terminal Classic occupation as well. Architectural complexity varies throughout SG 25, from low-lying single course platforms, to stepped buildings and buildings with central stairways, and structures with multiple courses of stone architecture. Excavations during the 2012 field season focused on Plazuela E (Structures 14-18; Figure 8) and revealed architectural elaboration not present in other household groups at Uxbenká. For example, SG 25 Structure 18 has a central stairway leading up to a platform and a smaller platform on top. Early occupation and construction at the group, however, was likely small-scale. Structure 18 possessed a posthole cut into the bedrock, suggesting that a perishable structure was present prior to the construction of

the terminal building phase. Excavations in Structures 18 and 15 found steep slopes in the natural bedrock, with boulder fill used to raise and widen the original hilltop. Though initial construction of the structures in SG 25 was small and may have not required much labor investment, it seems that a considerable amount of labor was focused on leveling out the site before large scale construction took place.

Further elaboration of architecture at SG 25 is visible in looter's trenches in Structure 14, which uncovered multiple masonry walls, atypical of Maya architecture in southern Belize (Braswell and Prufer 2009). The multiple construction phases of large boulder construction fill, packed cobble fill, eroded plaster floors, and finally possible masonry superstructure, reflect a great deal of labor investment at Structure 14. Artifacts recovered from Structure 14 during 2008 salvage excavations included jade artifacts, inlaid teeth,

a starburst bone pendant, and bone beads (Trask 2009). This investment, combined with the large size of Structure 14, leads us to believe that it may have functioned as an outlying temple for the elite residents of SG 25.

Salvage excavations of several looted tombs in SG 25 occurred during the 2008 field season and four new burial features were identified during the 2012 field season. These excavations found variations in the patterns of interment and status indicators of SG 25 residents. Burials vary from inhumations under benches and informal cists, to stone slab-lined crypts and formal tombs with cut stone architecture. The majority of tombs are located in buildings in the western *plazuelas* and typically have a north-south orientation. While most structures contained a single burial feature, Structure 15 contained at least two and possibly three different types of burials: one informal inhumation, one stone-lined crypt, and one possible formal tomb which will be investigated during the 2013 field season. The informal inhumation was located approximately 20-30 cm beneath the surface and contained high densities of broken ceramics and lithic debitage (Figure 9a). The stone-lined crypt did not contain human remains, but had two broken polychrome vessels (Figure 9b and Figure 9c). The body may have been removed during antiquity or the ceramic vessels may have been cached in place of the interred individual. The variation in burial styles at SG 25 suggests the presence of both high and low status individuals, while the time and labor involved in interments indicate the generally elevated status of SG 25 residents.

During the 2008 field season, artifacts found in Plazuela E included a jade-inlaid tooth and polychrome pottery. The presence of these items, which are unusual in households at Uxbenká, encouraged us to readdress this domestic group. During the 2012 excavations, utilitarian items found at Plazuela E included chert, obsidian, ceramics, hammerstones, and mano and metate fragments. Items indicative of higher status included polychrome pottery, jade bead fragments, figurines, and a jade plaque with a *kinich ahau* face carved into it (Figure 10). As at SG 37 and Group L, the presence of exotic items such as marine shell and jade indicate that the residents of this area had access



Figure 9a. Inhumation burial located in SG 25 Structure 15.



Figure 9b. Stone-lined crypt located in SG 25 Structure 15.

to more distant trade goods than other households at Uxbenká, which lack these items. Unusually high concentrations of chert cores, flakes, and flakes with cortex suggest intensive production of expedient tools, which dominate the Uxbenká lithic assemblages. The analysis of artifacts from the 2008 and 2012 field seasons will provide further insight into these



Figure 9c. Reconstructed polychrome vessel recovered from within the stone-lined crypt in SG 25 Structure 15.



Figure 10. Jade carved kinich ahau face.

preliminary conclusions regarding the social status of SG 25 residents.

Excavations in 2008 were performed in different areas throughout SG 25 and suggest differences in household wealth based on variations in architectural elaboration and the artifact types recovered throughout the mound group. Plazuela E's complex architecture and the high frequency of prestige goods set it apart from the other *plazuelas* in SG 25, which lack the prestigious items of Plazuela E and have significantly smaller platform footprints; Plazuela E has a footprint of just over 640 m²,

while the buildings of Plazuela D have a footprint of about 250 m². Plazuela E may have been the initial settlement of SG 25 and acting as a center for local elites as others continued to settle along the ridge.

SG 37

SG 37 was identified during the 2008 field season, and consists of seven structures arranged along the slope of a small, elongated ridge (Kalosky and Ebert 2009; Kalosky et al. 2012). SG 37 is located approximately 300 m east of the Group A Stela Plaza on an adjacent ridgetop. While no overall formal arrangement is noted for the group, Structures 1, 5, and 7 sit at the highest point on the ridge and bound an informal plaza space. The focus of inquiry at SG 37 was the largest structures in the group (Structures 1, 5, and 6). Structures 1 and 6 were also chosen for excavation, due to prior disturbance by looting activity (Figure 11). The location of the group, architectural styles, and artifacts recovered suggest a strong association between SG 37 and the Stela Plaza. Excavations in 2011 by Claire Ebert focused on Structures 1 and 5 located in the main plaza, and Structure 6 to the east.

The majority of household architecture at SG 37 consisted of the low platform mounds typical of households at Uxbenká. Foundational alignments were well-defined in some instances (e.g., Structure 5). Examples of more formal architecture include a north-south aligned tomb uncovered during salvage excavations within Structure 1. The tomb was first excavated into bedrock at a depth of 1.5 m below ground surface, packed with loose fill, and then faced with a single course of cut stone blocks. Similar construction was partially visible at the exposed edge of another looted tomb in Structure 6. Artifacts recovered from these contexts include prestige goods such as a jade ear spool (Figure 12), a small jade nugget, a polished black stone bead, and polychrome pottery sherds. The construction of the tomb is similar to those located in the Stela Plaza (Leventhal 1990, 1992) and other larger settlement groups (e.g., Group L) at Uxbenká (Kalosky et al. 2011). The greater formality of the architecture at SG 37 compared to other settlement groups suggests a greater investment of time and labor in its

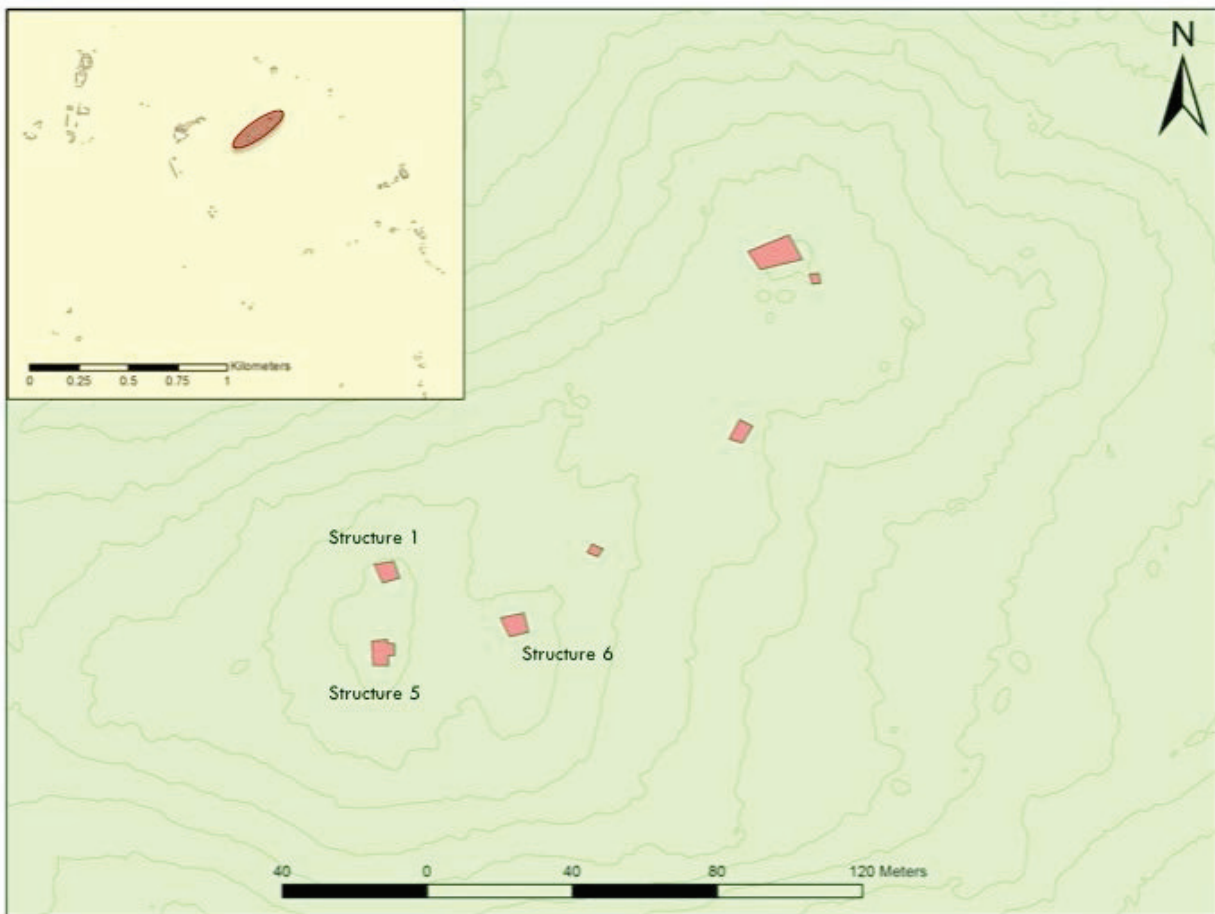


Figure 11. The location of SG 37 in relation to the Uxbenká site core (inset) and plan view of SG 37.

construction, a characteristic consistent with identification as an elite residential group.

Most of the ceramics from SG 37 were sherds from utilitarian coarse-ware vessels. Diagnostic features in this assemblage included thick walls with *bas-relief* designs such as concentric rings, round bulbous appliqué or circular holes. Remnants of *incensarios* associated with other prestige goods and fragments of fine-ware polychrome ceramics were also recovered from salvage excavations in an associated looted tomb. The presence of high quality polychromes and other vessels associated with ritual activity suggest that the inhabitants of SG 37 were on the higher end of the socioeconomic spectrum, or that they had access to a broader economic network than other inhabitants of the Uxbenká polity.

The lithic assemblage from SG 37 is comprised of items produced from both local

and exotic materials. Locally produced artifacts include chert tools (primarily retouched flakes and cores), with cortex present on more than 50% of the total assemblage. This suggests local material acquisition and expedient tool production. An abundance of chert debitage and tools recovered from Structure 7 was associated with a small ground-stone celt that exhibits evidence of battering. It is hypothesized that the western portion of the main plaza may have functioned as a household lithic production area. An eccentric chert biface (15.2cm x 12cm), shaped into an axe blade and associated with a shallow *incensario*, was recovered from excavations in Structure 5. No other eccentric bifaces have been found at Uxbenká, and the presence of this artifact type may be related to changing occupation patterns or settlement group function. The exotic portion of the lithic assemblage was composed entirely of obsidian

items, slightly over 60% of which were finished blades. All but one of these artifacts was chemically sourced to the El Chayal source (Nazaroff and Prufer 2012). The presence of large numbers of finished obsidian tools indicates the continuity of trade through the Late and Terminal Classic at Uxbenká.

Two radiocarbon samples were recovered from 90 cm below datum, directly below the east wall of the patio feature on the east side of Structure 5. These samples were associated with a concentration of smashed ceramics found at the outside corner of the patio, also located beneath the east wall. The deposition of these ceramics is interpreted as having taken place before the construction of the building. The 2- σ calibrated date ranges for these dates are AD 684-780 (UCIAMS-102521) and AD 685-806 (UCIAMS-105382). SG 37 is currently the only settlement at Uxbenká with dates extending into the Terminal Classic Period (Kalosky et al. 2012). Previous ^{14}C dates place the main period of occupation at the Uxbenká site core and surrounding settlements prior to AD 780. The latest major construction activity in Group A (a re-plastering event) took place sometime between AD 550-770, just prior to the placement of Stela 15 (AD 780). A modeled stratigraphic sequence for SG 37 places the construction of Structure 5 contemporaneous with final construction activities at Group D between AD 680-870 (Culleton et al. 2012).

The presence of large amount of prestige items at SG 37 indicates that at least some wealthy families retained access to wider social and economic networks in this later period, with prestige and trade items serving as a form of wealth used to maintain sociopolitical status into and after the Terminal Classic. Some researchers have argued for a more protracted sociopolitical disintegration and the persistence of local populations long after the dynastic collapse in several regions based on evidence from household contexts (Webster et al. 2004). The last recorded long count date at the Uxbenká site core (AD 780, Stela 15, Group A) is thought to mark the decline of elite authority and the decentralization of the political economy at the site. This is consistent with the termination of epigraphic records at other sites in southern Belize, starting first at Pusilhá (AD 731) and

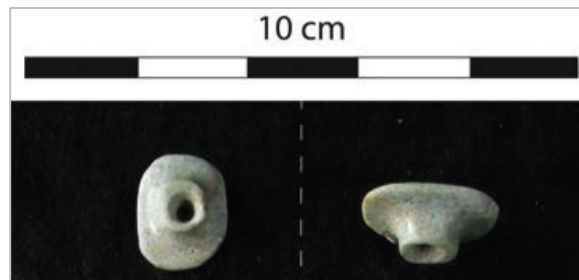


Figure 12. Jade ear spool from salvage excavations of a looted tomb in SG 37 Structure 6.

then extending northeast towards Nim Li Punit (AD 810). This pattern suggests a relatively rapid regional collapse, but work on settlements associated with these centers has been minimal. About half of the probability distribution of the modeled age for Structure 5 at SG 37 (based on a cumulative probability analysis) falls after AD 780 and suggests that this elite residential unit persisted for a short time after the Uxbenká dynasty lost control of the polity. However, dating is poorly constrained and requires additional work.

Comparisons between Residential Groups

Group L, SG 25, and SG 37 vary in their proximity to the site core, as well as their physical size. Comparing the combined footprints of buildings within each group, it is obvious that SG 25 is the largest at 1538 m². Plazuela E of SG 25 has a footprint of 641 m², which is larger than the footprint of Group L at 426 m² and the footprint of SG 37, which is the smallest with a footprint of 207 m² (Figure 13). The variations in architecture suggest great differences between these areas, and yet the artifact assemblages and their proximity to natural features on the landscape are surprisingly similar to each other. Unlike many Maya sites, polychrome ceramics are unusual at Uxbenká (Jordan 2012). However polychrome ceramics appear at each of these larger elite groups, setting them apart from the ceramic assemblages found in other residential spaces at the site. Residents at all three groups also had access to exotic trade items. While long-distance imported goods such as obsidian are found in nearly every settlement group at Uxbenká, other items such as marine shell, jade, and polychrome ceramics are not as common. Their presence at

these three settlement groups suggests that the residents of these groups had greater access to these items than their neighbors. Additionally, all three households are located in close proximity to year-round water sources, making their locations ideal for settlement and possibly giving the residents an advantage over others who had to walk a greater distance for water.

Our preliminary conclusions are that Group L, SG 25, and SG 37 represent elite residential areas within the larger settlement system at Uxbenká, and their growth mirror general trends in the Maya lowlands. Starting in the Preclassic and extending through the Classic Period, ancient Maya society and economy underwent a considerable amount of change (Clark and Cheatham 2002). Some archaeologists believe that there may have been growing specialization at the household level. There is also a notable rise in evidence suggesting the presence of crafting and complex architecture in elite households (Brumfiel and Earle 1987) as the number of petty rulers and kingdoms increased over time.

At Uxbenká, Group L is the earliest occupied and has Late Preclassic through Terminal Classic components. While it may have initially functioned as an elite household, during the late Preclassic and Early Classic it became associated with the site core located at Group A. Later, during the Late and Terminal Classic, it may have been used as a place of ancestral veneration in conjunction with the Group A “memorial garden” (Prufer et al. 2008). Similarly, SG 25 was occupied during the late Early Classic through the Late to Terminal Classic, but it is possible that it had earlier components as well. The large and elaborate architecture and the prestigious items found at SG 25 indicate increasingly greater degrees of power and wealth, as well as access to goods from afar. SG 25 appears to be a node of power located in the geophysical periphery of Uxbenká, but still acting as a key player in the political economy and sociopolitics of the site. It is possible that Plazuela E was the initial area of settlement among SG 25 residents, and attracted others through time, acting as a center for local elites. SG 37 has a Late to Terminal Classic occupation, but has a clear association with the site core as indicated by both its

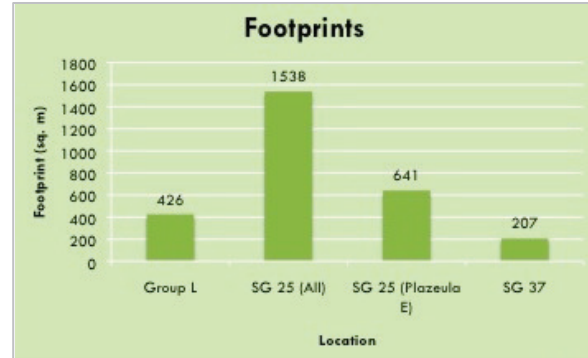


Figure 13. Structure footprints for Group L, SG 25, SG 25 Plazuela E, and SG 37.

physical location and the artifact assemblage recovered from the settlement group. The growth persistence of these elite household groups may have implications for evaluating the process of collapse at Uxbenká. As at Copan, the presence of large elite groups at Uxbenká after the collapse of the royal dynasty may indicate a more protracted decline of sociopolitical organization and population (Webster et al. 2004). Elite households may not have been abandoned until after AD 1000 and may have acted as a local socioeconomic authority.

Conclusions

It is important to highlight role of the elite households in social and economic changes over time as evidenced through changes in architecture and artifact assemblages. Households composed the most dynamic units of change in ancient Maya society. As households engaged more frequently and became more specialized in the production of craft items, their success and wealth began to blur distinctions between elites and commoners (McAnany 1993). Their shifting economic practices were responses to the challenges they faced as agrarian people. And it appears that their responses were varied. These three residential areas are representative of the multiple nodes of power spread across the landscape at Uxbenká that developed from the Preclassic through the Terminal Classic. While the artifact assemblages are fairly similar among these areas, they vary greatly in other aspects. This may suggest that emerging elites at Uxbenká had access to similar economic

networks, but locally had different response to social pressures. Future work will include the analysis of artifacts from these areas in order to gain a better understanding of the variations in ceramic assemblages and the presence of possible lithic production zones. Additionally, these areas should be compared to other potential elite domestic groups within the Uxbenká site such as Group I and Group F, as well as to other settlement groups. Such comparisons would lead to a better understanding of the variations in wealth and power, which developed over the course of time at Uxbenká. As new insights into the scale and timing of economic and social changes are developed and refined, they can help generate more models of the exact mechanisms through which sociopolitical development occurs at the household, community, and regional scales.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank the Belize Institute of Archaeology, The Institute for Social and Cultural Research, and the National Institute for Culture and History for hosting the 10th annual Belize Archaeology and Anthropology Symposium and providing us with the opportunity to disseminate information, data, and results from archaeological and anthropological research throughout the country. I would also like to thank the supportive members of the Uxbenká Archaeological Project, for without all of our hard work and collaboration, this research would not be possible. Appreciation must be given to the Bardalez family, Don Owen-Lewis, Amelia and Andy Johnston, and Bruno Kuppinger for providing us with a place to call home in Big Falls, Belize. Thank-you to Eric Fries for his thoughtful contributions. This material is based in part upon work supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) Graduate Research Fellowship Program to Ebert under Grant No. DGE1255832, and NSF HSD Grant No. 0827305, as well as the Alphawood Foundation.

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