

Site Core Investigations at Cahal Pech, Cayo District,
Belize: Preliminary Report of the 1988 Season.



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Frontispiece: Interior design of Vessel 3, Burial B2-2

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Introduction

Cahal Pech is a medium-size Maya Center located in the Belize Valley region of western Belize (Figs. 1 & 2). The site core sits on a steep hill overlooking San Ignacio Town, and the Macal branch of the Belize River. The name of the site is a combination of Yucatec and Mopan Maya meaning "Place (or City) of Ticks"; a name coined in the 1950's when the land around the site was used for pasture.

The reasons for investigating Cahal Pech were, and are, developmental and research oriented. In reference to the former our objectives were to, 1) halt further destruction of the center, 2) produce a map of the site demarcating an area to be established as a National Park and, 3) obtain the data necessary to publish a preliminary guidebook for use in schools and for promoting tourism.

Our research interests were concerned with diachronic development plus a study of the architectural, artistic and socio-political relationship between Cahal Pech and sites in the Belize River Valley Region. Although several scholars (Satterthwaite 1951, Willey et. al. 1965, Schmidt 1969-70, Ball & Taschek 1986) had previously visited and/or conducted limited and sporadic studies of Cahal Pech the chronology of the site was still undetermined. Since several studies (Ford 1985, Ball & Taschek 1986) are presently involved with regional

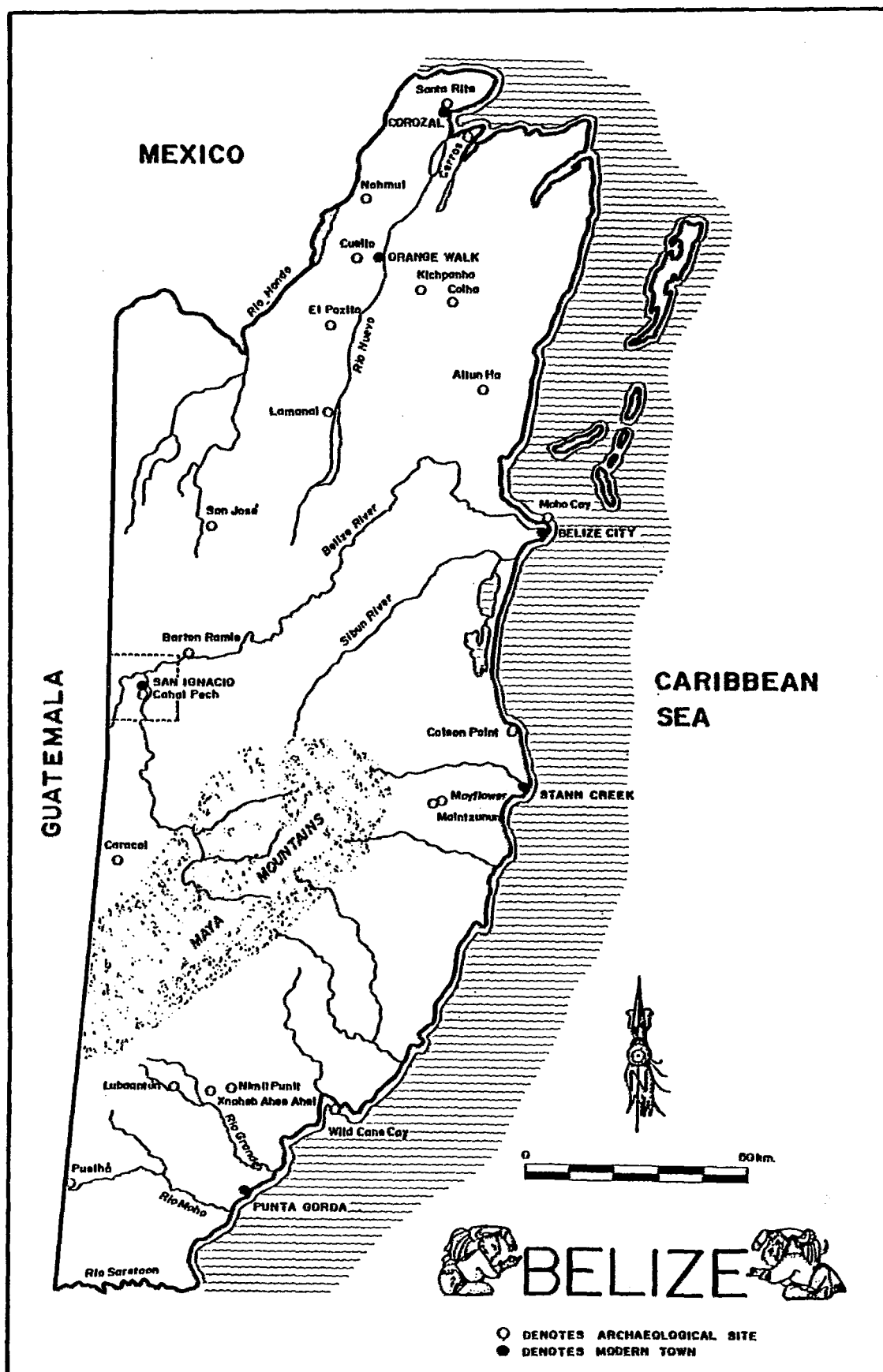
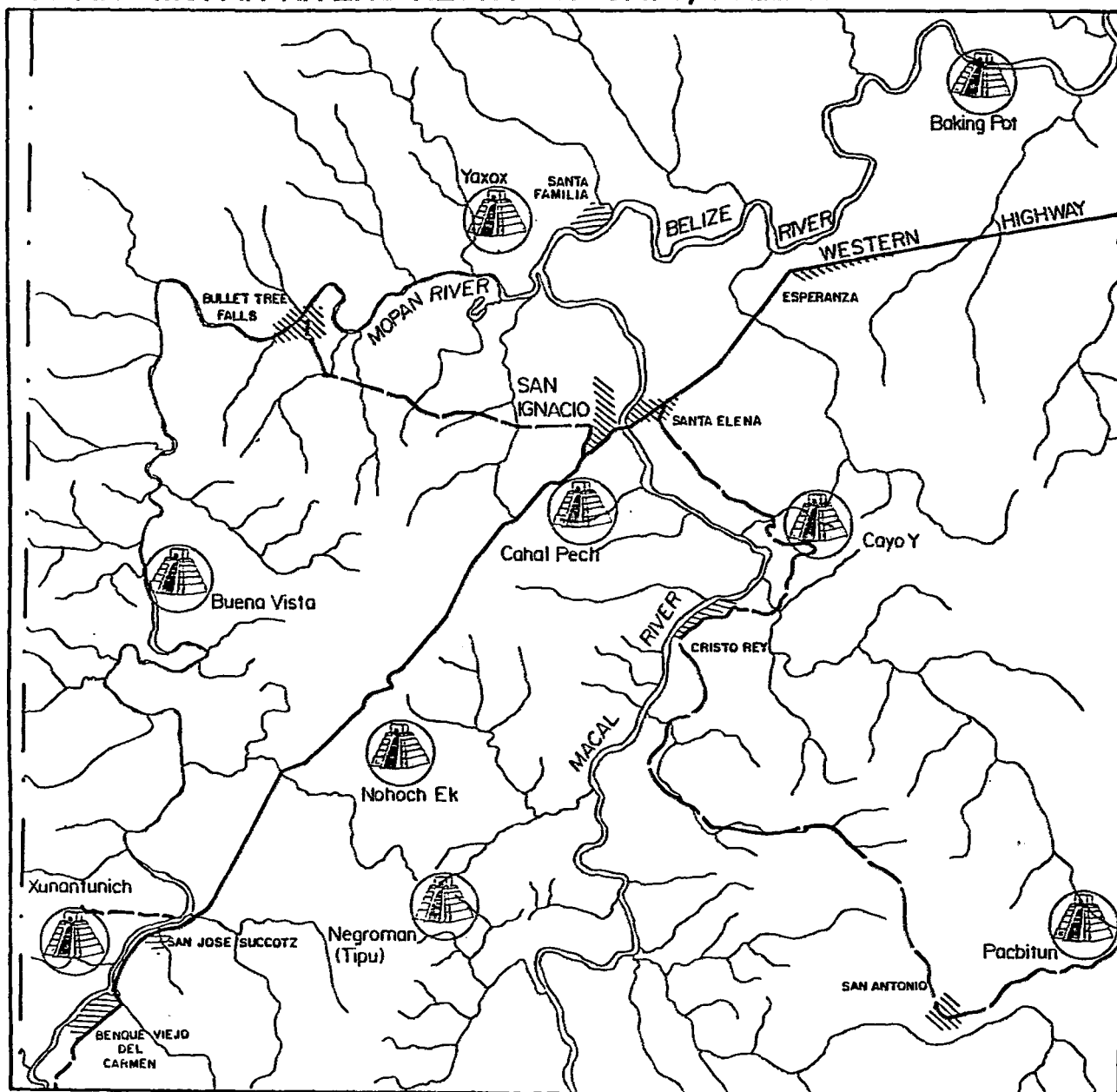


Fig. 1: Map of Belize showing location of Cahal Pech (Inset is enlarged in Fig. 2)

PLAN TO SHOW ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN THE MACAL - MOPAN RIVERS REGION OF CAYO, BELIZE





 denotes archaeological site
  denotes modern town
 — denotes paved road
 - - denotes unpaved road

Fig. 2: Archaeological Map of the Macal-Mopan Rivers Region, Cayo District, Belize

development in the Belize Valley we felt that it was imperative to ascertain the diachronic history of this relatively large site before any meaningful regional reconstruction could be made.

In a recent publication on Maya Settlement Patterns Hammond (1981:162) also stated that most research in Belize has concentrated "...on small sites, on residential as well as ceremonial structures, and on the relationships between settlement and environment. Some emphasis on the architectural, artistic and intellectual superstructure of Classic civilization, the traditional focus of Maya archaeology, remains, however, and these objectives are still worthy of attention." The present research at Cahal Pech is also an attempt to provide the type of information Hammond suggests is lacking, especially in the Belize River Valley Region.

History of Research

While we do not know the exact date of its discovery, reports of the site go back as early as the 1950's. At this time Linton Satterthwaite of the University Museum of Pennsylvania did some preliminary mapping and excavation of the center. Unfortunately, except for two paragraphs in a 1951 publication, Satterthwaite never published a report of the work he conducted.

A few years later (1953-55) Gordon Willey of Harvard University visited the site during his settlement study of the Belize River Valley. Although he did not carry out any investigations, Willey et. al. (1965:313) subsequently wrote a very brief description of the site in their Belize Valley Report.

During the 1960's Belize's first archaeological commissioner, A.H. Anderson, visited the site on several occasions. Because of its easy access and ideal location, Anderson recommended to the government that the site be left unaffected by private lands and that the center and its periphery be developed as a National Park. Anderson's recommendations, however, were never implemented.

In 1969 Peter Schmidt, having recently arrived in Belize to take over the post of Archaeological Commissioner a year after the death of Anderson, conducted a small salvage operation following his investigation of looting at the site. His work concentrated on an elite tomb within a large temple (Str. B-1) in the central plaza (Plaza B). Schmidt, like his predecessors, never published a report of this work. Fortunately, however, some of his notes and the artifacts recovered from the tomb are available in the Belize Department of Archaeology.

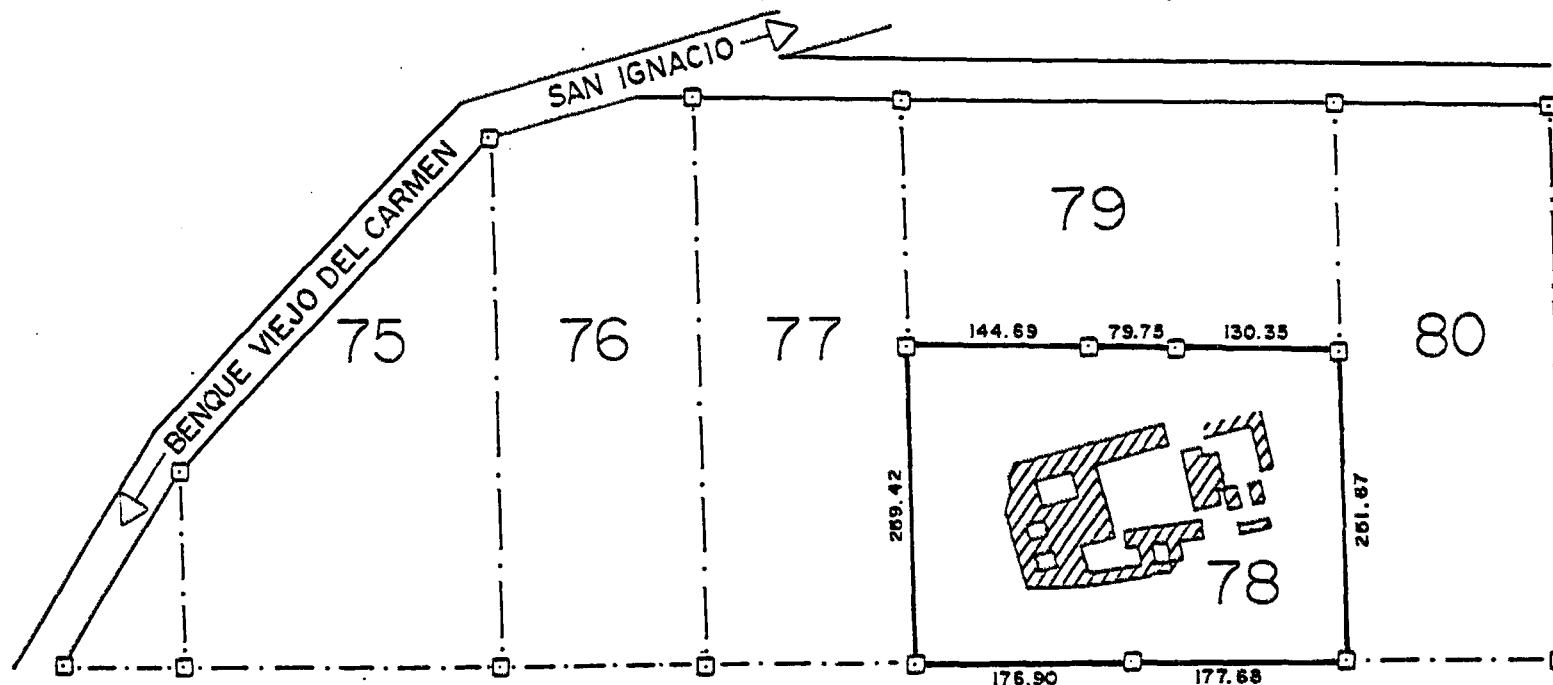
Between 1970 and 1978 the site was pillaged on numerous

occasions by looters. In 1978 several of these vandals were arrested by the senior author and members of the local police force and were subsequently convicted under the Antiquities Legislation. Except for brief visits by J. Ball and J. Taschek in 1986-87, no scientific investigations were conducted at the site in the last decade and the looting problem continued unabated. The destruction caused by these activities became a major concern to the San Ignacio Town Board and the Cayo Branch of the Belize Tourism and Industry Association who were interested in developing the site as a tourist attraction. After several requests for help from the latter group, Awe eventually organized the first major archaeological investigation of the site in the summer of 1988. A brief report of this work is provided below.

Site Survey in 1988

Although Ball and Taschek had previously prepared a tape and compass plan of Cahal Pech we decided to conduct a more accurate survey of the central precinct and its topographic layout. This was accomplished by clearing the underbrush within the site center and by establishing several stations and datums on an east/west transect which cut across the site core. Subsequently all structures within the core were plotted from these points and a larger area, encompassing the latter, was mapped and demarcated for reservation as a National Park (Fig. 3).

PLAN TO SHOW RESERVE FOR CAHAL PECH LOT 78, KAY WORKS, CAYO DISTRICT, BELIZE



SCALE 0 50 100 200m.

"SEE PLAN 1855, CAYO DISTRICT, CAYO"

LEGEND

- MOUNDS (SITE CENTER)
- CEMENT MONUMENTS

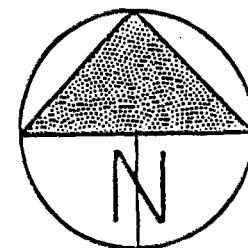


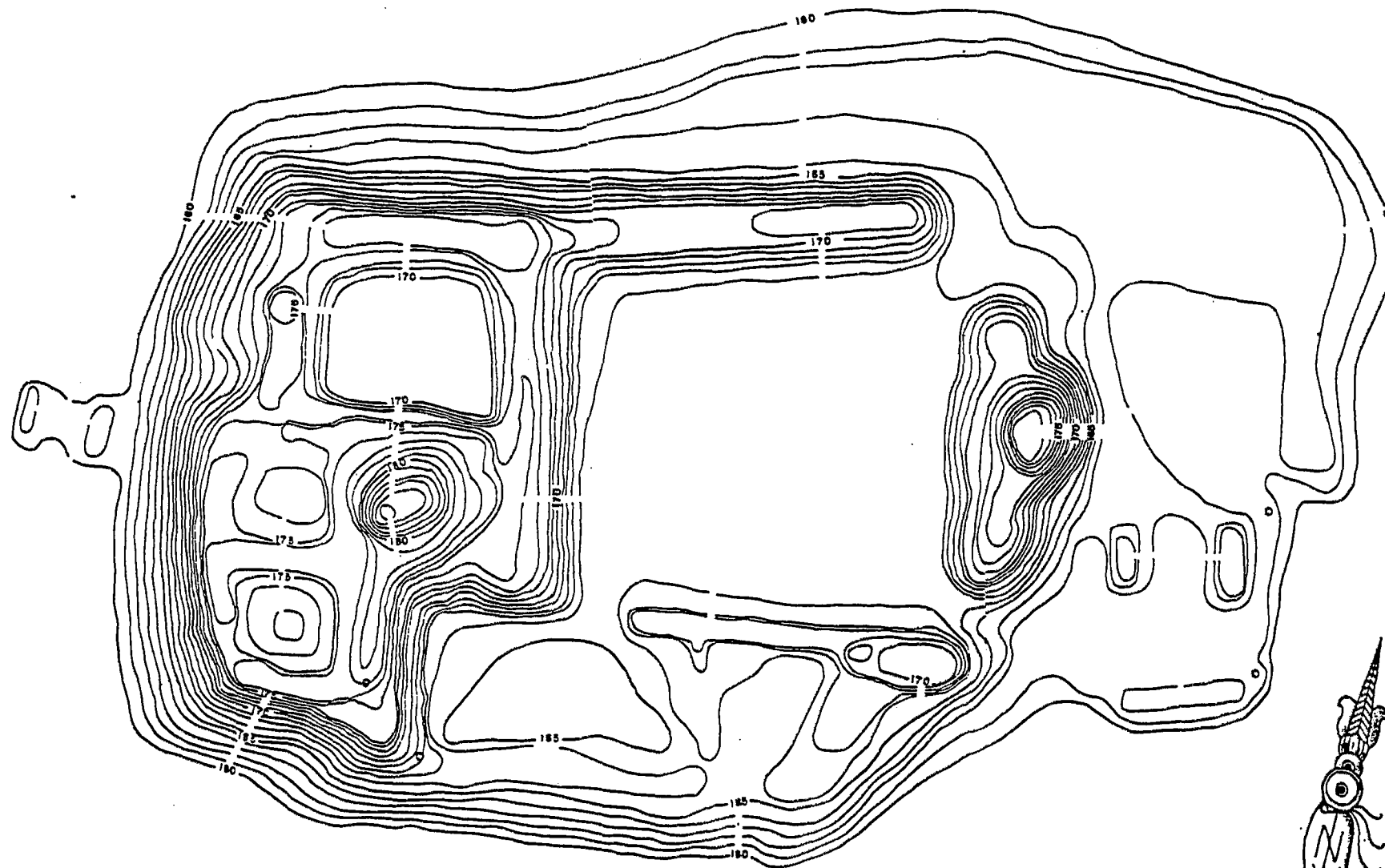
Fig. 3: Plan of the Cahal Pech Archaeological Reserve, Cayo District, Belize.

This operation revealed that the central precinct (core) of the site consists of at least 34 structures compacted on an acropolis slightly larger than 1 hectare in size (Figs. 4 & 5). The structures include tall temple pyramids plus several large, range-type buildings. The site also contains 2 ballcourts, 6 plain stelae, 1 plain altar and possibly a sweathouse.

Most of the structures are located around 7 plazas, the largest being Plaza B or what was referred to as the Central Plaza by Satterthwaite (1951:22). The principal courtyard, however, is Plaza A which together with Plazas D and E are located on the western half of the acropolis. All the structures within these 3 courtyards are tightly clustered and appear to have provided very limited access to and from the other plazas within the center. Mounds in the other plazas are relatively more spread out but nevertheless seem to be located in such a way as to provide limited access to the site core in general. There are in fact only 2 areas which provide access to the center. These are located to the north and south of the eastern end of Plaza B. This type of pattern, plus the acropoline nature of the central precinct suggests that the site core may have been purposely constructed in such a way as to provide defence during times of conflict.

While we did not have the time to conduct any mapping outside of the site core we did survey and map a dry spring on

CAHAL PECH, CAYO, BELIZE



SCALE 0 10 20 30 40



SURVEY AND PLAN BY:
MARK A. CAMPBELL, 1966

Fig. 4: Contour Map of the Site Core at Cahal Pech, Belize.

CAHAL PECH, CAYO, BELIZE

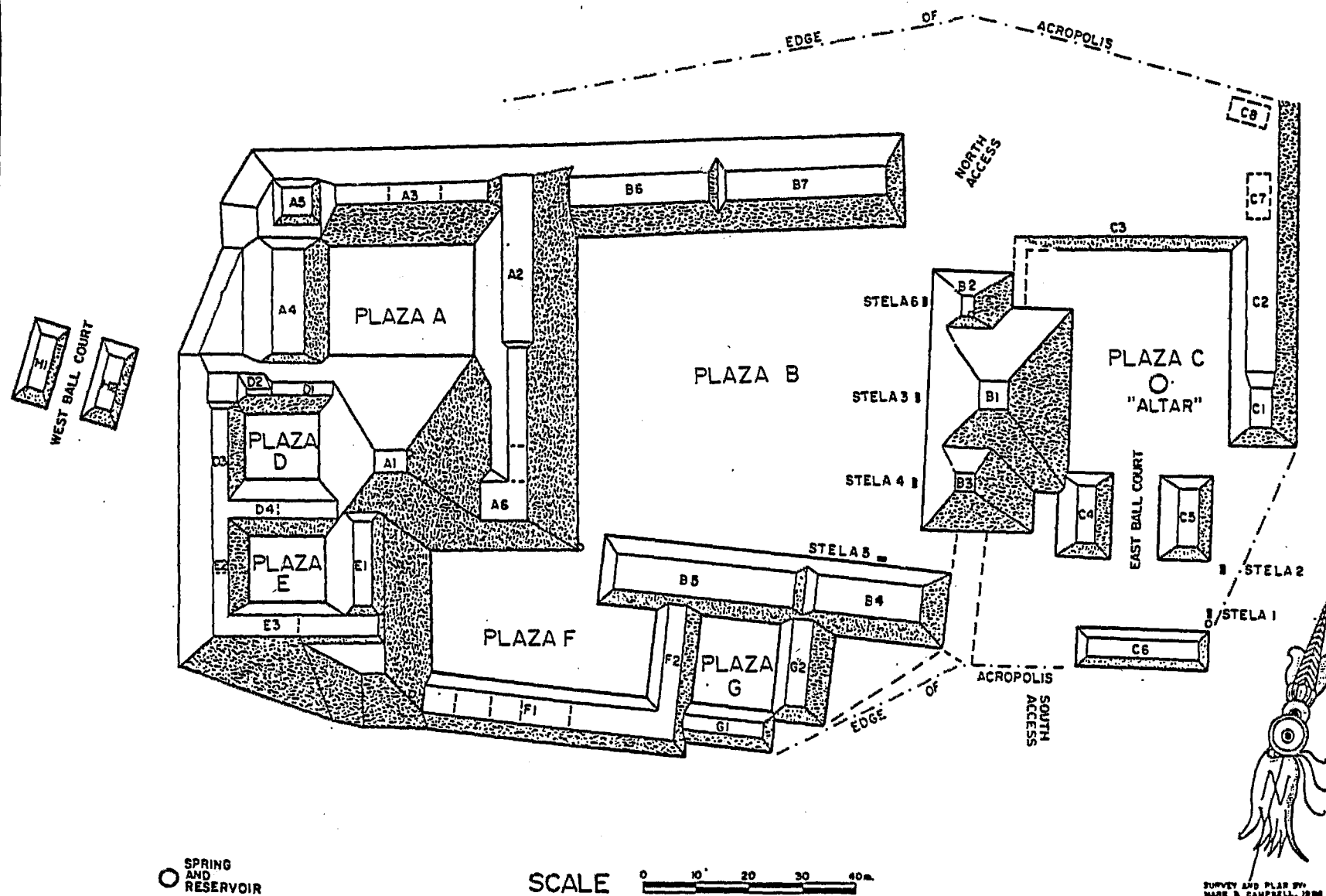


Fig. 5: Rectified plan of the site core at Cahal Pech, Belize

the southwestern base of the acropolis. Close inspection of the area around the spring suggested that it may have been dammed to contain a fairly large volume of water during prehistoric times. A more thorough investigation of this feature will be conducted in the future.

Visual survey in the immediate periphery detected a fairly large number of house mounds and plazuela groups to the west and especially to the south of the site core. Previous reconnaissance by Awe and Draper (n.d.) also suggests that a large percentage of Cahal Pech's support population was located on both banks of the Macal River, south and east of the center. Cayo Y (Willey et.al. 1955), a large residential unit on the east bank of the river, can be included in this group.

Settlement on the northern periphery of the center is, and will be, much more difficult to determine due to the location of San Ignacio Town in this area. Our familiarity and knowledge of this region nonetheless suggests that settlement density is lower than in areas to the south, east, and west of the site core. In fact, with the exception of a few scattered plazuela groups, such as the Melhado Site (Willey & Bullard 1956), settlement in this area is relatively sparse. Several factors may account for this pattern. First of all, this area lies in a low flat valley between the two branches of the Belize River and is susceptible to periodic flooding. Secondly, it contains some of the most fertile and arable soils

in the region. Thus it is possible that the area may have been primarily used for agricultural pursuits rather than for residential purposes. Undoubtedly, peripheral surveys in the future should provide a much clearer and accurate picture of the settlement around the site.

Towards the end of our field season we also discovered a very interesting altar-like feature in the center of Plaza C. The latter included 14 cut masonry blocks placed in a circular pattern directly between Strs. B-4 and C-1, in line with the primary axis of both structures. Since we had no time to determine whether this feature was prehistoric in date we plan to investigate it in 1989.

Finally, the survey identified a total of 55 looters tunnels, trenches and pits on 12 of the 34 structures within the central precinct. The most vandalized mound was Str. A-1 which had several tunnels and trenches penetrating it from all angles. Structure B-3 was also severely looted. It had two large tunnels that penetrated the structure vertically and horizontally. Other mounds affected by this activity included structures A-2,3 & 4; B-4,5 & 7; C-1,5 & 6; D-1 & 3; E-2 and H-2. Fortunately, most of the latter only suffered superficial damage.

Excavations

The 1988 field season partially excavated 10 mounds in 6 of the 7 plazas within the site core. Selection of mounds (for excavation) was based on several factors; the presence or absence of looting, location, and chronological considerations.

In the first instance structures were selected in order to assess their degree of damage, or, in the case of untampered mounds, to retrieve data before the structure was looted. Secondly, we attempted to excavate at least one mound within each plaza in order to obtain a representative sample of the site center. Thirdly, we chose structures which we felt could provide the data necessary to determine the diachronic development of Cahal Pech, its intersite relationships and other information essential to the publication of a preliminary guidebook.

Plaza A Excavations:

Plaza A is the principal courtyard within the site core. It is rectangular in shape and measures about 20 m. by 30 m. To the south it is bordered by Str. A-1, a large temple pyramid approximately 24 meters tall. To the east, north, and west are three range-type buildings (A-2,3 & 4). Two other small mounds (A-5 & A-6), one on the northwestern corner of the plaza and a

second that joins Str. A-2 and A-1 at the southeastern base of the latter, add to the complement of structures enclosing the plaza. Three of these mounds were excavated in 1988; Strs. A-1, A-2 and A-4.

Str. A-1: A-1 is the most massive piece of architecture in the site core. This also made it the most attractive to looters. Prior to excavation it had a large east-west looter's trench which partially bisected it from summit to its eastern base. Several other short (1 m. to 3.5 m.) tunnels penetrated the terminal, and in one case the penultimate, phase of architecture. The tunnels were probably dug during the last 10 years for they were absent in 1978 when we arrested the looters digging the large trench.

Our excavations on this mound initially consisted of 2 large units at the top and along the northern midsection of the structure. We subsequently conducted a small excavation within the large looter's tunnel that had exposed the second last architectural phase.

Although these excavations failed to reach sterile level they partially uncovered and penetrated two major construction phases. The penultimate phase was a fairly large flat-top, temple pyramid, approximately 15 or more meters tall, with a central stairway descending towards Plaza A. Ceramics recovered within construction fill consisted solely of Middle

and especially Late Formative types (Jocote Orange Brown, Savana Orange, Pital Cream, Iguana Creek White, Polvero Black, Sierra Red, etc.). This indicates that A-1 Sub. is most likely Late Preclassic in date. If this chronological assignment is accurate it is possible that the central stairway may be flanked by stuccoed masks. A search for the latter will be conducted during the 1989 season.

The terminal phase of A-1 completely modified the previous Late Preclassic structure. The end result was a much taller temple pyramid without a superstructure at its summit and with a long vaulted, single-room building on a narrow platform several steps above the plaza level. Within the room is a long decorated bench (originally painted red) with an axially located throne-like construction above it. Directly behind the bench and throne we discovered a small section of a poorly preserved hieroglyphic text. The glyphs had been incised or carved in low relief before the room had been painted. According to Peter Mathews (personal communication) the small section of preserved text contains a seating glyph.

The architectural style of terminal phase A-1 is typical of the Lamanai Type Building identified by Pendergast (1981a:41) at Altun Ha (Str. B4 2nd A) and Lamanai (N10-43). On the basis of architectural similarity this suggests that the final phase of A-1 was probably constructed sometime between the 6th and 7th centuries.

It is worthy to note that in the looter's backdirt at the summit of the structure we recovered a fragment of pyrite plus an ear-plug of hard limestone. The presence of these items indicate that the looters may have discovered a burial in this area. Interestingly, when we arrested the vandals in 1978 we recovered a black-slipped, Teotihuacan-style, slab-footed cylinder vase. If this vessel is indeed from a burial within A-1, it would support a 6th century date for the construction of the structure.

Str. A-2: A-2 is approximately 50 m. long by 20 m. wide and 5 m. tall. Excavation on this range-type building completely exposed most of the northern half of the structure and penetrated through 3 phases of construction.

Due to the small size of our excavation unit on A-2 Sub 2 we are presently unable to say much about the architectural style of this earliest phase. We do know that it consisted of a small platform, approximately 2 m. in height and was located on the northeastern side of Plaza A. A short flight of steps provided access from the plaza to the top of the platform. The latter most likely supported a perishable superstructure. Ceramics from the construction fill tentatively place the construction date of A-2 Sub 2 between Late Preclassic and Early Classic times.

The subsequent construction of A-2 Sub. drastically modified the earlier structure. It consisted of a fairly long platform with a central stairway superimposing that of the previous phase. Flanking the stairway we uncovered a series of 3 terraces with sub-aprons and basal moulding similar in style to those used on B4 2nd A at Altun Ha (Pendergast 1981b, Vol. 2) and on structures in the central plaza at Tikal (e.g. Temples 1 & 2). On the basis of architectural parallels we suggest that the construction date of A2 Sub can be placed sometime between A.D. 600-700; a date contemporaneous with that of terminal phase A-1.

The final phase of A-2 considerably modified the size and form of the previous structure. Above a large new platform, that spanned the entire length of Plaza A, we see the construction of a long double-vaulted building with multiple rooms. Presently a single doorway through the spine wall provides access from one side of the building to the other. During Middle Classic times this and other similar doorways may have provided the only access between Plazas A and B.

Most of the rooms in A-2 contain one or more benches but several of these reflect minor and later additions to the building. Four of the benches were excavated but only one contained a simple burial in fetal position, with no grave goods. Another small unit excavated on the portal of the doorway in Room 3 uncovered a small cache containing 2

unslipped ceramic vessels. Stylistically these vessels date the terminal phase of A-2 within the 7th century A.D.

Str. A-4: Str. A-4 is a vaulted, multi-room, range-type building. Excavations on this mound exposed several rooms within the terminal phase of architecture, and located the floor of an earlier structure (A-4 Sub.). Since we did not have time to excavate through the floor of A-4 Sub. we are unable to ascertain its time of construction. Conversely, we know considerably more about the terminal phase.

Terminal phase A-4 contains at least 4, and possibly 5, interconnected and modally different rooms. The southeastern room (Room 1) is rectangular in shape and was originally connected to Room 2 by a low vaulted doorway. Subsequently this doorway was sealed off and benches were constructed in both rooms. The bench in Room 1 practically covers the entire floor space. It also has a small rectangular niche in its center, and a step providing access to the surface of the bench. Room 2 has two benches in an L-shaped pattern, and is connected to Room 3, and possibly Room 4, via a narrow passageway along the western wall of the building.

Room 3 is the central room. It contains no benches but all the walls have a basal molding approximately 12 cm. above the floor. The room also has a central doorway facing Plaza A to the east.

Ceramics from structural fill indicate that terminal phase A-4 was probably constructed during the early part of the Late Classic Period. Above the floor of Room 3 we found fragments from several vessels which appeared to have been purposely smashed during abandonment of the site. Comparative analysis of this material suggests a late 7th century date for this phenomena.

Plaza B Excavations

Plaza B, the largest plaza within the site core at Cahal Pech, is located about 3 meters lower in elevation than Plaza A and measures approximately 50 m. (N x S) by 60 m. (E x W). It is bordered on the east by Strs. B-1, 2 & 3, to the south by B-4 & 5, to the north by B-6 & 7 and by Str. A-2 to the west. During his 1950 excavations Satterthwaite discovered 3 stelae and 1 altar in the plaza. These were located in front of Strs. B-1 (Stela 3), B-3 (Stela 4 & Altar 1) and B-4 (Stela 5). In 1988 we found the fragment of a sixth stela (Stela 6) in front of Str. B-2 but like the other monuments at the site it had a plain surface.

B-1 is the primary structure in Plaza B. It is a relatively tall (12 m.) temple pyramid, flanked to the north and south by 2 (B-2 & B-3) smaller pyramidal structures. Although none of our investigations focussed on B-1 we did

locate 2 old excavation units on the structure. The first, which was axially located at the eastern base of the mound next to Stela 3, had been dug by Satterthwaite in 1950. (Due to the absence of a report we are presently unaware of the results of this excavation) The second unit, located at the summit of the structure, is the salvage excavation conducted by Schmidt in 1969. Information on file in the Dept. of Archaeology indicates that Schmidt uncovered 2 burials in this location. The first contained an intrusive burial of a female individual (with teeth that had been filed and inlaid with jade). According to Schmidt's notes the burial was "effected sometime after major construction activity had ceased" and dates to Tepeu 3 times. The second burial contained the remains of an elite male with sumptuary grave goods in a poorly preserved tomb. Comparative analysis of the ceramic remains within the tomb suggests that the burial (and by association, the terminal phase of B-1) dates between A.D. 700-800.

The three mounds we selected for investigation in Plaza B included Strs. B-2, B-4 and B-5.

Str. B-2: B-2 was selected for excavation because unlike many of the temple pyramids at the site it had not been vandalized. Secondly, since B-2, B-1 and B-3 were all interconnected we were interested in determining the architectural relationship between these structures.

Two major excavations were conducted on B-2; one at the summit of the mound (6 m. deep), and a second axial trench on the west face of the structure. These investigations uncovered several phases of architecture. The presence of ceramic types such as Jocote Orange Brown, Pital Cream, Joventud Red, Consejo Red (?) etc., plus several hand-modeled figurine fragments and an interesting fragment of a flat-base bowl with Olmec-like paw-wing design (similar to Calzadas Carved from the San Lorenzo Phase [Coe & Diehl 1980, Figs 138-143], and to material from the Tok complex at Chalchuapa [Sharer 1978, Fig.6, 4g]) suggests that the first phase of B-2 was probably constructed as early as the Middle Preclassic Period. Unfortunately, the size of our unit and the depth (5 m. plus) at which we discovered the floor of this structure prevents us from making any statements regarding the architectural style of this early phase.

During the Late Preclassic B-2 underwent several renovations but again the size of our excavation unit precludes any description of architectural styles.

The architectural activity of the Late Preclassic is followed by what appears to be a paucity of construction in the Early Classic. Major construction on B-2 eventually seems to regain its vigor during the Middle Classic (Tzakol 3-Tepeu 1) Period but, like that of the site in general, ceases shortly thereafter. Unlike previous sub-phases, the dates for the

final phases of construction on B-2 derive from grave goods within two burials.

In its final form B-2 was slightly more than 6 meters in height. It consisted of a small platform which may have supported a perishable superstructure. On its western face the structure descended to Plaza B by a series of three terraces. The absence of a stairway in this area suggests that access to the top of B-2 may have only been possible via St. B-1. This architectural style and the connection of B-1 to B-2 and B-3 is identical to the style of Strs. A-1, A-4 and A-5 at Pacbitun (Healy 1987) and may very well be a regional architectural style. Furthermore, the position, location and orientation of these structures may represent a variant of the "E Group" complex previously identified at Uaxactun (Ruppert 1940) and more recently in the Mundo Perdido at Tikal (Laporte & Fialko 1987, Fig. 3).

Str. B-4: B-4 is a small (5.5m. tall) temple located on the southeastern corner of Plaza B. Prior to excavation it had an old looter's pit at its summit and a second more recent pit at plaza level, between its northern base and Stela 5. The former had mostly caused superficial damage. The latter exposed the bottom step of the structure and several earlier plaza floors. During their excavation the looters also broke Stela 5 into several fragments. This was probably done to facilitate excavating the area they had chosen to dig.

Our excavations on B-4 initially consisted of a large axial trench on the north face of the mound. Subsequently 3 small units were excavated into the platform and stairway of an earlier well-preserved sub-phase of the structure. While none of these excavations reached sterile level, and only one unit barely descended below plaza level, Str. B-4 produced some of the earliest material and architecture at the site.

Presently the earliest partially exposed phase of construction is tentatively dated between the Early and Middle Preclassic Periods (1000-600 B.C.). The excavated section of this structure suggests that this early sub-phase consists of a small rectangularly-shaped platform bordered by cut masonry blocks two courses in height. Access to the top of the platform is via a short stairway that ascends from Plaza B to the north. The height of the platform is approximately 2.5 meters. The early date for this structure is suggested by a fragment of a human effigy bottle with affinities to material from the Ramgoat Group of the Bolay Complex at Colha (Valdez 1987:71-73) and the presence of ceramics similar to diagnostics from the Xe Complex in the Peten and Early facet Jenney Creek material from Barton Ramie. Complementing this ceramic assemblage are several solid hand-modeled anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurine fragments. The latter display great similarity with Early to Middle Preclassic figurines from Altar de Sacrificios, Chalchuapa (Kulil & Xiquin Figurine Complex),

Kaminaljuyu (Charcas Phase), Chiapa de Corzo (Dili & Escalera Phases) and from the Nacaste and Palangana Phases at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan.

The next phase of architecture on B-4 was probably constructed between the Middle and Late Preclassic Periods. This well preserved sub-phase completely covered the earlier structure and consisted of a small, 4 meters tall, temple with a wide stairway that led up to a thickly plastered platform. The discovery of a posthole on the northern edge of the platform suggests that the latter may have supported a pole and thatch superstructure. Pottery from within the construction fill of this phase were a mixture of Mamom and Chicanel ceramic types.

In Late Preclassic times the structure was modified at least twice and possibly three times. These changes, however, did not drastically alter the earlier sub-phase and basically only enlarged and increased the height of the preceding structure. The most interesting find within the fill of these later renovations was a simple burial (probably of a female with filed and inlaid teeth) containing a single, tall (30 cm.) polychrome vase of Late Classic style. Since the burial had clearly cut through the floors of the earlier structures and was located in a matrix containing only Preclassic material there is little doubt that it represents an intrusive burial. Interestingly, this scenario, and the burial as a whole, is

extremely reminiscent of the Late Classic (Tepeu 3) intrusive burial discovered by Schmidt on Str. B-1 in 1969. It is possible that both burials may actually represent post-abandonment use of the site by people still living within its vicinities. Whatever the case may be the early material recovered in B-4 definitely makes it one of the most interesting and earliest structures so far tested at the site, and, it will be a major foci of our investigations in 1989.

Str. B-5. NOTE: (Although in our plan of the Site Core (Fig. 5) Str. B-5 is shown to abutt Str. B-4, carefull observation towards the end of the 1988 season suggested that there may actually be another structure between these two mounds. If this proves to be the case, B-5 will then abutt Str. B-8).

Str. B-5 is a range-type building on the southeastern corner of Plaza B. Prior to excavation it had a deep T-shaped looter's tunnel that entered the mound from its southern side then veered east (at midsection) into the long axis of the structure. Since the tunnel had exposed part of a well preserved masonry wall and a doorway into the building, we decided to expand on the looter's excavation. This operation completely uncovered the southern end of the building and exposed a large section of a vaulted room within. Two small units were subsequently placed on a bench in the room and at the portal of the doorway.

Ceramics recovered in these investigations presently suggest that B-5 may represent just a single phase of construction. The structure consists of a vaulted range-type building (approx. 3.75 m. tall) atop a very low platform, containing at least two, and probably three, rooms (Figs. 6, 7, 8 & 9). The southwestern room (which had been tunneled through and which we partially exposed) had a very interesting form. It had a very narrow (56 cm.) and low (1.5 m. high) doorway which provided access to the room from the southern side of the building. Inside the room three rather tall (1.10 m.) benches, two-thirds the height of the doorway, bordered a short (1.6 m.) and narrow (56 cm.) passage leading out to the door. Since the size and height of these benches would have provided very little room to maneuver it is quite possible that the room served some special function other than civic or domestic. Ceramics from fill within the bench and from below the platform suggests a Protoclassic or Early Classic date for this building.

Plaza C Excavations:

Plaza C is located at the eastern end of the acropolis. It is approximately 2 meters lower in elevation than Plaza B and contains 7 structures. It is bordered on the east by a small mound (Str. C-1) which abutts a long low platform (C-2) with a north/south axis. To the west are B-1, B-2 and B-3. To the north, C-3 is a raised platform that may have supported one

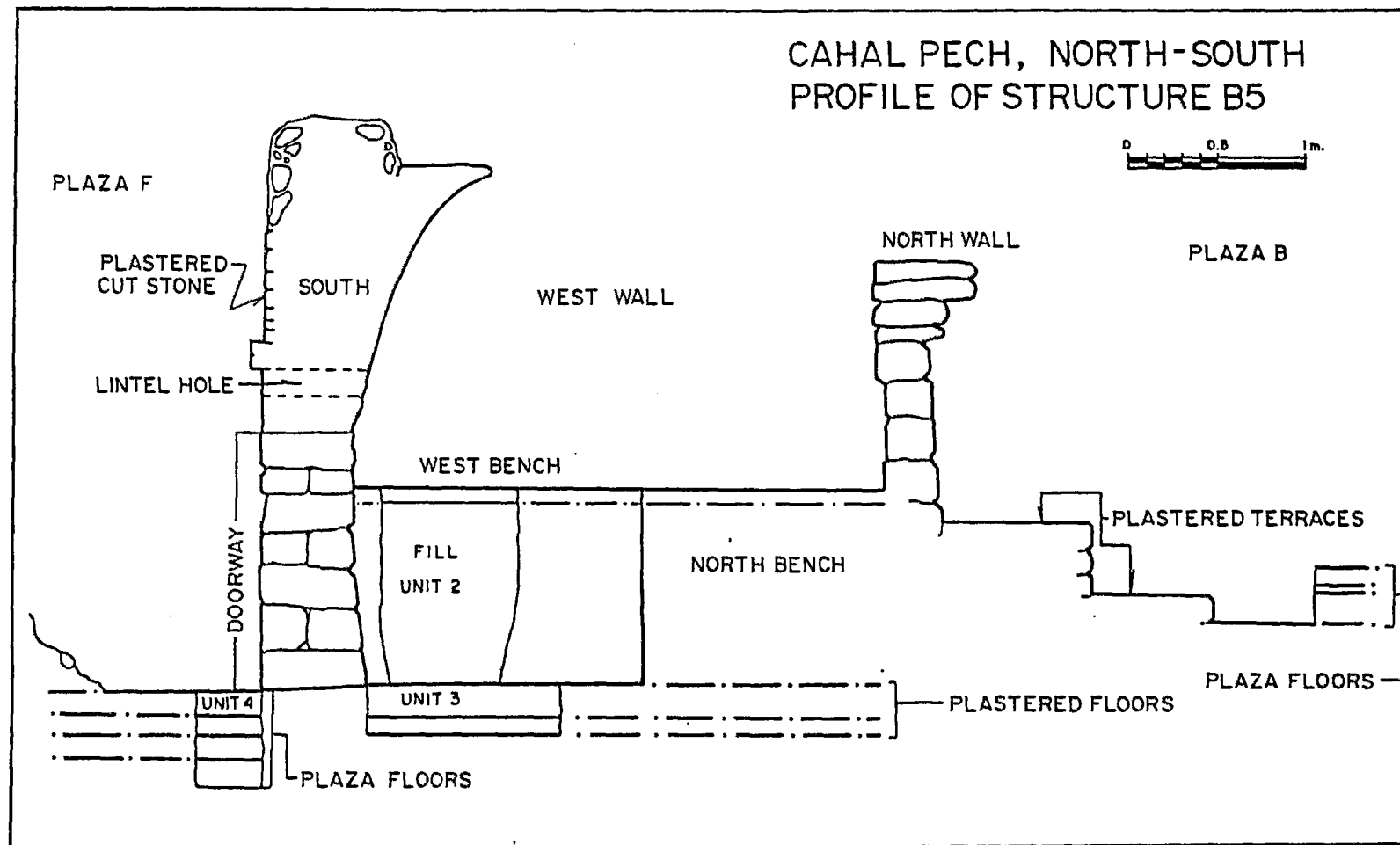


Fig. 6: North-South profile of Str. B-5, Cahal Pech

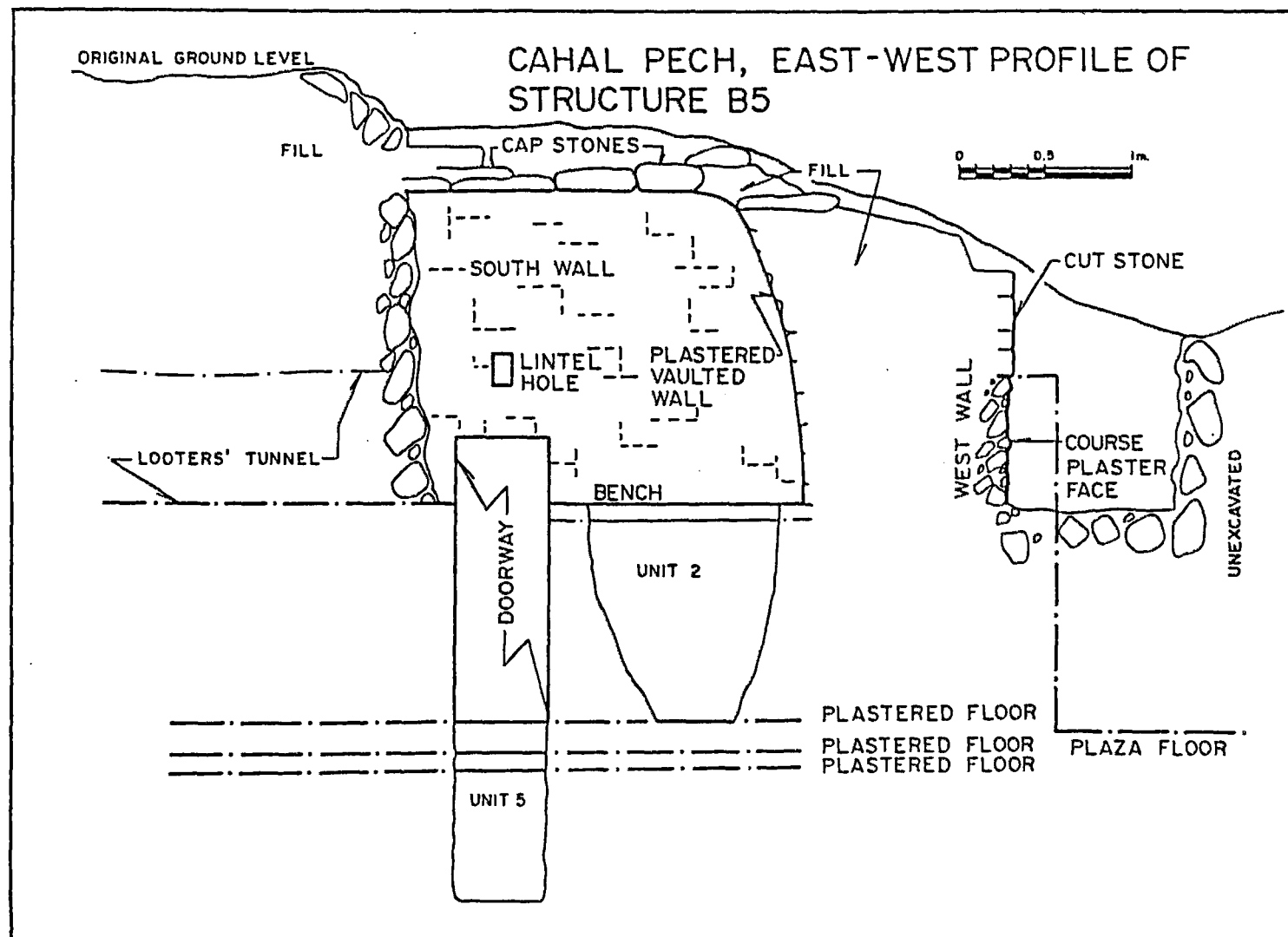


Fig. 7: East-West profile of Str. B-5, Cahal Pech

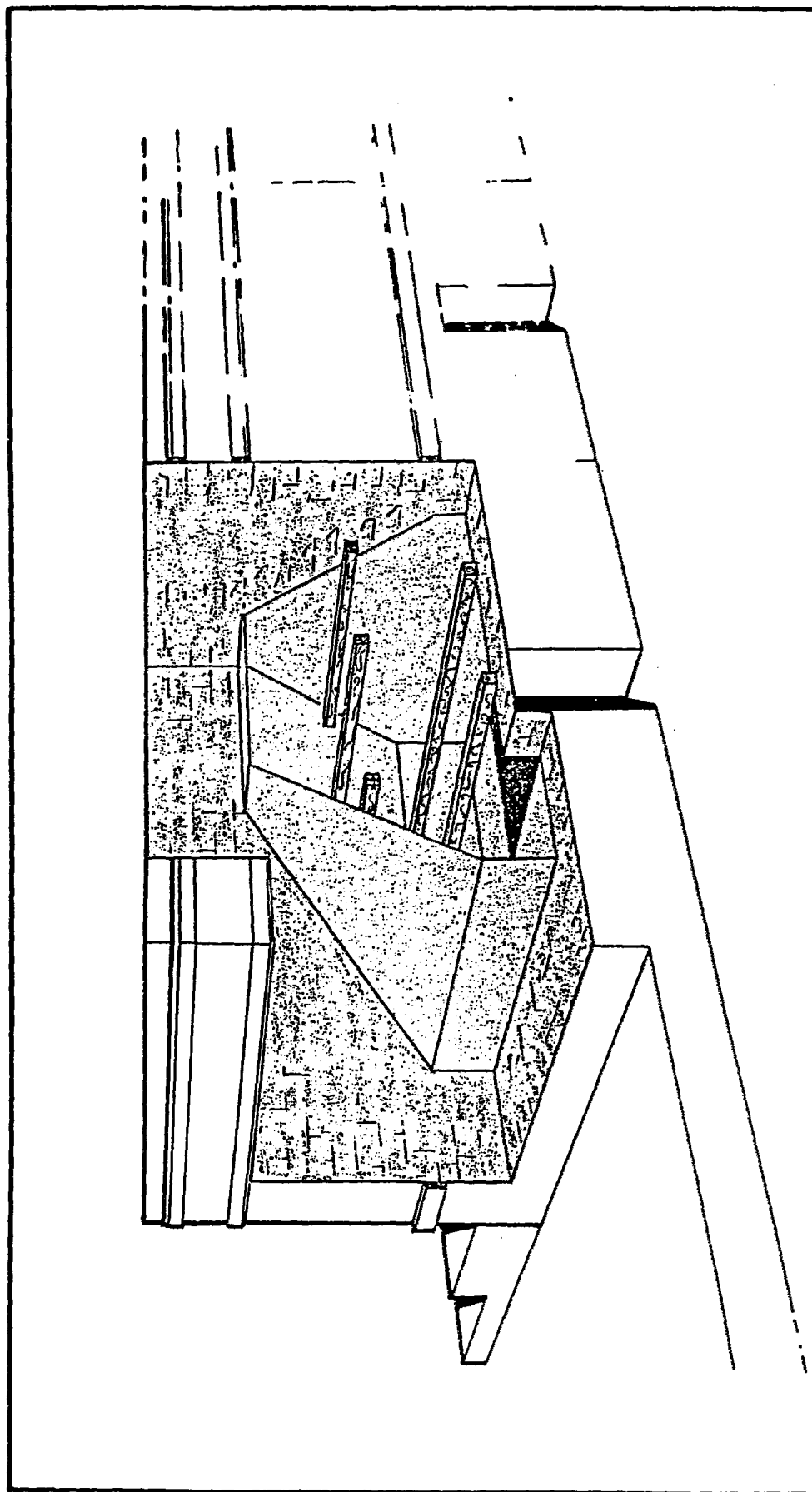


Fig. 8: Reconstruction profile of Str. B-5, Cahal Pech

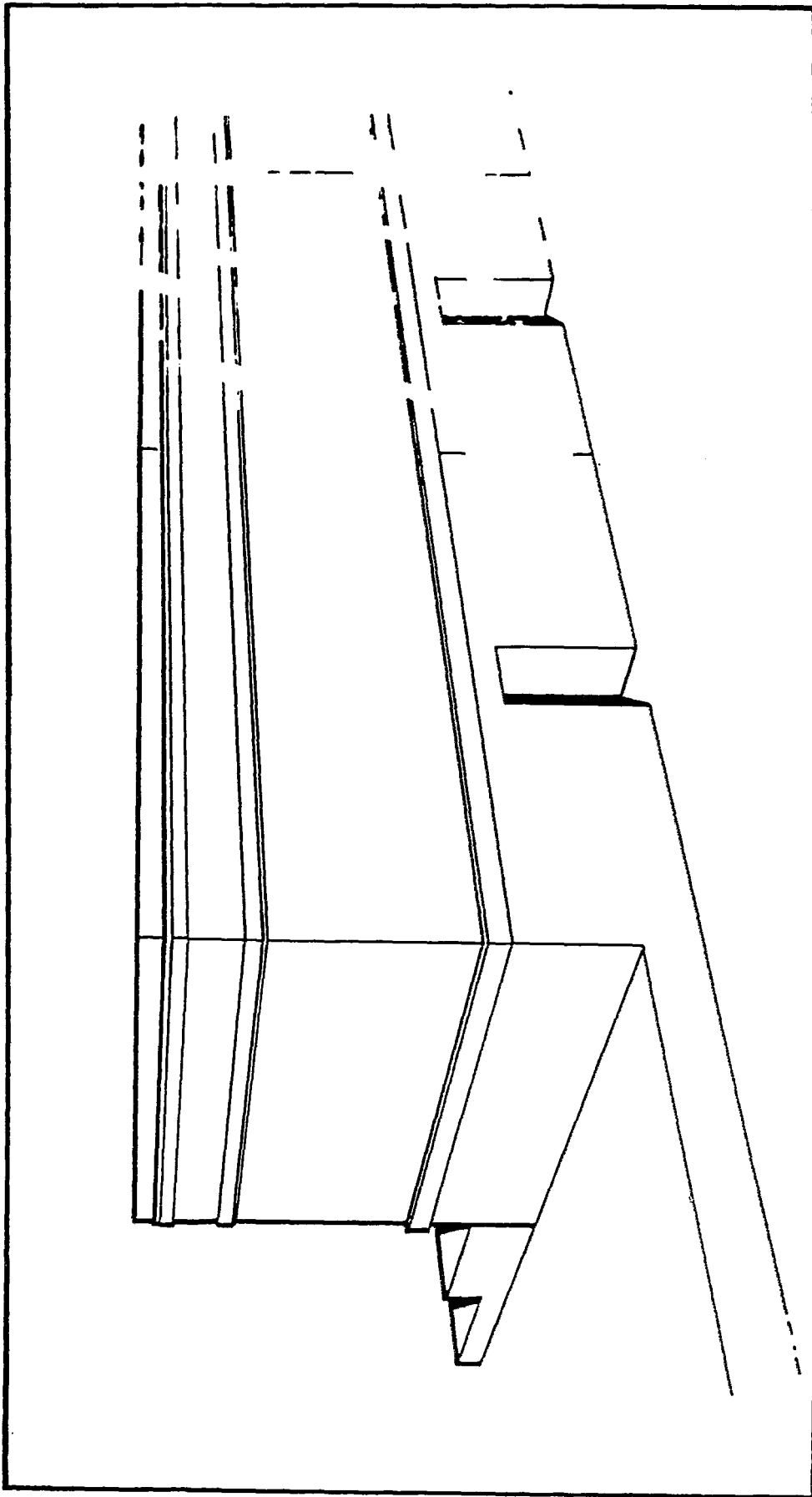


Fig. 9: Reconstruction plan of Str. B-5, Cahal Pech

or more perishable superstructures. Northeast of C-3 are two low-lying mounds which, although not facing Plaza C, were included in this group. C-6, a fairly large mound, forms the southern border. Within the Plaza, and just north of C-6, two identical and parallel structures (C-4 & C-5) form the eastern ballcourt. In 1950 Satterthwaite discovered two stelae within the confines of this group. Stelae 1 was found at the northeastern base of Str. C-6, and Stelae 2 was located a few meters to the north, next to the southeastern base of Str. C-5.

At the start of our Plaza C investigations we also discovered several old excavation units that were previously conducted by Satterthwaite. These were located on Strs. C-1, C-4, C-5 and C-6. We also discovered a large looter's tunnel penetrating the eastern side of C-5 and a smaller pit on top of C-6. Our 1988 investigations focussed primarily on Str. C-6 and partially exposed a small section of the west face of Str. C-5.

Str. C-1: While we did not excavate C-1, notes contained in the Belize Dept. of Archaeology suggest that Satterthwaite suspected this structure to have functioned as a sweathouse.

Str. C-5: Investigations on C-5 simply stripped the surface layer over a narrow section of the west face of the structure. This was done mainly to confirm the accuracy of Satterthwaite's profile of the buildings and to ascertain the architectural

style of the ballcourt. Results of the excavation indicated that Satterthwaite's reconstruction was indeed accurate and that the structures are similar in style to the ballcourt next to Temple 1 in the main plaza at Tikal. (Similarities also exist with the ballcourts at Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan).

Str. C-6: Excavations on C-6 exposed 2 phases of construction but failed to reach sterile level. The earliest phase (C-6 Sub) consists of a fairly large platform which may have originally supported a thatched building. A low (3 steps) outset stairway, facing the playing alley between C-4 and C-5 to the north, provided access to the top of the structure. While a precise date for this architectural phase is presently undetermined, data from the subsequent phase suggests a pre-Tepeu 1 (A.D.500-600 ?) date of construction.

Except for a few minor changes Terminal phase C-6 simply increased the height and size of the previous structure. In conjunction with these architectural modifications a new plaza surface was also added to Plaza C. A cache (containing 2 vessels) located on the southeastern corner of the stair side dates this construction to the early segment of the Late Classic Period (Tepeu 1, [A.D. 600-700]).

Plaza D Excavations:

Plaza D is a small enclosed courtyard west of Str. A-1 and south of Str. A-4. It measures approximately 15 meters by 15 meters and is bordered on the north by Strs. D-1 and D-2, to the west by D-3, to the south by D-4 and by A-1 to the east.

Our investigations on this plaza were minimal and consisted of a single, small unit on the northeastern outside corner of D-2. This excavation was conducted because initially D-2 appeared to be a western extension of D-1 which angled to the south a few meters before abutting D-3. Results of our excavation negated this assumption and indicated that D-2 was actually a separate small structure, differing in its alignment to D-1. D-2 is in fact set further into the plaza than D-1, thereby forming a small veranda-like patio overlooking Str. A-4 to the north and the western ballcourt down below the acropolis. Above the floor of the veranda-like patio we recovered a fair amount of broken pottery (including fragments of a Mt. Maloney Black Vessel) which indicate use of the structure during the middle (Tepeu 2) part of of the Late Classic Period (A.D. 700-800).

Plaza E Excavations:

Plaza E is located just south of Plaza D, and is approximately similar in size to the latter. It is enclosed by Str. D-4 to the north, E-1 to the east, E-2 to the south and E-3 to the west. Both E-1 and E-2 had previously been superficially damaged by looters. Partly because of this damage, and because it appeared to be morphologically different from the other mounds within the courtyard, we decided to investigate E-1 towards the end of our field season. As a result of this late start our excavations failed to reach sterile level but did uncover two phases of construction.

Due to the small unit that tested E-1 Sub it is presently difficult to provide an accurate description of the architectural style of this earlier sub-phase. Even dating of this substructure is presently tenuous. Some of the ceramics from within fill suggest a Middle Classic date of construction but this will have to be verified in the future.

Unlike the case with E-1 Sub we have a fair amount of information regarding the style, form, and date of terminal phase E-1. This structure consists of a relatively large platform supporting a beautiful and well preserved vaulted building (Figs. 10, 11 & 12). The latter, which probably served as a private shrine or temple, has a single room with a long

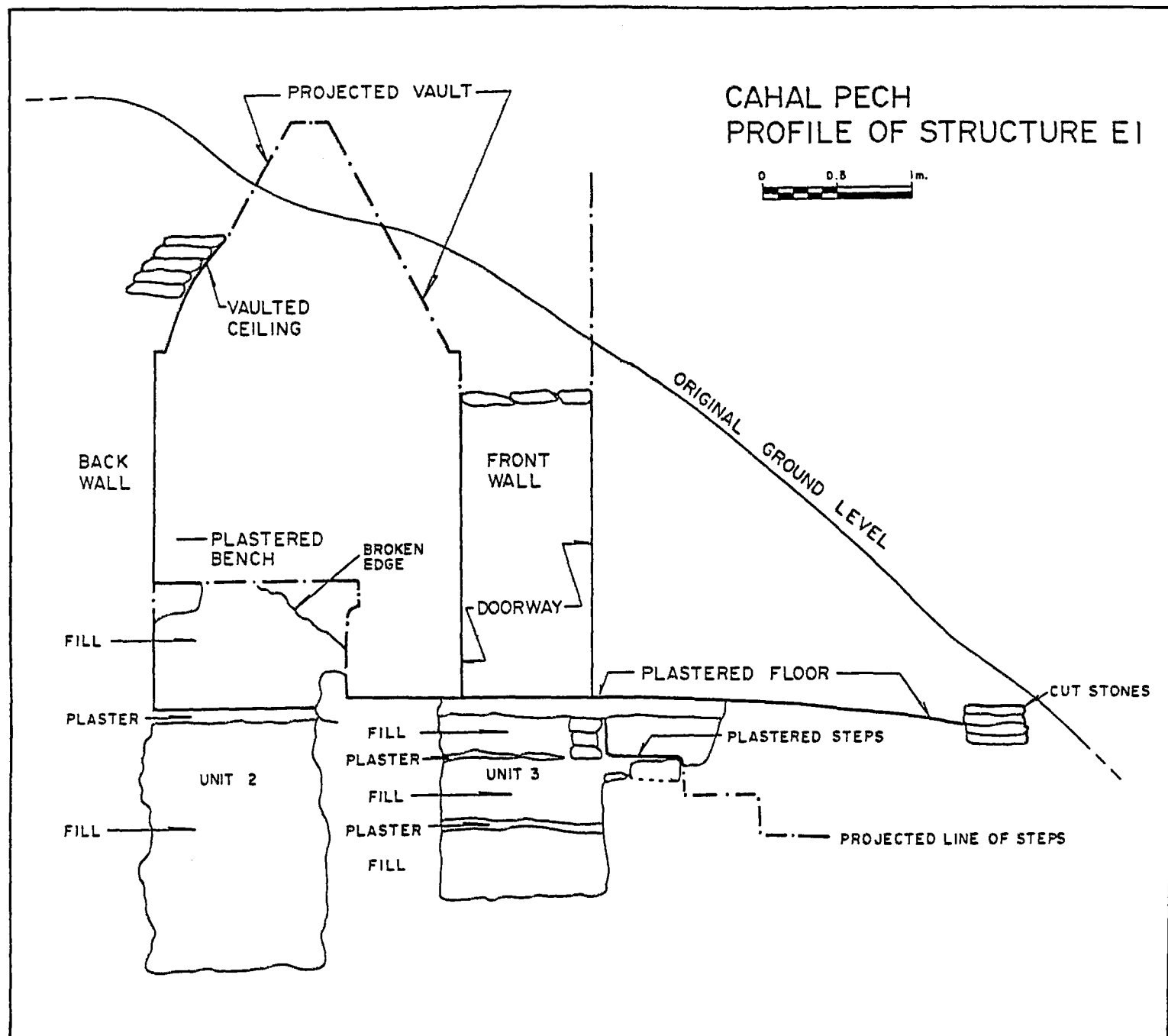


Fig. 10: East-West profile of Str. E-1, Cahal Pech

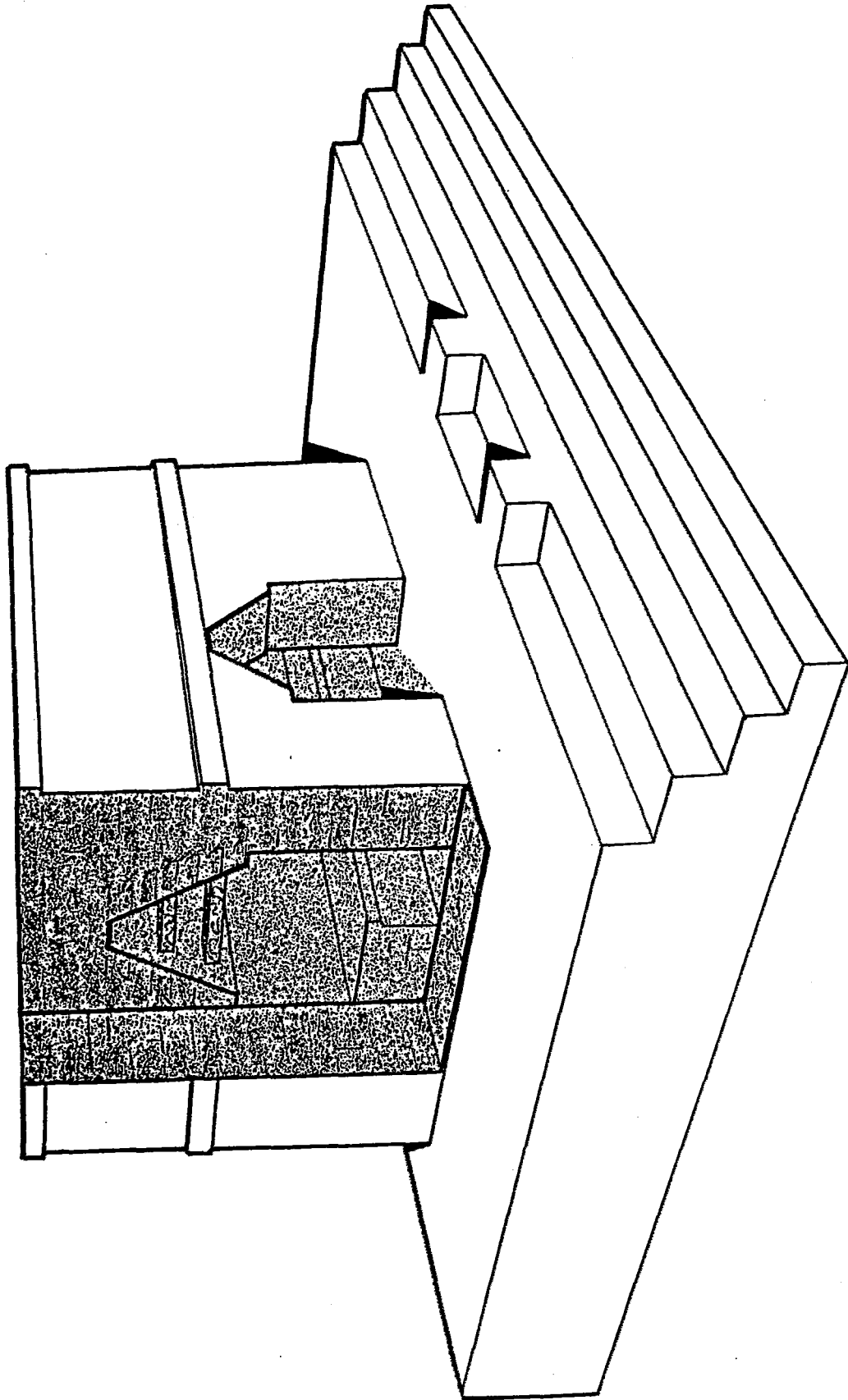


Fig. 11: Reconstruction profile of Str. E-1, Cahal Pech.

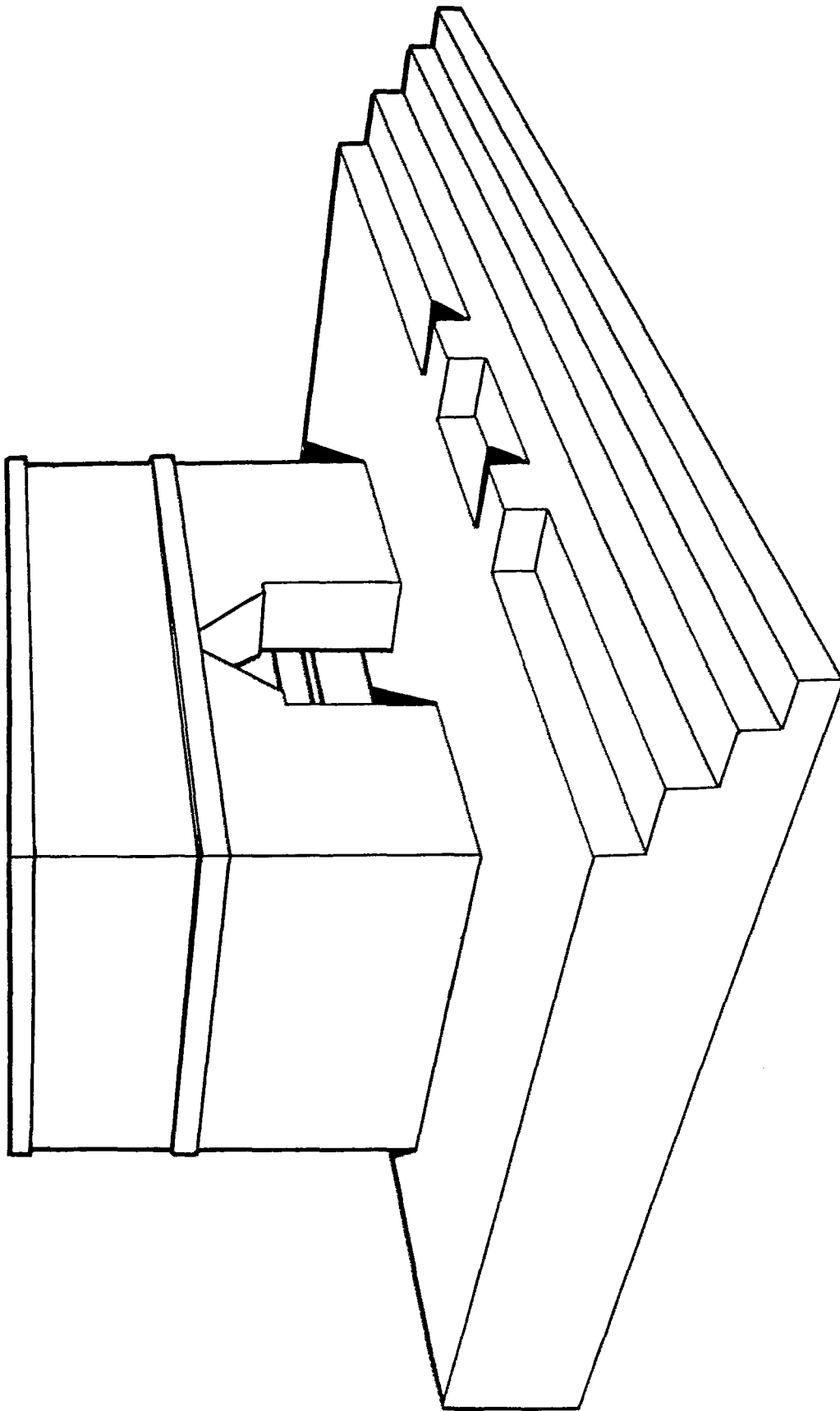


Fig. 12: Reconstruction plan of Str. E-1, Cahal Pech.

bench and is entered via a low vaulted doorway facing west. The floor, bench and a wide (15 cm.) band above the bench were painted red. The rest of the room may have been painted a different colour. Dating for this structure is tentatively placed between A.D. 700-800. This coming season we plan to completely expose and consolidate this structure.

Plaza F Excavations:

Plaza F is situated several meters below and to the east of Plaza E, and south of Strs. A-4 and B-5. An open space between the latter structures provides the only visible access to Plaza F from Plaza B in the north. Only two structures were recorded in Plaza F; F-1 and F-2. Both are very long and low (2m.) platforms that had escaped the looter's picks.

For our sample we selected to investigate F-1 primarily because it had far less tree cover than F-2. Our excavation started off as a wide trench placed approximately in the center of the mound. Having cleared the final phase of architecture we then placed two small units through the floor of the structure and excavated to sterile levels. These investigations revealed that F-1 may have functioned as a residence for second class elite, or elite attendants, over an extended period of time. The original structure appears to have been constructed during the latter part or the Preclassic Period. Subsequently, the floor of the platform was

replastered several times, increasing the height of the structure with every floor added.

The final modifications were eventually conducted sometime during the early part of the Late Classic Period. During this stage the platform may have supported a minimum of 4 separated, single-room buildings, each with a central doorway facing north and with a short stairway leading down to plaza level. (Our excavations exposed one of these units). Each room may have been bordered by a low wall of cut masonry blocks and roofed with perishable material. If time permits we hope to expose at least one more of these units during the 1989 season.

Plaza G Excavations:

Plaza G is located just east of Plaza F. It is bordered by Str. B-5 to the north, F-1 to the west, G-1 to the east and G-2 to the south. Both G-1 and G-2 are long, low-lying (1.5m tall) platforms. We were unable to investigate either of these structures in 1988 but plan to excavate at least one of them this coming summer.

Concluding Remarks:

Preliminary analysis of the 1988 data indicates that Cahal Pech was continuously occupied from about 900 B.C. to A.D. 800. However, since few of our excavations reached sterile levels

future investigations may place the initial occupation of the site even earlier.

The discovery of relatively large Late Preclassic (300 B.C. - A.D. 250) structures (e.g. A-1 Sub) directly beneath Middle Classic (A.D. 500-700) modifications presently suggests that these were the periods of greatest development at the site. Furthermore, since no Preclassic architecture of similar scale has been reported in the central Belize Valley (Bullard & Bullard 1965; Willey et. al. 1965) or the Mopan-Macal Triangle (Coe & Coe 1955; Ball & Taschek 1986), it is also possible that Cahal Pech may have been the primary center of this region during the Middle and Late Formative Periods (This function differs from that proposed for the site by Ball and Tashek (1986:8) who suggest that Cahal Pech was a secondary elite residential satellite of Buena Vista. The latter article, however, was written prior to the commencement of the Cahal Pech project therefore did not have access to the data provided herein).

The nature of the Early Classic Period at Cahal Pech is presently the most difficult to define. During this time the site appears to have lost its previous regional control (perhaps to Buena Vista, a large Classic center some 6 km. to the southwest). This decline in importance is suggested by a paucity of architectural activity and by a drop in the frequency of Tzakol Sphere diagnostics relative to material

from the Late Preclassic Period. A similar phenomena at Seibal led Sabloff (1975) to suggest that that site may have experienced an Early Classic hiatus. Contrary to this opinion, Hammond (1985) and Lincoln (1985) argue that the paucity of Tzakol 1-2 diagnostics does not necessarily imply hiatus and may in fact suggest that some sites simply did not participate in what appears to be a regionally specific ceramic complex. Instead, they add, these sites may have begun to develop their own regional idiosyncracies, or conversely, they may have selected to retain Late Preclassic ceramic styles and technologies well into the Early Classic (Hammond 1985; Lincoln 1985). While this may not necessarily be the case at Cahal Pech, especially in light of the strong Early Classic component at Barton Ramie (Gifford 1976) and the well represented Early Classic Ahcabnal complex defined by Ball and Tashek (1986:21-22) for the region, we hope that future research will clarify the developmental dynamics of the site during this period.

By Middle Classic times (A.D. 550-700) construction activity regains its momentum at Cahal Pech. A large Lamanai-type structure replaced the Late Preclassic temple on A-1, and most of the structures within the site core were modified. Whether the resumption of architectural activity was associated with an improvement of the site's regional political stature is difficult to ascertain but it does indicate an improvement of the local economy. Like other sites along the

headwaters of the Macal River (e.g. Caledonia [Awe 1985]) these changes may have been associated in some way with the contemporary rise of Caracol. Unlike other centers in the region, however, the renewed prosperity of the Middle Classic at Cahal Pech only seems to last for approximately 2 centuries and then, for some presently undetermined reason, the site slowly collapses and is abandoned around A.D. 800. This date of abandonment is suggested by the rare occurrence of Tepeu 3 ceramics and by the virtual absence of Spanish Lookout Ceramic Complex diagnostics (especially material from the Belize Ceramic Group). This situation is very interesting especially when we consider that most sites (e.g. Xunantunich, Baking Pot, Buena Vista and Pacbitun) in the central Belize Valley have produced strong and well defined Spanish Lookout components.

Should our tentative interpretations be validated by future research at the site they will provide important implications to the Preclassic and Late Classic socio-political developments in the Belize River Valley Region.

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