

FIELDWORK REPORTS

The 2002 Season Investigations at Pook's Hill, Belize

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Introduction

A fourth season of excavations was conducted between July and September 2002 at the site of Pook's Hill, Belize, as part of the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project (BVAR) under the direction of Jaime J. Awe. The site is located in the Roaring Creek Valley of western Belize in the Cayo District, approximately 14km southwest of Belmopan (Fig. 1), among the karstic foothills of the Maya Mountains.

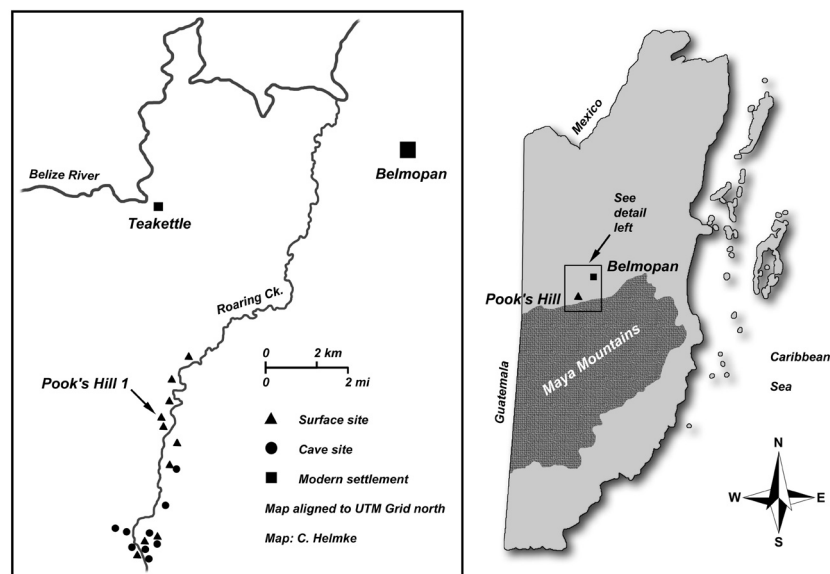
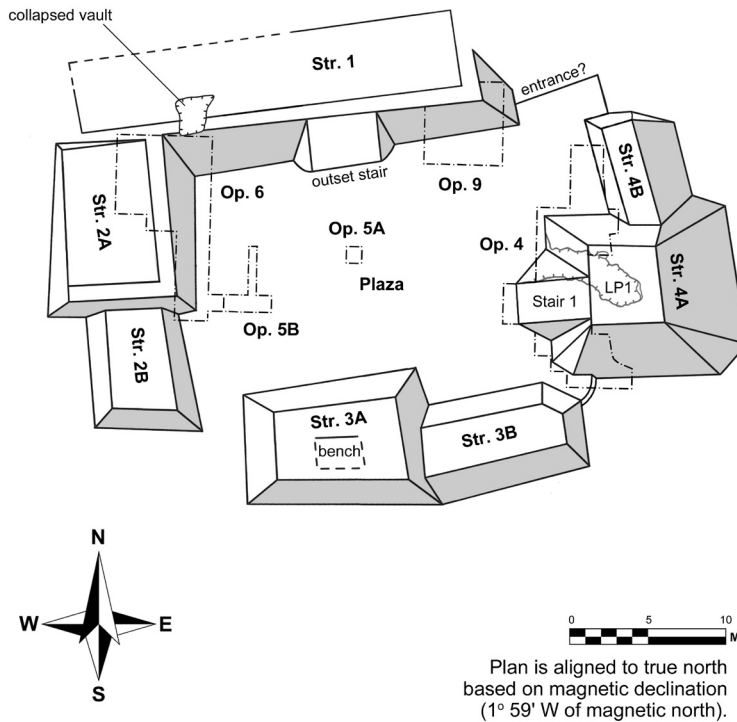


Figure 1. Maps of Belize and the Roaring Creek Valley showing the location of the Pook's Hill 1 *plazuela*.

Site Description

The principle complex of Pook's Hill is commonly referred to as a *plazuela* group, a residential site with masonry structures of various functions facing onto and delineating a quadrilateral plaza. Such residential groups follow typical Maya architectural practices, in being quadrangular and aligned to major cardinal points (Ashmore 1981: 49-54). The *plazuela* has been termed "Pook's Hill Group 1" (PKH1) and consists of the mounded remains of seven to eight buildings (Fig. 2). The largest measures 21m long (east-west) and over 3m high. The group as a whole occupies an area of approximately 1030m² of which about one-third is occupied by the plaza.

Pook's Hill 1, Belize
Plan of *Plazuela* Group
Distribution of Operations
BVAR 2003
 Plan: C. Helmke



Plan is aligned to true north based on magnetic declination ($1^{\circ} 59'$ W of magnetic north).

Figure 2. Plan of the Pook's Hill 1 *plazuela* showing the configuration and distribution of excavation operations at the close of the 2002 season. Note Stair 1 of Structure 4A as well as the looters' trench marked as LP1.

Objectives

The objectives of the 2002 season were to document the activities conducted within and around the eastern structures of the *plazuela* (Structures 4A and 4B). Frequently, structures situated on the eastern perimeter of a *plazuela* are built as diminutive temple buildings and contain special deposits, including human interments and votive caches (Becker 1999). Based on these characteristics such structures have been referred to as 'Eastern Shrines' in Maya archaeology (Chase and Chase 1994; Welsh 1988). Investigation of these structures (expansive horizontal stripping and limited vertical trenching) was conducted at Pook's Hill to assess the degree of congruence between

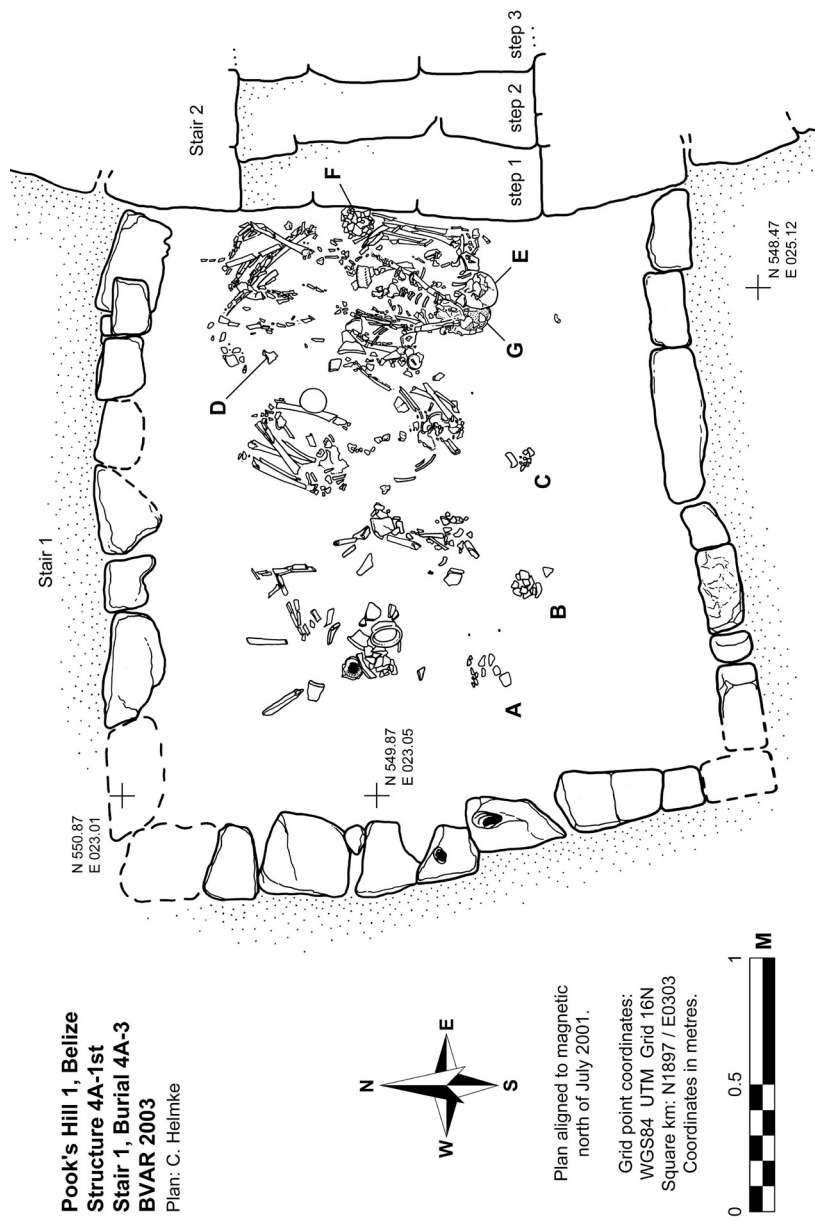


Figure 3. Plan of Burial 4A-3 deposited within the core of Stair 1. Crania of the skeletons of individuals are indicated by their alphabetic designations (A-G). Note the basal course of facings of Stair 1 framing the burial, the curved basal terrace and the steps of the penultimate Stair 2.

ritual activities documented for several nearby caves and those taking place at domestic household shrines. Our investigations were also designed to explore a middle-scale site within the settlement hierarchy present in the Roaring Creek Valley.

Results

Special Deposits

Before archaeological excavations began, Structure 4A had already been partially looted. The large looters' trench (c.2 x 6m), penetrating from the western face into the heart of the structure, along with the associated looters' spoil heap were the foci of salvage excavations in 1999 (Helmke 2000). Human remains and partly reconstructable ceramic vessels in the spoil heap, as well as a masonry crypt bisected by the looters' trench, all confirmed that Structure 4A was an 'Eastern Shrine' (Bassendale 2000; Helmke 2000).

The 2000 and 2001 seasons exposed the full architectural configuration of some structures of the *plazuela* group and explored other structures in a series of smaller trials. Test excavations at the base of Structure 4A were also intended to expose any special deposits unaffected by looting. The latter were completed in 2001 down to bedrock throughout, and led to the discovery of the basal outline of the principal outset axial stair of the shrine's terminal phase (Stair 1), as well as seven discrete primary human interments and a dedicatory cache. With the exception of one burial (Burial 4A-3), which was contained within the core of Stair 1, the cache and all others occurred within the core of earlier plaza platform floors (Bassendale *et al.* in press; Helmke *et al.* 2001). All burials were prone, oriented north-south with heads to the south, as is customary for the greater Belize Valley from Middle Formative times onward (> 600 BC) (Song 1995; Welsh 1988).

While the looters' trench destroyed an undetermined amount of special deposits, it did not penetrate through the primary axis of the structure, the preferred locus for caches and burials (Chase and Chase 1998; Loten and Pendergast 1984: 3, 5; Pendergast 1998). We were able to excavate eleven discrete burial contexts. All were primary single burials with the exception of Burial 4A-3. The latter was fully excavated by 2002, within which a total of seven individuals (Individuals A-G) were documented (Fig. 3). The individuals are represented by varying degrees of skeletal completeness, ranging from a single skull (secondary interment) to nearly complete skeletons (primary interments). Burial 4A-3 also contained the fragmented remains of at least six Terminal Classic (AD 830-950) ceramic vessels, two exhausted obsidian cores, fragments of prismatic obsidian blades, 16 incisors of large edible rodents (*Dasyprocta punctata* or *Agouti paca*), one shell pendant, one jadeite inlay and one fragmentary pyrite mosaic piece (typically used in Mesoamerican mosaic mirrors) (Helmke *et al.* in press). In addition, paleobotanical analysis of the burial fill revealed pine (*Pinus* sp.) and hardwood charcoal as well as unidentified carbonised residues (possibly derived from *copal* incense or pine resin) (Helmke *et al.* 2001; Morehart 2001).

Excavations below Burial 4A-3 also exposed the surface of the earliest plaza platform floor (Floor 3), through which an ancient pit had been cut into the core and underlying

bedrock. The fill of this cut contained 25 human bone fragments, which suggests that a burial may have been present that was subsequently exhumed (a practice documented at other Lowland Maya sites: Fitzsimmons 2002; Weiss-Krejci 2002). Elsewhere within the core of Floor 3, a dedicatory cache (Cache 4A-2) comprising 47 lancet-shaped, prismatic obsidian blades and a shell *adorno* had been placed exactly along the primary axis of the shrine. The deposit was associated with an episode of burning as indicated by charcoal inclusions and partly charred ceramic sherds (Helmke *et al.* in press). Dating the special deposit will be possible on the combined basis of diagnostic ceramics, ^{14}C and obsidian hydration. It is hoped that the matrix samples may shed light on the type of organic remains (carbonised residues) included as part of the cache.

Architecture

The architecture of the penultimate and terminal phase buildings share a double terrace configuration as well as a principal stair of seven steps. However, in its terminal phase, the shrine (Structure 4A-1st) was a round platform, with two terraces and a stair (“a principal axial outset stair”: Stair 1), leading to its summit (Fig. 4) (Helmke *et al.* in press; Loten and Pendergast 1984). In contrast, the penultimate phase (Structure 4A-2nd) had a sub-rectangular plan, rounded corners and imposing stair-side outsets, inset into which was the principal stair (Fig. 3, Stair 2) (Ek and Helmke in press; Helmke *et al.* in press). A poorly constructed architectural component was encountered in the southwestern flank of the penultimate basal terrace. Exposure of the totality of the shrine’s face in 2002 revealed that this component formed part of the round basal terrace of the terminal phase refurbishments and apparently remained unfinished at the

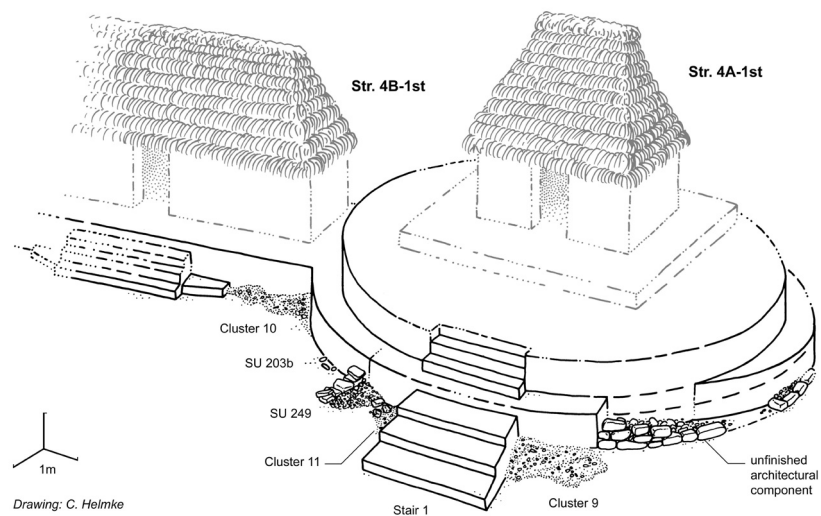


Figure 4. Isometric view of the eastern structures of Pook’s Hill 1 as they may have appeared in the Terminal Classic (AD 830-950). Note that Cluster 11 is partly obstructed by Stair 1 in this northeasterly view. Perishable superstructures of thatch and adobe are conjectural.

time of the site's abandonment. The terminal phase has been tentatively dated to the Terminal Classic (AD 830-950), but corroboration awaits full ceramic analyses and ¹⁴C dating.

Features

Five features discovered during exposure of the terminal architecture of the shrine are worth noting. All were found at the foot of the basal terrace and post-date terminal construction. Three are small, midden-like clusters of refuse (*i.e.* Clusters 9-11), that were swept into the internal corners formed by the shrine with the ancillary structure and outset Stair 1 (Fig. 4). To varying degrees, all consist of high concentrations of ceramic sherds, chert debitage, fragmentary chert tools, faunal remains, freshwater shell and a few special finds. By virtue of their content, as well as their spatial and stratigraphic context, these deposits are thought to be intimately tied to the activities that took place at the shrine in the Terminal Classic. A fourth feature was present as the remains of masonry aggregate and partly disarticulated facings set according to a roughly rectangular plan (SU 249). Although affected by the looting, it is clear that this feature was built abutting the face of the terminal basal terrace, but its function remains unidentified. In possible secondary association with this component was a fragment of a stucco moulding coated in red hematite pigment – indicating that during at least one of the phases of construction the shrine was embellished by brightly coloured, modelled stucco. The association between the colour red and the eastern cardinal direction in Maya cosmology (Thompson 1934) suggests that the use of red stucco here is far from coincidental (note that red-tinted plaster is absent from all other contexts at Pook's Hill). Located just under a metre to the north, was the fifth feature: composed of three river cobbles, set in a rectangular configuration (SU 203b). The overall configuration is reminiscent of so-called 'three stone hearths' that are prevalent in the Maya area (Freidel *et al.* 1993: 66-67, 79, 130; Wagner 2001: 283-284), but this feature was not associated with any charcoal and thereby remains of unidentified function.

Hieroglyphs

Another exciting find made during the course of the 2002 season was the discovery of partial glyphic inscriptions. These were all represented on moulded-carved vase fragments, which are diagnostic of the Terminal Classic, with most recording part of the titular clause of a particular historical figure named *Olom* (Fig. 5). Contemporary records for this individual span between AD 810 and 830 (with a posthumous reference in AD 879) in the monumental inscriptions of neighbouring archaeological sites in Guatemala. Ceramic vases bearing this individual's name are widespread at sites in the greater Belize Valley and parts of adjoining eastern Guatemala, but were apparently restricted to a particular social class engaged in competitive feasting (Helmke 2001). The distribution of these vases probably indicates the spatial extent of a particular social network in which such vessels were important material components. It is also possible that these vases in some way reflect the political sphere of influence of this particular historical figure.



Figure 5. Sample of moulded-carved vase sherds exhibiting fragments of glyphic inscriptions. Transcriptions, transliterations and translations of glyphs represented are provided.

Conclusion

Discoveries made at Pook's Hill offer a detailed perspective on changing ritual practice and social transformation in the Roaring Creek Valley and greater west-central Belize. Burial 4A-3 for example stands in stark contrast to all other burials discovered at Pook's Hill, which are typically discrete primary interments of single individuals. Notably, this burial is contemporary with the latest phase of the shrine and may differ from other interments as a result of changing mortuary practices associated with that building. Moreover, round shrine structures in the Maya Lowlands, such as the one at Pook's Hill, are relatively rare, but appear to gain some prominence during the Terminal Classic, with notable examples at sites such as Seibal in Guatemala (Smith 1982: 164-173). The incidence of this architectural type appears to be associated with socio-political restructuring, population movement and changes in ritual practices occurring under the influence of so-called 'Mexicanised' Maya neighbours (Culbert 1973). Further investigations will clarify whether such patterns are idiosyncratic or reflect wider social processes.

Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to the Belizean Department of Archaeology, its Commissioner and its members for their continuing support and permission to conduct work in the Roaring Creek Valley since 1996. Jaime Awe is thanked for encouragement and support in the field. My gratitude is also due to Ray and Vicki Snaddon for allowing excavations on their property, providing an ideal home and for supplying unwavering financial and logistical support as well as labour. The success of the investigations also relied in large measure on a grant awarded by the Institute of Archaeology, UCL. Ann Kalinski of Black's photography is kindly acknowledged for a generous donation of slide film.

The selfless contributions of all those who have worked so hard in these investigations since 1999 are warmly thanked, particularly the enduring support of (in alphabetical order): Megan Bassendale, Andrew Bevan, Brian Cavanaugh, Everaldo Chi, Omar Chi, Oscar Chi, Placido Cunil, Jerald Ek, Josalyn Ferguson, Jonathan Forbes, Sherry Gibbs, Cameron Griffith, Sally Graver, Rafael Guerra, Christina Halperin, Sue Hayes, Daniel Hodgman, Christopher Irwin, Reiko Ishihara, Harri Kettunen, David Lee, Christopher Morehart, Owen Morton, Jennifer Piehl, William Poe, Alfredo Puc, Nazario Puc, C. Mathew Saunders, Norbert Stanchly, Douglas Weinberg, Eric White and all BVAR field school students who assisted in 2000. I am also grateful for improvements made by Marcos Martín-Torres and Julie Eklund to earlier versions of this report. Finally, I would like to thank my family for seeing me through these seemingly endless field seasons and for their continuous support. All omissions and interpretative shortcomings remain the responsibility of the author.

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