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The Southern Belize Epigraphic Project:
The Hieroglyphic Inscriptions of Southern Belize

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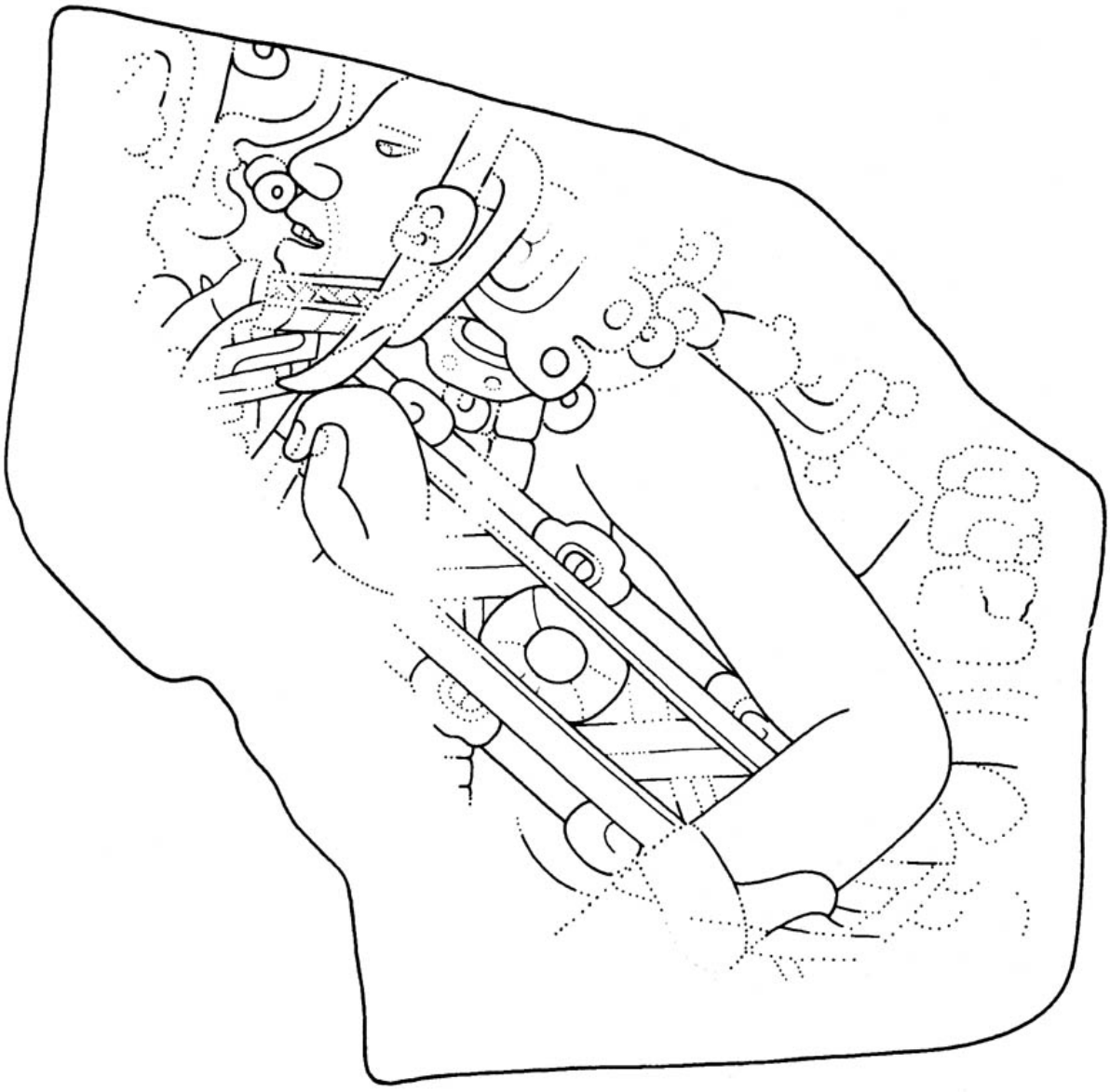

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Introduction

The following report is the result of thirteen years of extensive and thorough epigraphic investigations of the hieroglyphic inscriptions of the Maya Mountains region of southern Belize. The carved monuments of the Toledo and Stann Creek Districts of southern Belize are perhaps one of the least understood corpuses in the entire Maya Lowlands and are best known today because of their unusual style of hieroglyphic syntax and iconographic themes. Recent archaeological and epigraphic evidence now suggests that this region may have played a critical role in the overall development, expansion, and decline of Classic Maya civilization (see Dunham *et al.* 1989, Graham 1983, 1987, Hammond 1975, Laporte 1992a, Laporte and Mejía 2000, Leventhal 1990, 1992, MacKinnon 1989, McKillop and Healy 1989, Wanyerka 2004). Unfortunately, until now, only a small portion of this corpus has ever been published or drawn to professional standards (see Grube *et al.* 1999, Joyce 1929, Joyce *et al*. 1928; Morley 1937-1938, Prager 2002, Wanyerka 1996, 1999b, 1999c). Because this corpus was so poorly documented and was in constant danger of being lost due to rampant looting, repeated acts of vandalism, and due to continued exposure to the elements, it was vital that the entire corpus be properly documented as soon as possible. Based on a generous grant in 2001 from the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., the entire hieroglyphic and sculptural corpus of southern Belize has now been professionally drawn by John Montgomery (Ph.D, University of New Mexico). Featured in the following report are new line drawings of some 80 carved monuments and/or inscriptions. All of the data presented here was collected and compiled while serving as both project epigrapher for the Maya Mountains Archaeological Project (MMAP); a multiyear/multidisciplinary project exploring ancient Maya resource exploitation and exchange in the southern Maya Mountains (Peter S. Dunham, Director), and as project director of the Southern Belize Epigraphic Project (SBEP), a multiyear study of the iconography and hieroglyphic inscriptions of southern Belize (FAMSI Grant #00077, 2001).

Geographic Background

The Maya Mountains were once considered by some archaeologists to be unimportant in the overall development of Classic Maya civilization. However, recent archaeological investigations have now identified and mapped more than 200 sites in this region, many of whose economic activities appear to be tied to resource exploitation and exchange (Dunham et al. 1989; Graham 1983, 1987; Hammond 1975, 1981; Laporte 1992, Laporte and Mejía 2000; Leventhal 1990, 1992; MacKinnon 1989; McKillop and Healy 1989; Wanyerka 2004). Archaeological evidence now suggests that the Maya Mountains region were heavily occupied during the Classic Period and many sites have also been found that feature distinct elite groups that appear to be the loci for production or exchange of specialized resources (Dunham 1996; Dunham *et al*. 1993; Laporte 1992b, 1996, 1997).

The Maya Mountains are home to a variety of raw materials used by the ancient Maya, many of which were widely believed to have come from far distant locations, primarily the Guatemalan Highlands. The Maya Mountains are the only significant mountain range in the Southeastern

Maya Lowlands and they sit atop an ancient uplifted geological fault composed of Late Paleozoic sedimentary and volcanic rocks belonging to the Santa Rosa Group (Abramiuk 2002:1). Among other resources, there are huge deposits of granite, volcanics, volcaniclastics, mudstone, siltstone, and limestone used for grinding stones; pyrites, slate and hematite for mirrors; high quality clays for ceramics; and a host of other minerals for pigments. Given the resource diversity of the Maya Mountains region the area would have been of great economic interest to the ruling elite in and around the region. Recent petrographic analysis has revealed that a large number of grinding stones found at the sites of Tikal, Seibal, Xunantunich, and Uaxactun can be traced back to the Maya Mountains region and sourced to known deposits in the Bladen River Drainage (Abramiuk 2002; Shipley and Graham 1987). Chert and obsidian are two resources noticeably absent from the geological record of the southern Maya Mountains. Both of these resources had to be imported into the region. Nearly all of the obsidian found at sites throughout the Maya Mountains have been sourced either through neutron activation or x-ray fluorescence to three distinct sources (El Chayal, San Martin Jilotepeque, and Ixtepeque) all located in the Highlands of Guatemala (Graham 1994:90; McKillop and Jackson 1989:62). Trade and exchange appears to have been an important economic and political mechanism for the rise and prosperity of sites in this region. The variation in the distribution and appearance of both local and non-local natural resources in this region suggests that resource procurement and exchange may have been the economic stimulus for the development and growth of polities and trade routes in the Maya Mountains region.

Project Background

The data presented here stems in part from the author's own extensive archaeological and epigraphic investigations of some 23 Classic Maya sites located within the Maya Mountains Regional Sphere. The Maya Mountains Regional Sphere, as geographically defined here, includes all of southern Belize (all of the Stann Creek and Toledo Districts, and portions of the Cayo District) and the adjacent portions of southeastern Guatemala (the Municipios of Dolores, Melchor de Mencos, Poptun, and San Luis). Located within this vast regional sphere are more than 200 archaeological sites containing a corpus of more than 170 hieroglyphic inscriptions. However, the following report is restricted to those 12 sites recording iconographic or hieroglyphic texts located within the southern Belize portion of the Maya Mountains Regional Sphere (Figure 1): Lubaantún, Nim Li Punit, Pusilhá, Xnaheb, Uxbenka Tzimín Ché, Caterino's Site, Choco, Pearce Ruin, Lagarto Ruin, Papayal, and Bladen Cave 2.

The epigraphic data presented here represents only a small portion of the author's current Ph.D dissertation research aimed at investigating the nature of Classic Maya political organization in the lesser-known peripheral regions of the Maya Lowlands (see Wanyerka 2004). No where is this more important than in regions like the Maya Mountains where there are numerous smaller emblem-glyph-bearing polities with hieroglyphic inscriptions that appear to chronicle the same sorts of hegemonic features characteristic of those described by Martin and Grube in the central Petén (1994, 1998, 2000). The author's current research is aimed at investigating whether same types of political relationships and hierarchies, now thought to exemplify the Classic Maya can be found in the lesser-known or peripheral regions like the Maya Mountains. Rather than looking at Classic Maya political organization from a superordinate's perspective, the author's dissertation is aimed at investigating this question from the perspective of sites located in the lesser-known or peripheral zones, specifically the Southern Maya Mountains Regional Sphere of Belize and adjacent southeastern Guatemala.

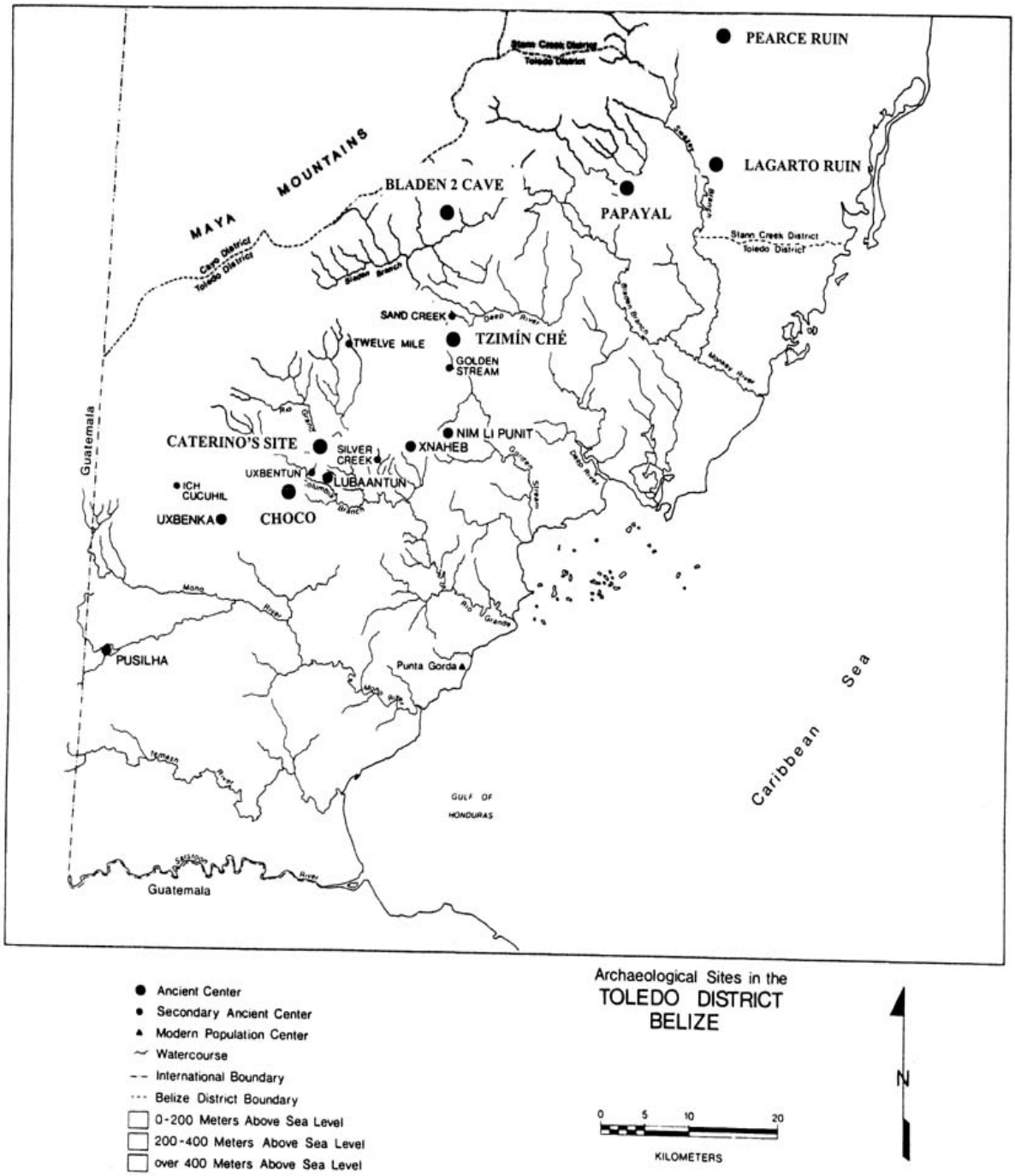

Figure 1. Map of Southern Belize. (Drawing by Richard Leventhal, [Leventhal 1990: Map 8.1], modified by Wanyerka 2004)

This research was intended to accomplish four specific and interrelated goals. First, to analyze all of the hieroglyphic inscriptions of the Maya Mountains region using the methods of modern linguistics and epigraphy (along with the archaeological data) to test whether the same hegemonic characteristics described by Martin and Grube for the central core region of the Maya Lowlands can be found here. The implications of such a study would not only demonstrate that peripheral regions fully participated in a macro-political/hegemonic system during Classic Period times, but it would also strengthen the validity of Martin and Grube's overall interpretation of Classic Maya political organization. If no epigraphic evidence can be found to support a hegemonic system in the inscriptions of the Maya Mountains region then Martin and Grube's reconstruction of Classic Maya political organization might have to be reevaluated. The second goal is to develop and reconstruct a regional chronology and dynastic history of sites located within the Maya Mountains region. The third goal is to examine and define the cultural, geographic, economic, ideological, and political processes that may have contributed to the growth and prosperity of this region. And finally, the fourth goal is to examine how the economies of less-powerful peripheral communities were integrated into the "realm" of larger hegemonic states and how this affects our overall understanding of the political and economic dynamics of Classic Maya civilization.

The hieroglyphic inscriptions of the Southern Maya Mountains Regional Sphere are perhaps the least understood in the entire Maya Lowlands. As a corpus unto itself, the monuments of this region are best known because of their unusual style of hieroglyphic syntax and iconographic themes. The earliest dedicatory date in the region is 9.7.0.0.0 (A.D. 573) as recorded on Pusilhá Stela O and the latest dedicatory date in this region is 10.4.0.0.0 (A.D. 909) as recorded on Tzimín Ché Stela 1. However, based on stylistic and iconographic evidence, the earliest monuments in the Maya Mountains region come from the site of Uxbenka, a site located approximately 10 km east of the Guatemala/Belize border in the southern foothills of the Maya Mountains. Stylistically dated by the author to between 8.16.3.10.2 and 8.17.1.4.12 (A.D. 360-378) or shortly thereafter, Uxbenka Stela 11 is clearly the earliest carved monument in Belize and one of the earliest in the entire southeastern Maya Lowlands. The date assigned for Stela 11 is based on the appearance of a well-known Early Classic ruler's name from the site of Tikal named *Chaak Tok Ich'aak I* ("Great Burning Claw"). *Chaak Tok Ich'aak I* is the Tikal ruler who met his untimely death in A.D. 378 with the infamous "arrival" event of the Teotihuacanoes at Tikal. In total, the hieroglyphic inscriptions of the Maya Mountains region record an internal dynastic history spanning some 549 years.

One of the long-range goals of the SBEP is to use the inscriptions of this region, along with archaeological data, to test whether resource exploitation and exchange may have been the primary economic motivation for the development of a macro-political system in the Maya Mountains region. If this hypothesis is correct, then we should expect to see evidence of this interaction by way of explicit patronage, alliance, and subordination phrases reflected in the hieroglyphic inscriptions of this region and in fact, there are many such references. Interlaced within the dynastic inscriptions of Nim Li Punit and Pusilhá there are several explicit references to accessions and other important events taking place under the auspices of rulers from foreign polities. Based on these findings, it now seems quite clear that this corpus can significantly change and alter our current understanding of the political landscape and interactions of sites located within the Southern Maya Mountains Regional Sphere.

Since this corpus was so poorly documented and was in constant danger of being lost, due to looting, repeated acts of vandalism, and due to continued exposure to the elements, it was critically important that this corpus be properly documented to the standards set forth by the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscription Project* (Graham 1975). Thus, based on a generous grant from the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. in 2001, a final season of fieldwork enabled the SBEP to document all of the remaining sculpture in the Toledo and Stann Creek Districts of southern Belize. In addition, we were also able to document all of the monuments removed from Pusilhá by the British Museum Expeditions of the late 1920's. This comprehensive corpus will now provide scholars with an accurate source for further epigraphic and iconographic analysis.

Methodology

Methodologically, the SBEP utilized primary data obtained from previous and ongoing archaeological investigations and from the extensive photographic archives obtained by the author as project epigrapher for the Maya Mountains Archaeological Project. Prior to the start of this project, only a small portion of this corpus had been properly documented. Detailed photographs and a few line drawings of the best-preserved monuments have appeared in several publications (Grube *et al*. 1999; Hammond 1975; Hammond *et al.* 1999; Joyce 1929; Joyce et al. 1928; Leventhal 1990, 1992; Morley 1937-1938; Prager 2002; Wanyerka 1996, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). However, many of the existing technical drawings that have been produced thus far were simply not accurate and many lacked the accompanying figural scenes. By establishing and maintaining a close working relationship with all of the principle archaeologists and epigraphers who have worked in southern Belize over the years, the author was able to secure copies of all of their relevant archaeological reports, field notes, photographs, slides, and preliminary drawings. Without the enthusiastic help and support of colleagues like Geoffrey Braswell, Peter Dunham, Nikolai Grube, Norman Hammond, Nicholas Hellmuth, Steve Houston, Richard Leventhal, Barbara MacLeod, Christian Prager, and Dorie Reents-Budet this report could never have been written. This material, as well as data obtained during the 2001 field season, serve as the basis of interpretation for many of the new technical drawings contained within this final report.

The project photographer, Jack Sulak, using a NIKON N90S camera with an assortment of Nikon lenses, photographed all of the carved monuments in southern Belize. Each monument was also digitally photographed using a Nikon 990 Coolpix Digital Camera. To highlight specific details, side lighting or the use of dual-flash units was also employed during principal photography. Approximately 1800 35mm slides and over 1200 digital photographs were taken by the SBEP during the 2001 field season. These images, as well as photographic archives provided by the above mentioned colleagues (totally more than 5,000 images), were then scanned using a Nikon LS-1000 35mm Slide Scanner and the final images were then burned onto CD ROMS. Thus far, the photographic archive of the SBEP totals more than 100 CD ROMS, each cataloged by site and by sculpture. Once all of the images were scanned, the images were then printed that served as the templates for the new technical drawings. All of the drawings featured in this report, with the exception of the Bladen Cave paintings, were all drawn by the project's graphic artist John Montgomery (Ph.D., University of New Mexico). Preliminary field sketches were made prior to our arrival in Belize and checked against the original monument while in the field where applicable. To ensure accuracy of the drawings, John worked closely with the author using the SBEP's massive photographic archive to help in the final preparations for all of the new technical drawings.

In all, some 130 carved or plain monuments were documented during the 2001 field season. This final report features a nearly complete site-by-site inventory of all the known carved sculpture and hieroglyphic texts of southern Belize. Be sure to look for addition updates of this report on the FAMSI website. The format of this final report is based largely on the format used by Ian Graham as part of his Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions Project (1975). Thus, the type of data collected and complied here includes information regarding provenance, monument condition, the type of material used, its shape, its precise dimensions, its carved areas, the dedicatory date of the monument, references to earlier drawings or photographs, and a brief commentary on the iconography and/or hieroglyphic inscription of each monument.

A Note about Monument Dimensions

The following is a key to the abbreviations used in this report:

HT: Overall Height of the Monument
MW: Maximum Width of the Monument
HSA: Maximum Height of the Sculptural Area
WSA: Maximum Width of the Sculptural Area
WBC: Maximum Width at the Base of the Carving
WTC: Maximum Width at the Top of the Carving
MTH: Maximum Thickness of the Monument
RELS: Maximum Depth of Relief of the Sculptural Area
RELG: Maximum Depth of Relief of the Glyphic Area

A Note on the Epigraphic Conventions and Orthography

Each hieroglyphic text was analyzed on a glyph-by-glyph basis according to the conventions of proper epigraphic transliteration and translation (see Fox and Justeson 1984:363-366, Stuart 1988:7-12). This means that each glyph or glyph block was analyzed according to its constituent components (affixes and main signs) and assigned a corresponding Thompson (T) Number for easy identification (Thompson 1962). Some of the values for the T-numbers used in this report come from the glyphic revision of the Thompson catalog published by Ringle and Smith-Stark in 1996. Logographic readings are capitalized and syllabic or phonetic readings are in lower case. A single period (.) between each sign value represents a horizontal alignment of the reading order and a colon (:) is used to denote a vertical relationship between signs.

In general, this report uses the orthography for Maya words that have been accepted by the Academia de Lenguas Mayas in Guatemala.

Any errors, omissions or misidentifications that appear in this report are the sole responsibility of the author. The author welcomes any insights, comments, or criticisms you might have concerning this report.

Acknowledgements

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SBEP would like to thank FAMSI and the entire Grantee Selection Committee for choosing to fund and support our project. We especially wish to thank Sandy Noble, the Executive Director of FAMSI for her friendship and enthusiastic support of this project. The SBEP would also like to thank the Acting Archaeological Commissioner of Belize, George Thompson, and Allan Moore of the Department of Archaeology, Belize for granting us permission to conduct fieldwork in Belize. We are indebted to the entire staff of the Department of Archaeology, Belize for their generous help in facilitating archival research for our project and for computer support while in Belize. In particular we wish to acknowledge and thank John Morris, Brian Woodye, Jamie Awe, Paul Francisco, and Theresa Batty for all of their help.

We likewise express our gratitude to Peter S. Dunham, Director of the Maya Mountains Archaeological Project, for the use of the MMAP basecamp while conducting fieldwork in Belize. In addition, a heart-felt thanks is also extended to Jack and Alexa Sulak for their generous support and belief in the importance of documenting the sculpture of southern Belize. Jack, a close friend and confidant, served as the project photographer and continues to be an invaluable asset to the SBEP. I owe a great deal of gratitude to Jack for his commitment to the SBEP for he traveled back to Belize on two different occasions to re-photograph specific details of key monuments at both Xnaheb and Nim Li Punit. I would also like to thank Dr. John Montgomery, the project's graphic artist and art historian for his commitment and dedication to drawing the entire corpus as part of this project. This corpus could never have been drawn without John's technical expertise and keen eye for detail.

We are also particularly indebted to Santiago Coc and his son Kenan, the caretakers of Lubaantún and to Placido Ash and Pedro Sam, the caretakers of Nim Li Punit, for their patience and help in facilitating our photographic needs while working at those two archaeological sites. We would also like to thank our workmen Marcello Canti, Bex Pop, and the late Monico Sho for their help in guiding us to the ruins and keeping us safe while there. And a special thanks must also go out to Don Owen Lewis and the Coleman Family for their friendship and hospitality while in Belize.

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