

Introduction

The study area and research aims

The Alacranes Bajo and the settlements with which it is associated are in the Three Rivers Region (TRR) of northern Belize. The TRR has been the setting of decades of research — primarily by the Maya Research Program (MRP), the Programme for Belize Archaeology Project (PbBAP), and the La Milpa Archaeological Project (LaMAP) — that focus on the archaeology of the Precolumbian Maya. Settlements near bajos have interested archaeologists for many years, partly because the bajos— a specific kind of wetland —are believed to have been exploited in some way, and perhaps in different ways over time. The main questions driving my research into the character of settlement associated with the Alacranes Bajo are:

- What is the nature of the settlement at the eastern edge of the Alacranes Bajo in the Three Rivers Region of Northern Belize?
- Is there evidence to support the idea that the settlements were situated primarily to take advantage of the bajo's resources?

To approach these questions, I undertook archaeological fieldwork consisting of mapping, surface artefact collection, soil sampling, aerial reconnaissance, with excavation of Tulix Mul, Nojol Nah and areas around the two sites and near the bajo.

In order to address the main research aims, it was necessary to articulate questions that would help to structure investigations of both the land and its settlement:

- Landscape-focused questions:
 - a) What natural resources and/or features are found in the study area?
 - b) Where are these features/resources located with respect to settlement?
 - c) Is there evidence of land modification or exploitation of these resources or features, in particular, the bajo?
- Settlement-focused questions:
 - a) What evidence is there for settlement in the study area?
 - b) What is the chronology of settlement?
 - c) What pattern of settlement is indicated?
 - d) How does the pattern of settlement and its chronology fit with models already proposed for the Three Rivers Region?
 - e) What can the material culture (artefacts and architecture), as well as burial data, found associated with the settlements on the eastern edge of the

Alacranes Bajo tell us about social organisation, daily life, labour specialisation, and local and regional interaction?

The Maya Research Program

My interest in the Three Rivers Region began when I first went to Belize in 2008 as a final year undergraduate to participate in the Maya Research Program's field school. I returned the following year as a staff member and co-ran the lab for two years with Jacquie Martinez (then a graduate student at the University of York). During the 2009 field season, when I was not working in the lab, I assisted the project's surveyor, Marc Wolf with mapping endeavours, including the relocation and mapping of the site of Grey Fox (see Chapter 4). In 2010 I was involved in assisting Marc with mapping in the Blue Creek area, when we started getting reports from the team working at the Nojol Nah site core that on the way to their site they saw vast swathes of land being bulldozed, burned, and chain-cleared by local farmers. Although the destruction of archaeological features is against the law in Belize, there is little infrastructure in place for enforcement. On the advice of the Maya Research Program director, Dr Tom Guderjan, we went and carried out reconnaissance of the area, and it quickly became apparent that we had an extremely short window in which to record the archaeological features that had been revealed by the land-clearance before they were completely destroyed or covered by crops. To this end, we re-focussed our 2010 efforts, and mapped the whole area (ca. 8-10 km sq.) on foot, noting that as well as large architecture and presumed house mounds there were a number of what appeared to be landscape modifications visible. Located directly to the south of the Nojol Nah site core, the cleared area was bounded by a small 500 m-wide *bajito* (small bajo) to the east, the Alacranes Bajo to the west, a modern fence line to the north and to the south a modern marl road that bisects the land following the natural topography. The most interesting thing about the land modifications and archaeological features was that they were located on the edge of the Alacranes Bajo, the largest land feature in the vicinity, a feature that had not been the subject of previous research. I subsequently became interested in determining the nature of the settlement around the eastern edge of the Alacranes Bajo and investigating how this settlement fitted into what was known about the wider Three Rivers Region. The following three field seasons (2011-2013) were primarily devoted to the excavation of features uncovered during the 2010 field season. The results of the excavations and their implications for our understanding of the Alacranes Bajo and its settlements are reported in the following pages.

Chapter outline

Chapter 1 provides the broad regional context of the research in the TRR. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework for the Alacranes Bajo area study, drawn from landscape archaeology and approaches to community organisation. Chapter 3 presents the ecological and environmental context of the eastern Alacranes Bajo area, and Chapter 4 presents previous research in the Three Rivers Region, both archaeological and environmental.

Chapter 5 outlines the methods used in the course of my field research and analyses. Chapters 6 through 9 present the data collected for this study, and at the end of each of these chapters I provide a summary and interpretation of the data. The data chapters are split as follows: Chapter 6 presents the 2010 mapping and surface collection; Chapter 7 deals with the 2011 test excavations across the Nojol Nah Settlement zone; Chapter 8 describes the 2012 and 2013 excavations and landscape investigations at Tulix Mul; and Chapter 9 reports previously unpublished work relevant to the Alacranes Bajo zone carried out at the Nojol Nah site core by various members of Maya Research Program staff.

The final two chapters, Chapter 10 and Chapter 11, present the conclusions of the study by assessing how my data have addressed the main research questions. Chapter 10 focuses on data collected from the Eastern Alacranes Bajo sites, and Chapter 11 contextualises the Eastern Alacranes Bajo area within the wider Three Rivers region. Appendix A is an online resource (www.barpublishing.com/additional-downloads.html) with high quality images of some of the maps and graphs that appear in this manuscript, including detailed photographs of a painted wall from the site of Tulix Mul, and a report on the graffiti found there. Photographs and items that appear in the appendix are referenced in the body of this book as e.g. A1, A2. All photographs, where not otherwise noted, were taken by me during the time I spent researching this book.