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**The Maax Na Archaeology Project: Documentation of Stelae, Altars,  
and Cave Entrances in the West Ceremonial Group**



**Research Year:** 2001

**Culture:** Maya

**Chronology:** Late Pre-Classic

**Location:** Río Bravo Conservation Area, Orange Walk District, Belize

**Site:** Maax Na

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## Abstract

A short field project was conducted at the Maya site of Maax Na in northern Belize in the spring of 2001 to investigate an area of cave entrances and associated monuments. Eleanor King (Howard University) and I, along with a small crew, documented what turned out to be a single stela, or perhaps more correctly, a megalith, and excavated a portion of the platform supporting it. The cave entrances were cleared and documented and it appears that all entrances open into a tubular cave that likely carries water during the rainy season. Our current interpretation of this *locus* at Maax Na is that it was an important place for the collection of water, with the megalith placed to acknowledge the sacredness of underground springs.

## Resumen

Durante la primavera de 2001, se llevó a cabo un corto proyecto arqueológico en el sitio maya de Maax Na, en el norte de Belice, para investigar un área de entradas a cuevas y monumentos asociados. Eleanor King (de la Universidad de Howard) y yo, junto con un pequeño grupo de asistentes, documentamos lo que resultó ser una estela individual, y, para decirlo quizás más correctamente, un megalito, y excavamos una parte de la plataforma sobre la cual éste se asienta. Despejamos y documentamos las entradas a cuevas, y por lo que parece, todas estas entradas se abren a una cueva tubular por la que muy probablemente circula agua durante la estación de lluvias. Nuestra interpretación actual de este sitio de Maax Na, es que se trató de un lugar importante para el aprovisionamiento de agua, y que el megalito fue colocado allí como reconocimiento del carácter sagrado de los manantiales de agua subterráneos.

*Submitted 09/20/2002 by:*

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## Introduction to the Maya Site of Maax Na

The Maya site of Maax Na<sup>1</sup> is located in northwestern Belize in the Río Bravo Conservation Area ([Figure 1](#)). The site was first documented by archaeologists in 1995 when a reconnaissance team for the Programme for Belize Archaeology Project

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<sup>1</sup> The site name, which means 'spider monkey house', was given by the PfBAP survey team in 1995. The apostrophe in the spelling was dropped in 2001 to follow regional convention (Coe and Van Stone 2001).

(PfBAP), directed by Dr. Fred Valdez of the University of Texas at Austin (Valdez 1997), identified the monumental center. The Maax Na Archaeology Project, co-directed by Leslie Shaw (Bowdoin College) and Eleanor King (Howard University), began in 1996 with a season of site mapping and exploration. Our efforts to date have continued to concentrate on site mapping and only limited excavations have been conducted. From this initial work, we have evidence of site occupation from at least the Late Preclassic Period (250 B.C.–A.D. 250), with major construction efforts taking place in the Early Classic. Maax Na is one of five major sites within the boundaries of the conservation area, and with this high site density, each site must have had to balance its economy in reference to the volatile political world that surrounded it.



Figure 1. The location of Maax Na in northwestern Belize.

The monumental center at Maax Na is located on a hilltop at 180 m above sea level and is within the Río Azul/Río Hondo drainage basin. The site center is distinctive in that it was designed on a large scale, particularly in the wide spread between buildings surrounding Plaza A ([Figure 2](#)). The monumental center includes a north plaza (Plaza

A) which is connected to a western plaza (Plaza C) by a wide causeway. A standing stela (Figure 3) was discovered at the southern end of the causeway, and although no evidence of carving remains, its position is similar to one found at Copán which demarcated the juncture of sacred and secular spaces (Schele and Mathews 1998:136). To the southeast of this causeway is a third plaza (Plaza B), which is dominated by a single large pyramid. The pyramid structure is 17 meters high but was positioned on a natural hill so that its summit stands 24.6 meters above Plaza B. The limestone hill was cut and filled to create a two-tiered rise to the base of the pyramid structure. A large reservoir filled the area to the west of the causeway, and the reservoir would have contributed both aesthetically and functionally to the community.

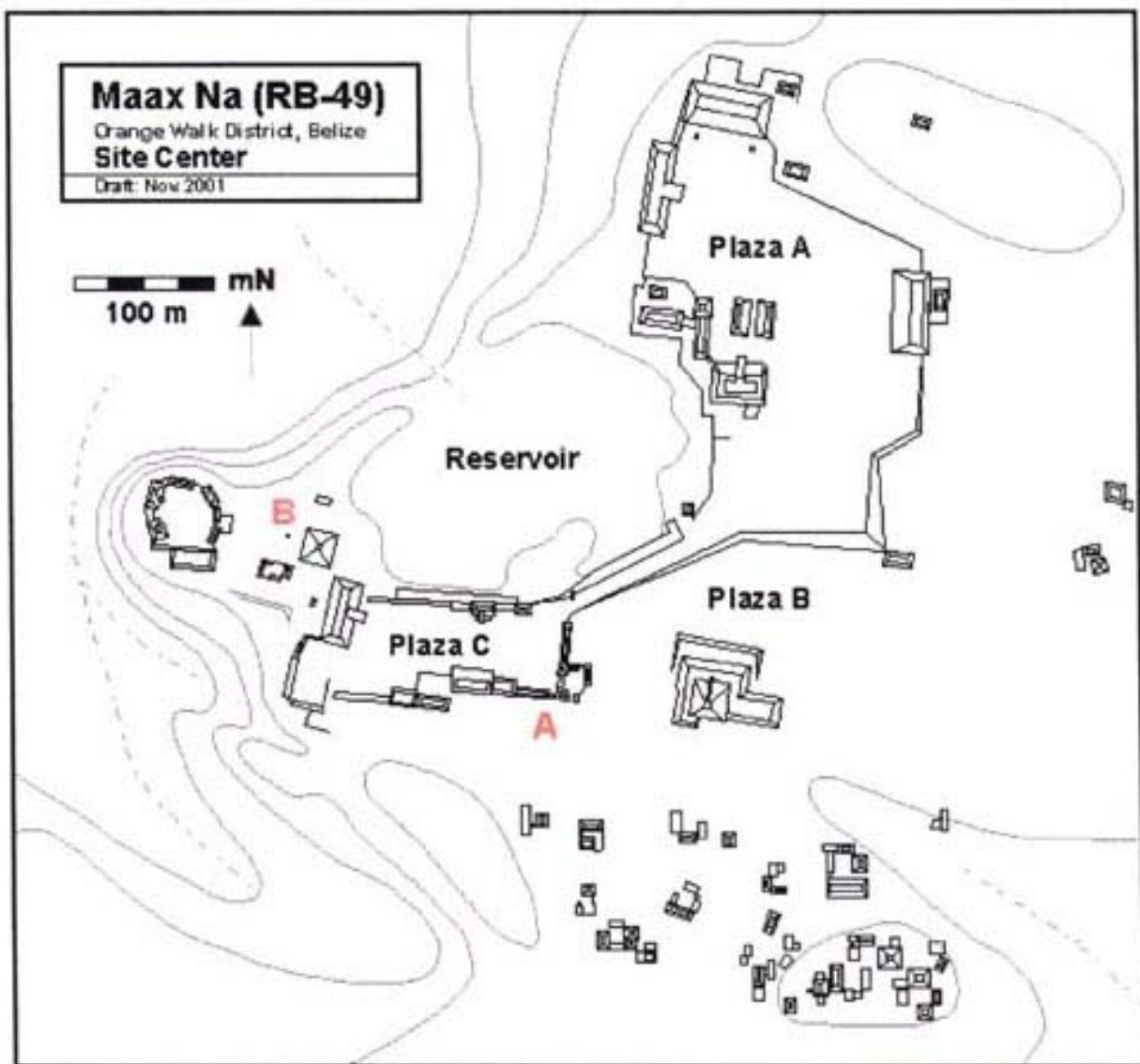
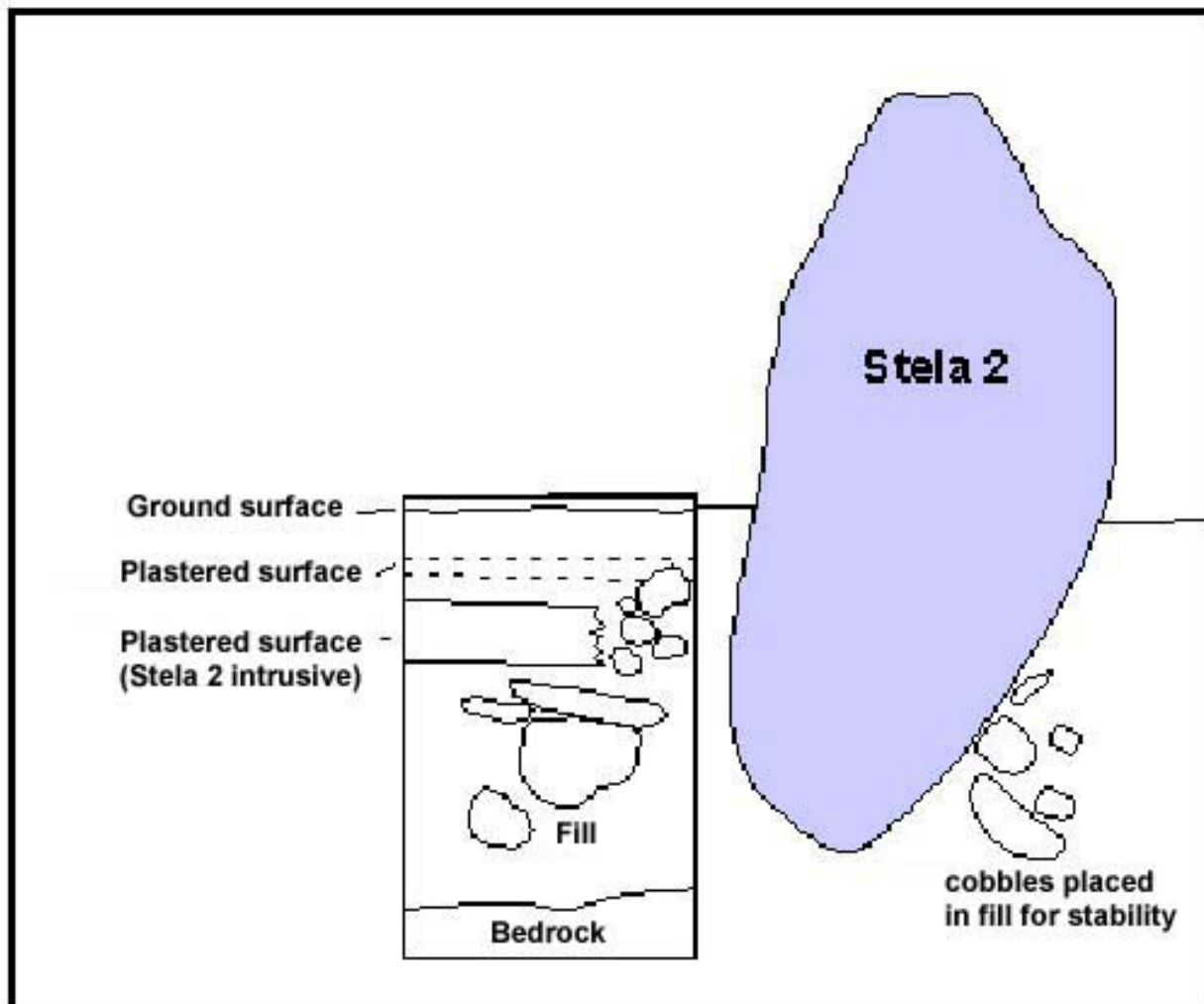


Figure 2. The site center of Maax Na. The letter 'A' designates the location of the 2001 investigation and 'B' identifies the placement of Altar A.



**Figure 3. Stela 2 was found in a standing position on the south end of the causeway. The stylized profile (from a test unit on south side of stela) shows there were at least two plastering episodes of the causeway surface, with the stela being associated with the most recent.**

A large area of upland bajo is located northwest of the site center; this area is drained by Thompson's Creek, which flows north into the Río Azul/Río Hondo River drainage. The residential zones relating to Maax Na concentrate to the west of the site center and cluster around these wetlands, suggesting an economic focus on agricultural products. Survey to the east of the site center has identified only sparse settlement.

One distinctive aspect of Maax Na is the large number of cave entrances that surround the monumental center ([Figure 4](#)). There are indications at some of these cave entrances of human modifications and in several instances ceramic fragments have been observed inside the cave. We plan to have expert cavers explore these in the future, but simply on the basis of their frequency and prominent locations in relation to

key buildings within the site center, we have proposed that Maax Na may have played a specialized role in ritual activities in the region (King and Shaw ms.) James Brady et al. (1997) have recently added to our understanding of Maya site organization by suggesting that caves were used in positioning surface structures within a cosmological model, such as that proposed by Ashmore (1992; see also Houk 1996). Brady and his team, working within the Petexbatún region of Guatemala, have found strong evidence that above-ground structures were placed in reference to caves and springs below. The linkage of caves with the underworld is key in this association, as is the connection of caves and freshwater, which certainly would have been of relevance to a hilltop community.



**Figure 4. A cave entrance located to the west of the North Plaza at Maax Na.**

## **Results of March 2001 Field Work**

### ***Project Objectives***

The Maax Na Archaeology Project had conducted four summer field seasons between 1996 and 2000. These efforts allowed for the majority of the ceremonial center to be mapped and for test excavations to be conducted, primarily in the North Plaza. At the end of the 2000 season, an interesting cluster of cave openings and possible stelae were discovered at the southeast corner of the West Plaza ([Figure 5](#)). Work at Maax Na to date had only identified two stelae, and the location of these stones outside of a formal plaza was intriguing. The funding requested from FAMSI was to support 16 days of fieldwork in the spring of 2001 to complete the investigation and documentation of this area. The excellent weather and the committed crew allowed us not only to meet our original objective but also to conduct several additional tests in the southwestern area of the site. The additional work resulted in the discovery of the first altar (Altar A) reported at Maax Na.

### ***The Megalith and Caves (Operation C2-1000)***

The possible stela (later defined as Megalith I) and caves are located at the southeastern corner of the Western Plaza ([Figure 5](#)). A residential group, known as the Water Group, is also in this area. A large limestone block stood upright on what appeared to be a shallow platform. Two other large blocks were adjacent to the first block, but had fallen over. The upright block stood 112 cm above the platform surface and was 39 cm thick. There was no apparent carving on the block, but it did appear that it had been shaped, particularly the 90-degree juncture between the east/front side and the edges.

After clearing the area of vegetation and following a close inspection of the blocks, it was determined that the blocks that we had thought were fallen stelae had in fact been part of the original block ([Figure 6](#)). A crack had formed that split the block parallel to the east face. Given the dimensions of the fallen blocks, we estimate that the original block was roughly 155 cm high, 126 cm thick north/south, and 75 cm thick east/west. These dimensions place it more in the category of megalith rather than stela, but it is clear that it represents the intentional placement of a large, shaped boulder. This feature will now be referred to as Megalith I to avoid confusion with clearly defined stelae at the site.

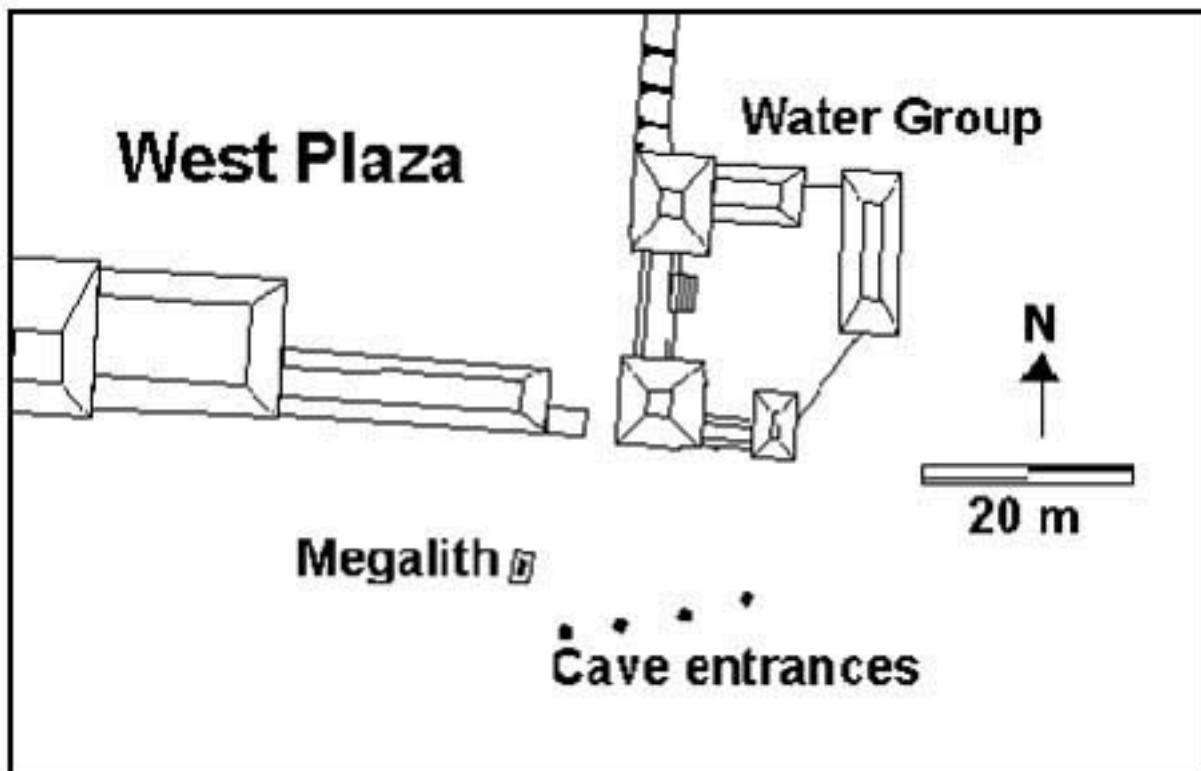
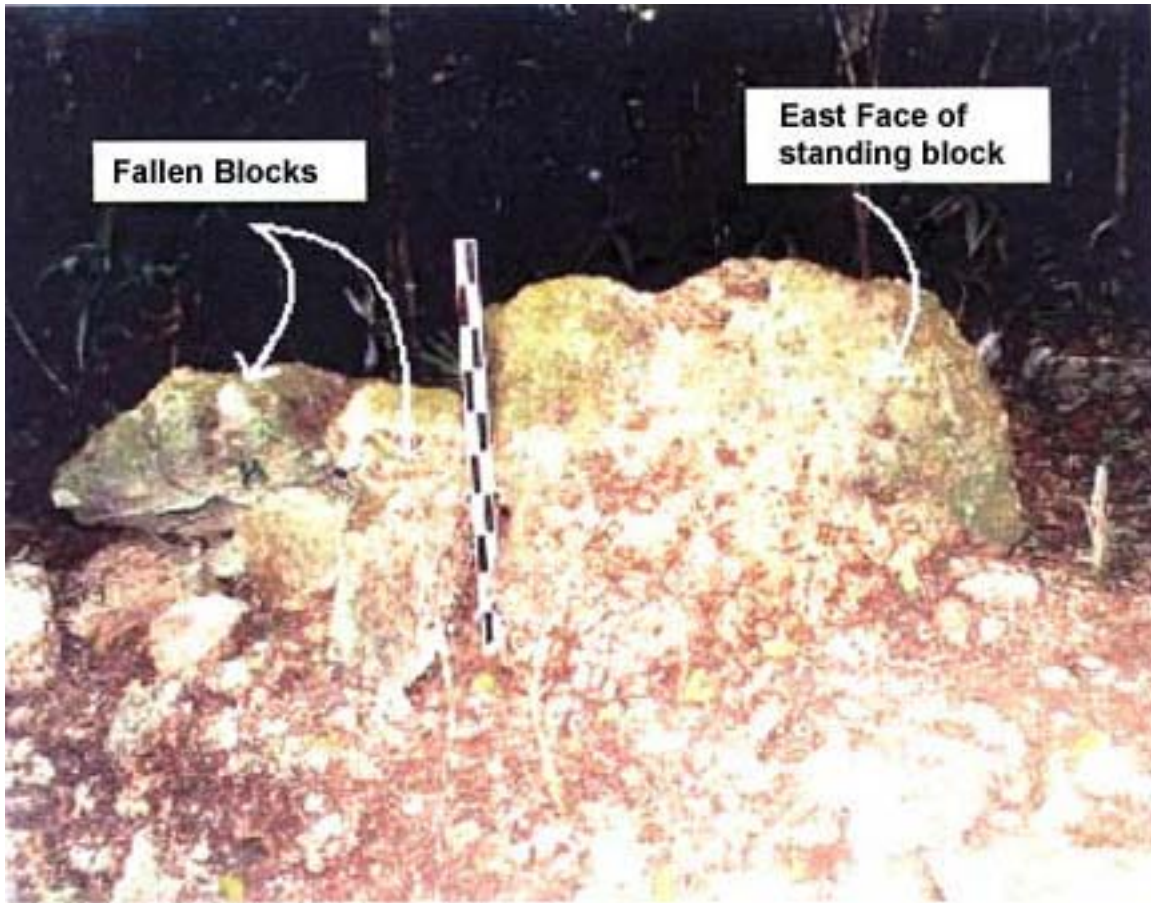


Figure 5. Map of the southeast corner of the West Plaza (Plaza C) with the location of the cave entrances and the megalith and platform.

An excavation unit was placed on the east side of the standing block to expose both the platform and to determine how the block had been placed. The excavations revealed that the primary, standing block was positioned on top of bedrock, and that small stones had been wedged under its northeast corner to stabilize it. The block had been placed on limestone bedrock that did not seem to have been covered with soil, so either the area had been cleared of soil or this limestone had been exposed through quarrying activity. Quarrying activity was clearly evident on the hill located to the southwest of this area. The surface of the megalith on the east face, near the base (the area that had been covered by soil), was very smooth, but no carving or paint was apparent.

The excavation of this unit located the platform at only 15-20 cm below the ground surface. The edge of the platform was exposed as an alignment of small stones with marl used to fill in the voids between the alignment and the bedrock. This could easily have been plastered to create a formal platform, although no floor remained. A moderate number of ceramic sherds was recovered, but most of these were heavily weathered. A few rim sherds of water vessels were found. A low number of chert flakes and one obsidian blade were also recovered.





**Figure 6. The standing portion of Megalith I is to the right (north) of the fallen pieces.**

Another interesting feature of this area is a linear group of openings which lead to a tubular cave below ([Figure 5](#) and [Figure 7](#)). The openings have been shaped by humans to create roughly circular entrances and they are all about 80 cm in diameter. The cave below appears to be a tunnel, roughly 1.5 meters in height running from the southwest to northeast. It was not our intent to explore the interior of the cave fully, so we do not know how far it extends in either direction. It is likely that it flows with water during the wet season, and might have provided a good source of fresh water.

The mapping and testing of the standing stone, now tentatively called a standing megalith, and the cave openings have left us with more questions than clear answers. This area does appear to have been heavily modified and maintained by the Maya, and our interpretation is currently that it was used as a water collection area. The open entrance into the West Plaza ([Figure 5](#)) would have allowed easy access. The artifact sample from this area, although limited, does suggest water collection and the cave could have supplied a critical source of clean drinking water. We hope in the future to explore the cave interior and perhaps to conduct excavations within it.



**Figure 7. Clearing the vegetation away from the cave openings. The arrows point to two of the entrances into the limestone bedrock.**

### **Investigation of Altar A**

One of our secondary goals during the 2001 season was to investigate the area directly west of the western plaza, both in terms of associated structures and the natural and/or modified topography around it. This area had been briefly documented during the initial site discovery (Barnhart 1997), and a large, residential complex had been observed. This complex was positioned on a narrow promontory which extended west, bounded by very steep slopes dropping roughly 20 meters to a drainage ([Figure 2](#)). Given the topography, this residential group was private and well protected. The large pyramidal and range structures in this group support its use by the elite, possibly even by the ruling lineage.

During the investigation of this area, an altar was discovered in association with a west-facing pyramid. The altar, designated as Altar A, exhibited no clear carving on its top or side surfaces, although it had been heavily weathered. It had been fractured into three main pieces, possibly from the growth of tree roots. The altar measured 1.56 meters in diameter and was 27 cm in height. Although weathered, the symmetry and clearly defined edges indicate that it had been made to high standards.

The altar was mapped and documented, and a 1 x 1 meter unit was excavated below one of its fragments to evaluate pavement associations and deposits. The excavations revealed the presence of a shallow chamber; no human bones or objects were apparent. Our limited time did not allow us to expose the chamber fully, but the area within our unit was carefully screened and samples for flotation were collected. The chamber was then carefully covered to await more complete study during a future season. The positioning of this chamber so close to the surface would likely have resulted in the complete deterioration of organic materials, including human remains.

## **Conclusions**

The short 2001 field effort supported by the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) was highly productive and allowed us to complete the documentation of an important area in the site center. The presence of a water collection area, especially one that is recognized with a standing megalith, is an interesting feature in light of the recent recognition of the intensive management of water at hilltop sites (Scarborough 1993). Maax Na has at least one large reservoir within its site core area, but the availability of spring water from this cave system may have been key to providing clean drinking water throughout the year. We will continue to explore the role of water management at Maax Na as well as initiate an investigation of the cave systems around the site.

## **Acknowledgments**

I certainly thank FAMSI for the financial support of our 2001 season at Maax Na. I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the Belize Department of Archaeology in Belmopán for their support and the granting of an excavation permit. We are grateful to the Programme for Belize for their continued enthusiasm for archaeology in the Río Bravo Conservation Area. In addition, thanks are extended to Dr. Fred Valdez for his logistical support during our stay at the R.E.W. Adams Field Camp in the conservation area. My co-director, Eleanor King, and I would also like to extend our heartfelt thanks to our field crew during 2001: Dr. Claire Allum, Dana Anthony, Dr. Richard Fields, Darcie Flanigan, and Toni Wallace.

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