Sibun Valley from Late Classic through Colonial Times:
Investigations of the 2003 Season of the Xibun Archaeological Research Project

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Few can foretell how an archaeological field season will turn out. As Boston Red Sox fans know well, solid financing and a talented staff provide no guarantee that the game will go your way. Contingent events—injury and sickness, poor weather conditions, field strategies that just don’t work and, in the case of archaeological field work, vehicle breakdowns—can cause a well-planned season to spiral into a situation that one simply hopes to live through. Fortunately, the 2003 season of the Xibun Archaeological Research Project (XARP) did not fall prey to the curse of the Bambino (even though the Department of Archaeology at Boston University is located less than two blocks from Fenway Park).

Perhaps our good fortune was due, in part, to the stellar nature of the field team that gathered together in pursuit of the deep history of the Sibun Valley. Field directors—Eleanor Harrison-Buck and Steven Morandi—returned for their third field season on the Sibun and both planned to gather data for dissertations as part of their PhD program at Boston University. Ellie would further investigate the Terminal Classic occupation with special emphasis on circular shrine structures and Steve was returning to Cedar Bank where he had found Spanish-Colonial deposits during the previous 2001 season. Enjoying his first season in Belize, Boston University graduate student Satoru Murata maintained our field computer system, was part of our reconnaissance team, and conducted the first excavations at Queso Blanco. David G. Buck, a graduate student at the University of Florida, returned for his second season with XARP to run the mapping-grade GPS instrumentation and head up the reconnaissance and survey team. Three graduates of the 2001 XARP field school—Christa D. Cesario, Emily Hall, and Jessica L. King—were promoted to staff positions and all three supervised excavations. In addition, Jessica and Emily rotated responsibility for the field lab during the first and second half of the field season, respectively. Polly Peterson, a Boston University graduate student, conducted reconnaissance in some newly encountered caves and also assisted with field photography. Tori Saneda, of Ohio State University, joined the project with plans to conduct a geophysical survey of Cedar Bank with a fluxgate magnetometer. Unfortunately, her plans were stymied by technical difficulties with the instrumentation although her test excavation at the site of a magnetic anomaly in the northern plaza of Cedar Bank yielded significant obsidian artifacts.

Investigation of the Anglo and African Colonial Period in the valley continued under the capable direction of Daniel Finamore (Peabody Essex Museum) who focused his efforts on the area of Gracy Rock. Project ceramicist, Sandra L. López Varela (Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos) continued a type-variety analysis of the Sibun Valley pottery, grappling with both the well-preserved but unsealed contexts of cave pottery and the often poorly preserved but contextually stratified pottery from surface settlements. Kirsten J. Tripplett, project paleoethnobotanist (University of California, Berkeley), spearheaded the large-scale systematic sampling of excavation contexts for retrieval of botanical remains via water flotation. Palynologist John G. Jones of Washington State University returned to face another season of core extraction from the crocodile-infested oxbows of the Sibun River. Finally, Thomas F. Bullard, project geomorphologist from the Desert Research Institute in Reno, Nevada, addressed the complexities of
the fluvial system in the upper valley and the compelling question of why Xibun Maya built the Hershey site on a floodplain that is inundated during extreme discharge events.

The job of this talented staff was two-fold: to conduct field research while simultaneously providing training in archaeological field methods and inter-disciplinary research to a group of highly motivated undergraduate students. Six students from Boston University matriculated in this program: Lauren Bateman, Keri DeVerna, Wallis Lord, Keith McIntosh, Kevin Mitchell, and Donna Yates. A student from Cornell University, Katherine Belzowski, and Alyson Thibodeau from Amherst College completed the group of eight undergraduate students.

The physical work of clearing vegetation from sites, chopping tree roots out of excavation areas, hauling heavy buckets, screening deposits for hours on end, and backfilling excavation units demands a level of patience, endurance, and strength that few North Americans can claim. XARP will always be indebted to the following Belizeans who with smiles and good humor undertook the heavy work of the project: Lance Usher, Elias Ortiz, Samuel Ortiz, Genaro Barrera, Vaughn Brakeman, Gilbert Cardenas, Marvin Caballeros, Alejandro Davila, Freddy Galdamas, Derrick Hemens, Whitfield Hemens, Leonel Hernandez, Isaias Rodriguez, and Walter Usher. In addition, Roderick Burns provided tremendous support to Kirsten Trippelett at the float tank and processed countless numbers of samples.

Community or grass roots support for archaeological investigations is a critical part of the recipe for a successful field season. The project enjoyed the continued support of the village of Freetown Sibun and the family of Augustine Obispo. Upriver at Cedar Bank, community leader Lance Usher helped to interpret the goals of the Xibun Project to the larger community. At the base of the Gorge, Bert Faux as the general manager of Hummingbird Citrus, Ltd. provided continued support by supervising repeated clearing of the Hershey site. The family of Ramon Galvez welcomed our survey of their ranch and the site we came to call Queso Blanco after the homemade cheese produced by Mrs. Galvez. Victor Quan, likewise, embraced our survey of his land near the confluence of the Sibun and Caves Branch Rivers.

The ability to move crews between field and camp locations and to conduct reconnaissance and survey is dependent upon reliable vehicles. Unfortunately, most of the XARP fleet is past its prime and was held together largely by the mechanical ingenuity of Bruce Cullerton to whom we will remain forever grateful. During the first half of the season, the crew was housed at Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary on the Western Highway. We thank Matthew Miller and Marga Waals Miller for providing us with spacious accommodations in a unique research-camp setting. Camp managers—Fiona Martin and Michael Gibbs—plus the cooking and maintenance staff of the Wildlife Sanctuary expended tremendous effort to feed and house the XARP crew. During the second half of the season, the project moved to the upper part of the valley and was housed at the incomparably beautiful Yam Wits, a small resort along the Hummingbird Highway. Hosted by the family of Joy and Rupert Smith, the crew enjoyed meals planned by Carolyn Bellini and early breakfasts prepared by the staff of Yam Wits.

Last but not least, the National Science Foundation (BCS-0096603) and the Division of International Programs at Boston University provided funding for the 2003 field season. Permission to investigate the archaeological record of the Sibun Valley was granted by the government of Belize and, at that time, the Department of Archaeology under the Ministry of Tourism (Permit No. DOA/H/2/1/03). We are grateful for the support of the departmental staff that was headed in 2003 by Acting Commissioner George Thompson, and assisted by Brian Woodye, who graced us with site visits and handled the administration of the XARP permit.
Many other individuals—in Belize, Boston, and elsewhere—contributed to the success of the 2003 XARP field season. Although not named here, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to all whose generosity in spirit and kind helped to maintain us through fieldwork and subsequent preparation of this report.

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