

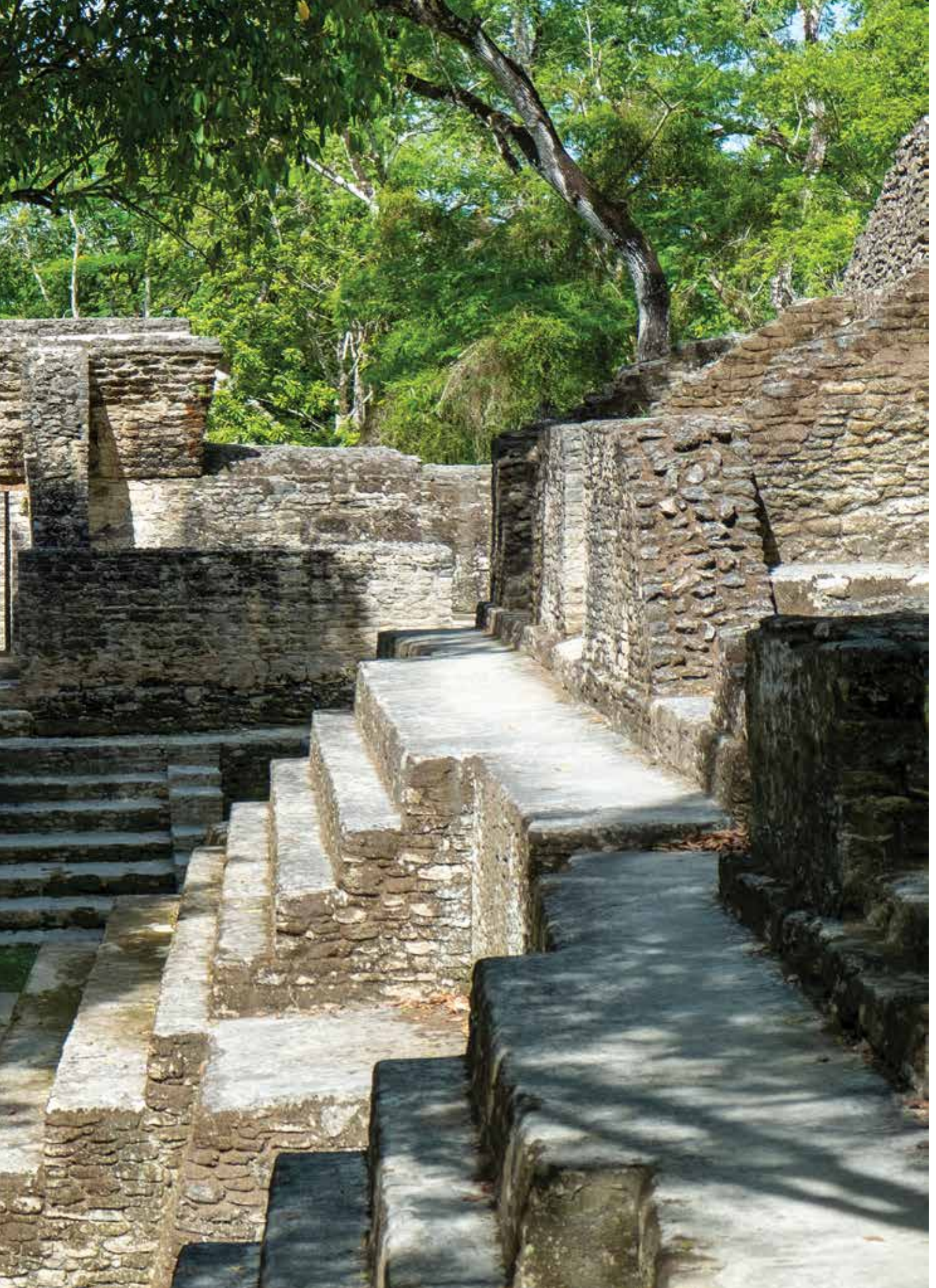
# Exploring Belize's Deep Past

By Michael Bawaya

**For more than thirty years the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance project has studied the ancient Maya.**

*Temple A1 at Cahal Pech is seen here.*





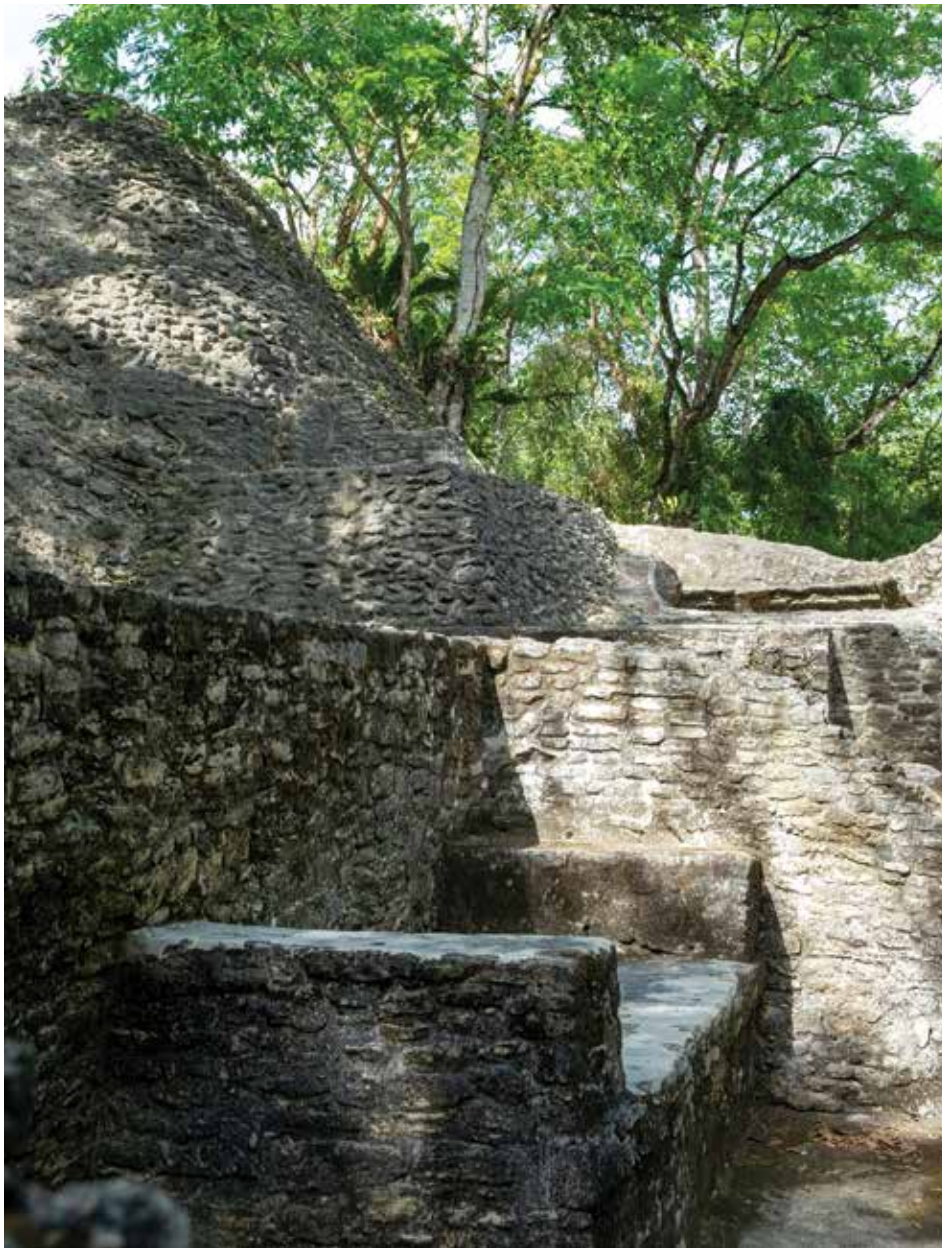


Jaime Awe had an epiphany. He was scrutinizing a sweat bath he and his crew had uncovered at Xunantunich, a Maya ceremonial center in western Belize, when he realized there were two hearths and two entrances. The only reason for a second hearth and entrance, Awe deduced, would be if the sweat bath had been remodeled; and, based on associated cultural remains, if it were remodeled, that would have occurred after the city was abandoned around A.D. 900. Due to the similarities in the material culture, he thinks people who remained in the area after the city center was abandoned may have eventually reoccupied Xunantunich's site core for a generation or two.

There's roughly a dozen people working in several different excavation units by the sweat bath, and Awe bounds from one excavation area to the next. He was born in British Honduras, a colony of the British Crown found on Central America's east coast. When of school age, he learned the history of Great Britain, rather than that of his native land. To entertain themselves,

Awe and his brothers (he was the ninth of eleven children) would dig up artifacts in various places, including their backyard, that had no affinity with the Crown. In 1973 British Honduras was renamed Belize, and by September 1981 it was no longer tethered to Great Britain.

Wanting a career in archaeology, Awe went abroad for his college education, eventually earning a Ph.D. from the University of London in England. (He was the first Belizean to earn a Ph.D. in archaeology and he subsequently became the director of Belize's Institute of Archaeology.) In 1988 he established BVAR to learn the deep history of Belize. BVAR is shorthand for the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project, an interdisciplinary endeavor that incorporates research, conservation, education, and tourism. Awe, now a professor at Northern Arizona University, continues to lead the project, along with his codirectors Julie Hoggarth of Baylor University and Claire Ebert of the University of Pittsburgh.



*The throne room in a structure at Cahal Pech.*

BVAR started at the behest of the Belize Tourism Industry Association. The ancient Maya city Cahal Pech, which is located in what is now the town of San Ignacio, was being destroyed by development, and the association's San Ignacio chapter asked Awe to help record and protect the site. San Ignacio is Awe's hometown, and working at Cahal Pech has been a constant in his life. "Cahal Pech is my Hotel California," he said, referring to the Eagles' song. "I checked in, and I never checked out." His Ph.D. dissertation was based on his research there, and it was one of three sites—Xunantunich and Baking Pot were the others—that he and his crew excavated last summer.

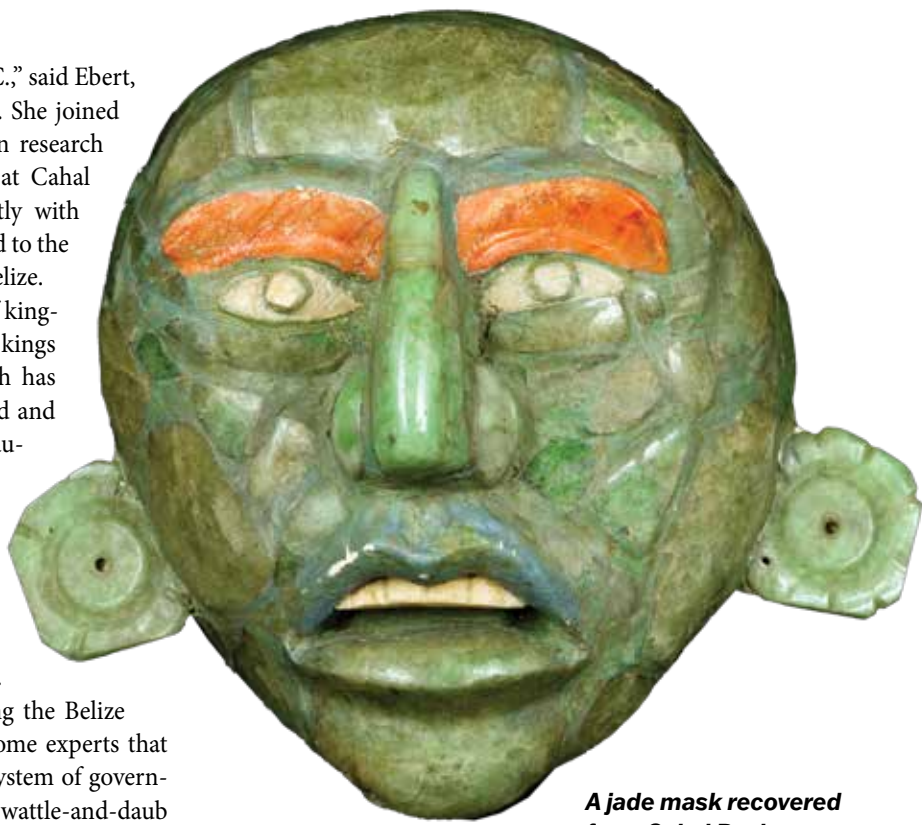
Awe and his colleagues have found evidence of an Archaic period occupation in western Belize that is "more significant than was previously known," he said. He also identified an Early Preclassic period occupation at Cahal Pech known as the Cunil phase, which dates from 1200 – 900 B.C. (When Awe made these discoveries, most other Maya research was focused on the Classic period.) The Cunil phase featured a distinct ceramic complex and round structures where community rituals likely took place. "Cahal Pech is one of the few sites in the Maya region with

concrete evidence for settlement before 900 B.C.,” said Ebert, who oversaw BVAR’s summer fieldwork there. She joined BVAR in 2012 to begin her Ph.D. dissertation research that examined the rise of social complexity at Cahal Pech during the Preclassic, which fit perfectly with Awe’s interest in determining the factors that led to the development of Maya civilization in western Belize.

One of those factors was the emergence of kingship. Though it’s well known that hereditary kings ruled much of the Maya world, little research has been devoted to how this institution developed and evolved over the centuries. Though there is a paucity of data about kingship in the early Preclassic period, a few sites in the Belize River Valley, such as Cahal Pech, Xunantunich, and Blackman Eddy have yielded information as to how this ruling class emerged.

The earliest settlements in the valley were established between 1200 and 1000 B.C. and they were located on the hills overlooking the Belize River and its tributaries. It was assumed by some experts that these people had a decentralized, egalitarian system of government. Cahal Pech, for example, was dotted with wattle-and-daub homes that “were all similar in size, suggesting little differences in wealth across the community,” Ebert said.

But Awe, Ebert, and others argued that even then there was evidence of an incipient ruling class. “We now know rulership starts around the Cunil phase in western Belize,” he said. This rulership consisted of a number of ambitious social and political



**A jade mask recovered from Cahal Pech.**

climbers he and his colleagues call “aggrandizers.” “The aggrandizers want to be more special than others,” he said, and, like successful politicians, they had the savvy to achieve their ends. They possessed exotic goods such as marine shells, jadeite, and decorated pottery, and they built ceremonial structures. Awe



**These lithics, known as eccentrics, were found at Xunantunich.**

JAMIE AWE

JERRY RABINOWITZ





**Jaime Awe excavates a cultural deposit at Xunantunich.**

theorized the aggrandizers gave gifts, such as corn, to others, and that they sponsored public events. “People become beholden to them,” he said.

And, most importantly, “they use religion to further cement their positions,” he stated. Investigations of caves and rockshelters have revealed evidence of possible ritual activity during this time. A marine shell effigy in the form of a quatrefoil and caches of cave pearls found at Cahal Pech and Blackman Eddy suggest the aggrandizers were using them as sacred places. The aggrandizers’ ceremonies could have been the genesis of cave rituals, officiated

by community leaders, that were practiced by the ancient Maya for centuries and that continue to be practiced by their modern descendants.

Simply put, the aggrandizers attempted to deify themselves and their ancestors. They used iconographic motifs such as the quatrefoil, which to the Maya represented the portal to the underworld, and identified themselves with the Maize God. (According to Maya mythology, people were created from maize, their staple crop.)

As of the Cunil phase, the Maya had conducted private rituals in their homes that often featured figurines for ancestor worship as well as some female figurines that represented fertility. Archaeologists have found these figurines beneath the floors of houses. But by 400-300 B.C., the figurines disappear from the archaeological record.

The appearance of monumental architecture was another indication of growing class distinctions. “Public buildings replaced small domestic structures beginning around 900 B.C. These were formal masonry structures made out of cut limestone blocks that were built in large open plazas. This would have taken extra labor and organization above the level of a single household,” Ebert said. By around 300 B.C., palaces and temples are being built, and by A.D. 100, “we see the first royal burials in the temples. The construction of these massive temples suggests that elites began to use architecture to publicly manifest and display their more elevated status in the society,” she added. “These temples would remain the focus at Cahal Pech through the Terminal Classic, and would be remodeled to become larger and more elaborate over time.”

Monumental architecture also appeared at Xunantunich and Blackman Eddy during the Middle Preclassic period (750-300 B.C.), and the number of large buildings as well as their size increased dramatically during the Late Preclassic period (300 B.C.-A.D. 300). Large, circular platforms were replaced by rectangular structures with stucco masks of deities flanking central stairways that rose to their summits.

Another significant architectural change seen at Cahal Pech, Blackman Eddy, and other sites is the transformation of

JERRY RABINOWITZ

so-called E-Group complexes into Eastern Triadic Shrines. An E-Group is an arrangement of buildings in which a single square structure is positioned to the west of three smaller buildings that stand in a row above a rectangular platform. This was a common arrangement in this region during the Middle Preclassic period (900-300 B.C.) “In the Late Preclassic, the E-Group at Cahal Pech was replaced by an Eastern Triadic shrine where several royal tombs are located,” Ebert said. The shrines are huge three-part structures that required an extensive amount of materials and labor to build. “In contrast,” she added, “E-Groups were likely used for communal events that deemphasized differences in the community.”

BVAR archaeologists discovered a Late Preclassic stela at Cahal Pech, known as Stela 9, that speaks to the rise of the first kings in the Belize Valley. The stela depicts a human emerging from the open maw of a supernatural feline, an iconographic

greater social, political, and economic influence than the smaller cities. Maya royalty resided there, whereas the smaller cities housed local administrators and commoners. Caches of items such as ceramic vessels, jadeite beads, and various types of sea-shells, were placed in public courtyards.

By the Classic period (A.D. 300-750) hereditary rulership was the norm throughout the Belize Valley and the Maya region. Rulers resided in palaces perched atop acropolises in the heart of the city that were nonetheless separated from the plazas frequented by those they ruled. Kings included the names of gods such as K’awiil (the personification of lightning) and K’inich (the sun god) in their royal titles, and they spread their propaganda through inscriptions on stela and ceramic vessels.

Having reached its zenith in the Classic period, the rul-



*Xunantunich's El Castillo features a restored frieze at the summit.*

VICKI MARIE SINGER

theme that is seen in other parts of Mesoamerica. “This imagery links leaders with the supernatural word,” said Ebert, “a tie that commoners wouldn’t have.” Awe asserted that Stela 9, as well as other stela of roughly the same age, offer evidence that a social/political hierarchy had taken hold in the Belize River Valley by this time.

Cahal Pech, Xunantunich, and Blackman Eddy appear to have become the primary centers in the Belize Valley, wielding

ing class was primed for a fall, and fall they did. The Terminal Classic period (A.D. 750-900) marked the end of their glory, as many cities in the Belize Valley and the greater Maya region were abandoned. Cahal Pech was one of the first cities in the Belize Valley to collapse, and though the remaining members of ruling family made some concessions to their reversal of fortune—they retreated from their palace to smaller, austere quarters—they clung to other regal practices.





mentions of Naranjo rulers on ceramics, and ceramics painted in the style of those produced at Naranjo found at Belize Valley sites.” One of the ceramics Hoggarth referred to is the Komkom Vase, which was found in peri-abandonment deposits at Baking Pot and is one of BVAR’s most significant discoveries. (The vase was found in fragments and has been reconstructed. About one-third of it is missing.) “It is unique because it is the longest hieroglyphic text discovered on a vase in the Maya area,” said Christophe Helmke, an archaeologist at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark who also serves as BVAR’s epigrapher, deciphering Maya glyphs. “This also makes it the longest Precolumbian text on any portable object ever discovered.”

The vase was made in A.D. 812 and its text speaks of military events in 799. “It talks in detailed manner about fast-paced military encounters that were taking place right during the time of the collapse,” Helmke said. And though warfare was a feature of the collapse, there is little evidence of it in the Belize Valley during this time. “We don’t have a lot of evidence of them fortifying their settlements,” said Hoggarth. Naranjo’s influence in the valley could have resulted from soft power. “It appears there was some sort of alliance building going on,” she said. The alliances were martial and marital and, perhaps because of the latter, Naranjo lavished “the Belize Valley sites with these really

Another of BVAR’s primary research interests is the roles cities in the Belize Valley played in the larger political landscape of the Late to Terminal Classic period. In some cases, political hierarchies became more complicated during the Classic period, as rulers of smaller cities like Cahal Pech, Xunantunich, and Baking Pot found themselves contending with the rulers of larger, more powerful ones, such as Naranjo in Guatemala, and Caracol in western Belize.

“We think that both Caracol and Naranjo exerted influence, or possibly directly controlled, the Belize Valley based on the available evidence,” Hoggarth said. “That evidence includes the Naranjo emblem glyph on a monument at Xunantunich,

**(Above) The Komkom Vase was found at Baking Pot.**

**(Right) A pelican effigy vessel recovered by Awe.**



JERRY RABINOWITZ





**Workers relax under a canopy near a structure known as A11 at Xunantunich.**

fine polychrome ceramics,” she added. The Belize Valley cities could have offered their powerful neighbors surplus food from their fertile lands in return.

But whatever the successes of these alliances, they failed to avert the collapse. The royals’ deification propaganda, which had worked so well for so long, no longer persuaded people suffering from drought, deforestation, and other calamities. “People could essentially vote with their feet and leave,” Hoggarth observed, and the residents of Baking Pot and many other cities did just that. Baking Pot’s population declined markedly by the early 800s, and by 900 it was virtually empty. The royal family had vanished with everyone else. “Where they go,” she said, “we don’t know.”

Back at Xunantunich, Awe showed a reporter a small temple and noted that the excavation of the structure revealed three discrete construction episodes. As he explained this to the reporter, a tour group of ten or so people arrived and, without missing a beat, Awe addressed them as well, pointing to the evidence of the three episodes. But this should be no surprise as for four years he directed the country’s Tourism Development Project that, in collaboration with BVAR, excavated and conserved Maya sites

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for purposes of tourism. “Excavation and consolidation are important because it allows visitors to see what the site looked like during its heyday in the Classic period,” said Ebert.

Education is another of BVAR’s priorities, and it offers research opportunities to Belizean high school and college students. “A number of Maya archaeologists have been trained under the BVAR project, and several now spearhead their own research efforts,” said Melissa Badillo, the current director of the Belize Institute of Archaeology. “The BVAR project has been immensely contributing to the development and understanding of the archaeological record in Belize.” (Belize gives a Person of the Year Award, and in 2019 Awe was the recipient. He also won the Society for American Archaeology’s Excellence in Latin American and Caribbean Archaeology in 2022.)

On an afternoon last July Awe worked in his office in San Ignacio, surrounded by numerous artifacts that were ready for processing. Maya ceramic vessels, points, and figurines filled the shelves. There was nothing from Great Britain.

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